



## DO CLASSROOM TEXTBOOKS ENCOURAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY?

Hayo REINDERS\*  
Cem BALÇIKANLI\*\*

**Abstract:** The development of learner autonomy is widely seen as beneficial in preparing students for lifelong learning. It is also recognised that most learners need explicit instruction in skills for independent learning. Classrooms provide a natural opportunity to develop these skills in learners. As textbooks play such an important role in most classrooms, it is important to ask to what extent they prepare learners for their future learning. Surprisingly, this has not been done before. This study investigated five English textbooks, commonly used in classrooms worldwide, to determine the 1) range and 2) frequency of advice given to learners about the language learning process. It uses an evaluative framework to identify advice relating to the different aspects of the independent learning process. The study found that the textbooks do little to foster learner autonomy and that when they do, they offer limited opportunity for practice to students.

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy, materials adaptation, language textbooks.

**Özet:** Öğrenen özerkliğinin gelişimi öğrencileri yaşam boyu öğrenme sürecine hazırlama konusunda yararlıdır. Birçok öğrencinin bağımsız öğrenmeyle ilgili olarak belirgin bir şekilde eğitim alması sıklıkla fark edilen bir durumdur. Sınıf ortamları öğrencilerin bu becerilerini geliştirmesi için doğal bir fırsat olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Ders kitapları, sınıf ortamlarında oldukça önemli bir rol oynadığı için, ders kitaplarının öğrencileri gelecekteki öğrenme süreçlerine ne kadar hazırladıkları sorulması gereken önemli bir sorudur. Bunun henüz yapılmamış olması oldukça düşündürücüdür. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma öğrencilere dil öğrenme süreciyle ilgili olarak verilen bilgilerin 1) çeşitliliği 2) sıklıklarını belirlemek amacıyla tüm dünyada sıklıkla kullanılan beş İngilizce ders kitabını incelemiştir. Bağımsız öğrenme sürecine ilişkin bilgileri belirlemek için değerlendirme çerçevesi kullanılmış ve incelenen ders kitaplarının öğrenen özerkliğini az geliştirdiği ve öğrencilerin bu süreci deneyimlemesi konusunda sınırlı fırsatlar sunduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Öğrenen özerkliği, materyal uyarlama, dil ders kitapları

### Introduction

The development of learner autonomy has become commonplace in many classrooms around the world. 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). In general, there is now a broader awareness of the importance of developing language learning skills in addition to the language itself. The development of learner autonomy is sometimes carried out through 'learner training' or 'dedicated strategy instruction' but the most likely context in which learners come into contact with the idea of autonomy on a regular basis, is the language course, and by extension, the textbook used in that course. Course textbooks may include some deliberate focus on the learning process and encourage students to reflect on their progress and as such are likely to play an important potential role in the development of students' independent learning skills. However, it is unclear how textbooks implement this, or indeed, if they really do. If they do not, or do so inadequately, then it is less likely that students will develop as autonomous learners. There is no previous research to answer these

\* PhD, Middlesex University, The UK, hayoreinders@gmail.com

\*\* Lecturer, Gazi University, Ankara, Turkey, balcikanli@gmail.com

questions and this study therefore set out to investigate and compare the inclusion of a focus on autonomous learning skills in five of the most commonly used English textbooks.

### **Materials evaluation for autonomy**

This small-scale study involved an evaluation of course textbooks. Evaluating language teaching materials can take place at different stages. At the pre-use stage materials are seen as work plans or constructs, during use they are judged as materials in process, while retrospective evaluation considers outcomes from materials use (Breen, 1989). Ellis (1997) suggests that predictive evaluation, which aims to determine appropriateness for a specific context, is carried out either by experts or by teachers using checklists and guidelines. At the in-use stage ‘long-term, systematic evaluations of materials ... are generally considered to be successful’ (Tomlinson, 1998, p. 5). These include ‘formative decisions for improvement through supplementation or adaptation and [sensitising] teachers to their own teaching and learning situation’ (Nedkova 2000, p. 210).

Evaluating textbooks for autonomy can be done at each of these three stages, but here we limit ourselves to predictive evaluation; we aim to ‘determine the appropriateness for a specific context’, which in our case means the extent to which the textbooks attempt to provide information about, and practice in, skills for autonomous language learning. No previous studies exist that we are aware of that have looked at this particular question. There are, however, studies that have investigated how self-access materials (i.e. materials used in a self-access centre by students learning independently), and the extent to which they support the development of learner autonomy. Reinders & Lewis (2005, 2006) investigated 25 randomly selected materials advertised as ‘suitable for self-access’, from their University’s self-access centre. They then applied an evaluative framework for self-study materials. They found that many of the materials did not include those elements needed for successful self-study. In a follow-up study they found that this applied not only to print materials but also to computer programs for the self-study of languages (2005). Purely self-study materials (i.e. not designed for use in a self-access context) were investigated by Jones (1993). He found that many of the ‘do it yourself’ materials he looked at were old-fashioned in their pedagogy and methodology with a number in 1993 still based on audiolingual principles. Jones also found that strategy training and the fostering of autonomous learning skills were almost entirely absent.

Previous, informal, discussions held by practitioners interested in learner autonomy, such as those on the long-standing Auto-L discussion list and the ‘autonomy in learning and teaching materials’ blog and forum have emphasised the importance of evaluating textbooks for their focus on autonomy. As they are often the primary (and in some cases the only) source of information *about* learning, it is important that it is investigated how they encourage students to reflect on their learning process, and how they offer practice and feedback in this. The discussions held online also pointed out that such investigation may help to establish parameters for recommended textbook features, which will help in future materials production. Such evaluation of regular classroom textbooks for their focus on autonomous learning has not, to the best of our knowledge, been carried out to date. We therefore set out to fill this gap in the literature.

Previous studies (e.g. Fenner 2000) have highlighted the importance of identifying whether textbook materials give students opportunities to make their own choices about what or how to learn within the book, whether there is a focus on learning styles and strategies, and

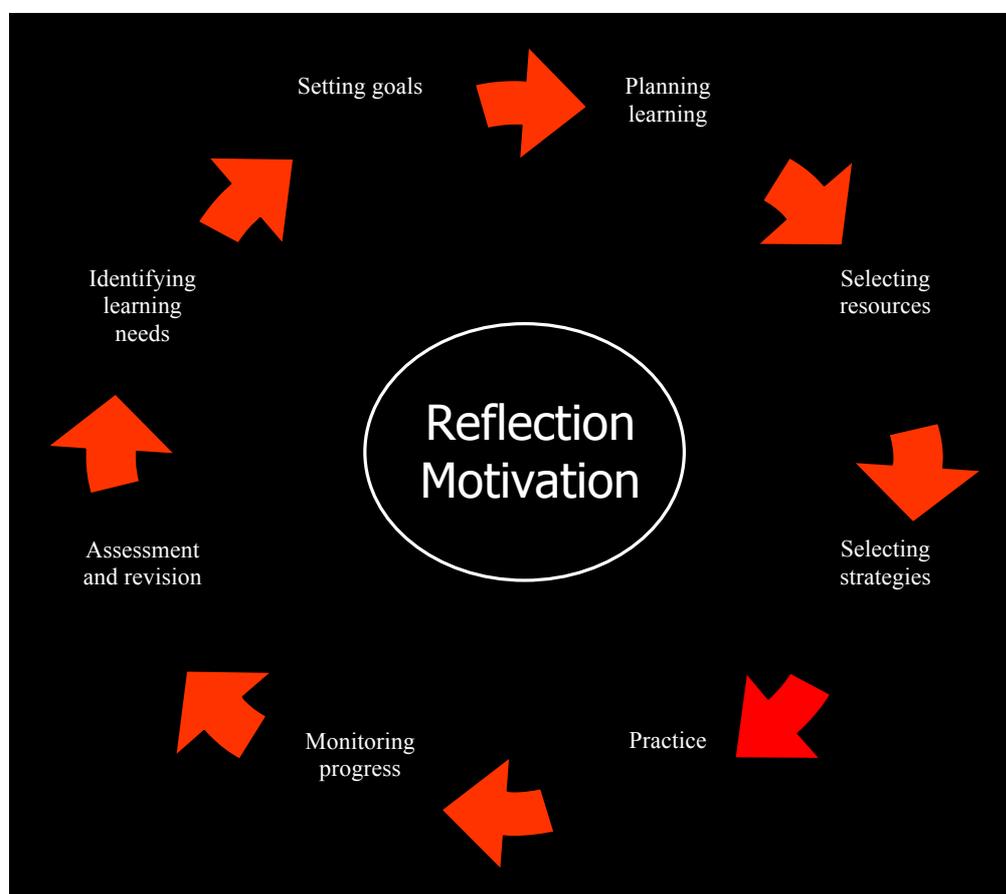
whether there are opportunities for reflection and awareness-building. As for the Turkish context, there have been certain studies focusing on course book assessment and evaluation up to now. To illustrate, Arıkan (2008) examined what kind of topics are included in 15 EFL textbooks used in Turkey. Employing both quantitative and qualitative measures, he found out that the topics do not reflect real life as much. Arıkan (2009) collected the opinions of future teachers of English in order to shed light on what happens in Turkish EFL classrooms with regard to the use of English. Using qualitative research design and analyzing reports made by 12 volunteering practicum students, the research indicated that participants generally find the quality of coursebooks acceptable although problems with coursebooks are often associated with the teachers who use them. Kesen (2010), on the other hand, investigated EFL learners' perceptions about the concept of foreign language coursebook by means of metaphors. Analyzing the data using the content analysis, the study indicated that for most of the learners, language coursebooks are perceived as a planet, foreign country, secret garden, and space, which indicates uncertainty and enigma experienced by the learners. Nonetheless, none of those, to the best of our knowledge, paid a particular attention to the place of autonomy in textbooks. In this regard, in order to investigate if, and if so, how textbooks books provide information and practice in the areas of whether textbook materials give students opportunities to make their own choices about what or how to learn within the book, whether there is a focus on learning styles and strategies, and whether there are opportunities for reflection and awareness-building, we drew on a framework for self-directed learning developed by one of the authors (Reinders, 2010). It includes eight stages in the self-directed learning process. 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). They are widely considered to be the key skills learners need to be able to self-direct their learning.

Table 1. Stages in the self-directed learning process

<b>LEARNING STAGES</b>	<b>TEACHER-DIRECTED</b>	<b>LEARNER-DIRECTED</b>
<b>Identifying needs</b>	Placement tests, teacher feedback.	Learner experiences/ difficulties in using the language.
<b>Setting goals</b>	Determined by the course, relatively fixed.	Contextually determined, relatively flexible.
<b>Planning learning</b>	Determined by the teacher. Somewhat flexible.	Contextually determined. Very flexible.
<b>Selecting resources</b>	Provided by teacher.	Self-selection by learners.
<b>Selecting learning strategies</b>	Teacher models and instructions.	Self-selection by learners.
<b>Practice</b>	Exercises and activities provided by teacher	Implementation (language use) and experimentation.
<b>Monitoring progress</b>	Regular classroom feedback and comments on assignments and tasks	Self-monitoring, peer-feedback
<b>Assessment and revision</b>	Tests, curriculum changes	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). Astute readers will have noticed that we have used the term 'self-directed learning' above when talking about learner autonomy. It is important to note here, that by emphasising observable skills we are taking a somewhat mechanical view of learner autonomy (one that includes self-directed learning skills). We are fully aware of the more political aspect of learner autonomy, relating to an individual's freedom to make their own choices about their education, as well as the 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 are beyond the scope of this article. . In the rest of the article we describe our study and its results as they pertain to the observable and recognisably trainable elements of learner autonomy.

Figure 1: The cycle of self-directed learning



### Methodology

First, we identified five popular English language textbooks based on publicly available sales-rankings. The criteria for inclusion were that the books teach English, as opposed to other languages, are written in English, are available for learners at the intermediate level, and are widely used in many countries. The books we selected are: Face to Face, New Cutting Edge, New Opportunities, The Interchange Series, and New Headway. Although it is possible these are not the best-selling books we do believe they are both very popular and widely available around the world even in Turkish context as some of those were used in several research

studies in Turkey as well (Arıkan, 2008; Arıkan, 2009; Batdı and Özbek, 2010). Next, the five textbooks were investigated by the two authors in terms of the occurrence or absence of these eight stages using the framework discussed in the previous section. We made a distinction between cases where the books provided *information* about self-directed learning, and where they provided opportunities to put them into *practice*. For example, if a book talked *about* the importance of learning strategies but did not give any opportunities for controlled practice, this would be considered as an example of giving ‘information’ only. If, however, classroom activities were included to give students a chance to practise these strategies, then this would be categorised as ‘practice’. Any cases where there was a mismatch between the evaluation of both researchers were discussed until all discrepancies (of which there were very few) were resolved.

## Results

First we present a summary of the results in Table 2. This shows the number of books in which each of the learning stages was included. The final column shows the number of books that gave *information* about that learning stage (for example, explaining the importance of ‘identifying needs’) and the number of books that included *activities* for students to put it into practice. We include information about books individually in order to be able to show *how* they included information about the different learning stages.

Table 2. Learning stages in the textbooks

LEARNING STAGE	INCLUDED?	INFORMATION OR ACTIVITY?
Identifying needs	X	
Setting goals	X	
Planning learning	X	
Selecting resources	X	
Selecting learning strategies	2	New Opportunities: includes information on speaking strategies. New Headway: includes information on vocabulary records.
Practice	X	
Monitoring progress	2*	Cutting Edge: At the end of each unit, there is a section called ‘do you remember’. Face to Face: Each unit includes a Progress Portfolio where students record what they have learned.
Assessment and revision	X	

As the table above shows, the language textbooks we looked at do not explicitly encourage learner autonomy. New Opportunities and New Headway do offer limited opportunities for students to select their own learning strategies and provide practical tips around this. New Opportunities, for instance, introduces speaking strategies, such as keeping the communication channel open, and terminating the conversation appropriately. Even though it does not enable students to *practise* these strategies, it does encourage language learners to use them outside the classroom. As for New Headway, it has a section called “keeping vocabulary records” where students are given information on how to memorise lexical items

covered in that unit. That is, students are also encouraged to discuss with their teachers and other students how they record new words with questions such as ‘which of these do you use? A- Translation. B- The part of speech. C- The meaning’.

As for monitoring progress, *Cutting Edge* and *Face to Face* do encourage students to engage in some monitoring. *Cutting Edge* has a section called ‘Do you remember?’ where students are asked to do exercises on the grammatical and lexical points covered. These exercises do not strictly involve monitoring of progress (as measured against individual learning goals) and are more about memorization, however since they do let students keep track of their progress we included them here. *Face to Face* includes a section called ‘Progress Portfolio’ which helps students keep track of how much they have achieved over time. To illustrate, this section includes instructions like “Tick the things you can do in English” and items like ‘I can describe homes’, ‘I can compare people and things’ and ‘I can talk about future arrangements and plans’. Additionally, the section asks students to consider what how they feel about their own progress through questions like “What do you need to study again?” and “Do you need to go back to the unit?”

### **Discussion and implications**

Textbooks are the most likely way in which learners will come into contact with ideas about autonomy. At the same time, we agree with Fenner (2000, p. 78), who observes that ‘the whole idea of developing autonomy may be difficult to reconcile with the use of a textbook in the foreign language classroom’. Almost all textbooks are collections of texts and tasks structured by the author in a way he considers best for teaching and learning a foreign language and in addition, most textbooks define the progression of such learning.’ At the same time, textbooks do have the potential to foster autonomy in a number of ways even if the progression of learning is largely fixed, for example, as Cohen (2003, p. 2) points out, through a focus on learning skills and through strategy instruction; this has the advantage that ‘because the focus of the activities is contextualized language learning, learners can develop their learning strategy repertoires while learning the target language’. One advantage of using textbooks with explicit strategy training is that students do not need extracurricular training; the textbooks reinforce strategy use across both tasks and skills, encouraging students to continue applying them on their own’ (Cohen, 2003, p. 2).

However, it is clear from the results reported above that such a focus on strategies or other elements of self-directed learning is not at all common in the five textbooks investigated. Out of the nine skills, only selecting learning strategies and monitoring progress were covered, and only in some of the books. Clearly, the enormous amount of attention given to autonomy in recent years (cf. Benson 2001) has not translated into a deliberate focus on developing students’ skills for self-directed learning (and by extension, their autonomy) in the most popular English language textbooks. Even when a textbook does include one or more of the skills listed in the framework, these are not covered in a structural way; there appears to be no attempt to draw learners’ attention to the learning process in a way that gradually gives them more responsibility for their learning. Occasionally some information or an activity may be included but this is not connected to previous or subsequent content.

What are some of the implications of this? Firstly, teachers will have to be careful not to rely on textbooks too much to develop learner autonomy. Teachers may expect popular textbooks published by major publishers to present the state-of-the-art in language teaching, but this clearly does not extend to skills for self-directed learning. What this means is that teachers will have to be prepared to evaluate resources before their application in class. Such an

evaluation need not take long; the evaluative framework presented here and other suggestions available in the literature are relatively straightforward. Alternatively, and this is more time-consuming, teachers need to be prepared to adapt or complement classroom materials to include a focus on learner autonomy. This may mean integrating additional tools, such as a portfolio, or a needs analysis, into the curriculum and aligning its use with the textbook (for example, to be used at the start of the course, or at the end of a chapter or section).

What this also means is that textbooks need to be seen more as a source of activities and information rather than as a storyboard for what happens in class. Most teachers do this anyway; they select what is most appropriate from existing materials for the given context, and interpret these materials in their own way. The activities contained within them gain further meaning from their realisation in the learning practice that occurs between learners and between learners and teacher; in other words, the social context greatly affects how activities are played out. There is, therefore, a great deal of opportunity to extend textbook activities beyond the classroom or to include in them a focus on the learning process, in addition to the learning content. But this does require an awareness on the part of the teacher to do so.

Finally, the findings from this small study have clear implications for textbook writers; there is currently very little attention given in these textbooks to developing autonomy. Fenner recommends: ‘If textbook writers can create tasks and options which leave room for personal interpretation and scope for autonomy, and where, consequently, the outcome is unpredictable, the teacher joins a process of learning in collaboration with the learners. In order to manage this in the classroom, we have to realize that learning a foreign language is not an end in itself; language is a tool for communication, and communication is always about something. It is about interpreting and creating meaning (2000, p. 85)’. Clearly, there is ample scope for materials writers, publishers and teachers to put into practice the commitment to developing autonomy that has been voiced so frequently in recent years.

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