

Questions of Autonomy in English Teachers' Discursive Practices

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Structured Abstract

Background Recent educational legislation has redefined and extended teachers' space for exercising professional autonomy. For instance, Norwegian English teachers enjoy substantial freedom in choosing texts for classroom use, provided they meet the competence aims of the national subject curriculum. Teachers are expected to use their professional judgment when choosing the means and modes of teaching to meet local needs. At the same time, current educational legislation requires that teachers exercise their autonomy as participants in 'professional communities' to ensure common standards for teaching and to assume shared responsibility for the pupils' learning.

Purpose and Method The research question is whether the redefined space for professional autonomy corresponds to teachers' understanding of such autonomy. In this article, I address this question through an analysis of lower secondary teachers' discourses underlying the selection of texts for their learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A total of 18 teachers were interviewed and a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach was used for data analysis.

Findings Findings suggest that the teachers' reasoning about text choice and teacher autonomy are negotiated between two potentially competing discourse positions. The first promotes individual freedom of choice, and the second is the view that the textbook represents an authoritative interpretation of syllabi aims, as well as a premise for the teachers' common planning. Although the teachers speak in favour of choosing texts freely, few say they exploit this freedom beyond choosing between texts in the textbook. In addition, decisions to deviate from the textbook appear to be viewed as hinging primarily on the individual teacher's discretion.

Conclusion Thus, possibilities for change rely mainly on individual teachers and are placed outside the sphere of collective planning. I argue that the teachers' discursive practices may limit rather than extend their space for exercising professional autonomy regarding this area and that the textbook plays an important role in this.

Keywords: *teacher autonomy, textbook reliance, curriculum, EFL teaching, critical discourse analysis (CDA)*

Introduction

This article addresses 18 Norwegian English teachers' reasoning about their text-selection practices and their continued reliance on the textbook as a primary text source in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. While teachers' reliance on the textbook is well documented (e.g. Bachmann 2004; Pinar 1995; Stuvland 2016), the discourses and perceptions that may sustain its position in schools have received limited scholarly attention. The main aim of this article is to describe aspects of the teachers' discourses that may sustain understandings about text-selection practices, thereby making them explicit and open to scrutiny.

Teachers' preference for the textbook seems at odds with the availability of English texts that teenagers encounter every day on the Net and in social media. Moreover, in Norway, the current English Subject curriculum describes sophisticated literacy aims to deal with 'a diversity of texts (...) [which] involves oral and written representations in different combinations and a range of oral and written texts from digital media' (Ministry of Education and Research 2013, 1). Despite these developments, textbook texts dominate in EFL teaching. Why is this so? In what ways do Norwegian English teachers justify their text-selection practices? How are these justifications sustained, and how do they compare with the redefined, autonomous teacher role that educational authorities describe?

To those ends, I pursued these interrelated research questions:

- What characterises the teachers' reasoning about their text-selection practices?
- What characterises the teachers' reasoning about the role of the textbook?
- What notions of professional autonomy do the teachers express?

Previously, national curricula required teachers to use an approved textbook or text selection and prescribed specific reading procedures (Bakken 2017a). However, the English Subject Curriculum specifies competence aims for all subjects that are to be adapted to local learning contexts. This means that teachers are expected to exercise their joint professional competence in applying the national curriculum and securing the required learning outcomes for their pupils (Carlgren and Klette 2008; Engelsen 2015). This article addresses these questions of professional autonomy by exploring teachers' reasoning about their individual and collective text-selection practices. Using perspectives from critical discourse analysis (CDA), I investigated how teachers draw on and contribute to existing discourses around professional autonomy and linked this to the role of the textbook in their individual and collective planning. The goal was to explore teachers' negotiation of their professional autonomy in the context of external requirements for increased teacher cooperation, textbook reliance and 'traditional' and 'new' discourses of professional autonomy.

The Role of the Textbook

The textbook has always played a significant role in teachers' classroom practices (e.g. Pinar 1995; Svensson 2000; Svingby 1985). This includes Norwegian EFL teachers, who rely heavily on textbooks in their teaching (Bachmann 2004; Drew et al. 2007; Stuvland 2016). In many ways, the textbook serves as the 'dominant form of curriculum' and as the main tool in teachers' planning (Hodgson et al. 2010, 26). Teachers continue to rely on the textbook because of lack of time, and satisfaction with the quality of textbooks (Sosniak and Stodolsky 1993). The textbook has attracted widespread criticism for preserving routinized teaching practices and uncritically transmitting traditional content knowledge (e.g. Apple 1992; Englund 1997), and as a 'stabilising' or 'conserving' factor that insufficiently challenges teachers' work (Bachmann 2004, 119, my translation). This criticism extends to teachers who

rely on the textbook, who are sometimes presented as ‘mindless practitioners’ (Schug et al. 1997, 98).

Notably, professional autonomy does not necessarily mean disregarding the textbook; teachers may use a given textbook autonomously without following its instructions to the letter. Even then, it is often perceived as an indispensable ‘prop’ (Sosniak and Stodolsky 1993, 266) that seldom receives critical attention. The textbook often regulates EFL teachers’ choice of text and influences teachers’ perceptions of how texts should be approached (Bakken and Lund 2017b; Ellingsund and Hellekjær 2009; Stuvland 2016). In an EFL context, it is considered especially important to source alternative texts in order to build pupils’ foreign language proficiency and text competence through sufficient and differentiated text exposure (e.g. Krashen 2004; Urquhart and Weir 2014).

Some teachers may stay with the textbook because they lack awareness of alternative text choices or how to use them (Stuvland 2016, 2018; Drew et al. 2007). A lack of confidence, experience or subject knowledge may make teachers choose familiar practices (Borg and Orafi, 2009; Li 2013; Wright 2005). Moreover, previous experiences from teachers’ own schooling often have a strong impact on their perceptions and practices (e.g. Borg 2006; Richards and Pennington 1998). The socialisation of ‘novice teachers into a professional culture with certain goals, shared values and standards of conduct’ (Calderhead 1992, 6) is vitally important to teachers’ development. The first encounters with a school culture may decide whether a new teacher will resist or embrace change but are often tacit, implicit, and difficult to challenge (Farrell 2008; Freeman 1996; Urzua 1996).

There is little existing research on the discourses underlying the role of the textbook in teachers’ work. McGrath (2006) offered a ‘thematic classification of teacher images’ (174) that captured teachers’ views of the textbook via metaphors they used to describe its role in

their teaching. Based on their written descriptions, McGrath identified four main views of the textbook: as ‘guidance’, ‘support’, ‘resource’ and ‘constraint’ (174). He argued that these reflect varying degrees of autonomy or control in the teacher’s relationship with the textbook, ranging from close allegiance (guidance) to a critical view (constraint). More generally, the varied images suggest mixed feelings about reliance on the textbook: one teacher described the textbook as ‘a straitjacket’, and another referred to it as a ‘smokescreen’ that conveys a sense of professionalism to parents (McGrath 2006, 175). While these metaphors offer some indication of teachers’ individual perceptions, there remains a need to understand more fully the role assigned to the textbook by teachers as participants in discursive practices.

Teacher Autonomy & Professionalism

Aligning with international developments, the current output-oriented national curriculum makes teachers and school owners collectively responsible for choosing means and modes of teaching appropriate to local needs (Engelsen 2015). Perhaps paradoxically, the redefinition of teachers’ professional autonomy in recent decades has extended their decision-making space while simultaneously imposing increased control of teachers’ work (Carlgren and Klette 2008; Helgøy et al. 2007). New testing regimes measure pupils’ learning against universal standards, making teachers accountable for pupils’ learning. However, as Goodson observed, ‘these world movements of school reforms “embed” themselves in national school systems in very different ways’ (2014, 769). Norwegian teachers and their Nordic colleagues have not generally been subject to the same degree of external control as their Anglo-American counterparts (e.g. Mausesthaugen and Mølstad 2015; Stephens et al. 2004). At the same time, teachers in Norway have historically been accustomed to top-down, state-mandated, prescriptive curricula regulating how and what to teach more so than in Denmark and Finland (Mølstad and Karseth 2016; Telhaug et al. 2006).

In this context, the central term *autonomy* is associated with the idea of ‘teacher professionalism’. The term comprises two main components: ‘freedom of action’ and ‘an agent’s capacity for action’ (Lundquist 1987, 39). In this view, autonomous action requires that the agent is not inhibited by external control and has the knowledge, interest and capacity for self-governance. This view relies on the notion of ‘pedagogical freedom’ in the continental *Didaktik* tradition of curriculum making, ‘which put[s] into the single teacher’s hand the planning of how to enact which part of the curriculum, where and when’ (Hopmann 2007, 113). This implies that educational authorities ‘license’ individual teachers to make autonomous choices for their class informed by their professional ‘knowledge base’ (Mausethagen and Mølstad 2014, 153). Building on this idea, discourses around teacher autonomy often emphasise ‘freedom of method’ for the individual teacher, where teacher autonomy equals absence of external control. While this has positive connotations, interference in teachers’ work is seen as infringing on the creativity, integrity and professional judgment of the individual teacher (Cribb and Gewirtz 2007).

While autonomy is often linked to the individual, it may also be exercised collectively and institutionally (Cribb and Gewirtz 2007). For example, teachers can act autonomously alone or collectively, in teacher teams or as members of teacher unions. Hence, teacher autonomy can be understood as membership of ‘expert communities’ and as participation in the ‘safeguarding of a shared knowledge’ (Hermansen 2017, 2). In tandem with the introduction of cross-national, result-based curricula and the standardisation of learning outcomes, a so-called ‘new’ professionalism has developed. Following recent Norwegian educational legislation, the domain of teacher autonomy now extends beyond the competences previously required to teach a specific subject and, indeed, beyond the classroom.

Norwegian teachers do not automatically embrace the increased opportunities for decentralised decision-making. Rather, they often welcome external control in matters perceived as extending beyond their core work, such as analysing and assessing curricular competence aims (Mausethagen and Mølstad 2014). Nonetheless, the notion of teacher autonomy as individual freedom of method persists among Norwegians. Mausethagen and Mølstad (2015) asked whether the ‘strong focus on protecting individual autonomy can also contribute to diminishing autonomy at a more collective level’ (38). Mausethagen (2013a) called for further study of teachers’ discursive practices to shed light on “how and why some aspects of policy are placed within teachers’ main frame of teaching, whereas other policies and practices are not’ (424).

Methodological Perspectives

The methodological premise for the analysis of the teacher interviews in this study is that individuals become ‘co-producers of discourse’ (Jäger and Maier 2009) through their participation in discursive practices. These practices place social actors in dialogue with the ‘situational’ practices of family relations or specific work environments, ‘institutional’ practices (including those in schools) and more distant ‘societal’ or cultural practices (Fairclough 2010, 133). By participating in these practices, individuals draw on, maintain or alter the meanings these discourses carry (Fairclough 2003; Jäger and Maier 2009). While single utterances may exert a limited effect on existing discourses, they resonate with other utterances and, thus, contribute to ‘reproducing’ and ‘transforming’ (Fairclough 1992, 65) our understanding of a given aspect of the world and, ultimately, the associated social practices.

However, discursive practices differ in their ‘dialogicality’ (Fairclough 2003, 41) - the extent to which they accommodate diverse and competing views.

To explore the characteristics of the 18 teachers’ discursive practices, I build on Fairclough’s notion of *interdiscursivity*: how different discourse types (*genres*, *discourses* and *styles*) are simultaneously expressed in texts: in this case, teacher interviews. These indiscrete forms accommodate three distinct analytical approaches. The first type (*genres*) influences the specific communicative context in which people write or speak, thus regulating both discourse content and style. For instance, certain genre-specific characteristics condition the interaction between a researcher and respondent in an interview. Participants may also be influenced by genre characteristics that are not ‘situated’ within a specific practice but operate across practices (Fairclough 2003, 69). The second type (*discourses*) relates to the way the content of a specific discourse is represented, for instance, which themes are foregrounded or backgrounded in a text, and how. *Styles* refer to ‘how people identify themselves and are identified by others’ (Fairclough 2003, 160). Such ‘identification’ can be manifested in pronouns denoting what ‘we’ (as members of a profession) believe or do, or by metaphors expressing certain characteristics associated with members of communities and their practices. Fairclough argues that such elements of style draw on ideologies that ‘have a durability or stability that transcend individual texts or bodies of texts’ (2003, 9). Styles also express social actors’ degree of commitment to a proposition through explicit or implicit evaluation (Fairclough 2003), in turn contributing to the weakening or strengthening of a given discourse content. The three discourse types allow investigation of the internal relations

of a text (i.e. what elements are promoted or subdued in a teacher interview), as well as its external negotiations with outside discourses.

Participants

The empirical material consists of interviews with 18 lower secondary English teachers (teachers of pupils in the age range of 13 to 15 years). The respondents were purposefully sampled for maximum variation in age, experience, educational background and gender (Patton 1990). The group was heterogeneous in age (within the range of 20 to 60 years) and teaching experience (within the range of one to 30 years). As most teachers in these schools are women, female respondents outnumbered males (13 to 5). Most of the participants had 60 credits in English as one of their three subjects from university or a university college, with 60 credits being the minimum required to teach a subject in Norwegian lower secondary schools. A minority of the participants had a master's degree in English. While background and teaching experience was likely to have influenced their reasoning, these correspondences are not of immediate interest here. Rather, the heterogeneity of this group facilitated the investigation of discursive practices that operate across educational backgrounds and levels of teaching experience. This is the focus of this article. My objective is to examine how these teachers discursively frame one important aspect of their work.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted according to the Norwegian Social Science Data Services' (NSD) guidelines for research ethics. After receiving permission to conduct the study, I contacted potential interviewees through their headteachers before inviting them to participate. Of the 40 teachers contacted, 18 agreed to participate. The teachers received a letter of invitation informing them of this study's intention and the principles of anonymity, as well as their right to withdraw at any point. At the start of the interview, this information was repeated, and the

teachers gave their oral and written consent to participate in the study. In this paper, to secure anonymity for the participating teachers, I refer to all of the teachers as ‘she’ or ‘her’.

In any research interview, as alluded to earlier, it is impossible to avoid influencing the respondent to some degree (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Research interviews draw on *genre* characteristics that condition the interaction between interviewer and respondent (Fairclough 2003). For instance, the fact that I come from a teacher training institution is, in itself, likely to encourage certain assumptions about my view of EFL text-selection practices that may influence the teachers’ meaning making. This reflexivity also applies to the researcher’s contribution to the meaning created in the research process (Creswell 2013) and in the interactions with the empirical material, where the researcher’s own ‘repertoire of interpretations’ (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009, 273) may deemphasise or exclude competing views.

While the interviews with the teachers provide some depth and breadth in investigating their discursive practices, the sample’s scope is limited and not generalisable. The validity of the findings presented is confined to a specific time and place; teachers elsewhere might introduce other themes or speak differently about them. Nevertheless, as the way people talk is conditioned by relatively durable social structures and practices, such as those supported by language itself (Fairclough 2003), the issues that emerged from this analysis are likely to be familiar to other English teachers and to teachers of other subjects.

Data collection and analysis

Most of the teachers provided plans that listed texts or textbook chapters they had read or planned to read in class during the current year. In many cases, these plans were common to all English teachers at the school or to teachers who taught at the same level. They were organised according to textbook logic, with a topic headlining each chapter. To varying degrees, the plans also listed the titles of texts the teachers had chosen, either individually or with colleagues, and contributed to an understanding of text-selection procedures. The plans themselves were not included in the analytical material but were used as a point of departure for questions and as an interpretive context for the analysis.

Using a semi-structured approach, all the interviews addressed largely the same topics while accommodating individual elaboration (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). These topics were approached in slightly different ways, often taking cues from the teachers' reasoning. This strategy sought to get as close as possible to 'naturally occurring language use' (Jäger and Maier 2009, 2) to capture the immediate repertoire of meanings that teachers rely on in reasoning about their practices. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and the chosen excerpts presented below were then translated into English and anonymised for use in this paper.

The CDA perspectives mentioned above were incorporated in the analytical processes. The initial stage traced congruence and incongruence across the interview material in terms of discursive features of content and language. The material then underwent a more refined interdiscursive analysis employing Fairclough's (2003) discourse types: *genres*, *discourses* and *styles*. The purpose was to explore the complexity and characteristics of each teacher's meaning-making and their negotiations with external discourses. The analytical processes

involved an abductive approach (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009), which meant juxtaposing interpretations from the interdiscursive analysis with relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research. For present purposes, I focus on two of the discourse types, *discourses* and *styles*, in the Analysis and Findings section.

Analysis and Findings

The first part of this section explores three of the 18 teachers' meaning-making. These three were chosen specifically because their individual profiles captured important attributes of all 18 teachers' reflections. At the same time, certain features of the three teachers' reasoning serve to illustrate the complexity and incongruence that recur across the interview material. The second part relates the three teachers' shared and diverging characteristics in the interview material as a whole, while tying the overall findings to Fairclough's discourse types: *discourses* and *styles*.

Analysis of teacher interviews

Teacher 1

Teacher 1 explains that, on completing the current course, she will have taught English at all three levels of lower secondary school. At the beginning of each course, she makes it a priority to acquaint herself with the textbook for that specific course. Other than a few fiction films and a text found in another textbook, she has restricted her selection to those provided by the textbook. Looking back at the texts she has used with her ninth graders this year and in earlier classes, she asks herself: 'Am I too tied to the textbook?', thus introducing an element of ambiguity towards her current practices. She contends that this is 'how it will be' because she is still a novice teacher. In the two interview excerpts below, the teacher's reasoning evolves around the framework that regulates text selection and the possibility of the single

teacher moving beyond the textbook. When asked who decides what texts to choose, the teacher emphasises her freedom of choice.

T: That is entirely my decision, and I think that's really good. I know that this varies from school to school, but our plans – term plans and so on – do not decide what texts we will read. In terms of the chapters we work with, there are texts from A to F or A to G, depending on the number of texts in the chapter, and then I choose, myself, within that framework.

I: And that framework is?

T: It is the chapters and topics we use as points of departure—the topics that the textbook brings up.

The teacher expresses strong commitment ('this is really good') to what she describes as relatively loose cooperation between teachers. She states that because she and her colleagues list only chapter topics and not what texts to read, she can choose between the relevant texts in the textbook and other sources if she is so inclined. The phrase 'I know that this varies' reinforces the sense that she feels fortunate not to be part of a form of cooperation that allows individual teachers less flexibility. She explains that the manner in which plans are organised 'varies from school to school', juxtaposing 'our' loose plans with the rigidity that it is perceived other teachers must endure. However, she positions her own space for decision-making ('my decision', 'I choose, myself') in the context of collaboration with her colleagues ('the chapters we work with', 'the topics we use'). It is within this 'framework' that she appears to define her professional autonomy.

The conversation then moves on to what underpins her choices. First, she explains that while her own interests are important in her choice of texts, she is also compelled to consider the

relevance of those texts for the pupils' learning. In the excerpt below, she is asked to reflect on her sense of being 'too tied to the textbook' and the possibility of choosing texts beyond it.

I: You said you realised that you used the textbook quite frequently.

T1: What I would have wanted is...I have added one now. I have used a text from another textbook from the tenth grade in my own ninth grade class (...), but while this is the textbook we use, we still have books from other publishers and authors with texts that are just as good and perhaps better in many ways. But to sit down and familiarise yourself with a lot of books and then pick... But ideally, one should have done that rather than slavishly following these books.

Here, Teacher 1 declares that she would have preferred to become less dependent on the textbook - for instance, by sourcing texts from other textbooks and becoming conscious of the different priorities of authors and publishers. At this stage, however, she appears to view these tasks as somewhat overwhelming. While distancing herself from the notion of 'slavishly' following the textbook, several elements modify her commitment to that proposition, notably the phrases 'I would have wanted' or 'should have'. While she identifies with the counterpart of the 'slavish' teacher, the 'one' who does what 'ideally, one should have done' (i.e. critically assess textbook choices), this seems to represent an abstract idea rather than a reality.

Teacher 2

Like Teacher 1, Teacher 2 quickly comments on her reliance on the textbook when asked what texts she reads with her class.

(...) I guess I'm pretty driven by the textbook, but we do have some wishes about not being so tied to the textbook. But I do realise that one tends to fall back on it.

I: Being ‘driven by the textbook’ – what does that mean?

Well, we put together the plan for the year according to the chapters, in a way, because it has a natural progression in terms of grammar and so on. And then there is varied selection of texts, so in a way, it is convenient to follow the book.

In the first sentence, ‘I guess I’m pretty driven by the textbook’ suggests a critical attitude towards close reliance on the textbook. However, though she expresses a wish to reduce that reliance, her commitment to that proposition is modified in a number of ways. For instance, the ‘I guess’ suggests that she refers to an outsider’s view of text choice rather than her own. In addition, while sourcing texts beyond the textbook is expressed as desirable (‘we do have some wishes’), it appears to be considered an exception to the norm (‘one tends to fall back on it’).

Teacher 2 offers several reasons for adhering to the textbook. First, it secures ‘a natural progression’ of language learning and offers a ‘varied selection of texts’– views that emphasise the convenience of following the textbook. Second, this practice is valued because it provides what she seems to regard as a safe option that teachers can ‘fall back on’ or ‘keep to’, as she adds later in the interview. In this way, the teacher juxtaposes the benefits of textbook reliance with the risk of deviating from it – the possibility of jeopardising pupils’ learning.

When subsequently probed about the possibility of choosing alternative or additional texts, Teacher 2 describes the common plan as ‘dynamic’, as it allows some space for individual priorities. She goes on to explain that, at the beginning of each year, teachers at each level must agree on two of the four texts from each chapter. This means that they can source texts elsewhere if they wish to introduce other material into their classes. Although admitting that

she rarely takes advantage of this opportunity, Teacher 2 seems ready to defend it on behalf of others.

This means that we talk together and, in a way, establish the frames but not necessarily the content. So, we try to do the same but with a degree of artistic freedom, because we are different as people and as teachers.

Up to this point, the ‘we’ in Teacher 2’s reasoning refers to herself and her colleagues; now, it expresses affinity with certain universal teacher characteristics. She explains that although she and her colleagues cooperate and try to ‘do the same’, one must recognise they are ‘different as people and teachers’, and that individual preferences should be respected. As an example, she says that a teacher’s decision to include literary texts depends largely on the individual teacher’s interest in literature. She admits that although she reads English articles on the Internet every day, she is not particularly fond of reading books and is therefore less likely to prioritise such reading in her teaching. In contrast, she explains, some of her colleagues are particularly interested in literature and are more likely to incorporate literary texts in their classroom practices.

In many ways, the reflections of Teachers 1 and 2 coincide. While questioning their current textbook-driven practices, to differing degrees, both seem to commit themselves to the notion that sourcing texts primarily from the textbook is the unavoidable norm. Alternative text-selection practices seem to depend on the individual teacher’s initiative based on personal interests and concern for their class.

Teacher 3

Teacher 3’s description of text selection revolves around the new cooperation with a colleague; their common planning has turned the situation around:

Now, we work as a team with me and another teacher, who is an English teacher at this level. So, I have two classes, and she has two classes, and I'm quite fortunate because she is not afraid to try something new. So, after about seven or eight years, from being something of a boring English teacher, using the textbook a lot, we now try to move away from the textbook and try other things. We are tired of reading texts and working with tasks, and it's not very motivating for the pupils, either.

I: You work primarily with that teacher, then?

T3: So, we are the ones who cooperate to put the plans together. What are the pupils going to learn? We use the topics in the books mostly as a point of departure. The biggest challenge is that the pupils are at such different levels, some at fourth or fifth grade, and some are a bit too good for where we are at. So, the challenge is to find common texts for them, to find texts in the textbook that appeal to all.

Teacher 3's reasoning emphasises the balance in teamwork ('I have two classes'; 'she has two classes'). In addition, repeated expressions that include 'try' imply some measure of risk-taking that accompanies a change in practice. The statement 'we are the ones who cooperate' is juxtaposed against an implicit 'them', perhaps referring to those who adhere to the textbook and familiar reading and task-solving procedures. Apparently, Teacher 3 is happy to have left that part of her career behind, conveying distance ~~from~~^{to} 'the boring English teacher' she once was. She seems to attribute that achievement to her colleague's willingness to 'try something new', and she now feels that she has the courage to change previous patterns. This teacher explains that the textbook topics generally serve as the starting point for text selection, but their main concern is to find texts that match their pupils' differing levels. Their assumed lack of enthusiasm for textbook work ('it is not very motivating for the pupils² either') together with their mixed abilities serves to justify the teachers' collective change of approach to text selection.

It is evident that ~~te~~Teacher 3's reasoning differs in several respects from the first two teachers' reflections, as it does not foreground the link between autonomy and individual choice (especially in the case of Teacher 1). Additionally, while Teacher 2's reasoning represents textbook reliance as the safe and sensible choice, Teacher 3 sees it as too predictable. While both Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 adopt a critical stance to excessive reliance on the textbook, Teacher 2 seems less inclined to challenge its priorities. However, while evaluating the textbook as insufficient for accommodating her pupils' mixed abilities, Teacher 3 concedes that chapter topics serve as points of departure for choosing alternative texts.

Findings

This section considers how the findings from the analysis of the three teachers' reflections resonate with the group as a whole. It relates the overall findings to the ~~posed~~-research questions posed. Since the first two research questions are intrinsically related, I address them together.

What characterises the teachers' reasoning about their text-selection practices and the role of the textbook in these practices?

A general characteristic of the teachers' reasoning about their text-selection practices was the 'naturalised' role of the textbook (Fairclough 2003) in their work, alone and with others.

While competing discourse positions coexisted in their reflections, certain views dominated and were sustained by discursive features. For instance, the idea that the textbook provides a 'framework' (T1) or 'frames' (T2) for teachers' individual and collective text selections recurred across the interviews with the 18 teachers. Some promoted the textbook as offering teachers useful and necessary support. One novice teacher stated that the textbook was her 'trusted advisor', providing a safe direction for her work, at least at this stage in her career.

This is compatible with McGrath's idea of the textbook as a source of 'guidance' or as a

‘resource’ (2006, 174). Like Teacher 2, a couple of other teachers referred to the textbook as a compulsory and legitimate syllabus (Bachmann 2004) – a means of ensuring pupil progression, as well as offering appropriate and sufficient textual diversity, noting as one teacher did that ‘there is more than enough to choose from’. Several teachers said that following the textbook is essential to providing predictability for pupils.

Stylistic elements expressed commitment to the proposition that adhering to the textbook is the safe and advisable option in the long run; concluding, for instance, that this is what ‘we end up with’ because it ‘fits best in most cases’. Further, when the teachers talked about making alternative or additional text choices, elements of style may have diminished their commitment to alternative practices. Deviating from the textbook was commonly referred to as a personal ‘wish’ or as a ‘break’ from everyday routine. Such features reinforced the sense that any alternative strategy was temporary, and that the textbook represented the safer, more realistic option. In this way, characteristics of the teachers’ discursive practices contributed to legitimising and naturalising close reliance on the textbook based on shared professional judgment.

Like Teacher 3, however, several of the teachers argued in favour of alternative or additional text practices, based on their concerns regarding pupils’ mixed abilities and also because they felt that the textbook lacked depth and diversity, or failed to include texts that appealed to pupils. Additionally, there was a very tangible sense of ambivalence in relation to excessive textbook reliance, portraying it as a ‘constraint’ (McGrath 2006, 174) in the sense that it inhibits professional autonomy. This was apparent in Teacher 1’s reasoning; while identifying with the self-reliant teacher who adopts a critical stance towards conventional text-selection practices (‘Am I too tied to the textbook?’), she simultaneously conceded that relying on the

textbook is ‘how it will be’, at least at this point in her career. The recurring ambivalence towards reliance on the textbook suggested some discontent with the status quo and yet, at the same time, some sense of acceptance of the reliance. This ambivalence was often visible in stylistic features such as metaphors of enslavement and captivity, which expressed distance from certain practices. For example, Teacher 1 described textbook reliance as ‘following the textbook slavishly’, and Teacher 2 referred to being ‘driven’ by it. These discursive elements seemed to equate textbook reliance with a lack of independent thinking.

What notions of professional autonomy do the teachers express?

Two other dominant and interdependent discourse features, which I interpret as notions of professional autonomy, emerged in Teacher 1 and 2’s reasoning that were also visible among the other participants. The first of these placed emphasis on the teachers’ own interest in certain text types or topics when deciding on texts. This discourse content was strengthened by words that promoted teachers’ individuality and passions. It seemed generally accepted among the 18 teachers that choosing texts based on personal interests helps ensure quality teaching, and unduly close cooperation was often represented as potential infringement on personal creativity and professional judgement (Cribb and Gewirtz 2007). The second theme was that deciding to deviate from the textbook’s selection of texts seemed a matter of the individual teacher’s discretion. Both discursive features imply that the individual teacher should be accorded sufficient scope to make independent choices when collaborating with others. Notably, few expressed discontent about colleagues not wishing to go along with new initiatives. Rather, they were generally inclined to support their ‘right to exercise personal preference’ (Little 1990, 513), regardless of whether they themselves found it necessary to source texts beyond the textbook.

Thus, in most of the teachers' reflections, professional autonomy appeared to be linked to the potential for 'freedom of action' (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2007) within the framework of teachers' collaborative practices. However, there was some variation in their accounts of the common planning and the commitment it demands. Teachers 1 and 2 described a shared planning that was mostly structural, involving agreement about which textbook chapters or texts to list, but with little discussion of how to use texts or whether they satisfied the competence aims. One teacher observed, 'if we were to find texts outside the textbook together, it would mean that we would have to cooperate much more closely'. Such cooperation would require considerable time that many teachers stated they did not have. A few expressed frustrations with inflexible structures based on a very detailed common plan. While this frustration was minimally expressed by the three selected teachers, others expressed discontent with plans that restricted individual choice. As one teacher put it, 'there are times when I wish I had more freedom to choose, but we have chosen to be loyal, to agree about what texts to read'. Another teacher echoed this frustration, but feared attempts to deviate from the common plan might lead to discontent among her colleagues. She explained that this structural cooperation was intended to ease logistics across classrooms; for instance, to be able to regroup pupils according to their abilities.

While most of the teachers said that the textbook texts they chose together served as convenient common points of departure, a couple of the teachers also pointed to the possibilities for increased professionalism through collective work. They noted that they focused on texts that could provide 'products' for assessment, enabling teachers to agree on common assessment criteria. Such close commitment to collective decision-making was particularly salient in Teacher 3's account. She expressed a sense of autonomy in text selection that derived from close cooperation with a colleague rather than from her scope for

independent choice. She indicated that joint efforts enabled her to ‘try new things’ that she might not have chosen on her own; however, her cooperation with a colleague did not extend (at this point at least) beyond a team of two. As with Apelgren’s (2001) Swedish English teachers, there was an understanding that close cooperation to develop teaching practices would mostly involve ‘the allied teacher’ (294) rather than being part of organised planning. This suggests that the possibility of change was still seen to depend on the individual and on having the opportunity to cooperate with someone who shares one’s views.

Discussion

As evident in the sections above, the textbook was central in the teachers’ reflections about collegial cooperation, as well as in their negotiations of professional autonomy. In this section, I discuss the characteristics and complexity in the teachers’ reasoning and the ways the teachers drew from and contributed to discourses around EFL text-selection practices, and to notions of professional autonomy. Finally, I mention some implications of the findings.

The teachers often gave practical reasons for textbook reliance: the textbook was viewed as a convenient, time-saving solution in a busy teaching schedule and as an organising principle for common planning. Apparently, the textbook lends itself to a form of structural cooperation by providing a given, agreed-upon procedure that requires minimal shared reflection (Bakken and Lund 2017b). In this way, the textbook was represented as a natural point of departure and as a precondition for teacher cooperation. Further, most of the teachers described textbook-driven cooperation as facilitating streamlined practices and fairer assessment criteria. In some cases, an emphasis on seamless logistics may serve as an *in-situ* response to external demands for standardisation and the measurement of learning outcomes. In this way,

the teachers' discursive practices legitimised and maintained existing routines (Mausethagen, 2013a, 2013b) while accommodating external demands for increased teacher cooperation.

Pedagogical concerns were sometimes foregrounded in favour of textbook reliance, while the value of differentiated and varied text choices outside the textbook were subdued or even represented as potentially jeopardising the pupils' learning. Thus, in most of these 18 teachers' reflections, the textbook was foregrounded as 'an authoritative interpretation of curricular aims' (Hodgson et al. 2010) and as an indispensable 'prop' (Sosniak and Stodolsky 1993). Stylistic elements reinforced the teachers' commitment to the proposition that textbook reliance is the sensible and safe solution that most teachers will 'fall back on'; equally, competing discourses appeared in several of the interviews via recurring metaphors of captivity.

A salient characteristic of the teachers' reasoning was that finding alternative texts when deemed necessary or relevant was perceived as an individual responsibility rather than a collective one. This notion of autonomy seemed to work in two ways. First, it suggested that teachers must have some freedom to choose alternative texts, from within and outside the textbook, as they saw fit; also, those who prefer to rely solely on the textbook should feel free to do just that. In this way, the teachers negotiated a space for conventional practices and perceptions between *in-situ* and *ex-situ* discourses.

Despite a repeated insistence on personal preference, however, there was a general acceptance of collegial cooperation. Such cooperation did not seem particularly to be developed beyond choosing common texts or chapters from the textbook or sharing tips for additional material that is unlikely to result in 'improvement-oriented change' (Little 1990, 511). However, the

textbook-driven collective planning that most described offers s limited leeway for individual or collective initiatives to challenge routinized practices. Thus, when discussing changes in established text practices, the teachers tended to take this task upon themselves as an individual responsibility. Here, they relied on persistent discourses of teachers as ‘independent entrepreneurs’ (Little 1990, 509) in educational debate and in the media. This discourse inflates the single teacher’s capacity to achieve lasting change, as well as their effect on pupils’ achievements (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012).

Thus, it appears that the textbook continues to have a ‘stabilising’ or ‘conserving’ factor that insufficiently challenges teachers’ work (Bachmann, 2004, 119, my translation), both in terms of text choice and cooperative practices. It seems that close textbook reliance also inhibits the development of a collective professional autonomy where teachers assume shared responsibility for appropriating curricular aims and for pupils’ learning.

The view advanced by education authorities that teacher collaboration should foster professional autonomy and allow teachers to identify as members of ‘professional communities’ (Ministry for Education and Research 2008–2009, 14, my translation) received limited attention among these teachers. Instead, a recurring assumption was that the teacher’s individual creativity and engagement would be diminished by the constraints of tight collective decision-making. As evident among other Norwegian teachers (Mausethagen and Mølstad 2015), most of these teachers expressed little interest in extended collective autonomy but drew instead on a discourse of ‘freedom of method’ in the classroom.

The tensions in the teachers’ reasoning about textbook reliance and individual versus collective autonomy were especially noticeable among some of the less experienced teachers when trying to understand the competing discourses surrounding them. Thus, the ‘ways of

representing' text-selection practices or the 'ways of being' (Fairclough 2003, 27) an English teacher promoted among colleagues can be seen as aspects of a socialisation process into an educational culture. They may prove crucial to developing novice teachers' understanding of their work: whether they stay with conventional practices or challenge them (e.g. Calderhead 1992, Farrell 2008). Also, the 'local language' (Freeman 1996) used among colleagues is likely to sustain certain taken-for-granted views that teachers bring with them from their own schooling if left unchallenged.

Additionally, teacher discourses are not only 'situational' (Fairclough 2010, 133), as they accommodate understandings that operate across social practices inside and outside of the school context and draw on both contemporary and 'historically prior' understandings (Fairclough 1993). For instance, recent external demands may have de-professionalised teachers (e.g. Goodson 2014; Hargreaves 2000). It seems likely that many teachers have relied on a tradition in Norwegian educational legislation that has offered relatively detailed instructions (at least in a Nordic context) about how and what to teach (Telhaug et al. 2006). Similar to some other Norwegian teachers (Helgøy and Homme 2007; Mausethagen and Mølstad 2014), a majority of the teachers in this analysis did not seem to mind receiving specific instructions about teaching practices, nor see the critical assessment of curricular aims as part of their domain.

Final Remarks

The aim of this article was to raise awareness of certain discrepancies between the intentions of educational reforms and the English teachers' perceptions of the scope of their professional autonomy, with specific reference to text-selection practices. The article also explored how the 18 participants accommodated 'new' and 'traditional' views of professional autonomy in

the context of their immediate work environments. The analysis suggests that the teachers' reasoning was dominated by a discourse compatible with a 'traditional' view of professional autonomy, restricted to the individual teacher and his or her class (Hopmann 2007; Mauseithagen and Mølsted 2015). While some expressed a collective commitment to developing their text-selection practices, this view received limited attention. Additionally, when alternative choices were referred to regarding individual 'wishes' rather than collective professional judgment, they may have been perceived not as part of a new development but as personal detours from the steady, textbook-driven course. Thus, the teachers' discursive practice about text selection helped them to juggle individual freedom of choice with textbook reliance and recent requirements for collaboration between teachers.

By promoting the textbook as an undisputed organisational principle and defining alternative text choices as beyond their collective work, the teachers' discursive practices may limit discursive 'dialogicality' (Fairclough 2003, 41) concerning the boundaries of their work. Thus, they negotiated a notion of teacher autonomy promoting individual freedom of choice, while allowing little room for alternative decisions. When professional autonomy and possibilities for change are limited to the decisions made by individuals, this inhibits the development of teachers' notions of their scope for exercising professional autonomy.

Given the resilience of the established views concerning this aspect of English teachers' work, the discourses and practices that maintain them require increased attention. While this article gives some insight into the school-level discourses contributing to these teachers' reasoning, it invites further study of, for instance, how social practices and structures at the school level encourage or challenge persistent understandings of text-selection practices and professional autonomy among English teachers.

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