

A PROPOSED MODEL FOR THE DESIGN OF SELF-LEARNING LANGUAGE MATERIALS*

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ABSTRACT

Course books and other aids play a major role as facilitators of learning in both educational institutions and for the individuals who wish to learn on their own. Despite several studies done and models designed on the nature and actualization of self learning, the models display diverse as well as common components; furthermore, when the work on the nature of educational materials is investigated, their required properties seem to have been gathered outside a desirable systematisation. Among the shortcomings of such disorganisation, different terms to denote the same concept and a lack of accuracy in categorisation can be mentioned only as a few. In the present article using the studies in the literature, the necessity of a model for educational aids is validated, and the basic points of such a model are set out. As a consequence, the structure of the model can be further discussed and presented for evaluation.

Keywords: *Course Books, Materials Design, Self Learning, Self Directed Learning, Model.*

KENDİ KENDİNE DİL ÖĞRENME GEREÇLERİNİN OLUŞTURULMASI İÇİN BİR MODEL ÖNERİSİ

ÖZET

Öğrenme sürecini kolaylaştıran öğeler olarak ders kitapları ve diğer gereçler, kurum içi kullanımları kadar kurumdan bağımsız olarak kendi kendine öğrenmek isteyen bireyler için de çok önemlidir. Kendi kendine öğrenmenin nasıl gerçekleşeceği hakkında birçok model ve çalışma yapılmış olsa da modellerin ortak bileşenleri kadar birbirlerinden çok değişik olan bileşenleri de bulunmakta; ayrıca bir gereçte bulunması gereken özelliklerin, arzu edilen bir dizgeselliğin kimi bakımlardan dışında kaldığı görülebilmektedir. Bu makalede, bir yabancı dili kendi kendine öğrenmek isteyen bireyin gereksinimlerini karşılayabilecek gereç modelinin gerekliliğinin geçerlemesi ilgili alan yazınından yararlanılarak yapılmakta ve böyle bir modelin ana çizgileri çıkarılmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, modelin yapısı ayrıca tartışılabilir ve değerlendirilmesi için sunulabilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Ders Kitapları, Gereç Hazırlama, Kendi Kendine Öğrenme, Özyönetimli Öğrenme, Model.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Course books and other instructional aids can be accepted as components that facilitate learning. Course books and other teaching-learning materials are extensively utilized within an institutional framework as they provide aid for teachers. Such materials are also important for the individuals who prefer to study on their own independently of an institution. It can not always be clearly understood to what extent these course books and other instructional materials, all a sine qua non for foreign language learning, are written or designed by taking the learner characteristics into account, nor can it always be possible to find an explanatory note either in the introductory parts of these teaching-learning materials' teacher's books or elsewhere on what portions of these materials correspond to what learner characteristics.

Course books are generally designed and published depending on some certain criteria. However, gathering all the learners within some set criteria as one entity is not in compliance with the contemporary notions of education. Educational terminology constantly changes with the addition and sometimes extraction of newly-emerging concepts and, thus, terms. Individual differences, learners' pursuit in self-learning, and preparation of the learners so that they can continue their education on their own are emphasized on various platforms, which, as a consequence, spread and make known such concepts and terms as *learner autonomy* and *self-directed learning* to an ever widening educational environment. Still, however, course books are published for one common target group of users, the same material is not diversified for differing learner characteristics and thus course books seem to fall outside of the requirements of the concepts in developing educational terminology.

The goal in educational institutions now takes a stance for enabling the individuals to reach and get the knowledge on their own instead of teaching that knowledge. Many ways are led and practices kept for learning and teaching languages, but language learning can be seen as some personal *skill*. This is because, in a way, *learning* in general and *language learning* in particular are eventually what an individual can manage, reach or accomplish on his or her own. Since no valid and reliable way is yet known as to rightfully decide on whether a learner-individual has the "aptitude" or not, it is then rather difficult to say whether a learner is apt to learn or not. However, "skill" is somehow a capacity that can be improved by means of education and through an appropriate set of techniques, and, therefore, it can be said that any individual not under the apparent influence of some deficiency or handicap is apt to learn what she or he wants to learn to a degree of own choice and preference. Then, by extending the limits of his or her conditions, a learner-individual can learn a new language to a level of his or her own need, if that individual has an intention to learn that language. What should be done in this respect is a needs analysis, teaching the learner how to learn and providing autonomy for the learner (Kocaman and Osam, 2000:23).

The work on self-directed language learning and extended language learning, which gained even more importance by the Council of Europe's "Modern Languages" (or "*Langues Vivantes*") projects also necessitates that educational materials be designed suitably (Council of Europe, 2000:14). It can be said that most of the

materials, either existing or under preparation, are for institutional, formal teaching. However, the self-learning environment significantly differs from the classroom environment. Therefore, the qualities of *teaching* materials, specifically designed to be used in a classroom situation under the attendance of some teacher, will be as much different from those of *learning* materials specially designed for a learner-individual who prefers to study on his or her own in a situation and in an environment that he or she has the right to choose.

In the course of an action to specify the qualities of self-study materials, some primary discussion seems to be appropriate on how *learning*, which is an individual endeavour and a process carried on by the individual, is achieved by *oneself* and on why *self-learning* should really be seen necessary. Because learners may tend to develop some negative attitudes towards learning in a teacher-centred traditional classroom setting, learning must be learner-centred and individualized (Demircan, 1990:127). In this respect, Skinner emphasizes that teaching in a group is against the nature of learning. Skinner places importance on that the learner should (Senemoğlu,1998:433):

- Interact directly with instructional materials,
- Display behaviour,
- Be instantly reinforced,
- Be given immediate feedback on the results of his own behaviour,
- Be immediately corrected, and
- Progress at his own pace.

Even though there have been many models for and much research on how self-learning can be achieved, the models have as many similar components as the dissimilar ones.

At this point, the readers can be led to the view that all those discovered factors and concepts function differently in every individual. Every individual possesses different background knowledge. A common process can be explained as the following:

- Regardless of the learning option, the learner must be ready for learning.
- In order for the individuals to be able to learn, they must take the responsibility of their own learning and arrange their learning process.
- The learners who can arrange their own learning have the capacity for autonomy.
- The learners who can arrange their own learning know how to reach the knowledge.
- Autonomous learners have positive feelings towards what is to be learnt.
- Autonomous learners believe that they are able to do it, which means, in other words, they are able to succeed in learning.
- The beliefs on the positive side enhance the capacity for success, which, in turn, motivates the learner-individual.

This is the starting point of the discussion in the present article: *There is a necessity for the materials that can bring the learner to this point.* No matter whether the individual can reach the materials on his own or he is directed to them, the materials must be designed in a way that facilitates learning and motivates the learner.

2. SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The learners who possess the capacity to learn on their own can be regarded as *self-directed learners*. Self-directed learning finds its roots in the remote past, even classical antiquity. According to Kulich (1970, cited in Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991:7), *self education* bore great importance in the lives of Greek philosophers, like, for example, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates described himself as a self-learner able to benefit from the learning opportunities in his environment. As Brockett and Hiemstra (1991:3) explain self-directed learning, they emphasize that self-directed learning is not any temporary enthusiasm but a way of life for the learner. It can be said that in adult education self-directed learning has sprung out of the roots of humanism. Every person can learn provided that the appropriate environment, material and conditions are available (Elias and Merriam, 1980:118). According to Valett (1977:12), humanistic education is a lifelong process, the purpose of which is to develop individuals who will be able to live joyous, humane, and meaningful lives. When the inequity of opportunities offered to each individual is taken into consideration, the provision of a situation for the individual to be able to continue his education on his own also displays respect for the human.

Among the variety of definitions and descriptions as to what self-directed learning is, the summarized items below can be given as widely known and accepted points (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991:21; Knowles 1975:18, Knowles 1970:38). According to Knowles' widely renowned description:

- Self-directed learning is a process,
- Individuals take the initiative to make a choice between being with other people or standing alone,
- They diagnose own learning needs,
- They formulate learning goals,
- They identify human and material resources for learning, choose and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999, cited in Canipe, 2001:19) define self-directed learning as a learning process in which learners plan, implement and evaluate their learning experience.

Even though different definitions and points of view exist, most of the learners can be thought to have some inclination towards self-directed learning. Most adults have interest in self-directed learning on a natural and mature level. This conclusion can also be drawn from the adult characteristics as identified by Knowles (1990:231):

- Upon encountering a problem, adults seek solutions,
- They want to find learning ways relevant to their past experience,
- They prefer not passive but active learning,
- They prefer studying with someone truly interested in their progression, who assumes the role of some "counsellor-teacher" rather than that of a traditional teacher in formal education.

Self-directed learning, an important field of study in adult education, is described as an instructional process where a learner assumes primary responsibility for the learning process, and as a personality characteristic centring on a learner's desire or preference for assuming responsibility for learning (Brockett, 1983:16).

Learning by instructional activities supported by the individuals and groups eager to learn but not in a formal, institutionalized structure is self-directed learning (Rogers, 1996:2).

Knowles identifies a few reasons to support self-directed learning (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991:10):

- Active engagement in learning is more educational than the passive,
- Active engagement in learning is more compatible with the development of the psychological state,
- Many educational innovations predispose the learner toward taking primary responsibility for personal learning.

Knowles states that self-directed learning is not a pleasant, desirable or temporary enthusiasm but only a basic human capacity in that one's learning on his own turns into a predominant condition in the contemporary world (Brockett and Hiemstra 1991:10, Knowles 1975:16-17). Personal responsibility is envisioned as the cornerstone of self-direction in learning (Brockett and Hiemstra 1991:27). It seems that when the individual assumes the responsibility of learning and develops a positive attitude toward the subject to be learnt, the actualisation of learning becomes possible. Self-direction in learning corresponds to the endeavours of planning, implementing and evaluation by the learner (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991:24; Brockett, 1983:16).

As inferred from these definitions and descriptions, it may not be so much possible in schools to improve the learners' skills and equip them with all the knowledge required for life.

3. JUSTIFYING THE NEED FOR SELF-LEARNING MATERIALS

Innovative ways are constantly under study in the effort to solve the problems in education. As a result and outcome of such research, a shift occurs in understanding from *teacher-centred instruction* towards *learner-based learning*. It does not seem much plausible to have a classroom environment in which each learner's needs, personal learning pace and frequency of repetition can be accounted for. Suitability for the individual learning styles of learners and selection and grading of items (i.e. the syllabus) are the factors fostering self-learning. When the difficulty in designing one common set of materials that can be suitable for all of the learners and the impossibility of meeting each learner's needs are taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that ample consideration should be given to learners studying at a place and time that they prefer in their own way analysing their own needs and finding the most suitable materials for themselves. The best thing that individuals can be enabled to gain is to be able to assume the responsibility of their own learning, plan the learning experience on their own, specify their deficiencies and thus advance towards learning and access to

knowledge and skill. In this respect, it is also necessary to contribute to the formation of learners who are able to continue their learning by themselves.

The above discussion can also be integrated with the following points:

- “Information boom” can influence teaching-learning processes,
- The classrooms in formal educational institutions are not sufficient either in quality or quantity,
- Classrooms are crowded and teachers are not able to spare time required for each individual learner,
- Teachers and learners can develop negative feelings towards each other and this, in turn, can negatively affect learning,
- Traditional educational resources are rather limited,
- Some teaching methods are expensive,
- In some private institutions, but not few of them, teachers’ salaries or wages are sometimes considered “increasing teacher expenses” and “an extra load on the budget”, which leads the institutions to a highly arguable decision of hiring less competent teachers and even people with no degree who are in a position to accept any wages they are offered to. This causes apparent loss of time and money on the side of the learners,
- Many teachers do not exactly know how to work with adults and try to change the habits, attitudes and characteristics, which are hard to change,
- Instructors are physically and psychologically strained while preparing materials and may suffer from time and money constraints and fatigue.

Quite contrary to these negative views of the formal settings, the following can be put forward as the characteristics of the self-learning environment:

- Demands for learning increase,
- Focus of emphasis shifts from *teaching* to *learning*,
- Adults are apt to assume the responsibility of their own learning and know how they learn best,
- Learners can identify their own needs and decide what to learn and to what extent,
- Learners can have revision as many times as they like but skip the subjects they know better and thus save time,
- While they are studying on their own, learners can make a much more efficient and effective use of the time wasted on the way to and from school,
- Self-study materials can be used repeatedly several times, which, again, saves time and money,
- Learners’ self-esteem and self-confidence can develop due to self-learning.

The most important problem that arises against self-learning materials is that they view the element of teacher outside the scope of the learning process and render that element ineffective. If so, then, this question can be introduced: “Would it be impossible to attain a similar level of success in learning if the reasons underlying the

need for the teacher and teacher characteristics were compiled into the material and thus learning taken out of a formal educational institution?”

The answer to this question is hidden in the quality of the materials and the learners who are to use those materials (i.e. within the scope of the present study, language learning materials). This is because there are no generally acceptable and valid predisposed upper or lower limits for language learning, and learners want to learn that language to the extent that their needs specify. The wider the range of the learner needs, the higher the learners’ learning pace and command on that language. In other words, any valid upper or lower limit that can be set in language learning can be determined by the learners’ need for that language. If the factors contributed to the teaching-learning environment by the learner are left aside, learning materials can be designed and produced in such a way that incorporates all those substantial roles, facilitates learning process, presents information, directs learners and gives advice.

At this point of the present discussion, prior to answering the question above, it may be better to ask a pre-question: “Why should learners need teachers?” The answers to this are in fact quite clear. Learners need teachers because teachers present information with cues in a summarized manner in the form of digestible portions, motivate learners by eliminating the negative points that would otherwise demotivate them, actualize learning interactively in a social setting, and because of many such other factors. Nevertheless, the point that is sometimes ignored here is the fact that these are the qualities of *only* the well-educated, well-trained, qualified teachers. It is rather unfortunate that this may not be achievable all the time in teacher education. When all the educational institutions and all their teachers are taken into consideration, it becomes even more difficult to confidently state that the number of the qualified teachers are at a desirable level. The number of the instances in which learners fall unsuccessful because of teachers is not any fewer, to put it mildly, than the number of instances in which learners achieve success by means of their teachers. It is even impossible to be able to calculate in percentage terms the possibility of a learner having a qualified teacher in his class, because although there are studies as to what the characteristics of a “good teacher” are, the total number of these qualities has not been found out, nor have the identified characteristics been accurately defined.

When the formal education is thought of from all its aspects it is not only the element of teacher that is important. The characteristics of the teaching-learning setting also needs careful scrutiny. At this point, it becomes difficult again to be able to say that all institutions mostly possess positive characteristics. The likelihood that the individual-learner chooses the most appropriate place and time for himself, as in self-direction, is not any lower than that he meets the most appropriate place and time characteristics at his educational institution.

The self-learning materials designed and produced with a careful, principled and controlled manner will primarily eliminate the drawbacks of unqualified institutions and teachers and actualise learning. In other words, if the learner is “lucky enough”, he can find the live being before him as a qualified teacher. However, the material which is produced with a certain set of characteristics will eliminate this unreliable element of “luck” and serve the role of a qualified teacher for all of its users. Even though there exists a conception that the learning material (a course book, for instance) itself can not

overtake the advantages of qualified teachers and institutions, there are not so many reliable studies to carry this “conception” up to the level of a “fact”.

4. TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MODEL

The key point in this present study of validating self-learning materials lies in the endeavour of reflecting the qualities of *good teacher* and *good institution* on to such materials. As the result of the research conducted for this purpose, along with the identification of the learner characteristics of the self-studying individual, construction of a valid and generalisable model in accordance with these characteristics will be made possible. The potential solution to this problem actually lies in the learner who will be using the material and in the characteristics of the material. By means of a model that can set forth such characteristics of a course book as self-study material and that can systematise these characteristics within a well-established framework, it will be possible to design a desirable course book as self-learning material.

It is assumed that the qualities and characteristics below should be considered during the course of the construction of such a model. The construction of the model will progress around these specifications¹.

4.1. Frequency of use: In an attempt to answer to what extent course books affect learning, an investigation into what learner groups will read and study this course book appears to be a prerequisite, as also stated in Driscoll (2005).

In the present study discussing the characteristics of such a model, it is hypothesized that the learners will be progressing alongside the course book and its supplementary materials *primarily* and *continuously*.

4.2. Linkage and motivation: Language learning is a multi-faceted process composed of a wide array of components, and the learner who is to carry on with this process should possess some psychological capacity. In other words, the characteristics of the material that the learner is thought to need should establish a link between the learner and the material and should motivate the learner. When each individual's difference from the other is viewed, the point of *linkage and motivation* is open to any detailed categorization possible.

4.3. Rearrangement of descriptive evaluation scales for a generative purpose: There have been many studies in what characteristics the materials as teaching and learning aids should bear and in the development of the criteria that should be taken into consideration in the evaluation of these materials. These studies naturally take a *descriptive* stance. In other words, they present an approach to analyse the educational or instructional appropriacy of existing materials and to find out whether these materials are appropriate for the set target group of learners. Descriptive studies undoubtedly occupy a significant place in any scientific or professional work. However, descriptive studies are also expected to form the basis of the forthcoming stage of *generative* studies. While descriptive work enables the evaluation of existing products on some certain criteria, models for production can be developed by means of the generative work.

¹ A developed prototype of the model can be found in Tarhan (2005).

4.4. Systematization: Whether in scientific or professional fields, performance-based models are expected to possess an easily screenable, gradually proceeding systematic structure. In this way, the model is *valid* in that it is internally coherent and appropriate for the set goal, and *reliable* in that it is replicable and appropriate for the target group with all its users.

4.5. Dimensions: A very important point in the construction of the model is probably the specification of the dimensions. Specification of dimensions is actually only one of the earlier steps in the construction of the model, because this is to be followed by the establishment of the sub- and super-categorical relations in a logical, coherent and consistent fashion. If the dimensions are specified faultily, their internal relationships may not be properly built and the validity and reliability of the model will be in danger. Accurate specification of the dimensions are therefore important for the provision of systematisation, because any structure that fails the establishment of sub- and super-structures may not reach a level of system and may not become a model. Here, two main dimensions can be mentioned so as to form a basis for the systematisation of self-learning language materials:

- a) Characteristics of the learners,
- b) Characteristics of the material.

a) The dimension of the *characteristics of the learners* embodies the qualities pertaining to the learner. Among these are the learner's:

- Age,
- Appropriate cultural setting,
- Beliefs about learning,
- Culture,
- Experience in learning other languages,
- Level of education,
- Motivation,
- Social interaction,
- Spared time,,
- Suitable study place, etc.

b) The *characteristics of the material* dimension pertains to all the qualities of appropriate materials. Among these, the material's:

- Appropriacy for the speakers' age,
- Attitudes contained within units,
- CD qualifications,
- Cultural features,
- Discourse features,
- Ease of duplicability,
- Exercises,
- Face validity ,
- Language components,
- Marketing ,

- Motivating nature,
- Physical features,
- Psychological roles contained within units,
- Scope,
- Settings contained within units,
- Supplementary aids,
- Syllabus,
- Time span of regular editing and revising,
- User manual,
- Ways of attracting individuals' attention,
- Ways of improving listening,
- Ways of improving reading,
- Ways of improving speaking,
- Ways of improving writing,
- Ways of needs analysis,
- Ways of presenting units,
- Ways of presenting vocabulary for all levels,
- Ways of providing feedback, evaluation and suggestions for correction, etc.

can be named as a few examples.

There are many more features to be added to the above lists, ordered only alphabetically. It is essential that these features be identified and their relationships be established with the other items in the final comprehensive list.

4.6. Marking the points of development: Together with the rapidly-changing nature of information, such a generative model will be in a position that requires continuous revision. If there is a generative model at hand with each step clearly and distinctly defined or at least described, it will be clearer what steps in materials production need to be reviewed and revised. Doubtless to say, the model to be produced will be in any way open to elaboration. A generalisable model of materials design must clearly cut between the boundaries of its components where some kind of elaboration is possible. This conclusion can also be reached from the "4.4. Systematisation" above. If the model lacks some systematic structure, the points of revision will be vague.

4.7. Responsibility of learning: The learners with a certain set of learner characteristics can take over the responsibility of their own learning. The factor facilitating the learning of the learners who have decided to what extent and in what way they will learn can be well-designed materials. The efficiency of the *self-learning materials*, which emerge as an outcome of the notions of *life-long learning* and *learner-centred learning*, depends, to a large extent, on the learner's responsibility of learning. These materials must be designed in such a way that they do not leave learning at a false level of some seemingly personal choice, that they support the learner's responsibility of learning and that they keep in the learner's mind the fact that success in learning can only be achieved when the learner acts in accordance with this responsibility. In a classroom setting, when a learner gets distracted or falls outside the lesson, the teacher can sense this situation and try to pull the learner back into the lesson. In self-study materials, however, he who monitors the learner is basically the learner himself alone.

The material must display a nature that will prevent the learner who says “I’m bored; time to have a break now”, from coming to a stop if the current learning unit has not yet been completed and, thus, will have the learner continue self-studying till the end of that learning unit.

5. CONCLUSION

When the studies on the characteristics of educational materials are viewed, it can be seen that the required characteristics of the materials (for instance, a course book) sometimes fall outside of desirable systematisation in some way. These deficiencies can be summarized as:

- The use of different terminology to denote the same concepts,
- The presence of ambiguity in the categorization of the concepts relevant to the characteristics of the materials, and
- The inaccuracy in the relationships established between the sub- and super-categories.

While it is quite clear that instructional materials are primarily important in the self-learning process not as learning aids but as components essential to learning, such a deficiency in categorisation and systematisation can lead to inconsistency and inefficiency of the studies both on a descriptive and generative level. Therefore, the necessity of the valid and reliable research into the aspects of self-learning materials becomes obvious. Its appropriate design for its goals will denote its *validity*, and its generalisable nature will denote its *reliability*. Such research will not only make it possible for the self-learning materials to be handled in both descriptive and generative manner, but for the application to any teaching-learning environment as well. All the present discussion shows that the mentioned research will end up in the construction of a model. Stated in another way, the model will be playing an explanatory and leading role in the evaluation of existing and the production of new self-learning materials, as well as offering coherent definitions of such materials and placing the related concepts within a systematic structure.

The features of self-learning materials are specified in various studies around some certain concepts and such certain components as the course book and CD. However, some inaccuracies and loopholes seem to exist in the relationships between them and it appears rather unclear as to which component relates to which. As a result of such an accurate and generalisable model, which will meaningfully assemble all the relatable components, such practices as the following that have not been so much possible yet will be attainable:

- Since the evaluation of existing self-learning materials are based on the interrelated components, some subjective comments like “*Good*”, “*Bad*” or “*Not bad*” can be replaced with concrete, accurate and even quantitative judgements like “*Appropriate only to a ratio of 36%*” or “*Defects found in the following aspects*”,
- When the defects of the existing materials become obvious, it will be confidently possible to determine what parts of the material can be improved

or whether it will be better to adopt different materials instead of those under evaluation,

- A sound and useful road map will be available for the materials designers or the teachers preparing own materials in accordance with the characteristics and needs of their target learners,
- By means of the standards that it brings into the self-learning materials design, the model will entail the sameness of the quality of all the self-learning practices wherever it is applied.

In the present discussion, the necessity for a model to design self-learning materials is justified and the studies towards this goal validated depending on the possible drawbacks of the current situation and the desirable outcomes of that model. Further research and studies will be needed in order to make this model complete and ready for even further evaluation and revision.

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