

# Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning autonomy and its implications in the classroom: A mixed method study

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*Justifications for promoting learner autonomy in language learning are manifold. As teachers have a central role in developing learner autonomy and given the influence teachers' beliefs have on their practices (Borg, 2006), it is essential to gain insight into their views regarding learner autonomy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Similarly, learners' perceptions concerning language learning influence their openness to the ideas presented in the language classroom (Cotterall, 1995). Furthermore, as mismatches between teachers' and students' beliefs could have a negative impact on learners' motivation, understanding the relationship between teachers' and students' beliefs might lead to more successful learning. The present study explored language teachers' and learners' beliefs and classroom practices concerning learner autonomy in a Hungarian secondary school. Mixed methods were used: attitude-questionnaires and interviews revealed what language teachers (n=9) understood by learner autonomy and in what ways they claimed that they incorporated it in their practice. The study also looked into language learners' beliefs (n=100) and reported autonomous behaviours. A questionnaire explored to what extent students felt responsible for their autonomy in language learning. Furthermore, classroom observations helped to gain insight into teachers' classroom practices and language learners' autonomous behaviours. Finally, the study revealed correspondences and mismatches between teachers' and students' autonomous beliefs. The findings of the study have pedagogical implications for practicing teachers and teacher educators as their awareness should be raised about the importance of learner autonomy to help them shape their learners' learning experiences positively regarding autonomy development.*

*Keywords:* autonomy, beliefs, practices, language teachers, language learners

## 1 Introduction

Justifications for promoting learner autonomy are manifold. Learner involvement in decision making concerning the learning process makes learning more purposeful, increases motivation (Cotterall, 1995; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; Little, 2007; Smith, 2008), and leads to more effective learning. Benson

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(2008) suggests that learner autonomy helps students act independently in various situations outside the classroom and become critically conscious members of society. Even though learner autonomy and its implications for teaching and learning have been widely researched, teachers' and students' voices have been paid little attention to. In this small-scale research I intend to address this gap using mixed methods to examine the nature of teachers' and students' beliefs about learner autonomy, and how these beliefs relate to teachers' classroom practices and students' behaviours.

The study aims to gain a better understanding of teacher cognition and students' beliefs concerning learner autonomy, as well as to reveal the sources of possible mismatches between autonomous beliefs and behaviours. More specifically, it intends to present the findings of both quantitative and qualitative research. The rationale for adopting the mixed method approach was that combining methods made it possible to take into account the complexity of the teaching and learning context. The study draws on the explanatory power of sociocultural theory which understands cognition as inseparable from the social and cultural context where knowledge is constructed in a community through interaction (Williams & Burden, 1997).

## **2 Theoretical background**

### *2.1 Learner autonomy*

The idea of autonomy in learning is based on the assumption that knowledge is not simply transmitted and acquired, but it involves the active construction of meaning by individual participants in the learning process, it happens in social interaction with others, and it is co-constructed (Benson, 2013; Little, 1991). As it is impossible to teach everything students need to know, and given that learning does not stop outside the classroom, it is necessary to teach skills they can transfer to other learning situations (Nunan, 1988). Although teaching clearly contributes to learning, learners themselves are the agents of their own learning. The increase in their involvement in the process of learning leads to more effective learning. As Little (1994) views it, "all genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous" (p. 431).

Although there is no indication when the term learner autonomy was used for the first time, in second language education it appeared in Holec's seminal report (1981), which defined autonomy as an "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). This implies that learner autonomy is an attribute of the learner, not of the learning process. Holec's influential definition was followed by several attempts to describe different versions of autonomy. Learner autonomy was found to have two central features: (1) learners take responsibility for the organisation of the learning process from the selection of the study materials to assessment and (2) they feel responsible for their own learning (Benson, 2013; Benson & Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1995), and have "an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning" (Dickinson, 1995, p. 167). Furthermore, Benson and Voller (1997) claim that the concept of autonomy has been used at least in five ways: (1) for situations in which students learn entirely on their own; (2) for a group of skills which can be acquired and used in self-directed learning; (3) for an inborn

capacity which is not supported by formal education; (4) for learners' responsibility for their own learning; and (5) for the right of learners to decide about the direction of their own learning.

Dam (1995) found that autonomous learners are able to take charge of their own learning, they make decisions, act independently, and are motivated by their learning. She also included the notion of "willingness" to emphasise that regardless of their capacity, learners would develop autonomy only if they were willing to take responsibility for their learning, resonating Holec's (1988) views. Altogether, researchers agree that autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning, show responsibility, are voluntarily involved in opportunities for practice, apply appropriate learning strategies, review and evaluate their learning progress regularly (Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; Little, 1991, 2007). Oxford (2003) suggests that although no single definition of learner autonomy is accepted, there is an agreement on what learner autonomy means and "consideration of all relevant perspectives is likely to provide a stronger, richer understanding of learner autonomy" (p. 81).

## *2.2 Teachers' roles in fostering learner autonomy*

Although different approaches of learner autonomy welcome teacher assistance to different extent, as Benson (2008), Cotterall (1995), Little (1990) and Oxford (2003) put it, the role of the teacher is central to the development of learner autonomy. It has also been agreed (Dam, 2008; Little, 1991; Nunan, 1997; Voller, 1997) that in an autonomy-supportive classroom teachers are expected to act as counsellors or facilitators in a context where learners are supported to become actively involved in every stage of their learning process. Voller (1997) claimed that teachers' main role is to facilitate learning and associated this role with teachers' personal qualities, as well as with technical support. Teachers were seen as counsellors and as resources for students' learning. However, as Sheerin (1997) pointed out when discussing teachers' roles as counsellors, one should be aware of the "paradox of independent learning that almost all learners need to be prepared and supported on the path towards greater autonomy by teachers" (p. 63) and suggested that teachers should find the balance between too much and too little advising.

## *2.3 Beliefs*

Beliefs have been found to have an important role in different areas of life as they help individuals make sense of the world and influence the way in which new information is internalised (Borg, 2003, 2006; Pajares, 1992). According to a comprehensive definition (Borg, 2001), a belief "is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in the sense that it is accepted as true by individuals, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p. 186). As beliefs cannot be directly observed but must be inferred (Borg, 2006; Bullock, 2010), they are difficult to investigate because individuals are often reluctant to unveil their beliefs (Williams & Burden, 1997). Moreover, beliefs are often contradictory (Borg, 2006), may change over time and they are inconsistent in the sense that beliefs do not always correspond to behaviours due to various reasons, such as previous experiences, contextual factors and situational constraints (Borg, 2006).

### **2.3.1 Teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy**

Although researchers do not have direct information about how beliefs change, some factors that affect teachers' beliefs have been identified. For example, Bandura's (1986) theory of triadic reciprocity revealed the interrelatedness of beliefs, behaviours, and environment claiming that teachers' beliefs influence their behaviour and environment, and that teachers' behaviour and environment affect their beliefs. Moreover, Borg (2006) highlighted that teachers' cognition was influenced by all aspects of their work and also revealed the relationship among teachers' beliefs, teachers' professional development, classroom practices and contextual factors.

Teachers have been found to be willing to develop their practices, and they support the idea of incorporating learner autonomy in their teaching; however, they are reluctant to involve students in methodological decisions, claiming that institutional constraints made the promotion of learner autonomy less feasible (Camilleri, 2007; Chan, 2003; Balçıkanlı, 2010). Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) findings shed light on teachers' positive attitudes towards learner autonomy as well as their less optimistic views concerning the feasibility of promoting it in practice. Their study revealed that teachers believed that the most salient factors that hindered the development of learner autonomy were learner attributes and institutional factors. Along with Bullock (2010), Joshi (2011) and Yoshiyuki (2011) found that teachers had diverging views about the extent to which their learners were autonomous. Reinders and Lazaró (2011) revealed that teachers felt that students did not understand the importance of autonomy, they lacked the skills and were reluctant to learn independently. Studies by Al Asmari (2013) and Reinders and Lazaró (2011) revealed positive attitudes towards learner autonomy, but they found that teachers lacked proper training and experience in this field and emphasised the importance of integrating the methodology for promoting learner autonomy in the curriculum of teacher training programmes.

Regarding self-assessment, teachers had been found to worry about implementing self-assessment, as they had doubts about learners' ability to assess their own proficiency accurately (Blanche & Merino, 1989). However, research showed that training helped (Brantmeyer & Vanderplank, 2012; Council of Europe, 2001), and accuracy increased when language was self-assessed with clear descriptors which were connected to the learning context, and items of abstract nature proved to be less accurate than functional (can do) skills (Butler & Lee, 2010; Harris, 1997). Teachers also felt challenged by the feasibility of self-assessment and expressed the need for it to be practical in terms of time and availability of resources (Harris, 1997).

### **2.3.2 Relationships between teachers' beliefs and practices**

Teachers' beliefs are seen inconsistent in the sense that beliefs and practices do not always correspond (Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2001, 2006). It has also been proven that transfer of beliefs from teacher education to classroom practice is not swift or automatic (Borg, 2006, 2011; Lugossy, 2007). Lugossy (2007) found that in a Hungarian elementary school context, teachers did not rely on their knowledge acquired through formal education, but rather on their own teaching theories and previous experiences as learners or as teachers. Even though finding a particular method or strategy successful and motivating, teachers tended to recycle direct instruction and form-focused activities, claiming that it saved time.

Therefore, Breen et al. (2001) suggest that “beneath individual diversity in action in the classroom and the personal dispositions that guide it, there appears to be a collective pedagogy wherein a widely adopted classroom practice is, from their perspective, an expression of a specific and largely distinctive set of principles” (Breen et al., 2001, p. 496). Feryok (2008) claims that the reason for the mismatch between “fully developed practices” (p. 236) and stated beliefs may be due to reliance on familiar routines: “practices reflect the complex interplay of multiple cognitions from multiple sources acting as frames” (p. 236).

Although previous studies contributed to understanding the way teachers perceive autonomous learning and their roles in fostering learner autonomy, moreover, they revealed that teachers had positive attitudes towards it, little is known about how autonomy is put into practice in language classrooms. The extent to which teachers’ and students’ beliefs concerning learner autonomy correspond is also unclear. Understanding the way autonomy works in practice and the possible difficulties that may occur, could help teachers prepare for their roles as facilitators of autonomy. Their ability and willingness to deal with the emerging difficulties depends on their own beliefs concerning the learning process and given that cognition and practice are closely interrelated, understanding teachers’ beliefs may give researchers and practitioners a clue about the driving force underlying their practices.

### **2.3.3 Students’ beliefs**

Research showed (Horwitz, 1988; Rieger, 2009) that language learning beliefs play an important role in the outcome of the learning process as they impact learning efficacy. Therefore, understanding learners’ beliefs could help teachers understand the expectations with which their students arrive at the language classroom and the factors influencing their efficacy in language learning (Horwitz, 1988). It has also been proven that unsubstantiated beliefs are likely to lead to language learning anxiety. Moreover, if beliefs coincide with the expected good practice in a particular learning context, they enhance efficacy, while otherwise beliefs impact it negatively (Riley, 2009). Students’ beliefs also seem to be impacted by teachers themselves as learners view them as models and experts (Horwitz, 1988). Even though students’ beliefs concerning learner autonomy have not been widely explored, it has been agreed (Chang, 2007; Édes, 2008) that learners’ autonomous beliefs do not always result in autonomous behaviours for several reasons.

### **2.3.4 Correspondences and mismatches between teachers’ and students’ beliefs**

Few studies have compared and contrasted teachers’ perceptions of effective learning and teaching with those of the students’. Brown (2009), Kern (1995) and Schulz (1996) suggest that learners’ and teachers’ cognition do not coincide at every point and they argue that mismatches between teachers’ and students’ expectations could have a negative impact on learners’ motivation and on the learning outcome. Barcelos (2000) explored the relationship and interaction between students’ and teachers’ beliefs, investigating the way in which beliefs changed over time and their influence on classroom practices. She claims in agreement with Kern (1995) that “beliefs cannot be separated from identity, action and social experience” (p. 4), and suggests that when investigating beliefs, the wider social context should be taken into consideration.

### 3 The study

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of autonomy in L2 learning by exploring the following areas:

1. What does learner autonomy mean to language teachers?
2. How are teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices related to their classroom work regarding the development of learner autonomy?
3. What is the relationship between students' autonomous beliefs and behaviours?
4. What is the relationship between teachers' and students' beliefs about learner autonomy?

#### 3.1 *The context of foreign language teaching and learning in Hungary*

The year of 1989, with the abrupt close of communism, led to many fundamental changes in Hungary, which influenced all the areas of public and social life including the field of education. Foreign language learning was characterised by the monopoly of the Russian language for over forty years, however, after 1990 learning Russian ceased to be compulsory in schools: English and German became the two dominant foreign languages.

The change of the regime meant liberalisation from the previously uniform curriculum and the development of a National Core Curriculum (NCC). Put into practice in 1996 and modified several times, the new document set a central criteria basis on which every school was expected to take responsibility for creating its local curriculum and educational programme. The NCC prescribes requirements and sets the standards in ten different knowledge areas, intending to take control over output rather than input (Nikolov, 1999). The changes in the curriculum resulted in a shift from encyclopaedic knowledge to the application of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, key competencies were defined as knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes that are necessary for each person to become a useful member of society. Levels of proficiency defined in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) were integrated into the school leaving exams. The implementation of the NCC has been criticised as changes were imposed over the heads of teachers: although institutions had been asked to comment on the different versions of the NCC, these suggestions had not been taken into consideration, moreover, teachers had not been asked to express their views at all (Medgyes & Nikolov, 2010).

Although the opening up of the borders, the growth in the tourist industry and economic relations followed by the undeniable boom in the accessibility of the media and Internet should have led to an increasing need for speaking foreign languages, Hungarians still seem to lag behind in foreign language proficiency (Special Eurobarometer 386, 2012). The review of recent research in the Hungarian language teaching and learning context points towards dispiriting conclusions (Soproni, 2013): heavy workload, teachers not informed about changes in policy, and scarce if any contact with training institutions. Although the NCC went through several modifications, language teachers kept teaching following their own hidden curriculum, adopting an eclectic approach (Nikolov, 2003). Research showed that the most frequently used teaching methods were teacher-centred, learner autonomy was not supported and that

teachers did not feel responsible for raising and maintaining motivation, claiming that students ought to come to English lessons motivated (Nikolov et al., 2009). Students were not willing to make extra efforts to improve their English if they did not have to pass a language proficiency exam and that their autonomous beliefs did not translate into practice (Édes, 2008).

### 3.2 *The context of the study*

The present study was conducted in a comprehensive secondary school in the south of Hungary. The school specialises in economics and information technology. Apart from the usual four years of education, the school offers two-year-long post-secondary education in accounting, logistics and information technology. At the time of the research the school employed 51 full-time and four part-time teachers and had a total of 683 students. Students were offered two foreign languages: their first foreign language, English or German was theoretically a continuation of their primary-school studies.

Most learners were motivated and intended to continue their studies: 28% of the students who graduated in the school in the summer of 2016 chose tertiary education, whereas a further 40% enrolled in the post-secondary programmes launched by the institution, 17% studied at other post-secondary programmes, and 8% have full time or part time jobs (the school did not have any data about the 7% of the school leavers).

The study involved 12 language teachers in the classroom observation and the questionnaire phase. The participants did not represent a homogeneous group: although all the teachers were women, they were aged between 36–58 years (mean 46.6 years), and their teaching experience varied between 10–35 years with a mean of 21 years. In order to achieve triangulation and with the objective of gaining insight into the participants' beliefs and reported practices concerning learner autonomy, I asked four classroom teachers from those who completed the questionnaire to participate in the interview phase of the research. This decision was based on the results of the classroom observation: two of these teachers proved to have the most supportive approach towards learner autonomy and two other teachers the least supportive practices, both pairs included teachers of English and German. Besides the age difference (32, 42, 46 and 58) the interviewees also differed in their work experience, which ranged from 14 to 35 years. Students' beliefs were also important: all the four classes of 9<sup>th</sup> graders participated in the study ( $n=100$ , 50 boys, 50 girls), their age varied from 14 to 17.

### 3.3 *Data collection instruments*

The study applied a mixed method approach. The choice of method used to collect data was determined by the complex nature of beliefs (Borg, 2006), the low number ( $n=9$ ) of teacher respondents with a relatively high number ( $n=100$ ) of student participants; and most importantly a need to achieve an in-depth understanding of the datasets.

Although heated debates have argued for the 'superiority' of quantitative and qualitative research methods (Mackey & Gass, 2005), mixed methods seem to emerge as a continuum of these and is considered a third approach in research methodology (Dörnyei, 2007). Today it is accepted that combining measures has

an increasingly important role in ensuring reliability and validity of findings. The value of mixing methods has been recognised to balance the inherent weaknesses of a single method with the strengths of other ones in order to enable the analysis of complex issues which could lead to results acceptable by a larger audience (Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

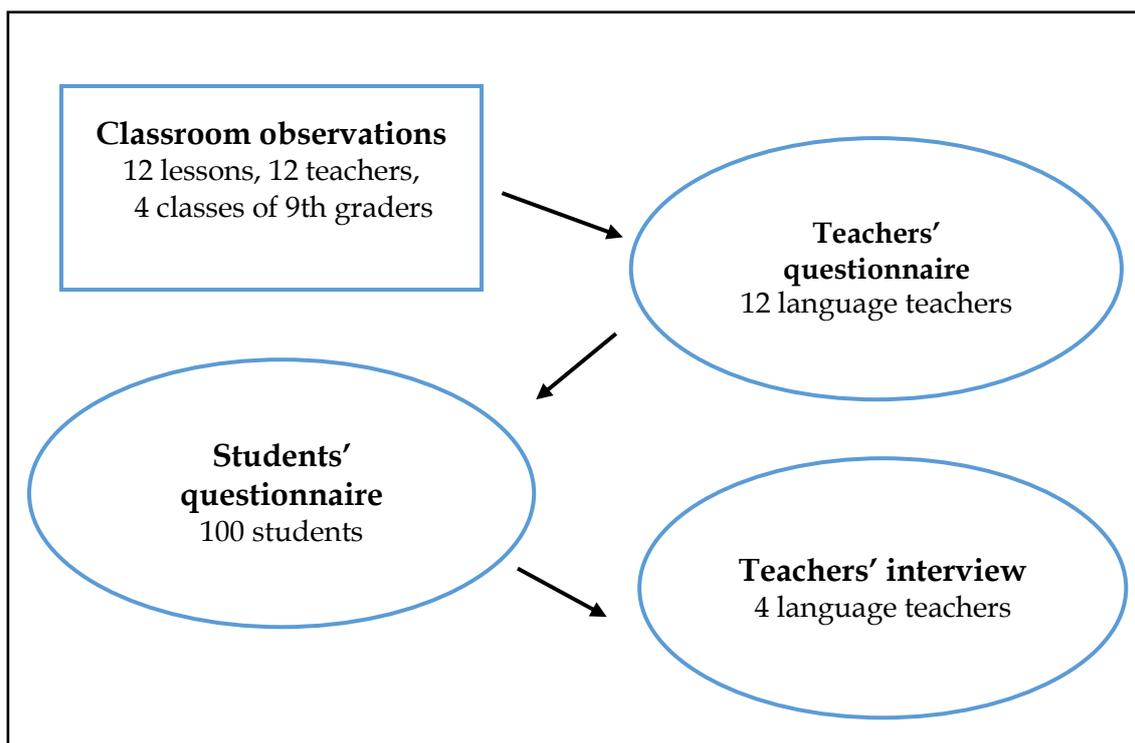
The qualitative phases applied in this study included observational notes, semi-structured interviews with teachers, two questionnaires administered to teachers and students, partly consisting of open-ended questions. The Likert-type items of the two questionnaires, as well as the sample-size of the student-participants contribute to the quantitative component of this study. The trustworthiness of the study was achieved by the triangulation of multiple perspectives: teachers' and students' views, as well as different data sources (Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Classroom observations allowed to determine in what ways the concept of learner autonomy was supported in the language classroom. The present research intended to gain insight into language teachers' practices concerning learner autonomy as elaborated by Benson (2011): encouraging student preparation, drawing on out-of-class experience, using authentic materials, encouraging independent inquiry, involving students in task design, supporting student-student interaction, as well as divergent student outcomes, implementing self- and peer-assessment and encouraging students' reflection. Furthermore, the observations focused on students' autonomous behaviours and also served as a springboard for selecting participants for the interview phase of the study. Figure 1 illustrates the procedures of data collection and the participants involved in the different stages of the research.

The teachers' questionnaire addressed issues in line with the research questions: teachers' views on various aspects of learner autonomy, their opinion about the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy. It also asked questions about how autonomous teachers believed their learners were and the extent to which they promoted learner autonomy in their everyday teaching practice. The questionnaire consisted of 17 open questions and 14 closed items on a four-point Likert scale, the closed items were adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012).

The first section of the students' questionnaire asked for demographic data and for end of the year grade; the second section included ten open questions focusing on students' attitudes towards learner autonomy, their learning and language use habits and preferences. The final section of the instrument consisted of 18 closed items on a four-point Likert scale which asked learners how responsible they thought they should be for doing things on their own and it also asked them to what extent they actually did so.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore teachers' responses to the questionnaire about their experiences in connection with learner autonomy in more detail. Several questions were meant to elicit narratives about personal experiences and memories concerning learner autonomy, the instrument consisted of 20 guiding questions.



**Figure 1.** Summary of the data collection procedures and their participants.

### 3.4 Procedures of data analysis

As the main data sources were various, the process of data analysis needed to follow different approaches. In this respect, concerning the qualitative strand of the research, an inductive approach to data analysis was adopted, involving several stages. First, the data was prepared for analysis. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, questionnaire data was organised according to the questions, quantitative data was transformed in order to be suitable for statistical analysis. This stage was followed by organizing and coding the qualitative data. The answers given during the interviews were summarised into key points, then main themes identified after thorough reading and rereading and categorised according to the research questions. The analysis of the classroom observation field notes proceeded in the same way as in the case of the interview data. After cleaning the questionnaire data, responses were coded and categorised according to the research questions and were subjected to content analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005), and recurring concepts were identified. Finally, quantitative data was statistically analysed with the help of SPSS 23.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated, independent samples T-tests and Pearson's correlation test at two-tailed significance were also administered.

### 3.5 Results and discussion

#### 3.5.1 Language teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy

The research revealed diverging views regarding the language teachers' understanding of learner autonomy: teachers defined learner autonomy as

responsibility to control one's own learning, self-direction, need for decision making about the learning process. Other recurring concepts were students' ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses and their awareness of the need for learning outside the school. However, respondents emphasised the importance of teacher-directedness, teachers' role in raising and maintaining motivation, identifying and meeting students' needs. The results of the questionnaire and the interviews showed that language teachers viewed students' motivation as the most powerful factor that influences learner autonomy, although every participant mentioned only extrinsic motives. Moreover, they also considered the socioeconomic background and learning context crucial in autonomous language learning, as one of the interviewees explained:

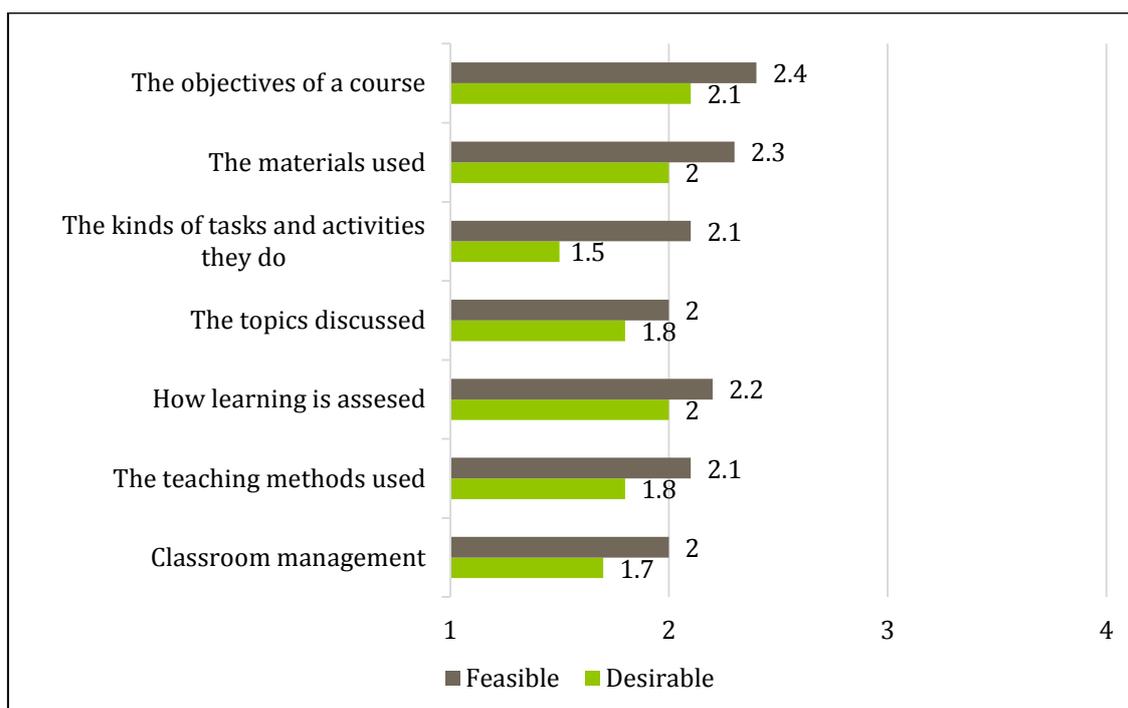
Family background means a lot, whether students are paid attention to at home, and introduced to the right strategies. Obviously, if a child is not paid attention, she would not develop her autonomy (...), she would lose her motivation and would not make any extra effort. (Personal interview, translated from Hungarian)

Teachers highlighted the psychological and sociocultural aspects of learner autonomy, as well as their technical perspectives. The interviews revealed that all teachers considered life experience and language learning experience more relevant than age, however, the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency was found to be complex. Teachers were aware of the strong potential of technology, although they emphasised the need for proper guidance in this sense.

All respondents of the teachers' questionnaire agreed on the positive effects of learner autonomy on language learning and referred to the personalised pace of learning, deeper understanding and sense of achievement. As drawbacks teachers mentioned that autonomous behaviour needed self-discipline; they found error correction problematic when supporting learner autonomy and feared to lose control over their lessons. Teachers' views on autonomy in teaching and learning were shaped by their own learning experiences and by their previous teachers' practices, as it was expressed by a participant: "to some extent I teach the same way as my English teacher did".

Teachers claimed that they promoted learner autonomy by encouraging their students to use modern media, to make presentations on topics of their own choice, provided them with extra language exercises and with advice concerning learning strategies, furthermore, they introduced autonomy supportive activities in the classroom. Although, as revealed by the questionnaire, autonomy was viewed as a desirable goal to reach, the interviews showed that teachers had diverging views about the level of freedom their students should be given in the classroom: "too much autonomy isn't good, students can't handle it or they abuse it", "they'll become spoilt".

Figure 2 provides a summary of the teachers' responses from the questionnaire. It shows that participants were more positive about the feasibility of student involvement than about its desirability. Teachers believed that more autonomy would be possible, but they did not think it was applicable in their context, revealing the discrepancy of the world that was desirable but not available to them at the time of the research. These results contradict Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) findings. The reason for the differences may be due to the different research context (university teachers in Oman) or to the larger sample size ( $n=61$ ).



**Figure 2.** Feasibility and desirability of student involvement in decision-making. Note. 1=unfeasible/undesirable; 4=very feasible/ desirable, nine teachers' data included

The questionnaire and the interviews also revealed that teachers had positive attitudes towards self-assessment, although they had worries about its accuracy, since teachers cannot be everywhere to control the situations emerging in the classroom:

...the problem is that they don't realise at this age that they are not cheating me but themselves and (...) they would like the teacher to praise them (...) and they would try to cheat. But as they grow older they realise that self-assessment is good if it is done fairly. (Personal interview, translated from Hungarian)

Teachers thought, that except for a few learners, most of their students had low levels of autonomy as they were not ready to take control over their learning, "they just sit, watch and wait for someone to tell them what to do". This view reveals an inherent contradiction: although teachers believed that learner autonomy was crucial, they thought that their students were not ready for it (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). They did not perceive development as an ongoing process where participants grow into routines and get socialised into ways of using language. Teachers believed that students were more concerned about immediate learning goals than showing long-term engagement. The most challenging factors in promoting learner autonomy were seen to be students' lack of motivation, lack of time, students' socioeconomic backgrounds, continuous distraction caused by the overuse of technology, and institutional constraints.

The interviews with the teachers shed light on teachers' different understandings concerning teacher autonomy as they associated the concept with freedom from external constraints, personal autonomy or teacher authority, rather than a personal responsibility for their teaching (Little, 1994). The

exclusive use of past tense when speaking about autonomy in their own development (“I was motivated”, “I did everything I needed”) suggested that teachers hardly perceived any space for professional growth in their career. The fact that teachers mostly held external constraints responsible, revealed the influence of the powerful socio-educational tradition manifested in learned helplessness (Williams & Burden, 1997). Furthermore, it also points towards the conclusion that teachers did not feel responsible for their teaching, and thus their level of autonomy as teachers was low. The most prevalent emerging issue was the importance of previous learning experience and the influence of previous teachers, which implies that if teachers could experience strategies fostering autonomy as learners, reflect on these strategies and experiment with them in their teaching practice these activities could lead to more effective teachers.

### **3.5.2 Relationships between language teachers’ beliefs and practices concerning learner autonomy**

The present research unveiled a conflict between what teachers claimed they wanted to do and what they believed they could do. Although the NCC and the Local Curriculum listed learner autonomy among its explicit aims, teachers expected external intervention. Seemingly, theories-in-action, stemming from teachers’ personal and professional biographies, as well as from their teaching contexts, are slow to change.

The observed lessons focused on various issues not only because of the difference in timing of the visits, but also because one of the classes took part in a year of intensive language learning where certain target areas (Grammar, Communication and Culture) were taught by different teachers. The lessons were varied concerning the extent to which learner autonomy was supported, they ranged from totally teacher-centred work to lessons based on students’ presentations. Teachers used course books accompanied with workbooks in nine cases, two lessons were built on students’ presentations completed with worksheets and copies from different course books, and one of the lessons was based on copies of grammar exercises.

The most frequently occurring elements of autonomy supportive practices were allowing students to choose the topic of their presentation or of their writing task to be done at home, guessing the meaning of words, involvement in individual work, pair work and less often in group work. Teachers motivated learners in various ways: praised them, showed interest in their free time activities, hobbies, raised their interest in the topics under discussion, tried to meet their needs with choice of topics. Teachers encouraged creativity and individual ideas when learners were involved in picture description, comforting them by stating that “English is easy”.

Although classroom observations revealed practices that supported learner autonomy, the presence of the Prussian teaching tradition was definitely more prevalent. The traditional arrangement of the classrooms, the teaching objectives and the content influenced by the instructional materials, scarcity of technology use even though IT facilities were available and reliance on the course books because of the pressure associated with the curriculum provided little evidence that learner autonomy development was a consciously sustained process.

The perception that learner involvement into decision making was feasible but not desirable was mirrored in the teachers’ observed practices. Even though teachers thought that students liked to be given the opportunity for making

decisions, these occasions seemed to be a scarcity. It was not clear how teachers' attitude concerning self-assessment translated into practice, as its implementation was limited to certain tasks. Although teachers were aware of the benefits of learner autonomy in language learning, only sporadic occurrences of learner autonomy support could be traced.

Although learner autonomy has been listed among the explicitly stated educational aims in the curriculum of the school, it was unevenly present in teachers' reported practices. Despite their positive views on learner autonomy, teachers tended to rely on frontal classwork and form-focused activities. Teachers' attitudes towards autonomy seem to be strongly connected to their own learning experiences and influence their roles in fostering their learners' autonomy. These results point towards a need for change: even though innovations were supported from above, these initiatives did not find their way into the classroom as teachers did not embrace the concept (Hyland & Wong, 2013).

### 3.5.3 Language learners' perspectives

The results of the students' questionnaire revealed that students felt most responsible for setting their own learning goals, stimulating their own interest in language learning and deciding what to learn outside the classroom. On the other hand, as shown in Table 1, they felt least responsible for deciding what to learn in the classroom, to learn from their peers and to evaluate their own learning progress.

**Table 1.** Learners' beliefs about their responsibilities concerning LA.

Learners feel responsible for	N	Mean	SD
Identifying their strengths and weaknesses	95	3.04	.837
Setting learning goals	95	3.47	.712
Deciding what to learn outside the classroom	96	3.20	.913
Evaluating their own learning progress	95	3.00	.851
Stimulating interest in language learning	96	3.27	.827
Learning from peers	96	2.82	.871
Becoming more self-directed in language learning	97	3.12	.869
Exploring the language without the help of the teacher	95	3.13	.914
Offering opinion about what to learn in the classroom	96	2.18	1.046
Total		3.01	

Note. N=number of cases; SD=standard deviation

Students reported that they set up their own learning goals and stimulated their own interest in language learning, which is in line with their perceived responsibilities (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Learners' reported autonomous behaviours.

Learners' autonomous behaviours	N	Mean	SD
Identify their strengths and weaknesses	98	2.66	.773
Set learning goals	97	3.01	.757
Decide what to learn outside the classroom	97	2.55	.890
Evaluate own learning progress	97	2.70	.926
Stimulate their own interest in language learning	97	3.01	.896
Learn from peers	98	2.76	.985

Become more self-directed in language learning	97	2.87	.799
Explore the language alone without the help of the teacher	99	2.79	.929
Offer opinion about what to learn in the classroom	99	2.06	1.028
Total		2.71	

Note. N=number of cases; SD=standard deviation

The least often, students offered opinions about what to do in the classroom, which reflected their beliefs; however, they decided what to learn outside the classroom less frequently than they believed it was their responsibility. Comparing the means of the extent to which students believed it was their responsibility to act autonomously (3.01) and the extent to which they claimed to act autonomously (2.71) revealed a mismatch in favour of beliefs, implying that students' autonomous behaviours lagged behind their perceived responsibilities.

Moderately strong correlations were found between beliefs and practices concerning decision making about what to do in the lesson, exploring the language without the help of the teacher and stimulating their own interest and learning from the peers (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Correlations between students' autonomous beliefs and behaviours.

Beliefs and behaviours	Pearson correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)	N
Identify their strengths and weaknesses	.242*	.019	94
Set learning goals	.303**	.003	93
Decide what to learn outside the classroom	.261*	.010	95
Evaluate own learning progress	.345**	.001	93
Stimulate their own interest in language learning	.503**	.000	94
Learn from peers	.508**	.000	95
Become more self-directed in language learning	.385**	.000	95
Explore the language alone without the help of the teacher	.487**	.000	95
Offer opinion about what to learn in the classroom	.476**	.000	96

Note. \* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level (two-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$  level (two-tailed).

The weakest positive correlations were found between perceived responsibilities and actual behaviours concerning identifying strengths and weaknesses, and decision making about what to learn outside the classroom, followed by setting learning goals, evaluating their own progress and becoming more self-directed. It is important to note that correlations reported here are not strong enough to arrive at definite conclusions, in-depth interviews with the students might have provided a more comprehensive picture about learners' autonomous beliefs and actual levels of autonomy.

Correlation analysis of students' end of the year grades and their autonomous beliefs revealed moderately strong relationship only in case of responsibility to become more self-directed ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results showed also moderately strong correlations between the grades and four of the investigated behavioural elements: setting learning goals ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), stimulating interest ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), becoming more self-directed ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), exploring the language alone, without the help of the teachers ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

As for language learners' attitudes towards learner autonomy, the students' questionnaire revealed that autonomy-supportive work forms were popular among the students, although only in the case of individual work was it obvious that learners preferred it for reasons that pointed towards autonomy development (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Students' preferred work forms and the reasons for learning preferences.

Preferred work form	Total respondents %	Reasons for preferring work form	Work form %
<b>Individual work</b>	34	I can be more focused	50
		I can work in my own pace	20
		It is comfortable, I have always worked alone	14
		It gives information about my own knowledge	12
		It helps me identify my weaknesses	4
<b>Pair work</b>	33	We can help each other	75
		It is more interesting to work together	15
		It improves speaking skills	6
		It improves pronunciation	4
<b>Group work</b>	8	We can help each other	85
		It is more interesting to work together	15
<b>Frontal work</b>	22	I can understand the lesson better	35
		It is easier to rely on the teacher	30
		It is better to be corrected by the teacher	15
		It is more comfortable to be instructed by the teacher	10
		It is more interesting to discuss different things with the whole class	5
<b>Missing</b>	3		
<b>Total</b>	100		

Regarding students' reasons for preferring pair work and group work, the prevalent reliance on peers implies low levels of autonomy in language learning. The results also showed that most high achievers preferred individual work suggesting that high achievement and autonomous behaviour are related.

Table 5 shows that concerning the trends of language use among the groups with different achievement levels that most low achievers avoided using English or German outside the school or mostly used their respective foreign language in computer games, whereas most of the high achievers used their foreign language everywhere they found the opportunity to do so.

**Table 5.** Frequency of students' out of class language use and their end of year grades.

Out of class language use	End of year grade					Total %
	1	2	3	4	5	
No language use	1	9	6	3	3	22
Everywhere	0	0	0	4	5	9
Computer games	0	5	3	2	1	11

Internet	0	1	5	7	5	18
Watching films	0	0	0	3	4	7
Listening to music	0	0	0	3	2	5
Travelling	0	1	0	3	2	6
Personal communication	0	0	8	7	5	20
Subtotal	1	16	22	32	27	
Missing						2
Total						100

The fact that loss of interest in language learning was the least frequent among the most successful language learners, whereas it was more prevalent among the weaker students, points towards the interrelatedness of autonomy and motivation. Students lost interest in language learning most frequently because they found the language difficult or too boring, because of poor grades, or because they became tired. The most powerful motivating factors in overcoming difficulties in language learning were good grades and students' awareness of how useful the target language was. The results revealed a difference between students' beliefs within achievement levels: low achievers felt helpless about becoming more autonomous, blamed lack of motivation or school setting for their lack of autonomy. More successful language learners, in contrast, identified motivation and activities that could be done in a self-directed way to support their autonomy; those who could overcome their difficulties in language learning were also more aware of the role of motivation in autonomous learning. As shown in Table 6, performance orientation outnumbered mastery orientation: 59% of the students set their goals to take the school leaving exam or a language proficiency exam, whereas 31% aim at fluency or high proficiency. Goal setting and performance were found to be related: lower achievers set less challenging goals, whereas more successful language learners intend to take B2 or C1 level language exams. Also, the presence of mastery orientation is more characteristic to high achievers.

**Table 6.** Language learners' goals and the end of the year grades.

Aim of language learning	End of the year grades					Total %
	1	2	3	4	5	
school leaving exam (B1)	1	5	4	3	1	14
B2 language exam	0	4	6	14	8	32
C1 language exam	0	0	2	4	7	13
Fluency	0	2	7	8	6	23
High proficiency	0	1	1	2	4	8
Does not know	0	4	2	1	1	8
Subtotal	1	16	22	32	27	98
Missing						2
Total						100

Most students (see Table 7) were driven by instrumental motivation, they claimed that they learned the language to be admitted to higher education, to be able to apply for a better job, to work abroad, or to cope better in life in general.

**Table 7.** Students' reasons for language learning.

Reason for language learning	End of the year grades					Total %
	1	2	3	4	5	
Higher education	0	0	5	3	5	13
Work	0	0	4	6	2	12
Work abroad	0	4	7	14	6	31
To cope better in life	0	2	1	7	9	19
Have to	1	8	4	1	0	14
Joy of learning	0	0	0	1	4	5
Subtotal	1	14	21	32	26	94
Missing						6
Total						100

Only 5% of the students reported that they learned the target language because they liked it, and 14% was not fuelled by either types of motivations, they claimed to learn due to external pressure. The most powerful motivating factor was the possibility to work abroad, which mirrors the trends identified in Special Eurobarometer 386 (2012). Learning a language to cope better in life was more characteristic to successful learners, as well as targeting further education. Furthermore, most students were driven by instrumental motivation, intrinsic motives were mentioned only by high achievers, whereas reasons for language learning because of external constraints were most prevalent among weaker students.

The reason for students being concerned about their immediate learning goals may be that they expect to be in class only to receive lessons passively rather than find ways to take control of their learning process. Low achievers seemed to consider a foreign language a school subject and they failed to see it as a tool to achieve further goals or an area of intrinsic interest. Only high achievers felt devoted to lifelong language learning.

Concerning students' autonomous beliefs and behaviours, the present research found a mismatch in favour of beliefs, implying that students' behaviours lagged behind their perceived responsibilities: language learners' beliefs about autonomous learning did not result in autonomous behaviours, which corresponds with Édes's (2008) findings. Socialised in a context where teachers' roles were associated with that of authority, students tended not to take responsibility for their own learning but rather relied on their teachers to provide them with information and instruction.

The observations revealed that only a few students were willing to contribute actively to the lessons and to make suggestions. Majority of the interactions between students happened in L1, moreover, off-task interactions could be observed whenever the teacher's attention was diverted. Students used the target language only when they were answering display questions and in the cases when they needed clarification, they asked for help in L1.

The results of the questionnaires and classroom observations showed that language learners' beliefs about autonomous learning did not result in autonomous behaviours. This finding is important as unsubstantiated beliefs impact language learning negatively, whereas beliefs coinciding with the expected good practice enhance efficacy (Horwitz, 1998; Riley, 2009).

### **3.5.4 Relationships between language teachers' and learners' beliefs concerning learner autonomy**

Learners' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning did not overlap at all points. Concerning the correspondences between teachers' and students' views, both groups found teacher-directedness desirable, expressed that monitoring the learning process was not among learners' responsibilities, students expected their improvement from the teacher, and both groups emphasised the importance of immediate error correction. They agreed that students set immediate learning goals and were led by extrinsic motives. Both groups believed that students were overburdened at schools.

As for the differences, teachers were aware of the role of motivation and of the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in language learning, students did not seem to realize the importance of these abilities. Moreover, teachers believed that autonomous language learning could happen both in the classroom and outside of it, while students did not consider school as a context where they could act autonomously. Furthermore, teachers were more positive about out of class uses of modern media resources than their students.

## **4 Conclusions**

The results showed that language teachers were aware of the benefits of autonomy in language learning and they believed that the most powerful factors that influenced learner autonomy were students' socioeconomic background and motivation. Furthermore, teachers found learning experience more relevant than age concerning autonomy development.

The research revealed conflicts between what teachers claimed to do or wanted to do and what they actually did. Although learner autonomy was listed among the stated educational aims in the curriculum and teachers' attitudes towards autonomy was positive, their beliefs did not translate into practice. Even though their practice showed elements of autonomy support, the presence of the Prussian tradition was definitely more prevalent. Furthermore, teachers were reluctant to provide their learners with opportunities for decision making.

The fact that teachers made external constraints responsible for their choices in their teaching practice revealed low levels of teacher autonomy. Teachers' attitudes towards autonomy seem to be strongly connected to their own experiences as language learners and influenced their practices concerning autonomy support. Teachers believed that their students had low levels of autonomy, which coincided with students' views about themselves. Language teachers and their learners had diverging views concerning the space for autonomy development: as opposed to their teachers, learners did not associate language classroom with autonomous behaviour. The study also shed light on mismatches between learners' autonomous beliefs and their classroom behaviours, moreover, it revealed a relationship between learner autonomy, achievement and motivation.

Because of the small sample size, the results of the study cannot be generalised, furthermore, follow-up interviews with the students might have provided a more comprehensive picture about learners' autonomous beliefs and actual levels of autonomy. Although every effort was made to avoid potential

pitfalls, as the research involved only one age group, further research would be desirable by involving a larger population from various age groups or by conducting a longitudinal study.

Despite the limitations, the findings carry pedagogical implications to practicing teachers and teacher educators. Teachers' and learners' awareness should be raised about the importance of learner autonomy, as well as the roles of the teachers which are central to the development of learner autonomy.

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