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Unpacking EFL textbook content: A focus on teachers' role in the textbook-based classroom

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Abstract. This theoretical paper first explores how English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers' beliefs impact their delivery of textbook content. In response to this important pedagogical relationship, as well as the trend of de-contextualized teaching in EFL settings, this paper argues for the compatibility of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as an intervention tool to shape teachers' beliefs and facilitate their deconstruction of textbook content in terms of the co-play between language form (i.e., grammar/vocabulary) and meaning representations. The paper ends with pedagogical strategies for pre-service and in-service EFL teacher education, enabling teachers to conceptualize the dynamic relationship between language form and meaning embedded in textbook content and to enact contextualized instruction in textbook-based classrooms.

Keywords: EFL textbook, teachers' beliefs, systemic functional linguistics, language use.

[zh] 解構EFL教科書內容: 教師在教科書為中心的課堂中的角色

摘要. 本論文首先介紹了教師的信念對其解構教科書內容方式的影響。基於此以及EFL教學過程中脫離語境的現象, 本文指出系統功能語言學理論可以用於EFL教師教育, 幫助職前和在職EFL教師重塑信念, 從而改善教科書內容解構的方式。本文最後就如何使用系統功能語言學進行教師教育以及教科書使用, 提供了策略和建議。

关键词: 英語作為外語的教科書, 教師信念, 系統功能語言學, 語言使用

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Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. The Impact of EFL Teachers' Beliefs on Their Textbook Practices. 3. Necessity for Intervention Studies on Teachers' Beliefs About Textbook Use. 4. Language Use as a Meaning-Making Process. 5. A Halliday's Model for Shaping Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Textbook Use. 5.1. Maintaining the Principle of Using Minimal Terms 5.2. Mediating Pre-service and In-service Teachers' Understanding of SFL 5.3. Reflection-based Belief Change 5.4. Overcoming Constraints that Hinder Teachers' Practices 5.5. Teachers' Self-Empowerment and Textbook-based Pedagogy 6. Conclusions and Implications. References

1. Introduction

Textbooks are crucial resources in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classrooms, where they are used by both teachers and students as authoritative channels for language learning and teaching (Richards et al., 2001; Tomlinson, 2003). As such, one line of emerging research concerns textbook evaluation in relation to pedagogical purposes (e.g., testing or curriculum standards) by relying on self-made criteria or adapting previous evaluative frameworks (Tomlinson, 2003; see also Mukundan & Ahour, 2010 for a review). These studies have contributed to the textbook selection process for language learning classrooms. Additionally, another line of research elicited feedback from teachers and students regarding their suggestions for textbook adaption and reselection. Obviously, these two lines of research on textbooks and textbook users' feedback acknowledge the importance of textbooks in language classrooms, while implying that good textbook content automatically leads to the success of language learners.

However, the content of textbooks is embedded statically; ultimately, teachers play a crucial role in mediating students' learning in textbook-based classrooms (Jakubiak & Harklau, 2010). As Nunan (1991) highlighted, focusing on textbook content appears to be inadequate and "ultimately, such questions can only be settled with reference to their actual use" (p. 211). This means that it is important to look beyond the evaluation of EFL textbook content or textbook users' feedback, investigating the ways in which textbook content is delivered in EFL classrooms. In particular, curricu-

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lum standards in international communities have focused on teaching authentic language use (i.e., using the appropriate language form to convey meaning) in EFL classrooms. For instance, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in Europe explicitly emphasizes teaching authentic language use for all communication settings at all levels of language education. In response to this worldwide teaching goal, textbook-based research is needed on how teachers deconstruct textbook content and develop language learners' contextually appropriate language output in the classroom.

To this end, this paper disrupts the conventional research on textbooks by discussing the interconnection between teachers' practices, beliefs and the ways in which they deliver textbook content. At the same time, in response to the international trend of fostering language learners' knowledge of authentic language use, pedagogical suggestions informed by Halliday's (1994) systemic functional linguistics (SFL) are made in relation to teachers' practices with textbook content delivery in class.

1. The Impact of EFL Teachers' Beliefs on Their Textbook Practices

In addition to the textbook content in textbook-based classrooms, teachers' agency is a vital factor that influences students' success in language learning (Anton, 1999; Sunderland, 2000). For instance, Anton (1999) investigated how learner-centered and teacher-centered teaching styles impacted students' foreign language learning of Italian and French. The results revealed that teachers who emphasized learner-centered teaching created more opportunities for students' participation and negotiation with the teacher than teacher-centered discourse, suggesting the importance of the teacher's role in the textbook-based classroom. More relevant is Bonkowsky's (1995) study, which investigated English language teachers' use of elementary textbooks in two Francophone public schools in Quebec. That research showed that instructors adopted different strategies to interpret textbook content. In other words, while textbook content is important, the teacher's role in interpreting and delivering the textbook content cannot be ignored, as the teacher's actions synergize with the textbook content itself in impacting students' language appropriation.

In particular, the importance of teachers' role in a textbook-based classroom also points to the importance of teachers' beliefs, which generally guide their behavior (Menkabu & Harwood, 2014; Pajaras, 1992). Teachers' beliefs, among many other definitions (see Fives & Buehl, 2012), can be understood as teachers' evaluative stance toward teaching, which is "consciously or unconsciously held" and "serves as a guide to thought and behavior" (Borg, 2001, p. 185). Teachers' beliefs, though intangible, can be revealed in the fragments of participants' interviews, which are "highly personalized, often constructed in episodic ways, and containing affective and evaluative components" (Luft & Roehrig, 2007, p. 42). In addition, teachers' beliefs are not formed in a vacuum. They are shaped by contextual factors that teachers are exposed to, the most important of which is their learning experiences (Lortie, 1975). Additional important contextual factors that can shape teachers' beliefs have also been identified, such as effective teacher education courses (Borg, 2011; Farrell, 2013). In other words, to show textbooks as pedagogical resources in language classrooms, it is imperative to divert research attention to the relationships between textbook content, teachers' beliefs, and their in-class practices, rather than merely focusing on textbook content itself (Sosniak & Stodolky, 1993).

Unfortunately, while studies on other subject disciplines, such as mathematics, science, and social studies, have illuminated the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their textbook practices (e.g., Sosniak & Stodolky, 1993), in the field of language research, studies around teachers' writing beliefs and practices abound (e.g., Zhang, 2017a), but research on teachers and language textbooks is limited (e.g., Allen, 2008; Menkabu & Harwood, 2014). Among them, in a case study on foreign language teachers' beliefs and textbook use in an American college, Allen (2008), through interviews and questionnaires, elicited Italian and French teaching assistants' beliefs and practices. The study illuminated that teachers' beliefs about the role of textbooks were demonstrated in their teaching practices: non-native foreign language teachers used textbooks for cultural materials, while native speakers considered themselves experts on this matter—their different beliefs were based on their different learning backgrounds. Among these limited studies on language teachers' beliefs, including textbook studies in other disciplinary subjects, researchers have mainly focused on teachers' beliefs about macro dimensions of language teaching (e.g., teaching strategies or cultural dimensions) in relation to the textbook content (Menkabu & Harwood, 2014).

To help language learners learn and use authentic English as required by EFL curricula in international communities, teachers need to engage students in meaningful communications in diverse contexts. However, many EFL teachers' beliefs are constrained to language form; they enact de-contextualized teaching in the textbook-based classroom and struggle with effective teaching methods and textbook use (Menkabu & Harwood, 2014; Zhang, 2017a). Indeed, focusing on language form has been dominating EFL classrooms for many years, a context in which pre-service and in-service teachers gained their corresponding beliefs by observing or interacting with teacher educators (Lortie, 1975; Zhang, 2017a). In other words, there is an urgent need to reconstruct EFL teachers' beliefs so that they may better deconstruct textbook content and benefit students' language learning.

2. Necessity for Intervention Studies on Teachers' Beliefs About Textbook Use

While some research has highlighted teachers' resistance or reluctance to change their beliefs (e.g., Ellis, 2008), teachers' beliefs are constructible and changeable when teachers are engaged in teacher education programs, where

effective practices and reflections are constantly enacted (Borg, 2011; Woods, 1992). As Kuzborska (2011) noted, “encouraging teachers to reflect on their existing beliefs and behaviors could help them become more receptive to alternative perspectives and be prepared to modify their knowledge and work in ways that are consistent with their developing views and research-based standards” (p. 103). Similarly, Farrell (2013) also emphasized that when teachers are encouraged to reflect upon their existing or past teaching in comparison to a new teaching method, they can feel disequilibrium between their current beliefs and the new teaching methodology, thus constructing their new beliefs. Indeed, empirical research, such as the study by Borg (2011), showed that even a one-semester intensive teacher education program encourages pre-service teachers to become open to new conceptualizations and to form new beliefs. This is especially true when the education program follows an effective model that could engage them in critically analyzing current classroom learning situations, implementing effective measures to address classroom concerns, and improving students’ language learning for a particular purpose (Farrell, 2013). In other words, an effective intervention that engages teachers in analysis and reflection, and motivates them to implement a renewed teaching style by understanding the positive impact it will have on their students’ learning, can powerfully enable teachers to re-conceptualize their teaching and act upon these new beliefs in their future teaching.

In regards to textbook use in EFL classrooms, this points to an effective education model that could change pre-service and in-service teachers’ existing beliefs about language form and, instead, conceptualize language at the level of both form and meaning, meeting the demands of this globalized world where authentic language users are valued. In other words, EFL teachers’ existing beliefs should be counteracted through an intervention tool that can play the following two roles: (1) it emphasizes authentic language use; (2) it can explain how linguistic resources (vocabulary/grammar) make meaning required for different contexts, as learners in textbook-based classrooms have to ultimately exit the classroom and use language for authentic communicative purposes.

3. Language Use as a Meaning-Making Process

Halliday’s (1994) SFL views language use as a meaning-making process in context. That is, instead of viewing language use as de-contextualized and structure-based, SFL holds that particular language forms (i.e., vocabulary/grammar) are required to create meanings in response to context. In other words, SFL differs from a de-contextualized understanding of language, emphasizing authentic language use in terms of the dynamic relationship between language form and meaning. This fits nicely as a tool for mediating teachers’ construction of new beliefs that could guide their textbook-based teaching practices and develop language learners’ knowledge of language use.

SFL uses four constructs to show how language is a contextualized meaning-making process: (1) Register (a manifestation of the context of a situation) explains how language meaning is contextually influenced by the immediate situation to which the discourse is related. The context of situation construct includes three variables: field (what is going on), tenor (the social relationship among discourse participants), and mode (the medium of communication). (2) Three meta-meanings. In response to the three contexts of situational variables, a discourse manifests three meanings: field-based ideational meaning (the discourse users’ inner or external experiences of the world), tenor-based interpersonal meaning (the way discourse users’ construction the social relationship within a text and without), and mode-based textual meaning (the way the discourse users organize a text). (3) The third construct of lexico-grammar explains how particular lexico-grammatical choices (vocabulary and structural organization) are used to achieve meaning in the context of a situation. The choice of lexico-grammar, according to SFL, is regulated by the three dimensions of a system: a. transitivity, a system mainly involving the choice of participants (akin to subject and object in traditional grammar); process (akin to the predicate in traditional grammar); and circumstance (e.g., adverbial phrases or prepositional phrases) as well as logical connectors to realize ideational meaning; b. mood, a system mainly for choosing subject and predicate to realize interpersonal meaning or choosing lexico-grammar to realize evaluative stances; and c. cohesion, a system mainly involving the choice of theme (e.g., how the semantic content of the starting point of a clause relates to other clauses and creates an organizational pattern) and cohesive devices (e.g., conjunction words) to realize textual meaning. (4) In the construct of genre (a manifestation of the context of culture), all three meanings realized in each sentence are organized into different stages to achieve a particular purpose (e.g., to inform or to persuade).

Because of the effectiveness of SFL in unpacking diverse modes and genres of texts, a large body of research has emanated in English-as-second-language (ESL) contexts (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2004), facilitating students’ knowledge of authentic language use. For instance, the above constructs helped ESL students understand that informational texts have the following key features: nominalized verbs act as participants/subject, implicit resources (e.g., adverbs) are used to show authors’ evaluative stances, and frequent use of conjunction words and theme patterns are used to construct a holistic text (O’Hallaron et al., 2015; Schleppegrell, 2004). In sum, the constructs of register, meaning, lexico-grammar, and genre powerfully demystify the mechanisms of any mode and type of text by showing the close relationship between language features and meaning in context.

In contrast, limited research on teachers’ use of SFL has emerged in EFL contexts, let alone specifically on language teachers’ beliefs and textbook use. For instance, in the line of EFL educational contexts where textbooks are not specifically mentioned, Yasuda (2015) demonstrated that SFL facilitated Japanese EFL learners in constructing

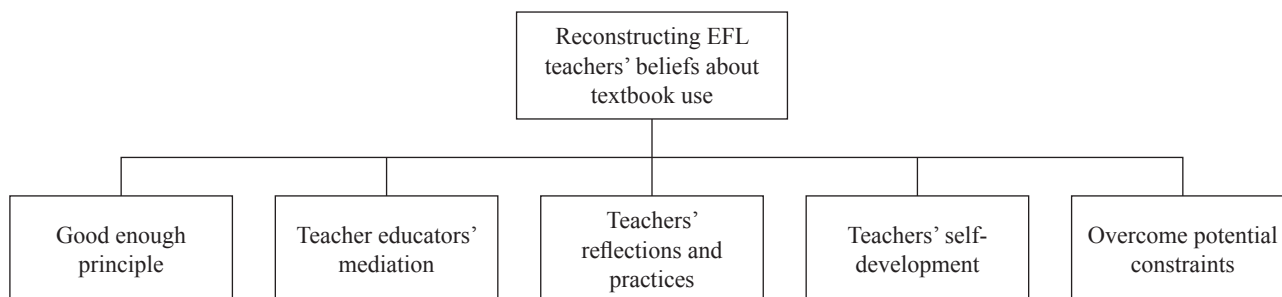
texts at the level of meaning and linguistic features, and deconstructing writing texts accordingly. Atai and Khatibi (2010) illuminated that by sensitizing Iranian EFL students to the SFL constructs, they were able to improve their listening comprehension. Rivera and David (2012) showed that Columbian EFL learners were able to speak more contextually appropriately following SFL-informed instruction. These studies illustrate the crucial role of SFL in supporting EFL language learners' learning. Yet, at the same time, studies along the line of using SFL in EFL contexts are still limited. The lack of using SFL in EFL contexts may be due to insufficient attention being paid to the pedagogical power of SFL, as it has been used more often in the past as an analytic tool, rather than a teaching praxis in EFL contexts. This highlights the importance of promoting SFL among teachers, help them construct SFL-based beliefs, and assist them with deconstructing discourses in both language form and meaning in textbook-based classrooms.

Indeed, research in the field of SFL-based ESL teacher education, though mostly limited to writing, has shown that pre-service teachers' cognition is changeable when they are engaged in SFL-based literacy teaching, reflection, and practices in ESL contexts. For instance, Gebhard et al. (2013) demonstrated how, through SFL-based courses, in-service teachers (including a pre-service EFL teacher from China) transformed their beliefs about teaching writing from de-contextualized form-based instruction to purposeful meaning-making teaching. The change, as shown in the study, arose out of guided mediation, students' practice-based reflection, and independent deconstruction and construction. This study particularly highlighted how teachers' beliefs change and impact their practices through the exposure to SFL, which also points to the plausibility of SFL-based teacher education in EFL contexts and the ability to reshape teachers' beliefs and practices in textbook-based classrooms.

4. A Halliday's Model for Shaping Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Textbook Use

This section presents a teacher education model that is designed to construct teachers' SFL-based beliefs and guide their textbook use in language teaching classrooms (see Table 1 below). In particular, SFL is not only a linguistic theory that explains the mechanism of texts; it is also a language learning theory that emphasizes the mediation of experienced language learners (e.g., teacher educators with SFL-based knowledge) in facilitating language learners (e.g., in-service or pre-service teachers), with verbal mediation the most important tool among any other mediational tools (Halliday, 1976). In other words, the way a teacher talks is a gateway for pre-service or in-service teachers' appropriation of a language theory. Based on SFL's core constructs and its emphasis on teacher educators' mediation, as well as relevant research on changes to teachers' beliefs, the following subsections elaborate on how to implement SFL-based teacher education and empower teachers in reconstructing their beliefs. The ultimate purpose of the teacher education model is to enable teachers to enact instructional strategies in their own textbook-based classrooms independently over the long term.

Table 1. An SFL-based model for reconstructing EFL teachers' beliefs about textbook use



5.1. Maintaining the Principle of Using Minimal Terms

Given the complexity of SFL as a language theory, in the process of showing and explaining the theory to teachers, educators have to craft their training curriculum carefully, as the purpose of the training is not to make teachers robust linguistic experts; rather, it is intended to help teachers utilize resources that benefit students' learning (Gebhard, 2010). As such, educators could follow a "good enough" principle (Macken-Horarik et al., 2011), balancing training content and what teachers can use in the classroom, with the ultimate purpose of helping teachers show the relationship between meaning and form within a clause or a discourse that complements EFL teachers' existing knowledge about structural accuracy (see also Rose & Martin, 2012).

For example, take the sentence, "Erosion reduces soil, and it leads to an increase of desert areas." Using minimal categories, educators may guide teachers in understanding how particular linguistic choices are mapped out in contextualized sentences. That is, the nominalized verb *erosion* serves as a participant, subject, and theme at the three levels of meaning in science texts, which has to be highlighted in the process of teacher training to remind teachers

of specific linguistic features in this text type. In a similar vein, educators can use the term *process* to alert teachers that the action verb *reduce* is used as a *process* at the ideational level and also implicitly shows the writer's negative evaluative stance toward erosion. By showing what and why these linguistic features are used through limited terms, teachers will not feel overwhelmed with linguistics terms used to explain diverse types of texts, and at the same time, they will be able to readily deconstruct the textbook content beyond the de-contextualized language form in their own classrooms (Gebhard, 2010).

5.2. Mediating Pre-Service or In-Service Teachers' Understanding of SFL

Teachers' appropriation of knowledge is a gradual process (Rose & Martin, 2012). Particularly, many EFL teachers might not have linguistic backgrounds; instead, many are experts in teaching mythologies or literature (Zhang, 2017a). As such, teacher educators (experts in SFL) have to mediate teachers' learning by attending to their prior backgrounds and gradually help them appropriate SFL as a teaching praxis (Gebhard, 2010). More specifically, in the process of mediation, teacher educators can adopt the reading-to-learn cycle through verbal mediation (Rose & Martin, 2012). That is, through plain language-based instruction, educators could demonstrate the deconstruction of multimodal texts (speaking, reading, listening, and writing); then, by involving teachers in jointly deconstructing sample texts based on SFL constructs, educators could show how language form participates in making meanings in diverse modes of texts. Other mediating tools for understanding SFL are also recommended, such as accessible reading materials (e.g., Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Gibbons, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004) that focus on the four literacies in an accessible way.

In addition, unlike teacher education in ESL (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2004), one particular component that needs to be explicitly mediated is cross-linguistic differences, as it hampers EFL learners' understanding of the English language (Cook, 2008). As such, in the process of conducting SFL-based education, teacher educators have to guide teachers in knowing the difference between these languages. For example, Spanish and English differ in terms of thematic differences, such as the use of fronting verbs in Spanish to convey themes but not in the case of English (Lavid et al., 2010), and Chinese and English differ in terms of cohesive devices, in that fewer cohesive devices are used in Chinese than English (Lian, 1993). The additional challenge for EFL contexts means that educators, in the process of teacher education, should include this curriculum component in mediating pre-service or in-service teachers' cross-linguistic knowledge, thereby enabling them to better appropriate SFL-based knowledge.

5.3. Reflection-Based Belief Change

Belief formation is a challenging but possible process, which can be achieved through teachers' reflections on their practices (Farrell, 2013; Richards et al., 2001; Schön, 1983). As Karavas and Drossou (2010, p. 273) claimed, "classroom data collection, focused and guided observation of teachers, open discussions on their opinions/perceptions of teaching practices, reflective and evaluative assignments are some of the techniques that can assist student teachers in examining their beliefs, reflecting on them." In other words, to have pre-service or in-service teachers have SFL-based beliefs and not just knowledge and, ultimately, have teachers act upon their beliefs in textbook-based classrooms, educators have to make teachers practice SFL and reflect upon their previous teaching practices along with their on-going practices. In this way, teachers may experience the power of SFL, which, in turn, helps shape their SFL-based beliefs in textbook-based classrooms.

Specifically, pre-service and in-service teachers are encouraged to reflect upon their on-going teaching practices and think about how to harness their SFL knowledge to improve their current teaching practices (reflection-in-action) or their future teaching (reflection upon action; Schön, 1983). In addition, to better facilitate teachers' transitions, teachers are encouraged to implement their teaching strategies in their actual classroom and consider students' feedback to better experience how SFL-based teacher education impacted their students' learning (Richards et al., 2001). Based on feedback from their students, teachers are asked to reflect on their teaching and make modifications in regards to their own students' levels. In the process of teacher education, educators should also actively help analyze feedback that teachers collect in their own classrooms and modify teacher education programs to provide additional help for pre-service or in-service teachers, such as students' adjustments to SFL-based knowledge (Borg, 2011). Through constant reflection, practice, and feedback analysis, teachers can understand the usefulness of SFL knowledge, construct SFL-based beliefs and can regularly apply it in their on-going teaching and future classrooms, instead of simply having SFL knowledge without acting upon it.

5.4. Overcoming Constraints that Hinder Teachers' Practices

Indeed, in EFL texts, possible contextual constraints might hamper the formation of teachers' emerging SFL beliefs (Lee, 2008; Zhang, 2017a). For instance, Lee (2008) showed that despite their beliefs about meaning making, teachers who did not follow their beliefs did so because of the emphasis of local grading rubrics on language form/accuracy (Lee, 2008). To solve this through the process of SFL-based teacher education, the key point is that educators must assure pre-service and in-service teachers that SFL does not violate students' interests in any form-based

language tests, as SFL gives dual emphasis to language form and meaning, which is applicable to students' interests in form-based language tests as well as their real interests outside the classroom.

Another contextual factor is a lack of appropriate textbooks for EFL teachers' in-class use (Zhang, 2017b). While numerous textbooks are available on the market for institutions to choose, many are not systemic in terms of their editing principles, such as their appropriateness in terms of students' levels, ages, and interests (Tomlinson, 2003). This highlights the importance of teachers' agency in using supplementary textbooks with their students. Teachers can supplement their teaching with diverse genres/modes that meet language learners' needs, and not just limit themselves to textbooks available or designated by their department. More importantly, to better facilitate teachers' independent implementation of their newly acquired beliefs, teachers, in collaboration with SFL experts, could edit textbooks that include SFL constructs and activities, facilitating teachers' and students' transitions to meaning-making-based teaching and learning in textbook-based classrooms (Zhang, 2017b).

5.5. Teachers' Self-Empowerment and Textbook-Based Pedagogy

When exiting teacher education programs, teachers are encouraged to engage in self-development. Indeed, some teacher training programs are limited and, typically, only helpful for a short time. As changes in students can be seen every year, such as their learning styles, the pedagogy they used previously might need minor revisions over time (Cook, 2008; Kress, 2011). In other words, even teachers who have received SFL-based teacher education and have constructed SFL-based beliefs have to constantly engage in self-development and maintain their passion for addressing particular classroom language learning problems, with the purpose of being long-term reflective teachers who act upon their SFL-based beliefs in their textbook-based classrooms. For example, teachers might use a multimodal approach (e.g., drama performance) in their SFL-based teaching to deliver textbook content based on students' preferences (Kress, 2011).

Self-development is even more crucial for teachers who might not be able to receive SFL-based teacher education (Zhang, 2017a). In this scenario, teachers must exert their own agency in enacting SFL-based teacher education and apply their beliefs in their classrooms. Indeed, many EFL teachers are void of effective teacher education. In response, teachers could consult SFL-based experts, read materials, and consult journal articles while constructing their beliefs. Although this is a long process, teachers' self-agency is an alternative method for teachers seeking to construct SFL-based beliefs and improve their language teaching in constrained teaching contexts over the long term (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009).

6. Conclusion and Implications

This theoretical paper has two main contributions. First, it fills the existing gap on trends in language textbook research by highlighting the EFL teacher's role in influencing the value of textbooks in class (c.f., Tomlinson, 2003). Indeed, given the way EFL teachers' beliefs impact their textbook content deconstruction, it is crucial for textbook researchers to give attention to teachers' beliefs and their textbook-based instruction in language classrooms (Menkabu & Harwood, 2014). In addition, given the re-constructability of teachers' beliefs in the context of practice-based reflection, the paper also proposed an SFL-based teacher education model that reshapes teachers' beliefs, thereby enabling them to deconstruct textbook content accordingly in class and foster language learners' authentic use of language in and outside class, meeting the challenges of this globalized world.

Future research could conduct empirical intervention studies on the use of language textbooks as well as other disciplinary textbooks (e.g., science or math) in relation to teachers' SFL-based beliefs. In addition, research could also focus on how students' SFL-based beliefs could assist them in regulating their own learning or providing peer assistance (e.g., how SFL-based beliefs enable them to provide peer feedback beyond language form in textbook-based classrooms).

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