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Chapter 2

Evaluating opportunities in Dutch EFL coursebooks for developing pre-vocational learners' oral interactional ability[1]

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Abstract

Course materials play a vital role in the foreign language classroom. Little attention has been paid, however, to analyzing the activities that foster oral interactional ability in EFL course materials. For the purpose of this study, a coding scheme was designed that focuses specifically on the development of interactional ability. This was used to analyse the three most commonly used EFL coursebooks for pre-vocational learners in The Netherlands. The analysis revealed that coursebooks focus more on developing language knowledge than on developing the ability to use this knowledge in interaction, that interactional strategies practice is missing, and that interactional practice is limited to the personal and public context. We conclude that EFL coursebooks lag behind current SLA theories in the practical application of activities focused on developing interactional ability. Recommendations to strengthen the link between theory and practice are made.

Introduction

Since the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970s, consensus amongst practitioners has grown that the primary goal of language teaching is to enable learners to engage both in written and spoken communication in order to achieve real-life goals. Mastering the grammatical and structural features of a language is no longer goal in itself, but is considered necessary to interact and communicate in the foreign language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Despite this consensus, implementing CLT curricula in the EFL context has not been without problems (e.g. Ahmad & Rao, 2012; G. Ellis, 1996), in particular with reference to teaching oral communication (e.g. Chen & Goh, 2011).

In the Netherlands, *oral interaction* was introduced as an official goal for EFL teaching in 1986 (Kwakernaak, 2016). Exam programmes list attainment targets for performing a range of communicative language functions, and for learning strategies to help achieve interactional goals and to compensate for deficiencies in language- or communicative knowledge (College voor Toetsing en Examens, 2017). However, EFL teachers indicate that they lack the methodological tools for developing their learners' oral skills when faced with large classes and limited contact time (Fasoglio, 2015; Jansma & Pennewaard, 2014). Teachers make limited use of the target language as the language of instruction, and make little use of opportunities for life-like interaction, particularly for practising meaning negotiation and other functional communication strategies (Bonnet, 2002; Educational Inspectorate, 2004).

Meanwhile, becoming competent in interaction is important to learners in the lower pre-vocational tracks. These learners are headed for further vocational education and employment at middle-management levels, where they will use English for occupational purposes, i.e., in service encounters with non-Dutch customers as part of their job (cf. Liemberg & Van Kleunen, 1998). At present, learners are reportedly too hesitant to engage in EFL oral interaction, and at times fail to meet the required level of accuracy and fluency upon entering vocational programmes (Jansma & Pennewaard, 2014).

Language education in The Netherlands is predominantly coursebook-led (Educational Inspectorate, 2004; Kwakernaak, 2008). This means that the coursebooks largely determine the pedagogies available to teachers and practice opportunities available to learners. The main aim of this study, therefore, is to analyse to what extent widely-used, commercially produced EFL teaching materials in The Netherlands help prepare pre-vocational learners for oral interaction in real-life situations.

Interactional ability refers to the ability to achieve communicative goals, and convey and understand communicative intent in interaction with others in real time (cf. Celce-Murcia, 2007). Developing this ability in a foreign language is not easy. First, oral interaction is mediated by time constraints, and is therefore mostly unplanned. This requires speakers to conceptualise, formulate and articulate messages more or less in parallel (Levelt, 1999), which makes oral interaction cognitively taxing (Bygate, 1987). Secondly, interaction is reciprocal. This requires speakers to both produce *and* understand messages in real time, to adjust these messages to their speech partner's understanding, and to manage the interactional encounter itself. While interactional encounters are largely steered by employing informational and interactional routines, Bygate argues that improvisational skills are needed when such routines falter. Oral interaction thus not only requires linguistic knowledge and the ability to use this knowledge appropriately in real time and in specific contexts, but also a set of self-supporting and other-supporting strategies that help speakers address communicative problems (cf. Canale, 1983a; 1983b; Celce-Murcia, 2007). Although such strategies are also employed in L1 interaction, effective use of these does not automatically transfer to L2 interaction (e.g. De Bot, 1992; Kormos, 2006).

Developing language knowledge

Interactional ability first and foremost requires learners to have grammatical and lexical knowledge (e.g. Celce-Murcia, 2007) aimed specifically at fulfilling an array of communicative functions (Criado & Sánchez, ٢٠٠٩; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This requires noticing how certain language features function in interaction (Schmidt, 1990), e.g. by first drawing learners' attention to language features in modelled interaction, or by first noticing the need for specific language forms during actual interaction (Long, 1996) or task performance (Swain, 1985). Integrating language knowledge into the learners' knowledge base furthermore requires repeated practice. Since the language knowledge serves as a means to communicate, this practice should be interactive, meaningful and focused on task-essential forms (Ortega, 2007). The development of language knowledge is further enhanced by obtaining corrective feedback on language use (e.g. Lyster & Saito, 2010). To develop learners' language knowledge for interactional purposes, reflection and feedback should not only focus on learners' correct use of language forms, but also on the extent to which learners are able to achieve the communicative goal using specific language forms (Ellis, 2009).

Developing the ability to use language knowledge

In addition to language knowledge, learners must develop the ability to use that knowledge while meeting natural processing demands, i.e., taking account of time constraints and reciprocity in interaction (e.g. Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999). Thornbury (2005) posits that the problem for speakers is not so much a lack of knowledge, but the unavailability of that knowledge during real-time, inter-active talk. Learners thus need frequent opportunity to practice retrieving their language knowledge under real-life processing conditions. This requires engaging in extended and challenging discourse that focuses primarily on meaning-making, i.e., discourse that is both linguistically and cognitively demanding (Lightbown, 2008; Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999), that serves a clear communicative purpose beyond interacting alone and is concerned with a genuine exchange of meaning between speech partners (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005).

Because real-life interaction is mediated by time-constraints, speakers may have some time to plan what they want to say, but not necessarily how they will say it. Having to attend to conceptualization, formulation and articulation of the message in parallel means that learners' attentional resources will be thinly stretched. Lightbown & Spada (1990) and Skehan (1998) demonstrate than an explicit focus on developing accurate language use tends to be at the expense of developing fluency in interaction. Furthermore, focusing on form while learners' cognitive resources are occupied with a focus on meaning has adverse effects on accurate language use (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Giving learners time to plan the formulation of their messages prior to speaking frees up attentional resources, which has beneficial effects on both accuracy and fluency (Foster & Skehan, 1996). Repeating the same or a similar task after having reflected on task performance and having received additional input and practice (i.e., delayed task repetition) also benefits fluency and accuracy. Such delayed task repetition counters the transitory 'one-off' nature of speech, which helps learners progress after their initial attempt (Bygate, 2001; Skehan, 1996).

Developing interactional strategies

Competent speakers possess an array of interactional strategies that help them safeguard mutual understanding and address interactional problems when needed (e.g. Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998). Self-supporting strategies are used to overcome problems in speech production and reception, and include both compensation strategies such as message reduction, -substitution and -recon-ceptualization as well as meaning negotiation strategies, such as checking and indicating understanding, uncertainty and incomprehension and asking

for elaboration, clarification and repetition of the message (e.g. Bygate, 1987; Dörnyei & Scott, 1995). To ensure mutual understanding, successful interaction also requires speakers to possess other-supporting strategies, i.e., attentive listening, aligning messages to the speech partner's need for information, topic knowledge and understanding, and responding to clarification requests, indications of incomprehension and erroneous interpretations of the message (cf. Bygate, 1987). Beneficial effects of interactional strategy instruction have been confirmed in several studies, e.g. on general proficiency (Lam, 2006), the degree of participation in interactional encounters (e.g. Bejarano et al., 1997), the quality of the interaction (e.g. Nakatani, 2005) and self-confidence (e.g. Forbes & Fisher, 2015; Lam, 2006).

Developing the ability to interact in specific contexts

Oral performance is context-bound. Language knowledge (Long, 2015), speech act knowledge (Thornbury, 2005) and knowledge of interactional routines (Bygate, 1987) are context-specific. Aligning the contexts in which learners practice with the contexts in which they are likely to engage in (future) interactional encounters is likely to optimize the effects of interactional instruction and practice (cf. Lightbown, 2008). The CEFR distinguishes four contexts in which language learners should be able to interact in the foreign language: the personal, public, occupational and educational context (Council of Europe, 2001). Since pre-vocational education prepares learners for occupation-specific EFL interaction in their future careers, interactional practice should include the opportunity to develop their interactional ability in occupational contexts.

Previous research on EFL coursebooks

To date, little explicit attention has been devoted to analyzing activities that foster oral competence development in course materials. Analyses tend to take a broader perspective, either by focusing on general suitability of the material within a specific educational context, e.g. regarding issues like lay-out, accessibility and appropriacy (e.g. Sheldon, 1988) or by including a surface evaluation of all language skills and systems (e.g. Mukundan et al., 2012). Recently, a number of studies have focused on the extent to which insights from SLA theory are applied to the design of EFL materials. With the exception of Burns and Hill (2013), however, these have not focused specifically on oral competence. The overall picture that emerges from these studies is that links between theory and practice are quite weak (Masuhara et al., 2008; Sheldon, 1988; Tomlinson, 2012; 2013). For instance, while the benefits of free language use in purposeful communication

and interaction is widely recognized (e.g. Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 2009,), EFL materials seem to adopt a largely controlled, form-focused approach characterized by practice activities such as dialogue repetition and filling in blanks (e.g. Burns & Hill, 2013; Gómez–Rodriquez, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012). Criado & Sánchez (2009) report a 50-50% divide between communicative activities and activities aimed at form control in EFL coursebooks targeting different educational levels (compulsory secondary and upper-secondary) and age groups (teenagers and adults) used in Spain. An evaluation of EFL coursebooks for (young) adults at the intermediate level, however, uncovered only few activities that focus on meaning-making, little opportunity for learners to use the language, and very few demands on learners to speak or interact for a communicative purpose at any length (Tomlinson, 2013). Interactional strategies to handle real-time interaction are rarely modelled, introduced or practiced (Bueno-Alastuey & Luque Agulló, 2015a; Dörnyei & Thurrell,1994; Faucette, 2001). To our knowledge, no studies have investigated the alignment of practice contexts and contexts of future use.

The present study

This study focuses on the analysis of commercially produced EFL materials used with learners who are in their third year of a four-year pre-vocational Business & Administration programme in The Netherlands, namely *Stepping Stones* (André et al., 2012), *New Interface* (Cornfold et al., 2010) and *All right!* (Houtenbos-Stupenea et al., 2014). Although there are indications that current course materials focus more on developing language knowledge than on learning how to make use of this knowledge in real-time interaction, up-to-date analyses of commonly used coursebooks in The Netherlands are lacking (Kwakernaak, 2008). Since language education in The Netherlands is largely dependent on the use of course materials (Educational Inspectorate, 2004), it is important to establish whether these materials provide pre-vocational EFL learners with effective tools to develop their ability to interact in real time and in interactional situations that match the occupational context for which they are being prepared. We posed the following research question: To what extent do interactional activities in commercially produced course materials in The Netherlands provide opportunities to a) expand pre-vocational learners' EFL knowledge, b) develop the ability to use this knowledge in real-time interaction, c) develop interactional strategies and d) practice interaction in occupational contexts?

To answer this question, a coding scheme was developed that operationalised the requirements for developing interactional ability, i.e., attention paid to language knowledge, language use, interactional strategies and specific contexts (e.g. Celce-Murcia, 2007).

Method

Course materials

Three coursebooks from Dutch publishing houses were selected that were most used with third-year pre-vocational learners in 2013–14: *Stepping Stones 3 vmbo-K* (fourth edition), *New Interface Yellow / Orange label, 3 vmbo K)* (second edition) and *All Right! 3 vmbo-K* (second edition)[2]. The main aim was to determine the type of learning behaviour required of learners in each interaction activity (Littlejohn, 2011). Hence, the interaction activities of all chapters (six or seven per book) were taken as the unit of analysis[3].

Coding scheme

Following Littlejohn (2011), a coding scheme was designed that allows for three levels of analysis: objective description, subjective analysis and subjective inference regarding the likely effect the material will have on its users (cf. Tomlinson, 2012). This resulted in three sections requiring increasingly more interpretation and analysis. Several elements from Bueno-Alastuey & Luque Agulló (2015b)'s tool for analysing oral competence were adopted and made specific to oral interaction, e.g. determining activity type, evaluating the pre-, during and post-stages, the level of directedness (from controlled to guided to free interaction), attentional focus and attention paid to strategies (Appendix 1A).

   Section I collects objective descriptions of factual information pertaining to publication details, type of material (general English or ESP), targeted CEFR level, language of instruction and the number of interaction activities in relation to the total number of activities. It includes an overview of textbook and workbook organisation (including reference material) and of the language functions that are central to each chapter.

   Section II is an inventory of task type, task organisation and interactional context. It only lists activities in which two or more speakers take turns to produce

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[2] Recently, new editions have been published for Stepping Stones and New Interface. These editions have not been taken into consideration for this analysis, because we wished to analyse the materials that learners participating in studies 3 and 4 (see chapters 4 and 5) worked with.
[3] Teacher guides for Stepping Stones and New Interface were available. These did not add substantial information about the interaction activities and were therefore not included as a unit of analysis.

spoken English and distinguishes between simple learning activities focused solely on the practice of EFL oral interaction, and complex tasks in which learners interact in order to complete a task larger than interaction alone. To answer part d) of the research question, this section furthermore surveys the contexts in which each interaction activity is situated, differentiating between the personal, public, occupational and educational context (Council of Europe, 2001).

Section III of the coding scheme operationalises the requirements for developing a) language knowledge, b) language use and c) interactional strategies by detailing the demands made on learners at four stages of learning: leading up to the interactional activity, before interaction, during interaction and after interaction.

The *lead-in* category charts whether learners are prepared for interaction by paying attention to both linguistic knowledge and interactional strategies, and by determining whether this takes place before or after engaging in interaction themselves (e.g. Long, 1996). It further surveys whether reference is made to interactional strategies that learners could use during performance, and whether dialogues are used as models. If so, the coding scheme details whether these dialogues model real-time speech, i.e., the use of language forms and interactional strategies.

The *pre-interaction* category surveys the type of pre-interaction activities that learners perform in order to free up attentional space (Foster & Skehan, 1996): language preparation, content preparation or interactional strategies preparation.

The *during-interaction* category establishes the extent to which the interactional activities provide learners with practice in purposeful real-time interaction. Time demands are charted by analyzing the type of language learners are asked to produce (prescribed or spontaneous). Reciprocity demands are charted by analyzing whether activities contain an information gap. The focus of learners' attentional resources during task performance (e.g. Lightbown & Spada, 2013) is analysed by differentiating between a focus on achieving a communicative goal, using accurate language and interactional strategies. Finally, the coding scheme plots the extent to which learners are engaged in extended, challenging discourse that focuses primarily on meaning-making (e.g. Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999).

The *post-interaction* category surveys the extent to which the gains of interaction are consolidated by outlining the focus of reflection and feedback activities (e.g. Ellis, 2009), opportunities for additional instruction and practice (e.g. Willis, 1996), and opportunities for task repetition (Bygate, 2001; Skehan, 1996).

To promote a reliable use of the coding scheme, exhaustive and precisely-defined options were provided for each category, along with rating guidelines and descriptors of the categories covered in the scheme (e.g. Neuendorf, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003).

Procedure

The first author identified the interaction activities in each chapter and completed the factual information in sections I and II on each coding scheme. Then, three undergraduate students in their final year of an EFL teacher training programme aimed specifically at obtaining a teaching degree in (pre-) vocational education filled in section III for the first chapter of each of the three coursebooks. In the training session that followed, ratings and interpretations of each category were discussed. Some modifications with regards to formulation were made, e.g. for the category *Attentional focus,* the descriptor 'focus on communicating meaning' was reformulated to 'focus on achieving a communicative goal'. This resulted in final consolidation of the coding categories. Subsequently, raters independently rated chapters 2, 4 and 6 of each coursebook to establish inter-rater reliability (see below), and each of the three raters independently rated the remaining chapters of one of the coursebooks.

Rating

Intercoder reliability was determined using Krippendorff's α for multiple raters (Krippendorff, 2004), using the SPSS macro of Hayes and Krippendorff (2007) with bootstrapping (10,000) to estimate confidence intervals. Most of the coding categories showed severe skewness. Since this tends to result in low reliability coefficients despite relatively high levels of inter-coder agreement (cf. Artstein & Poesio, 2008), percentage agreement among the three raters was also calculated for the nominal data.

Ratings for *Language forms* ($\alpha = .928$, 95%, *CI* .901 to .954) and *Interactional strategies* ($\alpha = 1$) modelled in the sample dialogues were ordinal. All other ratings were nominal. Substantial agreement between raters was found for *Preparation* (96.67%, $\alpha = .933$, 95% *CI* .876 to .978), *Spontaneity* (86.67%, $\alpha = .740$, 95% *CI* .61 to .849), *Information gap* (93.33%, $\alpha = .889$, 95% *CI* .774 to .975), *Reflection/ feedback* (91.67%, $\alpha = .687$, 95% *CI* .474 to .887), *Task repetition* (98.33%, $\alpha = .954$, 95% *CI* .834 to 1.) and *Task-repeated information gap* (96.67%, $\alpha = .939$, 95% *CI* .857 to 1). Although alpha values were lower for *Lead-in, Additional work, Discourse type* and *Attentional focus* due to severely skewed data, percentage of agreement was acceptable for these categories (95.00%, $\alpha = .235$, 95% *CI* $-.311$ to .650; 96.67%, $\alpha = -.006$, *CI* -1.00 to .397; 81.67%, $\alpha = .385$, *CI* .044 to .698 and 71.67%, $\alpha = .134$, *CI* $-.109$ to .356, respectively).

The variables were examined for accuracy of data entry and missing values, and were subsequently analysed for each coursebook separately.

Results

Table 1 contains factual information obtained from Section I of the coding scheme. Section I shows that all three books offer general EFL instruction aimed at CEFR level A2/B1 and use Dutch as the language of instruction. It also shows that ca. 10–15% of the curriculum is reserved for oral interaction practice.

TABLE 1

General information about the sample of coursebooks (Section I)

	Stepping Stones	New Interface	All Right!
Type of English	General	General	General
CEFR level	A2/B1	A2/B1	A2/B1
Language of instruction	Dutch	Dutch	Dutch
Number of chapters	7	7	6
Number of interaction activities	35 (10.9%)	50 (14.4%)	50 (15.0%)

Section I furthermore shows that language forms are introduced in relation to specific language functions in all three coursebooks. *Stepping Stones* contains a reference section for interactional strategies in the back of the book, and *All Right!* includes a speaking tip in each unit (Appendix 1B).

Frequencies in Section II (Table 2) indicate that interactional practice is largely organized as pair work and is predominantly situated in the personal and public context. The most frequently occurring activity type is the stand-alone interaction activity. Complex language tasks in which oral interaction is integrated are scarce.

TABLE 2

Inventory of interaction activities (Section II)

		Stepping Stones	New Interface	All Right!
Activity type	stand-alone activity	31 (88.6%)	48 (96%)	50 (100%)
	task	4 (11.4%)	2 (4%)	-
Organisation	pairwork	34 (97.1%)	49 (98%)	50 (100%)
	groupwork	1 (2.9%)	1 (2%)	-
	whole-class work	-	-	-
Context	personal	30 (85.7%)	48 (96%)	18 (36%)
	public	3 (8.6%)	2 (4%)	32 (64%)
	occupational	2 (5.7%)	-	-
	educational	-	-	-

Table 3 shows that *Stepping Stones* does not make use of sample dialogues to introduce the interaction tasks. The other two books use dialogues in 22–28% of the cases. These dialogues mainly model language forms. On two occasions, *All Right!* models some interactional strategies. *New Interface* does not.

TABLE 3

Analysis of sample dialogues

			Stepping Stones	New Interface	All Right!
Number of dialogues			0 (0%)	14 (28%)	11 (22%)
Modelling	language	none	-	-	-
	forms	some	-	11 (78.5%)	11 (100%)
		many	-	3 (21.4%)	-
	interactional	none	-	14 (100%)	9 (81.8%)
	strategies	some	-	-	2 (4.0%)
		many	-	-	-

Section III (Table 4) shows that the lead-in activities are almost exclusively form-focused in all three coursebooks. In the pre-interaction stage, learners mostly engage in language planning. During interaction, speech production is more prescribed than spontaneous except in *Stepping Stones,* where 37.1% of learners' messages feature spontaneous speech and where speech is prescribed for one speaker and spontaneous for the other in 11.4% of the cases. *Stepping Stones* also features a substantial amount of information gap activities. These are largely absent in the other two books. In all three books, learners' attention during interaction is mainly focused on accurate language use and interaction activities engage learners in limited rather than extended discourse.

   After interaction, learners frequently switch roles with their partners and immediately repeat the same task. In these instances, an information gap is mostly absent. *Stepping Stones* and *All Right!* contain a small amount of reflection and/or feedback activities. In the former, the focus is on task completion and accurate language use. In the latter, the focus of reflection is not clear. None of the books offer additional instruction or practice after interaction.

TABLE 4

Analysis of oral interaction activities (Section III)

			Stepping Stones	New Interface	All Right!
Lead-in	focuses on	language	35 (100%)	43 (86%)	46 (92%)
		interaction strategies	-	-	-
		other	-	-	2 (4%)
		interaction precedes activities	-	7 (4%)	2 (4%)
Pre	preparation	language	16 (45.7%)	34 (68%)	42 (84%)
		content	9 (25.7%)	-	3 (6%)
		combination language / content	5 (14.3%)	2 (4%)	-
		uneven between speakers	1 (2.9%)	-	-
		interaction strategies	-	-	-
		no preparation	4 (11.4%)	14 (28%)	3 (6%)
During	spontaneity	mainly prescribed	18(51.4%)	49 (98%)	36 (72%)
		mainly spontaneous	13 (37.1%)		14 (28%)
		uneven between speakers	4 (11.4%)	1 (2%)	-
	information gap	yes	21 (60%)	-	11 (22%)
	attentional focus	accuracy	22 (62.9%)	46 (92%)	45 (90%)
		communicative goal	2 (5.7%)	-	5 (10%)
		strategies	-	-	-
		combination accuracy / communication	9 (25.7%)	3 (6%)	-
		unclear	2 (5.7%)	1 (2%)	
	discourse	limited	31 (88.6%)	48 (96%)	44 (88%)
		extended	4 (11.4%)	2 (4%)	6 (12%)
Post	reflection / feedback	task completion	5 (14.2 %)	-	-
		accuracy	3 (8.5%)	-	-
		communicative goal	1 (2.9%)	-	-
		interaction strategies	-	-	-
		focus unclear	-	-	11 (22%)
	additional work	language	-	-	-
		interaction strategies	-	-	-
		other	-	1 (2%)	-
	task repetition	immediate	13 (37.1%)	49 (98%)	50 (100%)
		delayed	-	-	-
		information gap	10 (76.9%)	2 (4.8%)	15 (30%)

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Discussion and conclusion

The main objective of this study was to establish to what extent interactional activities in commercially produced course materials in The Netherlands provide opportunities a) to expand pre-vocational learners' EFL knowledge, b) to develop their ability to use this knowledge in real-time interaction, c) to develop interactional strategies and d) to practice interaction in specific contexts. The results demonstrate that the interaction activities are focused on developing language knowledge, but rarely focus on learning how to use this knowledge in real-time interaction. The results furthermore show that interaction strategies instruction is largely absent. Interaction activities are set mainly in the personal and public context, but not in the occupational context.

All three coursebooks adopt a form-focused approach to oral interaction. Language forms are introduced in relation to specific language functions, the application of which is practiced mostly in stand-alone activities rather than integrated in more complex tasks. If present, these tasks are placed at the end of the learning sequence. The sample dialogues and lead-in activities almost exclusively serve to help learners notice, practice and apply salient language forms prior to interaction, but typically do not model interactional strategies. The tendency in EFL coursebooks to model accurate and problem-free discourse has previously been reported by Gilmore (2004).

The focus on form is maintained throughout each stage of the interaction activity. In the pre-interaction stage, learners engage in a considerable amount of language planning, but much less in content planning. Speech production during interaction is more prescribed than spontaneous. The advantage of language planning is that it frees up learners' attentional resources, which aids accurate and fluent performance (e.g. Foster & Skehan, 1996). A disadvantage is that language planning hinders practicing formulating messages under time pressure. *Stepping Stones* offers a more balanced practice of prepared and unprepared speech than the other two books. It also features a substantial amount of information gap activities that potentially provide learners with the opportunity to practice interaction that is unpredictable, i.e., where they do not know what the other person is going to say. Despite the large number of information gap activities, however, ratings suggest that learners' attention during these interactions is mainly focused on accurate language use rather than on achieving a communicative outcome, just as in the other two books.

The role cards in *Stepping Stones* explicate the setting and do not reveal what each speech partner is going to say or ask, but they do not always contain a clear communicative goal that can only be achieved through a genuine exchange of

information given. At the same time, learners are instructed to use the sample phrases presented in the coursebook. This is likely to lead more to practicing the correct use of language than to practicing achieving a communicative goal.

Ratings furthermore suggest that all three coursebooks engage learners in limited rather than extended discourse i.e., in discourse that is cognitively and/or linguistically unchallenging. Activities like the repetitive drill and acting out (previously completed) dialogues occur frequently in all three coursebooks. The information gap activities in *Stepping Stones,* however, are also frequently rated as limited. As mentioned above, these activities tend to lack a communicative goal and instruct learners to use sample phrases presented in the coursebook during task performance. This seems to decrease both the cognitive and linguistic challenge posed to learners. An overrepresentation of activities that require little cognitive and linguistic effort in EFL coursebooks has previously been reported by Burns & Hill (2013), Gómez-Rodriquez (2010) and Tomlinson (2012; 2013). Their restricted nature prevents learners from practicing retrieving language knowledge under time-pressure, while the absence of an information gap and/or a communicative goal keeps learners from actual meaning-making while meeting real-life reciprocity demands. Lightbown (2008) and Segalowitz & Lightbown (1999) have argued that such restricted interactional practice does not develop the learners' ability to interact in real-time encounters effectively.

At the post-interaction stage, the three books offer limited reflection, feedback activities nor additional instruction and practice. The reflection activities present in *Stepping Stones* focus on task completion (e.g. "I asked my peer five questions") or on language accuracy ("e.g. I used the words correctly"). *All Right!* invites learners to reflect with an instruction like "Read the dialogue on page 14. Act this out with a classmate. Switch roles. <u>Do you find it difficult?</u> Then listen to the dialogue again" (Workbook, page 14), but it does not become clear what learners might find difficult.

The most-used post-interaction activity is immediate task repetition. This means that learners are instructed to switch roles immediately after completing the interaction task, often without the guarantee of an information gap. Task repetition is generally considered to be helpful in freeing up attentional resources (e.g. Bygate, 2001; Skehan, 1996), but only if learners have been made aware of the aspects of task performance that hindered achievement of interactional success prior to repetition (e.g. Willis, 1996). Since this is not the case in the coursebooks under scrutiny, it is uncertain how valuable immediate repetition is for the development of learners' interactional ability.

Interactional strategies do not typically feature in the coursebooks. *Stepping Stones* includes an overview of useful interaction strategies, but learners are

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not referred to these in the materials. *All Right!* models the meaning negotiation strategy ("Could you repeat that please?" "Could you speak more slowly, please?") in chapter 2, but this strategy is not practiced, applied or reflected on in the interaction sequence. *All Right!* also includes speaking tips, but these do not cover interactional strategies as such and practice of these remains implicit in the material. The overall absence of interactional strategies instruction and practice is in line with Bueno-Alastuey & Luque Agulló's (2015a), Dörnyei and Thurrell's (1994) and Faucette's (2001) findings that interactional strategies aimed at helping learners handle real-time interaction are rarely modelled, introduced or practiced in EFL course materials.

Finally, the contexts in which interactional activities are situated are largely limited to the personal *(Stepping Stones* and *New Interface)* and public *(All Right!)* context. Although this choice seems appropriate for the age group in question, the absence of interactional practice in the occupational context is remarkable in light of the pre-vocational track for which these coursebooks are used. Since interactional ability developed in one context does not guarantee the same ability in other contexts (e.g. Lightbown, 2008), this may leave learners underprepared for occupation-specific EFL oral interaction in further vocational education.

In all, the results of this study show that interaction practice offered in coursebooks focuses on developing language knowledge, but not as much on using this knowledge in interactional settings that simulate real-life processing and reciprocity constraints. Results furthermore show that interactional practice does not include the development of interactional strategies and is limited to the personal and public context. This raises the question whether these curricula provide pre-vocational learners with sufficient opportunity to develop their interactional abilities.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The three coursebooks selected for this study are the most commonly used with pre-vocational learners in The Netherlands and are therefore considered to be representative of pre-vocational curricula in this country. Further research is needed to gain insight into the treatment of oral interaction activities in curricula designed for different educational tracks, age groups and languages, both in- and outside of The Netherlands.

The coding scheme designed for this study is the first to focus specifically on the analysis of oral interaction activities. The substantial agreement found between three independent raters provides a first indication that the coding scheme can usefully be employed to analyse oral interaction activities in (E)FL coursebooks,

but wider application in a variety of educational contexts is needed to further validate this tool.

Implications for practice

At present, weak links exist between SLA theories focused on developing interactional ability and the practical application of these in EFL coursebooks used with pre-vocational learners in The Netherlands. Strengthening this link could increase the opportunities for developing EFL interactional abilities currently offered to pre-vocational learners. Some suggestions are discussed below.

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE

As seen, the coursebooks place heavy emphasis on developing learners' language knowledge and, in line with the overall aims of Communicative Language Teaching, present grammatical and lexical language forms in relation to the communicative functions they serve to fulfil. To develop language knowledge specifically for interactional purposes, language practice should be integrated in meaningful language use (cf. Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.117). To further enhance the development of language knowledge specifically for interactional purposes, coursebooks could supplement their controlled activities (e.g. drills and gap-fills) with practice activities that focus on achieving a communicative goal. Furthermore, since reflection and feedback positively affect the development of language knowledge (cf. Lyster & Saito, 2010), coursebooks could include reflection and feedback activities more systematically than is currently the case. These activities should focus not only on the accurate use of language forms, but on the extent to which learners are able to achieve the communicative goal using these language forms.

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE USE

Coursebooks could improve learners' ability to use their language knowledge by engaging them more in challenging discourse that serves a clear communicative purpose beyond interacting alone, and that is concerned with a genuine exchange of meaning between speech partners while taking account of time constraints and reciprocity in interaction. This could be achieved by including more information gap tasks where there is an actual need to interact with each other in order to exchange the information necessary to achieve a communicative goal, e.g. solving a problem or reaching agreement (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996).

Furthermore, coursebooks could evoke more extended and challenging discourse by complementing interactional practice in isolated interaction activities

with practice in more complex tasks, where learners draw on a range of language skills to achieve a larger communicative goal (e.g. interviewing classmates in order to obtain the information needed to write a brochure).

Coursebooks should prepare learners for interacting under time-pressure while taking into consideration that learners' attentional resources will be thinly stretched when doing so. Coursebooks could balance language planning with content planning, or alternate between these forms of planning. Similarly, coursebooks could complement planned (i.e., prepared) interaction tasks with unplanned (i.e., spontaneous) interaction tasks. Real-life interaction could be simulated, for instance, by placing the interaction task at the beginning of a learning sequence rather than at the end of it. To alleviate the attentional challenge that such a task-first approach poses, coursebooks could promote delayed task repetition. Here, learners reflect on task performance and receive additional input prior to repeating the task, possibly in an adapted version, or with a different peer. During the repeated performance, the need to focus on formulating messages correctly is reduced. This gives learners the space to focus fully on achieving the communicative goal (c.f. Skehan, 1998).

DEVELOPING INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES

To provide learners with more opportunities to develop their interactional abilities, coursebooks could include strategies instruction and practice. Including a survey like the survey in *Stepping Stones* provides learners with a useful tool, especially if it is referred to in the preparation stage of the interaction activity. Awareness of strategies could furthermore be raised by studying models of interaction in which strategies are employed (e.g. Dörnyei, 1995; Rossiter, 2003; Sayer, 2005) and by reflecting and obtaining feedback on their own use of strategies during task performance (e.g. Bejarano et al., 1997; Nakatani, 2005; Yule and Powers, 1994). Additionally, coursebooks could include direct instruction (e.g. Lam, 2004; Nakatani, 2005) and conscious practice of strategies (e.g. Dörnyei, 1995; Rossiter, 2003).

DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO INTERACT IN SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

Because oral performance is context-bound, coursebooks should align the contexts in which learners practice with the contexts in which they will engage in (future) interactional encounters. In this light, coursebooks used with pre-vocational learners could complement the activities situated in the personal and public context with interactional activities that are situated in the learners' future occupational contexts.

Conclusion

Strong oral interaction skills are indispensable for pre-vocational learners, who will need to interact with non-Dutch speakers as part of their job. It is thus of vital importance that these learners gain maximum benefit from the 10–15% of activities presently reserved for oral interaction in coursebooks. Using a theory-based coding scheme to analyse these coursebooks has made apparent the hiatuses that exist in the practice opportunities offered to pre-vocational learners, showing concretely which aspects of oral interaction are missing from current interactional practice. This may give curriculum developers and practitioners direction in their discussions about potential future developments in the EFL curriculum.

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