Teacher perspectives of learner autonomy in language learning

Francesco Barillaro

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Supervisor: Dr Diana Ridley

Abstract

This project is an investigation into teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy in language learning. Research was carried out with English language teachers and the Director of Studies (DOS) at a private ESL (English as a second language) school in Vancouver, Canada. The report focuses on teachers' beliefs in five areas: (1) teacher/student roles and responsibilities, (2) opinions and evidence of students' autonomous learning, (3) autonomous learning activities inside and outside the classroom, (4) interpretations of learner autonomy and (5) learner autonomy and the curriculum. A mixed methods approach was employed which consisted of a questionnaire survey, in which all teachers had the opportunity to take part, followed by semi-structured interviews with a small sample of teachers. Findings show that teachers feel mainly responsible for most teaching and language-related decisions inside the classroom. Student learning and progress outside the class is generally believed to be the responsibility of the student. The majority of teachers do not view their students as very autonomous, a belief also shared by the DOS. Teachers have very positive attitudes towards autonomous learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. They believe using English outside the classroom is essential in the learning process; however, they do feel that many students do not use opportunities to learn English outside class time. Teachers have a clear understanding of the concept of learner autonomy and feel it is important in language learning. There are concerns, however, that constraints within the school system such as time pressures, frequent class changes, and increased class sizes may hinder the development of learner autonomy. Some teachers feel specific courses within the school curriculum offer more opportunities for autonomous learning, others feel developing learner autonomy does not depend on the curriculum, but is rather teacher dependent.

While discussing the findings of this study, the implications for professional practice within the school where I work will also be considered. The final part of this paper will summarise the key findings and offer recommendations for future research.

Table of contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 The issue I am investigating and research aims

The main aim of this study was to investigate teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. It explored these perspectives in the following areas:

1. Teachers' views of their roles and responsibilities in language learning/teaching, and those of their students.
2. Opinions and evidence teachers have of their students autonomous learning
3. Teachers' attitudes towards activities, both inside and outside the classroom, which are thought to help in the development of learner autonomy.
4. Teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy.
5. Whether teachers believe the course curriculum helps or hinders the development of learner autonomy.

Given that point number five above involves learner autonomy and the curriculum, an interview was also conducted with the Director of Studies (DOS) of the school to find out whether learner autonomy played a part in decisions concerning the curriculum and choice of course books.

This project is an investigation into teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy. It is not intended to discover if their classrooms incorporate autonomous learning elements nor is it meant to tell them what they should think or do. Teachers bring their own educational beliefs into the classroom as well as teacher education programmes (Pajares 1992) and these beliefs must be respected and valued. With educational research come new ideas and suggestions. Asking teachers to put these ideas into practice without inviting them consider, reflect and discuss their opinions about them will prove ineffective, possibly resulting in teacher resistance. Findings from my study will be used in the planning of a professional development workshop on learner autonomy at the school. It is my hope that this research project, together with the workshop, can generate discussion on what learner autonomy means to teachers at our school, paving the way for future discussions on the practical, classroom applications of learner autonomy in our educational setting.

1.2 The context in which this project is set

This research project was carried out with teachers and the DOS at a private ESL (English as a second language) school in Vancouver, Canada. The school plays a major part in our students' study abroad experience. English is all around them when they leave the classroom and there are many opportunities for them to encounter

and use the language in real and authentic English interactions. In our context there is great potential for student learning outside the classroom. A study abroad school such as ours is one which can help students develop the skills and confidence needed to seek out learning opportunities for themselves outside the class. It can help them develop lifelong learning skills that they can take with them once they leave and return to their countries.

The school was established more than 20 years ago and over the years its team of dedicated teachers, coordinators and managers have developed a variety of courses and programmes to meet the needs of its learners. Programmes offered include general and business English, exam preparation classes and English for academic purposes (including a complete University Foundation Certificate recognised by a number of universities and colleges in Canada). The school also offers work and university placement services. Learners come from all over the globe (Central and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East) and levels range from complete beginner to proficiency. On average, around 600 learners are registered at any given point throughout the year.

The teachers range in experience from under five years to over twenty-five years teaching. Some have been with the school since it opened, which highlights the commitment these teachers have to the school and its programmes. The DOS has also been with the school from the beginning and, in collaboration with teachers, has developed and continually revises the curriculum to meet the demands of learners. The school curriculum has a mix of in-house, teacher created material as well as commercially available course books. Teachers meet once a month with management for informal 'lunch-time' meetings. There are also eight professional development workshops throughout the year which teachers are required to attend. I feel teachers will welcome the workshop on learner autonomy as it will make the findings of this research project available to them and will also provide them with the opportunity to explore and discuss their beliefs with colleagues.

1.3 Key terms defined

1.3.1 Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is generally defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec 1981, cited in Field 2007: 30). This is the most widely used definition; however, as I will show in Chapter 2, coming to an exact, universally

accepted definition of learner autonomy is not as simple as one might think. Teachers, as well as learners, have different backgrounds and learning experiences and, therefore, have different views on the process of learning. It follows that they will also have different interpretations of learner autonomy. Rather than being a hindrance, this should be seen as helpful and useful. It is commonly accepted that the meaning of learner autonomy can differ from culture to culture and person to person due to differences in beliefs. Through cooperative effort and discussion between all involved (i.e. teacher, learner and educational institution), it is possible to come up with a definition of learner autonomy, along with suggestions for classroom implementation, appropriate to the local context. We will discuss the meaning of learner autonomy in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.3.2 Teachers' beliefs

Teachers' beliefs can be defined as 'teachers' pedagogic beliefs or those beliefs of relevance to an individual's teaching' (Borg 2001: 187). Phipps and Borg (2009: 381) describe it as 'propositions about all aspects of their work which teachers hold to be true or false'. In other words, teachers' beliefs are beliefs they have about education (i.e. teaching and learning) which guide their actions and behaviours as teachers.

1.4 Why the issue is important

I have had the privilege to work with some very helpful and supportive colleagues. Through my discussions with these colleagues – which included fellow teachers, coordinators, teacher trainers and course book writers – and as I became more comfortable with my teaching, I began to realise that it was not always necessary to follow the curriculum or course book completely. I realised that a curriculum, or set course book, is a collection of methods, activities and tasks written by someone else based on their interpretation of the process of learning. When it comes to commercially available course books, one must also understand that the publisher provides input since they want to sell as many books as possible. As my dissatisfaction grew with what I was asked, and sometimes required, to bring to the classroom, I began to ask my students their views and opinions of the material and the class as a whole. I asked about their interests, areas of difficulty and what they wanted more of. Basically, I got to know my students much better. With their suggestions I began to supplement with material they wanted and needed. I was

able to bring in topics they were interested in and tasks (e.g. writing and reading tasks) which were more suitable to their learning goals. Involving learners more and sharing some of the decision-making responsibilities resulted in a much better and more effective learning environment for all of us.

I strongly support learner autonomy and the sharing of responsibility in the learning process as I believe it leads to a better learning and teaching experience. I understand that my views on autonomy may have an influence on my findings; however, I am still approaching this project neutrally and objectively. My research approach is firmly based on the literature and my research instruments have been developed from the literature and other research studies on teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. (Methodology is discussed in detail in Chapter 3).

Investigating teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy is extremely important as it is difficult to implement learner autonomy practices in the classroom if teachers are not exposed to the principles of learner autonomy. Fundamental to bringing more autonomy into classrooms are teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning (Lamb 2008). Without involving teachers in a self-reflection of their own well-established beliefs about teaching and learning, including teacher and learner roles and responsibilities, there is a strong chance that any effort to promote more autonomous classrooms will be unsuccessful. Teachers' beliefs are resistant to change (Pajares 1992; Borg 2003) and therefore should always be the starting point when introducing new ideas and concepts.

Another reason why this issue is important has to do with context. Teaching and learning are context specific, meaning educational systems and teacher education programmes differ greatly from one place to another. School culture, which includes both the education side (teachers' beliefs, teaching methods, curriculum and course books) and the organisation side (rules and regulations, time factors, exams, management expectations), can be a significant constraint on efforts to promote learner autonomy in the classroom (Smith 2003a). For this reason, I felt it was important that this research project included an element on curriculum and whether teachers feel it hinders the development of learner autonomy. It is important that constraints within the school system are brought to light and discussed as these can prove to be major barriers to encouraging more autonomy in the classroom. Context-specific constraints can cause inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs and what they are doing in the classroom (Bullock 2010).

1.5 Summary of chapter

- The issue I am investigating is teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy.
- An interview with the DOS was also conducted to collect more information regarding learner autonomy and the curriculum.
- A professional development workshop will be held at the school at the end of this project to discuss the findings from this study.
- Teachers in this study work at a private ESL school in Vancouver, Canada.
- Teachers' beliefs are difficult to change. It will be very difficult to put learner autonomy ideas into practice if teachers do not have the opportunity to consider and discuss their beliefs about learner autonomy and their roles in teaching and learning.
- Context-specific constraints within the educational setting need to be exposed and addressed as they can hinder the development of learner autonomy.

Chapter 2 – The literature review

2.1 Introduction

As stated in my introduction, the purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. We begin this chapter examining the definition of learner autonomy. We will then move on to consider ways in which we can foster learner autonomy with our students. Two possible models for promoting learner autonomy in the classroom will be discussed and we will look at four components essential to the development of learner autonomy: *reflection, learning strategies, dialogue* and *collaboration.* Following this, we will discuss the role of the teacher as well as justifications for promoting learner autonomy. Limitations to fostering learner autonomy will also be considered. In the final part of this chapter we will examine related research in the field which has led me into my study.

2.2 Defining learner autonomy

There has been a growing interest in learner autonomy in language teaching and learning over the past 30 years (Benson 2006) and much has been written in this area with the aim of coming to a better understanding of both the theory and practice of learner autonomy. However, reading through the literature one begins to see that learner autonomy is difficult to define precisely (Little 2002; Finch 2002) and that there are a number of different interpretations of the term. This lack of a coherent theory (Oxford 2003) may diminish the importance of learner autonomy, especially from the perspective of the teacher, thus making it difficult to implement and operationalise in the classroom (Reinders 2010). Our common goal as teachers, practitioners and researchers is to think critically about each of these views of learner autonomy, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses based on our current teaching and learning environments.

The term learner autonomy was originally defined in the early 1980s by Henri Holec as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Little 2004; Benson 2006; Field 2007). Since then learner autonomy has been defined in many ways using such words as *capacity*, *willingness*, and *attitude.* The following are definitions of learner autonomy commonly found in much of the literature:

- *'… a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action' (Little 1991:4, cited in Finch 2002: 21)*

- *'…a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person' (Dam et al. 1990: 102)*

- *'… an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning' (Dickinson 1995:167)*

Benson and Voller (1997:2, cited in Dofs 2007: 1-2) provide five definitions for learner autonomy:

1. ... situations in which learners study entirely on their own
2. ... a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning
3. ... an inborn capacity [to learn] which is suppressed by institutional education
4. ... the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning
5. ... the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

Defining learner autonomy is no simple task as there is little consensus on its meaning. However, there is general agreement in all the literature that autonomous learners are those who understand the purposes of their learning programme, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of their learning objectives, plan practice opportunities, implement appropriate learning strategies, and regularly review and evaluate their progress (Cotterall 1995, 2000; Dickinson 1993, 1995; Little 2002, 2006; Field 2007).

What these definitions do well is give us a more holistic view of the learner (Little 2002) where the learner is perceived as a decision maker and one who is connected to the process of learning. They address the political aspect of learner autonomy where learners have the individual freedom to take control and make choices about their learning (Reinders 2010) as well as the philosophical view of learner autonomy where choice and independence in learning are seen as essential in preparing learners for full citizenship in a rapidly changing society (Cotterall 1995; Mezirow 1997). However, these definitions may fall short in their appeal to the teacher as they fail to consider the practical, classroom element of learner autonomy and the role of the teacher.

Benson (2008: 15) argues that learner autonomy from the teachers' perspective is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula'. A theory of learner autonomy must be informed by the perspective of the teacher in the classroom (ibid: 30). La Ganza (2008) offers a more

appealing definition of learner autonomy for the teacher. He states:

> *'Learner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner and the teacher' (p.65)*

The degree to which learners can become autonomous and take responsibility for their learning depends on their relationship with the teacher. Learner autonomy is an *interdependent* relationship where the subject of learning, in our case a foreign or second language, is placed between teacher and learner. It is in this space that the teacher helps the learner develop his or her ability to make choices in their learning. This for me is the true essence and meaning of autonomy. Just as learning is social, so is learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is an awareness of self as a learner which is developed through dialogue (e.g. with the teacher), social interaction and cooperation with others.

The concept of choice is fundamental to learner autonomy (Cotterall 2000). Autonomous learners can make choices in all aspects of their learning, and this includes when to be dependent on the teacher or when to be free from teacher direction. Chanock (2004) calls this *'responsible dependence on teachers'* (p.4). When learners are unable to take control of their learning, they are being responsible by asking someone who can help them and, as a result, they are better able to function in the new context (ibid). Learner autonomy is about knowing one's options and knowing how to interact with all the resources available for one's learning. The teacher is one resource, but more importantly, they help the learner become better aware of other learning options and opportunities which surround them.

It is not enough to define learner autonomy as the *ability*, *capacity* or *willingness* to take charge of one's learning, although one cannot deny that this is a goal to be achieved by the autonomous learner. Learner autonomy can differ in value and meaning from culture to culture due to differences in cultural beliefs (Oxford 2003). A definition of learner autonomy must respect the view of the teacher in a particular teaching and learning context. The teachers' perspective is the starting point which initiates the dialogue needed for finding a definition and pedagogy of learner autonomy appropriate to the teaching and learning context. Just as the teacher is involved in developing learner autonomy, and supporting a learner's existing autonomy, it is vital that they are also involved in examining its definition and

exploring classroom approaches and practices suitable and relevant to their educational setting. As Palfreyman (2003: 185) points out:

> *'…an educational organization which attempts to promote learner autonomy without facilitating discussion about what this means to different participants may well run into practical difficulties, which are all the more baffling if those concerned appear to share a common goal.'*

2.3 How to foster learner autonomy

Developing learner autonomy is a gradual process. It is a process in which both teacher and learner are involved, and it must move at a pace that both can manage (Camilleri 1997). There is no 'one size fits all' approach to learner autonomy (Smith 2003a: 256). Learners are different in their opinions and beliefs about the process of learning. They also differ in their readiness for, and interpretations of, learner autonomy.

Few practical models exist which guide teachers in implementing autonomy in the classroom (Reinders 2010). Cotterall (2000) and Reinders (2010) propose frameworks which attempt to close the gap between the theory of learner autonomy and classroom practice. With such frameworks (described below), teachers and educational institutions may find it easier to integrate principles of learner autonomy in the classroom.

Cotterall (2000: 111-112) offers five principles for language course design which aim to foster learner autonomy and support the transfer of responsibility for decision-making from teacher to learner:

1. The course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies.
2. Course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process.
3. Course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks.
4. The course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance.
5. The course promotes reflection on learning.

Principle five, reflection, is the necessary component which holds the rest together.

According to Cotterall (ibid.), as one's awareness of their learning grows, so does their potential for learner autonomy. Reflection helps learners increase their ability to be more self-reliant and independent. In her study of two short courses integrating these five principles, she concluded that:

- learners were able to manage their learning in ways which contributed to task performance
- motivation was enhanced
- learners reported using course strategies outside the classroom
- learners improved their ability to evaluate their performance
- learners reported increased confidence in adopting strategies to solve new language problems (from Cotterall ibid.: 115)

Reinders (2010: 46-49) looks at ways teachers can encourage autonomy in the classroom and proposes the following stages in the development of learner autonomy:

1. *Identifying needs*: carry out a needs analysis with students and link these needs with classroom activities.
2. *Setting goals*: discuss and help learners identify and set realistic learning goals.
3. *Planning learning*: include learners in decisions on what to learn and pacing of lesson
4. *Selecting resources*: provide the opportunity for learners to bring in authentic resources to share and learn with the rest of the class
5. *Selecting learning strategies*: incorporate strategy instruction with classroom activities and allow time for learners to discuss and reflect on their strategy use.
6. *Practice*: offer choice, for example, in the types of homework tasks to complete so that they are using language in ways that are relevant to them.
7. *Monitoring progress*: students can record, and reflect on, their learning experiences in a learning diary which can be shared with other members of the class or used as private dialogue between teacher and student
8. *Assessment and revision*: provide alternate forms of assessment and reflection activities such as language checklists (e.g. the European Language Portfolio) and self and peer assessment worksheets/activities.

The stages above do not need to be followed step by step, but should rather be seen

as a cyclical process guided and supported by the teacher. It is important for teachers to interact with the framework and decide how best to use it in the classroom. This is a challenging task but one which can be achieved with discussion with other teachers and a support structure placed in the educational setting.

The two frameworks above are important as they encourage reflection, strategy use, dialogue and collaboration, which are all seen as essential to the development of learner autonomy. Reflection, as Reinders (ibid: 50) puts it 'is the glue that holds autonomous learning together'. Reflection is an ongoing process that the teacher starts, supports and directs (Little 2004). Without it learners cannot assess their past learning or make plans for future action.

The ability to use a wide range of learning strategies is important if learners are to take more responsibility for their learning and become more autonomous learners (Hedge 2000; Dofs 2007; Field 2007). Learning strategies may be defined as 'mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so' (Wenden 1998: 18, cited in Thanasoulas 2000). They can be divided into four main types: (1) *cognitive* strategies (e.g. working out meanings of new vocabulary items), (2) *metacognitive* strategies (e.g. self-monitoring), (3) *communication* strategies (e.g. maintaining a conversation without understanding every word they hear) and (4) *socio-affective* strategies (e.g. being able to initiate conversations in English). Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford 1990, cited in Reinders 2010) is a useful resource. Learners can work through this questionnaire (found online at http://ell.phil.tu-chemnitz.de/cing/frontend/questionnaires/oxford_quest.php) at various points in the course evaluating to what extent their strategy use is developing.

Further to reflection and strategy use, dialogue is another component considered important in attempts to encourage more independence in learning. Dialogue between teacher and learner helps learners to see the link between the learning tasks they do and the reasons for doing such tasks, thus, helping them to better understand the process of learning. Dialogue is an important *area of learning* that should arise naturally out of classroom tasks (Cotterall 1995). Through learner/teacher dialogue, learners are able to reflect on what they know and don't know, gradually gaining the confidence needed to take necessary actions for their

learning.

Learner autonomy does not mean learning alone in isolation. We are social beings and the development of learner autonomy depends on social interaction (Little 2009). Therefore, it is important that one views the classroom as a place where learners collaborate to learn and share knowledge. 'It is our condition that we learn from one another' (Little and Dam 1998), and thus, collaboration should be seen as a useful resource in encouraging greater independence in learning.

Promoting learner autonomy involves a shift towards what Finch (2002: 8) calls *informed learning*. The more a learner is consciously aware of their learning, the greater the chance of being more independent. Learner autonomy is not a product or something which can be pre-packaged for the teacher. Teachers need to discuss, as a collective whole, the importance of asking learners to engage with the different components of the models described above and then find ways, appropriate to their teaching environment, to put this into practice (Reinders 2010).

2.4 The role of the teacher

As mentioned, the role of the teacher is central to the development of learner autonomy (Hurd 1998; Benson 2008). The teacher will need to create a classroom learning environment that is supportive of learner autonomy. This may involve the teacher first addressing learners' past learning experiences, then slowly raising their awareness to the benefits of increased independence in their learning. Teachers may also need to address their own beliefs about teaching and perspectives of learner autonomy. If not, the teacher could, intentionally or unintentionally, constrain learner autonomy in the classroom 'leading to a lack of authenticity in learning which can disconnect it from real life' (Lamb 2008: 273).

In the learner autonomy classroom the teacher becomes more of a manager, a resource person and a counsellor (Camilleri 1997).

- As *managers* teachers will need to balance their role of supplier of knowledge and that of manager of learning opportunities. Teachers need to be skilful in managing a class where learners actively participate in decision-making.
- Teacher as *resource person* involves helping learners to develop an awareness of their learning styles and the various learning strategies available to them in order to direct them to appropriate learning materials

inside and outside the classroom.

- The role of *counsellor* involves monitoring student's learning and offering advice to help them manage learning difficulties (from Camilleri 1997: 36-38).

The learner autonomy teacher is one who helps learners become more aware of themselves as language learners (e.g. styles, needs, difficulties) and encourages greater independence in learning 'while recognising that as learner expertise increases, teacher involvement inevitably decreases' (Hurd 1998: 70). This is undoubtedly a challenging task and teachers will most likely need preparation and support. Preparation can come through in-service teacher workshops or 'idea exchange' sessions where teachers can share practical ideas on classroom applications of learner autonomy. Support can come through a support structure at the institution which encourages communication between all levels of staff, allows for greater flexibility in teaching and offers an avenue where teachers can receive guidance in how to promote learner autonomy in their specific teaching and learning environment.

2.5 Justifications for learner autonomy

Throughout the literature we find a number of reasons supporting the promotion of learner autonomy. For example, learner autonomy can be justified on the grounds that reflective learning and self-awareness can lead to better learning (Little and Dam 1998; Cotterall 2000). The belief is that more learner involvement in making choices and decision in all aspects of learning (e.g. goal setting, selecting material, pacing, etc.) can make learning more purposeful, thus, leading to greater success in learning. Another justification is that the rise in globalisation, technology and a knowledge-based economy has created a society and educational system that has become more open to autonomy related ideas and concepts (Balcikanli 2007a). In situations of rapid change and increasing movement in the global workforce, the autonomous, responsible thinker (and worker) has become a matter of necessity (Mezirow 1997; Finch 2002) and therefore, society and learning institutions should work hard to offer the kinds of learning which lead to autonomy (Benson 2008).

There have been a number of other justifications for promoting learner autonomy that have been put forward:

1. Autonomous learning helps learners become critically and socially aware

members of their own lives and of those around them (Benson 1995).

2. Learner autonomy increases motivation which, in turn, increases learning effectiveness (Dickinson 1995; Little 2002).
3. Encouraging and active approach to learning helps develop the ability to think and act interdependently which will allow learners to 'play active, participatory roles in a democratic society' (Benson 2006: 31).
4. Learners spend more time outside the classroom than inside and it is important to prepare learners for the various learning opportunities that exist for them outside the school walls (Field 2007).
5. Learner autonomy addresses the differences in learning styles and preferences of learners (Reinders 2010).
6. Learners need the ability to function independently as they may not always have access to teacher and institutional support (e.g. academic studies in mainstream university classes) (Cotterall 1995; Palfreyman 2003; Little 2009).

2.6 Limitations to fostering learner autonomy

There are several justifications for learner autonomy found in the literature; however, there are some concerns that both teachers and students may have which I feel are important to address. First, teachers may be reluctant to bring more learner autonomy into the classroom due to the cultural stereotypes they have of their students. They may feel that since their students come from cultures which depend heavily on the authority of both teacher and institution (e.g. Hong Kong), they will feel uncomfortable with learner autonomy initiatives (Voller 2005). Furthermore, these students may think that the teacher is being lazy and not doing their job. Secondly, teachers could be afraid of handing over some responsibility to their learners for fear of losing control, especially if they have had control of the classroom for most of their teaching life (Lacey 2007). Another concern involves institutional pressures. Some teachers have a strict curriculum to follow and deadlines to meet which makes the development of learner autonomy all the more difficult. Finally, teachers and students coming from non-Western cultures could have reservations as they may see learner autonomy as a Western concept not suitable to their culture or educational system (Smith 2003b).

In order to successfully design and implement a plan for learner autonomy appropriate to the local context, justifications for learner autonomy as well as teacher

and student concerns need to be addressed and discussed.

2.7Related research into the teachers' perspective of learner autonomy

A great deal has been written about learner autonomy (e.g. definitions, justifications). However, there has been very little research carried out into teachers' perspectives and little is known about what learner autonomy means to language teachers in various contexts and educational settings around the world (Borg 2010). Seeing as teachers play a central role in the promotion of learner autonomy, uncovering their beliefs in this area is an important gap to fill. This has been the main influence in my decision to explore teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy for this research project. In this section we will briefly examine some studies which have investigated teachers' voices of learner autonomy.

Al-Shaqsi (2009) reports on English teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy at General Education schools in Oman. Learner autonomy as a goal is now represented in the new Basic Education curriculum in Oman and this may have influenced the 'surprisingly [high]' (Borg 2009: xiii) positive results from this study. Teachers defined learner autonomy in terms of learning independently, self-evaluation, taking responsibility and cooperating. Furthermore, they were optimistic that their learners displayed autonomous behaviours. However, these results need to be taken with caution for two reasons. First, there is no qualitative data (from interviews, for example) to help explain and/or clarify the questionnaire findings. The researcher of this study also acknowledges this weakness stating that some of the findings from the study were unclear and needed further exploration so as to clarify teachers' responses. Secondly, the current educational policy in Oman encourages autonomous learning and teachers may have responded in ways which reflect this policy.

Camilleri (1997) to my knowledge was the first study to investigate teachers' views of learner autonomy. The study was carried out with teachers in various European countries. The main findings were:

- A willingness of teachers to change and develop practice
- Strong support in incorporating learner autonomy in different areas of teaching (material selection, areas of classroom management, learning strategies, learning styles)

- A reluctance of teachers to involve learners in aims and methodological decisions
- Constraints from higher authorities made it hard to encourage learner autonomy or offer more learner choice (from Camilleri 1997: 28-30)

There were a high number of incomplete responses which raises the question of piloting procedures and validity of the findings. However, there are some important implications we can take from this study. First, resistance to learner autonomy initiatives could be the result of situations beyond teacher control (e.g. syllabus constraints, exam schedules). Secondly, the study revealed the need to 'educate' teachers in learner autonomy through pre-service and/or in-service professional development. This is why I have decided to offer a professional development workshop on learner autonomy for teachers upon completion of this project. Finally, teachers and teacher educators need to decide which areas of learner autonomy are feasible within the educational setting. They then need to organise professional development (with teacher input) around these topics before gradually working on classroom implementation.

In another study, Chan (2003) examined teacher's perspectives of learner autonomy in a large-scale study at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her findings show that teachers felt mainly responsible for the methodological decisions within the classroom. Moreover, respondents reported a clear awareness of autonomy as a goal of teaching and felt fairly positive about students' decision making abilities in aspects of the language learning process. Teachers did feel, however, restricted by curriculum constraints and consequently did not provide decision-making opportunities for learners in areas of autonomous learning (e.g. learning objectives, activities). This study is relevant to mine as I have developed my questionnaire from hers. The development and design of the Chan's questionnaire is clearly based on the literature and theory of learner autonomy. I have also adopted a similar 'mixed method' methodology of gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. This study highlights the fact that learner autonomy cannot be encouraged without support from the teacher. In addition, it shows that thinking about our beliefs and teaching practices is important as it allows for reflection and change if needed. The weakness, however, in her study is that she does not provide sampling procedures for her qualitative data (e.g. random, hand-picked or voluntary selection?). This is important

information as it could have had some influence over the results.

2.8 Summary of chapter

- A definition of learner autonomy is not complete unless it respects the perspective of the teacher.
- Learner autonomy is a process that is developed in different ways depending on teacher interpretations, cultural beliefs and educational setting.
- The learner autonomy teacher is no longer only the *supplier* of knowledge but also manager, resource person and counsellor.
- Our modern society requires responsible, autonomous thinkers and therefore autonomy needs to be reflected in current educational systems.
- Teacher and student concerns about learner autonomy need to be addressed and discussed before autonomous learning initiatives can be put into practice in the classroom.
- More research into teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy is needed in order to uncover teacher beliefs and encourage classroom practice.