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Learning to Foster Autonomy: The Role of Teacher Education Materials

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increased appreciation of the interrelationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, both in the classroom and in the self-access centre. One obvious impact on learners' autonomy is their teachers' understanding of what autonomy means, and their ability to implement it in the classroom. Especially for beginning teachers, knowledge of learner autonomy is likely to be shaped in large part by the professional training they receive and the amount of attention given to the topic during their teacher education. It is therefore important to ask to what extent teacher training courses prepare teachers for fostering autonomy, including those teachers working in self-access centres. This study attempts to answer that question by critically investigating a range of popular teacher training course materials widely used in professional programmes worldwide. We apply an evaluative framework to identify 1) what information teachers are given about learner autonomy, and 2) the extent to which the materials cover the teaching of different skills for independent learning. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the growing interest in autonomy, it was found that the selected books included almost no information about learner autonomy at all and did not, with one or two minor exceptions, focus on the development of skills for supporting autonomous learning.

Keywords: learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, teacher education, teacher education resources.

Introduction

Learner autonomy, as a subject for research and as an educational goal, has gained a lot of traction in recent years. Autonomy is now a common theme at conferences and in professional journals, and is well on the radar of the average language teacher. The idea that learners need to be able to take control over their own learning to be successful not just in class, but also to learn independently without a teacher outside the class, has become widely accepted in mainstream language teaching (Benson, 2001). Breen's process syllabus (1987) and Nunan's learner-centred approach (1988) are examples of this but also more recent approaches to learning and teaching, such as task-based language teaching, include elements that can support the development of autonomous learning skills (cf. Errey & Schollaert, 2005). In general, there is now a broader awareness of the importance of developing language and autonomous learning skills in addition to the language competencies. The development of learner autonomy is sometimes carried out through "learner training" or dedicated strategy instruction often through self-access centres (Gardner & Miller, 1999), but the most likely

context in which learners should come into contact with the idea of autonomy and develop appropriate skills is the language course. As such, the classroom teacher is likely to have a major impact on students' development towards autonomy. Much depends, then, on the teacher's knowledge of autonomy and his/her ability to implement it into the curriculum, either with or without the use of self-access facilities to complement classroom teaching. However, it is still unclear how teachers develop this knowledge and the necessary practical skills. It is likely that teacher education courses and the materials used in them play an important role (Lamb & Reinders, 2008), but this has not been directly investigated yet. For this reason, this study looks at eleven popular teacher education books to establish if they deal with learner autonomy and if so, how they teach teachers to foster autonomy in the classroom. In particular we were interested to identify if the books show teachers *how* to foster autonomy in the classroom. We will begin by reviewing the relevant literature on developing learner autonomy before describing our study.

Learning to Foster Autonomy

Learner autonomy is a multi-faceted and complex construct that includes political, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions (Benson, 1996, Reinders, 2011). At a practical level, the development of autonomy requires learners to build up a skillset that allows them to direct their own learning. Most learners do not naturally have this skillset and need explicit instruction to develop it: "...if learners are not trained for autonomy, no amount of surrounding them with resources will foster in them that capacity for active involvement and conscious choice, although it might appear to do so" (Hurd, 1998, p. 72-73). But what do teachers need in order to be able to foster autonomy? Much will depend on their own conception of autonomy and their experience in implementing it at the chalk face. There are two aspects to this, one has to do with the teacher's own autonomy, and the other with a set of teaching skills relevant for developing autonomy. In the literature, there has been an increasing attention given to teacher autonomy (McGrath, Sinclair, & Lamb, 2000; Lamb & Reinders, 2008). Teacher autonomy has been defined as the ability to improve one's own teaching through one's own efforts (see Lamb & Reinders, 2008). It therefore includes both the teacher's ability to make decisions about teaching and their own professional development. This assumes both a degree of political autonomy in the sense that teachers need to have the freedom to make such decisions, as well as knowledge of themselves as teachers and as learners, in order to know how to make such decisions. Teacher autonomy is

also usually conceived of as including the ability to understand the students' learning needs and the ability to support them in their development towards autonomy. It is this latter ability that we are investigating in this article.

Very little previous research exists that investigates the development of such skills and the ways in which teachers are supported in this. This research focuses either on existing programmes (Vieira, Paiva, Marques & Fernandes, 2008), who describe the development of a teacher education programme that attempts to “involve teachers in action-based inquiry into the development of pedagogy for autonomy in schools” or on professional literature for beginning teachers (teacher training materials/textbooks). The programme “aims at promoting student teachers' critical reflectivity by helping them to: (1) problematise the contexts of teaching and teacher development, (2) inquire into pedagogical theories and practices, (3) promote learner-centred pedagogy, and (4) value self-direction and collaboration in professional development.” The programme is based on and uses small-scale action research projects conducted by the student-teachers in which they learn about ways to encourage reflection, experimentation, regulation, and negotiation. This is an innovative programme, which has been operating for 15 years now and to which a great deal of expertise and resources have been committed. It is probably safe to say that such expertise and resources are not generally available to most beginning teachers and such programmes are unlikely to be representative of the experience of most teachers. For practical reasons it would have been difficult for us to get insight into the contents of professional courses in a range of countries. Instead we decided to focus on the contents of the most commonly used teacher education literature.

Methodology

This study took place in Gazi University, with one of the authors providing support from a distance. Our aim was to identify the most popular, widely used, and currently available course books for language teachers. First, we identified eleven of the most popular books for courses in language teaching based on publicly available sales-rankings, such as through Amazon.com and other popular book sellers. Although we cannot be completely certain that the books we selected are indeed those that sold the largest number of copies, we do not doubt that they are among the most commonly used around the world. The criteria for inclusion were that the books teach beginning language teachers, cover a wide range of skills

(excluding books on, for example, teaching vocabulary or grammar), and are widely used in many countries. The books we selected are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. The books selected for the study

1- <i>Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach</i>	Michael Wallace	1991
2- <i>Teacher education for languages for specific purposes</i>	Ron Howard & Gillian Brown	1997
3- <i>Tasks for Teacher Education: A Reflective Approach</i>	Rosie Tanner & Catherine Green	1998
4- <i>A Course in Language Teaching</i>	Penny Ur	1998
5- <i>Teachers in Action: Tasks for In-Service Language Teacher Education and Development Cambridge Teacher Training and Development</i>	Peter James	2001
6- <i>Understanding Your International Students: An Educational, Cultural, and Linguistic Guide</i>	Jeffra Flaitz	2003
7- <i>A Practicum in TESOL</i>	Graham Crookes	2003
8- <i>Professional Development for Language Teachers: Strategies for Teacher Learning</i>	Jack C. Richards & Thomas S. C. Farrell	2005
9- <i>Principles of Language Learning and Teaching</i>	H. Douglas Brown	2006
10- <i>Becoming a Teacher through Action Research</i>	Donna Kalmbach Phillips & Kevin Carr	2006
11- <i>Working with Second Language Learners: Answers to Teachers' Ten Top Questions</i>	Stephen Cary	2007

In order to investigate if and, if so, how the books provide information to teachers about how to foster autonomy, we drew on a framework for self-directed learning developed by one of the authors (Reinders, 2010). This includes eight stages in the self-directed learning process (see Table 2). These stages are iterative; they form a cycle that repeats and builds on itself. They are an expansion and adaptation of the five-step model developed by Knowles (1975) and are widely considered to be the key skills learners need to be able to self-direct their learning. We investigated if the books covered ways of supporting learners at these stages. It is worth noting here that we are fully aware that self-directed learning and learner autonomy are not interchangeable. Autonomy, for example, includes a more political aspect relating to an individual's freedom to make their own choices about their education, as well as a more philosophical view relating to "the ability for individuals to choose and follow their own conception of a life that they deem to be suitable for themselves" (Winch, 2006, p. 1). We are not diminishing the importance of these elements of autonomy, but they are less easily

identifiable from materials and were therefore considered to be beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we decided to focus on the more practical skills involved in the development of autonomy.

Table 2. The eight stages in the self-directed learning process

LEARNING STAGES	EXAMPLES
Identifying needs	Learner experiences/ difficulties in using the language.
Setting goals	Contextually determined, relatively flexible.
Planning learning	Contextually determined. Very flexible.
Selecting resources	Self-selection by learners.
Selecting learning strategies	Self-selection by learners.
Practice	Implementation (language use) and experimentation.
Monitoring progress	Self-monitoring, peer-feedback
Assessment and revision	Self-assessment, reflection

Figure 1 shows how these eight stages form a cycle, and how they are grounded in and impact on students' reflection, motivation, and their interaction (with the language and other learners).

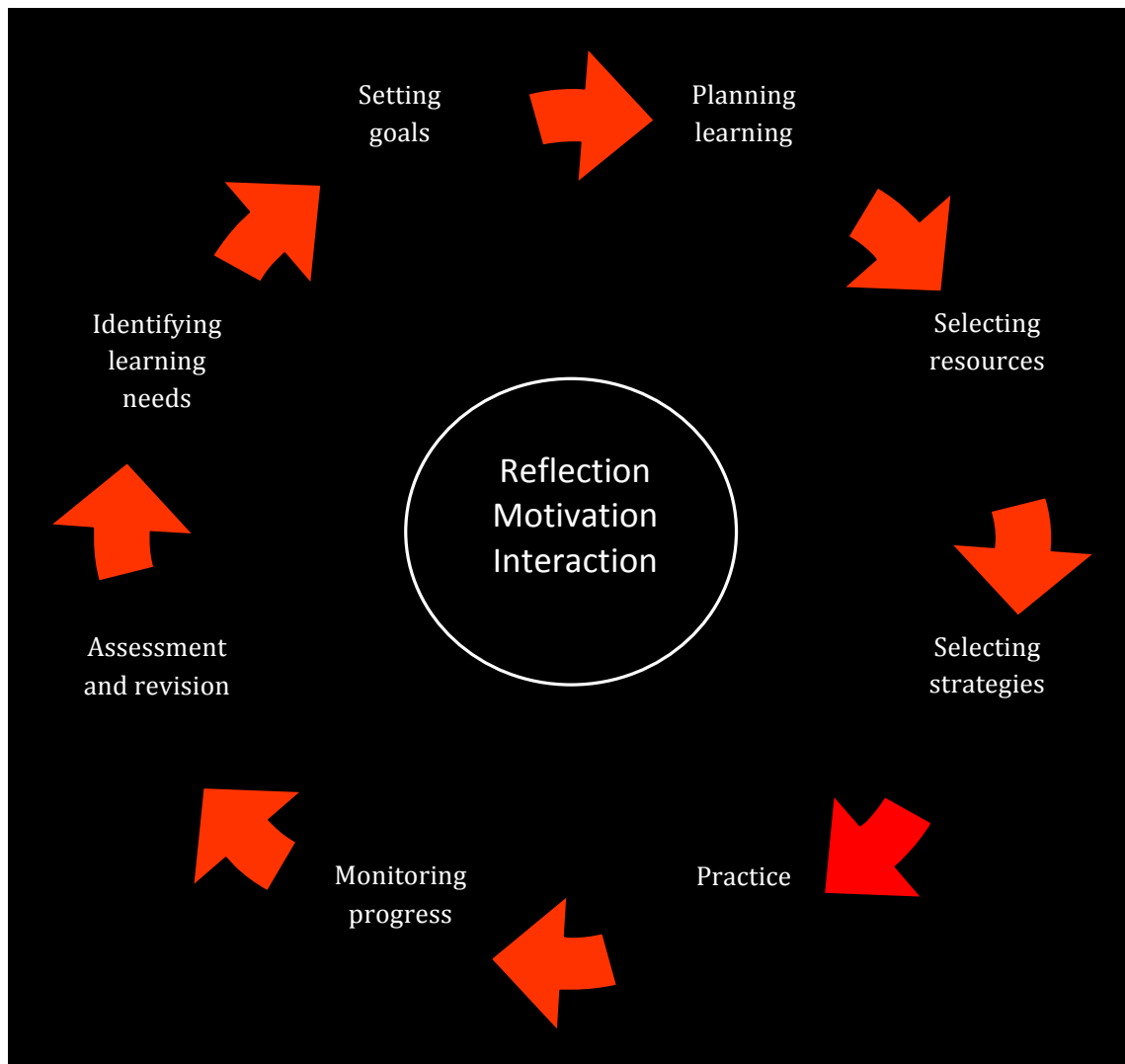


Figure 1. The iterative self-directed learning process

Next, the eleven textbooks were investigated by the two authors to identify if and how they discussed the eight stages mentioned in Table 1. Each of us went through each of the eleven books and marked any instances where the books mentioned autonomy or any of the skills in Table 1. We made a distinction between cases where the books provided a description of learner autonomy and where they provided suggestions and materials on how to foster autonomy (e.g., sample materials, models). In case of a mismatch between the evaluation of both researchers, the findings were discussed until all discrepancies (of which there were very few to begin with) were resolved.

Results

Upon analysis of the results, it immediately became clear that descriptions of learner autonomy were virtually non-existent and that in only very few instances the skills in Table 1 were discussed. We will look at some examples now.

In *Professional Development for Language Teachers* by Richards and Farrell (2005), mention is made of the use of portfolios and their potential role in developing in learners' awareness of the learning process. This book also discusses the use of portfolios by the teacher and, implicitly, as this is not mentioned, by the student to monitor progress. It includes an example of a teacher's portfolio and vignettes from teachers who have used portfolios with their students. The book also talks about the importance of learners being able to plan their own learning but it does not include specific instructions on how to do this, nor does it make explicit reference to learner autonomy. The course book *Tasks for Teacher Education: A Reflective Approach* by Tanner and Green (1998) does mention the importance of learners setting their own goals, albeit not in any length. It also talks about the importance of learners planning their own learning but does not include information about how to teach learners how to do this. Similarly, it discusses the importance of learners monitoring their own progress, without going into any practical detail. The book *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach* by Wallace (1991) only mentions the need for learners to plan their learning, under the heading of "microteaching." The book *Teacher Education for Languages for Specific Purposes* by Howard and Brown (1997) includes some information about the importance of independent learning strategies, but these are limited to strategies that teachers use to develop their own skills. The books in Table 3 did not include any information about the skills listed in Table 2.

Table 3. Books that did not contain information about skills in Table 2

1. <i>A Course in Language Teaching</i>	Penny Ur	1998
2. <i>Teachers in Action: Tasks for In-Service Language Teacher Education and Development</i> <i>Cambridge Teacher Training and Development</i>	Peter James	2001
3. <i>Understanding Your International Students: An Educational, Cultural, and Linguistic Guide</i>	Jeffra Flaitz	2003
4. <i>A Practicum in TESOL</i>	Graham Crookes	2003
5. <i>Principles of Language Learning and Teaching</i>	H. Douglas Brown	2006
6. <i>Becoming a Teacher through Action Research</i>	Donna Kalmbach Phillips & Kevin Carr	2006
7. <i>Working with Second Language Learners: Answers to Teachers' Ten Top Questions</i>	Stephen Cary	2007

The chart below summarises the state of play. Out of 11 books, only 4 cover information about autonomy. None of the books included examples, or specific instructions.

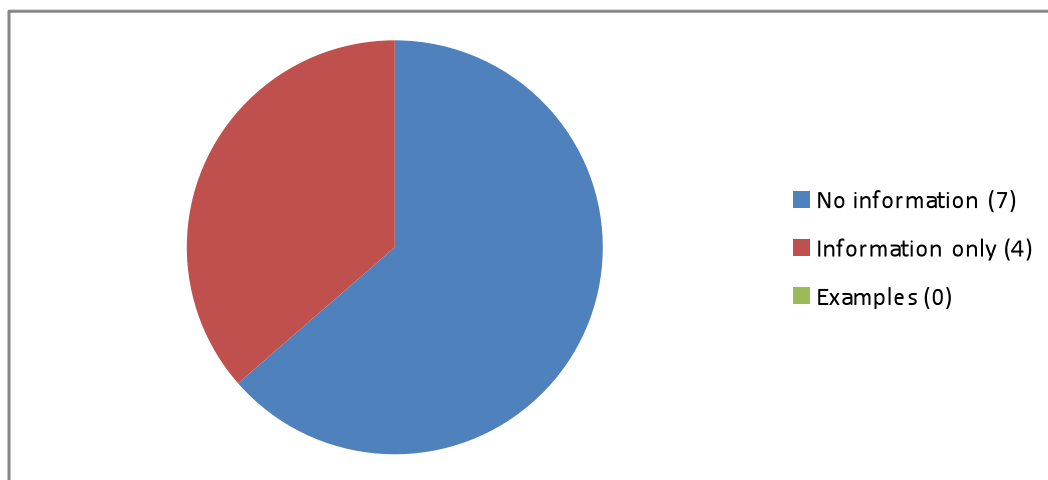


Figure 2. Number of textbooks covering autonomy

Discussion

The results above are surprising, and from the perspective of researchers interested in learner autonomy, disappointing. Although there was some limited discussion of portfolios and the importance of planning and monitoring in some of the books, none made any attempt to cover the skills identified in Table 2, and none discussed the topic of learner autonomy explicitly or to any depth. In the few occasions where the books discussed skills, such as planning and monitoring, no explicit guidance was given to the readers, no examples or models included, and no specific instructions on how to incorporate these subjects into a lesson.

Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are closely linked and without sufficient knowledge and guidance, teachers are unlikely to develop the skills to be able to foster learner autonomy in their own classrooms. The last decades have seen major changes in language education with a focus towards more communicative, more authentic, and more learner-focused pedagogies, but clearly there is still a considerable way to go before the development of language-learning skills, and the importance of preparing learners for, and supporting them in language use outside the language classroom becomes a standard area of attention in textbooks.

We would like to acknowledge some limitations to this study. One of these, of course, is that teachers' development does not only result from their interaction with textbooks. People learn from many sources, not least of which are the teacher educators who facilitate

the teacher development courses they take, as well as classroom observations and journal reflections. Nonetheless, we feel the course textbook is an important source of information and therefore important to look at. Secondly, it can be argued that the model of self-directed learning used in this study only reflects one aspect of autonomy, and only includes some of the more practical skills that learners need to develop. It is possible that the textbooks discuss aspects of learning, such as choice and freedom, critical reflection, and the development of a general awareness, but for practical reasons we had to limit ourselves to only those aspects that we could relatively easily recognise as relating to the development of autonomy. It also became clear to both of us after studying these eleven textbooks that very little attention is given to such aspects of teaching.

In conclusion, the results show that despite the common interest in learner autonomy teachers are not necessarily provided with sufficient information in teacher training texts to develop an understanding of learner autonomy, at least not at a practical level. This is likely to extend to those working in self-access centres. Without such an understanding, perhaps it is not surprising that we often find learners struggling to develop as autonomous learners. One implication of this is that materials writers need to pay more explicit attention to the ways in which teachers can develop learner autonomy and provide beginning teachers with more information about autonomy and, in particular, with specific guidance and examples of how to foster autonomy in and outside of the classroom. Another important implication is that teacher educators, and of course the teachers they teach, cannot rely on popular textbooks to cover this important subject and will instead have to complement the course book with additional materials and instruction. If learner autonomy is less likely to develop without teacher autonomy, then more attention needs to be given to the contents of teacher education materials.

Notes on the contributors

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