



**HIBERNIA
COLLEGE**

The Role of the Teacher in Fostering Student Autonomy in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Classroom

Item Type	Dissertation
Authors	Moylan, Olivia
Download date	2026-04-15 21:45:53
Link to Item	https://iasc.hiberniacollege.com/handle/20.500.13012/239



**HIBERNIA
COLLEGE**

The Role of the Teacher in Fostering Student Autonomy in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Classroom

Olivia Moylan

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the award of
Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary

I agree that this dissertation may be uploaded to Hibernia College's institutional repository, IASC, subject to Hibernia College School of Education agreement, and the Hibernia College open access policy. IASC (Institutional Archive of Scholarly Content) is an open access repository designed to store, archive, and disseminate the work of Hibernia College faculty, staff and students.

Date: 11/06/2024

Abstract

Learner autonomy has gained momentum within the context of language learning in the last two decades. The movement towards learner-centred approaches has resulted in more emphasis on autonomy and students taking control of their own language learning process. This study explored Irish MFL teachers' views on the importance of autonomy and effective pedagogical approaches to foster it. The sample size comprised of twenty participants for an online questionnaire and two external participants for two semi-structured interviews. The participants were MFL post-primary teachers with a minimum of five years teaching experience. The mixed methods data revealed that teachers employ diverse strategies daily and highly value autonomy. However, they face challenges implementing it at the Senior Cycle level due to curriculum constraints.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Chapter One:	6
Introduction	6
1.1 Introduction	6
1.2 Background to Study.....	6
1.3 Rationale.....	7
1.4 Dissertation Layout	7
1.5 Conclusion.....	7
Chapter Two:	9
Literature Review	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Learner Autonomy: Definitions	9
2.3 The Classroom Context and Learner Autonomy	10
2.4 The Classroom Teacher and Learner Autonomy	11
2.5 Teaching Strategies to Promote Autonomy.....	12
2.6 Autonomy in the Irish Post-Primary MFL Context.....	13
2.7 Conclusion.....	14
Chapter Three:	15
Methodology	15
3.1 Introduction.....	15
3.2 Selection of Methods and Design.....	15
3.3 Materials and Instruments	16
3.4 Population, sample, and participants	17
3.5 Data Analysis.....	18
3.6 Ethical Considerations	19
3.7 Rigour and Validity.....	19
3.8 Concluding Remarks.....	19
Chapter Four:	21
Findings	21
4.1 Introduction.....	21
4.2 Important Strategies of Language Learner Autonomy.....	21
4.3 Benefits of a Facilitative Approach.....	22
4.4 Benefits of Student Autonomy.....	24
4.5 The Irish Education System and Student Autonomy	24
Chapter Five:	31
Discussion	31
5.1 Introduction	31
5.2 Important Aspects of Language Learner Autonomy.....	31
5.3 Benefits of a Facilitative Approach.....	32
5.4 Benefits of Student Autonomy.....	34
5.5 The Irish Education System and Student Autonomy.....	35
5.6 Conclusion.....	36
Chapter Six:	37
Conclusion	37
6.1 Introduction.....	37
6.2 Summary of findings.....	37
6.3 Limitations.....	37
6.4 Recommendations.....	38
6.5 Concluding remarks.....	38
Reference List	40
Appendices:	43
7.1 Appendix A: Consent Form to Principal.....	43
7.2 Appendix B: Information Letter for Participants	44
7.3 Appendix C: Consent form.....	45
7.4 Appendix D: Interview Schedule.....	46

List of Figures

Figure 1: The most important strategies for promoting student autonomy.

Figure 2: The role's involved in fostering student autonomy.

Figure 3: Teaching approaches adopted in the MFL classroom.

Figure 4: The benefits of student autonomy.

Figure 5: The promotion of student autonomy in language learning within the Irish Education System.

Figure 6: The promotion of student autonomy in the Junior Cycle Curriculum.

Figure 7: The promotion of student autonomy in the Senior Cycle Curriculum.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBA- Classroom Based Assessment

CEFR- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

CPD – Continuous Professional Development

DES- Department of Education and Skills

ELP- European Language Portfolio

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulations

INTO- Irish National Teachers' Organisation

MFL- Modern Foreign Language

NCCA- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

PPLI- Post-Primary Languages Ireland

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this research study is to examine the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the modern foreign language (MFL) classroom. Autonomy is an essential element in language learning, and teachers must help students become autonomous so they can have ownership and responsibility for their own learning process. As Benson stated, ‘when learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners, but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of communities in which they live’ (Benson, 2013, p.1). The role of the teacher is crucial in facilitating student autonomy for effective language acquisition.

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to gather data from MFL teachers with at least five years teaching experience. The study examined the perceptions of MFL teachers on the importance of language learner autonomy. The study also set out to investigate the most effective pedagogical strategies employed by MFL teachers to foster autonomy. The data were collected using two semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire, which were distributed to participants in a Post-Primary Christian Brother School and a Community School.

1.2 Background to the Project

Autonomy is a multidimensional concept with various definitions developed by researchers. The most frequently used definition was formulated by Holec in 1981 where he stated that autonomy was ‘the ability on the part of the learner to take charge of own’s learning’ (Boyadzhieva, 2016). The concept of autonomy is a significant contribution to the field of foreign language education and is an integral part of the Council of Europe’s strategies regarding education. Autonomy in language learning has been broadly described as ‘learning practices involving learners’ control over aspects of their learning’ (Benson, 2013). Although learners play a crucial role in this process, it is essential that a teacher creates a learner-directed environment that can encourage students to keep control of their own language-learning process (Dam, 2003).

Traditional approaches to language teaching have evolved as there is a growing shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centred approaches. The role of a teacher in an autonomous classroom is

more of a facilitator aiding students to take responsibility (Asmari, 2013). Autonomy is a student-centred approach that develops independent language learning, whereby the learner is at the centre of the language-learning process. Using their roles and practices in the classroom, teachers can take responsibility for the autonomous development of their students. However, there is an increasing concern in the field of language learning regarding what approaches and strategies can be employed by teachers to foster language learners' autonomy.

1.3 Rationale

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the role of post-primary teachers in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom. The study explores the perceptions of MFL teachers regarding this topic. Insight is gained by investigating the different pedagogical strategies and approaches employed by teachers in fostering student autonomy. As a German MFL teacher, I find it challenging to empower my students to become independent language learners. I believe my students may lack the confidence or skills necessary to manage their own learning. Students may also be more accustomed to traditional, teacher-centred environments, with little to no student autonomy occurring. The findings of this study will allow the researcher and fellow language teachers to explore new techniques that could be used to help benefit our students. By identifying effective techniques and identifying common challenges, teachers can enhance their pedagogical practices to better support language learner autonomy.

1.4 Dissertation Layout

The current chapter will entail all background information regarding the dissertation. Chapter two will contain all relevant literature focusing on autonomy in the context of language learning, the role of the teacher in promoting autonomy, and autonomy in the post-primary context. The research process, including the methodology and the method selected for research will be discussed in chapter three. Chapter four will display the data collected, highlighting what the researcher set out to explore and what was found. Findings will be considered in relation to the discussion in chapter five. The final chapter will draw together the main conclusions in relation to the literature and new findings.

1.5 Conclusion

By examining theory and conducting personal research, this study aims to explore new and effective strategies that can be utilised by post-primary teachers to help foster student autonomy in the MFL classroom. The literature review in chapter two will delve into the theoretical foundations of student

autonomy and its implication and role in language learning. The teacher's explicit role and the concept of autonomy in the Irish post-primary language context will be further explored.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In contemporary educational settings, teachers play a crucial role in fostering student autonomy, guiding learners to take control of their own learning. Over the last two decades, learner autonomy has become a topic of interest and discussion within the context of language learning. It is true that if learners can manage their own learning, they will be better prepared and more likely to succeed. Allowing students to become independent learners is considered a key element in the context of language education. As language teachers, it is our duty to be aware of the factors which are conducive to learner autonomy, as this strategy is the key to lifelong learning. The learner is responsible for making decisions and taking ownership of their learning, but without teacher guidance and supervision, the process will be inefficient. This literature review will present research on the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom.

2.2 Learner Autonomy: Definitions

Definitions of learner autonomy have evolved and changed over time with multiple sources outlining different interpretations of the concept. The most widely cited definition in language learning was coined by Holec (1981) as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec, 1981, cited in Raya and Vieira, 2015, ch. 1, part 2). According to Holec, this includes choosing learning strategies, deciding on learning objectives, learning content, learning progression, monitoring acquisition, and assessing learning outcomes (Han, 2020). Holec argues that the teacher has two distinct roles regarding language learning. A teacher must guide the learner in fostering autonomy while also helping the learner acquire the desired linguistic and communicative abilities (Little, 2012). According to Benson, autonomy in language learning refers to ‘learning practices involving learners’ control over aspects of their learning’ (Benson, 2013, p.840). Benson claimed that it is not enough to view learner autonomy as learner responsibility as he assumes that the essence of autonomy is made up of three interconnected aspects: learning management, cognitive process and learning content (Yildiz and Yucedal, 2020). Control over learning management relates to the behaviour’s learners use for planning, control over cognitive process is connected to learning psychology, and control over learning content refers to learners’ freedom to set their own goals and objectives (Yildiz and Yucedal, 2020). David Little defines learner autonomy in the second language classroom as ‘a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action’ (Almusharraf, 2020. p.2). He implies that the learner will

form a specific type of psychological relationship with the nature and scope of their learning. An autonomous learner in Dam's view is characterised by 'a readiness to take charge of his/her needs and purposes' (Dam, 2018, p.263). The learner is willing to manage their own education to meet their needs and goals. This calls for the ability to act independently and cooperatively as a socially responsible person (Dam, 2018). Dam is of the view that it is the role of the teacher to ensure students are actively involved in their own learning and this can be done with the cooperation of both parties.

2.3 The Classroom Context and Learner Autonomy

Studies have examined the meaning and experiences of autonomy in the language classroom. According to the relevant literature, classroom-based approaches that promote autonomy are built on giving students the opportunity to choose how to control their own learning. According to Benson, accounts of experiments where the student was encouraged to assume some responsibility for the planning and assessment of classroom instruction have yielded positive results (Benson, 2001, cited in Egel, 2009). Research has shown that learner autonomy plays a key role in the growth of linguistic competence. Corno and Mandinach (1983) stated that autonomous learners were the learners of high language proficiency (Corno and Mandinach, 1983, cited in Dafei, 2007). An investigation of the connection between learner autonomy and English competency was conducted by Dafei (2007). Dafei found that there is a strong correlation between both factors. He affirms that a learner is more likely to achieve high language proficiency the more autonomous they become (Dafei, 2007, cited in Haque, 2019). Language teachers must train their students in becoming more autonomous. Little (2007) asserts that 'the acquisition of metacognition and metalanguage necessary for exerting control over learning requires a deliberate effort and conscious reflection on the part of learners and their teachers (Little, 2007, cited in Ertürk, 2016, p.652). Considering this, Little (2007) makes the argument that students who have received the right autonomy training will be able to transfer their capacity to direct the learning process to successful communication outside of the classroom (Little, 2007, cited in Ertürk, 2016, p.652). According to Little, the success of foreign language teaching is controlled by three intersecting principles: learner involvement, learner reflection, and target language use (Little, 2007). According to the notion of learner involvement, the teacher must involve their students in their own learning by giving them ownership over defining the learning agenda, choosing learning activities and materials, directing classroom interaction, and assessing learning results. The concept of learner reflection also calls on us to embrace 'reflective intervention' as a crucial aspect of the teaching-learning process. This involves the incidental reflection that planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning entails with an explicit, detached reflection on the nature and purpose of learning. The target language must be used for all classroom activities, including organisational, reflective, and

communicative activities. The classroom context must cultivate a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable exploring and experimenting with the language.

2.4 The Classroom Teacher and Learner Autonomy

In traditional language instruction, teachers generally have a more significant impact on the learning environment than do the students. However, for autonomy to develop, the teacher's role requires a shift from teacher-focused education to student-focused instruction (Almusharraf, 2020). According to Gardner and Miller (1999), instructors should acquire new skills to take on new responsibilities as manager, organiser, evaluator, counselor, etc (Alonazi, 2017). Teachers are no longer seen as sources of information or facts but 'serve as facilitators and guides rather than directors and moulders of (...) learning' (Lazăr, 2013, p.461). Experimental research has demonstrated that the approach adopted by the teacher affects motivation, and in turn, impacts student autonomy. According to a study by Deci and Ryan, students in classrooms with autonomy-supportive teachers showed higher levels of intrinsic motivation, perceived competence and self-esteem, compared to students with controlling teachers (Egel, 2009). Deci states that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three basic needs that we must satisfy to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment (Little, 2007). We are autonomous, he proposes, when we are 'fully willing to do what [we] are doing and [we] embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment' (Little, 2007, p.17). We have a sense of competence when we confront and effectively overcome optimal challenges, and we feel relatedness when we love and are loved by others (Little, 2007). Learner autonomy is an attribute that is central to the constructivist view of learning. Constructivism exists in many different forms, but each of them makes the same fundamental claim: that we construct our knowledge by fusing what we already know with new information, concepts, and experiences we encounter (Little, 2007). Constructivist learning environments enable students to learn meaningfully, based on their own prior knowledge and through their own personal experiences. This method, which places more emphasis on learning than teaching, also promotes learner autonomy and encourages student participation in the learning process. The social constructivist viewpoint goes even further by asserting that the process of creating knowledge and meaning is fundamentally 'social' and that meaningful learning happens when students participate in social activities (Kameda, 2017). Constructivist teaching promotes learner autonomy, responsibility, and active learning and therefore, a teacher must aim toward constructivist practice (Panhwar et al, 2016).

2.5 Teaching Strategies to Promote Autonomy

Little (2007) stated that few students will enter class at first prepared to fully manage their learning; instead, most students will need to learn how to do so, starting with very little steps (Little, 2007, cited in Almusharraf, 2020). As a result, the teacher's job is to identify students' areas of strength and weakness immediately so that they can direct their own learning progress. This requires thoughtful consideration regarding diverse learning styles, interests, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.

According to Wang, if students are to take responsibility for their learning process, it is much more important to let them know about their own learning style (Wang, 2011, cited in Avazmatova, 2022). Its ongoing success is thought to depend heavily on the supportive engagement of learners' current autonomy. In a language learning experiment led by Yang (1998), students discussed their experiences learning languages in class as well as their educational backgrounds. Before describing the notion of learning methods, the teacher first used questionnaires to assess the students' preferred learning styles and beliefs. The findings highlight the significance of the teacher's involvement in fostering language learners' understanding of learning methodologies and increasing their own learning autonomy. Yang discovered that such a method increased students' awareness of language learning tactics, enhanced their use of those strategies, taught them how to evaluate their own language competency, set objectives, track progress, and overall autonomy increased (Yang, 1998, cited in Ertürk, 2016, p.652). Self-Assessment is a key component of learner autonomy. Students must establish their own personal goals and develop independence from the teacher as the sole judge of their weaknesses and strengths. This reduces reliance on the teacher and enables students to make decisions about their next stages in the learning process. According to Palfreyman and Benson (2019), formative assessment is essential to the accomplishment of an independent learning process, due to teachers providing constructive feedback allowing students to reflect on, revise, and reassess their work (Almusharraf, 2020). Several strategies have been suggested to encourage student autonomy in vocabulary learning, and the most productive strategy is for learners to evaluate their own work. Hargreaves' (2014) empirical study, which examined how teachers use classroom feedback to help students increase their capacity for autonomous learning, revealed a favourable impact on students' learning. According to the research, learning outcomes for pupils increase when teachers offer opportunities to evaluate their own work. (Almusharraf, 2020). Peer assessment is also considered an effective strategy for autonomous learners. When students have the ability to correct peer errors, they are considered to be autonomous language learners (Avazmatova, 2022). Teachers can employ a variety of instructional methods to promote autonomous learning. By establishing open lines of communication, teachers can understand individual learning styles and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. Benson (2001) suggested a few strategies

for promoting autonomous learning, such as technology-based strategies and independent communication in instructional materials (Almusharraf, 2020). Another argument by Little et al. (2017) contends that instructional approaches should be developed to foster learner autonomy to meet human needs on the psychological and social levels as well as enhance subject knowledge (Almusharraf, 2020). This can be done by offering choices that allow learners to engage with the language. Teachers can offer various learning materials, projects, topics, etc., that align with students' interests. This allows students to see the relevance of language in new contexts.

2.6 Autonomy in the Irish Post-Primary MFL Context

The Language Policy Programme of the Council of Europe created the European Language Portfolio (ELP) to support the development of learner autonomy, plurilingualism, and intercultural awareness and competence (PPLI, 2023). The Council of Europe set the promotion of learner autonomy as a necessary condition for successful lifetime learning (NCCA, 2003). In Ireland as well as other nations, the ELP has shown to be a successful tool for encouraging language learners to become more independent. The Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages specification seeks to foster communicative language abilities that are broadly in line with the A band (A1 to A2, basic user) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and its descriptors (NCCA, 2023, p.6). Students are encouraged to 'be reflective and autonomous in their language learning' (NCCA, 2023, p.6). The new Junior Cycle Framework promotes eight new key skills, one being the skill of creativity. Students will have 'opportunities to explore options and make choices as they engage in communicative activities and become increasingly more autonomous learners' (NCCA, 2023, p.10). Building on the learning outcomes of Junior Cycle MFL, the Leaving Certificate syllabus aims to further heighten learner autonomy to help the students foster strategies for effective language learning (NCCA, 2023). Interestingly, the number of students studying a foreign language in Junior Cycle has 'fallen from 87% in 2016 to just under 84% in 2022' (DES, 2024).

Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools is a 'framework that outlines a shared understanding of what successful and highly effective learning, teaching, leadership, and management practices look like in the Irish school system' (NCCA, 2022, p.5). It is interesting to note that student autonomy is not mentioned in this publication. In 2016, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) released a document titled 'Advancing School Autonomy' (INTO, 2016). INTO notes that there has been no request from the Irish education community for further school autonomy, and there is no evidence to back up the idea that giving schools more autonomy in Ireland will benefit school communities (INTO, 2016). *Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in*

Education 2017-2026 outlined that a large number of students find languages challenging and their language experience is not positive (DES, 2015). One goal of this strategic plan is to ‘improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment’ (DES, 2015, p.8). Interestingly, autonomy is not mentioned in this publication, which leads to the question of whether autonomy is needed to create a positive and engaging learning environment.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature reviewed highlights the pivotal role that teachers play in fostering student autonomy within the MFL classroom. The transition from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach allows learners to self-direct their processes of language development and become more autonomous. Learner autonomy is not ‘something that teachers do to learners, but something teachers do together with learners’ (Lazăr, 2013, p.464). Weaver and Cohen assert that learners are encouraged to learn how to learn and learn how to utilise a foreign language with the fostering of autonomy (Egel, 2009). Teachers must train their students in becoming autonomous for language acquisition to develop. By embracing the strategies and insights highlighted in this literature review, teachers can truly become catalysts for fostering a sense of autonomy.

This raises two distinct questions:

1. Do Irish MFL Post-Primary teachers value the concept of autonomy?
2. What pedagogical strategies do Irish Post-Primary MFL believe are most effective for fostering language learner autonomy in their classrooms?’

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Included in this methodology section is the research design that will be used to answer the research questions posed in the study. This chapter describes the mixed method approach of using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in order to answer these questions. This chapter provides a justification for the selection of the different methods. The researcher's compliance with ethical guidelines as set out by Hibernia College and the British Educational Research Association is emphasised.

3.2 Selection of Methods and Design

In educational research, a research paradigm has its 'own identifying characteristics, its own ways and means (methods and practices) that create expectations about the nature and conduct of research which it embraces' (Ayiro, 2012). The main objective of effective research is that the choice of paradigms is comparable, consistent and coherent to the area of chosen study. Quantitative research methodologies are often connected to the logical positivist paradigm. This paradigm relies on empirical data and inferential reasoning in order to interpret occurrences (Baldwin, 2018). Therefore, there is one objective reality, which can be studied and measured. In comparison, qualitative research methodologies are often associated with the interpretivist paradigm, which involves expanding and deepening knowledge of 'everyday' experiences and interpretations. (Wyse, et al., 2017) Therefore, interpretivism views reality as rather socially constructed, and is less concerned in finding an objective reality.

Mixed method research has been noted as the 'third methodological movement' and the 'third research paradigm' (Johnson et al, 2007 cited in Cohen, et al., 2011, p.22). This paradigm recognises that research should not be exclusively quantitative nor qualitative, as both may be needed to answer the research questions fully leading to a pragmatist paradigm approach. Pragmatism is 'outcome-oriented and interested in determining the meaning of things' (Baker, 2016, p.322). To get an insight into the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom, qualitative data can capture the depth of teachers' views, while quantitative data can provide statistical data and trends. Additionally, factors that influenced the choice of mixed methods were participant access, the maximum number of potential participants for this study, and time constraints during the Advanced School Experience and Professional Practice (SEPP) phase.

A mixed-methods research design draws on the methods of qualitative and quantitative designs. Reams and Twale argue that mixed methods are essential to ‘uncover information and perspective, increase corroboration of the data, and render less biased and more accurate conclusions’ (Ream and Twale, 2008, cited in Cohen, et al., 2011, p.22). In practitioner teacher research, mixed methods are used to explain findings from the initial method, and to uncover and cross-check new perspectives by comparing contradictory or complex findings from multiple methods (Babione, 2015). Qualitative research can entail background information on the context while quantitative can strengthen gaps in the qualitative study if needed. Triangulation is the term for this technique, which involves using two or more approaches in this manner to try and confirm the accuracy of the information being gathered (Blaxter, et al, 2014). Using questionnaires, empirical data was obtained to explore language teachers’ perspectives on the importance of autonomy in language learning. The questionnaires were also utilised to investigate which strategies employed by language teachers are most effective for fostering student autonomy. To confirm the accuracy of such data, further information was then obtained using two semi-structured interviews with a selected sample of these questionnaire participants.

3.3 Materials/Instruments

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires as two methods of data collecting to effectively address the research topics. One of the most popular methods for doing social research is the questionnaire (Blaxter, et al, 2014). A questionnaire is ‘a written set of questions that are given to people in order to collect facts or opinions about something’ (Wyse, et al, 2017 p.31). The researcher chose questionnaires as a data collection method as they can be distributed and collected easily. Questionnaires were given to a larger sample size of thirty participants, allowing an overall perspective. The questions for the questionnaire were designed to obtain statistical data on the perception of language teachers’ views on the importance of student autonomy in language learning. Further questions were designed to examine which strategies language teachers feel are most effective in fostering student autonomy.

Prior to conducting research, the researcher utilised a piloting process to ensure the questionnaire was relevant and contained no errors. Instruments frequently require ‘piloting with smaller or different groups and are then revised before they are fully ready for use’ (Babione, 2015, p.157). This was carried out by sending the questionnaire to the supervisor as well as to a smaller group size of three. Once consent was obtained, questionnaires were individually circulated in electronic format using google forms and sent to MFL teachers from both SEPP school placements. The completed

questionnaires were returned to the researcher and quantitative data was collated and analysed. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Multiple-choice questions or scales that enable respondents to rank or choose a response for each topic are found in closed-ended surveys. The responses can then be tallied for percentages (Babione, 2015). Open-ended surveys include questions that invite respondents to provide further details or their own viewpoints (Babione, 2015).

This research project also used the data collection method of semi-structured interviews to gather more in depth and personal thoughts. Qualitative investigation interviews tend to be more open-ended and less structured, whereby either all of the questions are worded in a flexible manner, or there is a mix of more or less structured questions (Merriam, 2016). A pilot interview allowed the researcher to investigate possible issues with their research instrument and to improve the quality of the interview before starting the process of research. The interview questions were open-ended to encourage the participants to share their thoughts and opinions. Probing questions were used by the researcher when necessary for the research participants to elaborate on their answers. The interviews conducted were 15–20 minutes to ensure that they were focused and had direction. Semi-structured interviews allow for some standardisation to draw on parallels, while still allowing the opportunity to record depth and detail in answers (Firth, 2020).

The two interviews were recorded on the researcher's iPhone using Voice Memos, an audio recording tool. Before being subjected to additional analysis, the MP3 files were transferred to the researcher's laptop and encrypted. Recording the interview allows the researcher to focus and not become distracted. In the interviewing process, one must be aware of 'social desirability bias', where the participant may distort the truth to impress the researcher (Firth, 2020). Additionally, the interviewee may not have knowledge surrounding the answer, leading to prejudices, assumptions, and false memories (Firth, 2020).

3.4 Population, sample, and participants

Purposive sampling was utilised during this study whereby participants consisted of qualified language teachers. Purposive sampling also known as purposeful sampling is based on the idea that the researcher wishes to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must choose a sample which has the greatest learning potential (Merriam, et al, 2016). In qualitative research, purposive sampling schemes are utilised to choose a sample according to specific criteria (Wyse, 2017). These participants were selected on the basis of having experience in teaching a Modern Foreign Language at Junior and

or Senior cycle. The teachers within these schools were required to have at least five years of teaching experience, while also being a mainstream language teacher. The sample was gathered from the schools in which the researcher completed their SEPP2 and Advanced School Placement. The two schools were an Urban Christian Brothers School and a Rural Mixed Community School. Two female teachers were selected as interview participants as one had six years teaching experience, while the other had fifteen years of experience. The sample size necessary for the online questionnaire was a total of twenty participants, however, the questionnaire was sent to thirty participants in the hope of gaining adequate responses. Due to this small-scale study and sample size, the concept of generalisation has relevance. It concerns whether your findings are likely to be applicable in a wider context than the study's primary focus (Blaxter, 2010). A limitation is present whereby the sample size of 20 is relatively small for making broad generalisations about the entire population of language teachers.

3.5 Data analysis

The research study aimed to explore language teachers' perspectives on the importance of autonomy in language learning. The study explored which strategies are most effective in fostering student autonomy. Data analysis is a 'process of addressing how interpretations are made and the way key concepts evolve, often using critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills of comparisons, categorisation, evaluation, and synthesis of new information' (Babione, 2015, p.137). The research paradigm dictated how the collected data was analysed. In essence, the information gathered from the questionnaire was evaluated using quantitative methods to identify participant trends, and the qualitative data was subjected to thematic coding in order to extract further information. In order to graphically present statistical data, the creation of both charts within Microsoft Excel was necessary. Significant results are presented in Chapter Four.

The data from face-to-face interviews also had to be analysed and processed. To eliminate the need for taking notes, audio recordings of every interview were stored on the researcher's private, password-protected laptop. Following the interviews, the conversations were transcribed into Microsoft Word. Analysing data can be quite complex, requiring the researcher to determine concepts, codes, categories, and relationships (Bell et al, 214). Content analysis was used to identify themes and topics. This was done by reading and rereading data, arranging information, coding data, modifying, and examining the coding system, identifying patterns of themes, and providing an overview of the result (Babione, 2017).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The Hibernia College Dublin Ethics Committee provided ethical approval prior to the commencing of the research to ensure the highest ethical standards were followed. The researcher sought informed consent from school principals in order to collect data from teachers in their schools. Informed consent includes providing participants with precise details about what participating in a research project will involve and offering them the opportunity to choose if they would like to continue participating in the research (Wiles, 2013). The participants of the research were asked to give their informed consent by signing the consent sheet accompanying the questionnaires and interview questions. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw, allowing them to pull out at any time throughout the research process. Participants were protected using anonymity and confidentiality. The essence of anonymity is that 'information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity' (Cohen et al, 2007, p.65). Anonymity is carried out through the use of pseudonyms applied to participants, institutions, settings, or other means of keeping participants' true identities anonymous (Wiles, 2013).

3.7 Rigour and validity

Rigour and validity are principles utilised to measure and judge the quality and reliability of the piece of research and its findings (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2014). The rigour of one's research is a signal of its quality. Rigour was maintained by carefully creating semi-structured interview questions and an online questionnaire to comprehensively explore the teachers' perspectives. Validity ensures your research project findings are 'sound and carry weight and authority' (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2014). Validity was prioritised to accurately measure and reflect the true insights of the participants. The validity of this research increased by using a process of triangulation. In this research, triangulation was used by gathering two types of data in the form of two semi-structured interviews and 20 online questionnaires. The online questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews used in this study were appropriate for the research questions, therefore the findings were likely to be valid.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology employed to investigate the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom. The researcher adopted a mixed-method approach and ensured that personal bias did not affect the research findings. This was made possible by the questionnaires' anonymous nature, the researcher's ongoing awareness of bias, the use of reflexivity in the semi-structured interviews, and the triangulation of data. Findings are compared to the findings of the various literature discussed in chapter two as a means of

triangulating the information. The purposeful sampling technique ensures a targeted selection of participants, specifically teachers of Modern Foreign Languages. Ethical considerations are carefully considered, with voluntary participation, informed consent, and the protection of participants' identity through anonymization. The following chapter will portray a detailed account of both the qualitative and quantitative findings.

Chapter Four

Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the online surveys and interviews will be presented. An online survey was used to collect quantitative data, while two semi-structured interviews and a survey containing open-ended questions were used to obtain qualitative data. A total of 20 online questionnaires were submitted and returned by qualified language teachers, all with a minimum of at least five years of teaching experience. Thematic analysis was used to systematically make sense of complex data by extracting significant information and generating insights relating to the research questions. Interviewee A is an Irish and EAL post-primary teacher, who has fifteen years of teaching experience. Interviewee B is a French post-primary teacher, who has six years of teaching experience. Both participants work full-time in a Mixed Community School.

Qualitative

4.2 Strategies important for Language Learner Autonomy

1. *Goal Setting & Clear Objectives*

The research participants in the two semi-structured interviews emphasised the need for goals and clear objectives when it comes to language learner autonomy. Interviewee A stated, 'Seniors setting goals is really important as without goals they have no direction...Learners need to set goals at a pace that suits their own ability...this should be done in correspondence with the teacher...Students like to follow routine and have something to aim for in their lessons.' Interviewee B also emphasised the role of goal setting with the additional use of assessment. 'Setting goals and then assessment...they can see then how they fared at that...These goals must be short-term, measurable and achievable.' When asked what the most important aspects of language learner autonomy were, survey responses stated, 'Setting clear objectives whereby students are able to self-assess and take initiative in their own learning journey...Setting goals that are tailored to student's needs.'

1. *Self & Peer Assessment*

Both research participants in the two semi-structured interviews highlighted the role of both self and peer assessment as important aspects of Language Learner Autonomy. Interviewee A stated, 'I believe peer assessment is especially important for Junior Cycle students as they enjoy working in pairs and are honest with each other...and will want to take responsibility and improve.' Interviewee B noted, 'peer assessment promotes collaborative which aids autonomy...The use of checklists, rubrics and feedback forms are needed.' The survey responses also emphasised the need for both self and peer assessment in autonomous language learning. One participant highlighted the need for teachers to provide opportunities for students to 'self-assess their own language proficiency levels and identify areas for improvement.' However, feedback was highlighted as essential when conducting both self and peer assessment as one participant noted, 'Without feedback, students might struggle to identify areas for improvement or may overestimate their abilities.'

3. *Reflection*

The two interview participants highlighted the importance of reflection in autonomous language learning. Interviewee A stated, 'By reflecting on their learning, students can become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and put a plan in place to improve...They become aware of what strategies work best for them in developing language skills.' Interviewee B discussed the incorporation of reflection tasks into her Irish classes on a weekly basis as well as the incorporation of reflection in the CBA's. As stated by this interviewee, 'the reflection tasks aid students in evaluating their progress and understanding areas in need of improvement...Students at Junior Cycle are exposed to reflection when completing CBA's when assessing what they have achieved and learned from completing the CBA.' The survey participants indicated the need for reflection in autonomous language learning as one of the participants noted, 'Give the students a sense of control over their learning, which in turn, develops student skills to reflect, adapt and problem solve.'

4.3 Benefits of a Facilitative Approach

1. *Active learning & Student-led*

The research participants in the two semi-structured interviews highlighted the benefits of a facilitative approach in creating an autonomous classroom. Interviewee A linked facilitative teaching with increased motivation by stating, 'Facilitative teaching encourages active learning where the classroom is student-led, allowing the students to be more motivated because they are actively involved.'

Interview A further noted that if facilitative teaching is to be implemented effectively, ‘you definitely need the 60-minute class.’ Interviewee B stated, ‘Active learning provides opportunities for learners to use the target language in more meaningful contexts, for example, if they are creating a role-play with a group or a partner.’ When asked about the benefits of a facilitative approach in language learning, one survey response highlighted how a ‘facilitative approach gives the teacher greater chance to observe, monitor and develop a lesson.’ One survey participant went against this approach by stating, ‘Our system does not promote facilitative teaching as our class sizes are too big and student-led activities is too difficult.’ Another survey participant highlighted how ‘clear guidelines and instructions are needed for facilitative teaching to succeed.’

2. *Student Motivation & Engagement*

The interview respondents recognised how a facilitative approach can enhance greater student motivation and engagement, which in turn, aids language learner autonomy. Interview B stated, ‘If a child is interested, they will want to learn more... By allowing students to choose topics, projects, or learning activities based on their interests, students will become more engaged in the material.’ Interviewee A questioned, ‘How much more interesting, less boring, more engaging, less passive, would it be for students if they experienced a more facilitated learning style?’ The survey participants also highlighted how student motivation and engagement is increased due to a heightened ‘sense of accomplishment’ when students are actively involved in their learning process.

3. *Risk Taking & Responsibility*

Interviewee A emphasised how risk taking is essential for language learner autonomy. The interviewee emphasised that a facilitative teaching approach allows the students to take risks and ‘directed learning provides zero opportunities for students to take risks...risk taking is vital if students are to learn new language skills.’ Interview A also suggested ‘Some students do not receive responsibility at home and that can lead to them being afraid to fail in school...students have to be reminded that it is okay to make mistakes...it is how you learn from your mistakes is what is important.’ Interviewee B noted, ‘when giving students more responsibility for their learning it is important that they receive strict guidelines as there is a possibility that some students may run off tasks.’ One survey participant stated, ‘Students cannot be independent in their learning if they are receiving instruction by a teacher only.’

4.4 Benefits of Student Autonomy

1. *Social skills & Participation*

Both interviewees were asked to discuss the benefits of student autonomy. Interviewee A suggested that ‘quieter students working in pairs or groups can get a chance to use their voice in an autonomous classroom...mixed-ability groupings work effectively.’ Interviewee B noted, ‘Interactive exercises such as group work, role-plays and discussions, will involve the learners and allow them to actively engage with the language and with each other.’ Interviewee B also stressed the integral role of technology in the autonomous classroom and how technology can increase student participation. Interviewee B stated, ‘The use of videos, songs, games, apps, etc., can make language learning more engaging and heightens student participation.’

2. *Positive Learning Environment*

The results from the interviews suggested that an autonomous learning environment creates a positive learning environment. Interviewee A stated, ‘If you give a student autonomy they will learn more and will be happier...students will be comfortable engaging in the language.’ Interviewee B agreed by stating, ‘Students have a more positive attitude to learning when they are given responsibility, leading to a more positive learning environment.’ Both participants highlighted the integral role of the teacher-student relationship. Interviewee A stated, ‘When students feel respected and valued by their teachers, they are more motivated and confident in taking control of their own learning.’

4.5 The Irish Education System and Student Autonomy

1. *Junior Cycle & Continuous Based Assessments (CBAs)*

The research participants in the two semi-structured interviews highlighted that the new Junior Cycle Curriculum promotes student autonomy due to the implementation of the continuous based assessments (CBAs). Interviewee A stated, ‘The new Junior Cycle is very much focused on group work, pair work, and student-led activities, leading to a greater choice available for students in terms of assessment. E.g., CBA...Students develop essential skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership.’ However,

this participant also asked the question, ‘The CBAs give certain autonomy but how many of those are all student work solely?’ Interviewee B highlighted how the CBAs can lead to personalised learning. ‘CBAs allow the students to use their own interests to create their own personalised learning goals.’ The results from the survey highlighted that there are some developments for student autonomy in the new Junior Cycle Curriculum, especially with the establishment of the key skills, such as ‘communication, critical-thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and digital literacy.’

2. *Senior Cycle & Rote learning*

The interviewees indicated that there is a culture of rote learning due to the high-stakes exam at the end of Senior Cycle. Interviewee A stated, ‘Rote learning is 100% down to the curriculum, 100% down to directed learning... The curriculum's emphasis on memorisation drives students towards rote learning.’ Interviewee A also suggested ‘In the teaching of Irish, there is little or no promotion of autonomy. There is a set curriculum...the teaching strategy which produces the top exam results is learning by rote.’ The survey responses also indicated that there have been some attempts made at Junior Cycle for more autonomy, however, there has been a failing to do so at Senior Cycle. One respondent mentioned ‘The pressure to perform well in exams often leads to a more traditional, teacher-centred approach.’ Many participants noted how the ‘long, rigid, theory-heavy curriculum’ does not allow for student autonomy.

3. *Assessment Methods*

Both interview participants emphasised the curriculum and how assessment methods can affect autonomy. Interviewee A stated, ‘The curriculum is so broad there is so much you have to do and it's so rigid you can't go off...If our whole education is points focused it will lead to rote learning.’ Interviewee B stated, ‘There needs to be a new Leaving Cert put in place.’ The survey results also highlighted the differences in assessment methods between both the Junior and the Senior Cycle. The Junior Cycle offers a continuous assessment throughout the three-year cycle, allowing students to receive ‘regular feedback and reflect on their learning progress.’ In comparison, autonomy at Senior Cycle is ‘often overshadowed by the focus on exam preparation and points.’

Quantitative

Important strategies of Language Learner Autonomy

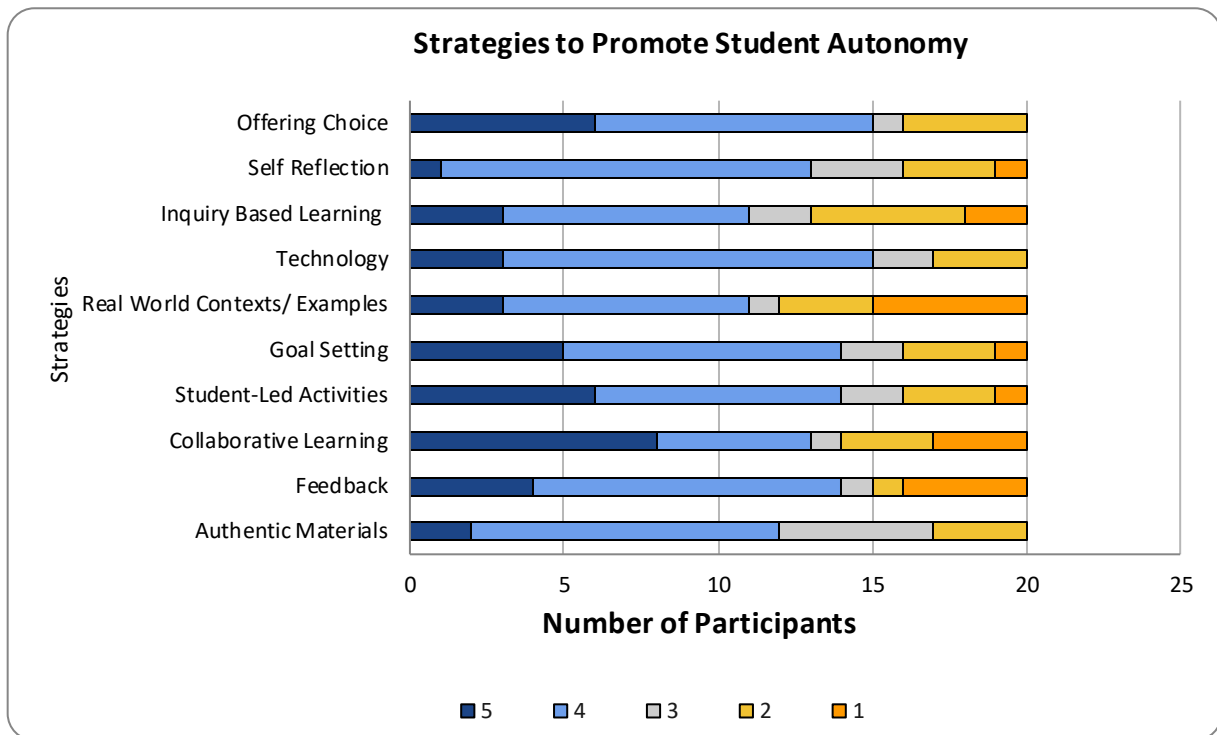


Figure 1: The most important strategies for promoting student autonomy.

The participants of the online survey were asked to choose the strategies that they utilise in their MFL classroom to foster student autonomy. The above diagram highlights the strategies employed in the classroom by language teachers to promote student autonomy, with ratings provided on a scale of 1 to 5, indicating the frequency of use (5 being the most frequent). Analysis of the data revealed that collaborative learning emerged as the most frequently utilised strategy to promote student autonomy in language learning. The second most utilised strategy emerging from the graph was the offering of choice followed by student-led activities. Following closely behind was the implementation of goal setting. Real world contexts/examples were voted the least frequently used strategies to promote autonomy. Inquiry-based learning was the second least-used strategy. Surprisingly, feedback was also ranked as a rarely employed method.

Benefits of a Facilitative Approach

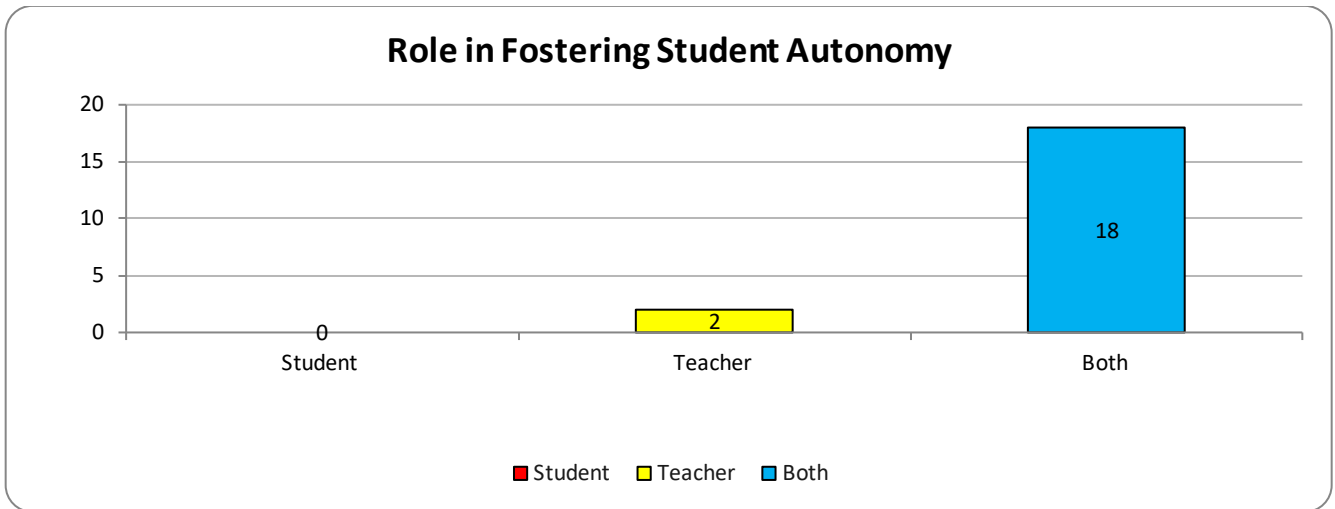


Figure 2: The role's involved in fostering student autonomy.

The above bar chart portrays the results for the following question- 'In your classroom, who plays a role in fostering student autonomy?' In the online questionnaire, 20 participants were given three multiple choice options- student, teacher, and mixture of both. 90% of participants choose option three, which was a mixture of both student and teacher. 10% choose option which was the teacher.

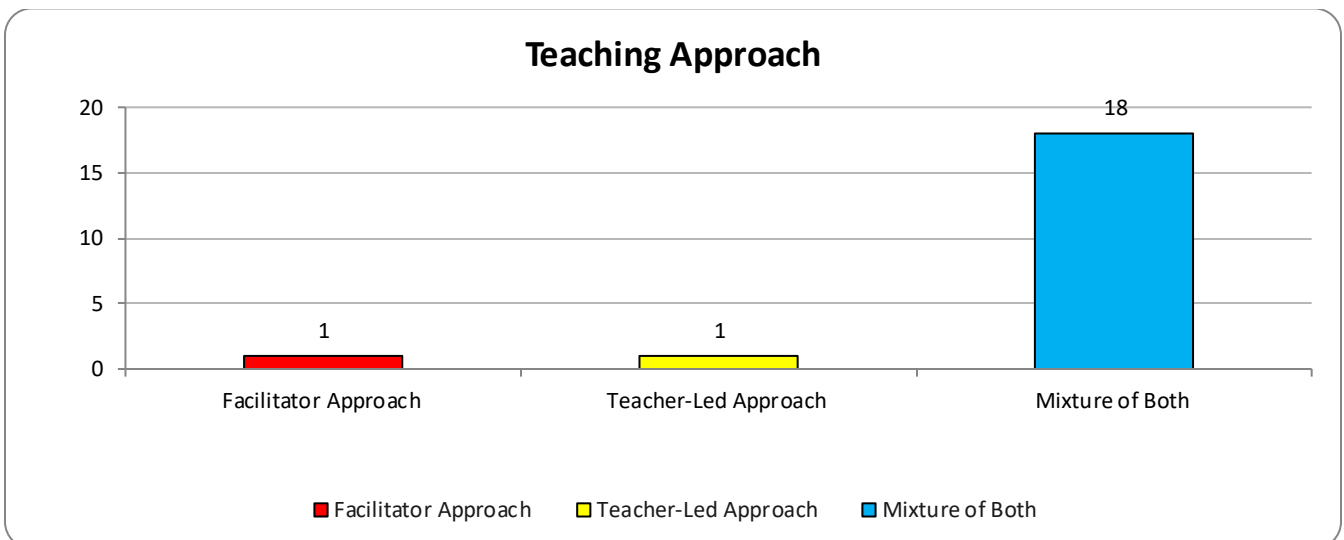


Figure 3: Teaching approaches adopted in the MFL classroom.

The above bar chart portrays the results for the following question- 'Which teaching approach do you adopt in your language classroom?' In the online questionnaire, 20 participants were given three multiple choice options- facilitator approach, teacher-led approach, and a mixture of both. 90% of

participants chose option three, which was a mixture of both. 5% chose the facilitator approach and 5% also chose the teacher-led approach.

Benefits of Student Autonomy

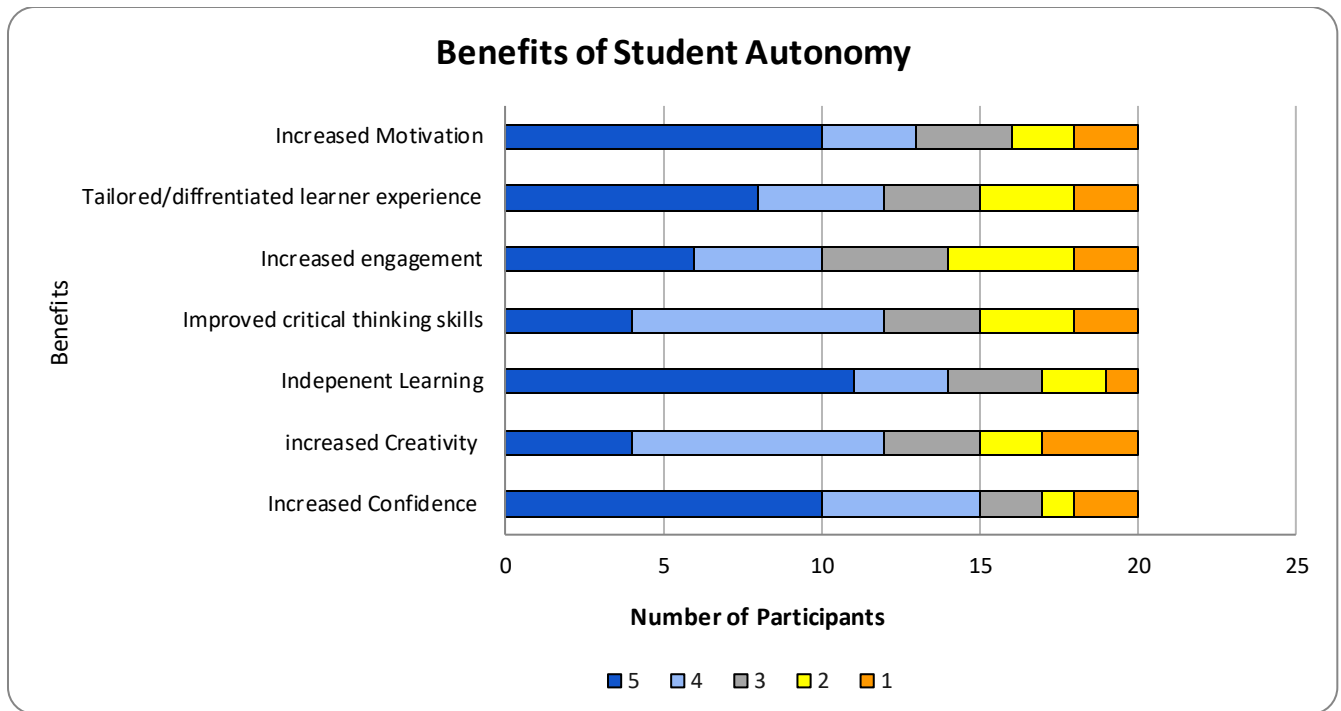


Figure 4: The benefits of student autonomy.

The participants in the survey were asked to choose the main benefits of promoting student autonomy in language learning. The above diagram showcases the benefits with ratings provided on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the most important benefit). Analysis of the data revealed that independent learning emerged as the most important benefit of student autonomy in language learning. Following closely behind are the increasing of confidence and motivation. Tailored/differentiated learner experience was also highly ranked. The results highlight that increased creativity was a low-ranking benefit of the promotion of autonomy.

The Irish Education System and Student Autonomy

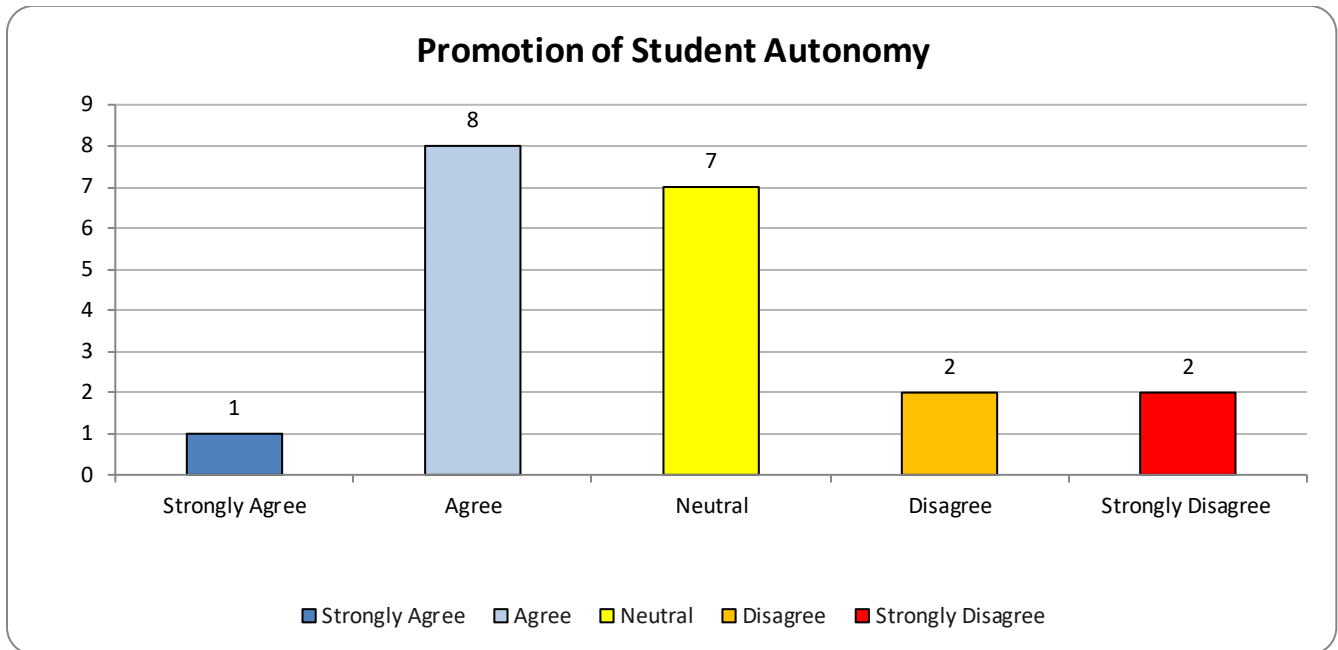


Figure 5: The promotion of student autonomy in language learning within the Irish Education System.

In the online survey, the participants were asked to rate their agreement on whether the current Irish education curriculum promotes student autonomy in language learning. The above bar chart presents the results. Responses varied with 8 out of 20 participants agreeing. 1 participant voted strongly agree and 7 out of 20 participants voted neutral. 2 out of 20 participants disagreed, along with 2 out of 20 strongly disagreeing.

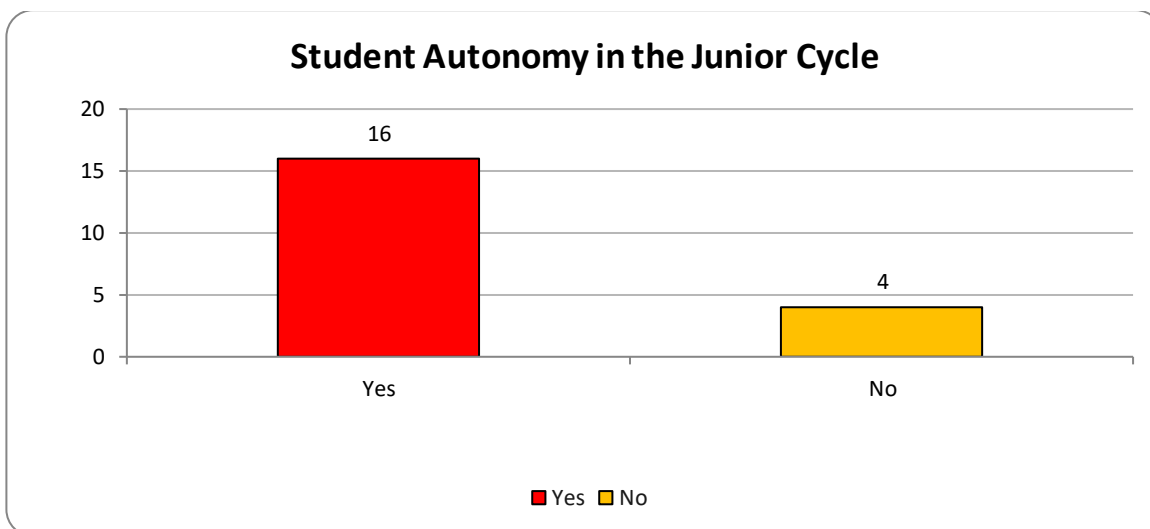


Figure 6: The promotion of student autonomy in the Junior Cycle Curriculum.

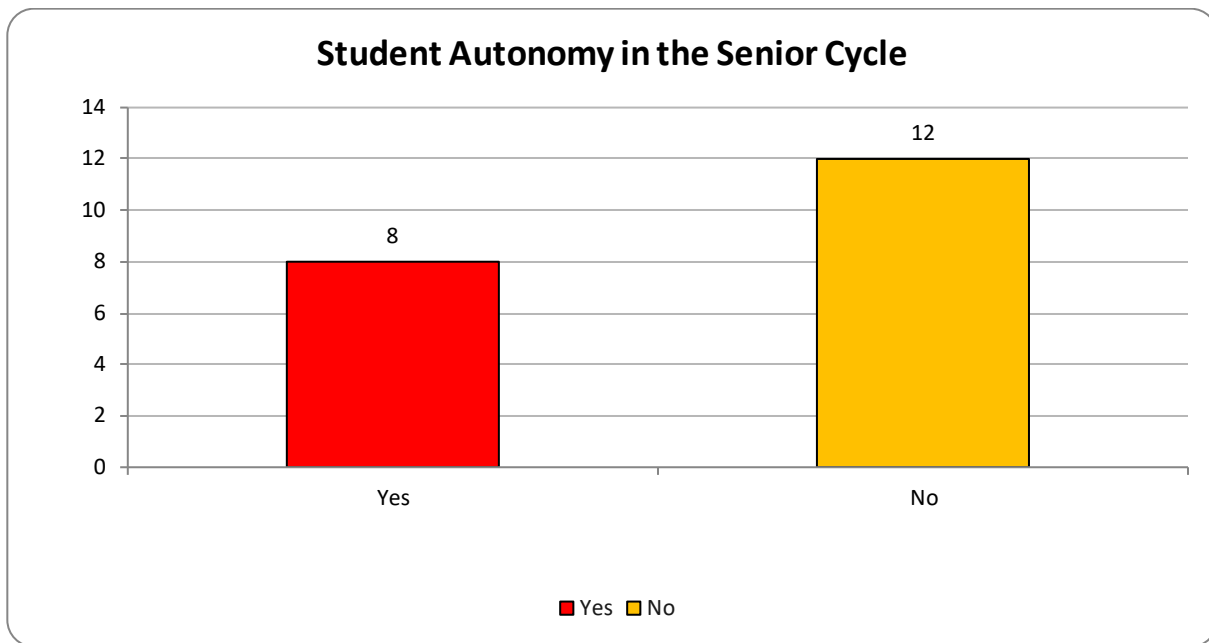


Figure 7: The promotion of student autonomy in the Senior Cycle Curriculum.

The above bar charts portray the results for the promotion/embedding of Student Autonomy in both the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle Curriculum. In the online questionnaire, participants were asked to select yes or no. In bar chart A, 16 out of 20 participants selected ‘yes’ highlighting that Student Autonomy is promoted in the Junior Cycle Curriculum. 4 out of 20 participants opted for ‘no’. In bar chart B, 12 out of 20 participants voted ‘no’ highlighting that Student Autonomy is not promoted in the Senior Cycle Curriculum. 8 out of 20 participants voted for ‘yes’.

(4.6) Conclusion

In conclusion, this findings chapter has outlined various aspects of language learner autonomy within the context of language teaching and learning in Ireland. Through a mixed-method approach utilising both quantitative data from online questionnaires and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and surveys, insight was gained into the views of Irish Post-Primary MFL teachers on their valuing of student autonomy in language learning. Research was also gained on the pedagogical strategies’ teachers employed to foster autonomy. This research was analysed using thematic analysis with the emergence of four themes. This data will be discussed in detail in chapter 5.

Chapter Five

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Data from the previous chapters are addressed and discussed throughout this chapter while referring to the findings in key literature highlighted in chapter two. Once gathered, data was analysed using thematic analysis, and compared and contrasted to identify recurring key themes relevant to the research questions. Both the online questionnaires and the two semi-structured interviews provided in-depth data to help answer the two research questions set out.

The research questions were as follows:

1. *Do Irish MFL Post-Primary teachers value the concept of autonomy?*
2. *What pedagogical strategies do Irish Post-Primary MFL teachers find the most effective for fostering autonomy in their classrooms?*

5.2 Strategies Important for Language Learner Autonomy

From qualitative research using two semi-structured interviews, it became evident that goal setting, self and peer assessment and reflection are commonly utilised strategies employed by MFL post-primary teachers to foster language learner autonomy. This aligns with the most cited definition of autonomy which was coined by Holec as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec, 1981, cited in Raya and Vieira, 2015, ch. 1, part 2). This highlights the need for students to set their own personal goals, assess their progress, as well as reflect on their learning journey. According to Ertürk, ‘in order to qualify as an autonomous learner, one should independently choose his/her aims and purposes and sets goals’ (Ertürk, 2016). The importance of goals was also cited in survey responses, with one respondent stating, ‘Setting clear objectives whereby students are able to self-assess and take initiative in their own learning journey.’

Both self and peer assessment were highlighted as vital components of language learner autonomy. According to previous literature, students who are able to discover their own and peer’s errors and understand how to correct them, are believed to be autonomous language learners (Avazmatova, 2022). Survey respondents also stressed the importance of both self and peer assessment and how teachers

must provide students with opportunities to ‘self-assess their own language proficiency levels and identify areas for improvement.’

The integral role of reflection was also highlighted to help understand students’ strengths and weaknesses. This aligns with Little’s view whereby it takes ‘deliberate effort and conscious reflection on the part of learners’ (Little, 2007, cited in Ertürk, 2016, p.652). Interviewee A stated, ‘By reflecting on their learning, students can become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and put a plan in place to improve.’ Survey participants also emphasised the importance of reflection, with one noting, “Give the students a sense of control over their learning, which in turn, develops student skills to reflect, adapt and problem solve.”

The quantitative research using online questionnaires showcased how Irish Post-Primary MFL teachers are incorporating many strategies to aid autonomy into their classes daily. The data highlighted that ‘collaborative learning’ emerged as the most frequently utilised strategy, which is in line with the constructivist viewpoint whereby meaningful learning occurs when students participate in social activities (Kameda, 2017). This outlines the importance of social interactions in fostering autonomy. The survey participants also emphasised the importance of ‘choice’ which is in line with the goals of the NCCA. The NCCA aims to give students ‘opportunities to explore options and make choices as they engage in communicative activities and become increasingly more autonomous learners’ (NCCA, 2023, p.10). However, the relatively lower utilisation of inquiry-based learning and real-world contexts/examples suggests potential areas for further research and pedagogical development. From quantitative research, one can assume that Irish Post-Primary MFL teachers value the concept of autonomy and incorporate a wide variety of strategies to foster autonomy on a daily basis. The qualitative data offered a narrower perspective on the strategies that were believed to be most important such as goal setting, self and peer assessment, and reflection.

5.3 Benefits of a Facilitative Approach

From qualitative research, it was evident that a facilitative approach was key to fostering student autonomy in language learning. Both the interviewees and the survey respondents highlighted the necessity of creating student-centred environments that empower learners to take responsibility for their learning. This approach can lead to active and more student-led learning. As noted in previous literature, a constructivist teaching approach promotes learner autonomy, responsibility, and active

learning (Panhwar et al, 2016). This constructivist approach places more emphasis on learning than teaching, allowing the students to be actively involved.

Motivation and engagement were also seen to be factors that were developed using a facilitative approach. According to Dickinson, 'the strong relation between autonomy and motivation is based on the presumption that more autonomous a learner is, the more motivated they are' (Boyadzhieva, 2016). Interviewee B stated, 'If a child is interested, they will want to learn more.' This finding is in line with Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, which states that autonomy-supportive teachers boosted greater levels of intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and self-esteem in comparison to those with controlling teachers (Egal, 2009). The survey responses reinforced this, indicating that students are more motivated and engaged when they feel actively involved in their learning process.

The interview participants also emphasised how risk taking and responsibility increased as a result of adopting a facilitative approach in the classroom. Interviewee A stated that students need opportunities to take risks and learn from their failures, which is supported by the constructivist theory. Again, the literature provided by Panhwar is of relevance, due to the construction of knowledge by personal experiences and social interactions (Panhwar et al, 2016).

Quantitative data highlighted the integral role of both teachers and students in fostering autonomy as 90% of survey respondents emphasised the reliance on both parties as seen in figure two above. This highlights the collaborative nature of autonomy development. According to Dam, it is the role of the teacher to ensure students are actively involved in their own learning and this can be done with the cooperation of both parties. This involves a capacity to act independently and cooperatively as a socially responsible person (Dam, 2018). Quantitative data also highlighted that the majority of survey participants (90%) adopted a mixed approach to teaching whereby they incorporated both facilitative and teacher-led instruction.

The participants of both qualitative and quantitative research emphasised the importance of creating student-centered environments that empower learners to take responsibility for their own learning journey. The study identified a facilitative approach as a key pedagogical strategy for fostering autonomy in the classroom.

5.4 Benefits of Student Autonomy

The two interviewees noted many benefits of promoting student autonomy. One prominent benefit was the enhancement of social skills and participation. The interviewees stated that classroom engagement increased as a result of student autonomy and ‘quieter students working in pairs or groups get a chance to use their voice.’ The participants noted that providing students with autonomy can facilitate the development of stronger relationships with peers, as well as increase participation in class activities. This finding is again in line with Dam's view that autonomy involves acting independently and cooperatively within a social context (Dam, 2018).

The interviewees also highlighted the relationship between autonomy and a positive learning environment. Interviewee A stated, ‘If you give a student autonomy they will learn more and be happier.’ This is supported by Najeeb who argues ‘If the learning environment is comfortable where the learners feel encouraged, they are more likely to experiment with different learning strategies’ (Najeeb, 2012). The survey respondents also highlighted the positive effect of autonomy on the overall learning environment, resulting in students having a more positive attitude towards learning. This underscores the importance of creating a supportive and empowering classroom environment where students feel comfortable taking control of their learning.

From quantitative research, it became evident that there are many benefits in fostering student autonomy. Data showed that the most important benefit was independent learning. Autonomy is a student-centred approach that develops independent language learning. Increased confidence and motivation both emerged as two important benefits of student autonomy. As referred to previously, the study conducted by Deci and Ryan is also relevant here, with greater intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and perceived competence for students with autonomy-supportive teachers (Egel, 2009). Increased creativity emerged as the least important benefit which is interesting as the new Junior Cycle Framework promotes eight new key skills, one being the skill of creativity, which centres around students being autonomous learners.

From research, it is evident that both interviewees and survey respondents shared numerous benefits of promoting student autonomy. The interviewees highlighted how social skills, student participation, and a more positive classroom environment can be the results of fostering of autonomy. The survey respondents showcased how there is a wide range of benefits for promoting autonomy, which highlights that MFL teachers strongly value the concept of autonomy.

5.5 The Irish Education System and Student Autonomy

The interview participants were both of the opinion that the new Junior Cycle aids the promotion of student autonomy, particularly through the implementation of Continuous Based Assessments (CBAs). The participants highlighted that the new curriculum gives students more opportunities to assume greater responsibility for their education by promoting key skills. Interviewee A stated, 'The new Junior Cycle is very much focused on group work, pair work, and student-led activities leading to a greater choice for students in terms of assessment.' This aligns with the new Junior Cycle aims whereby students will have 'opportunities to explore options and make choices as they engage in communicative activities and become increasingly more autonomous learners' (NCCA, 2023, p.10).

The findings regarding the promotion of student autonomy in the Senior Cycle were in sharp contrast. A culture of rote learning was emphasised that is highly influenced by the high-stakes exam. Students are 'encouraged to rote learn...preparation for the Leaving Certificate Examination consists predominantly of this type of learning' (McGrath, 2021). Interviewee A stated, 'Rote learning is 100% down to the curriculum, 100% down to directed learning.' To understand a subject on a deeper level, meaningful learning is required. The participants of the online questionnaire also highlighted the 'rigid, theory-heavy, and time-consuming curriculum', often resulting in the teacher adopting a teacher-centred and instructional approach.

Furthermore, the two interviewees highlighted the differences in assessment methods between the Junior and Senior Cycles. While the Junior Cycle offers continuous assessment and regular feedback, the Senior Cycle predominantly focuses on exam-based assessments, which may hinder autonomy and creativity in learning. Interviewee A noted, 'The curriculum is so broad there is so much you have to do and it's so rigid you can't go off.' According to Gleeson (2024), the Irish 'assessment and examination systems have remained largely unchanged in an environment where entry to higher education is determined by Leaving Certificate performance.' The survey participants emphasised the need for a more flexible curriculum and assessment system that prioritises learning outcomes over exam results, allowing for greater autonomy and personalisation in student learning experiences.

The findings of the quantitative data reveal a mixed view regarding the promotion of autonomy in the Irish Curriculum as seen in figure five above. While 8 out of 20 participants agreed with the idea that the curriculum promotes student autonomy, indicating some level of support for the current approach,

only 1 participant strongly agreed. Additionally, 6 participants remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about the degree of autonomy encouraged by the curriculum. On the other hand, 2 participants disagreed, and another 2 strongly disagreed, highlighting a minority view that the curriculum does not effectively foster student autonomy in language learning. These findings indicate a need for more thorough research.

The findings of the quantitative research also suggest that student autonomy is embedded in the Junior Cycle; however, autonomy is not promoted as effectively in Senior Cycle. The majority of participants (90%) believed student autonomy was integrated into the Junior Cycle. In contrast, a larger proportion of participants, 12 out of 20, highlighted that student autonomy is not promoted in the Senior Cycle Curriculum. These results suggest a notable contrast between the two curriculums. This comparison highlights significant differences in educational approaches and priorities across the two curriculums. This raises the question of whether the Senior Cycle Curriculum may need to be revisited to ensure the goals of autonomy are being integrated across both cycles.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this discussion highlights the value Irish MFL post-primary teachers place on the promotion of student autonomy in language learning. This study's findings have shown that there is a wide and varied amount of strategies employed by language teachers to achieve autonomy daily. Goal-setting, self and peer assessment, and reflection emerged as three key strategies necessary for fostering autonomy. Additionally, the facilitative approach emerged as a crucial factor, leading to student-centred learning, increased engagement and student responsibility. The research also highlighted that there are a wide variety of benefits of student autonomy, notably, enhanced participation, independent learning, and a positive learning environment. However, significant challenges remain within the Irish education system, particularly at Senior Cycle, where there is a strong focus on the high-stakes exam and a long-rigid theory-heavy curriculum to follow. The differences in curriculums suggest the need for curriculum reform to ensure autonomy is embedded effectively in both cycles.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This closing chapter will draw conclusions and make recommendations based on evidence presented in this dissertation. This mixed-method research study explored MFL teachers' perceptions of the concept of student autonomy. Additionally, this study enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the most effective pedagogical strategies to foster language learner autonomy. The findings revealed how current Irish post-primary MFL teachers value the concept of student autonomy and utilise a wide variety of pedagogical approaches to foster language learner autonomy daily. However, there is an acknowledgement of the need for curriculum reform due to the strong contrast between the embedding of student autonomy in the Junior and Senior Cycle Curriculum.

6.2 Summary of Findings

The findings from this study confirmed that MFL teachers find the concept of language learner autonomy to be very valuable as they incorporate many strategies to promote autonomy on a regular basis, such as goal setting, self and peer assessment, and reflection. The participants emphasised a great number of benefits resulting from autonomy such as increased participation, greater independence, and a more positive learning environment. However, the findings also identified a number of challenges and constraints experienced by teachers in the implementation of student autonomy at Senior Cycle. The participants noted that there was too much emphasis placed on the high stakes exam, which in turn resulted in a culture of rote learning. This is in line with McGrath's view that students are 'encouraged to rote learn and that preparation for the Leaving Certificate Examination consists predominantly of this type of learning' (McGrath, 2021). The participants also noted how the curriculum was long, rigid and theory-heavy, resulting in limited use of autonomy at Senior Cycle.

6.3 Limitations

A mixed methods approach was utilised in the form of two semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire. The study was limited to two different school types, one a mixed school and the other an all-boys school. The semi-structured interviews were only conducted in the mixed school, which may

result in a biased understanding that does not fully represent teachers' perceptions across different school types. The different school environments may influence teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward student autonomy. According to Babione, 'each school context or setting includes distinctive personnel representing wide-ranging experiences and understandings, variations in beliefs about teaching, learning' (Babione, 2015, p.153). The sample size of 20 is also relatively small for making broad generalizations about the entire population of language teachers.

6.4 Recommendations

The findings emphasised the need for curriculum reform in Senior Cycle. This may include a review of the assessment methods which are currently in place. The NCCA conducted a study on teacher, parent and student perspectives on the current senior cycle and potential directions for change. All groups emphasised the workload, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover the course', leading to rote learning for the Leaving Certificate exam (NCCA, 2019). There may be a move away from predominantly exam-based assessments to more continuous-based assessments. However, many schools in the above study noted that since the 'points race' is a major cause of concern in students, adjustments to senior cycle assessments would not be effective without corresponding modifications to the college admissions process (NCCA, 2019). In Junior Cycle, the number of students studying a foreign language has decreased to 84% in 2022 from 87% in 2016 (DES, 2024). Schools should collaborate with programmes such as Languages Connect and Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) to enhance professional development, improve the quality of language teaching and effectively promote learner autonomy. The introduction of foreign languages in the primary curriculum from 2025 may also aid the uptake of languages at post-primary level. Educators may decide to incorporate more autonomous strategies regularly into their classrooms especially at Senior Cycle. As students are also responsible for autonomy, they too should be educated on how to become more autonomous language learners.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the findings reveal the significant role that teachers play in fostering language learner autonomy. Lazăr stated, learner autonomy is not 'something that teachers do to learners, but something teachers do together with learners' (Lazăr, 2013, p.464). The shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centred environment is essential for enabling students to take control of their own learning. The study highlights the value post-primary MFL teachers place on the concept of autonomy as well as the most

effective strategies they utilise to foster it. Irish education has made progress in relation to autonomy due to the implementation of the new Junior Cycle Curriculum, which promotes student-centred and active learning, especially within continuous based assessments. However, the studies revealed that the Senior Cycle needs reform, due to the emphasis on the high-stakes exam and the culture of rote learning which can hinder the implementation of autonomy in language learning.

Reference List

- Ayiro, L.P. (2012) *A functional approach to educational research methods and statistics: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Al Asmari, A.-R. (2013) 'Practices and prospects of learner autonomy: teacher's perceptions', *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 6(3), pp.1–10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5539/e1t.v6n3p1>.
- Almusharraf, N. (2020) 'Teachers' perspectives on promoting learner autonomy for vocabulary development: a case study', *Cogent Education*, 7(1), pp.1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1823154>.
- Alonazi, S.M (2017) 'The role of teachers in promoting learner autonomy in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia', *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 10 (7), pp.183–202. <http://doi.org/10.5539/e1t.v10n7p183>.
- Avazmatova, M. (2022) 'The role of learner autonomy in foreign language learning', *Humanising Language Teaching*, pp.1-6. Available at: <https://www.hltmag.co.uk/aug22/role-of-learner-autonomy>. (Accessed: 06 January, 2024)
- Babione, C. (2015) *Practitioner teacher inquiry and research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Baker, P.S (2016) 'Making paradigms meaningful in mixed methods research', *Sage*, 10(4), pp.1–16. [Online] Available at: <https://didier-jourdan.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Paradigms-MM.pdf> (Accessed: 06 June, 2024)
- Baldwin, L. (2018) *Research Concepts for the Practitioner of Educational Leadership*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bell, J. and Waters, S. (2014) *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Benson, P. (2013) 'Learner Autonomy', *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), pp.839–843. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43267936>.
- Benson, P. (2013) *Teaching and researching autonomy*. London: Routledge.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2010) *How to research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Boyadzhieva, E. (2016) 'Learner-centered teaching and learner autonomy', *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, (232) pp.35–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.008>
- Cohen, L., Morrison, K. and Manion, L. (2011) *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.
- Dam, L. (2003) 'Developing learner autonomy: the teacher's responsibility', in Little, D., Ridley, J and Ushioda, E. *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom, teacher, learner, curriculum, and assessment*. Trinity College Dublin: Authentik Language Learning Resources. pp.3–9.
- Dam, L. (2018) 'Learners as researchers of their own language learning: examples from an autonomy classroom', *SiSAL Journal*, 9(2), pp.262–279. <https://doi.org/10.37237/090303>
- Deng, D. (2007). 'An exploration of the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency.' *Asian EFL Journal*, 24, 1–23.
- Department of Education and Skills. (DES) (2015) *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/52f94d-framework-for-consultation-on-a-foreign-languages-in-education-strat/> (Accessed: 29 May 2024)

Department of Education and Skills. (DES) (2024) *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289094/0b705914-81d1-4951-8f96-ae8c57d7bc15.pdf#page=null>. (Accessed: 25 May 2024)

Egal, I.P. (2009) 'Learner autonomy in the language classroom: from teacher dependency to learner independency', *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, pp.2023–2026. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2009.01.355>

Ertürk, N.O. (2016) 'Language learner autonomy: is it really possible?', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, pp.1–5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.089>.

Firth, J (2020) *The teacher's guide to research: engaging with, applying and conducting research in the classroom*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Gleeson, J. (2024) 'Heads or tails: the relationship between curriculum and assessment in Irish post-primary education.' *Irish Educational Studies*, pp. 237–61. [Online] Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03323315.2022.2061564>. (Accessed: 30 February 2024)

Han, L (2020) 'On the relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy', *International Educational Studies*, 13, pp.153–162. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v13n6p153>.

Haque, M.M. (2019) 'From cognition, metacognition to autonomy: a framework for understanding language learning dynamics', *Arab World English Journal*, pp. 207–221. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/ef11.15>.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (2016) *Advancing School Autonomy* [Online] Available at: https://www.into.ie/app/uploads/2019/07/SchoolAutonomy_Submission_Feb16.pdf. (Accessed: 30 August 2023)

Kameda, Q. (2017) 'Research provocation: creating opportunities for deeper authentic learning for teachers to improve teaching and learning in schools', *African Educational Research Journal*, 5(2), pp. 109–113. [Online] Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1214158.pdf>. (Accessed: 25 August 2023)

Lazăr, A. (2013) 'Learner autonomy and its implementation for language teacher training', *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, pp.460–464. [Online] Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042813006897>. (Accessed: 25 August 2023)

Little, D. (2007) 'Language learner autonomy: some fundamental considerations revisited', *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, pp.14–27. <https://doi.org/10.2167/illt040.0>.

Little, D. (2012) 'The European Language Portfolio: history, key concerns, future prospects', in Kühn, B. and Pérez, CML. (eds) *Perspectives from the European Language Portfolio: Learner Autonomy and Self-Assessment*. London: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 5–22.

Mac Naughton, G and Hughes, P. (2009) *Doing action research in early childhood studies: a step-by-step guide*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

McGrath, P. (2021). 'The leaving certificate examination - a target for unfair criticism?', *Irish Journal of Education*, 44 (5), pp.1–23. [Online] Available at: www.erc.ie/ije (Accessed: 25 April 2024)

Merriam., S.B and Tisdell, E.J. (2016) *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Morrison, B. (2011) *Independent language learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2003) *Languages in The Post-Primary Curriculum: A Discussion Document*. [Online] Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/1808/languages_in_the_post-primary_curriculum_a_discussion_paper.pdf. (Accessed: 29 August 2023)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2019) *Student, Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Senior Cycle*. [Online] Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS94_1.pdf. (Accessed: 26 May 2024)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b1bb3-looking-at-our-school-2022/> (Accessed: 29 August 2023)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages Curriculum*. [Online] Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/bbb30195-a78a-4d66-9b80-04af66349905/JCMFLspec.pdf>. (Accessed: 29 August 2023)

Panhwar, A.H, Ansari, S. and Ansari, K. (2016) ‘Sociocultural theory and its role in the development of language pedagogy’, *Australian International Academic Centre*, 7(6), pp.183–188. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.7n.6p.183>.

Pemberton, R. (1996) *Taking control: autonomy in language learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) (2023) *European Language Portfolio*. Available at: <https://ppli.ie/policy/common-european-framework-of-reference-cefr/european-language-portfolio-elp-2/>. (Accessed: 29 August 2023)

Raya, M.J, Viera, F. (2015) *Enhancing autonomy in language education: A case-based approach to teacher and learner development*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Wiles, R (2013) *What are qualitative research ethics?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Wyse, D., Selwyn, N., Smith, E., and Suter, L.E. (2017) *The BERA/SAGE Handbook of Educational Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Wyse, d., Selwyn, N. and Smith, E. (2017) *The BERA/SAGE handbook of educational research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Yildiz, Y., Yucedal, H.M. (2020) ‘Learner autonomy: a central theme in language learning’, *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 7(3), pp.208–212. <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v7i3p208>.

Word Count: 10,807

Appendix A: Consent Form to Principal

Researcher's Address

4/11/2023

Principal School's Address

Dear Mr. _____

As part of my Professional Masters in Post-Primary Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating the role of the teacher in fostering student autonomy in the Post-Primary Modern Foreign Languages classroom. This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward in order to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview two classroom teachers. The MFL teacher's will be asked to partake in semi-structured interviews to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study.

Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication. I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher: _____ Email: _____

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin. Tel (01) 6610168

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Principal's Signature _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Information Letter for Participants

As part of my Professional Masters for Education with Hibernia College, I plan to investigate the Role of the Teacher in Fostering Student Autonomy in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) classroom. The aim of this research study is to explore language teachers' perspectives of the importance of autonomy in language learning. I wish to investigate the pedagogical approaches that language teachers find most effective for fostering autonomy.

Teachers play a crucial role in autonomous learning and for that reason it can never be ignored. Over the last two decades, learner autonomy has become a topic of interest and discussion within the context of language learning. It is true that if learners can manage their own learning, they will be better prepared and more likely to succeed. Allowing students to become independent learners is considered a key element in the context of language education.

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research however your name and the name of the school will not be published. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be made available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Yours Sincerely,

Appendix C: Consent Form

I, _____ have read and understood the Letter of Information provided to me by _____. I agree that in order to conduct research about student autonomy in the MFL classroom in my school, she may request an interview with two teachers and upon receipt of their consent may conduct interviews on school premises at times convenient for the teachers and the school. I understand that participation is voluntary and that there are no physical or psychological risks associated with the study. I know that all answers provided during the interview will be used for the purposes of the study only and that all responses will identify neither individual or the school itself. Signed: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Introduction

- Introduce yourself and provide a brief overview of your research topic.
- Purpose of interview and how data will be organised.
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity of responses.

Introductory Questions

- Background in teaching Modern Foreign Languages (MFL).
- How long have you been teaching MFL, and which languages?

Perception of Language Learner Autonomy

- How important is it for students to develop autonomy in language learning?
- As a teacher, could you describe your approach to promoting autonomy?
- What are the main benefits of promoting autonomy in language learning?
- Are there any challenges in fostering student autonomy in the MFL classroom?
- Do you think autonomy impacts language acquisition?

Effective Strategies for Promoting Language Learner Autonomy

- Can you describe any specific teaching methods or strategies you use to promote student autonomy in your language classes?
- How do you incorporate these strategies into your classes on a daily/weekly basis?
- How can you improve autonomy in your own classroom?
- How often do you incorporate strategies that promote student autonomy in your classroom?

Autonomy in the Irish Education System

- Do you believe student autonomy is embedded in the Irish Education System?
- How is autonomy embedded in the Junior Cycle Curriculum?
- How is autonomy embedded in the Senior Cycle Curriculum?
- Are there any changes you would like to see in how student autonomy is promoted in MFL in the Irish Curriculum?

***Any additional comments in all sections**

Conclusion

- Is there anything else you would like to add/discuss?
- Thank the interviewee for their time.

