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Learner Autonomy and Voice in a Tertiary ELT Institution in Oman

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6.4. Analysis: Metacognitive Knowledge

6.4.1. Introduction

The analysis in this section will focus on metacognitive knowledge, i.e., knowledge which students have about themselves as (language) learners, the learning process and the learning context. This part of the analysis should respond to the second research question, which is set to explore students' awareness of and capacity to use their metacognitive knowledge when learning English in and outside the classroom. The investigation of students' metacognitive knowledge (and so is the analysis herein) encompassed the following four aspects:

1. Person knowledge
2. Knowledge about the learning context
3. Task knowledge
4. Strategic knowledge

I have explained earlier in section (6.2), and as table (6.3) shows, that metacognitive knowledge dispersed itself across all of the six RGCs. As such, students' perceptions of their roles, the teacher's role and constraints on their language learning, which I have presented in the previous sections, also touched upon aspects of metacognitive knowledge. However, task and strategic knowledge in particular, were explicitly explored in the third and fourth RGCs through the certain tasks and questioning techniques which aimed at exploring students' knowledge about language learning tasks and language learning strategy use. The purposes were to explore the way the students described and evaluated themselves as language learners and how they perceived success in language learning. The analysis of this set of data focused on the ways in which the students believed they could control and influenced their learning, and thus, theorising about their capacities for self-management of (language) learning.

Given the overlapping nature of the research issues, and the fact that a large part of what metacognitive knowledge encompasses has been presented in the earlier sections, direct quotes and examples will be kept to the minimum in this section of the chapter to avoid

repetition and keep my thesis within a reasonable length. I will begin the presentation of the findings on metacognitive knowledge with person knowledge.

6.4.2. Person knowledge

In this study, I define person knowledge as the ways in which students perceive and evaluate themselves as language learners (Wenden, 1998). It includes the students' knowledge about their capacities for, and strengths and weaknesses in learning. Person knowledge manifested itself in the data in the very initial RGCs which covered students' perceptions of language learning at school and higher education as well as in the later RGCs which investigated students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for learning and the internal constraints on their learning. As such, the analysis in this section will inevitably make reference to some of the issues mentioned in the previous sections.

To begin with, part of the students' person knowledge was obvious in the way they described their learning **abilities, roles and styles** in learning at school and later at university. We have seen that the students had the ability to reflect on their early language learning and describe their attitudes as well as aptitude for learning at that stage. For example, most of the students were not serious about learning English and, as such, did not pay much attention to it. They also described how they began to realise the importance of English for their future studies and possible careers and so began to develop their language skills using various means such as taking English courses over the summer holidays and hiring private tutors. Others had realised and invested on their independent learning capacities and began to search for materials and opportunities for practice in order to develop their language skills. So it was clear that at the later stages of their schooling, most of the students had developed positive attitudes towards learning English and its role in their life and identified some useful learning opportunities accordingly. However, students kept emphasising that teaching methods and curriculum did not encourage or promote in them the skills for independent thinking and learning, and recommended that such essential knowledge was introduced to students at the school level before pursuing higher education. This shows that the

students knew (and had the knowledge) about their aptitude and style of learning and acted accordingly.

As for their own roles in learning, the students in all the groups had a strong sense of their own role in learning and considered it as greater than that of the teacher. They also associated having a bigger role in learning with achieving better results. In this respect, they mentioned examples of independent learning initiatives through which they were able to develop their language skills on their own either through the internet, TV series or even cartoons. Again they emphasised that such knowledge about students' roles in and responsibility for learning was to be introduced to the students at the school level.

In addition, the students also showed awareness about *some* of their limitations which impeded language learning such as their lack of awareness about the nature, goals and requirements of learning in higher education, lack of self-confidence, laziness and shyness. I have italicised the word *some* above to indicate that what students reported about their weaknesses in learning represented only part of their actual weaknesses, part of which they may not even have full awareness of. In the previous section, I have categorised these student-related limitations under 'internal constraints'.

Students' knowledge about themselves as learners (or their person knowledge) was also evident in their knowledge of what constitutes **success in learning**. Although this part of person knowledge manifested itself in different ways in other RGCs too, it was targeted explicitly in the third and fourth sessions.

Since students had experienced the value of having a greater role in learning through their independent learning initiatives, exercising their agency through independent learning was considered an essential principle for effective and successful learning. In this respect, students demanded that teachers and curriculum planners should listen to their voices and take their needs and interests into account when designing course materials. This is evident in the following extracts from a conversation I had with group A:

(RA2a): "So do you mean that your roles and voices as learners are missing in the curriculum?"

(PA2a): "Yes, and I think that by the end of each semester, there should be a committee which listens to the students and their suggestions and ideas in order to improve the curriculum, but this is missing in our case".

(PA2a): “Another problem is that sometimes the materials are written by people from outside and we as learners are not taken into consideration. I think learners need to be taken into consideration and their needs should be investigated. People from the local environment who know our needs should be involved because they understand the environment”.

Students also had a strong sense of the importance of **research** as one of the key factors of effective and successful learning. That is, they associated success in learning with the ability to search for information *on their own* and see direct applications of what they learn in real life settings rather than memorising information for testing purposes, which what they had experienced at school and also university.

Other factors of success in language learning which relate to person knowledge also include having:

- A firm belief in the importance of English and its role
- A clear goal for language learning
- Curiosity
- Ability to identify opportunities for practice.

Part of the students’ knowledge about themselves as learners was also evident in their conception of who the successful learner was. Here is part of the conversation I had with Group A students in this respect:

(PA2a): “First of all, the successful learner is the one who understands what higher education is. He has a clear idea what higher education is all about.”

(RA2a): “Why do you consider this as important?”

(PA2a): “I can say this is a very important thing, this is the foundation.”

(RA2a): “Good, and what else do you think the successful learner has or does?”

(PA2a): “He has clear goals.”

(RA2a): “And who make these goals?”

(PA2a): “The student himself, but when he faces any challenges or difficulties he tries to find solutions.”

(PA2a): “I think he has the ability to take decisions and to study each option, and consider the advantage and disadvantages of the decision he is about to take”.

The conversation with group A continued and touched upon the following characteristics of the successful learner:

- having interest in what he/she is studying
- having a vision
- being diligent in his/her studies
- being responsible
- playing a bigger role in his/her learning
- being self-dependent
- working and sharing with others (but with certain limits)
- planning his/her own studies and accepting no pressure from others
- managing challenges
- searching for learning opportunities outside university
- managing time efficiently
- keeping to a set plan for learning
- having/using strategies when facing challenges in learning

A student in group B came up with his own list of who he thought the successful learner was:

“I think he is hard-working, one who has ambition and is highly motivated. He asks questions and he seeks to find out about things and learns from others' experiences. He works hard and searches for information outside the [text]books given. He makes use of the students who are in the same major and others who are in advanced years. He is not arrogant, he doesn't neglect small things and he plans his time” (PB2a).

Students also reported having (and using) certain academic skills, which reflected their knowledge of their own capacities for learning or perhaps **managing their own learning**. A vivid example of this was the students' ability to evaluate their own learning (self-evaluation). In this respect, they showed knowledge of the nature, goals, timing and limitations of self-evaluation:

(PD2a): “I think self-assessment is not only to see how much I have learned in that unit but also to check our method of learning, so if there is anything I need to change in my learning methods and strategies in order to help me achieve the objectives of the unit in a better way...Self-assessment can be done by the student himself in order to evaluate his learning strategies and abilities.”

(PD2a): “But students should always evaluate themselves before the teacher does it.”

(RD2a): “So you are saying that you could evaluate your own learning away from the teacher and the exams set by school?”

(PD2a): “Yes, but students take exams more seriously”.

Furthermore, in the quote below, we can see that the student decided that she needed to evaluate her own learning, her thinking and the methods she was using in learning. She managed to make changes in her learning accordingly:

“Honestly, I have recently decided that I need to evaluate how much I have learned of the content and also my thinking and the methods of learning I have been using because I noticed that my marks were not good although I studied hard. When I did this, I began to change some of my strategies and my level has changed accordingly” (PD2a).

Finally, besides self-evaluation, the data showed that the students’ capacity for self-management of learning also included awareness of their weaknesses in certain language areas: “I have two main objectives: I want to learn how to write a report and how to develop my critical thinking” (PD2a), having a clear agenda for learning: “I really want to develop my language skills and my thinking skills” (PD2a), and the ability to identify opportunities for language practice: “I think that learning English is not only restricted to schools or books. You can learn English anywhere. There are books, there are movies, or you can make a friendship with somebody who speaks English in another country on Facebook or the Internet” (PA2a).

In addition to the knowledge they had about themselves as learners, students also had their own understanding and perceptions of their immediate learning context in terms of

its constituents and conditions. This is the second type of metacognitive knowledge. I detail this type in the section below.

6.1.1. Knowledge about the learning context

It is worth noting here that the literature on metacognitive knowledge does not discuss knowledge about the learning context explicitly as a discrete category, nor did I have it as a separate area of discussion in my protocol for the RGCs. However, during data coding, the need arose for an additional sub-category to accommodate the newly emerged data on the learning environment besides person, task and strategic types of knowledge.

Students described critically their immediate language learning context, be it the university or the wider community, in a way that reflected part of the knowledge they held about their context. This knowledge encompassed, among other things, the students' perceptions of the nature, opportunities and challenges of their learning context. It is worth noting here, though, that due to the interrelated nature of the research concepts, part of the students' knowledge about their learning context was revealed through the analysis of the data on 'external constraints' on language learning which I presented in section (6.3.4.4) above.

The analysis of data on this issue revealed at least two levels of students' knowledge about their learning context. These include the knowledge students had about the opportunities for and challenges of language learning in their community inside the classroom as well as those outside the classroom. With regard to their learning community outside the classroom, although generally agreed by the students that these were limited, they appeared to be knowledgeable about language learning opportunities and resources in their immediate context. We have seen in the previous section that some students, those who were keen to improve their language skills, were able to identify various language learning opportunities including private language courses offered by language institutes over the summer holiday; language learning resources on the Internet including films in English, material on YouTube and, chat rooms; shopping, TV series, and even watching cartoons in English. In the following quote, a student in group A is elaborating on this issue:

“I think that learning English is not only restricted to schools or books. You can learn English anywhere there are books, there are movies, or you can make friendship with somebody who speaks English in another country through Facebook or the Internet” (PA2b).

However, other students talked about the limited resources and opportunities for language practice outside the classroom which, again, reflected their awareness of the opportunities available as well as those missing in their context. In addition, the students talked about the challenges or constraints on language learning in their context as they perceived them. I have presented these in a separate section above. These include limited opportunities for language use and practice, some of the university regulations which limit students’ freedom of making choice, difficult living conditions, especially for the off-campus students, the overall culture which does not always support and encourage students’ autonomy, etc. On this very last issue, one of the students in group C wrote the following in her journal:

“I don’t think our society and environment can accept the idea of learner autonomy in learning. Since we were young, we have been learning according to the curriculum and plans which were made by the teachers, so everybody is accustomed to this type of education. So if students were given more autonomy [in their learning], I think the parents may see this as something new and may cause some contradictions in thinking. For example, they [parents] may say that we are still students and don’t realise certain issues and that the teacher is the one who should choose what we should learn. Or they may say that we can’t understand or learn without a teacher” (JC2b).

The second level of students’ knowledge about their learning context is the opportunities and challenges of language learning inside the classroom. The opportunities include learning from and about different cultures and experiences through the teachers in their context who come from different parts of the world, learning new language and study skills, etc., while the challenges include set curriculum, poor and unvaried teaching methods, little or marginalised role of the students in making choices, over-testing, emphasis of teaching and exam marks over learning, etc. I now turn to the third type of metacognitive knowledge: task knowledge.

6.4.4. Task knowledge

No different from how it is defined in the literature (see for example, Wenden, 1998), in the context of this research, task knowledge refers to students' specific knowledge which guides the completion of language learning activities. It also refers to the knowledge students have about the nature, demands and contribution of the learning tasks to their language development (Wenden, 1991, 1998). The conversation guide (see table 4.3, chapter four) sets out the procedures for exploring task knowledge. Though students' knowledge about language learning tasks manifested itself in various other RGCs, it was explored explicitly in the *fourth* RGC. This was achieved through specific tasks and probing questions which aimed at gaining insight into the students' knowledge about what language learning entails when compared to learning other subjects as well as the nature, purposes, demands and usefulness of some student-selected language learning tasks. Drawing on the literature on task knowledge and for the purpose of this investigation, task knowledge was explored through the following components:

1. task type and purpose
2. task requirements (in terms of skills and strategies)
3. task level of difficulty
4. task relation or link to other tasks within a topic or unit of learning
5. task value or usefulness from the students' perspectives; and
6. possible ways of task improvement from the students' perspectives.

I will begin this section by presenting the knowledge students had about language learning as a task before moving on to present the students' knowledge about the nature, requirements, level of difficulty and evaluation of the value of some specific language learning tasks. I began the discussion by asking the students if, in general, they see any difference between **learning a language and learning other subjects**. The immediate answer was that the two tasks differed in terms of teaching method. I further investigated if students meant teaching or 'learning' method. The questioned made them think for a while but they soon realised that the two tasks differed in terms of both teaching and learning. A student in group B viewed language learning as different in the way they studied and revised it as well as the way they prepared for it:

“Yes, the method is different, and the way you study it is different, and the way you take notes is also different, and also the resources you use to learn English are different from the resources you use to study other subjects...The way we prepare is also different.” (PB2c).

Another student linked learning a language to learning its vocabulary and grammar:

“In English you need to learn words and rules but when you learn other subjects like geography, it's already in your language and so you will learn the information” (PB2c).

Another student was more specific about the way he viewed the difference between the two tasks. He viewed language as skills-based but other subjects concepts-based, which they could memorise:

“In these subjects we learn concepts, but in a language course we learn writing, speaking, reading and listening... but when it comes to a subject like management for example, sometimes I just resort to memorising, so if I don't understand something, I just memorise it” (PB2c).

In terms of requirements, and compared to learning other subjects, students in group D viewed language learning as a task requiring *innovation*, for in order to learn a language, one needs to develop his/her own methods and strategies for learning it:

“I think learning a language requires innovation. It's something you can innovative in. It is true that the words are available for you to learn but it's you, *you* need to develop your own methods and strategies in learning a language. So you can innovate in your learning, but when it comes to learning other subjects like geography and history, the information is there for you and you just learn and maybe memorise it” (PD2c).

Another student in group D perceived learning a language as more interesting than learning other subjects. She had her own reasons:

“I see learning a language as more interesting than learning other subjects because other subjects just have information and you learn it. In English, I like learning the words and whenever I learn new words, I feel I have challenged the difficulty of these words and the difficulty of the language” (PD2c).

I now turn to students' knowledge about the **nature, requirements, difficulty** and **value** of some of the specific **language learning tasks** which they did in the classroom. Through the discussion I had with the students about language learning tasks, I realised that keeping learning portfolios was a common task which students in the four groups had to do during their foundation year at the university. I therefore thought that this would be a good opportunity to explore their knowledge about such a learning task. In particular, I was interested in exploring the extent to which students could realise portfolios as a language learning task. Therefore, the principal focus here was on investigating students' knowledge and not on evaluating portfolios or the language course.

To begin with, group B students appeared to have a somewhat negative attitude towards keeping learning portfolios: "they are now asking us to keep portfolios...I am not convinced of the importance of these portfolios in the way they want it" (PB2c). They also complained that the guidelines provided for keeping the portfolios were either unclear or unconvincing:

"The problem was that they gave us strange methods of keeping portfolios. We didn't understand those methods and guidelines. They were really strange. The other thing was that there were not following them up, and because of this, many students didn't take care of their portfolios" (PB2c).

They acknowledged that they were keeping a file of their work for the teacher to see because "the teacher wanted it, but we don't really know why we were asked to do it, and the instructions were complicated. When I don't understand I always asked myself why are we asked doing this?" (PB2c).

An important part of the portfolios was a section where students had to reflect on what they were learning. However, most of the students, if not all, acknowledged their lack of proper reflective skills:

(RB2c): "Before you ask yourself why you need to reflect, do you really know what reflection is?"

(PB2c): "Not really".

(PB2c): “To be honest, until today, I don’t understand what reflection is. And I’m not sure why we had to do it.”

However, one of the students seemed to have a clue:

“For example, you choose a problem you have in listening, for example, and you note your weak points in listening. Then you look at the causes of the problem and the solutions to it” (PB2c).

Because they had to submit their files with the section on reflection filled in, students admitted that they only had that section completed in writing; they did not use reflection in reality. They did not benefit, for either they were not convinced of the value of what they were asked to do or because of lack of clear instructions on how to carrying out the task on reflection.

Group C students were relatively more positive about keeping portfolios. They admitted that they were useful but mainly because they helped them to memorise new words: “they are useful. We keep a weekly list of the new words and the exercises which we have done. And also when we were asked to make reflection” (PC2c).

While group B students complained about lack of explicit guidance on keeping portfolios, group C students wanted more independence in keeping their portfolios: “it would be better if they leave us to do them the way we like” (PC2c).

With regard to reflection, group C students seemed to also have a negative attitude towards this part of their portfolios. I asked them if they took it seriously, one of them responded: “not really. I used to do it at the end, just before the submission day”. Other students also commented on reflection as follows: “it’s not familiar and also it’s not integrated into the courses” (PC2c).

Finally, drawing on the six components of task knowledge listed above (task type and purpose, requirements, level of difficulty, relation or link to other tasks, value or usefulness and ways of improvement) we have seen that the students were able to express their attitude and opinions towards portfolios and support their opinions with evidence. They also showed a considerable level of awareness about the lack of clear

instructions they had for keeping their portfolios and the challenge they had with reflection. They were also aware of how the task of keeping learning portfolios could be improved. In this regard, they suggested allowing the students a bigger role in deciding how they wanted to organise and maintain their portfolios.

To further explore students' task knowledge, I asked the students in each group to choose *two* tasks from their course materials in advance to be discussed during the session. The purpose was to gain insight into the students' knowledge about not only what they were learning but also how, why and with what results they were learning. To this end, I used a series of probing questions (see appendix 10) to explore various aspects of the students' task knowledge including: task type and purpose, task requirements, task level of difficulty, task value and ways of improving their learning tasks. Though the analysis was performed on both of the tasks chosen by students in each group, the presentation herein will be limited to only the first task due to word limit of the thesis.

At this point, I find it useful to draw the attention that I will be using the term 'task' to refer to the main learning task which the students in each group chose from their course material for the discussion and the term 'exercises' to refer to the sub- or follow-up tasks which followed and were related to the main one. These follow-up exercises may be vocabulary, grammar or writing exercises based on the main task.

The first task **group A** chose for the discussion was reading. I began by exploring their knowledge about the type of task and how they were expected to respond to it. One of the group members said that they first had to skim and scan the text for information, but "which one comes first skimming or scanning, not sure!" (PA2c). I asked other members of the group if they knew the difference between skimming and scanning and the sequence in which they usually do them. One of them had the answer: "I think we first read for general ideas and then for details" (PA2c). In addition, they knew about the type of response the task required: "In this exercise we need to read and then think so I think we need the three skills together: reading, thinking and then writing" (PA2c).

The reading text was followed by a number of exercises and I wanted to see to what extent the students could see how these exercises linked to each other. The first exercise following the reading text was identified by the students as ‘multiple-choice’ in which they had to choose the correct answer from the options given. At this point, I wanted to see if they were clear about the purpose of the multiple-choice exercise. They responded: “it’s about the meaning and understanding of the text” (PA2c). They also had what they termed ‘WH questions’, which they recognised as “also on understanding” (PA2c).

This was followed by an exercise where they had to read a number of sentences and search for support for them from the reading in order to decide whether the information in the sentences was relevant or otherwise. They recognised this exercise as being “about understanding the story” (PA2c).

The next exercise was on vocabulary where they had to define some key words: “these are important words from the reading. We need to understand these words in order to understand the text” (PA2c). I noticed that this student repeated the word ‘understand’ twice in his answer and wanted find out what he meant. She responded: “they are important and we should memorise them” (PA2c). Not the answer I was expecting though. I also noticed that they had written Arabic translations above each of the key words. They said that those were important words which they had to memorise and they “might come across these words in our future studies” (PA2c). I further asked what they had to do with those key words: “we have to write their parts of speech and their definitions...we also have to put them in the correct blanks in the sentences” (PA2c).

Having done the reading, multiple-choice and vocabulary exercises, the following exercise was grammar, in which they had to what parts of speech the words were and decide if the verbs were in the past, present or the present perfect tense. However, they evaluated this exercise as being difficult to understand. I asked them if they felt this exercise was placed correctly between the reading and writing exercises. They viewed the exercise as correctly placed “because we will need to know the right tense of the verbs for later [the writing exercise]” (PA2c). They meant that the grammar exercise helped them to do the writing exercise which they did later.

According to the group, the writing exercise was based on the reading text which they did earlier but they were also aware that the exercises which followed the reading facilitated their writing. After they had written the paragraph, they had to insert some linking words. Students seemed to be aware of the function of these words and phrases. They were also aware of the model paragraphs provided as part of the exercise on linking words. According to the students, the model paragraphs “show different ways of writing. Some students may start with ‘first’ and other students may start with ‘first of all’” (PA2c).

In addition, I wanted to find out how they would evaluate the level of difficulty of the task based on what they had said about the procedures and conduct of the different exercises in it. They reported that some of the words in the reading passage were unfamiliar which resulted in a problem “understanding the meaning of the text...and we also had a problem understanding some of the questions” (PA2c).

As for their perspectives on the value of the task in terms of the skills it helped them to improve or at least practise, students felt that the task helped them to practise and develop reading, vocabulary, grammar, writing and use of linking words.

I finally explored the students’ perspectives on ways of improving the task. I asked them if they were to re-write this task for other students, how differently they would do it and what changes would they make to it. In this respect, students had some useful recommendations to make in order to improve the task:

(PA2c) “At the beginning of every task, I would add an exercise where the students have to find words in the text which have the same meanings as the words given in the exercise.”

(RA2c) “And how do you think such an exercise would help the students?”

(PA2c) “The students could learn the synonyms and the words which have the same meaning.”

I asked if they had other ideas to improve the task. Another student in the group suggested that an additional exercise could be added to this task where some pronouns

are highlighted in the text and the students had to search for and match them to their referent nouns. Another student suggested highlighting the key and linking words in the text or writing them in bold so that they become obvious for the students. His partner in the group immediately agreed with this last suggestion and justified his opinion by noting the incident when they did not know what one of the key words in the text meant because it was not highlighted: “yes, I agree. If the word [...] was in bold we would have focused on it and its meaning” (PA2c). Regardless of how genuine these suggestions are, they do show part of the students’ ability to identify part of the limitations of the learning tasks in their materials.

Generally speaking, the students in group A were able to describe the type and purpose of the task they chose for the discussion, how they had to go about carrying out the task, the level of difficulty of the task and the usefulness of the task. They were also aware of the sequence of the different exercises which were part of the main task, how these exercises related to each other and how the task in general could be improved. The discussion also included the students’ knowledge of the types of strategy the task required and the students’ assessment of their strategy choice and use. These will be discussed in the section on ‘strategic knowledge’, which is the fourth type of metacognitive knowledge (see section 6.4.5 below).

Moving on to **group B**, I used the same probing questions which I used with group A to investigate Group B students’ task knowledge. The task which this group chose for the discussion was about using dictionary. To begin with, I asked them to describe the type and requirements of the task. The purpose was to gain insight into the students’ understanding of the task rubrics. It seemed that they had a clear picture of what the task was about and how they had to approach it:

“We have a short passage and at the end of each paragraph there is a word and they want us to find out what these words mean, and in order to do this we need to use the dictionary. At the back of the dictionary, there are appendices and you can search for the words, and you can find out what they mean” (PB2c).

They were also aware of the appropriate type of dictionary for the task “this is a smaller one. There is a bigger dictionary which has more information” (PB2c). They said they

were using a small and general dictionary to do the task rather than a specialised, bigger dictionary. I asked them if they had tried using other dictionaries, such as electronic dictionaries. They said they did not use electronic dictionaries because the task did not require such a type of dictionary and the teacher did not ask them to do so.

I was also interested in finding out if they were aware of the time it took them to search for the definition of each word using the dictionary: “it took longer with the first words but the later words took less time”. So they were aware that it took them shorter time to search for the definitions of the words in the task as they progressed in the task. However, I noticed that they mainly copied the definitions of the words from the dictionary into their textbooks without necessarily understanding what those definitions might mean. To check my assumption on, I asked them to define one of the technical terms in the task. They had a problem getting the meaning straightaway, which reflected an obvious limitation in the way the task was designed.

I also asked them if they took part in choosing or writing any of the tasks in their course material. The purpose was to draw their attention to the importance of their role as learners in learning. They said they were not involved.

I then moved on to discuss the potential difficulties they had when carrying out the task. One of them replied that: “at the beginning, we had a problem finding the codes [acronyms] in the dictionary...but later on it became easier because I began to search for the codes in the appendix” (PB2c). So once they knew that the dictionary contained an appendix for the common acronyms in their specialisations, the task of finding definitions of those acronyms became easier.

I also asked the students if they thought the task linked in any way to other tasks within the within the unit of study in the textbook. The purpose was to see if they had an overall view of goals of the entire unit and how the different parts linked or related to each other. They seemed to have a good knowledge about this aspect of the task: “yes, the whole unit is about using dictionary” (PB2c).

As an act of evaluative enquiry, I asked the students about the value of the task and the kinds of skill they felt it developed in them. This group did not feel the task was very helpful in terms of developing their intellectual and thinking abilities: “not really, this is

just normal... If you had to give it to somebody who was not in college, I wouldn't think it would be difficult for him to find the answers. It's just straightforward" (PB2c).

I also asked them if they could think of some possible ways to improve the task so that it comes more challenging and useful for the students. One of the students seemed to have benefited from the earlier discussion we had about not knowing the meanings of some of the acronyms even after copying the definitions from the dictionary onto their textbook. He suggested that the task should include an exercise where students had to define the acronyms (perhaps in their own language).

Group C chose a different type of task: gap-fill. They were presented with a box of ten words and passage with also ten blanks to be filled with the words from the box, a usual gap-fill type of task. I asked the students to describe the task type and what they were required to do: "in this exercise, we have to put the words in the suitable blanks" (PC2c). Students were aware that there were ten words in the box and also ten blanks in the passage but they had to put the words in the correct form to fit the sentences: "we need to change the form of the words according to the sentence: nouns or adjectives or verbs" (PC2c).

The students did the task in the class individually at the beginning of the class, but at a later stage, they did it in groups. They also said that it took them about five minutes to fill in the gaps with the correct words.

As for the challenge they had in doing the task, they realised that "if the student was able to understand the meaning of the word then it will be easy to put it in the correct place" (PC2c). So to them, understanding what the words in the box mean was a key factor in getting the correct answers.

I also asked the student in this group about the kind of thinking required by the task. The students were aware that they first had to understand what the sentence meant in order to supply the missing word: "you need to first understand the sentence in order to complete it with the missing word...Sometimes there are two possible answers but we need to think which one is the most suitable answer" (PC2c).

In terms of the task difficulty, one of the students felt that the task was ‘silly’ and it did not take her more than two minutes to do it. However, this was not the case with others: “we found it a bit difficult because not all of the words were easy and sometimes you feel that more than one word can be the correct answer” (PC2c). So the students differed in the way they evaluated the task level of difficulty.

I also asked the students if they had to use a certain strategy in order to decide on the correct answer: “we just had to recall the meanings of the words and think of the correct forms” (PC2c). So those who knew the meanings of the words in the box found the task easier than those who did not.

In terms of the perceived benefits of the task, the students felt that it “reinforces the meaning of the words in our minds. So these words have now become familiar” (PC2c).

As was the case in other groups, I asked the students if they knew how the task linked to the ones they did before and the ones they did after. One of the students felt that “parts of the book are not linked very well” (PC2c). According to this student, there was a lack of coherence between different parts of the textbook. However, at the task level, another student felt that the task we discussed linked well to the reading exercise which they did a week earlier. So the students had different opinions about the task and how it linked to other tasks. What is important here though that the students were able to evaluate the task and see how it links to other parts and tasks in the textbook.

Finally, I asked the students if they had contributed to writing the exercises in the textbook. They said the whole textbook and tasks were chosen and written by the teachers. They were not involved. Again the purpose here was to draw their attention to their possible role in contributing to their learning materials.

Turning to **group D**, the students in this group chose a report writing task. It was one of the exercises which they had been working on during the investigation period. According to the students, they did the task individually using the information provided in the task itself. I asked them what they thought the purpose of the task was. The answers showed their familiarity with task type and what they had to do: “it shows us

how we could take information from different sources and put them together in our report, according to the instructions” (PD2c). Another student added: “it also helps us to use and order the references at the end of the report” (PD2c), while a third student commented: “it also shows us how to write an outline” (PD2c).

Since they mentioned referencing, I wanted to explore further their understanding of this task. They seemed to have acquired the knowledge to do so: “at the end of each sentence we take from the sources, we need to include the author of the article and the year” (PD2c). I further asked what they would do in cases when the author was unknown “when there is no author, we write the first three words of the title of the article followed by the year” (PD2c). They also knew what the year in a citation stood for: “it’s the year when the article was written”.

They were also aware of the importance of ‘paraphrasing’ when citing information from other sources into their reports: “sometimes the teacher asks us to change the words and not copy the same sentences from the sources, we do paraphrasing” (PD2c). When asked to justify this, they replied that they could not use information from other sources as it is. They had to paraphrase it and acknowledge the source. I asked them if they had found paraphrasing easy or difficult, they said they found it difficult when they first started doing it but later on they got used to it. Generally they found paraphrasing useful for writing their reports. The discussion also included the strategies they employed or required by the task. This will be presented in the section below on strategic knowledge.

Generally speaking, students in group D appeared to be thoughtful of the type, purposes and the specific requirements of the task. They were also aware of how the different smaller exercises contributed to carrying out the main task. They perceived the task as useful.

In summary, the investigation of task knowledge aimed at exploring the students’ knowledge about the types, purposes, requirements, level of difficulty and value of a sample of language learning exercises of their own choice. The analysis aimed at gaining insight into the breadth and depth of the students’ specific knowledge on the task of language learning and what such a task entails. The analysis revealed that students in general were able to identify the different *types* of tasks they were working

on, the specific *purposes* and *requirements* of such tasks, how they *relate* or contribute to the overall unit of study as well as their perspectives about how such tasks could be *improved*. I will now proceed with my analysis to describe the fourth type of metacognitive knowledge: strategic knowledge.

6.4.5. Strategic knowledge

In the context of this research, strategic knowledge refers to the range of strategies available for learners and their ability to utilise such strategies in different language learning situations (Wenden, 1998). According to Wenden, strategic knowledge has three dimensions: knowledge of **strategy type**, **strategy choice or use**, and **strategy evaluation**. The analysis of the data on strategic knowledge aimed at exploring the students' knowledge of and capacity to use these three components or dimensions of strategic knowledge through both self-report and in-depth discussion of the specific language learning tasks the students in each group chose. I did not present the students with a list of strategies for discussion but rather elicited their knowledge, choice and use of strategies by asking them to describe their thinking and the kind of actions they took in specific language learning situations in and outside the class. This also involved justifying their choice of a specific strategy as well as the strategies which they could have employed in various learning situations, i.e., thinking of alternative ways of learning. This however remained a limited attempt to access the larger picture of the actual students' knowledge and use of learning strategies.

It is useful to note at this point, though, that the kinds and range of learning strategies which I explored with the students in this research were mostly, but not entirely, broad strategies such as memorising, understanding, watching films, keeping vocabulary reminders and using YouTube, rather than the kinds usually explored in specific strategy research such as *how* they memorise, understand, watch films, etc. Nevertheless, students' strategic knowledge was not only limited to these broad strategies. Students did demonstrate the use of some micro-strategies when carrying out certain language learning tasks.

Strategic knowledge manifested itself in various RGCs, but it was explored explicitly and in a greater depth in the fourth RGC together with task knowledge. Amongst the topics which I explored and discussed with the students was their perceptions and use of two types of learning strategies or approaches which learners usually employ according to the learning task or the learning situation they are in. These were **surface learning and deep learning** (Lublin, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Russell, 2004). Simply stated, surface learning refers to rote learning where information is dealt with at a superficial level. In this type of learning, students tend to memorise information for the purpose of easy retrieval in exams while deep learning requires making an effort to learn and comprehend information (Lublin, 2003; Russell, 2004). (For the purpose of the discussion in this section, learning approaches and strategies will be used to refer to the method(s) which students choose to utilise in a particular learning situation).

After I had explained what surface and deep learning stand for, students were able to identify the type of approach they had to employ to carry out specific exercises within the larger learning task they carried out in the class. Here is an example from group D:

“I think we use surface learning in the first part of the exercise where we had to get the definitions of the words but clearly the multiple-choice part requires a bit of thinking” (PD2d).

I was able to find out through the investigation that in the first part of the task where they had to use the dictionary to look up some key terms, the students only copied the definitions of these terms from the dictionary into their textbooks without making an effort to learn what the terms actually meant. They even justified why they did not bother about learning what the terms meant:

“To be honest, we just copy the definitions as we find them in the dictionary... Also we are not tested on the meanings so we don't bother to learn them! And even in the exam, when there is a question about the definition, we use the dictionary, which is always with us” (PD2d).

We have seen in the previous section on task knowledge that group A students had an exercise where they had to insert some linking words and phrases into a paragraph. I asked them what approach or type of thinking they thought the task required. One of the

students responded that: “deep thinking was required by this exercise. We had to think carefully when we worked out the meanings of the words and when we linked the ideas together” (PA2d). Another student added “also we had to find out the reasons of success, and link the ideas together, and summarise the information for the paragraph [writing exercise which followed]” (PA2d).

So we can see here that the students were able to decide when to use the surface approach to learning (in this example they decided that they only needed to copy the definitions from the dictionary without having to make an extra effort to learn the meanings) and when to use the deep approach which involves deeper thinking (they had to figure out the correct answer in the multiple-choice exercise).

Another strategy which the students reported using was searching for key words in a sentence and then looking them up in the dictionary in order to work out the meaning of the whole sentence. In addition, they reported using the ‘context’ to find out what some difficult words in a passage might mean.

In this respect, I was also particularly interested in finding out if the students could evaluate the strategies they had used, i.e., if the students could see the value of the strategies they were using in a certain learning situation and how useful they were for learning:

(RD2d): “So in the course of our learning, you are using a range of strategies when you do different exercises, but is it clear why you're using these strategies?”

(PD2d): “Yes, they make finding the answers much easier.”

(RD2d): “So would you say that you are aware of what strategies you need to use in a certain task and why you're using those strategies?”

(PD2d): “Yes, for example I look at the keywords in the question and then go back to the text and find the same keywords in the text and look at the words which come before and after these keywords.”

Investigation of strategic knowledge also included students’ ability to think of alternative strategies or ways which they could employ to carry out the same learning

tasks. Group A students reported that they could easily resort to their mobile dictionaries to look up some difficult words: “In this part of the exercise, we had to use the dictionary, but we didn't have a dictionary so we used our phones” (PA2d). Another student added that they could have also asked the teacher for meaning.

Another student shared his experience about learning vocabulary which I thought was a good example of strategy use and strategy evaluation:

(PA2d): “But there is also another method which I used when I was at school and I found it useful. I used to make a list of ten words every week and learn them. This helped me to learn them and do better in the following class, because I wasn't good in memorising grammatical rules.”

(RA2d): “So you had a strategy.”

(PA2d): “Yes, I kept using this strategy and I felt that my vocabulary has increased.”

In addition, we have also seen in the previous section on task knowledge that group B students used their paper dictionaries to lookup some technical acronyms. I asked them what they would have done in that learning situation if they were unable to find what they were searching for using their dictionaries. They appeared to have other different ways of doing the task:

(RB2d): “Do you think there are other strategies which you could have used to do this exercise, Other than the one you used in the classroom?”

(PB2d): “Yes sure. I could have used the internet to check the meanings. The internet is faster.”

(RB2d): “But if you used Google, for example, to search for the letters (IM), you are not only going to get [...], you are going to get other phrases which begin with these letters as well.”

(PB2d): “Yes, but I will then search for the [...] term.”

(RB2d): “And so do you think that the strategies you used to do the exercise was successful?”

(PB2d): “Yes, because we found the answers required.”

These above were some examples of the strategies and alternative strategies which I elicited through the students reporting of how they carried out the tasks they chose for the discussion. However, the investigation also involved exploring the types of strategies which the students employed when having difficulties carrying out certain learning tasks such as making presentations or writing essays. In this respect, when asked what they usually do when having problems getting their writing correct, a student in group B mentioned three different ways by which he could improve his writing. These include using sample writings available from Moodle (their course e-learning platform), fixing an appointment with a writing teacher or asking his teacher for help during his/her office hours. Another student in group D said that in cases when she had problems with her writing or presentations, she would seek assistance from other students, friends or even her father, use related materials such as model reports or essays, and finally resort to the teacher if the problem persists. Another student in the same group had a problem with pronunciation. This is what she said she usually does:

“I really have a problem with pronunciation when I plan my presentation, so I check the difficult words in the dictionary or on the Internet. Another way which I use is using a model report or essay. I don't copy the same essay and the same ideas but I just follow the same organisation” (PD2d).

Another student had a problem with listening but she managed to find a way to help her develop her listening skills and pronunciation: “I personally have a problem with listening but I help myself by listening to the news bulletins and movies. I pay attention to the pronunciation (PD2d).

Memorisation (as in surface learning) and comprehension (as in deep learning) were also explored as part of the strategic knowledge. The investigation revealed that students had a clear view of both strategies, and knew when and why they use each. For instance, a student in group B reported that he did not separate comprehension and memorisation as learning approaches; for him, they go together. Based on his experience, memorisation was not easy so he had to resort to comprehension which he found easier and more useful than having to memorise huge amounts of information. He

also added that “even for exams, memorisation does not always work. Sometimes you need to understand” (PB2d).

I further investigated the students’ awareness of when they would resort to each approach (or strategy). Generally speaking, students appeared to use these strategies according to the learning situation:

(RB2d): “Would you say that students are conscious about when to memorise and when to understand?”

(PB2d): “Yes. Talking about myself, I know when I need to memorise and when I need to understand. For example, when we had presentations, female students usually memorise the presentation.”

Laughter!!

(RB2d): “Yes, I noticed this when I was teaching.”

(PB2d): “They are good in this. I envy them. But you can tell because they sometimes look at the ceiling as they were trying to remember something...and they get nervous. In my case, I need to understand the topic. Sometimes I translate in Arabic. I believe that understanding is always better than memorisation, especially in presentations.”

Moving on to group A, some of the students here seemed to associate their use of learning approaches with the kinds of exam they were having. They said they resort to memorising information in their courses because the exams required them to do so. That is, they had to memorise the facts from their courses because they knew they would be tested on such facts. For example, they reported that for exams, they had to memorise the definitions of the key concepts as they were written in textbooks. Their own definitions of terms were not accepted.

Some of the students in group C however, seemed to have an opposing opinion. For them, they needed to understand or comprehend materials before they could memorise them:

“I think most of the things need to be understood but only little [remains] for memorisation...If we have definitions, we need to understand them before we could memorise them” (PC2d).

They also appeared to link strategy use to the subjects they were studying and their requirements:

“It depends on the subject. There're some subjects which you need to only understand. So you need to understand in order to memorise. So understanding is important in order for the information to be learned” (PC2d).

So we can see that students had to make ‘informed decisions’ (Sinclair, 1999) about which strategy to use. The analysis showed that students appeared to base their decisions of strategy use on the appropriateness of a given set of strategies or approaches for the learning situation or their immediate learning needs.

Even if these strategies are limited to what the students *reported* using in certain language learning situations, the bottom line is that they do offer useful insights into the students’ strategic knowledge in terms of the range of strategies available at their disposal, when to use each strategy and how useful each strategy is.

6.4.6. Summary

To sum up this section on metacognitive knowledge, I have established in the literature review chapter (see chapter three) that metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about self and learning process) is an important component of learner autonomy. As such, it was important to investigate the nature and characteristics of the knowledge students have about themselves as language learners (person knowledge), their immediate learning context (what I can term as ‘contextual knowledge’), language learning tasks (task knowledge), and about the types and use of language learning strategies (strategic knowledge). Indeed, the analysis showed that students appeared to perceive themselves as *proactive* language learners who have agency and can take informed decisions about their learning based on their capabilities while at the same time having awareness about the opportunities offered and challenges imposed by their learning context. In fact, even

students' perspectives on how they might have a greater role in and more responsibility for their language learning, which is the subject of the following section, constituted an important part of their metacognitive knowledge, for such perspectives offered insight into students' capacity to think beyond what and how they were learning to include what and how they *should* be learning.

6.5. Analysis: Students' perspectives on improvement in their learning context

6.5.1. Introduction

The exploration of students' perspectives on improvement in their language learning context is at the core of the present investigation of language learner autonomy. To me, it is a natural step and important agenda item after having investigated students' perceptions of constraints on their language learning. In fact, students' perspectives on improvement, which turned out to unsurprisingly mostly encompassing ideas for having a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning, manifested themselves in almost all of the RGCs I had with the students but, in particular, during the session on the internal and external constraints on their learning. That is, throughout the investigation, students always had ideas and suggestions about what and how they were learning. However, students' perspectives have been explored explicitly in the fifth RGC as set out in the conversation guide (see table 4.3, chapter four).

This part of the analysis responds to the third research question which addresses students' perspectives on what might enable them to have a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning. Drawing on their observations and personal experiences, the analysis showed that students indeed had interesting ideas and practical ways to improve language learning and teaching in their context. The analysis also revealed that students' perspectives included suggestions about both *what* they should learn (learning content) and *how* they should learn it (learning methods). I initially planned to present the 'what' and 'how' aspects of students' perspectives as two separate categories but later on, they appeared as interrelated components in the analysis and, as such, I decided to present them together without attempting to separating them. I

have found this as a better choice, for attempting to separate students' perspectives may result in decontextualize the data and hence losing the natural and logical link between what should enable students' learning and how it could be achieved.

According to students, having a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning should be realised by officials and policy makers as a goal for language learning in their context. In this respect, students suggest that this could be realised by taking a number of steps and decisions to change or improve certain aspects of language learning and teaching in their context including the role of learners in the curriculum, teaching methods, learning activities, exams and assessment method, etc. I will present the analysis of each one of these aspects in turn.

6.5.2. Voice and role of learners in the curriculum

One way students thought they could have a greater role in their learning was by re-considering their voice and role in the current curriculum in terms of how much voice they have in what and how they learn. From the students' perspectives, this could materialise through, firstly, the teachers realising the active role students have (or should have) in their own learning and, secondly, by sharing their planning and goals of the curriculum with the students. In this respect, two students in group B maintained that:

“Teachers need to realise one fact, which is: the student is the one who learns in the first place, and he can understand, and he has abilities”
(PB3).

“They should realise that students have their own personalities and their own ideas and that they could learn in their own way. And that the [following the] curriculum is not the only way to make students learn”
(PB3).

Students in group A also shared the same opinion. They stressed that:

“The student needs to know the overall picture, the planning and the goals. Also the curriculum needs to be made clear to the student” (PA3).

Another student demanded that they should be asked for their opinion:

“Nobody asks us for our opinion regarding the curriculum. Everything is imposed on us. We have no choices or options. They should ask us what we think, in the same way you are doing now [in this research conversation]” (PA3).

On more than one occasion, students acknowledged the importance of being involved in the discussions about ways to improve language learning in their context, something similar to the conversations they had with me in this study:

“And I think meetings and discussions like this one are useful to improve the curriculum. They should listen to ideas of the students who have taken the course in order to improve the courses for the new students” (PB3).

In group C, the students also required a voice in what and how they learn “and I should have a say in what is happening” (PC3). Such emphasis on the importance of their voice was justified by the students that the current language syllabi did not respond to their actual needs and ways of thinking:

“Students do not have choices over the content because the syllabus is already there. I don't mind having the syllabus, but what I need to see is the kind of content which responds to the actual needs of the students and their ways of thinking. I think that the current curriculum and materials do not match my thinking” (PB3).

As for the students' role in the discussion sessions they proposed, one of the students suggested in his reflective journal that the discussion sessions are:

“Conducted and attended by teachers and those responsible for writing the curricula in addition to the students who have completed their foundation year and those who are still studying English” (JB3).

Students felt that those who had completed their foundation year had useful ideas and suggestions for both teachers and prospective students.

A student in group C even walked the extra mile and wrote in her reflective journal about how having a voice in what and how they learn could benefit their learning:

“If the student were given the choice about what and how to learn he would be motivated because he would have comfort and desire for learning that thing...which encourages us to learn” (JC3).

Another student also wrote that “when the student is given the chance to choose what he wants to learn, this makes him wanting to learn more and creates excitement in learning” (JC3). Students were generally confident about their ability to suggest useful ways to improve teaching and learning in their context:

“Learning English at the university needs improvement because the role of the student is not clear. The student needs to be involved in the learning process because he can suggest useful ways of learning” (JC3).

On a more practical point, group A and B students suggested two ways whereby teachers could involve the students in improving language courses. These include end-of-semester surveys and setting up a feedback page on Facebook for students to post their suggestions and ideas after they had finished the English Foundation Programme. They justified such measures as being important “in order to decide what changes need to be made to the curriculum for the following years” (PA3) and “so they benefit from each other and gain experience...so even if I have finished the foundation course, I can still...benefit those who are still doing their foundation [courses]” (PB3).

On a more specific perspective on curriculum and its functions, students in group D postulated that curriculum should encourage them to think beyond the classroom and the topics in the textbooks. They privileged understanding and problem-solving over rote learning and memorisation of information: “I feel I learn more and better when I use my mind and think about the ideas I have” (PD3). Last but not least, one of the students in group B wrote in his reflective journal: “curricula should be changed or improved in a way that encourages in the students the importance of English, ways to acquire it, and ways to continue learning it” (JB3).

6.5.3. Teaching methods

In terms of teaching methods, students seemed to have a clear vision of what teachers need to do in order to enable their students having a greater and more active role in their learning. For instance, one of the students wanted teachers to change the classroom

routine where they spend much of the time talking while the students having no chance to interact: “I think the classroom rules need to be changed because we get bored. We just sit and listen to the teacher. There is no interaction” (PC3). He added that interaction brings excitement in the classroom and in this way they learn better: “It would be more interesting if we had to interact more in the classroom, and learn it in a more effective way” (PC3).

Students believed that by varying their teaching methods, teachers could cater to the different needs and ways of learning the students have: “...students have different ways of learning and they need different things...I suggest they [teachers] change their teaching methods once or twice a week” (PD3). The reason they wanted teachers to vary their teaching was also given: “but when you [teachers] change the way of teaching then that helps us to think in different ways” (PD3). According to students, one way teachers could vary their teaching and, thus, boost students’ motivation and involvement in language learning was through integrating multi-media and information technology into teaching and learning:

“For example, many students don't like reading, they don't understand it [the text] and so they get bored soon. But if the same reading is available as a movie we would be able to understand it better and it would be more interesting because there would be sound and pictures as well” (PA3).

6.5.4. Learning activities

Students suggested a number of activities which they perceived as allowing them a greater involvement in their learning such as enquiry and research-based activities. These may include role play, discussion sessions, debates, competitions and even games. On this issue, one of the students wrote the following in his reflective journal:

“If there were activities which require enquiry and research and where the answers are *not* in the book, then this would open wider horizons for us in learning English because we would be searching for answers outside the course books and in this way we would free up ourselves from the constraints of the classroom to wider domains” (JB3).

On the issue of games, students seemed to have a strong sense of the contribution of games to their language learning and recommended that they were integrated into all courses: “games could be added to all courses” (PC3). I asked them if they felt games

were suitable for their age and level as university students. My question was understood by students as one of the preconceptions some teachers have about what university students could and could not do:

“The problem is that some teachers at the university have the idea that games are not suitable for university students. They take everything too seriously. But there are some suitable games for university students” (PC3).

They thought there was still space for games at their level of study and were aware of some games which were suitable for their age.

In addition, students perceived activities such as discussion groups, competitions and debates as offering them a great opportunity to practise their language and thinking skills. We have seen earlier in the section on constraints (see section 6.3.3.4 above) that students complained about the insufficient opportunities they had to practise their language. Therefore, amongst the skills which students said they wanted to practise more than anything else was speaking:

“I suggest they give us more speaking opportunities. Five minutes are not enough for the student to speak [in the class]...And in the class, they focus more on listening than speaking. We listen more than speak” (PC3).

6.5.5. Exams and assessment methods

Moving on to students’ perspectives on how exams and assessment methods could be improved in their context, they firstly wanted to have a say in how their language learning was to be evaluated. They emphasised that not all of them liked group presentations as the main (or even the only) means for assessing their speaking skills. They suggested other alternatives such as group discussions and debates. Secondly, they wanted to have fewer exams than they were now. This is because, as we have seen earlier, they complained about *over-testing* in their context. Thirdly, they wanted exams to focus on their actual learning and assess (and develop) their capacity for critical thinking rather than only memorising. They viewed understanding as an effective way for longer information retention and learning:

“So I think exams should be re-considered in terms of what they focus on. I think they should measure the student’s understanding rather than memorisation, because what you memorise just goes by very fast and after the exam, nobody will ask you about that information again. But when you understand a topic, you will not forget it easily” (PB3).

We have seen earlier that most of the students had a bad experience about keeping learning portfolios (see the section on task knowledge above). As such, in the later sessions, I was interested in exploring their perspectives on how portfolios could be improved in their learning context. Amongst the important suggestions students had in this respect was that they wanted to have a greater role and independence in maintaining their portfolios. This might include deciding on what *they* want to include in their portfolios and how to organise them. For example, students were unhappy about the restrictions imposed on them with regard to how they had to go about learning vocabulary, as is clear in the following quote by a student in group B:

“They should allow us to suggest how to organise the content of our portfolios. They wanted us to write the words and their pronunciation symbols and whether they were nouns, adjectives or verbs. I may not like this way. I may have my own way of doing it. I may understand the words through pictures but they wanted us to follow the way they suggest. They also wanted us to get the source of the words, where those words came from such as if I heard the words in a lecture, or on a program. But this was difficult to do and those who didn’t do it, they were held accountable for it” (PB3).

Students also suggested that they could be given other options for assessment besides exams. They suggested that more ongoing assessment should be integrated into their courses besides the present assessment methods. This may include group discussions, debates, group projects, display of the learning material, etc. In this respect, an interesting suggestion came from group B students who wanted assessment to include learning activities they do *outside* the classroom:

“Assessment is all done [based] on the curriculum. There is no assessment of what students are learning outside the curriculum. There needs to be different sources of information and assessment such as using the Internet, interaction between the students and also making exhibition of the students’ works” (PB3).

When assessing speaking and presentation skills, students preferred to be allowed to choose how they would like to present their topics. For example, they complained that teachers imposed *their* agendas on the students by asking them to use the computer:

(PB3): “In making presentation, for example, they may give us the opportunity to choose our topics but *they* decide how we should present and in which format.”

(RB3): “So you consider this as a constraint.”

(PB3): “Yes. Some students may like to use the computer but I may not like to do the same. I can present using a different way such as by showing pictures of the topic and comment on them or, for example, I present my topic in a form of a dialogue. It would be better if they could let us present in the way we like, the way we choose because if you like something you can then innovate in it.”

On several occasions during the RGCs, students kept emphasising that the non-traditional methods of evaluation have a positive influence on their learning. According to students, these ways of assessment foster information retention while at the same time helping them to concentrate better in the classroom.

6.5.6. Summary

There was clear consensus amongst students on the importance of having a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning. They did not only view their contribution to learning as possible but also useful and, as such, they suggested a number of ideas and learning activities to foster their contributions to their language learning.

6.6. Analysis: Impact of the research on students’ awareness

6.6.1. Introduction

One of the aims of the present study was to help participants to develop greater awareness about themselves as language learners and about language learning as a process. This was done through engaging students in focused and reflective discussions

on several issues pertaining to their language learning and their learning context. Although the RGCs were initially designed to elicit students' perceptions and perspectives about learning which should respond to the research questions, it was clear that they might (re)activate students' reflective skills by asking them to ponder upon specific issues pertaining directly and indirectly to their language learning. These issues included their role in and responsibility for learning; how the existing curriculum as well as teaching and assessment methods promoted or hindered their roles; their capacities for out-of-class and independent language learning; and the types of learning strategies which they used in learning.

Besides helping students to develop greater awareness by reflecting on what and how they were learning, I also attempted to do so through sharing with them my own personal experiences with language learning as a learner, as a teacher, and now as a researcher. Such knowledge and experience sharing took place throughout the investigation.

The way I gained access to students' awareness was through their reflective thoughts and 'self-report' which the students engaged in throughout the investigation, in general, and the sixth and final RGCs, in particular. In support of this, the literature suggests that the language which students use to talk about and reflect on themselves as learners and their learning might offer insight into their thinking as well as capacities and agency for learning (for more details, see *significance of learners' voices* and *significance of learners' perceptions* in the literature review chapter, sections 3.2.3 and 3.3.5 respectively).

It is worth noting here, though, that what I am presenting in this section is not what students said about themselves as learners and their learning context. I have covered this earlier under 'metacognitive knowledge'. Instead, this is the specific knowledge and understanding which students have likely gained or developed *during* or as a result of the RGCs which they actively engaged in. The analysis of the data gathered for this very purpose aimed at identifying any changes in language use or patterns of thinking in the students' discourses which might be understood as a result of their participation in the research. In most cases, these changes in awareness were obvious in the students' own comments either during the RGCs or through their writings in the reflective

journals. Evidence for students' developing awareness was also clear in their discourses in the later RGCs when compared to the first two RGCs.

The main motive for exploring the possible development of students' awareness as a result of taking part in the investigation was that such data might have important implications for curriculum design, teaching methods and the overall classroom practices. As such, the methodology and methods used in this investigation to help students to develop greater awareness about themselves and about language learning could well be proposed as a systematic, yet flexible, approach to language learning in contexts where the promotion of autonomy and reflective thinking was amongst the aims of language programmes.

As a wrap up session, the sixth (and final) RGC was devoted to a) helping students reflect on and, thus, reinforce what they had learned during the past sessions and b) identifying, through the language they used and guided reflection, any markers of potential development of students' awareness about themselves as language learners and/or about language learning as a process. Indeed, the analysis of the data obtained in this session revealed a noticeable development in awareness in the students. This was evident through two major markers:

- a. The language students used *during the investigation* to describe themselves as language learners as well as their language learning; and
- b. The language students used to reflect on the reasons for taking part in the research.

This section should provide responses to the fourth research question which addresses the potential impact of the research on students' awareness and how such awareness might manifest itself throughout the investigation (see research questions in chapter two, section 2.8). Drawing on the two major markers of students' awareness identified in the analysis, this section is, likewise, divided into two parts. In the first part, I will present the manifestation of and support for the students' developing awareness as reflected through *the language they used to reflect on themselves as language learners and their language learning* throughout the investigation, while in the second, I will present the manifestation of and support for the students' increased awareness as

reflected through the *language they used to reflect on the reasons for taking part in the research*.

6.6.2. Awareness as evident in students' reflection and use of language

Students' awareness about what and how they were learning began to manifest itself as early as the second RGC and was notably getting clearer and more sophisticated as we progressed in the investigation. Starting off with the free talk I had with the participants in the first RGC, it was clear that the language which all of the students used to describe their early language learning experiences was simple and did not include any of the concepts and terms which appeared in the later RGCs and reflective journal entries. For example, this is how a student in group C described her language learning experience at school in the first RGC:

“I wasn't interested in learning English when I was at school. It was only later in secondary school when I started to pay more attention to it because I knew I needed to get high marks. So I started to pay more attention and became more interested. I began to read stories in order to learn new words” (PC1a).

Also during the first RGC, a student in group D commented on her language learning experience at school as follows:

“Grades were a big push for me. They encouraged me to work harder and the teacher gave us certificates. So this pushed me to continue working harder and then over the summer holidays I started to learn on my own and read newspapers in English and so on” (PD1a).

So we can see that these two students used a simple language to describe their learning experience. However, by the fifth RGC, students began to use a more sophisticated language and new concepts such as *student needs, motivation, learning strategies* and even *autonomy* began to appear in their reflective language in the subsequent sessions as it is clear in the following exchange with a student from the same group:

(PD4): “I feel that student needs, motivation, desire and autonomy are important in learning anything.”

(RD4): “Good. But what do you mean by autonomy in learning? Have you come to realise what it means by now?”

(PD4): “I think it relates to having your own opinion in what we study, the content of what we study, the methods and strategies of learning.”

Such initial conscious reflection and use of language can be understood as the students’ ‘early’ or ‘developing’ awareness. Interestingly, the language which students used to describe themselves as learners and their learning in the subsequent RGCs and reflective journal entries appeared to be more academic and complex than the language they used in the first two RGCs, and included terms and concepts such as ‘*independent learning*’, ‘*learning how to learn*’, ‘*analyse my ideas*’, ‘*explore some issues in depth*’ and ‘*my role in learning.*’

Perhaps one of the major linguistic markers of the developing awareness of students and one of the repeatedly used words was ‘thinking’. For example, recalling his initial experience with the investigation, a student in group B commented: “I didn’t use to *think* deeply about my learning but after the first meeting I began to *think* about it” (PB4). Students used the term ‘thinking’ to refer to different things, including ways of thinking, awareness and understanding. In most cases, though, they used the word ‘thinking’ to refer to the way they used to think about (or reflect on) themselves as learners and the various aspects of their language learning as it is evident in the following comment by a student in group C:

“I haven’t thought about my roles in learning and about my autonomy and my responsibility before. These are all new concepts for me. What I used to think was that I need to study in order to find a job, and my study is to prepare me for that future job. I’ve never thought of independence in learning or about what I was learning or about my roles in learning, but after we had our first meeting, I was attracted by the topics and began to think about these issues” (PC4).

They also used the term ‘think about’ to refer to new aspects of their learning which they had started to consider as a result of the discussion such as independent learning and different perspectives on and goals of learning:

(PC4): “The discussion has helped us to think about our independence, and our autonomy, and about our life in general, and about learning in particular.”

(RC4): “This is great, and would you say it has any impact on you, on your way of thinking, for example?”

(PC4): “I can say that my way of thinking has changed.”

(RC4): “Are you sure about this?”

(PC4): “Yes.”

(RC4): “Can you give me an example of this kind of change?”

(PC4): “We can now think of many new things which we didn't know about before.”

(PC4): “The discussions have also widened our views and perspectives. So now I have come to realise that there are certain goals for students to achieve, not only to read the [text]books and listen to the teacher.”

The change in thinking which students had realised in themselves and was able to articulate was perhaps the starting point of a much more complex process of **awareness-raising** which they had undergone since the start of the reflective sessions. In fact, one of the students in group D admitted that the reflection-stimulating and probing questions as well as the discussions as a whole had ‘turned her head over’: “when I went back home, I felt as if my mind has been turned over (laughter!) because of the interesting ideas which we discussed here” (PD4).

Another marker of students’ developing awareness during the investigation was evident through the way students talked about teaching and learning in their context. I noticed that they had become more reflexive, reflective and critical in this. They appeared to be so reflective and critical, in particular, when it came to discussing their role in learning. I have presented part of the picture on students’ pressing needs for having a greater role in their learning in section (6.3.4.4) above on ‘constraints’, where they described how teachers controlled almost everything in the classroom including how they should do things and learn. For example, many of them used a clear language to describe the rigid instructions they had to follow for keeping ‘their own’ learning portfolios and for making presentations. As for learning, students appeared to be alert about how they began to consider how and why they were learning in a way that reflected the developing nature of their awareness.

Interestingly, students did not only appear to be aware of how their thinking about learning had changed but also about the *benefits of talking* about and *discussing* their learning in the classroom. A student in group C wrote in her reflective journal:

“In my opinion, talking about our past and present learning experiences helps to improve our ways of language learning. It gives the learner the opportunity to express his opinions in an easy way. We can also suggest ways to improve learning in higher education” (JC4).

Going back to the issue of role, students appeared to have developed a fresher understanding and awareness of their *role in learning*. In group C, for example, students talked about how their understanding about their role in learning had changed from being reduced to simply getting information from the teacher and textbooks and were characterised by being limited and passive in nature to a more active and robust one which involved thinking about what and how they were learning.

Another remarkable change in the students’ language about their learning was their talk about *methods of learning* or the need to *learn about learning*: “In my case, I used to depend on some basic learning methods such as reading and memorising information, but now I have realised that I also need to learn about learning” (PD4). Such very concepts of ‘learning about learning’ or ‘learning how to learn’ did not exist in students’ language at least in the first two RGCs.

Independent and out-of-class language learning was another area where students also began to discuss with an increasing conviction and confidence: “throughout the discussions, the issues of independent learning and my roles in learning have become a real concern to me” (PC4). Another student in the same group also explained that she: “didn’t consider the importance of independent learning before. I didn’t think it was important, but now I have realised that it *is* really important to be able to learn on your own” (PC4).

The use of the term ‘*autonomy*’ during the later sessions of the investigation and reflective journal entries was also another remarkable development in the students’ awareness. In fact, the first encounter the students had with the term was through the

title of the study, but I deliberately did not use the term explicitly during the initial sessions. In the fourth session, however, one of the students mentioned the term autonomy as they used it in their specialisation outside the language learning context. I then asked them to try to explain what the term meant to them as learners. One of them explained that “it’s about the learner making choices about his learning” (PD2c). In contrast, in the last session, students in group A defined autonomy as ‘self-learning’ and ‘independent learning’ and associated it with responsibility, decision-making, role and planning. Nevertheless, a more complex understanding of autonomy appeared in one of the last journal entries submitted by a student in group D:

“The student is responsible for himself and for his decisions and his reactions...he is responsible for his own results...The student also decides what subjects to take in a semester...He is also autonomous in learning by using different sources of information beyond the [text]book” (JD1b).

Other ‘new’ language which appeared in the later RGCs and journal entries include the following:

- “...the student has a central role in learning” (JB4).
- “I have become more aware of my strategies” (JD4).
- “...so now I’m thinking of keeping a reflective journal for my reflection” (PD4).
- “Now we know about strategies and ways of gaining information” (PC4).
- “I think that student needs, motivation, desire and autonomy are important in learning anything” (PD4).
- “The reason could be their methods of study” (PC4).
- “Deep learning”, “critical thinking, planning, monitoring and evaluation” (PB4).

In summary, it was obvious then that students’ awareness about themselves and their learning vividly manifested itself in their reflective discourses both during the RGCs and through their reflective journal writings. It would be unsafe, however, to claim that students’ awareness as was evident in their language has been developed entirely and only during the investigation. There was evidence that students did have some

awareness about certain aspects of their learning prior to the investigation. So it is perhaps safer to claim that the investigation might have facilitated the articulation of such awareness and brought it to the fore. It might have offered students an opportunity to channel and articulate their awareness in a more direct and assertive way. The following example of a student reflecting on independent learning may support such a claim:

“This issue of independent learning was in my mind, but I wasn't aware of how it happens or how it could be useful. I thought learning in the classroom was more important” (PC4).

I now turn to present examples of students' developing awareness as evident in their reasons for taking part in the research.

6.6.3. Awareness as evident in students' reasons for taking part in the research

The sixth and final RGC was devoted to exploring the potential evidence or manifestation of awareness in students through asking them to reflect on their participation in the research. Students stated various thoughtful reasons for taking part, which reflected part of the awareness they were able to develop during the investigation. I was however aware of the possibility that part of students' awareness might have developed due to other external factors. As such, I tried to carefully draw students' attention to how the 'present' investigation might have impacted their perceptions about themselves as language learners and language learning as a process.

To begin with, most of the students decided to take part in the study after they had read the Participant Information Sheet and got **attracted by the topic of the research**. Most of the students acknowledged they were novice to the topics and concepts of the study while only few of them reported that they knew little about the topic but wanted to know more: “this is a new topic which we haven't heard before” (PA4). Another student added: “yes indeed, the topic is attractive” (PA4). A student in group C said she did not consider her role in and responsibility for learning before and thus decided to take part:

“In my case, the title of the study attracted me because I haven't thought about my roles in learning and about my autonomy and my responsibility

before. These are all new concepts for me...I was attracted by the topic and it made me think about these issues” (PC4).

Another aspect of the study which was new to the students was **reflection**. Although reflection was amongst the activities in their learning portfolios and many of them appreciated its value, as we have seen in the previous section on constraints, students did not know how to reflect properly and so ended up ignoring it. As such, they felt that this study offered them a good opportunity to experience reflection in reality and learn how to employ it in their learning: “it was the first time I was asked why I think in this way or why I did things” (PC4). Another student in group D was motivated and decided to take part in the research when she knew it would involve reflection:

“To be honest, this is the first time I come across a discussion like this. I was motivated, especially when you said there would be reflection. And so I thought this would help me to reflect on myself and my thinking and my learning strategies” (PD4).

Other students appreciated the idea of being asked to discuss their learning and express their opinion about learning as this was not a usual practice in their learning context: “it's the first time we are being asked to talk about ourselves and our learning” (PD4), “I have never been asked to talk about my opinion on such topics” (PD4), “I feel comfortable being given the opportunity to be listened to. You feel that somebody out there cares about you” (PA4).

Other students decided to take part in the research because they felt the study would privilege their roles and opinions as learners and would benefit them too, not only benefit me as a researcher:

“At that time, I felt that this study would give some importance to the students and the focus would be on the students and our opinions, so I felt that the discussions would be about us and it would benefit us as students, not only the teacher” (PB4).

A student in group A valued highly the opportunity which the study had offered him to discuss his learning and the challenges he faced: “I was motivated because I think it's

important that one expresses his ideas and opinions, but we don't always get the chance to discuss our learning and the challenges we face" (PA4).

Another reason students gave for taking part in the research, which at the same time reflect their developing awareness about learning, was **the way the study was setup**. They appreciated the fact that the investigation involved a series of group discussions rather than structured interviews or simply responding to a questionnaire: "I was motivated because it wasn't about answering a questionnaire" (PD4). Another student in group B also commented that he had a different expectation about the research at the beginning but later on, he appreciated the interactive nature of the investigation:

"At the beginning, I thought that, like what many people always do, you'll give us a questionnaire to answer. This was what I expected at the beginning but later on, I realised that you actually wanted to *talk* to us" (PB4).

The reason why students enjoyed the group interaction and discussions was that it offered them a valuable opportunity to *interact* with, *listen* to and *learn* from other students' experiences and strategies in learning:

"We have found the discussions more useful because we listened to your ideas and also the ideas of other students in the group. It was useful to listen to other students talking about their learning and about their problems. It was good to see if others also have the same problems or if they have different ones" (PA4).

Another student in group B also appreciated the *input* he got from other students in the group:

"It's always helpful to listen to others and exchange ideas with others. For example, the ideas which my partner here has mentioned were sometimes new to me or sometimes I knew them but didn't consider their importance" (PB4).

Moreover, on several occasions, students expressed their appreciation of the opportunity which the study offered them to propose their changes to improve teaching and learning in their context. Thus, amongst the reasons which students stated for taking part in the research was their belief that research projects like this one could well contribute to the development of English language teaching and learning in their context:

“You mentioned that your goal [of conducting this research] was to improve language learning and to be honest I want to improve my English. And also we want English teaching to also improve at the university, especially on the Foundation Programme” (PC4).

In the same vein, another student in group A also believed that the findings of this research project could contribute to improving the teaching and learning system at the university:

“This research will benefit the university, and if it doesn't benefit me, it will benefit my brothers and sisters and other students who will come after me. And you have mentioned that it will help you in your PhD research, and also it will help to improve the system at the university” (PA4).

6.6.4. Summary

It was evident at this point that students' awareness about themselves and about various aspects of their learning was indeed starting to take shape. They also seemed to be able to articulate such awareness. Their reflection at the end of the research on the reasons for taking part in the investigation revealed increased awareness of a number of important issues including the importance and relevance of the topics explored in the research to their learning such as the skill of reflection itself; their role in learning; the importance of learning with and from others; and the relevance of their opinions as learners to what and how they learn. In addition, students were able to identify some key areas in teaching and learning in their context which, from their perspectives, posed hindrance to their learning and, thus, required improvement. Amongst the important improvements suggested by the students were for curriculum planners and teachers to listen to their opinions and privilege their roles in learning.

6.7. Overall summary of the research findings

In this section, I will attempt to summarise the major findings of the study in relation to the main research aims and questions which guided the investigation. In chapter two (see section 2.7), I defined the overall aim of the study as to consider critically students' voices in the context under investigation and the potential results which can be gained in relation to students' autonomy in learning by listening to their authentic voices on their language learning experiences, their learning context, as well as their capacities for language learning. This is all done as a springboard for encouraging a greater autonomy in the students and, thus, enhancing their language learning. The study also has further theoretical and methodological aims to achieve.

Given the large amount and intricate nature of the data and findings of the research, the task of producing a summary which covers *all* of the findings can be challenging. However, I will try to touch briefly upon the key findings which link directly to the research questions and overall aims of the research, making sure that my summary is concise, yet useful.

6.7.1. Students' perceptions of language learning at school

The exploration of students' perceptions and experiences of language learning at school was seen as a useful step leading to the exploration of their perceptions and experiences of language learning in higher education. Indeed the analysis showed that many of the perceptions and attitudes which students had about higher education could be best understood in light of their prior learning experiences. Many of the students' current perceptions, beliefs and practices could be seen as have either developed from their prior experiences or adopted as a reaction to them.

Students' overall experiences of their language learning at school can be categorised into two main stages. The first stage constitutes the early years of their learning (years 1-8) which can be described as the time of '*take it easy*', carelessness and, in some cases, lack of awareness. Most of the students reported that they did not learn a lot then. Students described themselves at the early stages of their schooling as lacking interest and the necessary skills for effective language learning. They related their lack of

effective learning to some personal factors but mostly to other more influential *external* factors such fixed and weak curriculum and poor teaching methods and exam system. Generally speaking, boredom and underachievement can be said the overall students' evaluation of the first stage of their schooling.

The second stage (years 9-12) can be described as the '*awakening*' period, for it was the time when they began to realise the importance and requirements of the stage they were in and the importance of English for their present and future learning needs and, therefore, began to pay more attention to it. It was also the stage when their awareness about themselves and learning began to develop and their sense of their role in and responsibility for learning began to take shape. In this respect, they reported taking important measures including the development and employment of their capacity for independent as well as *interdependent* language learning.

It is important to note here that some of the learning habits and skills which students reported having in their higher education learning can be traced back to the language teaching and learning environment which was prevalent at school.

2.7.2. Students' perceptions of higher education

Students' perceptions of the nature and requirements of higher education is another important, yet under-researched, area in the context under investigation. The underlying assumption is that such knowledge may help teachers and course developers to understand part of the students' behaviour in learning and, in this way, design learning in ways that support the students and meet their needs and learning styles. The present study therefore aimed to explore, amongst other things, how post-foundation students perceive the nature, purposes and requirements of higher education.

Students intuitively associated higher education with the stage which comes after school, but it differs from school as being more advanced in level and more specific in scope. At the initial stages of the investigation, the use of English only in the classroom and the opportunity to fix their own lecture timetable were amongst the important differences between the two levels of education as perceived by students. Other students

also considered the different teaching methods used by the teachers at the university compared to those by teachers at school as another dimension of the differences between the two levels of education. Most of the students at this stage tended to associate curriculum with the course books, which was a common perception of curriculum amongst the students in this context general. They also perceived the goal of higher education as to help them to develop better and stronger personalities and prepare them for the labour market.

However, when engaged in reflective and deeper thinking about the actual nature, aims and requirements of higher education beyond their everyday understanding, some complex responses began to unfold in their reflections on their learning. For example, students reported that while in general education they used to depend on textbooks and teacher's explanation as well as memorising the information in their textbook in order to pass exams, in which a case they benefited very little, they did realise that learning in higher education was not only restricted to the classroom and textbooks, and that they had to search for additional resources outside the classroom physical and time confines. Their own role in learning also seemed to come into play as the investigation progressed. Other students also mentioned that higher education helped them to specialise in certain areas of knowledge and become leaders in the future!

However, the way students perceived higher education did not necessarily reflect what they actually experienced in higher education; it was rather what they thought higher education 'should' be like.

6.7.3. Students' perceptions of 'language' learning in higher education

At the personal level, it was apparent that students appreciated the importance and value of being able to understand and use English as a foreign language. They perceived English as a means to get a good job and lead a successful life. Academically, students appreciated the role English plays in their studies, given it is the medium of instruction in all of their specialisation courses.

Students agreed that language teaching and learning at the university was largely different in range and focus compared to what they had experienced at school. They perceived the two stages of language learning as being different in terms of *what* and

how they learned and were taught. For instance, as a general observation, students commented on the use of English only in the language class at the university compared to the language class they had experienced at school where Arabic was also used. They also appreciated the fact that at the university they had a better opportunity to practise their English than they had at the school.

In terms of exam and assessment methods, students perceived the university assessment method as being varied and having a different focus, yet not very different compared to the assessment method they had experienced at school in terms of function and the usual inherent problems of exams such as being the ‘teacher-only’ business and not reflecting the actual level of students. Students did *not* appear to realise, at least at the initial stage of the investigation before their awareness had begun to develop, that assessment, especially formative assessment, could also benefit them as learners. Furthermore, students at the foundation level did not seem to care a lot about marks or how their level of proficiency in English was developing; rather, their major concern was to pass the foundation programme and joint their specialisations in their respective colleges. Last but not least, students viewed exams as presenting an unreal image of their actual level of proficiency and called for a different approach to and methods of evaluating their language development in which they could have a say and a greater role.

As for the students’ perceptions of their role in and responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom, they acknowledged that they had a more active role in and greater responsibility for their learning at university compared to the situation at school. However, the analysis showed that their perceptions of role and choice were limited to three purely ‘technical’ issues. These include the option to choose their specialisation courses from a list of courses offered by their departments, the option to choose when they could have a certain lecture and the ability to use other materials besides the course textbooks. These three aspects of their learning were the most obvious types of choice and control which the students experienced (and perhaps enjoyed) when they first entered university, for this was not the case at school. Nevertheless, this was how students perceived their role in and responsibility for learning ‘as they should be’. As the reflective conversations progressed in scope and depth, and began to focus on their actual learning *experiences*, students began to exhibit more reflective and considered perceptions of their roles and responsibility. They acknowledged that they were not

actually enjoying the role they should be having in higher education. They also exhibited awareness about and the capacity to exercise control over what (content) and how (method) they should be learning. They believed that students in higher education should find their own preferred way of learning, but in reality, they did not enjoy the freedom of selecting materials or choosing how they could learn. Finally, they appeared to associate having a greater role in and control over their own learning with effective learning.

As for out-of-class language learning, students appeared to have a good motivation for and understanding of the characteristics, nature, benefits and the challenges of this type of learning. Generally speaking, they had a positive attitude towards learning language on their own outside the classroom and perceived it as an important source of knowledge as well as a useful domain to practise their language skills. In addition, they perceived this kind of learning as more effective, flexible and produced long-lasting learning, for it was free from the limitations they experienced in a typical language learning class such as the teacher's over control of learning and ready-made curriculum.

Moving on to students' perceptions of the teacher's role, these were always embedded in the students' perceptions of their own roles and responsibility. Whenever the students talked about their roles and agency in learning they also referred to those of the teacher either explicitly or implicitly. However, despite the students' demands for having a greater role in what and how they learn, they did not disregard completely the teacher's role in language learning. They perceived the teacher in higher education as having a *different*, but not greater, role compared to the type of role they had experienced at school. They perceived the teacher as a guide, consultant and resource person. It is useful to note at this point that some of the students admitted that having a total freedom in learning was unrealistic and suggested that students' responsibility for their own learning was best introduced gradually. Nevertheless, the way students 'experienced' the teacher's role in their language learning context was different. Most of them were not certain about how the teacher's roles were defined in the curriculum. Students also complained that teachers were in control of the overall course planning, including the selection and presentation of materials, teaching and assessment methods.

The investigation also encompassed students' perceptions of the main constraints or impediments on their language learning and how such constraints could be overcome from their own perspectives. The analysis revealed a number of internal (student-related) and external (contextual) constraints. I summarise these in the table below:

<p style="text-align: center;">Constraints/impediments</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Students' perspectives on improvement</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some students have limited knowledge and awareness about their own role in and responsibility for learning as well as those of the teacher, and the criteria for success in language learning. For example, they perceive the teacher as responsible for their success or failure in learning. ➤ Some students acknowledge their lack of awareness of the nature and goals of higher education. ➤ There is a problem in preparing students for the university level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students at secondary schools should be offered a one-off orientation course on the nature, goals and requirements of higher education, so that they could cope with the new learning situation in higher education in a better way. ➤ A new subject is to be incorporated into the school curriculum at the secondary level which offers students information on what higher education is all about, including its nature, requirements, the challenges that students might face, how it is different from learning at school, and how they could prepare for it. ➤ The orientation course needs to be introduced before students enter university so to avoid students falling into troubles in their first year of university. ➤ A group of post-foundation students could visit secondary schools and talk to the students about university life, what it means to be a university student as well as various aspects of higher learning. The visiting students could also respond to secondary school students' queries about teaching and learning at tertiary level.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some students have some bad learning habits such as procrastination. ➤ Others lack seriousness and skills for proper time-management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Curriculum should include exercises which encourage students to reflect on their learning habits and involve them in researching their own learning. ➤ Students should be helped to develop better time-management skills as an example of more generic study and effective language learning skills which are needed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Amongst the internal impediments are also depression, anxiety and fear of failure which some students suffer, mostly in silence! ➤ Other students are hopeless: they keep thinking that no matter what they do, they will not succeed. ➤ Others have problem realising their actual capacities for learning. ➤ Repeated absence from class was also another internal factor mentioned by some students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Proper counselling should be offered to students who may lack confidence in themselves as learners and their capacities for learning. ➤ Specific social and learning activities should be tailored to boost confidence in students and help them realise their capacities for learning. This is best achieved through negotiation with students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some students limit themselves to what is offered by the teacher and the textbook. They do not fully appreciate the significance of expanding their learning beyond the classroom confines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Curriculum (including teaching methods) should encourage students to think beyond the classroom and the topics in the textbooks. Students privilege understanding and problem-solving over rote learning and memorisation of information.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Absence of excitement in language learning, considered by the students as an important factor of success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students believe that interaction brings excitement in the class and in this way they learn better.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Absence of space for creativity inside the classroom. The types and variety of topics which students had to read and write about in the class are not always interesting. ➤ Students keep repeating the same exercises and activities, leading to dull work and routine learning. ➤ Teachers spend much of the class time talking while the students have little time to interact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Teachers should incorporate social media and field trips into the language courses, which students perceive as stimulating and useful activities. ➤ Teachers should vary their teaching methods so that they cater for the different needs and learning styles of students. ➤ Courses should incorporate role plays, discussion sessions, debates, competitions and even games. ➤ Students perceive activities such as discussions groups, competitions and debates as offering them a great opportunity to practice their language and thinking skills. ➤ Such activities will also help students practise their speaking, which students say they want to practise more than anything else.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Teachers are only concerned about delivering the content, while nobody is interested in finding out about how students are thinking or learning, even when they see the students' level is declining. ➤ Teaching always has presidency over learning. Students feel too much effort is made by the teachers to complete the 'set' syllabus while little attention is paid to finding out how (and how well) they are learning and what challenges they are having in learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Investigation of the students' perceptions of learning in higher education at entry time is essential. ➤ Students should be allowed and encouraged to research and explore topics beyond the confines of the course books, which could help them to widen their horizons and have greater motivation for learning.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students believe higher education is about finding their own way of learning using various resources, not only that which is given in the classroom.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students feel they are not actually enjoying the role they should be having in higher education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Enabling students a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning should be recognised as an important goal for language learning in their context, which can be achieved through a number of decisions and changes which course planners and teachers should make/implement. ➤ Students acknowledge the importance of being involved in discussions about ways to improve language learning in their context, something similar to the conversations they had in this study.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students also complain that teachers are in control of the overall course planning, selection and presentation of materials, teaching and assessment methods, etc., ➤ Students do not like the teacher's dominance over learning goals and testing methods, and considered this as an impediment to effective learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ As a starting point, teachers should realise the active role students have (or should have) in their own learning and trust their capacity to exercise such a role. ➤ Students should be involved in setting teaching and learning plans as well as in how their learning is to be tested. They should be engaged and trusted. ➤ Students need to know the overall picture and goals of their language programmes. Language curricula need to be made clear to student.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students are not satisfied with the current exam system, for they believe the marks they get do not reflect their actual proficiency in English. ➤ The current testing and assessment methods emphasise getting high marks in tests and passing language courses over the actual linguistic or intellectual gains the students could gain from their courses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students need to have a say in how their language learning is to be evaluated. ➤ They emphasise that not all of them like group presentations as the main (or even the only) means of assessing their speaking skills. ➤ They suggest employing other more student-friendly and innovative approaches to assessment such as group discussions, debates, exhibitions of students' work, etc. ➤ Students want exams to focus on their actual learning and assess (and develop) their capacity for critical thinking rather than only their capacity for memorising.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students complain about over-testing in their context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ There should be fewer exams and more learning opportunities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some teachers lack important knowledge about the students they are teaching, in terms of learning needs and habits. ➤ There is a gap between the teachers' planning and students' expectations (agendas) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Teachers should always seek to find out about their students' learning habits, expectations and motivation for learning, perceptions of learning, etc. Such a survey needs to be conducted at the beginning of the course so that teachers have good knowledge of his/her students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students have little experience about keeping learning portfolios. ➤ They are unhappy about the restrictions imposed on them with regard to how they should go about organising their portfolios and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students should have a greater role and independence in maintaining their portfolios. ➤ This may include deciding on what <i>they</i> want to include in their

<p>vocabulary learning.</p>	<p>portfolios and how to organise them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Portfolios should be viewed as a personal learning resource and that students should be given a voice in how to organise the content of their <i>own</i> portfolios.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some of the university regulations are also perceived by the students as an important constraint on their learning, as they are perceived by students being against them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Any laws or regulations which concern students' learning should be negotiated with students.

Table 6.4. Students' perceptions of constraints on their language learning and perspectives on improvement.

6.7.4. *Metacognitive knowledge*

Besides perceptions and students' perspectives, metacognitive knowledge is another key issue in this research on learner autonomy and voice in the Omani context. Despite the complex nature of the construct, the analysis revealed important results about the students in four main domains:

1. ***Person knowledge:*** Generally speaking, students demonstrated having active knowledge about themselves as language learners in terms of their awareness of and capacities for language learning in and outside the classroom, their strengths and weaknesses in language learning as well as other personal factors important for learning such as their self-confidence, motivation and attitudes. They were aware of what effective language learning entailed, such as not only the importance of recognising one's own role in and responsibility for language learning but also the importance of having a supportive environment which offers the opportunity for students to exercise such a role. This is part of the second category of their metacognitive knowledge I describe below.
2. ***Knowledge about the learning context:*** Students were also critical about their learning environment in and outside the classroom. This type of knowledge encompassed students' awareness and understanding of the nature of teaching and learning in their context, the opportunities their learning environment offers for effective language learning as well as the challenges or impediments imposed by the various elements in their learning environment. This category of students' metacognitive knowledge also reflected their perceptions of the external constraints on their language learning which I summarised in the table above.
3. ***Task knowledge:*** Students were also knowledgeable of the various language learning tasks at two levels: generic level such as task involving language learning as an everyday task and those specific language learning tasks which students described carrying out either on their own or in the classroom. It is important to note here though that students showed awareness of not only the type of language learning tasks they carried out but also *why* they chose those tasks, *how* they carried them out and *what* challenges they had while carrying out those tasks.

4. ***Strategic knowledge:*** In this category of their metacognitive knowledge, students demonstrated awareness of a good range of strategies which they reported they resort to and employ in various language learning situations in and outside the classroom. They were also able to justify their selection and use of strategies, evaluate the usefulness of the strategies they used as well as think of alternative strategies to use in a certain learning context.

6.7.5. Research impact on students' awareness

The analysis showed notable development in students' awareness about themselves as learners as well as the learning process, which might have resulted from, amongst other possible factors, the reflective and in-depth discussions which they actively engaged in. This development of awareness was obvious in the language which students have likely learned and began to use in as early as the second RGC and batch of journal entries, as well as in their deep and critical thinking.

6.7.6. Autonomy manifestation in students' voices

Autonomy, as defined in the literature review chapter as the capacity to exercise control over one's own learning (Benson, 2011), manifested itself at a greater or lesser extent in various elements of the investigation, including students' perceptions of language learning, their metacognitive knowledge, perspectives on having a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning, etc. For example, students' capacity for autonomous thinking and decision-making was evident in the way they perceived their role in and responsibility for language learning as well as the measures they took at various stages and levels of their language learning, both at school and later at university. Although the overall classroom atmosphere did not appear to encourage or foster autonomy in the students, as reported by the students themselves, and despite being simple and reactive, such measures taken by the students can be seen to characterise the type, shape and degree of autonomy they were having (and perhaps developing). In addition, the analysis revealed that students demonstrated autonomous thinking and decision-making in their personal pursuit of language learning outside the classroom reflected in the kind of language learning tasks they engaged in and the range and kinds of learning strategies they employed in their language learning. Furthermore, besides being evident in students' perceptions of their language learning as well as their

perspectives for having a greater role in their learning, autonomy also manifested itself in their person, context, task and strategic knowledge.

Autonomy, as it was the case with awareness, has also been evident through two major markers: a) the language which students used to reflect on themselves as language learners and the language learning process, and b) the language which students used to reflect on their participation in the research.

6.8. Concluding remarks and reflection

This chapter has been devoted to presenting the analysis of the data gathered through a total of twenty-two RGCs in addition to twenty-six reflective journal entries. The analysis aimed at making sense of the data by classifying them into meaningful categories and relating them to the main research questions (data coding). I was keen in my analysis to pay attention to details and privilege my students' voices. In this respect, I tried my best to accommodate almost everything the students said or written and support each point of analysis by suitable direct quotations from the RGCs and journal entries. In addition, I decided to allow the data to speak for themselves at this stage and avoid any distraction of references to the literature or comparisons with other studies.

The investigation was conducted in a relaxed environment and students were encouraged to reflect on their learning experiences in a manner that helped me to gather data in order to respond to my research questions while at the same time facilitating awareness-raising in the students. The latter goal was an ethical commitment I had towards my participants at the design stage of the research (see chapter four, section 4.5).

We have seen in the previous section on the impact of the research on the students that they indeed demonstrated having awareness about themselves as language learners, their language learning context as well as the language learning process. The story-telling style in which the investigation was designed might have well facilitated the students' task to narrate and share their individual stories about their language learning starting with how they felt about and learned English at school and on their own outside the classroom, and ending with their language learning at the university.

This study of how students perceived their learning and learning context was indeed useful and, at the same time, stimulating. The analysis, as presented in this chapter, revealed some interesting and thought-provoking results which might have direct implications for language

learning and teaching in the context under investigation and other contexts in the region. Listening to students talking about their learning experiences and trying to explore critically their underpinning beliefs and assumptions about themselves and learning has proven a useful exercise and one of the effective ways through which learning outcomes could be enhanced. However, in most contexts, this is a lost opportunity, for students have valuable ideas and perspectives to share, as we have seen in this chapter, but their voices are rarely listened to. We as teachers plan our teaching in the way *we* think is appropriate and useful for our students but it is also true that students have their own agendas for learning, which many of us ignore at our peril.

As a concluding remark, amongst the many things I have learned from the data I analysed and presented in this chapter is that failing to understand how our students perceive their roles in learning, and those of ours as teachers, as well as failing to share our planning with them, may in most cases compromise a lot of the effort we are making to maximise the outcome of our teaching and help our students to make the most out of their learning. And here is where the importance of research comes into play.

PART THREE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

- Introduction to Part Three

This is the third and final part of the thesis in which I discuss the research findings, draw conclusions and reflect on the entire research process. Discussion of the research findings will involve making sense of the findings by interpreting and conceptualising them in light of the context and relevant literature.

Making sense of research data, drawing conclusions and reflecting necessarily involve considering the 'big picture' of the research or the central story and gaining a broader perspectives of the issues discussed in the research (Hennink et al, 2011). The big picture or central story of this research is reflected in what we could learn from students' voices about their language learning and context and how we could best utilise such knowledge to enhance their language learning. These voices encompass how students perceive various aspects of their language learning in their context as well as their capacities for taking control over their learning. The discussion of the findings, conclusions and reflections will therefore centre on what these voices might mean in relation to language learning and students' autonomy in the context under investigation in terms of the capacities such autonomy requires, its dimensions and applications.

This part comprises two chapters. In chapter seven, I will attempt to discuss and interpret the research findings and relate them to my own experiences and the relevant literature. In chapter eight, I will draw conclusions based on the overall analysis and discussions of the findings presented in chapter six and seven, discuss the potential implications such findings may have for various stakeholders, suggest ideas for further research in the field and, finally, reflect on the overall research process and myself as a researcher and practising academic and, after all, individual.

Chapter Seven

Discussion, Interpretations and Conclusions

“When learners cannot learn the way we teach them, we have to help them to find ways of doing their own learning.” (Chan, 2001)

7.1. Introduction

In chapter six, I have presented the findings of the thematic and thematic latent analyses, which I conducted on the raw data, and privileged students’ voices in relation to their language learning. I chose to present students’ voices as they emerged from the analysis and avoid any interpretations or distraction of references to the literature at that stage. Therefore, I will commit myself in this chapter to try to interpret and make sense of the data I described earlier. According to Gibbs (2007),

“Qualitative data are meaningful and need to be interpreted in analysis, not just to reveal the range of subject matter people are talking about but also to recognise and analyse the ways in which they frame and mould their communication” (p.2).

As such, making sense of the data or finding out what students’ voices (in their generic meaning as defined in the literature review chapter) could tell us about the students and their language learning will involve trying to interpret, contextualise and, finally, theorise about the data obtained. Interpreting and contextualising students’ voices will involve trying to understand such voices in light of the context in which they were obtained and its characteristics as well as the existing body of literature. As for conceptualising the data, I will attempt to theorise about students’ voices and autonomy in the context under investigation by moving carefully from describing such voices to trying to recognise and understand the conditions and factors which might have shaped and influenced them, including finding out how autonomy manifests itself through students’ voices. This will require reflecting on my own background knowledge, role as well as experiences as a language lecturer in the context under investigation. In addition, the cultural, social and political context in which the data were obtained will inevitably have its influence on the way the findings could be interpreted, contextualised and understood. However, I find it useful at this stage to remind the reader of my commitment to adopting an explicit and transparent approach to data interpretation, making other (perhaps different) interpretations also possible and even desirable, for the

actual reality of what students' voices could mean remains far from being claimed or realised in a single research attempt.

Before delving into the discussion and interpreting the research findings, I find it useful at this stage to re-visit the research goals and aims in order to maintain links to the original motivating forces of the research and help the reader to locate the discussion in its proper context.

7.2. Research aims re-visited

As set out in chapter two, section (2.7), I have defined the overall aim of this study as to consider critically students' voices about their language learning and the insightful results which can be gained by listening to the students talking about themselves as learners, their capacities for autonomous language learning as well as their learning context, as a gateway to encouraging greater autonomy in the students and, thus, enhancing their learning.

At a contextual level, and as a response to Smith's (2003, p.255) question about what learner autonomy might mean in the context of a particular culture, the study aims to offer a context-sensitive understanding of learner autonomy and explore its relevance and appropriateness to the Omani context from the students' perspectives. In particular, the study aims to investigate whether learners in the context under study experience autonomy, what shape such autonomy takes, and how it manifests itself through their discourses. In other words, the study should provide insight into the kind of autonomy students experience as well as the cultural and social dimensions of learner autonomy in the context under investigation.

In a broader sense, the study hopes to contribute to the existing literature and knowledge on language learner autonomy by offering a fresh perspective of the Omani students' understand and practice of learner autonomy in their context and the role such a context (or culture) plays in shaping the students' autonomy in learning.

Finally, the study aims to explore the potential impact which the research methodology and data collection methods employed in the research, i.e., the Reflective Group Conversations (RGCs) and reflective journals, might have had on the students' awareness about themselves as learners and their learning context.

In light of these aims, the discussion and interpretation of the findings in this chapter will attempt to contextualise and locate the results within the existing literature on language learning and language learner autonomy. In particular, I will make connections to the

literature on ELLT in Oman in order to see how and where the present results fit with what has already been found. I will also attempt to ‘conceptualise’ the findings and then ‘theorise’ about the main issues being investigated. According to Hennink et al (2011), without abstraction and theory development, research findings remain limited to description, which alone cannot explain the researched phenomenon. As such, description of the results should be followed by a process of conceptualisation which should respond to the questions of *how* and *why* the issues under investigation had occurred.

7.3. Students’ voices speaking out: What could we learn from students’ voices?

The discussion in this section and the one that follows should respond to the ‘fifth’ research question which looks into what knowledge we could possibly gain by listening to and scrutinising students’ voices about their language learning and learning context both in and outside the classroom.

This study is based on the premise that listening to students’ voices can yield valuable information on how students learn, how they could learn better and how our teaching and curriculum could be improved accordingly. There are cogent arguments in favour of exploring students’ voices. Besides other authors, Kohonen (2006) and Lamb (2010), for example, emphasise that students remain a significant source for their own learning and that exploring their voices can have a valuable contribution to enhancing learning. In this section therefore, I will attempt to elicit and discuss what we could learn from the data on students’ voices which I presented in detail in the previous chapter. But what do voices actually stand for in the context of my research?

In the literature review chapter (see chapter three), I have cited Lamb’s (2005) three categories of learners’ voices, which I have found useful and relevant to my work. I will list briefly these three categories of voice below before delving into discussing what we could actually learn from them:

1. Learners’ knowledge about the cognitive and psychological aspects of learning, which includes learners’ experiences, perceptions, beliefs, perspectives, metacognitive knowledge, etc.
2. Learners’ involvement in and influence over the learning environment in contexts which enable students to have a voice.

3. Learners' struggle for having a voice and role in contexts where students' voices are not usually heard.

Drawing on the above categories of voice, we can see that students' voices are not only limited to what students say but also lend themselves to how they *think* and *feel* about their learning. In the case of the present study, data analysis revealed all the three types of voice. The analysis in the previous chapter has revealed much about the students' perceptions of their language learning, perspectives on having a greater voice in responsibility for language learning and their metacognitive knowledge (type one). Furthermore, students reported having the capacity to manage their own learning in situations where some freedom was allowed (type two) and, likewise, struggled and expressed their desire for a greater role to play in their learning in situations where learning was highly controlled by the teacher (type three).

In the following sections, I will present and discuss the various voice types of the students about their language learning and learning context in and outside the classroom. I will begin by presenting and discussing students' voices about their language learning at school as an entry to the discussion of their voices about various aspects of their language learning in higher education.

7.3.1. What we could learn from students' voices about language learning at school

Listening to students talking about their learning can be both enjoyable and useful. It can also have direct implications for how language programmes are planned and delivered. This part of students' voices portrays an interesting image not only of the teaching and learning situation at school as seen by the students but also of the students themselves in terms of the scope and diversity of their thinking and abilities, how they feel about and perceive learning as well as their knowledge of how to learn (metacognitive knowledge).

A number of interesting issues about language learning and teaching at school can be seen as unfolding through students' voices. I will briefly highlight the major findings and then say what we could learn from them. In the very first RGC, students reflected on their 'careless' approach to learning English at the early stages of their schooling and that they only began to take language learning more seriously towards classes nine and ten. There was a general consensus amongst the students that they did not learn a lot then. While this may be associated with some personal factors relating to the students themselves or their social

environment, it also speaks much of their immediate learning and teaching environment. Before making any assumptions about the nature of the students' learning at that stage, they described their language learning as being superficial and characterised by direct transfer of knowledge by the teacher while they played a rather passive role in the whole process. They also pointed to the weak curriculum and poor teaching methods they experienced at school. Topics of learning were also limited to textbooks, i.e., there were limited opportunities to explore topics using other sources beyond the classroom. In addition, exams had a great influence on teaching and learning with both teachers and learners were trying to meet the demands of such exams regardless of gains on the learning side. Students also reported that they tended to memorise information rather than trying to understand it because exams in most cases measured information retention rather than understanding and critical thinking. Students also regarded exam results as not reflecting their actual learning. Though, some students perceived exams as an important motive to them for making effort and working hard, but again such a perception of exams was limited to mainly getting high marks and moving to higher stages on the education ladder. Nonetheless, in the last three years (years 10-12), students began to realise English as an essential requirement for their future studies and career and, as such, began to take important steps in this direction.

Students also talked about their low level of attainment in and lack of motivation for language learning in the early years of school, which can be partly related to the highly controlled and teacher-fronted method of teaching, fixed and weak curriculum and rigid exam system. Besides, this can also be related to the lack of knowledge on the part of students on how language learning as a process takes place and how to develop the skills necessary for language learning. In addition, students pointed to the issue of students lacking motivation for and interest in learning English, which might point to the possibility that teachers in general either fail to engage students in their learning by, for example, allowing them a greater role to play in their learning, introducing interesting topics to attract students' attention, especially at the early stages of their learning, or they (teachers) simply do not know how to do so. Students' voices about language learning at school also revealed that some students have the notion that English is a difficult language to learn and that in order to master it, one needs to learn as much grammar and vocabulary as possible. Unfortunately, such learning environment and assumptions about language learning at school have reinforced in students a sub-culture of (over)dependency on the teacher, curriculum and rote learning, a sub-culture which is indifferent to interdependence, partnership and critical thinking.

The present findings on students' perceptions of language learning and teaching in their context are in agreement with the available literature on ELLT in Oman, but only the part which describes the characteristics of the teaching and learning context. The present study however offers a different picture of the capacities of language learners than that usually depicted in the ELLT research in Oman, as we are going to see later in this chapter.

In chapter two (see section 2.4.) I have cited Goodliffe (2005) where she notes that the teaching and learning system in Oman overemphasises the product (passing exams or gaining a degree) over the process of learning. Students' voices in this research also align well with the findings of Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a) who postulate that some teachers lack reflective skills, adopt transmission-based approach of knowledge when handling content, marginalize the role of students as dynamic and active constructors of knowledge and deprive them from any thinking space by encouraging memorization, training students for exam purposes and confining learning to the textbooks.

Students' voices and discourses about language learning at school also reveal the absence of the social dimension of classroom learning in the school practices. Although students sit in groups and apparently look as if they were working together, the actual essence of interdependence or even how and why this could be integrated into the language curriculum is largely missing. The literature on language learning and language learner autonomy suggests that learning a language requires *human interaction* and *cooperation* and that the social or personal aspect of language learning is essential. Early on, Little (1991) wrote about the social aspect of language learning and emphasised the notion of language learning through language use. Recently, Murray (2014) has edited a valuable volume which features the social dimensions of language learning within the area of language learner autonomy. The chapters included in this volume emphasise that language is best learned in contexts which encourage interdependence and collaboration between learners.

Notwithstanding such impediments to language learning in the context under investigation, there has been evidence (again through the students' voices) that students at the age of school are indeed able to tackle their weaknesses in language learners and take suitable measures to improve their language learning. (Autonomy manifestation in students' voices is discussed separately in section 7.4. below). Unlike the common assumptions which some teachers have about their students as lacking skills for independent learning, students' voices investigated in this study emphasise that they *are* aware of their language learning and indeed took particular measures to overcome their weak and inadequate linguistic competence (see chapter six, section 6.3.2.4 for examples of these measures).

Finally in this section, students' voices about their language learning at school could also suggest, even implicitly, how they would handle their language learning at tertiary level. It is in fact hard to separate the two types of voices. I view students' experiences, perspectives and perspectives of their language learning at tertiary level as a natural continuation and perhaps a more developed version of the kind of perceptions and perspectives they had at school. Students' voices at school can also be seen as useful grounds for exploring and understanding their voices at tertiary level. This assumption, in fact, justifies my decision to begin this investigation by exploring students' voices about language learning at school before gradually moving with the students to exploring their voices at tertiary level.

Nonetheless, the above interpretations of students' voices about their language learning at school cannot be claimed to be inclusive or comprehensive. Secondary analysis on the data set could well reveal more (or even different) results and realities about language and teaching at this level.

7.3.2. What we could learn from students' voices about higher education

Following the sequence in which I presented the analysis in the previous chapter, I will first attempt to interpret and discuss how students perceive higher education and learning in higher education before delving into their specific perceptions on *language* learning at this stage.

In the literature review chapter (see chapter three, section 3.3), I have presented cogent arguments in favour of exploring students' perceptions of higher education at the early stage of their entry to higher education. The underlying assumption was that such knowledge may help teachers and course developers to understand part of the students' behaviour in learning and thus, help design learning in a way that supports students and meet their needs and learning styles. For example, Moore (2010) calls for students' conceptualizations of higher education to be investigated upon entry to higher education institutions so that they are psychologically and academically supported and are ready to cope with the demands of the new learning environment. Another motivation for exploring students' voices is the assumption that any mismatch between learners' expectations of learning and those of the programme may be one of the factors which can inhibit students' learning and success in higher education (Chan, 2001; Jehng et al, 1993; Kinchin, 2004; Kohonen, 2006; Schommer, 1999). In the same vein, Kinchin (2004) warns against creating a mismatch between the teachers' classroom philosophy and the students' learning approaches (epistemological gap),

for such a mismatch is anticipated to have a negative effect on the quality of learning. To my best knowledge, there has been no studies in the context under investigation that has looked into how students perceive, for example, the nature, purposes and demands of higher education, making this study a valuable source of insight into students' ways of thinking when planning learning either at the micro or lesson level as well as macro or programme level.

Generally speaking, students' perceptions of higher education, compared to education at the school level, tend to be *declarative* and *superficial* in nature. As for being **declarative**, the analysis has showed that while students *do* appear to realise that higher education is more specialised and focused, allows them 'some' independence in learning, and requires critical thinking, such perceptions may not necessarily be enacted in their learning or are what they experience in reality. The analysis has revealed that there might be three possibilities for this. First of all, students may lack the proper knowledge of the nature and demands of higher education and so tend to transfer their school learning behaviour to higher education. Secondly, the learning and teaching system in higher education has failed to develop in the students the kind of learning behaviours which are usually expected by learners at tertiary level, for example allowing students to make choices in what and how they learn. Finally, students are able to act autonomously in higher education but may choose not to because they do not see the need to do so. For example, while students realise that higher education requires them to think critically and lessen their dependency on the teacher, it is obvious through their perceptions of their role in learning as well as that of the teacher, that the majority of them still expect the teacher to treat them in the same way teachers at school teacher treat their pupils. In other words, they still see the teacher as a key figure in learning who makes learning happen.

Another evidence for the declarative nature of students' statements about higher education can be seen through their learning portfolios. While discussing learning portfolios and how they handle the reflection section in these portfolios, it was obvious that most of them appreciate the value of keeping learning portfolios and reflecting on their learning but do not take portfolios seriously as a learning tool. They keep a file of their work simply because it is required by the course and is assessed. Only a few students acknowledge that they know what reflection is and can do it as required.

The analysis has also showed that students' perceptions of higher education are **superficial** in nature. This is because, as the analysis in the previous chapter has revealed (see section 6.3.3), students tend to view higher education as being different from learning at school in

terms of formalities such as the use of L2 only in the classroom and the ability to fix their own lecture timetable. They also perceive higher education as to prepare them for the labour market.

However, such students' superficial perceptions of the nature and purposes of tertiary education have been found to be rather intuitive and spontaneous. When engaged in a more reflective and deeper thinking about the actual nature and aims of higher education beyond their everyday understanding, more complex perceptions began to unfold compared to their initial ones. For example, most of the students appear to realise that learning in higher education is not only restricted to textbooks and that they have to use other sources. They also realise that, unlike the situation at school, higher education requires understanding and critical thinking rather than simply memorising information. Moreover, the investigation I employed in this research has helped students to develop awareness about other functions of higher education beyond gaining knowledge and preparing them for the labour market, for example *learning about learning* or *learning how to learn*. As a result, this might have helped students become more reflective about themselves as learners, the learning process as well as the nature, purposes and requirements of higher education.

However, the questions of how much of the above cited students' perceptions are in fact encouraged by the curriculum and methods of teaching and to what extent is students' learning influenced by these perceptions are valid ones. Students kept repeating the above statements about higher education throughout the investigation but there is little evidence to support the assumption that the kind of perceptions students hold about higher education are in fact supported by the learning programmes in the context under investigation. On the contrary, students themselves acknowledge that there is a gap between how they perceive higher education and the way they experience it in reality.

If we try to understand and locate the investigation of students' voices in higher education within the available literature, we can see that literature on students' perceptions of learning in higher education increasingly suggests that there is a potential relationship between students' perceptions and their understanding and approaches to learning (Chan, 2003). In addition, studies on learners' epistemological beliefs (defined as the beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning) revealed that such beliefs in the students do influence their performance and comprehension in important and predictable ways (Chan, 2003; Schommer, 1990, 1999).

My findings in this study, though, suggest that such assumptions need to be approached carefully. While the relationship between what students believe and how they learn is established and can be understood, there appear to be other factors which can also contribute to shaping this relationship such as the learning context and students' autonomy. That is, the relationship between students' perceptions and how they learn is not to be viewed as direct and automatic but is rather 'conditioned' by the context in which learning takes place and the choices which the learners make. In the context of this study, the findings show that many of the students do not learn according to how 'they' perceive learning in tertiary education, for in certain situations they *choose* to depend on their teachers and memorise information rather than trying to develop autonomous behaviour and critical thinking. This is, according to students, because the methods of teaching and evaluation system encourage such direction in and approach to learning. As for autonomy, depending on the learning situation and their own mood and feeling, students may decide that they need to make an effort in learning but in other situations they may decide that they should rather adopt an easy approach to learning by depending on the teacher and adopt rote learning by, for example, memorising information. In both cases, however, students are exercising a 'version' of their own autonomy (Benson, 2011). Littlewood (1999) refers to these two versions of autonomy as 'proactive' and 'reactive' autonomy respectively. In this sense, students can be seen as already autonomous and are exercising their autonomy rather than lacking it (Benson, 2009a; Smith, 2003)

In summary, taking into account the previous research findings on the important link between students' perceptions and approaches to learning and the ambiguity or lack of knowledge in students' perceptions of tertiary education as revealed through students' voices in this research, it becomes imperative for the decision-making authorities in the context under investigation (and elsewhere) to address this issue and take the necessary measures in this directions. More on how this can be achieved will be in the next chapter.

7.3.3. What we could learn from students' voices about 'language' learning in higher education

Having discussed what we might learn from students' voices about higher education, I now turn to discuss and attempt to interpret students' voices about 'language learning' in tertiary education. The discussion and interpretation of students' voices here aims to find out what we could learn from such voices about the internal (student-related) and external (contextual) factors which might influence language learning in the context under investigation. In

addition, it is hoped that the discussion and interpretation of the students' voices will shed light on many of the assumptions which language teachers and policy-making officials have about students and their motivation and capacities for learning.

Generally speaking, students appreciate the value of being able to understand and use a foreign language. From a study-related perspective, students realise that having a good command of English is a key factor of success in tertiary education. They appreciate the role English plays in their studies, given that English is the medium of instruction in all of their specialisation courses. From a professional and career-related perspective, they perceive English as a means to gain access knowledge and technology-based careers, which are increasingly becoming competitive and challenging over time.

Students' positive attitudes towards learning English can be understood within the overall status of English in the context under investigation as an international language of science and business (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011a). Teaching and Learning of English in Oman are encouraged and supported (financially) by the government as well as the private sector institutions. At a social level, there is also a culture of recognising and accepting English as a language of mutual understanding with the non-Arabic speaking individuals, be they professionals, business people or even tourists (Al-Jadidi, 2009). Parents also encourage their children to learn English at an early age so that they may become better prepared to compete in education and, later, in career. According to Al-Jadidi (2009):

“In Oman, as in other Arabic-speaking countries, graduate students with an outstanding command of written and spoken English are highly valued and accepted in the private, in oil companies in particular, where English is the only means of communication in that workplace” (p.21).

One fact that all students realise is that English is indispensable for their success in higher education. As such, there has been an increasing demand for different types of language courses at different levels of proficiency by the local community. ELT in Oman has therefore become a thriving business and the language teaching centres and institutes have recently flourished across the country. So generally speaking, motivation for learning and teaching English is expected at the personal as well as institutional levels (for more on the English Language Learning and Teaching (ELLT) situation in Oman, see chapter one, sections 1.7 and 1.8).

7.3.3.1. *Four general observations*

Before delving into the specific pedagogical issues which arise from students' voices and their implications for theory and practice, I would like to make four general, but critical, observations. These observations are general and based on the findings as a whole rather than on a specific area of investigation. It is worth noting here, though, that I limit myself to four general observations only to keep to the word limit of the thesis, otherwise more issues could well emerge from the main as well as secondary data analysis.

First of all, from a cognitive perspective, the way students described their language learning reveals a high level of **awareness of their cognitive and thinking abilities**. For example, they do recognise that learning at the university level requires the types of thinking and cognitive abilities that are different from those they used to apply when they were at school. Throughout the RGCs, and during the specific learning tasks they worked on and discussed during the fourth RGC, in particular, students appeared to use complex cognitive capacities such as the capacity to analyse, critique, evaluate and reflect on what and how they are learning.

Another observation which can be made based on students' voices is that their capacities for deep and critical thinking as well as effective learning are conditioned by the **learning situation** they are in. Experience has shown that provision of the appropriate content, tools and methods in the learning situation can result in more motivation for learning and, likely, better learning outcomes. In the present research for example, my participants were able to articulate and exhibit a complex cognitive and metacognitive capacity when these were triggered through the stimulating, reflective and in-depth conversations which I employed in the investigation. The same principles can be applied to the classroom environment. Students can interact with the teacher and what they are learning in a better way when they feel that their needs and interests are being met. Likewise, they may choose *not* to do so if what they are learning or the teacher's methods of teaching do not match or are disparate from their own 'agendas'. In this respect, Krishnan and Hoon (2002), for example, reported successful implementation of reflective diaries with their students in a multicultural language learning setting. In their study, students were provided with the appropriate tool and saw the need for and benefits of reflecting on their language learning. So learning environment is an important condition for (and determiner of) the type of thinking and learning behaviour students choose to exhibit in a given learning situation. Smith (2003) and Benson (2009a) maintain that some aspects of learners' learning are 'suppressed' by some educational systems or practices. In addition, Breen and Mann (1997) talk about the possibility of students giving up their

autonomous behaviour and putting on the ‘mask of autonomy’ to please the teacher in cases when what they are learning does not appeal to them or the learning environment is not stimulating or attractive enough for them. Students of course vary in their capacities for reflection and thinking beyond what they are used to, but the unescapable fact here is that such empirical findings just testify to the fact that that we teachers sometimes overlook the potential of our students and that we need to reconsider the assumptions we make about the capacities of our students in and for learning.

Disparity between students’ perceptions and experiences is another observation which can be made based on students’ voices. The analysis has revealed that the way students perceive their language learning is not what they actually experience in their context. Earlier in this chapter, I have raised the question of the extent to which students’ perceptions of higher education in their context can be viewed as a manifestation of what they actually experience in reality. The analysis has revealed that while students perceive their active roles in and responsibility for language learning as essential in learning at tertiary education, on the whole they do not experience such roles and responsibility in their context. Let’s consider the following two exchanges I had with groups C and B which shows how students perceive their role in learning:

(RA1c): “So who has a bigger role here?”

(PA1c): “The student.”

(PA1c): “I think it's 90% for the student and 10% for the teacher.”

(RA1c): “Is this what’s happening in reality or it’s what you think *should* happen?”

(PA1c): “This is what should happen.”

(PB1c): “for me I think students should be given a greater responsibility.”

(RB1c): “What about in language courses?”

(PB1c): “In language learning I think students should be given 90-95%”

(RB1c): “90 to 95%! Is this what is happening in reality or is it what you think should be happening?”

(PB1c): “No, this is what should be happening but in reality just reverse the percentages!”

- Laughter!!

(RB1c): “Only 10 to 5%!!! But you have just said that in higher education you're enjoying quite a good margin of freedom and independence?!”

(PB1c): “Yes we have said that but [here] we're talking about the freedom and independence which we ‘wish’ to have”.

Such a disparity between students' perceptions and experiences does not exist because the principles and values of promoting students' autonomy and allowing them a greater voice in their learning are not recognised in their context, but rather such principles and benefits function largely at the theoretical level and the practising teachers vary in the way they define and apply them. At the end of the day, most students do not feel that language learning and teaching in their context reflects such principles and values, nor do they feel that the teaching and learning system in their context is flexible enough to accommodate their voices.

Policy documents and curriculum statements *do* in fact suggest that autonomy is expected in the students and that the teaching methods and activities are set to enhance autonomous learning and thinking in the students. I have already cited Borg (2006) in chapter two who maintains that the language curriculum reflects contemporary thinking in ELLT. He also asserts that the new ELLT curriculum emphasises meaningful and purposeful language use, promotes self-assessment and provides a variety of interactive and motivating language learning experiences. In addition, the new vision of education in Oman, as outlined in the policy documents, assumes more interaction in the classroom between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves who are assumed to play an active role in their learning (For a detailed critical account of the language learning and teaching situation in Oman, see Al-Saadi, 2011). However, one inescapable fact is that the reality of language learning and teaching in Oman remains far from what the policy documents preach. The findings of the present study on the disparity between students' perceptions of how language learning should be conducted in their context and the actual conduct of language courses are in line with that of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) who found that although activities for promoting autonomy in language learning such as independent study projects and portfolios are built into the courses, the existing strategies for promoting autonomy are not achieving the desired results. On the disparity between theory and practice in the ELLT practice in Oman, Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a) conclude their paper on educational reform in Oman by emphasising that "ELT reform in Oman has changed in theory but has been largely otherwise in practice, and that disparity between theory and practice still exists and persists" (p.30). In the same vein, Al-Mahrooqi and Assante (2012) postulate that

"A significant proportion of Omani students at any level on the educational ladder do not attain the level of autonomy and success in the earning of English that matches the amount of government investment in their language education" (p.480).

In such cases, however, Smith (2003) warns against placing the blame on the learners and running into the conclusion that they lack the capacity for autonomous learning. It could be that, as Smith emphasises, the approach is the one to be criticised:

“If learners in a particular context do not appear to respond well to a particular approach to developing autonomy, this – in itself – is no reason to assert that that they lack autonomy or that the goal of autonomy is inappropriate: it might be the approach which needs to be criticised, not the students or the validity of autonomy itself” (p.130).

Finally on this issue, Benson (2011) maintains that “the obstacles to autonomy lie less on the abilities or willingness of students than in the social and political problems involved in altering established routines for teaching and learning” (p.120).

The fourth and perhaps a unique observation of this research concerns the **mismatch between the findings of this study and those reported by other studies** within the ELLT context in Oman. While the findings of the present study concerning specific aspects of the language learning and teaching context in Oman are in agreement with those featured in the ELLT research, they offer a different perspective when it comes to describing language learners and their capacities for learning. That is, the way students’ capacities for and habits of language learning have been described and depicted in the existing research should be approached carefully and critically in light of the fresh insights offered by the present study. For example, the ELLT literature in the context under investigation usually describes learners as teacher-dependent, lacking self-motivation and tend to adopt surface approaches to learning. However, students’ perceptions I investigated in this study have revealed that students in general do *not* enjoy being spoon-fed and controlled by the teacher, do possess and apply autonomous and critical thinking and are generally aware of their capacities for (autonomous) language learning. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study have shown that the kind of environment in which learning takes place plays a key role in when and how students put such capacities for learning in use. According to Lamb and Reinders (2007) “students’ constructs about learning are always associated with a context, i.e., they do not exist in a vacuum” (p.191).

There are a number of examples where students’ capacities for autonomous thinking and learning have been underestimated or overlooked in the ELLT literature in Oman. First of all, recent studies such as by Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a), Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and

Goodliffe (2005) depict the vast majority of students in higher education institutions as being teacher-dependent and lacking self-direction. Regardless of how such conclusions have been arrived at methodologically (I will discuss some methodological concerns of the available studies later in this section), the exploration of students' perceptions of their role in language learning as well as those of the teacher reveals that students show a high tendency towards and capacity for self-direction and independent language learning. In other words, students may not be teacher-dependent in the same holistic way depicted by the above studies. On the contrary, we have seen in the analysis chapter of this thesis (chapter six) that on many occasions and aspects of their learning, students complained that they are not being given an adequate role in their learning and that teachers take control of almost the entire learning process including setting learning goals, selecting teaching and learning materials, deciding on evaluation methods and schemes, etc. Moreover, students do not only appreciate being given a greater role and voice in their learning but they are also aware of the benefits and contribution of their role and voice to their learning and regard them amongst the important ingredients for effective learning. The results of this study has also showed that students have developed awareness about the benefits of independence and self-direction in language learning by experiencing language learning on their own as well as with others outside the classroom. In addition, similar results have been arrived at in the analysis of students' perceptions of the potential constraints on their language learning. In this respect, they consider teacher' over control of learning as one of the top impediments to their learning (for examples of quotes from RGCs on this issue, please see chapter six).

Furthermore, in the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), students were perceived by their teachers as lacking motivation and skills for independent learning. Teachers in the same study perceived their students as having low expectations of what they can achieve and experiencing difficulty with other incidents of learning such as extra-curricular activities. The very issue of independent out-of-class language learning was explored thoroughly in the present study (see the investigation grid in chapter four, section 4.6.1.5). The first and most inclusive finding in this regard was students' acknowledgement that language learning could and does take place outside the classroom. The findings also suggest that students *do* have the motivation and desire for independent (or interdependent) language learning as well as high expectations of what they can achieve on their own. To add more, this kind of learning is often perceived by students as more effective, for it is free from the limitations which they usually experience in a typical language learning setting in the classroom such as teacher's control and ready-made curriculum. What students enjoy most about out-of-class learning is

the control and choices this kind of learning offers. They also perceive out-of-class learning as being more flexible and longer-lasting than classroom learning. Last but not least, students reported that another (and perhaps a practical) motivation for adopting independent learning is the poor teaching methods. That is, for many students, the only way they could comprehend the course content is by exploring other sources of information such as asking previous students who had taken the same course before or searching for relevant content on the Internet. So we can see that independent and out-of-class learning sometime become necessary in cases where neither course materials nor the teacher's input are sufficient.

As for their perceptions of and preferences for different forms of assessment, Goodliffe (2005) observes that students have negative attitudes towards new forms of formative assessment such as making presentations, portfolios of work, case studies, project work and peer assessment. She explains that all of these assessment approaches "are a new challenge to the students' idea of assessment and evaluation as there are no formal examinations" (p.6). Moreover, students at Caledonian Engineering College, where she conducted her investigation, were found to be more comfortable with examinations, which have more 'face validity' as opposed to other means of formative assessment. According to the same study, students in Oman are also found to perceive grades as something 'bestowed' by the teacher and not a result of their effort. This attitude, she concludes, is shared by learners in other higher education institutions in Oman. The current investigation encompassed students' perceptions of exams and evaluation methods in tertiary education and touched upon specific aspects of exams such as the different methods of evaluation and what marks means to them. Nevertheless, the results gained in this respect suggest a different reality. As the analysis in the previous chapter reveals (see chapter six, section 6.3.4), although students have their own reservations about the actual focus and conduct of exams at the tertiary level, they do appreciate the different methods of evaluation which are employed in some of the courses such as learning portfolios and group presentations. On the very issue of portfolios, while they do not like the way teachers impose on them certain methods for keeping their portfolios, they acknowledge the fact that that portfolios in general help them learn and organise their writing and vocabulary in a better way. On the other hand, they perceive quizzes as only testing their course information. For example, in the following quote, a student in group B critiques exams for not showing their actual proficiency in English:

"I disagree with the idea of exams. I think grades do not show my real level in the language...It doesn't show my real level in English. I don't see it as a logical evaluation of our actual level. Because of the nature of the exam, multiple-choice, somebody who doesn't study well or even doesn't know

English could get a (C) or (B), just by chance. So I feel I have learned English but the low grades I get in the exam do not really show it” (PB1b).

So we can see that, counter to what the above studies suggest, students *do* have their reservations about the traditional assessment methods such as quizzes and exams and indeed appreciate having different methods for evaluating their learning.

From another angle, studies such as the ones I cited above usually interpret students’ behaviour in a given learning situation from a single perspective allowing no room for different interpretations or understanding. For example, these studies offer no clues as to whether the statements they are making about students are to be understood as reflecting the students’ actual beliefs and thinking about learning or rather their ‘reactive’ behaviour and thinking which students exhibit as a reaction to the kind of learning and teaching situation they are in. The findings of the present study, however, suggest that they are more of the latter. As such, the fresh insights offered by the present study into language learners’ perceptions of and capacities for language learning raise conceptual and methodological concerns about the way such constructs have been explored in previous research. One way to explain the discrepancy in the findings between the present study and those of the previous research is that concepts such as learner autonomy, learner voice and capacities for language learning might have been understood and interpreted, and thus explored, differently. I mentioned earlier in chapter three (see section 3.2.1) that in the context under investigation, the concept of students’ voice is usually reduced to students’ needs and, at its best, their opinions.

Methodologically, exploring such complex concepts and constructs only quantitatively using, for example questionnaires or even qualitatively using structured or one-to-one interviews, may result in superficial and sometimes bizarre results. According to Sinclair (2000),

“...the adherence to solely quantitative research methods in the attempt to seek empirical proof of learner autonomy had led, in some cases, to inconclusive or even bizarre research results which provide little in the way of useful insights” (p. 14).

I explained in the methodology chapter (see chapter four) that in order to gain a useful insight into and do justice to complex and multi-dimensional constructs such as perceptions, voices, autonomy, metacognition, etc., one needs to employ suitable qualitative methodologies and

approaches which respond to the nature of the context as well as the concepts being explored. In this respect, Gao (2007) observes that “The field has been challenged by its over dependence on the survey method, which leads to decontextualised, ahistorical, correlational picture of the learners” (p.193). As such, it is important that the method(s) employed in data collection is flexible enough to cater for the context in which learning takes place as well as the varying ways students use to express themselves. It should also allow a greater depth into the issues being explored, for depending on the verbal and observable behaviour of the learner alone may not offer the intended results.

The findings of the present study are *not* unique to this particular context; similar results have been reported elsewhere. Chan (2001), for example reports on a study which aims at determining the applicability of learner autonomy in tertiary education in Hong Kong. The findings were unexpected and, as it is the case with the results gained from my study, present a different understanding of the students in that context. She reflects on her finding as follows:

“There were strong indications of a highly positive attitude towards learning autonomously than one would expect in the local context. The study results were unexpected and somewhat surprising given the fact that this group of learners largely come from traditional and authoritative backgrounds” (p.513).

Smith (2003) also reports similar results from his investigation of autonomy in his Japanese students. A more recent study which explored learners’ beliefs and practices concerning autonomous language learning has been in the UAE by Al Ghazali (2011b). Both Smith (2003) and Al Ghazali (2011b) have concluded that students in general are already autonomous but their autonomy is largely constrained by the learning context.

The reason why I cite these particular studies is that learners in these contexts come from more or less the same educational backgrounds as the students in the present study, which are largely characterised as being authoritative and teacher-led. Students in these contexts are often perceived as lacking readiness and the capacity for autonomous language learning.

7.3.3.2. Other specific issues

I now turn to discuss three specific issues which emerged from the data on students’ voices concerning their language learning in higher education. These issues link back to the main research questions and include:

- The issue of role and control
- Constraints on language learning
- Perspectives on having a greater role in and more responsibility for language learning.

- *The issue of role and control*

The first specific issues which emerged from the data on students' voices concerning their language learning in higher education is to do with students' role in and control over their language learning. To begin with, when discussing role and control in the context of language learning and autonomy, one could not overlook the three dimensions of control suggested by Benson (2011): control over **learning management**, control over **learning content** and control over **cognitive processing**. Figure (7.1) below shows these dimensions of control and the interrelated relationship between them.

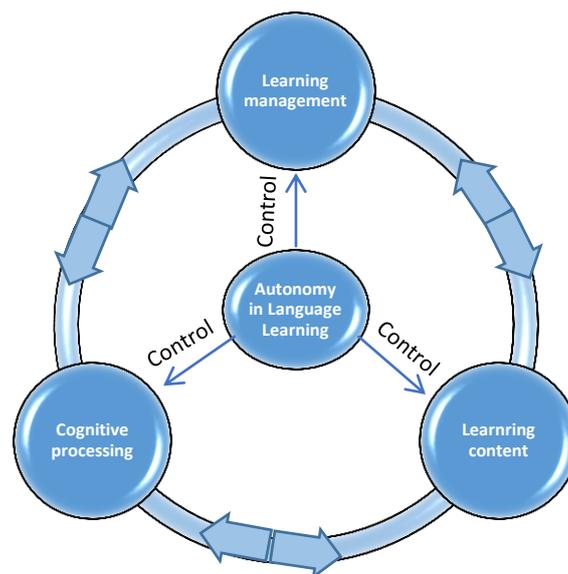


Figure 7.1: Dimensions of control in language learning (adapted from Benson, 2011)

Control over learning management involves planning, organisation and evaluation of learning while control over learning content is an aspect of control over learning management and concerns 'what' is being learned and 'why' it is being learned. Control over cognitive processing, on the other hand, is concerned with the pure cognitive capacities which enable learners to manage their learning and the learning content. In this sense, control over cognitive processing can be understood as a pre-requisite to control over both learning management and learning content. The three dimensions of control are interrelated, thus for

learners to enjoy, using Benson's (2011) term, 'authentic autonomy', they will need to exercise control over the three dimensions of control together. The double-sided arrows in the diagram above denote such a relationship between the three dimensions of control.

To apply Benson's model to the findings of the present study, we can see that through the various focused discussions, reflections and tasks which they were involved in throughout the investigation, students were found to have more control over cognitive processing and, to some extent, learning management than they do over learning content. For example, the findings revealed that students in the context under investigation are not involved in choosing or planning the content of their courses or even the topics of the reading class: "students do not have choice over the content because the syllabus is already there" (PB3). Another student in group A also commented "... we are told what to study and the teachers teach us the way *they* think is right" (PA3). As for the learning management, students did show a capacity for planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning. I have discussed this under 'metacognitive knowledge' in the analysis chapter (see chapter six, section 6.4).

Nevertheless, this seems to be only true at the formal or classroom learning level. According to the data obtained in this study, students reported exercising almost total control over all aspects of their out-of-class language learning, including the three dimensions of control suggested by Benson (2011). In the analysis chapter I cited the example where one of group C students managed to learn Korean and Japanese through TV series and cartoons. In this very unique independent language learning experience, the student was self-motivated and had full control over what, when, and how she was learning. Other students also reported successful attempts to develop their language skills on their own using different means and tools such as reading newspapers and short stories in English, practising their English through interacting with friends over the Internet and their oral skills with English-speaking people in their local community.

Similar findings have also been reported by Fazey and Fazey (2001) who investigated the predispositions for autonomous learning in first year undergraduate students in Wales in the UK. The authors found out that while their students possessed the potential for autonomous learning, the demonstration and development of such a potential was conditioned by the teaching and learning environment. They point out that "the higher education curriculum and teaching methodology is too often tightly prescribed and staff controlling" (p.358). So we can see that, regardless of the learners' cultural background, the environment in which learning takes place plays a key role in what, when and how students can exercise control over their

learning. That is, the learning environment can either facilitate or hinder language learning (Littlewood, 1999).

However, what we actually need to consider is *not* the degree to which students are free from the control of others but the degree to which they are *in* control of their own learning (Benson, 2010). This is because freedom from control of others does not guarantee that students would automatically take control of their own learning. This may have to do with learner-related factors such as the learner's mood, motivation and/or learning needs. We therefore need to find out and understand what elements of the learning environment contribute towards facilitating or hindering learning. In this respect, one of the constraints on language learning in the context under investigation, in my view and as experience shows, is that English is commonly viewed as yet another subject in the school curriculum or a course at the college which students will have to take in order to learn English. Such perception seems to be commonly-held, especially by learners and some practising teachers at the early stages of both school and tertiary education. The problem with such a perception is that it might inform practice and, thus, give the impression that English can only be learned in the classroom. In this regard, Benson (2009b) problematizes the distinction between classroom and non-classroom settings and suggests that language learning should be viewed as taking place in everyday life. As I have detailed in the analysis chapter (see chapter six), students in the present study appear to recognise the features and benefits of out-of-class language learning and are able to employ tools and successful strategies to this end. That is, the issue of role and control is perceived differently by the students when it comes to learning English on their own outside the classroom.

Besides featuring students' role in and control over language learning in their context, students' voices in this respect also feature those of the teacher. We have seen in the analysis chapter that students in the context under investigation have their own perceptions of the type and scope of role which the teacher should have in the learning process. In addition, students appear to recognise the benefits as well as limitations of the degree to which the teacher exercises his/her role in and control over the language learning process. More importantly, however, students' voices have revealed that students' perceptions of the teacher's role in and control over language learning are not what they actually experience in reality. While they expect the teacher in higher education to facilitate and support their autonomous language learning, they describe him/her as having a dominant role over learning, particularly when it comes to choosing learning content and modes of delivery and evaluation. There is of course a whole culture behind such (over)dominance but perhaps one way to explain it may be

through the available empirical evidence of the teacher's lack of confidence in their students' capacity to take control over certain aspects of their learning. For example, the findings of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), who surveyed teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy at the Language Centre where the present study took place, show that although teachers may appear to be positive about the desirability of students' involvement in their learning, they are not so about the 'feasibility' of such involvement, especially in relation to setting learning goals and assessment. Another relevant example of the mismatch between policy and practice is cited by Vieira (2003) on the learning and teaching situation in Portugal. She notes that:

“Although educational discourses and policies in Portugal appear to encourage the development of autonomous learning, reflective teacher education and even school-university partnerships, there is still a long way to go before dominant educational practices address these goals” (p.233).

Amongst the challenges which Vieira and her team members had to deal with in their pedagogy for autonomy project in Portugal were dominant educational practices and institutional resistance to change. Such challenges and mismatch between policy and practice are reminiscent of the features of educational policies and practices in the context under investigation. Finally, Voller (1997) explains that teachers exercise their role in and control over language learning based on both the assumptions they make about language and language learning at the approach level and suggests that roles should be 'negotiated' with the learners.

- *Constraints on language learning*

Having discussed what we could learn from students' voices about role and control in the context under investigation, I now turn to discuss what we could learn from students' voices about **constraints** on their language learning. Teaching and learning are undoubtedly facilitated or constrained by personal factors as well as the environment. As such, addressing constraints in teaching and learning contexts can contribute positively to understanding both the characteristics of learners as well as teaching and learning environment and, thus, counteracting dominant educational practices (Vieira, 2003). The investigation of constraints in the present study encompassed two aspects: 'internal' constraints: those relating to the students' knowledge, attitudes, abilities and skills; as well as 'external' constraints which relate to influencing elements or factors in the learning environment such as the teacher,

curriculum and the wider society. As the analysis in the previous chapter has showed, the internal and external constraints on language learning tend to interrelate and intertwine with one another. However, I find it useful to discuss them separately here so that we tease out what we could possibly learn from each individual type in relation to language learning and autonomy in the context under investigation. Generally speaking, students' voices about constraints can offer rich insights into at least three areas:

1. Students' knowledge about themselves as language learners (person knowledge)
2. Characteristics of the learning environment under investigation
3. Students' knowledge about what effective language learning entails.

To begin with, findings from the present study have shown that students' introspective and retrospective thinking, which particularly focused on the potential internal factors that might either facilitate or inhibit their learning, has helped them a great deal in developing a better understanding of themselves as learners (**person knowledge**). Such reflective thinking has also helped students to develop awareness about their strengths and weaknesses in relation to language learning in and outside the classroom. In this respect, the reflective discussion included how students may contribute to limiting their own chances of success in language learning, even unconsciously, which has hopefully helped them to develop better awareness of those personal and cognitive elements. This was evident through the reflective session which we had at the end of the investigation to explore the potential impact the research might have on the participants (see chapter six, section 6.6). It might have also contributed to identify what otherwise students considered as external or environment-based impediments to their learning. For example, finding opportunities for practice was one of the factors which students identified as an external or contextual factor which limits the development of their language proficiency. Through the assisted reflective discussions, however, students have realised that *they* do play a role in creating such opportunities for practice, given the somewhat technologically-rich environment they are learning in. Other internal elements such as learning styles, approach, intrinsic motivation, etc. have also been recognised by students as important factors of success in language learning. Similar findings were also reported by Krishnan and Hoon (2002) who used reflective diaries to explore how teachers and course developers could improve teaching and learning by listening to EFL students' voices in a multi-cultural setting in Singapore. The authors postulate that the opportunity to reflect can help learners to make connections between themselves and, thus, take steps to overcome learning obstacles.

In addition, students' voices about internal constraints could offer teachers and course developers useful first-hand and authentic data on students' perceptions of their learning, personality as well as cognitive and learning styles (Wenden, 1991). Such information can help them design materials and focus teaching in a way that tackles those elements in students' personality and cognitive and learning styles which may contribute towards slowing down or impeding learning.

In short, the way students reflect on and describe the internal constraints on their language learning can make it possible to find out how they perceive their aptitude for language and, in this way, help them to reflect on it in order to increase the rate of and chances for ultimate success in language learning.

The second area which students' voices about constraints offer insights into is the **characteristics of the learning environment**. Students' voices about their learning context can provide a valid and authentic profile of the elements in that context which either facilitate or inhibit learning. In relation to the present study, a great deal of reflective thoughts have been offered by the students on their learning context. Generally speaking, students do recognise the encouraging and positive learning atmosphere in tertiary education where they are given a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning in certain subjects. However, by and large, this remains only in comparison with the kind of set and highly controlled learning environment which they had experienced at school. A more critical and deeper exploration of their actual experiences of the language learning environment in tertiary education, however, revealed a different picture. I have already discussed some of the essential characteristics of the teaching and learning situation in the context under investigation in the previous sections in this chapter. What is important here, though, is that the profile provided by students on their learning environment has direct implications for their own language learning, course developers and the practising teachers. In order for our efforts of improving learning and teaching outcomes to prove effective, students' observations and assertions in this respect will need to be taken seriously.

Finally, students' voices about constraints offer insights into **what effective language learning entails**. By discussing the personal and contextual constraints on language learning, students provide yet another dimension to our understanding of what constitutes effective language learning and who the effective language learner is, this time from a purely students' perspective. The analysis of students' perceptions of constraints has yielded an exhaustive list of factors which students see as impediments to their language learning. The list covers various aspects of their language learning including their limited roles in and responsibility

for language learning, the rigid exam and evaluation system, emphasis on teaching rather than learning, inflexible teaching methods, etc. Students associate such factors with a lost opportunity to learn language effectively. For example, the limited opportunity students have for making choices about how and what they are learning are seen as directly *decreasing* the possibility for better and more effective language learning. Likewise, teaching and evaluation methods which emphasise information transfer and reproduction render learning rather a mechanical process of information memorisation and retrieval and, as such, encourage students to adopt a rather ‘superficial’ approach to learning, as opposed to ‘deep’ approach (for a discussion on the distinction between deep and surface approaches to learning, see Lublin, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Russell, 2004).

In a nutshell, one apparent finding of the present study is that students in the context under investigation are indeed aware of what effective language learning entails. Students’ list of the contributing factors of effective language learning relates in one way or another to the following basic principle of autonomous language learning: having a greater role in more responsibility for language learning. The implications of such findings, however, are relevant to different stake holders in the context under investigation including teachers, course developers as well as parents. The findings also call for further research on students’ perceptions of language learning in order to further understand the nature of the relationship between students’ perceptions of what makes effective language learning and their language learning behaviour, i.e., is such a relationship always positive, and what are the potential personal and contextual factors which govern such a relationship.

- ***Perspectives on having a greater role in and more responsibility for language learning***

So far I have discussed two specific issues which could be learned from the students’ voices: the issue of role and control and constraints on language learning. The third specific issue which unfolds from students’ voices is their **perspectives** on how they might have a greater role in and more responsibility for their language learning. The findings from this part of the research cannot be discussed separately from those on the internal and external constraints on language learning as well as students’ perspectives on what makes effective language learning, for these three issues remain inseparable when it comes to exploring students’ voices about their learning environment. I have presented in the previous chapter the students’ suggestions and views concerning how language learning could be improved in their context. My goal in this section is, therefore, to try to tease out what these suggestions

and views might mean in light of the overall theme of the research: voice and autonomy in language learning in Oman, as well as the recent public demands for change and having a greater voice at the social, political and educational levels in Oman, as described in chapter one.

Students' perspectives offer rich insights into various aspects of language learning and teaching in the context under investigation. First of all, the nature of the perspectives students have for enhancing learning in general, and *language* learning in particular, suggest that they indeed have developed mature thinking, awareness and understanding about themselves as language learners as well as about what language learning and teaching in tertiary education entails. This is evident through the level of argument and justifications which students have in support for their suggestions. Regardless of the extent to which these arguments and justifications are convincing to the teaching staff and authorities, they do raise valid concerns and suggestions.

Secondly, students' perspectives shed light on important aspects of language learning and teaching which may be overlooked by many of the teaching staff. Experience shows that some teachers keep hold to some of the teaching methods and take them for granted as working teaching methods. As such, the value of the students' perspectives offered by this study lies in the fact that they represent fresh, authentic and, most importantly, different viewpoints offered by the students themselves. In support of this, the literature offers cogent arguments of the valuable contributions students can make towards enhancing their own learning (see for example, Breen, 2001). The analysis has showed that on several occasions, students demanded a greater involvement in planning their learning, including selection of topics and assessment methods. Furthermore, through their suggestions, views and voices about enhancing language learning outcomes in their context, students express their eagerness to be part of the learning process and exercise their agency for making choice. Students feel that they are not being involved in their own learning nor are their voices being heard. In other words, students feel they lack the sense of ownership of their learning. Unlike the findings from some local research where students are depicted as lacking readiness and capacity for taking control over their own learning (see for example, Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012; Goodliffe, 2005), the findings of the present study reveal that students have highly positive attitudes and aptitude for learning language autonomously (this is of course within the students' own perceptions of autonomy), and that the educational system and practices (including materials and methods of teaching and evaluation) can play a key role in either supporting or supressing students' capacity for autonomous thinking and learning.

Last but not least, students' perspectives offer a valuable source of information for any endeavour aiming at enhancing language learning outcomes. Indeed they offer a springboard for reflection and future research on this important, yet neglected, area in our educational system.

7.4. Autonomy manifestation

This section should provide responses to the second part of the fifth research question which looks into how autonomy might manifest itself in the students' voices (see chapter two, section 2.8). Autonomy manifestation in students' voices was explored in this research in relation to a) the strong version of autonomy suggested by Smith (2003) where autonomy is viewed as a capacity which already exists in the learners to a varying degree rather than it is something they are deficient in, and b) research findings which suggest that learner autonomy manifests itself in various situations and takes different shapes and sizes (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991). In addition, this question is justified on the grounds that any responses gained in this respect will hopefully provide bases for theorising about the type, shape and characteristics of autonomy which exists in the learners and are able to exercise in the context under investigation. This, in turn, should facilitate the development of a context-sensitive definition and understanding of learner autonomy in the context under investigation, which is one of the aims of the present investigation (see aims of the study in chapter two, section 2.7).

Before delving into how autonomy manifests itself through students' voices, it is essential that I show awareness and be critical about the types, versions and dimensions of autonomy which I will be looking for in the students' voices. To do justice to the term, I will, for now, employ the definition of autonomy which is commonly cited in the literature: the capacity to take control of one's own learning (Benson, 2011). However, there is more to autonomous learning than just a certain capacity (Reinders, 2011). Autonomy in language learning has now been widely recognised as a 'metacapacity', complex construct, and a construct of constructs which entails various dimensions and components, including cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social components (Murray, 2014; Tassinari, 2008). In terms of general orientations to autonomy, there are proactive and reactive versions of autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). In addition, the capacity for self-regulation and self-management is considered as a principal requirement for any truly autonomous learning act (Lamb, 2005). For Reinders (2011), however, having the capacity or ability to learn autonomously is not enough. It has to be accompanied by an action, for having the capacity and ability to learn autonomously but not doing so would hardly be useful. He emphasises the role of conscious action in the learning process.

The above brief demarcation of autonomy is seen as useful at this stage, for autonomy manifestation in the students' voices will be identified based on such components, capacities and understandings of autonomy. Nevertheless, keeping to the aims defined for this research, another context-sensitive and data-driven definition and understanding of autonomy in the Omani context will be developed later based on students' voices in this regard. Autonomy will therefore be observed in the students' voices about their language learning in and outside the classroom and will encompass the following four main aspects of the investigation: perceptions, metacognitive knowledge, perspectives and reflections (see the investigation grid in chapter four, section 4.6.1.5)

7.4.1. Autonomy manifestation in students' perceptions of learning

The current investigation was designed to explore students' voices and autonomy in language learning in the Omani tertiary education context. However, as I explained earlier in chapter six (see section 6.3.2), the investigation also encompassed students' voices about their language learning at the school level which, too, manifest a considerable capacity for autonomous thinking and learning. This is supported by the literature on learner autonomy which emphasises that autonomy as a capacity (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981; Little 1991) is a natural attribute of all human beings and that learners (including children) "naturally tend to exercise control over their learning" (Benson, 2011, p.118). A number of studies have explored autonomous capacities in young language learners and children (see for example, Dam, 1995; Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Ellis, 1998; Lamb, 2005; Sinclair, 1999) and suggested that even young learners (at the age of elementary and secondary schools) do in fact exercise their autonomy in certain learning situations and are able to, provided the employment of appropriate research methods, describe and justify their actions. For Benson (2010), "the adoption of a behaviour signals the possession of some underlying capacity" (p.85). The aim of this section is, therefore, to tease out evidence for such a capacity in the students' voices.

In the last three years of their education at the school level, most of the students taking part in this research reported taking important and timely decisions concerning their language learning at that stage. They recognised the need to improve the level of their proficiency in English in order to meet their future learning needs. To improve their language skills, students began to take English more seriously by paying extra attention inside the classroom as well as making more effort in learning the language outside the classroom. These included

hiring private tutors, taking supplementary language courses over the summer break or simply trying to learn English on their own by reading newspapers, short stories and watching movies in English, using the Internet or by practising their English with English speaking people in their local communities (the latter learning method was reported by students in the capital area where the chances for meeting and interacting with expatriates are higher than are in other remote areas). If autonomy in language learning is perceived as the capacity learners have to make ‘informed’ decisions about their learning (Sinclair, 1999) and involves developing critical awareness about what and how they are learning (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Reinders, 2010; Sinclair, 1999), it follows then that these students indeed used the capacity they had to take informed decisions and learn autonomously. Although the overall classroom atmosphere did not appear to encourage or foster autonomy in the students, as reported by the students themselves, and despite being simple and reactive, such measures taken by the students can be seen to characterise the type, shape and degree of autonomy they were having (and perhaps developing). In this regard, Benson (2010) indeed observes that “even under circumstances where learning is primarily other-controlled, notably in classrooms, students are likely to exercise some control over their learning” (p.81).

Moving on to students’ perceptions of learning in tertiary education, it is possible to trace evidence of their autonomy through the way students perceive (and also experience) various aspects of their learning. These include students’ perceptions of tertiary education in terms of the goals it seeks to achieve in addition to the nature and demands of learning at this stage. For example, students recognise that higher education (should) aim to develop in them independent thinking and sense of responsibility. As such, while they acknowledge the important role the teacher plays in their learning as a facilitator, reference and resource person, they appear to reject his/her over-dominance on the learning content and the way they should learn it (see chapter six for examples). They see themselves at this stage as mature enough to act independently and manage their own affairs both personally and academically. In fact, such inclination for maintaining autonomous thinking and behaviour and rejecting external pressures has been well recognised in the literature on autonomy as an innate and natural attribute of every human being (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991). In this respect, Little, Ridley and Ushioda (2002) maintain that we are biologically and psychologically autonomous and we are self-contained in the sense that we think our own thoughts, not anyone else. Finally, as for the nature and demands of language learning in higher education, students do recognise innovation as well as reflective and critical thinking as basic

requirements of success at this stage of their learning. I will now turn to discuss how autonomy manifests itself in the students' metacognitive knowledge.

7.4.2. Autonomy manifestation in students' metacognitive knowledge

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I have defined metacognitive knowledge as the type of knowledge which learners have about themselves as learners and the learning process (Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Ellis, 1998; Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive knowledge is usually classified into three types: person knowledge, task knowledge and strategic knowledge (Flavell, 1979, as cited in Wenden, 1998). In this research, however, a *fourth* category emerged during data analysis, which is also relevant to our discussion here: **knowledge about the learning environment or context**. In the literature on metacognitive knowledge, this category is either implicitly subcategorised under person knowledge or is completely ignored. Wenden (1998), for example, lists sociocultural factors under person knowledge and considers it as one of the factors which distinguish learners. Based on the findings of this study however, I would like to argue that students' knowledge about their learning context should be considered as a separate subcategory of metacognitive knowledge and an additional type of knowledge besides the existing three types. This type of metacognitive knowledge can be termed '**contextual knowledge**'.

Generally speaking, recent research findings suggest that metacognitive knowledge plays a key function in how learners make choices and decisions concerning their learning. It also informs and gives shape to students' approaches to learning and their expectations of the outcomes of their learning efforts (Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Ellis, 1999; Lamb, 2005; Wenden, 1998). The link between metacognitive knowledge and autonomy is well established in the literature on both theoretical and empirical grounds (Dam, 1995; Ellis, 1998; Sinclair, 1999). Metacognitive knowledge has been found to facilitate autonomous thinking and actions. Lamb (2005), for example, regards this type of knowledge as a basic requirement for self-management and self-regulation of one's own (and thus autonomous) learning. As such, metacognitive knowledge is increasingly recognised as a crucial component of autonomy (Tassinari, 2008). What is important and relevant to our discussion here is the assumption made in the literature that metacognitive knowledge is stable, i.e., available to awareness (Wenden, 1998). Learners can become conscious of and articulate the

knowledge they have about what they are learning, how they are learning it and why they are learning the way they do (Dam, 1995, Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Lamb, 2005; Sinclair, 1999). This knowledge can also emerge during the learning process (Brown et al, 1983, as cited in Wenden, 1998). Since autonomous learners are necessarily metacognitively aware (Little, 1991; Reinders, 2010), the argument that the exploration of autonomous thinking and behaviour in learners through their metacognitive knowledge becomes valid. As such, the purpose of this section is to tease out evidence of autonomous thinking and actions through the four categories of students' metacognitive knowledge: person, context, task and strategic knowledge.

7.4.2.1. Autonomy in person knowledge

Person knowledge is the general knowledge students have acquired about themselves as learners (Wenden, 1998). It encompasses a number of factors including human factors which either facilitate or inhibit learning, personality traits, learning style, aptitude and the ability to manage and utilise the resources necessary for (effective) learning, as well as their perceptions of their ability to achieve certain learning goals (Wenden, 1991, 1998). If we consider students' perceptions of themselves as learners and of their capacities for language learning (as detailed in the analysis chapter) against what person knowledge stands for, one can make a safe assumption that the students in this research *are* on the whole autonomous. In this respect, autonomy can be seen as manifesting itself through the students' reported capacity for having a greater role and control in their learning and assuming more responsibility for the choices they are making.

In the previous section, I have discussed how students' have showed control over the three dimensions of control suggested by Benson (2011): control over cognitive processes, control over learning management and control over learning content. Autonomy also manifests itself in the students' capacity for self-management and self-evaluation of their language learning. In addition, I have described in the analysis chapter (see chapter six, sections 6.3 & 6.4.2) that students are able to manage and evaluate the effectiveness of their own learning. This was true to a lesser extent in their classroom learning due to the teacher's over-dominance of learning, but to a greater extent in their out-of-class learning initiatives. Students' adoption of certain learning styles and learning approaches in learning based on their abilities and preferences is also an important indicator of their person knowledge. Wenden (1991) also lists motivation for learning and sociocultural factors as other important elements of students' person knowledge. Last but not least, autonomy can be seen to manifest itself through

students' recognition and awareness of their weaknesses and shortcomings in language learning, which characterise part of their person knowledge, and hence, autonomy.

7.4.2.2. Autonomy in knowledge of the learning context

Lamb's (2005) second category of voice refers to the learners' involvement in and influence over the learning context. I have mentioned earlier in this chapter that the learning environment can either facilitate or hinder language learning (Littlewood, 1999). However, for students to exercise such involvement and have influence over their learning context, they necessarily need to recognise the characteristics of their learning context as well as the various opportunities for and constraints on their learning which exist in their context.

The data gathered in this study reveal that, to varying degrees, students *do* show awareness of the opportunities for and constraints on their language learning in their context. Such awareness appears to manifest itself in three dimensions: a) opportunities for and constraints on language learning in their immediate community, b) opportunities for and constraints on language learning inside the classroom, c) the disparity which exists between how they perceive language learning and teaching in their context and how they actually experience it.

At the community level, while students recognise the limited opportunities available to them to practise their language, due to various institutional and social factors including the existence of a sub-culture of indifference to English (see Al Mahrooqi & Asante, 2012), they do appear to be able to make use of whatever learning opportunities are available to them outside the classroom. These may include enrolling in private language courses, searching for learning resources on the Internet or practising their English in their local community when, for instance, go shopping. Independent out-of-class learning is also highly appreciated by students for both being self-driven and effective. As the data of this study show, such awareness and actions appear to be more obvious in the students as they progress in their learning at both school and university.

Likewise, the data show that students exhibit a reasonable level of recognition of the impediments to their classroom language learning imposed by the fixed, unnegotiated curriculum, rigid exam system and teaching methods. These represent part of a more exhaustive list of 'external' constraints on language learning suggested by students and discussed in the RGCs.

The third dimension to students' awareness of their language learning context is their awareness of the disparity between how students perceive language learning in tertiary education and what they actually experience in their everyday academic life. Relevant to our discussion in this section of autonomy manifestation is that students' awareness of such a discrepancy can be considered as an important constituent of their overall capacity for critical and thus, autonomous thinking.

It is important to note here, though, that students do not only report having the capacity to think and learn autonomously but are also able to take important decisions in service of their language learning. For Reinders (2011), having the capacity or ability to learn autonomously is not enough. It has to be accompanied by an action, for having the capacity or ability to learn autonomously but not doing so would hardly be useful. In this respect, Reinders emphasises the role of conscious action in the learning process.

7.4.2.3. Autonomy in task knowledge

According to Wenden (1998) task knowledge has three facets: what learners know about the purpose of the task, how it will serve their language learning needs and the various demands of the task. This category of metacognitive knowledge is usually distinguished from 'domain knowledge' which, according to Wenden (1998) and other writers, refers to the conceptual and factual knowledge students have about the language they are learning. As the analysis in this study has showed, task knowledge has manifested itself, to various degrees according to individual student's capacity for learning and learning needs, through the types and ranges of language learning tasks which they were involved in both in and outside the classroom.

If autonomy can be seen through the awareness and knowledge students have about *why* they are carrying out certain language learning tasks, *what* cognitive abilities and skills such tasks require and *how* such tasks might contribute to their language learning, then the majority of students in this study can be said to be highly autonomous in the sense that they demonstrated possession of the three following components of task knowledge: clarity of purpose, function and demands. Most of the students get engaged in various independent out-of-class language learning activities for reasons they are well aware of. For example, some of the students reported taking English language courses over the summer holiday which they had to pay for. Others learned English (and other languages such as Japanese and Korean, as it was the case with one of the students in group C) on their own. Autonomy in language learning tasks outside the classroom also manifested itself through students' control over a) the type(s) of

the tasks they choose to work on (learning content), b) when they carry out these tasks (learning time), c) how they carry out the tasks (learning method) as well as d) with what results they are carrying out these tasks (learning evaluation).

At the classroom level, although having much less control over what, when and how they learn, students did show having a considerable level of knowledge about the type, nature, demands, functions and value of the language learning tasks they had to do in the classroom. In fact, students were critical in their view to the content and conduct of the learning tasks and activities which they had to do in the classroom. Such criticality included the level of difficulty of the learning tasks, strong and weak points of the tasks, how the learning tasks link to each other, how they contribute to the students' overall language development, the learning outcome of the tasks and how such tasks could be improved and reintroduced to students either in class or online.

7.4.2.4. Autonomy in strategic knowledge

This is the fourth category of metacognitive knowledge where students' autonomy has also been evident. Drawing on the Wenden's (1998) definition, strategic knowledge in the context of this research refers to the students' knowledge about the range and usefulness of strategies available at their disposal. It encompasses knowledge of strategy type, strategy choice or use and strategy evaluation.

I have noted in chapter six (see section 6.4.5) that the kinds and range of learning strategies which I explored with the students were mostly, but not entirely, broad strategies such as memorising, understanding, watching films, keeping vocabulary reminders and using YouTube, rather than the kinds usually explored in specific strategy research, for example, how they memorise, understand, watch films, etc. Nevertheless, students' strategic knowledge was not limited to these broad strategies. Students did report using some micro-strategies when carrying out certain language learning tasks as the analysis below shows.

We learn from the literature that all learners use various types of learning strategies. However, autonomous and successful learners may appear to be more aware of their selection and use of the learning strategies which are available at their disposal (Sinclair, 1999). Such awareness may stem from student's knowledge of the usefulness of the strategies they are using. In the present research, I engaged students in 'retrospective' thinking about their learning tasks and strategy use in such tasks where they were required to and assisted in

drawing upon their ‘stored’ knowledge about the range, use and evaluation of their learning strategies.

In the present study, students demonstrated autonomous behaviour, this time through the advanced level of knowledge and awareness they reported and demonstrated having about the range, use and evaluation of their learning strategies. The investigation did not only target students’ strategy knowledge base but also their capacity for and actual use of such strategies in various learning domains in and outside the classroom. For example, students reported successful employment of learning strategies outside the classroom through the different independent learning initiatives they took to improve their language. Some of the students reported watching movies in English with no subtitles in Arabic. During the investigation, students emphasised using such a learning strategy purposefully and that they had found it useful. Thus, this example demonstrates students’ awareness of the strategy itself, in addition to its use, benefits and finally contribution to their overall language development.

As regards their classroom learning, students also demonstrated high awareness of strategy range, use and evaluation when carrying out specific language learning tasks. In addition, they appeared to recognise the limitations in their strategy use in the classroom imposed by the teaching methods and overall classroom learning and teaching environment, as opposed to their strategy use outside the classroom.

Autonomy also manifested itself in students’ knowledge and use of two sets of opposing learning strategies or approaches: memorising versus understanding and surface approach versus deep approach to language learning. Findings from the present investigation have showed that students are indeed aware of when and why to resort to memorising, understanding or rather combining both strategies when carrying out a language learning task. They also recognise the advantages and drawbacks of each strategy (see section 6.4.5 for more details and examples). These findings seem to align well with those of Cotterall and Murray (2009) who investigated the way in which the metacognitive and skills of three successive cohorts of Japanese students involved in a self-directed learning module developed over a 15-week period. Employing a mixed-method methodology, their findings demonstrate that their students were able to develop metacognitive ‘awakening’ involving both knowledge and skills. They relate such development in the students to the uniquely structured learning which created an environment conducive to metacognitive growth in the students. As for students’ use and preference for learning approaches, Russell (2004) reports on a study conducted in the UAE to explore Zayed university students’ beliefs about learning and their preferences for different types of courses and teaching, including their preference

and employment of the deep and surface approaches to learning. Unlike the common assumption that there is an orientation to surface learning in schools and higher education in the UAE, which is no different to the teaching and learning environment in Oman, Russell's (2004) findings suggest that Zayed university students show strong beliefs and preference for deep learning approaches in addition to surface learning approaches. He concludes that learning outcomes could be enhanced by employing deep approaches to teaching and learning.

There are two observations which can be made here: first of all, empirical findings from the present study as well as those from Russell's (2004) and Cotterall & Murray's (2009) suggest that students do employ learning strategies which they are conscious of and can articulate. What this means in light of our discussion in this section is that autonomy *can* be evident and manifest itself through students' conscious knowledge of their learning strategies and capacity to employ such strategies appropriately in relevant learning situations, in service of their learning needs. Secondly, the findings of this study also emphasise the observation I have made earlier in this chapter regarding the disparity between the way learners are described and characterised in the literature (as being passive learners who are lacking autonomy) and the way they perceive themselves as being active and autonomous learners who are aware of their learning needs, employ learning strategies consciously in service of such needs and can exercise control over their own learning even in teacher-controlled learning situations.

7.4.3. Autonomy manifestation in students' perspectives on improvement

So far, I have traced evidence and manifestations of autonomy in two areas: students' perceptions and metacognitive knowledge. This section aims to highlight and discuss autonomy as manifesting itself through students' perspectives on how language learning and teaching in their context could be improved. Using the data collected in this respect, I have identified and discussed *four* areas that stemmed from students' perspectives (see chapter six, section 6.5). These include a) students' suggestions and recommendations for having a greater role in and more responsibility for their language learning through reconsidering their current voice and role in the curriculum; b) redirecting teaching methods towards allowing students a greater role to play in their learning; c) innovating learning activities which encourage and promote in the students critical thinking, awareness of their metacognitive knowledge and capacities for autonomous learning; and finally d) restructuring the exam and

evaluation system in a way that targets learning gains rather than only teaching efforts and allows students a greater role in self-evaluation. Generally speaking, we can see that students' perspectives on improvement in their context encompass ideas and suggestions about 'what' students should be learning as well as 'how' they should be learning it.

If we were to scrutinise students' perspectives on autonomy, we could see that much of their suggestions target issues of having a role, voice and greater responsibility and freedom in their language learning. This is not surprising, for the major concerns students have about language learning and teaching in their context focus on these issues. This can indeed signal students' awareness of their language learning needs, on the one hand, and the limitations and impediments which exist in their learning and teaching context, on the other.

Students' autonomy in the present study, as represented through their perspectives on improvement in their learning and teaching context, echo that of their counterparts in other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Oman. I have described in more detail in chapter one (see section 1.4), the student demonstrations which were organised and led by the students in a number of HEIs across the country in 2011 in which the students demanded that real changes should be made to their educational system. Amongst the top demands were the establishment of Student Councils, provision of more and improved learning resources, more practical training and, most importantly having a greater voice in how their HEIs are run (Marie-Therese, 2011). As regards the students' demands for student councils, Al Rubei (2011) acknowledges that students' demands are valid and presents a cogent argument in support of their demand for establishing 'Student Councils' in the Omani HEIs. He emphasises that:

“Omani students have been exercising their right to protest, and one of their main demands is to have a say in how their HEIs are run. And so they should. It is through their student councils that students in higher education around the world have the most powerful voice; and it seems that student councils in Oman's HEIs have not been as empowered, or as active, as they should have been” (Al Rubei, 2011).

7.4.4. Autonomy manifestation in students' reflection and awareness

Students' reflection on how taking part in the research had impacted their awareness is another area where autonomy manifested itself evidently. By means of assisted group reflection, I explored the development of students' awareness about themselves as learners, about the learning process and about their learning environment, which in itself, featured

students' emerging capacity for autonomous thinking and behaviour. I have presented earlier in chapter six (see section 6.6) that such awareness (and thus autonomy) has been seen evident through two major markers: a) the language students used to reflect on themselves as language learners as well as the language learning process, and b) the language students used to reflect on their participation in the research.

Reflection on and awareness of one's self and learning is usually viewed as an essential capacity or feature which autonomous individuals are expected to have or can employ (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991; Sinclair, 2000). In the words of Sinclair (2000):

“Developing autonomy requires consciousness of the learning process, i.e., conscious reflection and decision making. If autonomy is a construct of capacity, the development of metacognitive awareness in the learner...is crucial” (p.9).

What I have learned from this research as well as the available literature is that reflection is likely to lead to increased awareness. Students in the present study were engaged in reflective thinking about themselves, including their capacities for language learning, as well as the affective, cultural and social dimensions of their learning. Such reflection has contributed clearly to the development of students' overall awareness about themselves and their learning context, which was evident through the language they began to use in the subsequent sessions and journal entries. I have already given examples of the terms and concepts which students have learned in the investigation and used throughout, but were more explicitly used in the final session where they had to reflect on how the research had raised their awareness and consciousness about themselves and learning (see chapter six, section 6.6). Clearly, concepts and terms such as *independent learning*, *learning how to learn*, *analyse my ideas*, *explore some issues in depth*, *exchange ideas with friends* and even the term *autonomy* speak part of students' developing awareness about themselves, and thus autonomy.

7.5. Learner autonomy as perceived by Omani students

The exploration of students' perceptions of autonomy in their language learning context was one of the main goals of the present study on autonomy and voice in the Omani context. Learner autonomy, as I have mentioned on several occasions in this thesis, is usually defined and perceived in the literature as the capacity learners have for detachment; independent and critical thinking; interdependence; conscious; and informed decision-making. In addition, autonomy has various dimensions such as cognitive, psychological (affective), social and

cultural dimensions. It assumes learners having metacognitive awareness as well as willingness to accept responsibility for their learning and actions.

Following on from such understanding and conceptualisation of learner autonomy, it was important that the present investigation encompasses the exploration of students' perceptions (and experiences) of their language learning and teaching context, their metacognitive knowledge as well as their perspectives on having a greater role in and more responsibility for language learning as a means to arrive at a proper contextual understanding of autonomy, through the students themselves. As such, in this section I will try to tease out the specific features and characteristics of learner autonomy as perceived (and practised) by students in their language learning context in and outside the classroom, within the various limitations imposed by their context.

Based on the above discussion of the findings, students appear to have their own perceptions and understanding of learner autonomy. I was able to elicit *twelve* features or characteristics of learner autonomy as perceived by the students in their context. I present these features below, supporting each point by some quotes taken directly from the RGCs and reflective journal entries:

1. Autonomy is about independence and capacity for detachment:

- *“To me it [autonomy] means finding information without depending on others” (PB1C).*

2. Autonomy is an ability (both as an internal capacity of the student and as being encouraged and fostered by the learning context) to make choices about one's own learning:

- *“It's about the student making choices about his learning” (PD2C).*
- *“After I had taken part in this study, I have learned that it's my right to choose what to learn” (JF4).*
- *“I think it is about having your own opinion in what you study, the content of what we study, the methods and strategies of learning” (PD4).*

3. Autonomy is a right which students should have:

- *“Autonomy grows confidence in the person, which is a basic right for every person to have. The learner has the right to choose what he wants to learn in addition to the curriculum, which is prepared by the teacher. The learner has the right to accept or reject what he [has to] learn” (JC3).*
- *“After I had taken part in this study, I have learned that it’s my right to choose ‘what’ to learn” (JF4).*

4. Autonomy entails responsibility for one’s own learning:

- *“Autonomy means that the student is responsible for himself and for his decisions and his reactions. Learners should feel autonomous in higher education because he is responsible for his own results” (JD1b).*

5. Autonomy is beneficial and can enhance learning:

- *“In my opinion, the learner has a big autonomy in learning and it is important in higher education. In this way, we create a generation of students who have the desire for learning and love what they learn, and in this way their level of knowledge and productivity would increase. This is if the learner is given some autonomy in deciding what to learn” (JC3).*

6. Autonomy is a capacity which pre-exists in the learners and can be supported by the learning context:

- *“The learner can choose his strategies and ways of learning. This depends on the student’s choice whether he prefers to learn through listening, writing or reading or through discussions and competitions. I think this could happen [in the classroom]. I have a previous experience in the foundation programme when I suggested to the teacher a method by which students can learn better. So we used that method and the students had the chance to express their opinions and suggestions” (JC3).*

7. Learner autonomy can be fostered in the classroom through curriculum, represented in teaching methods and availability of certain learning activities:

- *“No doubt that the content in the university curricula plays an important and effective role in developing the student autonomy. At the Language Centre, I came across some activities which develop autonomy but these were few and not*

enough to achieve this goal [autonomy]...If there were activities which require enquiry and research, where the answers are not in the book, then this would open wider horizons for us in learning English because we would be searching for answers outside the course books, and in this way we would free ourselves from the constraints of the classroom to wider domains” (JD3).

8. Autonomy also entails the use of various resources of learning:

- *“He [student] is also autonomous in learning by using different sources of information beyond the book” (JD1b).*

9. Autonomy also involves thinking of alternatives:

- *“Yes, we are learning how to think about the possible correct answers” (PD2C).*

10. There is no complete autonomy:

- *“I think it's difficult to give the students full freedom when they move to university, which is a completely different environment” (PB1c).*

11. Autonomy should be introduced gradually:

- *“I think it should be [introduced] step by step” (PB1c).*

12. Teachers and curriculum will always have a role in developing students’ autonomy:

- *“Well, the teachers and the curriculum are both important and we ask them [the teachers] if we don’t understand, so they are important” (PB1d).*
- *“We’re not talking about eliminating the teacher’s role altogether, but we’re saying that the teachers should take a different role. And I think this will succeed” (PB1d).*

It is useful to note here, however, that the above list of students’ perceptions of learner autonomy in their context cannot be claimed to be exhaustive, for constructs such as autonomy and voice (by definition) are too complex and diverse to be reduced to a short list of items. Other aspects of learner autonomy in the context under investigation, such as the social and cultural aspects, are also evident in the data. Finally, students’ perceptions of autonomy in their context can be said to be balanced, for it accommodates both the risk (from

the students' perspectives) of having too much autonomy and responsibility when they may not be ready for yet, and the advantages of autonomy which they very much appreciate.

7.6. Concluding remarks and reflection

This chapter has been dedicated to interpreting and discussing students' voices about their language learning. In particular, effort was made to elicit what we could learn from students' voices about their language learning in relation to autonomy at various stages and levels, both in and outside the classroom.

I was thoughtful and aware of the influence of my role as a researcher, including the possible influence of my experiences as a practising language teacher in the context under investigation, in the process of making sense of the data. I was also aware of the limits of the claims I was making about the data. As a qualitative researcher, I have tried my best to utilise my knowledge about language learning as well as the context under investigation to present sensible, useful, critical, yet accessible discussion and interpretation of the research findings.

At the end of this chapter, I would like to say that the results I have presented herein as well as the conclusions I have drawn remain open to various interpretations and that further, or perhaps different, results may be arrived at. I invite my fellow researchers and practising teachers to consider the results of the present study critically while at the same time reflect on their practices and learners' perceptions. Further research into this important, yet under-researched, area and culture becomes more demanding, for it is through research that we could arrive at a better understanding of our practices and ways of improving them.

Chapter Eight

Conclusions, Recommendations and Reflections

8.1. Introduction

Having interpreted and discussed the research findings in the previous chapter, I will attempt in this chapter to draw conclusions based on the analysis and discussions presented in the earlier chapters and discuss the potential implications which the research findings might have for various stakeholders at various levels. These conclusions, however, remain subject to my interpretations and understanding of the findings in light of my knowledge and experience about the context of the research as well as the literature I consulted on learner autonomy in language learning. The other sections of the chapter will cover the specific research recommendations, limitations, contributions to knowledge and suggestions for further research. The last two sections of the chapter will offer reflective thoughts on the overall research design and findings as well as myself as a researcher and individual.

8.2. Overall conclusions and implications

A number of conclusions can be made based on the discussion and interpretations of the findings presented in the previous chapters. The findings (and so the conclusions drawn from) also have several implications for various stakeholders at different levels. The main conclusions and their implications can be classified into at least three categories or levels:

1. *Theoretical and conceptual conclusions and implications:* these concern research on the theoretical and conceptual aspects of the issues covered in the research such as voice, autonomy, metacognition, culture, etc.
2. *Pedagogical and contextual conclusions and implications:* these concern learner autonomy and the way it is perceived and practised by students in their language learning and teaching context.
3. *Methodological conclusions and implications:* these concern research methods and methodologies on learner autonomy and learners' voices.

8.2.1. Theoretical and conceptual conclusions and implications

At the theoretical and conceptual level, learner autonomy as researched in this study has been found to be a **complex, multi-facets** and **intricate** construct. This conclusion just emphasises the ongoing theoretical discussion in the literature on the nature and characteristics of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991; Paiva & Braga, 2008; Tassinari, 2008). The first encounter I had with the nature of learner autonomy and its characteristics was when I first began to review the literature in this area and design my research to explore it in my context. However, my knowledge of the nature and practice of autonomy has been further emphasised during data analysis and interpretation. I have referred to the intricate nature and overlapping components of autonomy on more than one occasion across the analysis and discussions chapters. As such, one needs to be conscious and exercise caution about the approach and procedures he/she would need to select for researching such constructs. I will say more about this later under the third category.

Learner autonomy is also a **multi-dimensional** construct or, using Tassinari's (2008) term, a construct of constructs. As it is apparent in the way this research is designed to explore autonomy in the learners, arriving at a clear account and representation of students' autonomy has been found to involve an in-depth and thorough exploration of the *three categories of students' voices* suggested by Lamb (2005) and the *three dimensions of control* suggested by Benson (2011). Students' voices have been described by Lamb (2005) as incorporating several constructs including perceptions, metacognitive knowledge, self-management of learning as well as learners' struggle for having a voice in contexts where their voices are not usually heard so they would need to struggle for it (see chapter three, section 3.2.2). As for the dimensions of control, these include control over learning management, control over learning content and control over cognitive processing (see chapter seven, section 7.3.3.2).

Furthermore, the present study further emphasises the **social and cultural elements** of autonomy as essential dimensions and factors for a proper understanding and exploration of the concept. That is, autonomy is perceived and practised differently in different contexts (Benson, 2007, 2011; Chan, 2001; Littlewood, 1999; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Sinclair, 2000). Autonomy is also a capacity which can be developed in social contexts. Such a process, according to this theory, involves learner interdependence and collaboration (Murray, 2014). The findings of the present study further emphasise these statements and argue that autonomy is a universal rather than culturally-specific concept. Furthermore, issues

such as freedom and responsibility are deeply rooted in our culture and Islamic beliefs, so do they in other cultures and beliefs too, making autonomy a relevant and appropriate notion and practice in the context under investigation.

Besides having research and methodological implications (discussed below), the findings from this research have revealed that students' voices, dimensions of control and the social and cultural elements are essential components of learner autonomy and have been found to play a key role in determining the capacity one has for autonomous actions and the degree at which autonomy can manifest itself in the learners in a given learning situation. This conclusion on the multi-dimensional nature of autonomy further supports the existing argument in the literature concerning the key role which awareness and metacognitive knowledge play in students' autonomy (see for example, Lamb, 2005; Reinders, 2011; Sinclair 1999). As such, any research attempting to explore learner autonomy in any context will, arguably, need to incorporate such dimensions and elements. However, what research has been able to reveal so far remains an estimated account of the complex and intricate nature of autonomy as well as the capacity our students have for autonomy in learning.

8.2.2. Pedagogical and contextual conclusions and implications

At the pedagogical and contextual levels, this research has revealed that students hold their own notion, perceptions and understanding of learner autonomy. However, such perceptions appear to be greatly influenced by the students' **level of consciousness of their learning** as well as **social and cultural surroundings**. The practice and development of autonomy is conditioned by various elements in the learning environment such as students' learning needs, teaching methods, learning materials, overall course objectives and design, and the overall political and cultural atmosphere. After all, the notion of autonomy is indeed real and remains relevant and desirable across the wider community. The implication of this is that the notion of learner autonomy can be suggested as a viable goal for education at various levels. This research calls upon education authorities in the context under investigation to take concrete steps towards incorporating autonomy in their planning and making it an explicit agenda item in their short as well as long term planning.

Language learning and teaching at the school level is perceived by students as to suffer important inherent problems. Regardless of the recent developments in education at the school level, (language) learning is still perceived as being superficial and characterised by

direct transfer of knowledge, while students continue to play a rather passive role in the whole process. Unfortunately, students are still recipients of the teacher's instruction with their actual role in and capacity for autonomous learning is being underestimated. Weak curriculum and poor teaching methods are also amongst the inherent problems which education at school still suffers. Furthermore, learning resources are limited to textbooks while students have limited opportunities to explore topics using other sources beyond the classroom. In addition, exams still have a great influence on teaching and learning with both teachers and learners trying to meet the demands of such exams, regardless of whether any learning is actually taking place. Such learning and teaching conditions have encouraged students to resort to easy and superficial means for passing exams such as simply memorising the content rather than trying to understand it. As such, exam results do not in fact reflect students' actual learning. Unfortunately, some of these inherent problems have also been reported in tertiary education. While they do acknowledge the big shift in education they are experiencing at university compared to school, students in this study point to some key issues which require immediate attention from the concerned authorities, for these have direct implications for the quality of language learning programmes across the educational system in Oman.

Such findings have indeed important implications for curriculum planners, practising teachers and the students themselves. At the planning level, curriculum needs to be made more 'learning' and learner-centred, not on policy documents but also in reality. The investigation of students' perceptions of teaching and learning as well as their capacities for autonomous learning at their respective level of education should become a priority item on the authorities' agenda of enhancing the quality of education in Oman, given the benefits discussed in this thesis. Such capacities may not always be apparent and so it is the role of the curriculum and teacher to explore and nurture such capacities in the students. Students who are seen as lacking the desired level of motivation, awareness of their own capacities for learning or knowledge of the nature, aims and demands of learning and teaching at their respective levels, should be supported in various ways (perhaps through awareness-raising activities including helping them researching their own learning) so that they raise 'with' the challenges and requirements of the level they are in.

Students also reported that some students, parents and even teachers misconceive the whole notion of autonomy and its benefits, while some teachers may not see the point in relinquishing some of their 'prescribed' role and responsibilities to their students. Also, the overall school culture may not be supportive of the autonomy approach in learning and

teaching. In this respect, and drawing on students' perspectives about having a greater role in and more responsibility for learning, teachers should firstly view their learners as individuals who have the right to have a say in how and what they are learning and recognise their capacities for autonomous learning. Secondly, they should create an appropriate environment where students can exercise their agency for making choices, while at the same time assuming responsibility for their choices.

As for students, they also have a key role to play in their own learning, simply because others, including their teachers, cannot make them learn, for learning is after all a personal activity. They should develop the skills for research themselves as learners, including their potential capacities for autonomous learning as well as their weaknesses and motivational factors.

Another conclusion which can be drawn based on the results from the present research is that investigating students' autonomy can depict an important, yet rarely considered, image of the nature and standard of our current higher education system and another image of the kind of learners such a system has been producing. As for the first image, although students perceive higher education as to help them develop essential knowledge and skills in order to survive in an ever changing world and contribute to the development of their nation, most of them think that it has only partly succeeded in achieving such goals. The reason from the students' perspective is that their educational system lacks essential mechanisms and tools that are necessary for helping students to develop the required autonomy. The common practices are largely indifferent and unsupportive to the notion of learner autonomy. In regard to the second image (the learner), and as a result of the controlling atmosphere of teaching and learning, students usually choose to exhibit an 'anti-autonomy' behaviour in learning, especially in the classroom, when in reality they possess the capacity for learning autonomously. Students have been found to be metacognitively conscious and can employ the necessary strategies and skills to learn in a more effective way, provided they see the need for doing so. This becomes particularly evident in their out-of-class learning. As such, given the key role autonomy plays in learning, this research has important implications for the status of research on students' perceptions, metacognitive knowledge and the similar components of autonomy which unfortunately have largely gone unexplored in the context under study.

Findings from the present study also emphasise the key role which the learning contexts play in either nurturing or suppressing students' capacities for autonomous thinking and actions. Findings from the present study support those from other similar studies in this respect (see for example Al Ghazali, 2011b; Smith, 2003).

The findings from this study depict a rather more realistic and sensible image of the learner than that offered by the available literature on ELLT in Oman. That is, while the findings of the present research are generally in agreement with how the language learning and teaching context is described in the ELLT literature in Oman (e.g., Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011a; Al-Mahrooqi & Assante, 2012; Al-Saadi, 2011; Borg, 2006; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Goodliffe, 2005), they present a different image of how students' perceptions of and capacities for autonomous thinking and learning are presented. That is, students' capacities for autonomous learning are often overlooked or underestimated by the teachers and the curriculum, which is also the case in the ELLT literature in Oman. Unlike the common assumptions made in the literature that students lack skills for independent actions, results from the present investigation suggest that students *are* in fact aware of their language learning and can take the necessary measures to overcome their weak and inadequate linguistic competences. In short, students' capacities for language learning as featured in the existing literature need to be approached carefully and critically in light of the insights offered by this study. Nonetheless, this study points to the avenues for additional research in this area. I will say more on this in section (8.6) below.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the findings offered by this research is that there is a disparity between how students perceive their language learning and what they actually experience in their context. This very conclusion just testifies to the fact that students are conscious about their language learning and language learning context. While, according to policy statements and curriculum documents (see chapter one, section 1.8.1), autonomy in learning and capacity for independent actions are assumed and encouraged, this remains true at the theoretical level only. Also, teachers vary in the way they define, understand and apply what is stated in the documents. At the end of the day, most students experience a gap between how they perceive language learning and teaching in their context and what they actually experience. In short, teaching and learning in Oman remain far from what the policy documents preach. This of course has important implications for students' motivation and thus attainment in language learning. Serious and sincere effort should be made to explore why language programmes continue to fail to deliver successfully, not only in the context under investigation but across the nation. However, for such efforts to achieve their goals,

students' voices (including all the three categories of voice suggested by Lamb, 2005) should be acknowledged and privileged.

Furthermore, students' understanding of autonomy (and it is the version of autonomy which they also advocate and would like to have in their context) is the one which allows them a greater voice and role in and responsibility for their learning. However, for this autonomy to be productive, students suggest that responsibility for learning should be handed over to them gradually and the teacher have a 'different' role in the new approach to learning. Two useful approaches in this direction are offered by Reinders (2011) and Scharle & Ozabo (2000).

What the above findings tell us is that enabling students a greater (yet suitable) autonomy and voice in their learning can be seen as one of the effective methods for sustaining students' motivation, engagement and, thus, attainment in (language) learning.

As an overall conclusion, the present research on learner autonomy strongly suggests that autonomy is real, essential and much needed for effective learning and, as a capacity, it pre-exists in the Omani learners. They are ready for it and do in fact exercise it, as it is evident in their informal learning outside the classroom. Although autonomy has become part of the current orthodoxy of language teaching and learning research and practice, the fact is that it is largely ignored and missing from actual practices in our educational system at various levels (Benson, 2009a).

8.2.3. Methodological and research-related conclusions and implications

The third category of conclusions and implications concern the methods and methodologies of research on learner autonomy. The methodologies employed in this research to investigate learner autonomy (i.e., qualitative, inductive, bottom-up approach), should have made it possible to gain access to and obtain rich and first-hand data on students' voices and perceptions, which otherwise might have been superficial and less useful data. Depending on the nature of the constructs being explored, the employed research methods and methodologies need to be valid so that relevant and trustworthy results are obtained. As such, quantitative methods were not considered in this research.

Furthermore, the insightful results which have been gained through this research suggest that the specific methods of data collection employed in the present research; namely, First-Language Reflective Group Conversations (L1-RGCs) and Guided Reflective Journals, may

be proposed as potential methods for accessing and obtaining data on intricate and multi-dimensional constructs such as language learning, autonomy and metacognitive knowledge.

In addition, reflection and metacognitive knowledge can offer a useful framework for accessing and researching autonomy in language learning, for they have been increasingly recognised as essential components of autonomy (Tassinari, 2008; Lamb, 2005, 2010; Sinclair, 1999; Wenden 1998). The proposed framework emphasises students developing awareness about *how* to learn rather than only what to learn. This approach has been emphasised by Lamb (2010) but has also been found useful and relevant in the context of this research. After all, the methodologies and methods employed in the present research can offer a suitable, flexible and context-sensitive alternative to research learner autonomy in language learning.

Since autonomy means different things to different people in different context (Benson, 2007, Sinclair, 2000), it makes sense that that it is best researched through the people concerned and in their context. In the case of exploring learner autonomy, perhaps one of the most trustworthy means of exploring such a complex and multi-dimensional construct is through the learners themselves, i.e., taking an ‘insider’ perspective to research (Sikes & Potts, 2008). The approach I employed in this research for exploring autonomy in the context under investigation has proved useful in arriving at relevant and useful findings about the research context. This, in fact, can have essential implications for research on learner autonomy in the context under investigation where it remains one of the under-researched areas. More research is needed to explore the elements and factors which concern effective language learning and teaching in the context under investigation. However, given the potential of qualitative methodologies for researching complex and intricate concepts such as students’ voices about learning, autonomy and metacognitive knowledge, such methodologies should be adopted, for they have the potential for yielding rich, informative and valid results.

8.3. Specific research recommendations

Based on the major discussions of findings and the conclusions which have been drawn from these findings, some recommendations can be made. These solely concern suggestions for improving (language) learning and teaching in the context under investigation by means of enabling students to have a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning. It is useful to note here that the research recommendations presented below can be considered in

combination with table (6.4) in chapter six which summarises students' perceptions of constraints on their language learning and perspectives on improvement.

- Students at secondary schools should be offered an orientation course on the nature, goals and requirements of higher education, so that they are better prepared to cope with the new learning environment in tertiary education. An alternative is to incorporate a new subject into the school curriculum at the secondary level which offers students information on what higher education is all about, including its nature, requirements, the challenges that students are expected to face, how it is different from learning at school, and how students could prepare for it.
- University (as well as school) curriculum should emphasise and encourage reflective thinking in the students. They should be assisted to reflect on themselves as learners as well as on what they are learning, how they are learning it and with what results (Dam, 1995; Reinders, 2010; Sinclair, 1999). This should all be done through suitable, purposeful exercises designed to achieve such a goal. The framework proposed in this research for helping students develop better awareness about themselves and their learning also involves:
 - a) Sharing with students the specific objectives set (or should be set) for the learning 'process', not only those to do with learning outcomes.
 - b) Engaging students in discussion about what makes effective language learning with reference to their capacities for autonomous learning (person knowledge).
 - c) Discussing the enabling and constraining factors in their environment which influence their learning (knowledge about the learning context).
 - d) Discussing what language learning exercises they prefer to do and why (task knowledge).
 - e) Discussing what learning strategies they think they can use, when they use them, and how useful they have been (strategic knowledge).
- Proper counselling should be offered to students who may lack confidence in themselves as learners and their capacities for learning. Specific learning activities should be tailored to boost confidence in students and help them realise their capacities for learning. This is best achieved through negotiation with students.

- Curriculum (including teaching methods) should encourage students to think beyond the classroom and the topics in the textbooks. Students do privilege understanding and problem-solving and challenging activities in learning over rote learning and memorisation of information.
- Since learning is not only a cognitive but also an eminently social process involving interaction and collaboration (Reinders, 2010), more social interactions between learners needs to be encouraged and employed in service of their autonomy and, thus, learning.
- Teachers should vary their teaching methods so that they cater for the different needs and learning styles of their students. In this direction, courses should incorporate role plays, discussion sessions, debates, competitions and even games. Students perceive such activities as offering them a greater opportunity for practising their language and thinking skills.
- Opportunities should be created to enable students to have a greater voice and role in, and more responsibility for their learning. However, such capacities should be in the first place recognised as an important goal for language learning in the context under investigation, which can be achieved through a number of decisions and changes made by top authorities at the university as well as by course planners and teachers. In short, we should teach *for* autonomy, and more effective learning will hopefully take care of itself.
- Top educational management in the context under study (as well as nation-wide) should recognise the active role students have (or should have) in their own learning and trust their capacity for exercising such a role. As such, students should be an important part and actively present in any discussion about ways to improve education in their context (including language education). This could materialise through involving representatives from the proposed “students’ councils” (see chapter one) in the top management regular meetings.
- Students should also have a say in how their language learning is to be evaluated. Since not all of them prefer group presentations as the main (or even the only) means

for assessing their speaking skills, other innovative and more student-friendly approaches to assessment such as group discussions, debates, exhibitions of students' work, etc. should be introduced. Exams should focus on and assess understanding and critical thinking rather than only memorisation. There should also be fewer exams and more learning opportunities.

- Teachers should always seek to examine their students' existing perceptions, expectations, motivation in learning, etc. Such a survey needs to be conducted when students are first enrolled in a language programme. Appropriate interventions should then be devised based on the findings of such surveys. Such an important investigation should not be left to the individual teacher's interest and time; rather it should be integrated into language programmes and be amongst the top priority aims and objectives which language learning programmes aim to achieve.
- As for the management of their learning portfolios, students should have a greater role in and more responsibility for maintaining such portfolios. These should be viewed as a 'personal' learning resource, and so students should be given a voice in what *they* want to include in their portfolios and how to organise them. The bottom line is, however, that learners should be involved in finding out how *their* learning portfolios can be turned into as an enjoyable and useful learning experience as possible. In this research, though, excitement in and effectiveness of learning have been found to strongly link themselves to having a greater voice and autonomy in learning.
- Out-of-class (language) learning should be considered as a potential kind of learning by integrating it into the planning and delivery of language programmes.
- Language teacher education programmes should include modules on learner autonomy where student-teachers are engaged in autonomous learning activities so that they can experience what autonomous learning is like and what it entails so that they are ready to support their own students in developing such a capacity. As for practising teachers, *in-service* training which offers knowledge and hands-on experience in a form of workshops and seminars are strongly recommended in various schools and colleges across the country. These must be well prepared and delivered by qualified persons in the field.

- Any laws, bylaws or regulations which concern students and their learning should be negotiated openly with students.

8.4. Research limitations

Any research is subject to limitations. Research is always carried out within contextual and methodological constraints. I am aware of a number of limitations in my research which I describe here for two important reasons: a) limitations help the research audience understand any claims made about the research design and findings within the constraints in which the research was conducted, and b) limitations make it clear to the wider body of readers of my work what I am researching and what I am *not*. Among these limitations are:

1. My research draws on qualitative approach and focuses on quality and depth of the students' responses rather than on quantity – hence the sample size of participants (15 participants).
2. I was aware of the possibility that some students may find it difficult to talk about their learning capacities and describe their internal learning processes and metacognition at the initial stage of the investigation, for they had not experienced this prior to this research. However, I decided that everything students say carries useful insights into their 'developing' awareness and so is worthwhile.
3. As maintained by Lamb (2005), any research is to be understood within the specific context in which it was carried out as individuals' beliefs may change over time and even from one subject to another. According to Benson and Lor (1999), "beliefs are always contextualized in relation to some learning task or situation. The beliefs articulated by students are not necessarily held to under all circumstances" (p.462). It follows then that my findings and interpretations are to be viewed within the specific context of the research.
4. Another point I would like to make concerns the type of data obtained through the research methods. Given the nature of the investigation and my research questions, the findings can be seen as limited to students' perceptions and

experiences about their language learning and context as ‘reported’ during the investigation and not what they actually do when they learn.

8.5. Research contributions

In this section, I will outline the main contributions which I hope my research could make in relation to language learning and teaching in the context under investigation as well as the wider fields of learner autonomy and research methodologies on learner autonomy.

When I first embarked on this research, I was motivated by learning more about why many students in my context are teacher-dependent and have no interest or motivation for working on their own. For example, I had to go over the ‘self-study’ tasks with the students in the classroom for I knew that they would not otherwise do them on their own outside the classroom. I thought those students must be lacking the skills necessary for independent learning, but there had been almost no research which specifically looked into students’ capacities for autonomous behaviour in learning. So I thought designing research around this important area would hopefully result in a contribution to our existing knowledge on and understanding of **language learning, language learners and their capacities** such as autonomy and self-management of learning, at least, in my local context.

In addition, the present study offers another image of students and their **potential capacities for autonomous learning**, which is different from that usually implied in the ELLT literature on language learning in the context under investigation.

Furthermore, the findings from this research also sheds light on the **disparity** between how students perceive their language learning as well as learning context and what they actually experience in reality.

Another contribution of this research can be about the **methodologies and methods** which I employed in this research to explore issues related to language learner autonomy. The employment of the First-language Reflective Group Conversations (L1-RGCs) and reflective journals in this research to explore learner autonomy and voice in the context under investigation can be claimed to have provided a useful and insightful understanding about the complex and intricate issues investigated, in particular how students’ perceptions and metacognitive knowledge could contribute to our understanding of autonomy and the types of voice students in this context are having. The student-centred approach and the specific methods of data collection employed in this research may well be proposed as potential

means of exploring autonomy, voice and the overall students' perceptions of and perspectives on their learning.

My ethical commitment to carry out the entire research **from the viewpoint of the students** by directly listening to and privileging their voices can be another contribution of this research. I also kept such commitment to the stages of data analysis and interpretation, for these have also been carried out by privileging students' opinions and voices. Students' voices in the context under investigation, especially in research on learner autonomy, have largely gone unexplored.

The approach I employed in this research can be claimed to be **comprehensive, flexible and promising** for a **context-sensitive** and **student-friendly** exploration of voices and autonomy in language learning, in particular, and across discipline areas, in general. The framework I adopted in this research was not only significant in providing responses to my research questions but also in helping the research participants to hopefully develop greater awareness about themselves as learners, language learning as a process and also their learning and teaching context. I am proud to have obtained my participants' satisfaction about the benefits they reported having as a result of their participation in the research, something I would always treasure.

In the area of metacognitive knowledge, which is usually classified into three types: person knowledge, task knowledge and strategic knowledge, a fourth type can be suggested by this research which concerns learners' knowledge about their *learning context*. I propose that this type is termed '**contextual knowledge**'.

My greatest contribution to knowledge, research and practice through this research is perhaps the insight it offers into the **cultural aspect** of learner autonomy. However small and limited in scope it might be, the research should offer a fresh perspective on how learner autonomy and voice are perceived and practised by learners in their cultural and social context, an area which is currently under-researched. Outside the area of language learning, the research also offers the reader a taste of how concepts such as autonomy and voice as well as individual and collective responsibility are perceived and practised in our Arabic and Islamic culture.

8.6. Looking ahead: Suggestions for further research

This research has explored important issues relating directly to voice and autonomy in

language learning. However, I mentioned at the end of the discussion chapter (see chapter seven, section 7.6) that the results I have presented and the conclusions made remain open to various interpretations and that further, or perhaps different, results may be arrived at. Further research into this important, yet under researched, area becomes more demanding, for it is through research we come to better understanding and, thus, improve practice. This research points to the avenues for additional research on the following areas:

1. Although students' voices have been explored in this study, more research is needed to understand their defining and functional characteristics, the potential role they play in learning, how they can be accessed and researched, and how the findings from research on students' voices can be integrated into our planning and teaching.
2. More research is needed to further explore the role culture plays in shaping and influencing learners' autonomy in a given context.
3. Further research is also needed to explore what components or constituents are essential for a proper and context-sensitive understanding, and thus promotion, of learner autonomy.
4. Newly-considered areas in the field of learner autonomy such as 'social spaces' need to be explored and understood so that their potential contribution to and application in language learning could be made available for practising teachers.
5. Given the complaints from teachers about students not having the expected level of motivation, engagement and attainment in language learning programmes, further research employing innovative methodologies and methods to explore these and other related issues becomes increasingly imperative.
6. More research is needed to explore the potential of out-of-class (language) learning in enhancing students' autonomy and, thus hopefully, their engagement, motivation and attainment.
7. The focus of this research was autonomy and voice in language learning in *higher* education. To my best knowledge, such issues have not yet been explored at school level. As such, it would be interesting to see how students at school, which is a different learning and teaching context to university, perceive their capacities for autonomous (language) learning such as their role in and responsibility for language

learning as well as those of the teacher and whether they are allowed to make choices in such a context. As for how to approach such issues at school level, the research approach and design which I utilised in this research should be flexible and adaptable to fit an exploration of a similar nature at school level.

8. Further research on how students perceive themselves as learners, their language learning as well as higher education in their context can provide useful data which can inform a better design and delivery of the current and future language learning programmes in tertiary education in the context under study.

8.7. Reflective thoughts on the overall research design and findings

The present research, as it stands now, is set to explore students' voices and autonomy in tertiary language education in Oman. It particularly aims to explore what we could learn from such voices about the students, how they learn and how they could learn better. My initial research proposal and thinking focused on developing a quantitative tool (a scale) to measure students' level of autonomy in my context. I justified my choice of this area work on by the fact that such a tool was not yet available and, as such, it would be useful to have one so that we might begin to 'measure' our students' level of autonomy! As I had proceeded with my readings and discussions with my supervisor and colleagues, I soon realised that autonomy as construct is too complex to be researched quantitatively and that I needed to reflect further on the feasibility and validity of my entire research aims and design, and whether I still wanted to develop such a scale. In the meanwhile I have also developed a better and more critical awareness and understanding of the potential of qualitative methodologies in researching intricate constructs such as learning and autonomy. In addition, as a constructionist researcher, I should consider exploring how students themselves co-construct their meanings and formulate their perceptions and experiences about their learning and learning context, while at the same time privileging and acknowledging individual student's voices.

Within the atmosphere of such a new philosophy and understanding, I kept changing, rephrasing and refining my research aims, focus and questions until I arrived at a stage where I felt comfortable about the overall aims, specific questions as well as methodologies and methods of my research. What is important here though is that each stage offered me a unique opportunity to learn something new about the concept of learner autonomy, research methodologies and, most importantly, myself and my ways of thinking.

Since autonomy is a complex and unobservable construct, my research questions focused on exploring some of its *essential components and constituents such as* perceptions, metacognitive knowledge and *perspectives*. The kind of context and participants I was dealing with also required looking for suitable methods to gain access to and research such constructs in the participants in a language they understand and an environment which they find stimulating and relaxing. The employment the **RGCs** and **reflective journals** should have offered a working and context-sensitive framework for exploring students' voices about their language learning, which is otherwise considered difficult to explore.

The investigation yielded huge amounts of rich qualitative data whose translation, transcription and analysis was a lengthy, tiring, yet mind-boggling process. The data required suitable methods to analyse and interpret them. *Qualitative thematic analysis* and *latent thematic analysis* were found useful analytical tools and were employed in analysis and making sense of the data. As I have said earlier, each stage offered a valuable opportunity of developing new knowledge and skills.

As a concluding comment, I would like to say that the entire research process from design to implementation, including the claims I am making about my results, reflects my own positionality, perspectives and understanding of the concepts I have researched as well the context in which the research was carried out. It would be interesting to see what learner autonomy and voice might mean to learners in other contexts and what other approaches are also possible to explore such constructs in learners. I therefore invite my fellow researchers and postgraduate research students to explore such issues in their contexts and disseminate their results.

8.8. Final reflexive thoughts on myself as a researcher and individual

Being reflexive about one's own thinking and research is one of the important characteristics and requirements of social research (Bryman, 2012). Reflexivity involves being critical and asking oneself questions along the research process. Relatedly, Wellington (2015) postulates that:

“Part of being critical involves being critical of our own thinking, beliefs, faith and knowledge, not just other people's. This requires us to be sensitive to and to be aware of our own biases, prejudices and preconceptions. This is part of the requirement for our own ‘positionality’ to be included in a thesis, article or research report” (p. 87).

At various points in my research, I have been both critical about what I was researching and how I could possibly research it. I was also reflexive about my own **role, experiences and values** which I brought to the research and the potential impact such role, values and preconceptions might have on how the research was to be conducted and the findings interpreted. This was one reason why I was explicit about my overall research approach and the specific methods I employed in data collection, analysis and interpretation. I committed myself to maintaining an open door policy to any arguments or dialogue about the methodology and methods which I have employed in my work, for I believe that an important characteristic of good research, amongst other things, is encouraging and maintaining critical and constructive dialogue about the potential different ways in which the social phenomena under question can be explored and understood.

Doing research is undoubtedly a unique experience. I admit I have learned much at a professional as well as personal level. Professionally, I have learned a great deal of knowledge about research, language learning and teaching through my own readings and the discussions I have had with my supervisor as well as colleagues at the department. As a result, I have begun to reconsider in a new way various aspects of learning and teaching which I used to take for granted. Indeed such critical reading and thought-provoking discussions have broadened the horizons of my thinking and understanding of social research and its philosophical underpinnings, how context influences its conducts and, perhaps more importantly, how it could inform practice. In this respect too, I have developed important understanding and skills of qualitative research which should enable me to conduct further research tackling critical issues in my own context and publish my findings in academic refereed journals, which I have already begun to do. I have to admit I have changed many of the views which I used to hold about the usefulness of research and its conducts after I had embarked on my PhD studies. For example, I now have a stronger conviction that it is essential to develop a critical and context-sensitive understanding of an issue before possibly making judgement about it, and here is where research comes into play.

At a personal level, I think that one quality of being an academic (and a researcher) is to think like one. Adopting rational thinking, being critical, accepting others' (opposing) opinions and always requiring evidence before passing judgement are a few examples of the qualities which I think I have developed along my PhD studies. Yet, there is still a lot to learn about research and life in general. Indeed, the road to knowledge is (and will always be) under construction. This world is endless!

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Ethical approval letter



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

The
School
Of Education.

Hashil Al-Sadi

Head of School
Professor Jackie Marsh

Department of Educational Studies
388 Glossop Road
Sheffield S10 2JA

24 July 2012

Telephone: +44 (0114) 222 8081
Fax: +44 (0114) 222 8105
Email: MPhil-PhD@sheffield.ac.uk

Dear Hashil,

Ethical Review Application: "Learner Autonomy and Voice in Tertiary Language Education in Oman."

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project. I am writing to confirm that your application has now been approved.

You can now proceed with your research but we recommend you refer to the reviewers' additional comments (please see attached).

This letter is evidence that your application has been approved and should be included as an Appendix in your final submission.

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely

Felicity Gilligan
PG Officer

Appendix 2

**Letter of Research Approval and Access by VC's advisor for
Academic Affairs at
Sultan Qaboos University**

Sultan Qaboos University

OFFICE OF THE ADVISOR
FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



جامعة السلطان قابوس

مكتب المستشار
للشؤون الأكاديمية

23rd September, 2012

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that the University has no objection of Mr. Hashil Al-Sadi, PhD student in the School of Education, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, interviewing some of the students in Sultan Qaboos University to collect the relevant data for his research on:

“Learner Autonomy and Voice in Tertiary Language Education in Oman”

Kindly cooperate with him to obtain the data required for his research.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Taher Ba-Omar'.

Dr. Taher Ba-Omar
VC's Advisor, Academic Affairs



Appendix 3

Consent for data use

Sultan Qaboos University
Language Centre



جامعة السلطان قابوس
مركز اللغات

Ref: LC/SB/376/2014
Date: 23 April 2014

الرقم:
التاريخ:
الموافق:

Letter of Consent

This is to confirm that Hashil Al-Sadi, a postgraduate research student at the University of Sheffield, collected his data at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in 2012. The Language Centre hereby consents to Hashil's request to include information about the Language Centre and the courses it offers in his PhD thesis. However, no names of people may be mentioned in the final report of the research.



Saleh Salim Al-Busaidi, PhD
Director, Language Centre
Sultan Qaboos University
PO Box 43 Al-Khoud
Post Code 123 Muscat
Sultanate of Oman

Appendix 4

Covering letter to the Language Centre, Sultan Qaboos University

Covering Letter for a Postgraduate Research Study

Name of Researcher	Hashil Al-Sadi
Title of the study	Learner Autonomy and Voice in Tertiary Language Education in Oman
Dept./University	Educational Research Department, University of Sheffield
Name of Supervisor	Dr Terry Lamb, Head of teaching and learning, School of Education.

Dear Dr Saleh Al-Busaidi,

It gives me great pleasure to conduct this research project at the Language Centre, where I have been teaching (and learning) over the past fourteen years. This covering letter sets out the aims of and procedures for my research. I hope that the findings of my research will contribute to the ongoing improvement in quality of teaching and learning at the Language Centre.

The major aim of this research project is to investigate first year undergraduate Omani students' perceptions of autonomy in language learning at tertiary level. In so doing, the study will investigate the students' perceptions of their own roles in and responsibility for language learning at tertiary level as well as those of the teacher. Students will also be given the opportunity to voice their perspectives on ways of having more control of and a greater voice in their language learning, which will eventually help us to develop a precise context-sensitive definition of autonomy and critically reflect on our practices as curriculum planners and teachers.

I intend to conduct a number of 'Reflective Group Conversations' with a random sample of students who have just completed the Foundation Programme. Your kind co-operation is needed to gain access to a sample of these students by a) providing me with the names and contact details of any two Programme Coordinators and b) informing them about my research and that I would approach them to arrange access to the students.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee. (Please find committee approval letter attached). Should you have any further queries about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me on (hashils@squ.edu.om) or my supervisor Dr Terry Lamb on (t.lamb@sheffield.ac.uk).

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely,
Hashil Al-Sadi

13/9/2012

Appendix 5

Participant Consent Form – English version

Participant Consent Form

Title of Project:

Name of Researcher:

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [] for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I agree to take part in the above research project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant (or legal representative)	Date	Signature

_____	_____	_____
Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 6

Participant Consent Form – Arabic version

إستمارة إقرار بالموافقة على المشاركة في مشروع بحثي

عنوان البحث:

إسم الباحث:

الرقم المميز للمشارك:

1. قمت بقراءة وفهم ما ورد في ورقة التعليمات الخاصة بالبحث المشار إليه أعلاه ، وتم منحي الفرصة لطرح الأسئلة.

2. أقر بأن مشاركتي في مشروع البحث هذا تعتبر تطوعية وأنه بإستطاعتي الإنسحاب دون إبداء أية أسباب ، وأن ذلك لن يكون له أي تبعات على دراستي.

3. قام الباحث بالتأكيد لي على أن هويتي وجميع آرائي ستظل طي الكتمان ولن تكشف لأي جهة كانت ، وأن فريق البحث سوف يقوم بترميز البيانات قبل تحليلها وذلك برفع أية إشارات من شأنها التعرف على هوية صاحب المعلومة.

4. أقر بأنني قد منحت الباحث حرية جمع وتحليل آرائي لأغراض البحث بعد إخفاء هويتي.

5. أوافق على المشاركة في مشروع البحث هذا.

التوقيع	التاريخ	إسم المشارك
التوقيع	التاريخ	إسم الباحث

ملاحظات:

- يجب تعبئة إستمارة الموافقة هذه وتوقيعها من قبل المشارك في البحث شخصيا وبحضور الباحث.
- يحتفظ كل من الباحث والمشارك بنسخة من هذه الإستمارة بعد توقيعها.

Appendix 7

Participant Information Sheet – English version

Participant information sheet

Dear students,

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to know who is doing the research and understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

1. Who is conducting the research?

My name is **Hashil Al-Sadi**. I am a PhD research student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. I am conducting this study for my PhD thesis and would appreciate your participation.

2. Research Project Title:

Learner Autonomy and Voice in Tertiary Language Education in Oman

3. What is the project's purpose?

Recent research in language learning has shown that language learning becomes more effective when learners are actively involved in and take greater control of their own learning, which is what 'learner autonomy' means. This study aims to explore your perceptions of language learning and its demands at tertiary level as well as your perceptions of your roles in and responsibility for language learning and those of the teacher. In addition, the study will explore your perspectives on how teaching could be improved in your context in a way that results in a more effective learning. The findings of this study will have important implications for teaching and learning at the Language Centre. The study will take four to five weeks in all.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to take part in this study because you have spent an entire year studying English at the Language Centre and will have recognised the nature and demands of learning at tertiary level. In addition, you are in a good position to reflect critically on the teaching and learning situation at the Language Centre and suggest ways to improve the situation. So your perceptions of the nature of learning and its demands at tertiary level

(the first aim of the study) as well as your perspectives on these issues (the second aim) would be valuable for the study.

5. Do I have to take part?

No, taking part in the research is entirely voluntary. So it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a 'consent form'. *If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.* Please be assured that by choosing to either take part or not take part in the study will have no impact on your marks for this course or future studies.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be in a group of five other students from the same course. Your group will meet with me once a week over the coming five weeks. Each meeting will be in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere and will last for about one hour. We will discuss interesting issues about your language learning in the past and now. You will have the chance to freely describe how you learn English in and outside the classroom and reflect on your learning strategies and approaches. You will have the opportunity to interact with other students and hear interesting stories about how they learn and what strategies they are using, which you may not have had the chance to hear and discuss before. I will be interested to hear what concepts such as *taking control* and *independence* in language learning mean to you. I will try to help you to reflect on your own abilities and strategies in language learning which you will find interesting and at the same time useful for your future studies. We will also discuss ways of learning how to learn. This kind of discussion is not something you have experienced before, which, I hope, you will find interesting and useful.

In addition to these informal and friendly meetings, you will also have the chance to express your feelings further and reflect on your learning experiences in your context **in writing**. I will give you a small pad to keep during the study, which we will call '*reflective journal*'. You will need to write about how you would love to learn and why, things you would like to do on your own but you are not given the chance to do so and how you think learning in your context could be improved. I will collect your journals at each meeting and return them to you on the following day in your class.

The entire study will take five weeks, but, as I said earlier, we will meet only once a week. The days and times of meetings will be chosen carefully so that they suit all of the students taking part in the study.

7. What do I have to do?

Basically, you will attend five meetings with me and other students taking part in the study where we will discuss various issues related to your language learning. You will also keep a journal of your learning over the study period (five weeks). There are no lifestyle restrictions as a result of participating.

8. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

Yes, the conversations during the meetings will be audio recorded. The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and academic publications. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

9. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are absolutely no disadvantages or risks of taking part in the study. The only inconvenience which some of you may feel will be committing yourself to keeping a journal of your learning as this is not something you are used to. However, you don't have to buy a journal. All pads for the writing will be provided by the researcher.

10. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The study is designed in such a way that enables me to gather data for my research while at the same time creates an opportunity for you to learn something new. Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you in the project, it is hoped that this work will help you to become much more aware of yourself as a learner in terms of your capacity to learn and about the context in which you learn. It is also hoped that you will develop useful reflective thinking skills and ways to apply them in your studies now and in the future.

In addition, if you accept to take part in this study, you will be entitled to get a copy of my research results once my thesis is published as well as a free copy of the articles which I will

publish using data from this research project. You will also have priority in taking part in other research projects which I intend to carry out with students at the university in the future.

11. What if something goes wrong?

If you are unsatisfied about how the research is progressing or if something serious occurred during or following your participation in the project and you would like to raise a complaint, please send your complaint to me immediately on (hashils@squ.edu.om). Should you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you could contact my research supervisor at the University of Sheffield Dr Terry Lamb at (t.lamb@sheffield.ac.uk).

12. Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of the research material. All the information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential and will not be used for any other purposes than those of the current study and academic publications. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. Any opinion, suggestion or even criticism you express during the meetings or in your reflective journals will be anonymised, i.e., your real names or identities will never be used. You will be asked to choose imaginary names for extra confidentiality of the data. The audio recordings of the meeting will be transferred onto my hard drive for transcription but none of it will be released to a third party or published outside what you have agreed upon. Your journals will also be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the current study and future academic publications. Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University of Sheffield's policy on Academic Integrity.

13. What should I do if I want to take part?

If you want to take part in the study, please notify me when I come to your class on the following day. If you would like to notify me of your willingness to take part before I come to your class, please send me a text message on my phone (please see my contact details at the end of this information sheet). You will then be asked to sign a 'Consent Form'.

14. What will happen to the results of the research study?

Results obtained in this research will only be used in my PhD thesis and my future academic publications based on the current study. The thesis will be published by the University of Sheffield after I have completed my degree (by the end of 2013) and a copy will be donated to Sultan Qaboos University main library. You could also obtain a copy of my thesis or any subsequent publications by contacting me.

15. Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is sponsored and funded by Sultan Qaboos University as part of my PhD scholarship.

16. Who has ethically reviewed the study?

This research is supervised and has been reviewed by Dr Terry Lamb, Director of Learning and Teaching in the School of Education, and has been ethically approved by the University of Sheffield Educational Research Department's ethics review procedure. The research has also been reviewed and approved by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

17. Contact for Further Information

If you have any further queries about this study or the way in which it will be carried out, please contact me by phone on (99477421) or email on (hashils@squ.edu.om). Further information could also be obtained from my supervisor, Dr Terry Lamb, on (t.lamb@sheffield.ac.uk).

Note:

You may keep this information sheet for your record. You will also be given a copy of the signed informed consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

25/6/2012

Appendix 8

Participant Information Sheet – Arabic version

دعوة للمشاركة في دراسة حول ...

إستقلالية الطالب ومدى فاعلية دوره في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي بسلطنة عمان

عزيزي الطالب / عزيزتي الطالبة ...

أنتم مدعون للمشاركة في مشروع دراسة أكاديمية حول طرق تعلم وتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في عمان والتي أقوم بها لنيل درجة الدكتوراة ، الرجاء قراءة المعلومات الواردة أدناه بعناية قبل إبداء الموافقة على المشاركة.

1. من سيقوم بإجراء هذه الدراسة؟

إسمي هاشل بن محمد السعدي. طالب دكتوراة في جامعة شفيلد بالمملكة المتحدة. أعمل محاضرا في مركز اللغات بخبرة تزيد عن 12 عاما. هذه الدراسة هي الجانب العملي من دراستي والتي سوف أبنى عليها رسالتي لنيل درجة الدكتوراة إن شاء الله ، والتي أتمنى منكم المشاركة فيها معي بكل فاعلية.

2. عنوان مشروع الدراسة:

"إستقلالية الطالب ومدى فاعلية دوره في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي بسلطنة عمان"

3. ما هي أهداف هذه الدراسة؟

أظهرت الدراسات الحديثة أن عملية تعلم اللغات تصبح أكثر متعة وفاعلية عندما يتاح للمتعلم لعب دور أكبر في عملية التعلم ذاتها من خلال إشراكه في إختيار محتوى المنهج وطريقة التعلم وحتى التقييم. بمعنى آخر أن يتمتع المتعلم بإستقلالية أكبر ولعب دور أكثر فاعلية في عملية التعلم والتي هي بالأساس عملية ذاتية لا يستطيع أحد القيام بها نيابة عنه. ولذلك تهدف هذه الدراسة الفريدة من نوعها على المستوى المحلي وحتى الإقليمي لفهم تصوركم كطلاب جامعيين لطبيعة التعليم الجامعي ومتطلباته وما يميزه عن غيره من مستويات التعليم الدنيا ، بالإضافة الى فهم تصوركم لطبيعة أدواركم ومسؤولياتكم كطلاب في عملية تعلم اللغات وكذلك فهم تصوركم لطبيعة دور ومسؤوليات المعلم في هذه العملية. كما تهدف الدراسة أيضا لإتاحة الفرصة لكم للتعبير وبكل حرية ، ربما لأول مرة ، عن تصوراتكم حول طرق تطوير تدريس اللغات في الجامعة بما ترونه مناسبا وصولا لتعليم أكثر فاعلية.

نتائج هذه الدراسة بلا شك سوف يكون لها إنعكاسات مهمة على منهجية تدريس اللغات بالجامعة مستقبلا خصوصا فيما يتعلق بقضية إشراك الطالب في رسم سياسات التعليم وتحمله جزء من المسؤولية تجاه عملية التعلم.

4. لماذا تم إختياري للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة؟

تم إختياركم كعينة مناسبة لهذه الدراسة كونكم قضيتم عاما دراسيا كاملا في دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة وأصبح لديكم تصور واضح وشخصي عن طبيعة ومتطلبات التعليم الجامعي وهو ما تهدف الى إستكشافه هذه الدراسة بشكل معمق. كما أنك في وضع يسمح لكم بتقييم عملية تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في مركز اللغات بشكل ناقد وكيفية تطوير هكذا عملية من وجهة نظركم كطلاب.

5. هل يتوجب علي المشاركة في هذه الدراسة؟

لا. المشاركة في هذه الدراسة إختيارية وتطوعية بشكل كامل. لكن إذا قررت المشاركة فسوف يقوم الباحث بمكافأتك بشكل مناسب في نهاية الدراسة. كما إنك سوف تعطى الفرصة للإطلاع على طبيعة المشاركة ومدة الدراسة وطرح

الأسئلة على الباحث فيما يتعلق بمشاركتك في هذه الدراسة. وفي حال موافقتك على المشاركة ستقوم بالتوقيع أنت وبالباحث معا على إستمارة إبداء الموافقة على المشاركة في الدراسة. كما أنه بمقدورك الإنسحاب من مشروع الدراسة في أي وقت دون إبداء الأسباب. ولن يكون لقبولك المشاركة في هذه الدراسة من عدمه أي تأثير على سير دراستك الحالية أو في المستقبل.

6. ما هي طبيعة مشاركتي في هذه الدراسة؟

ستكون ضمن مجموعة من الطلاب المتحمسين لمشروع الدراسة مثلك. سنلتقي مرتين في الإِسبوع على الأقل لمدة شهر تقريبا وذلك حسب جدول محاضراتك وبالتنسيق مع بقية طلاب المجموعة. ستكون لقاءاتنا في أحد الفصول الدراسية لمدة ساعة تقريبا في وقت يناسب الجميع وفي جو ودي ومرح وغير رسمي ، حيث أنني هنا لا أمثل هيئة التدريس بالكلية ولا الجامعة.

سوف نقوم بمناقشة مواضيع مهمة ومشوقة عن التعليم في عمان وجودة المناهج وفاعلية طرق التدريس المتبعة في مدارسنا وجامعاتنا. كما سننتقل لمناقشة قدرات وطرق التعلم الخاصة بكل واحد منكم في الماضي والحاضر، وكيف تطورت هذه الطرق بإنتقالكم الى الجامعة. كما سننتظر أيضا لموضوع التعلم الذاتي خارج غرفة الصف وفاعلية الإستراتيجيات التي تتبعونها في هذا النوع من التعلم ، وما هي المعوقات المختلفة التي ترون أنها تحد من حريتك في التعلم بالطريقة التي ترغبون بها. وبالتأكيد سأستمتع بمقترحاتكم حول ما ينبغي القيام به من إجراءات ترونها ضرورية لتطوير التعليم في مدارسنا وجامعاتنا ، خاصة فيما يتعلق بالمناهج وطبيعة الدور الممنوح لكل من الطالب والمعلم.

سوف تمنحك هذه اللقاءات فرصة لا تتكرر للحوار والتفاعل المباشر معي كباحث وخبير في طرق تعلم وتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية وأيضا مع بقية الطلاب والإستفادة من تجاربهم والإستراتيجيات التي يتبعونها في التعلم ، لأن مواضيع كهذه لا تطرح عادة للنقاش أثناء المحاضرات أو حتى خارج الصف بين الزملاء.

ولإثراء الدراسة بشكل أفضل ، فإنكم سوف تتمكنون من التعبير عما يجول في داخلكم من أفكار وآراء شخصية عن طريق كتابتها على شكل مذكرات شخصية سأقوم بتجميعها بشكل أسبوعي. الهدف من هذه المذكرات هي البوح بتجاربك وآرائك الشخصية بشكل أكثر عمقا وخصوصية دون إطلاع الآخرين عليها. وسوف تلاحظ في نهاية الدراسة أنك أصبحت أكثر وعياً بقدراتك الكامنة وكيفية إستغلالها في التعلم.

7. كيف سيتم جمع بيانات الدراسة؟

ستكون حواراتنا مسجلة على جهاز تسجيل صوتي رقمي صغير يوضع على طاولة الحوار وذلك بهدف إعادة الإستماع اليها وتحليلها ، ولكن سوف أقوم بإزالة جميع التسجيلات وملفات الصوت من على جهاز التسجيل وجهاز الحاسوب بعد الإنتهاء من هذه الدراسة مباشرة. وأكد لكم على أنه سوف لن يتم الإشارة الى هوية أو إسم أي منكم أثناء عملية تحليل ونشر البيانات ، بمعنى أن كل ما سيتم تداوله أثناء لقاءاتنا سيبقى طي الكتمان ولن يطلع عليه أحد سوى الباحث ، ولن يتم إستخدامه أو الإشارة اليه خارج نطاق هذه الدراسة والمقالات الأكاديمية التي سأقوم بنشرها لاحقا، وأن أية نتائج يتم نشرها سوف لن تتطرق الى هويتك كمشارك في هذه الدراسة. تم مراجعة هذه الدراسة وإجازتها من قبل لجنة متخصصة في أخلاقيات وإجازة البحوث الأكاديمية بجامعة شيفيلد بالمملكة المتحدة.

8. موضوع الدراسة يبدو شيقا ولكني أحتاج لمزيد من المعلومات.

إذا كان لديك المزيد من الإستفسارات حول الدراسة ، يمكنك التواصل معي على الرقم 99477421 أو البريد الإلكتروني hashils@squ.edu.om

وفي النهاية أشكر لكم إهتمامكم بمشروع دراستي هذه.

تحياتي .. هاشل السعدي

15/9/2012

Appendix 9

Research Participation Form

قائمة المشاركين في الدراسة

الكلية:.....
College:.....

رمز المجموعة:.....
Group code:.....

ملاحظات Notes	Email البريد الإلكتروني	Mobile No رقم الهاتف	Name الإسم	م
				.1
				.2
				.3
				.4
				.5

Appendix 10

List of open-ended questions asked during the RGCs (English version)

Open-ended questions which guided the L1-RGCs

The questions below were meant to guide the overall course of the conversations only, otherwise, I was flexible about what I was asking and how. It all depended on the participants' responses and interest. I also used some probing questions to gain deeper insight into students' perceptions and stimulate their thinking and reflection.

RGC 1: Introduction & free talk

1. Do you like learning English?
2. Did you enjoy your English lessons at school?
3. What motivated you to learn English at school?
4. How would you evaluate your English learning experiences at school? Successful/enjoyable or challenging/boring? Why?
5. Do you like your English classes here at the university? Why? Why not?
6. What motivates you to learn English at the university?
7. How does learning English at university differ from that at school?
8. Do you think you can learn English outside the classroom without a teacher?
9. How do you feel about discussing and reflecting on the language learning experiences?

RGC 2: Students' perceptions of & roles in language learning in and outside the classroom

1. Validating questions on the topics discussed in the previous session.
2. What does Higher Education (HE) mean to you?
3. How do you think HE differs from learning in school?
4. What do you think are the main aims of HE? What do you think it focusses on?
5. What do concepts such as independence, responsibility, roles, decision-making mean to you in HE?
6. Who do you think is the successful learner? What does he/she do differently?
7. Do you consider yourself a successful learner? Why? Why not?
8. What do you usually do when you don't know something in, say, grammar or writing?
9. As learners, do you usually go to class with any kind of a personal goal or learning agenda?
10. Do you think your voices are listened to?
11. Is there any evidence of this (your voices are/not being listened to) in the curriculum/teaching methods?
12. Are you usually given the chance to choose?
13. How to do understand the role of the teacher in HE?
14. Do you think you have any control over what and how you are learning, i.e., the content and ways of learning?
15. Do you think learners can manage their own learning, in and outside the classroom? Why? How?
16. Do you think that the notion of autonomy in learning is suitable/acceptable/applicable in our context and culture?
17. Would you as learners be happy to accept more responsibility for your own learning?
18. Do you learn outside the classroom?
19. What do you learn? Where do you learn? How do you learn outside the classroom?

20. In your opinion, what distinguishes Out-Of-Class Learning from the formal classroom learning?
21. What roles do you as learners play in Out-Of-Class?
22. What do concepts such as autonomy and responsibility mean to you in Out-Of-Class?
23. What strategies do you usually use in your Out-Of-Class?
24. In your opinion, how could Out-Of-Class be linked to classroom learning?

RGC 3: Perceptions (cont'd.), metacognitive knowledge, skills & learning approaches

1. Validating questions on the topics discussed in the previous session.
2. Other than gaining new knowledge and skills, what do you think HE also aims (or should aim) to?
3. Which one in your opinion is more important, getting information through the teacher and materials or by using your own ways? Why?
4. Can you see any difference between *learning* (gaining knowledge) and *learning about learning* (ways of gaining knowledge?)
5. In your opinion, which one (gaining knowledge or ways of gaining knowledge) is more important? Why?
6. How much responsibility towards your own language learning would you like to be given? (Perhaps in percentage).
7. In your opinion, do you think that the current language curriculum including the teaching methods encourage learners' independence? Why? How?
8. Do you think the curriculum and teaching including teaching methods emphasise teachers' roles?
9. Are you given any choices about what and how you are learning?
10. Do you think self-management of language learning is possible?
11. If yes, is it easy? Doable? Challenging?
12. When we talk about self-management of language learning, what do you think such a process involves?
13. In your experience, what academic and study skills do you think are important for self-management of LL?
14. In what situations would you resort to memorising information and treating information at a superficial level? Why?
15. In what situations do you decide to make effort and study hard rather than simply memorising information?

RGC 4: MK (cont'd): Task, strategic & person knowledge

1. Validating questions on the topics discussed in the previous session.
2. Students choose 2-3 different language exercises they have recently done in their language class or as homework.
3. Can you explain to me what this exercise is about?
4. What kinds of response are required by the task? Are you responding to the task by reading, writing, speaking, or a combination of these?
5. Why do you think you are having this task here in the book? What do you think are the aims of this exercise?
6. Who prepared this task?!
7. How much time was required to do this task?
8. What sort of thinking was needed to do this task?

9. Did you have to think deeply in order to do this task/exercise, or just a quick thinking was all what was required here?
10. What strategies and methods did you use when you were carrying out this task/exercise?
11. Why did you choose to use these particular strategies and methods?
12. Were these strategies and methods useful/the right ones?
13. What difficulties did you have while doing this exercise?
14. Why do you think you had these difficulties?
15. What did you do to overcome them?
16. How would you evaluate this exercise? Was it useful? Enjoyable?
17. What (thinking) skills, if any, do you think an exercise/task like this helps you to develop?
18. Do you think this task links to what you have studied/done before and how it prepares you to what is upcoming in this unit?
19. Can you think of other ways of doing this exercise, other than the ones you used here?
20. If you were to re-write this exercise for other students, what changes would you make to it? Why?
21. What are your strengths in language learning as a language learner?
22. What are your weaknesses?
23. Have you ever thought of your strengths and weaknesses?
24. Do you keep a learning plan?

RGC 5: Constraints & Perspectives

1. Validating questions on the topics discussed in the previous session.
2. Reflecting on your experience as language learners at school and now here at the university, what do you think are the main constraints on your LL? What factors make your language learning less effective and enjoyable? These factors could relate to you as learners (we can call them *internal* factors) and to factors such as the teachers, teaching methods and learning environment and context (we can call these *external* factors).
3. Based on what we have said today as well as during the previous meetings, what changes would you like to see in the way English is taught and learned in Oman? Try to consider different aspects of the teaching and learning process.

RGC 6: Reflection on participation & potential influence of research on awareness

1. Validating questions on the topics discussed in the previous session.
2. What were your expectations of the study before our first meeting? Were these expectations different from/similar to what you have experienced during the meetings?
3. How would you evaluate your overall participation in this study?
4. Would you take part in a similar study in the future? Why? Why not?
5. What benefits (if any) have you gained by taking part in these focused discussions?
6. What benefits (if any) have you gained by writing about and reflecting on your learning experiences?
7. Can each two of you spend 4-5 minutes and make a list of the main concepts and issues we have discussed in this study? Are any of these concepts or issues unfamiliar to you?
8. If I were to repeat this study in the future, what changes would you recommend I make?

Appendix 11

Sample RGCs (Group A)

Group A
RGC 1: Past experiences

Researcher: This is a free talk about your experiences of language learning. So what could each one of you say about his language learning? We will go back your school days.. what was your learning like then and your methods of learning English, was it something you enjoyed? Yes anyone of you.

Student: To be honest, for me it was boring. I felt that the teacher comes into the classroom and leaves with no benefit, so as a student you don't benefit. I think learning a language requires communication between the learner and the teachers.

Researcher: Good this is an important point. What about you?

Student: When I was at school, I felt that the main aim of the teacher was to just finish the syllabus.. so he comes to the class and then does one or two exercises. He writes the answers on the board and then we are finished, so you as a learner you don't really benefit, you don't feel you have learned anything new but when we came to university, there was more emphasis on speaking, so we used to communicate with other students and in the writing class we have learned how to write paragraphs, topic sentence and how to organise our ideas, these sort of things. I think we should have learned these things earlier before university. And in the final exam in grade 12, we didn't really know how to answer, we just wrote anything, so we didn't know how the marks were divided, there were no instructions and clear guidelines on how to answer the test. It all comes from the Ministry. I think we should have learned these simple things earlier even before the secondary school so that when we get to the secondary level we have already learned all these stuff, and by the time we get to university, we already know how to express ourselves in good English.

Researcher: But some students may disagree with this. They may say that they were still young and they couldn't understand all of these things at that early level, leave them until a later stage when they get to university, for example.

Student: No, I don't agree with this because at the secondary school we were already 16 or 17 years old and we should know how to communicate, at least how to express ourselves in English so I think we should have learned these basic and simple things before coming to the University.

Student: I agree with my colleague in some points and disagree in other. When he said that English was boring, I think that all depends on you. If you really like English you would like it at school. I myself like English. I was watching movies and films and I can say that most of the words I have learned came from those films.

Researcher: So can we say this was one type of independent learning?

Student: Yes, this is a kind of independent learning.

Researcher: Can I stop you here for a while? What's your overall experience of this independent learning? How did it start? What motivated you to learn on your own?

Student: I mean by independent learning like.. some of the words really attracted me in the movies so I learned them. They were special words in actions movies for example. I also learned some conversations...

Group A
RGC 2: Students' perceptions of & roles in language learning in and outside the classroom

Researcher: At the beginning of each meeting, I will repeat what you have told me in the previous meetings just to make sure that what I have understood is exactly what you intended to say. So I will try to repeat the main points you mentioned last time about your learning. Please do stop me if I say anything that may not reflect what you have said.

In our first meeting we talked about your experiences of learning English at school and then we talked about your experiences of learning English here at the university. Most of you began learning English in year 1 while others in year 4, and the majority of you was generally weak in English. You didn't pay much attention to English as you were just beginning to learning it and you didn't realise the importance of it. But later on, you began to realise the importance of English for your future studies and jobs, and maybe for your life, and so you began to make more effort in learning it. Some of you asked support from their families and some of you attended language courses while others hired private teachers. So in this way your level slowly began to improve. It is this true? Is this what you wanted to say last time?

Student: Yes, this is true.

Researcher: Would anybody like to add anything about their previous learning experiences?

Student: I think responsibility becomes greater as you develop, as you move along your studies, as you grow up because the challenges become more.

Researcher: You mean your responsibility as a learner?

Student: Yes, as a learner.

Researcher: Your responsibility towards what?

Student: My responsibility towards the subjects I'm studying.

Researcher: And how do you think your responsibility relates to your roles as a learner?

Student: When you have more responsibility towards anything, your role becomes greater, and when you have little responsibilities then you don't have to play a very big role.

Researcher: Let me ask you this, how do you feel about being given a greater responsibility in your learning?

Student: I find this useful.

Researcher: But some students may say that they don't like to be responsible for their own learning- this is the teacher's responsibility.

Student: Yes, it is useful but you will always face difficulties because you may not have enough experience to hold this responsibility so you will always need support from your colleagues. But talking about benefits, there are benefits of course.

Student: I would like to say that students shouldn't be given more responsibility than they could take because they may feel bored and lose interest and stop working. But if students are given appropriate level of responsibility, they will benefit more.

Researcher: Good. So generally speaking, your past experience of learning was positive especially at the stage just before university as you knew that English was important here.

Student: Yes, also because you see other students in the class at a better level than you so you get encouraged by this and compete with them.

Researcher: Good. Today we will discuss your perceptions of higher education. What do you understand by higher education? What are the goals of higher education in your perspectives?

Student: Higher education is the stage which begins after school. It's the college and university level.

Researcher: And why do you think this type of education is called 'higher'?

Student: I think higher just because of the nature of learning as you are making a big jump from school to university or college.

Researcher: What about you? What do you understand by higher education?

Student: Higher education means more than the other basic levels: elementary, preparatory and secondary. And it's a more advanced study in terms of the level of difficulty and the kind of topics compared to school. There is also a difference in the way we learn. So you enter a new stage, more difficult than the stage before.

Researcher: So if we want to focus more on higher education, why do you think it's called higher? I will help you with some hints to help you think. When we talk about higher education then we have three issues: independence, roles and decision making. So how do you view higher education in terms of independence?

Student: In terms of independence, I think university students and college students have more independence than students at school. Students at school have no choice over the timetable and times of the classes. Somebody else's choosing for them and planning their studies. And if this planning does not suit you, nobody cares.

Researcher: It's a pre-established system.

Student: Yes. But here at the university we can choose and plan our timetables and then choose to take a subject in the morning or in the afternoon.

Researcher: So in higher education you would say that students are more independent and autonomous.

Student: Yes, there is more independence and flexibility.

Student: Also at school you can't negotiate the timetable with teachers but here you can do that.

Researcher: What about decision-making?

Student: There is less pressure on university students about what they do and how they do things. They stay away from their families and so they usually don't ask about what we are doing at university and what courses we are taking. They only ask about your [our] overall performance without asking about specific courses or about the exam results. So the university student has more freedom in what he does and how he does it, even you can choose to go to class or stay in your accommodation, family is not watching! The student at the university has more freedom and in charge of his own affairs ...

Group A

RGC 3: Perceptions (cont'd.), metacognitive knowledge & learning approaches

Researcher: In the previous meeting we talked about some important issues. One of the major points was higher education, and what means, and how is it different from general education at the school level. We also talked about out-of-class learning and what makes it different. I just want to check with you use some of the points you mentioned last time. You said that learning *can* take place outside the classroom, would you agree with this?

Student: Yes.

Researcher: And you gave me examples such as learning computer programs and mobile phone applications and other examples such as PowerPoint, graphics and website design.

Student: Yes, this could happen. Students could do many activities outside the classroom.

Researcher: You also told me that out-of-class learning is more effective and you have more options.

Student: Yes.

Researcher: And in terms of responsibility, you told me that you are more responsible and you are the master of your own ship, as we say, in terms of deciding on *what* you wish to learn, *how* you wish to learn it, and then you monitor your learning and evaluate what you have learned.

Student: Yes.

Researcher: Would anybody like to share with us any experiences of learning outside the classroom?

Student: I used to read magazines and newspapers in English outside the classroom on my own.

Researcher: What was your aim of doing this?

Student: I was able to learn new things and also improve my English.

Researcher: And what motivated you to do this? I am interested in the kind of thinking you had.

Student: I was weak in reading.

Researcher: Yes, this is exactly what I wanted to get to. So you felt you needed to import your reading skills.

Student: Yes.

Researcher: Was it something the teacher advised you to do when he, for example, noticed that your level in reading was low?

Student: No, I decided to do this on my own. The teacher used to give us some stories to read and I volunteered to read them, but I did all of my reading outside the classroom and on my own.

Researcher: My experience as a teacher is that students don't always welcome what their teachers suggest because they always complain that they already have a lot to do the courses and they don't have the time to go to the library and spend more time on reading.

Student: Yes, this is true sometimes.

Researcher: In some courses, there is a self-study component which students have to do on their own but the students complain that this self-study part of the course places extra pressure on them. This is sometimes due to the fact that students view these extra exercises as being part of the teacher's role and so it is something that teacher has to cover with them in the classroom rather than something the students have got to do outside the classroom. What do you think?

Student: Yes, this is true. Sometimes students don't like the teacher to force them to do things which they don't like or to assign them many tasks. They [students] want to do the things they like.

Researcher: But they don't! Laughter! My experience with some of the students is that they always they look at what's in the course as enough and that they shouldn't be doing any extra work. Would you say this is true with you as well?

Student: Yes!

Researcher: What I'm interested in here is to go deeper into your head and explore your thinking. I want to understand how students think, what ideas they have in their mind, how you see things, how you perceive your roles and the roles of the teacher and also the learning process. When you refuse to do the extra work which your teachers ask you to do, how do you really think and feel about this?

Student: At the beginning of the semester, we say to ourselves we need to work hard, we need to study well, but as soon as the semester begins, everything goes into the air.

Researcher: But don't we all have the motivation and enthusiasm to do things which we *like* to do?

Student: Yes, this is true when the students study the subjects *they* like. Not all students like English. Some students like to solve mathematical problems and so they have the motivation for this but when it comes to learning a language they may have less motivation and they may become bored. Some students like reading, so you see them walking around with books.

Researcher: And when you get closer to them, you see that the books they are carrying are those which match their interest, right?

Student: Yes, we become bored with no motivation or interest because the books are not suitable to us.

Researcher: So when you make your own decisions and choose your own books, is this likely to make you more motivated?

Student: yes.

Researcher: So would you like to say then that what distinguishes out-of-class-learning from classroom learning is that in out-of-class learning you set your own goals, you choose your own materials and choose your own learning times?

Student: Yes.

Researcher: But the main point here is how could we make use of this interesting, flexible and effective learning in the classroom learning in a way that maximises your motivation and learning?

Group A

RGC 4: MK (cont'd): Task, strategic & person knowledge

Researcher: let me briefly refresh your memory about some of the issues we discussed last week before we discuss two or three tasks you have worked on in the class. In our previous meetings, we discussed your understanding of higher education and its requirements. We also discussed independent learning and the personal and social skills which are required for independent and effective learning. And when we talk about learning, we're not just talking about learning but also about what makes learning become more autonomous, effective and enjoyable. This element of **joy** is essential here because we want people to not only have interest in what they learn but also innovate in their learning and think of new ways of learning because motivation and continuity in learning stems from the learner himself or herself rather than something that the teacher does for you. So what is essential here is your roles and position in the learning process, your feelings, your emotions, what makes you happy, and what upsets you in the whole process. Unfortunately this is often a neglected goal of education in our context, but I think it is important.

Let's now discuss two or three exercises which you have done in the classroom. Did you have to prepare this exercise at home beforehand?

Student: No, we did this exercise in the classroom.

Researcher: So what did the teacher tell you about this exercise? What is it all about?

Student: In my case, I didn't understand this lesson, but I understood the one after it because the teacher explained it differently.

Researcher: It's not so important to me here what the teacher did but what your thinking was and how you felt about the task. But do you still have a problem understanding what the task is about now after you have done other tasks?

Student: To be honest, I didn't come back to this exercise.

Researcher: Okay, so how did you start working on this exercise?

Student: We first started skimming and scanning the reading text as we used to do in the foundation program at level six. But which one comes first skimming or scanning, not sure!

Researcher: What do you think? Which one comes first? Choose one. Laughter!!

Student: I think we first read for general ideas and then for details.

Researcher: Yes, that's true. What kind of response was required from you as learners in this exercise? I mean did you have to respond by writing, by speaking, or was it an exercise which requires thinking?

Student: In this exercise we need to read and then think so I think we need the three skills together: reading, thinking and then writing.

Researcher: And what questions follow the reading exercise?

Student: Multiple-choice, we need to choose the correct answer.

Researcher: And then what comes next?

Student: Vocabulary exercise.

Researcher: Good and what did you have to do next?

Student: And then we have to do the writing which is based on all of these exercises.

Student: And then there is also grammar.

Researcher: In the multiple choice exercise, what do you think the purpose is here?

Student: It's about understanding. It's the meaning and understanding of the text.

Researcher: Good. These are called comprehension questions. Are there any other questions on comprehension?

Student: Yes, we have WH questions. They are also on understanding.

Researcher: So this exercise requires you to read for specific details and then find the answers.

Student: But this was a bit difficult for us to understand.

Researcher: Alright we'll talk about the problems you had while doing exercise later but now I'm asking about the nature of exercise and the kind of responses which were required by each task. What about the rest of the exercises?

Student: Here we have to read the sentences and search for support for them from the reading.

Researcher: Okay, so you're looking for support in order to decide whether the sentences are relevant or otherwise.

Student: Yes it's about understanding of the story.

Researcher: Okay, you also said there is a vocabulary exercise. Why do you halve these words? What do you have to do with them?

Student: We need to write the part of speech of these words. These are important words from the reading we need to understand these words in order to understand the text.

Researcher: I can see you have translated them into Arabic. What's the purpose of these words?

Student: These are all business words we might come across these words in our future studies.

Researcher: What is important for me here is when you say 'to understand'. So what do you understand by these words? Why are they important? Why are they put here in board?

Student: They are important and we should memorise them.

Researcher: Do you understand the meaning of all of these words?

Student: We know the meaning of some of these words before but we use the dictionary to learn the meaning of the new ones.

Student: Some of these words we learned in the foundation program...

Group A

RGC 5: Constraints on learning and perspectives on improvement

Researcher: As planned, today we're going to discuss the **constraints** on your language learning as you see them, as well as your suggestions for **improvement** and finally I need your reflection on your participation in this study. But let me first refresh your memory of some of the issues we discussed last time. Last time we said that we are hoping for a learning which is not only effective but also enjoyable - effective in a sense that satisfies your needs and prepares you for a successful career, and enjoyable in the sense that it sustains your motivation and encourages lifelong learning. If you like something you tend to learn it in a better way and you'll also continue learning it. So here you go to the classroom and have something in your head, you have your own goals which you want to achieve, so you're not pushed to learn.

Researcher: If we turn now to your language learning experience, you studied English for twelve years at school and spent a full year on the Foundation Programme here at the Language Centre and this is your first year at the college and you're still taking language courses. So I think by now you should have solid opinions and ideas about the constraints and challenges on your language learning and also about what could possibly create a good environment for successful and enjoyable language learning. So in your opinion what would you say the most important constraints on language learning? To make things easier here, we could divide these into internal factors, which are to do with the learner himself/herself and other external factors, which are to do with the learning environment around you.

Student: Family situations, circumstances and problems make the student think about these problems so he couldn't concentrate on his studies.

Researcher: But successful learners are those who try their best to separate their studies from other family-related factors, but don't you think that this could be an internal factor in the sense that it relates to you as a learner and your ability to control these factors and manage their effects on your studies?

Student: Yes, they can be both; they are related.

Researcher: We all have challenges and problems but it all depends on your ability to manage these situations.

Student: We know people who have problems but they achieve well.

Researcher: So how could we then differentiate between people who are easily affected by what's going on around them and those who have the ability to manage the situations around them in a way that makes these personal situations have the least effect on themselves and on their studies?

Student: Some people don't know how to face the challenges but successful learners may encounter even more difficult situations and they know how to face them and separate them from their studies.

Researcher: Yes, one also needs to have a proper understanding of life and that one is subject to difficult situations and different conditions and so when you find yourself in a difficult situation, it doesn't mean it's the end of the world. Just needs to realise the nature of the situation, think about it and see what you could possibly learn from the situation for future and how to lessen its effect on your present and future life. Any other factors?

Student: Some students become nervous; they are unsure how to face difficult situations in their learning. So they go and ask others people for help but these people's suggestions may not suit their [students] situation.

Researcher: In order to focus our thinking, let's discuss the internet factors first. So just imagine yourself you are in a classroom with the teacher and other students and you have your textbooks. So in such a situation, what could limit your ability to learn at your best?

Student: One of the internal factors is lack of confidence. Sometimes you may have the answer and you know your answer is correct but you don't say it because you think that other students may laugh at you or the teacher may not like your answer. I myself was in that situation. Once the teacher asked a question and other students gave their answers but their

answers were wrong and I had the answer and I was sure that my answer was correct but I was hesitant, I didn't give the answer and then when the teacher gave us the answer, it was similar to my answer.

Student: So this could be lack of self-confidence.

Student: Yes it could be.

Researcher: Yes, this is an internal factor.

Student: I think one way to overcome this lack of self-confidence issue is to talk a lot in the class and in groups. We also need to go in front of the class and do presentations, for example.

Researcher: Yes, could you think of some other internal factors while you are in the classroom?

Student: I think self-confidence is important here.

Researcher: And so now when we talk about constraints, do you mean self-confidence or 'lack' of self-confidence?

Student: Yes, lack of self-confidence.

Researcher: And when you don't trust yourself and abilities, what impact this might have on you and your learning?

Student: This leads to shyness.

Researcher: And fear of making mistakes?

Student: Yes, you don't have the courage.

Researcher: But how could all of these factors affect your learning?

Student: Self-confidence is an important factor and it leads to many things such as fear [of making mistakes] and shyness.

Student: It also limits your ability to participate [in the classroom].

Student: Teacher, we all have these kinds of feelings but the problem is that when these things go beyond the natural level, they begin to affect ourselves and our learning.

Researcher: Yes, sure. We as human beings and we all have these feelings and we all may encounter such situations in our daily lives but here we are talking about the level of your awareness of such things and the level at which these factors begin to impact your studies...

Group A

RGC 6: Reflection on participation & potential impact of research on awareness

Researcher: In this last session, our discussion will focus on the last point left which is your **reflection** on your participation in this study. So I would like you to reflect on our previous six meetings which we have had and tell me your feelings, both positive and negative. Try to be honest and share with me anything that comes to mind. But first of all, let me ask you about the reasons for taking part in this study. When I first came to your classroom and gave you the information sheet, why did you decide to write your name?

Student: I was just curious; I wanted to see what would happen.

Researcher: Have you taken part in any research projects before?

Student: I conducted a small research when I was at secondary school. And so I decided to take part because I plan to do research in future and I thought I could learn something useful.

Researcher: Good to see some of you are interested in doing search. What about you?

Student: I thought I would learn something new and also I like taking part in activities organised at the University.

Student: I wanted to take this opportunity because I haven't taken part in any of the activities you [my partners] have mentioned. I also believe in the importance of other activities which we do outside the class.

Researcher: What about you, why did you decide to take part?

Student: First of all, I thought I would volunteer because I knew I would be rewarded by Allah for helping others, regardless of any benefits. Secondly this research will benefit the university, and if it doesn't benefit me, it will benefit my brothers and sisters and other students who will come after me. And you have mentioned that it will help you in your PhD Research and also it will help to improve the system at the university. And thirdly, I have benefited by taking part in the discussions.

Researcher: Good. What about you, were you hesitant to writing your name or you decided straightaway?

Student: No, I was motivated because I think it's important that one expresses his ideas and opinions as we don't always get the chance to discuss our learning and the challenges we face. So first of all, I was attracted by the title and the topic, and also I've found it organised and [the meetings were] in or convenient times.

Researcher: It was important for me to provide a suitable place and to have these sessions at the convenient time for you.

Student: What I liked was that the choice of time and place was ours.

Student: In my case, the title of the study was a bit ambiguous to me, I didn't understand what autonomy meant. But in the first meeting, you explained they study and topics and we found the communication through the WhatsApp [instant messenger] quite useful.

Researcher: Did you find the communication through the whatsapp group useful?

Student: Yes, very useful.

Researcher: It was also useful for me because it enabled me to communicate with you the topics of the discussions and the changes of timing and venues. Just see how useful the communication becomes through this phone application which you all have in your hand when compared to e-mail communications. So now would you reflect on your participation in this study? Of course there is no right or wrong answers here. I just need your honest opinion.

Student: Yes of course, we have found it useful.

Student: I feel comfortable being given the opportunity to be listened to. You feel that somebody out there cares about you.

Student: And especially this is a new topic which we haven't heard about before.

Student: Yes indeed, the topic is attractive.

Researcher: I'm glad to see that you have learned something useful out of these sessions. But you also had another channel to express yourself, the reflective journals. How would you comment on you the reflective journals?

Student: We have found the discussions more useful because we listen to your ideas and also the ideas of other students in the group. It was useful to listen to other students talking about their learning and about their problems. It was good to see if others also have the same problems [as mine] or they have different ones.

Researcher: So you liked the communication with me and with other members of the group. That's good. Are there any recommendations about the study itself? Anything you were uncomfortable with?

Student: Almost everything we did happened as we agreed upon earlier.

Researcher: Was the timing of the discussion sessions enough?

Student: Yes, it was suitable.

Student: Also the number of students in the group was suitable.

Researcher: I also hope that the journals have helped you to develop better awareness of yourself as learners and to reflect on your ways of learning and develop better reflection skills in general. As I have said before, reflection is an important skill, and so when you reflect you could become aware of yourself as a learner, of the learning environment around you, of the learning process, how learning takes place and what facilitates learning. But, as I always say, reflective capacities need to be encouraged further in our curriculum and through teaching methods so that students become more aware of their learning and abilities. It's not just enough to fill your heads with information without 'you' playing an active role in this learning. And what is important than get gaining information is also learning about *how to learn*. So as a concluding point, I would like to recount the important issues and concepts which we have come across in the study so far. Some of these you may have known before while others were totally new to you. And by the way you could benefit others by organising workshops for your fellow students telling them about the things you have learned in the study.

Student: Autonomy...

Appendix 12

Sample Entries from Group C Reflective Journal

- I started learning English, I started in class 4 because I was in the General Education system. I didn't take much care of this subject because it wasn't important in my school as it was the case with other subjects such as Maths and Science. In the elementary and preparatory stages I didn't get more than Bs and Cs in English.
- However, at the secondary stage, I decided to take care of English.
- I began by memorising new words, not by learning how to pronounce or write them but by learning the shapes of the words. So I used to remember how to say and write the words when I *see* them in sentences, although I often mispronounce the words, I didn't use to memorise or train myself to learn these words.
- I began to read many books although I didn't understand most of the words, but I continued reading them. I also began to read newspapers in English but I wasn't using the dictionary, so I tried to understand what I could and leave the rest.
- I also used to write my dairies in English which has helped me to improve my skills. I also used to apply what I learn about writing in my diaries.
- In speaking, I sometimes try to practise my speaking with my friends and sometimes with my siblings and shopkeepers. I like to go shopping.
- Let me move to another point which is the characteristics of English learning at the university. In my opinion the most important feature is the availability of language practice, i.e., I can use English in the university because I know that everybody understands it, otherwise they wouldn't have been at the university.
- I really enjoyed learning English at the university. I was interested in learning it. I used to do my assignments on time because I had the desire, not to learn English but to get high grades and become distinguished in my studies.
- At the university I started learning English at level 4. I have learned many things such as many new words. I also learned to write paragraphs and articles in the correct academic way. I also learned many words which are used in speaking which has helped me to improve my speaking. I also began to read stories and I have learned all what I have to do when making presentations, which has helped a lot at levels 5 & 6.
- The most important features of learning English at the university:
 1. Taking care of improving all aspects of English including the four skills, making presentations and projects.
 2. We include the new words and what we have done in the whole week in the portfolio in addition to a list of what we have learned in the past and now and a list of what we want to learn and improve in future. This has taught us the importance of time management as we had to keep to the submission time.

3. The study skills course was also useful. We have learned how to prepare and make a good presentation.
- Higher education aims to improve learners' skills to reach the higher levels of knowledge. However, learning in some specialisations, does not focus on the practical side. Students only get information from the classroom and have to do homework and prepare for exams. Learning, as I see it, depends on one curriculum which should be followed until the end of the semester. Information does not stay in our heads for long because we never use it. But what is useful here is that we have many quizzes on each chapter, which forces us to revise on a daily basis. Also, one of the goals of higher education is to prepare learners for future jobs and there might be other goals which I don't remember now.
 - Perhaps higher education aims at different things:
 1. Develops students' talents such as acting, working with arts and science
 2. Renew thinking about the importance of work
 3. Helps students change their beliefs
 4. Most importantly, learning is an act of worship which makes Allah becomes pleased about the learners
 5. Resists the ideas of being isolated from others.
 6. Reinforces the importance of cooperation and group work
 7. Provides new ways of learning
 8. Helps learners express their opinions
 9. Helps learners develop understanding of international, religious, civil and educational affairs
 - The proportion of responsibility which I wish to take in relation to learning English is 50% because I need help from others to learn from and communicate with. I also need others to check my mistakes in writing and speaking.
 - The English curriculum at the university requires the learner to learn what is included in books and what the teacher says, so I don't see anything which may suggest taking students' opinions about what he learns.
 - We all know that there are internal and external factors which influence the student's desire to learn. The external factors are obvious to all students. One of them, in my opinion, is the family and the overall atmosphere in it, if problems are approached in a quiet and effective way, which creates a suitable environment for the student to study.
 - I will mention some of the external factors quickly as I want to discuss the internal factors in more details:
 - Friends
 - School
 - Teachers
 - Teaching methods
 - Motivation and encouragement
 - Time management
 - Studying hard
 - Living in a context where people have a particular skill, such as learning English, and they reinforce this skill.

- The English curriculum at the university requires the learner to learn what is included in books and what the teacher says, so I don't see anything which may suggest taking students' opinions about what he learns.