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Why a good theory does not necessarily make a better textbook: The case of Foreign Language teaching materials within the Applied Cognitive Linguistics framework.

Eloy Romero Muñoz (Sorbonne Nouvelle / ERSO)
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Outline



Theoretical
prerequisites



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Method



Findings



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Conclusion



References

*Andrea Tyler, Lihong Huang,
Hana Jan (Eds.)*

WHAT IS APPLIED COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS?

ANSWERS FROM CURRENT SLA RESEARCH

APPLICATIONS OF
COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

Theoretical prerequisites

This study is grounded in Applied Cognitive Linguistics (Tyler et al., 2018)

ACL views grammar as inherently meaningful and furthers an approach to language acquisition and teaching that stresses such meaningfulness.

The added value of a cognitive-pedagogical approach?

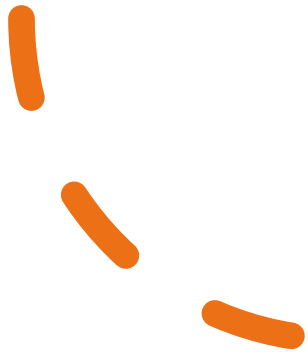
“**canon of ELT grammar**” (O’Keeffe & Mark, 2017)

ELT canon deals with surface phenomena such as **plurals and quantifiers** - grammar is viewed through its manifestations, not in its own conceptual right.
(Drożdż, 2017)

However appealing in their own right, be it only because they allow discrete-item teaching and testing (Ellis, 1997, p. 639), such axiomatic **rules à la Murphy may create more problems than they actually solve** by furthering categories that are “impressionistic” rather than cognitively pertinent (Romero Muñoz, 2012, 2022).



Despite years of research and repeated claims about its facilitative effect, few teaching materials exist within ACL.



The need for quality teaching materials



This paper adopts an ecological perspective to innovation : As Wedell (2009) reminds us, “[i]n-depth appraisal of the innovation context is vital” (p.397).

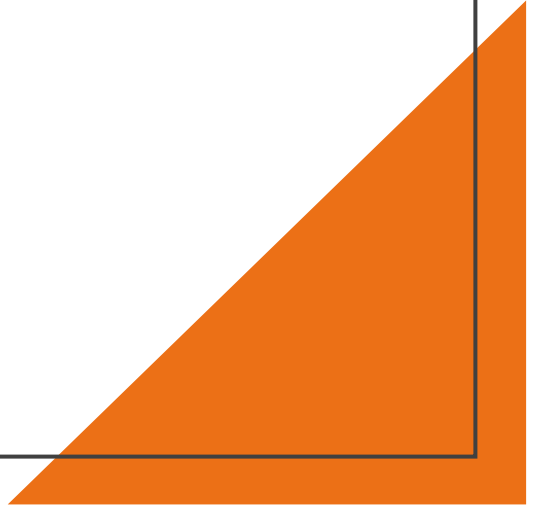
Markee (1997): primary innovations such as ACL require secondary innovations such as teaching materials.



We hypothesize that **ACL is unlikely to be adopted for its own sake; it needs a proper pedagogical vehicle.**

As a corollary, we believe that **existing teaching materials within the ACL framework cannot serve this purpose** in their current state.

Research questions



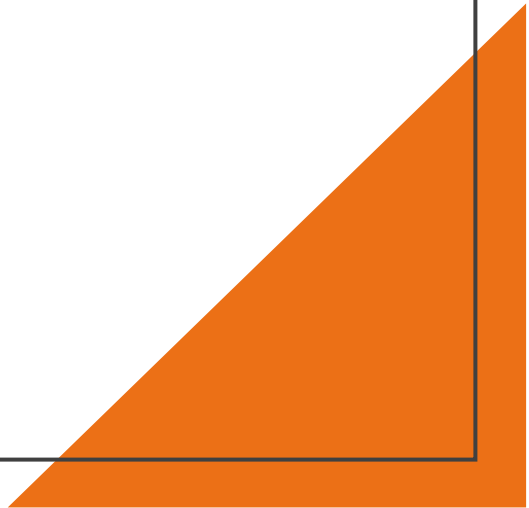


RQ1: Do the reviewed cognitive-pedagogical teaching materials meet basic principles in materials development research as detailed in our principled list of criteria?

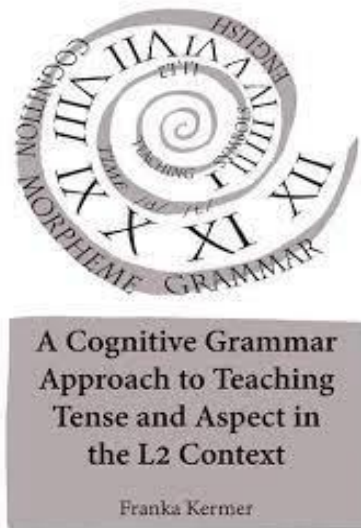
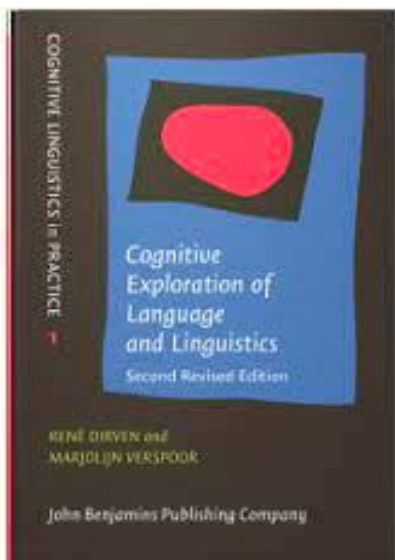
RQ2: How can we improve cognitive-pedagogical teaching materials to facilitate their adoption in language teaching?



Method



Corpus selection



- Corpus - 3 criteria:
 - Circulated beyond academic circles / in mainstream publishing
 - Readily available to the researchers (cf. convenience sampling – Dewaele, 2017)
 - Teaching *the language* rather than teaching the framework



Instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995).

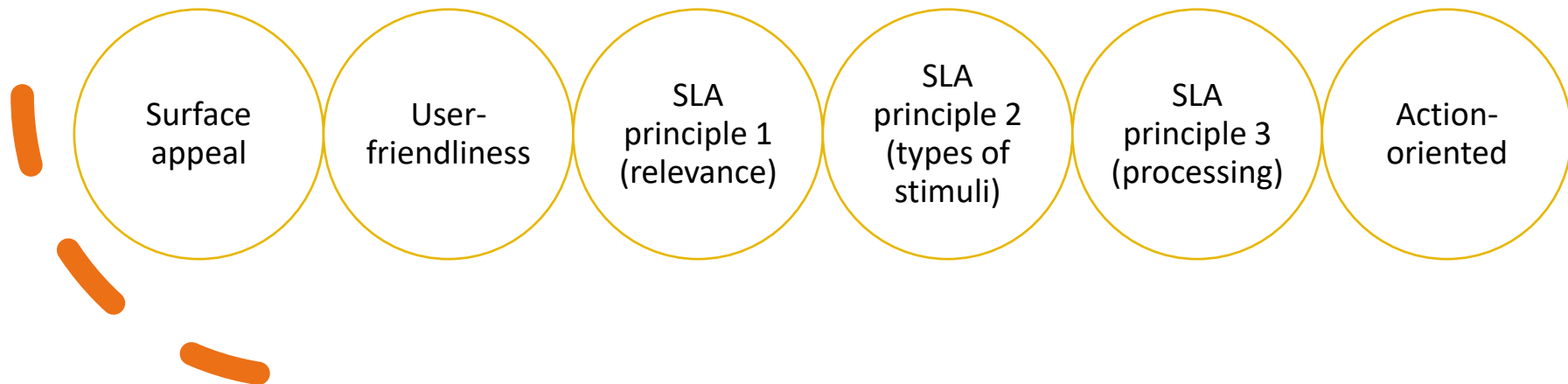
- Heuristic potential to “illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomena under study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 30), i.e. the fact that **ACL has so far largely yielded few commercially available teaching materials and no research has been done on the subject.**
 - As Yin (2009, p.48), we focus on a carefully selected case that is typical of the issue at stake, namely teaching materials inspired by ACL published in mainstream outlets. **The idea is thus to generate hypotheses rather than test them.**
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Corpus

Title and author(s)	Brief description	Language and level
<i>Woordkunst</i> (Rudzka et al., 1991)	Vocabulary self-study textbook ; essentially on prepositions and verb particles	Dutch; beginner
<i>Meanings and Metaphors: Activities to Practice Figurative Language</i> (Lazar, 2003)	Printable material on English idioms classified by metaphor (for teachers)	English; intermediate
<i>Word Power</i> (Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003)	Self-study textbook on English phrasal verbs	English; upper-intermediate and advanced

Principled evaluation criteria

Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018): general and context-specific criteria



Criteria and descriptors

Surface appeal

- Attractive layout (color, fonts).

User-friendliness

- The materials offer practical / flexible solutions:
 - For learners (easy to navigate, can be used independently);
 - For teachers (teacher's pack and supplementary material);
 - For parents and administrators (cost and availability).

SLA principle 1 (relevance)

- Content is relevant:
 - For students (emotionally engaging, see Krashen 2011).
 - For teachers, parents and administrators (compliance with official guidelines and measurable outcomes).

SLA principle 2 (types of stimuli)

- Types of verbal and visual stimuli (see Levin, 1981):
 - ‘decorational’ do not contribute directly or substantially to the meaning;
 - ‘representational’ mirror the contents;
 - ‘organizational’ provide a roadmap.
 - ‘interpersonal’ clarify difficult text;
 - ‘transformational’ offer a mnemonic component.

SLA principle 3 (processing)

- Input and output processing required.

Action-oriented

- The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) and its action-oriented approach have become a default “supranational language education policy” (Little, 2006, 2007). This approach promotes “realistic scenarios” and “learner agency” (Council of Europe, n.d.).

Procedure

Inspired by Tomlinson & Masuhara (2013)

Both authors of this article agreed on a list of principled criteria and used this list to evaluate each textbook, with a special focus on the introduction, illustrations and schematic representations, and a selection of a total of 3 tasks.

Each criterion was graded on a scale of 0 to 2 (with 0 indicating ‘unlikely to meet the desired criterion’, 1 indicating ‘likely to meet the desired criterion’, and 2 indicating ‘likely to meet the desired criterion’).

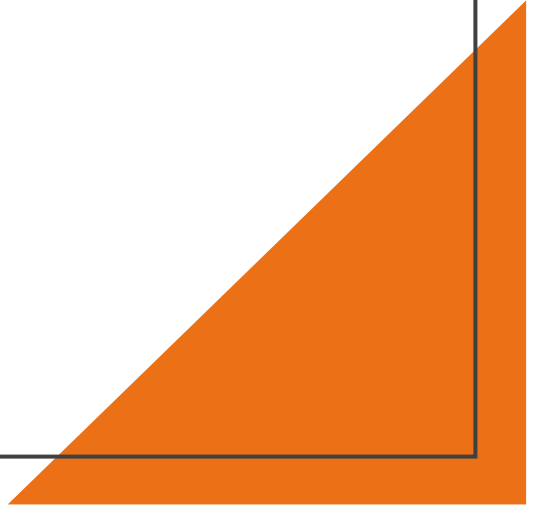
We made sure that **the selected illustrations, schematic representations and tasks** in each of the surveyed textbooks **were representative** of the content of the textbook.

We subsequently compared our findings and scores before agreeing on a common response, presented in the findings section below.

Criteria		Descriptors	TB1	TB2	TB3
1	Surface appeal	Attractive layout			
		Color	0	0	0
		Fonts	2	2	2
2	User-friendliness	The materials offer practical / flexible solutions			
		For learners (easy to navigate, can be used independently);	0	1	0
		For teachers (teacher's pack and supplementary material);	0	1	0
		For parents and administrators (cost and availability).	0	0	0
3	SLA principle 1 (relevance)	Content is relevant			
		For students (emotionally engaging).	0	1	0
		For teachers, parents and administrators (compliance with official guidelines and measurable outcomes).	0	0	0

Criteria		Descriptors	TB1	TB2	TB3
4	SLA principle 2 (types of stimuli)	Types of verbal and visual stimuli (see Levin, 1981):			
		‘decorational’ do not contribute directly or substantially to the meaning.	0	1	0
		‘representational’ mirror the contents;	0	2	0
		‘organizational’ provide a roadmap.	0	1	0
		‘interpersonal’ clarify difficult text;	1	1	1
		‘transformational’ offer a mnemonic component.	1	1	1
5	SLA principle 3 (processing)	Input and output processing required.	0	1	0
6	Action-oriented	“realistic scenarios” and “learner agency” (Council of Europe, n.d.).	0	1	0

Findings



Surface appeal

Fundamental principle for effective textbook design: **achieve impact.**

How **attractive** a textbook is to users (teachers and students of course, but possibly also parents and policy makers)

Corpus > **low surface appeal** (black and white, minimalistic design)

User-friendliness

> Central preoccupation in materials design (Mishan, 2021).

Publishers offer a wealth of **additional material** and **clear instructions** that serve as roadmaps for users.

Not the case in the corpus

Meanings and Metaphors includes extensive teacher's notes in a side-by-side format. The materials for students are presented as short, one to two-page long handouts, which makes for a compact format.

Word Power makes some suggestions to users, but it is unclear if the learner is actually the end user here.

Woordkunst is more explicitly addressing learners

User-friendliness

None of the examined textbooks seem to recommend a specific learning or teaching path.

It is up to the users, be they teachers or learners, to figure out how to best navigate the textbook.

No additional material is provided.

SLA principle 1 - Relevance

Learners and teachers are more likely to feel engaged by materials they consider relevant

- Corpus: lexical focus, prepositions, phrasal verbs, figurative language
- **Aspects that are not central in FLT**

Specialized terminology and metalanguage that is not part of your everyday FL classroom vocabulary (All three books provide a glossary)

SLA principle 2 – Types of stimuli

Corpus is characterized by **numerous schemas** and **some illustrations**.

Meaning and metaphors: decorative and representational illustrations.

Word Power and *Woordkunst* also feature transformational illustration (grammar schemas).

SLA principle 3 – Processing

Meanings and Metaphors PPP method

(Presentation, Practice, Produce).

Woordkunst and *Word Power*: the final stage of the PPP
sequence is omitted.

SLA principle 3 – Processing

Metacognitive approach: reflect on the conceptual underpinnings

Woordkunst and *Word Power*: **prototype to extension**

approach (from the most literal to the most figurative).

Meanings and Metaphors focuses on figurative meaning only.

Action-oriented approach

Current ethos in language teaching: CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001)

i.e. “realistic scenarios” and “learner agency” (Council of Europe, n.d.).

None of the surveyed textbooks adopt an approach that promotes learner agency.

Woordkunst and Word Power : gap-filling exercises.

Action-oriented approach

Word Power offers metalinguistic tasks

In pairs or groups, take turns to paraphrase a certain number of words and explain how the *verbs + out* instantiate the meanings above.

Ex. 4 **stuck out:** usually our hands are along, against our body; if you stretch out one hand it gets so to say *outside* our body, this imaginary container
9 thoughts, words are inside, when you make them come out (by stammering, for example) they come out of your mind/body

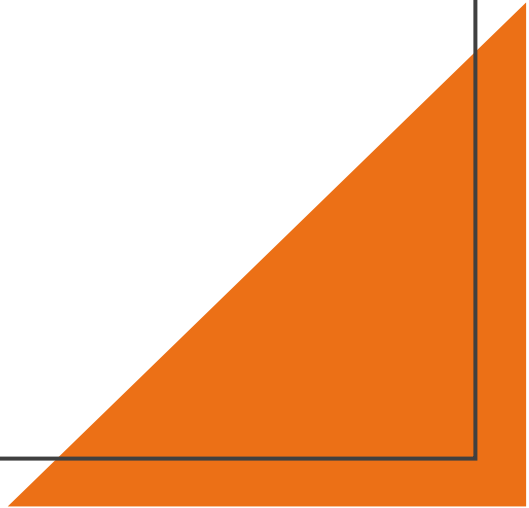
Action-oriented approach

Meanings and Metaphors: **different types of exercises** ranging from simple gap-filling and matching exercises to more complex reading and writing tasks.

Units tend to include an oral task at the end. Topics for such tasks range from interviewing someone / being interviewed to creating poems and giving one's opinion on a subject.

Meanings and metaphors **attempts to connect its content with real-life matters.** For instance, learners are encouraged to give advice (p. 27), sell a product using similes (p. 67), or complete a conversation (p. 71).

Discussion



Discussion

1. Uniformity among the reviewed textbooks
2. The textbooks are rather unattractive
3. They are not so usage-based after all
4. They overrely on the PPP approach
5. The illustrations are not always helpful
6. They further an exclusively lexical syllabus

1. Uniformity

The reviewed textbooks are **homogeneous** in terms of...

- **content;**
- **layout;**
- **methodology;**
- **and medium.**

2. Textbook examples of rather unattractive textbooks

The reviewed textbooks do not align with best practices in mainstream publishing, which is to offer a wealth of supplementary materials (exercises, tests, etc.) in a “glossy” package (Mishan, 2021).

Teachers, who are largely responsible for choosing teaching materials (Mishan & Timmis, 2015, p. 66) **may be reluctant to use or assign textbooks that offer so little** (Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017).

3. Not so usage-based

The surveyed teaching materials **only pay lip service to actual usage** despite ACL being a usage-based framework.

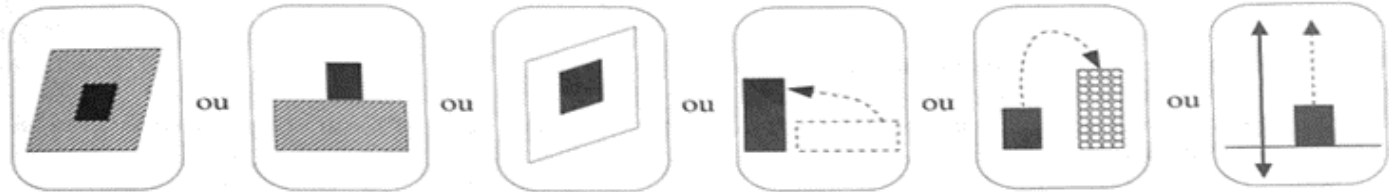
Textbook research places corpora and usage at the center of pedagogical materials (see e.g., Tomlinson, 2008; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010).

NOTE that mainstream language teaching materials score just as poorly (Gabrielatos, 2003, 2006; Römer, 2005; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010)

Synthèse 1 :

Contact / proximité entre le trajecteur et son site, ou action dirigée vers le site

1 op(-)



Le **T** touche le **S** (habituellement une surface);

ou : le **T** change sa position horizontale en position verticale;

ou : le **T** se déplace sur un objet plus élevé ou vers le haut;



ou : l'action du **T** est dirigée vers un but / une limite; le **T** devient souvent accessible;

ou : tout le **S** est affecté par l'action du **T**; l'accent est mis sur la notion de 'complètement';

ou : le **T** cesse d'exister; il est amené au niveau de la non-existence.

Figure 1. The different meanings of op (Woordkunst, p. 87)

4. Overreliance on the PPP approach

The PPP approach has been shown to be more appropriate for conceptually simple structures (Willis & Willis, 1996).

The PPP approach to language teaching may not ensure the kind of input and output processing that is conducive to long-term learning gains (Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2003).

5. Unhelpful illustrations

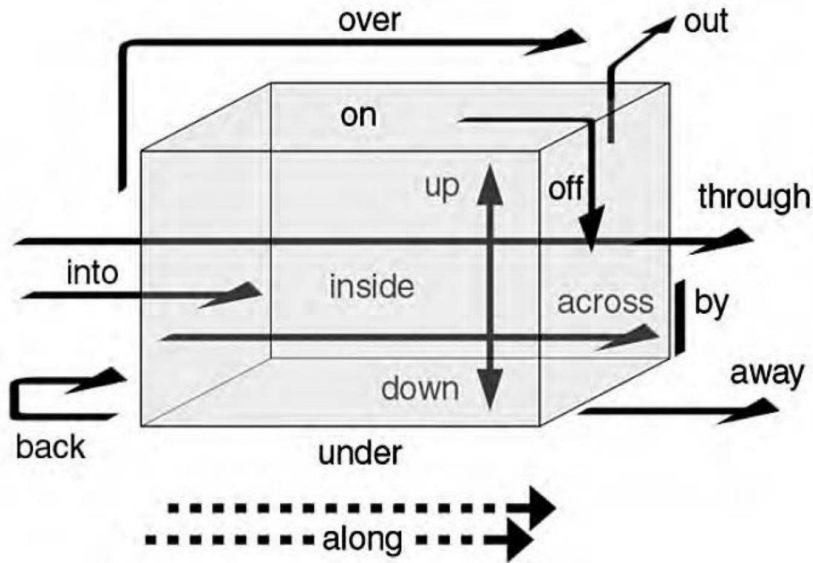


Figure 2. Summary of English prepositions / particles
(Word Power, p.4)

This illustration is 'transformational', i.e. a mnemonic aid (Levin, 1981).

The visual representation of *on* might lead the learner to construe it as *in* (*which is absent from the schema*) – confusing? What about cognitive overload (Sweller, 1988) when cramming so much information into one illustration?

A more recent example...



I told him to open the door.

Figure 3. CL explanation for to-infinitive complement construction (quoted in Niemeier, 2018).

to here signifies goal (cf. preposition). However, realization is NOT guaranteed.

- The illustration seems to imply otherwise (the door is open)
- The pointing finger may be interpreted as just that, and might just as well illustrate sentences such as *Look! He's opening the door* or *Get out!*

Why does it matter?

Poor illustrations may render any textbook unappealing or confusing to the user. For an approach such as ACL that considers grammar diagrams as “a staple” and “a hallmark” (Tyler et al., 2018, p. 3), it is all but a fundamental flaw.

Helpful illustrations?

A recent trend in ACL research: **animations rather than pictures** (see e.g., Roche & Scheller, 2008; Roche & Suñer, 2016; Arnett & Suñer, 2019).

This is the way to go for **better visual representations of cognitive processes**.

See i.e. <https://granima.de/> for an animated grammar of German.

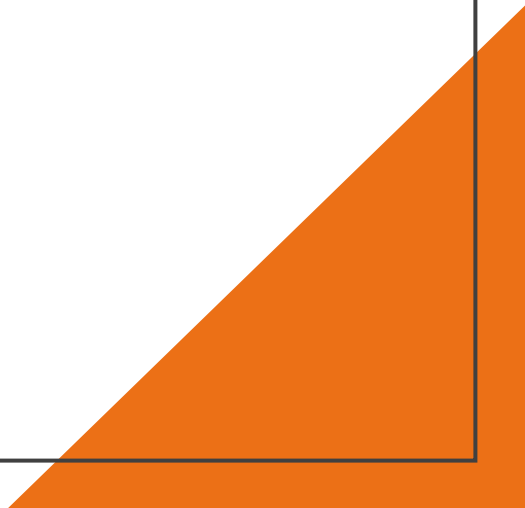
6. Exclusively lexical syllabus

> the surveyed textbooks exemplify the ACL framework's lexicalist agenda.

Kennedy (1988; quoted in Wedell 2009, p. 397), successful implementation of innovations largely depends on the compatibility between the innovation and existing educational guidelines

FL teaching is still largely organized around a morphosyntactic core (see O'Keeffe & Mark, 2017).

Conclusion



RQ1

Limited ecological validity of surveyed ACL-inspired teaching materials, which are neither “comprehensible” (Krashen 1987, 1988) nor “compelling” (Krashen, 2011)

The reviewed cognitive-pedagogical teaching materials **do not meet basic principles in materials development research as detailed in our principled list of criteria**, which may explain why their use has remained marginal in language teaching.

RQ2: Making ACL classroom-ready?

- Teachers look for **teachability**.
- Students look for **ease-of-use**.
- Publishers are keen on **replicating commercially successful course books** (Tomlinson, 2003).
- Language policy makers are more concerned with meeting **standards**

→ Hard to satisfy everybody.

ACL may be a hard sell, literally and figuratively, regardless of how robust ACL findings may be.

RQ2

BUT...

CL, even in its most applied iterations such as teaching materials, **is not a pedagogical framework**; it is essentially a theory about cognition and mental representation whose 'commitment' is **to offer a description of language** that matches what we know about the human mind and brain (Lakoff, 1990).

We can reasonably assume that a better understanding of how language works is bound to benefit language teaching. However much CL can inform FL pedagogy, it can neither replace nor ignore it.

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