Fostering the process of teacher and learner autonomy in foreign language classrooms through inquiry-in and -on practice

Alice Micallef

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family who has supported me throughout my studies.

I wish to thank you Marcelle for finding the patience to act as a sounding board within this journey and for sustaining me at all times.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Terry Lamb, for the insightful feedback on my work that enhanced my understandings of the journey embarked upon in the study, and that enabled me to work my way through and reflect on the pathways I undertook to arrive soundly at the destination.

Thanks to the three participating teachers in the study, for their collegiality and openness, to discuss and collaborate during the two years of the study, for their dedication to work within the challenging situations and winding roads of practice, their will and enthusiasm to educate and help learners find pathways of learning, and their readiness to portray the realities behind the doors of their classrooms.

Abstract

Nurturing teacher and learner autonomy is a prerequisite to foreign language development within institutionalised settings. This necessitates a process whereby teachers themselves become authors of their own pedagogical practice to experience and nourish their autonomy, critically reflecting on and flexibly managing processes that challenge and enable learners to develop competences as language learners and language users. The study portrays the notion of teacher and learner autonomy as two sides of the same coin, illustrating a process that enabled three teachers of German as a foreign language to inquire into the fostering of learner autonomy in secondary schools in Malta. Through a process grounded within a collaborative and inquiry-oriented approach, enacted through meetings and discussions with teachers, and the teacher inquiry with their learners in class, the study created the conditions that sought to help teachers to navigate through and gain insight into the process of fostering learner autonomy. The aims of the study, embedded within the two aforementioned processes, led teachers to problematise areas within their practice in relation to the development of learner autonomy in language learning and language use and looked into internal and external constraints and possibilities within this process. It furthermore analysed benefits that emerged from practice in this regard. Implications of this study call for the integration of inquiry-oriented processes in the foreign language classroom sustained by the collaborative space that fostered the conditions for inquiry through teachers' own lens of pedagogy for autonomy. It illustrates how a process of teacher inquiry and reflective practice bring together the voices of all participants involved in the study; teacher, learner and myself as researcher, to work towards the vision of fostering autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning. The study furthermore serves to portray illustrations of practice to provide insight into the underlying factors and various facets of such a process within the Maltese context.

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Glossary of Terms

FL - Foreign language – the term used in the Maltese context to denote second language learning

FLAP – Foreign Language Awareness Programme at primary school level (in Years 5 & 6 at the time of the study)

JL - Junior Lyceum exam - Benchmark examination at end of primary school cycle

LOF - Learning Outcome Framework Curriculum Reform

Matsec - The Matriculation and Secondary Education School Certificate

Chapter 1 – Introduction and overview

> [One ought to] be wary of educational discourses that are built on the margin of teachers' and learners' experience just as [one must learn] to trust discourses that are built upon the exploration and validation of ideals through collaborative inquiry with teachers, with reference to their working contexts (Vieira, 2003, p. 236).

1.1 Introduction and background

In this thesis I will set out to explore a process aimed at enabling teachers to direct their own pedagogical journeys for effective foreign language teaching and learning. Foreign language teachers need to be able to address situations and issues related to their contexts of teaching and learning and seek ways to help learners become effective foreign language learners and language users. In the Maltese context, the term 'foreign language' refers to the language or languages learned at school other than the mother tongue, Maltese, and English, the country's second official language. I will refer to foreign languages as FL henceforth. Teaching and learning a FL at secondary school level in Maltese schools is a challenging task due to the varied levels of learner motivation for FL learning displayed in class and the lesson time available to address FL learners' needs. Teachers need to find ways of helping learners actively engage in the process of FL learning to develop competences required to develop as FL learners. Within the Maltese context teaching and learning a FL at secondary school level is highly teacher-led in terms of content and process of learning. The 'rather formal teacher-centred approach [has been noted] as a possible cause for pupil disenchantment and poor performance' (Ministry of Education Language Education Policy Profile: Malta, 2015, p. 60). Learners remain highly dependent on their teacher during the process of learning and hardly

ever actively engage in independent FL learning or use of the language. My experience of planning a process of teaching and learning of German as a foreign language, in view of the diverse needs, interests, styles and motivation of learners in FL classrooms, required me many a time as a teacher to foster autonomous learning capacities to help learners take control of and follow their individual pathways of learning within the classroom community.

Before proceeding with this discussion, I will briefly describe how foreign languages feature within the secondary school curriculum in Maltese secondary state schools. It is compulsory for all learners at secondary level to choose a FL in their first year at secondary school and to learn it for five years. This discussion will serve as a backdrop to the study I conducted with three teachers of German as a foreign language within this sector. Primary and secondary state schools in Malta are incorporated into ten Colleges. Each College includes the primary and secondary state schools of its particular catchment area based at separate premises. A catchment area includes a number of villages and cities that may each have their own Primary school. Primary school students move to a different school at age eleven at the end of primary education. The College secondary schools receive learners from the various primary schools within their catchment area. Each College consists of a Middle School and a Senior secondary school, as separate buildings or on the same school premises. Learners attending the first two years of secondary education, Year 7 (commonly referred to as Form 1 and 2) are housed within the Middle school while learners in Year 8 (Form 3 and 4) and Year 9 (Form 5) attend the Senior school. At the end of Year 9 (Form 5), at age sixteen, the vast majority of learners sit for their Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate examinations (Matsec). These are examinations learners opt to sit for and may be utilised as entry qualifications for upper

secondary education. They may then apply to attend a higher secondary education College and work on an A level programme or continue their education at a vocational institution.

Foreign language options in secondary state schools consist of Italian, French, German, Arabic and Russian, the latter two selected by minimal numbers of students. The vast majority of students in the state and non-state school sectors choose to learn Italian. They amount to approximately half the number of students in each College. The second largest cohort of students choose French. German is the third most selected language alongside Spanish. Registrations for the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (Matsec) for scholastic year 2015, 2016 show that forty four percent of students registered for Matsec examinations in Italian, thirty three percent registered for French, eleven percent for German, 8 percent for Spanish and one percent for Arabic (Matsec, 2016[1]). At the end of the five year secondary school cycle, all learners would have already sat for their secondary school leaving examinations in the various school subjects. Such examinations are noted down in their Secondary School Certificate and Profile, issued by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the National Commission for Further and Higher Education in Malta (NCFHE). To obtain the Certificate and Profile learners require a minimum of eighty five percent of attendance per year, of the last three years of secondary education (ages 14 to 16). They also need to obtain pass marks in Mathematics, Maltese, English and at least two other school subjects. Learners need to furthermore provide evidence of attendance for two 'non formal activities',

[1] Information on Matsec statistics are issued on the Malta University website. https://www.um.edu.mt/matsec/docs/notices/statistics2/statistics_may_2016

organised by the school during school hours as well as two 'informal' activities attended out of school hours (Ministry of Education, 2012b; p. 1).

The foreign language is learned in addition to English as a second language, which in Malta is taught alongside Maltese. Whereas five lessons per week are dedicated to the first and second language, four lessons per week are allocated to FL learning in the first two years of secondary education, reduced to three lessons per week in the subsequent three years. Lessons last around forty to forty five minutes on average, reduced to thirty-five minutes due to time required in between change of lessons. Very few FL classes are slotted as double lessons on the school time-table. Learners who select yet another foreign language at Year 8, are allocated a double lesson slot, twice weekly for their three year course up to year 10 for the foreign language class. Very few students select another foreign language in Year 8 in their subject choice. The German option class is generally a class of three students or less, as in other foreign language option classes in both the state and non-state sector.

Learners enter their first year of secondary school referred to as Form 1 or year 7, at age eleven. As formerly noted, most learners sit for their Matriculation and Secondary examinations (Matsec) in the compulsory and option subjects selected in Form 1 and Form 3. Pass rates in FL examinations at Matsec level in foreign languages have been the cause of much alarm in the past years (Pace, 2015). The three teachers participating in the study either taught classes within a 'setting' system, which classified learners according to their examination results, or in mixed-ability classes, or a mixture of both as in the case of most subject options when class size is too small. Although learners are no longer segregated into different schools according to attainment levels at the end of primary education, most schools have developed their own systems of classifying learners into different classes. Further details

of the background to the teachers and classrooms taught will be presented in Chapter four that analyses and discusses the findings of the study.

Fostering a classroom environment which is conducive to the development of competences and motivation for learning a FL with diverse groups of learners is a challenging task. Such a scenario points at the need to consider alternative pedagogical approaches to the current ones adopted in FL classes within the Maltese secondary educational sector. The move towards learner-centred pedagogy remains the quest of curriculum reforms seeking to shift the focus from teaching to learning;

> […] pedagogy ought to be open to forms of learning within which learners collaborate and learn interactively with and from each other (Ministry of Education, Learning Outcome Framework, 2015, p. 10).

The requirement to develop aspects of learner autonomy in the curriculum is an integral part of learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning. This calls for critical reflection as to how the FL classroom environment may be transformed to enable learners to engage and develop autonomous FL learning competences and language use. Other factors that point at this need within FL education at secondary level is the focus placed on transversal and lifelong learning skills noted in curriculum documents. As the National Curriculum framework document states, to serve the course of formal education one ought to:

> Seek[…] to balance timeless knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes with new [ones]. This constitutes a considerable challenge given the limitations of the school year on the one hand and the magnitude of the body of knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes and values that can be delivered to learners on the other (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 5).

It is both impractical as well as detrimental to the holistic development of the learner that the locus of control over learning remains solely in the hands of the teacher. Through the course of this thesis I will argue that FL teachers need to attend to the fostering of learner autonomy to fulfil their roles as educators and enable learners to develop holistically through pedagogical approaches that centre teaching on learning. This course of action is integral to the development of pedagogical discourse on practice in FL teaching and learning in the Maltese context and to inform policy aimed at guiding such practice.

FL teachers need furthermore to acknowledge the rise in focus on plurilingual and multilingual education noted in educational policies that encourage the learning and active use of diverse languages (Ministry of Education, Language Education Policy Profile: Malta, 2015). A critical analysis of the extent to which pedagogical practices in Maltese classrooms are able to enhance and reflect the tradition of 'high levels of language competence, and in many cases effective operational trilingualism' in the Maltese context ought to be carefully considered (Ministry of Education, Language Education Policy Profile: Malta, 2015, p. 59). Teachers need to develop awareness of how to help learners make use of the language competences they already possess and to explore and sustain autonomous engagement in FL learning and use of the target language.

On the basis of the aforementioned aspects I will argue that teachers need to critically analyse and inquire into their practice to seek pedagogical pathways of how to foster an effective teaching and learning environment with their learners in their diverse FL classrooms. Such processes enable teachers to share, support and gain insight into how their learners may be able to develop control over learning while seeking understandings of this process. In this introductory chapter, I will next illustrate the aims of the study I conducted with three Maltese

teachers of German as a foreign language in this regard and locate its significance for the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy in the Maltese context. The three teachers hailed from three state school Colleges. State school primary and secondary schools are incorporated in ten Colleges in the state school sector. I will then proceed by portraying my experiences of FL teaching and learning and my positionality in the study. Following this I will delineate the limitations of the study and provide an overview of the structure of the thesis and content addressed in each chapter.

1.2 Aims of the study

The study explores the journey I embarked upon to sustain three FL teachers' pedagogical journeys in helping learners engage in and take charge of their learning to become effective language learners and language users. This required them to critically look into the competences required by learners to engage in this process and how they may be able to facilitate such a process. The need to create a collaborative space of inquiry with teachers from three different school settings was one of the main areas that I was committed to. In this way I sought to support the teachers' process of inquiry and contribute to educational research on teacher inquiry into practice grounded within social constructivist views, committed to airing the voices of participants in the research (Jiménez Raya, 2011; Barfield & Brown, 2007).

In the course of this thesis, I will illustrate how I inquired into this journey to enable teachers to direct their own pedagogical pathways and explore a pedagogy that fostered learner autonomy. The process was aimed at helping them gain insight into how such a practice may enhance conditions for effective teaching and learning in their diverse FL classroom settings

within the Maltese secondary school context. My aim was to depict illustrations of practice that reflect the three teachers' understandings of teacher autonomy and experiences in practice, the constraints as well as the possibilities that the journey of inquiry into the fostering of learner autonomy instigated. The illustrations of practice will serve to help teachers gain insight into particular and situational trajectories of inquiry into practice.

The study was grounded within an exploratory research stance that enabled me to navigate through a process of inquiry with teachers. Teachers reflected and collaborated with myself as researcher, the other teachers participating in the study and the learners they worked with. I explored a collaborative framework of inquiry that merged the individual journeys of the three teachers and their learners, recounted in individual meetings, with the sharing of experiences between the three teachers and myself in group meetings held during the two years of the study. My aim was to enable teachers to empower themselves through pedagogical inquiry into practice and seek understandings of the link between learner engagement and control over learning, and their autonomy-enabling roles in this regard. Although at no point will I presume that my research was free from the impact of my own values, my aim was to help teachers problematise aspects within their own practice and seek their own understandings of how to facilitate such a process. Through the study I explored the following overarching research question:

How may teachers direct their pedagogical journey and foster learner autonomy through inquiry in-and-on practice within their foreign language classroom settings?

This question was addressed through the following three research questions:

1. What aspects of teaching and learning did teachers problematise in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy during the course of the inquiry and what understandings were gained through the inquiry in this regard?
2. Which aspects of the process of fostering learner autonomy did teachers consider to be most conducive to FL teaching and learning during the course of inquiry?
3. What constraints and possibilities for the development of learner autonomy did teachers encounter within the process of inquiry in their FL classrooms?

Although the three questions were presented separately, they lent themselves to a process of inquiry that did not necessarily place the impetus of the inquiry on problematisation as a first step for inquiry. The questions allowed for a more fluid course of inquiry due to their interrelated nature. They also provided possibility of looking into the same themes from different perspectives.

1.3 Significance of the study

The study located the central role teachers play in directing a pedagogical journey that fosters learner autonomy. It provides an alternative to top-down approaches of supporting teachers in the process. It looks into how teachers in the Maltese context may benefit through their direct involvement in inquiry processes aimed at enhancing their autonomy and that of their learners. The concept of teacher autonomy is central within the teacher's professional journey. The study exemplifies the need to critically assess teaching and learning in view of the particular situations and contexts of practice and contributes to literature in the Maltese context in the field.

The study points at the central aspect of the process of critical inquiry into practice. It portrays how spaces may be created within which FL teaching and learning may profit from a process of inquiry through the lens of pedagogy for autonomy. The study portrays 'the close interplay' between the field of teacher inquiry, critical reflective practice and pedagogy for autonomy in this regard (Vieira, 2000, p. 222). It draws on issues from the fields of Applied Linguistics and Sociocultural theory, where perspectives on social constructivist language learning theories converge with those in pedagogy for autonomy (Benson & Cooker, 2013; Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007).

1.4 My experiences in foreign language teaching and learning - positionality

Vital to this discussion is the impact of my own personal journey as researcher on the pathways I adopted to conduct this research. My epistemological and ontological perspectives are inevitably impacted upon by my current and past experiences within the field of FL teaching and learning. In this section, I will illustrate how my pathways as a language learner of diverse foreign languages from childhood to adulthood as well as the teaching role I held in secondary schools, bear on my current pedagogical perspectives and research interests.

My involvement in curricular matters as Head of Department of German working with teachers in three different Colleges within the Directorate for Education at the time of the study was furthermore complemented by my interest and work in the field of teacher education and teacher training at University. Within these two roles I engaged myself in guiding teachers and student-teachers to work at developing their roles as educators and FL teachers within institutional settings. Such teaching and learning experiences instigated my

interest in exploring structures within which I could work with in-service teachers to help them guide their own journeys in the FL classroom and develop knowledge, competences and skills required in this regard.

My own experiences as a foreign language learner shaped my views on the FL learners' role within the learning process and resonated with principles of learner engagement in learner-centred pedagogies. My focus on the interrelation between autonomous learning principles and FL gains in learner-centred pedagogy in the FL classroom was initiated through my own personal inquiry into practice, in a study conducted at Master level within my own classroom, seeking insight into the notion of autonomy in FL learning and language use (Micallef, 2011). This initial journey was an exploratory journey. I yearned for pictures of practice which would help me visualise such a process in daily practice. My interest in the area arose out of the search for effective teaching and learning and principles of second language pedagogy. The notion of autonomy emerged as salient within constructivist and social constructivist learning theory and led me to explore it in FL pedagogy. The role of the teacher to nurture learners' direct involvement and engagement in the process of learning lay at the heart of the inquiry I conducted with learners in my own FL classrooms.

This led me to considerations of how I could share my own awareness of the notion of autonomy in FL learning to be able to facilitate this journey for others. My aim was to help FL teachers seek their own pathways to explore the notion of autonomy within their daily practice, and to share their experience of practice in this regard. I was always well aware that effective FL learning was not the result of classroom practice alone. My own experiences as a FL learner impacted directly on my views on the teaching and learning of foreign languages within and beyond school learning contexts.

Growing up at a time when the only option as a television viewer in the 70s and 80s was either the local Maltese channel or Italian channels, offering a far wider range of programmes than the local ones, exposure to Italian television as a child helped me acquire and learn the language, like many others at the time (Caruana, 2003). I was born in a community where English is learned as a second language, alongside the mother tongue, and I grew up learning most subjects at school through Maltese and English. Although I learned French, German and Italian at school as option subjects and Arabic, at the time as a compulsory subject, I felt I had to devise alternative pathways to the systems of learning adopted by teachers in class if I was ever to gain competence in the languages I opted to continue studying beyond secondary level.

I attributed my success at secondary and postsecondary levels in French to two teachers who made us use the language and learn in active and meaningful ways. Other teachers along the way failed to facilitate linguistic skills and concepts which ironically, I later realised, I was already familiar with through my knowledge of Italian, such as the way the perfect tense is formed in Italian, French and German. I selected German and Italian as option subjects during my third year at secondary school, however whilst in Italian I felt more confident as a result of my exposure to Italian through television, learning German was a totally different experience. It was a highly teacher controlled activity mainly based on tasks that were highly structured on a methodology of drilling and text book activities.

My motivation to learn the language however prevailed and I realised that if I had to drop the subject at secondary level, I would not be able to understand or communicate in the language at the same level as in Italian and consequently decided to continue studying it at higher levels. This meant that I had to seek ways of exposing myself to the language to learn,

succeeding mainly through time spent listening to a German radio station based in Malta at the time. I furthermore devised my own strategies while working on reading texts which I selected myself. I found my motivation to learn the language through ways which did not feature as part of teachers' methodological approaches in class.

Arabic was a compulsory subject in Maltese state schools in the eighties, and consequently I studied this language for three years up till Matsec level. Unlike Italian, Arabic was totally foreign to me, albeit its proximity to the Maltese language due to its semitic roots. I found the language intriguing owing to the fact that I learned to decipher a new alphabetic script and to the similarity of some of the words to the Maltese language. However, although I successfully passed my Ordinary level exam after three years of study, I remained unable to use the language. This lay in sharp contrast to my competences in Italian, where my out of class exposure to the language led me to develop communicative and receptive language learning competences well beyond those obtained in any of the other foreign languages studied at school up till secondary level.

My experiences of FL learning have led me to recognise the need to enable learners to engage in meaningful construction of language and language use through their own engagement and involvement in the learning processes. My own experience has impacted on my perceptions of the various pathways which may enable learners to take control of the FL learning process and to learn the target language. My own readiness as a teacher and learner to explore divergent pathways in the FL classroom led me to address issues on FL teaching and learning through the lens of a pedagogy that sustained both teacher and learner autonomy (Vieira, 2010; 2007; Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007). It led me to look into teachers' own readiness to develop their learners' autonomy. Along my years as a teacher of German as a

foreign language in diverse secondary school classrooms I witnessed how learners' lack of engagement in learning caused significant distress amongst teachers, struggling with ways of getting them to take responsibility for both in- and out-of-class learning. I noted that pedagogy for autonomy featured the notion of responsibility and control over learning as prerequisites for FL learner development.

As a result, I felt the need to work at a process which aimed at helping teachers seek their own possibilities of exploring such notions in their practice. During my years as Head of Department of German I encountered teachers in search of support to be able to address various areas within their practice. I observed that teachers benefited from engagement in pedagogical dialogue on both content and process of learning and from critically assessing their own practice and seeking understandings of the underlying implications of their actions. If changes and reforms are to be made, then I felt that these should be primarily fostered in the teachers' minds through bottom-up processes which enable teachers to direct their teaching and learning. This is fundamental since,

> [d]espite the rich promises [Learner-Centred Education] offers and its proliferation as a global phenomenon and national policy, there is evidence that implementation and changes to classroom practice have proved to be problematic in many contexts.
>
> (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 1).

My perspective resonates with studies indicating that questions addressed by research ought to be posed by the teachers themselves (Vieira, Mamede & Lima, 2008; Vieira, 2007). I consequently chose to work through an exploratory research approach which may be defined as an integrative approach to pedagogical inquiry within daily practice. Within such an approach "'[p]roblems" worth investigating soon turn up aspects of classroom life that

themselves need greater understanding, and whose understanding leads to a more satisfactory situation without necessitating any other "solution"' (Allwright, 2005, p. 358).

1.5 Thesis structure

Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses literature in the field of teacher and learner autonomy starting with an overview of the construct of learner autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning, depicting the complexity of the various facets of autonomy. The discussion considers how principles of learner autonomy relate to foreign language pedagogy within the fields of applied linguistics and social constructivist learning theory. It furthermore discusses the notion of teacher and learner autonomy in relation to the competences teachers require to be able to nurture learner autonomy. I illustrate how these two constructs are brought together within the field of pedagogy for autonomy. The processes of critical reflective practice and teacher inquiry for the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy are put forth as central elements of such a process.

The rationale for the research approach adopted in the study will be presented in chapter 3, illustrating the research questions and the design of the research approach. The methods of data collection are elucidated, portraying an exploratory research design, illustrating how data were gathered during the two phases of the study. Ethical issues will furthermore be addressed.

Chapter four illustrates findings that ensued from the process of inquiry in relation to the research questions of the study. The chapter furthermore provides background to the local educational setting and the particular teaching and learning scenario each teacher operated within.

Chapter 5 draws together the various threads of the process of inquiry I embarked upon as researcher with the three teachers in the study and elucidates the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy. It provides an overview of how the process enabled the three teachers to inquire into the practice of fostering learner autonomy and provides an analysis of the process of inquiry-in-and -on-practice and its outcomes. The findings of the three research questions are discussed in light of the process the three teachers embarked upon. This entailed what they problematised, understandings they gained, as well as the benefits, constraints and possibilities that presented themselves within such a process. I will furthermore illustrate the strengths and limitations of the study and its implications and recommendations for policy and practice in the Maltese context. Future directions for research on FL practice and contributions to research on teacher and learner autonomy are also put forth.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature review addresses three main areas, namely the constructs of learner autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning, pedagogy for autonomy and teacher inquiry. These three areas have informed my study and served as a backdrop to my research journey with the three participant teachers. Various facets of the notion of autonomy are presented in the sections on learner autonomy discussing the central role of the construct of autonomy. The notion of autonomy is portrayed as central to views of education aimed at developing a critical and independent faculty of mind and the development of personal autonomy within the social context of learning. Autonomy is furthermore illustrated in relation to constructivist views of knowledge. The multifaceted nature of autonomy and its cultural aspects are furthermore discussed. Following this general focus on the role of learner autonomy, the notion of autonomy as an attribute for the development of foreign language development is delved into. Issues related to active involvement, responsibility and control over learning are also focused upon. The link between the aforementioned concepts and motivation as well as the interplay between learner autonomy and differentiation in teaching and learning are also included. Other areas include the link between interdependence and independence in learning, the ability to seek support and interaction in learning. Aspects related to metacognition and metalinguistic talk are also discussed. Learner autonomy is defined as a central component of social constructivist learning theory in FL pedagogy in relation to the development of FL language learning and language use. The social dimension of learning forms an integral part of this discussion.

Having discussed the notion of learner autonomy and the various aspects related to it in FL teaching and learning, I will proceed to discuss principles of pedagogy for autonomy, a field that brings together the areas of teacher and learner autonomy. In this section I will illustrate the notion of teacher autonomy as related to self-directed pedagogical practice and as a competence for the fostering of learner autonomy. The central role of critical reflective practice is looked into. The last part of the literature review features the notion of teacher inquiry and how it enables teachers to regulate their own pedagogical paths and is presented as integral to the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy. The discussion which follows encapsulates the theoretical underpinnings that the process of inquiry in the study was embedded in and serves as a backdrop to the methodology chapter that follows. It provides insight into what I as researcher brought to the process of inquiry in relation to the principles discussed with the three participant teachers in the study and the process of inquiry embarked upon. It illustrates understandings that the study hinged upon in relation to the notion of autonomy, its links to foreign language teaching and learning, pedagogy for autonomy and teacher inquiry.

2.2 Why learner autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning?

This section focuses on the role of learner autonomy in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. I will start by illustrating general attributes related to autonomy as a prerequisite to the development of a critical and inquisitive mind, and of the reflective faculties required for the development of the foreign language learner as a member within society. I will illustrate learner autonomy as a central factor within constructivist learning theory and proceed to describe understandings of autonomy that have guided my research with teachers

of German as a foreign language in my study. In the course of this discussion I will portray the notion of autonomy as an essential component in foreign language learning, as reflected within a proliferous body of literature in the field (Benson, 2011a; 2011b; 2001). Learner autonomy may be illustrated through three perspectives;

> a 'technical' perspective, emphasizing skills or strategies for unsupervised learning: specific kinds of activity or process such as the 'metacognitive', 'cognitive', 'social' and other strategies identified by Oxford, 1990;
>
> a 'psychological' perspective, emphasizing broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning;
>
> a 'political' perspective, emphasizing empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over the content and processes of their learning (Palfreyman, 2003, p. 3).

Autonomy needs furthermore to be understood as 'a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times' (Benson, 2001, p. 47). Its complexity may furthermore be defined 'according to the person, the setting, and multiple contextual and micro-contextual factors' (Benson, 2011b, p. 16). It has long been argued that autonomy 'is not inborn, [but] must [rather] be acquired' (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Furthermore, autonomy is not to be understood as an 'all or nothing concept' (Nunan, 1997, p. 192) but as a 'continuum in which different degrees of self-management [are] exercised at different moments' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 2).

2.2.1 Development of a critical inquisitive mind and reflective faculties

The notion of autonomy in educational thought may be traced back to liberal philosophies of education on 'the development of a kind of person whose thought and action in important

areas of his life are to be explained by reference to his own choices, decisions, reflections, deliberations' (Dearden, 1975, p. 70). A person is considered autonomous 'to the degree that what he thinks and does […] cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind' (Dearden, 1972, p. 453). In the Kantian liberal tradition autonomy is perceived as a moral activity emanating from the individual's ability of self-governance through rationality of mind. Such perceptions of autonomy have coined autonomy as an 'educational endeavour' (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 18). Such discourse attends to the moral responsibility within the process of education in institutional settings to foster critical thinking, independent thought and action (Bailey, 2014; Burtt, 2003) and of developing competences in 'shaping' and 'authoring' one's life' (Young, 1986, p. 81). Autonomy is furthermore linked to the development of reflective faculties that enhance learners' awareness of the learning process (Little, 1991; Holec, 1981). Reflective engagement with learning is noted as central to efficacy in learning (Little, 1991). Learners acquire knowledge and skills to think critically and 'develop[…] explicit skills of reflection and analysis' through the 'planning, monitoring and evaluation' of their own learning (Little, 2004, p. 105-106). Through reflective activities learners become emotionally and personally involved in their learning (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011, p. 180).

2.2.2 Development of personal autonomy and the social context

Vital to discourse on personal autonomy is the notion of reflection in the light of 'free agency', a capacity to make informed choices as a result of flexibility in one's thinking, leading to the willingness to consider alternative possibilities to situations at hand (Oshana, 2006). The notion of personal autonomy must furthermore be perceived through the socially situated

and complex relations of the individual with other people and contexts, and the interpersonal frameworks in these relations since 'an important element of personal autonomy is the power it grants us to examine the communal values we absorb and the roles in which we discover ourselves' (Oshana, 2006, p. 19). '[T]he connection between personal autonomy and socialisation […] is a central focus of contemporary conceptions of personal autonomy' (Formosa, 2013, p. 11). It is reflected within the tenets of discourse on the transformative power of education as perceived within Freirean pedagogy on the 'critical social participation of the learner within the process of education itself' (Benson, 2001, p. 32). Such a view of education is furthermore perceived as a process emanating from the individual's engagement in social processes (Shor, 1992, Bauman, 2008). It is vital to note that autonomy needs to be understood within the conceptualisation of respect and support for the autonomy of others (Benson, 2012, p. 32). This is central to an educational process that aims at helping the individual develop a capacity to think, reflect and act independently within a democratic process in and beyond their context of learning (Little, 2004; 1991, Holec, 1981). This characteristic of learner autonomy has been defined as 'an integral part of learning of any kind' (Boud, 1988, p. 17). In view of this, the process of guiding learners to exercise their autonomy embodies the process of education as a holistic and social endeavour and may be regarded through the Kantian tradition as an end in itself.

2.2.3 Constructivist learning

Learner autonomy is furthermore an attribute that is central to constructivist views of knowledge. Constructivist views of learning point at implicit and explicit active learning processes and challenge traditional objectivist views of knowledge. The cognitive view

emerged from the field of cognitive development and individual construction of knowledge (Piaget, 1977; 1955; 1954). The notion of creating opportunities for learning underpinned by constructivist notions embedded the approach to teaching and learning discussed in the study. Constructivist learning is that kind of learning which is intentional, active, cooperative and authentic (Jonassen Peck & Wilson, 1999). For learning to take place it is vital to allow the learners space to generate their own rules and adjust their mental models to accommodate new experiences. Constructivist theory posits that knowledge is personal, subjective and not fixed, and necessitates a teaching and learning approach which contrasts with epistemological views based on knowledge as the result of content transmission and standardised plans for classroom learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). It is impacted upon by the experiences the learners themselves bring with them to the process, 'some ad hoc and instable, others are more deeply rooted and well developed' (Sjøberg, 2007, p. 3). Explicit learning processes, learner initiative and control guide the learner towards constructivist learning experiences which they themselves 'construct[…] and dominate[…]' (Holec, 1981; p. 21).

This calls for rethinking of rigid curricula which impede opportunities for constructivist learning (Knowles, Holton & and Swanson, 1998). Empowering learners to construct their own understanding threatens the hierarchical conventions that bind teachers and learners in mainstream classrooms (Daniels, 2001). Constructivist learning requires the teacher to rethink the organisation and management of learning according to principles of autonomy prompting learners to take responsibility for their own learning to transform their own learning process. As Reinders states,

> constructivism gives a more central stage to the learner by focusing less on the knowledge to be transmitted, and more on the process of constructing,

> reorganising and sharing that knowledge. In this process, the learner plays a key role. In order to be successful, learners need to be made aware of their own learning and how to manage it (Reinders, 2010, p. 40).

2.2.4 Cultural aspects of autonomy

Culture plays a vital role within the aforementioned processes of learning. '[C]ulture refers to values and customary ways of behaving in different kinds of community, for example the culture of a classroom, or of a school' (Palfreyman, 2003, p. 1). While autonomy is considered as central to the development of the individual across cultures, promoting learner autonomy is impacted upon by a number of cultural factors (Palfreyman 2003; Ryan, Kuhl & Deci, 1997). One hence needs to consider to what extent autonomy is enabled or suppressed by the cultural context one operates within, since;

> [c]ultures assign meaning to people's autonomous experience, interpreting it either as positive and desirable, which needs to be supported and cultivated, or as a negative and undesirable, which needs to be prevented and circumscribed (Chirkov, 2009, p. 254).

The influence of cultural contexts on learning are made explicit through Vygotsky's social constructivist theory which states that thinking and meaning making are socially constructed through interaction and as an influence of the environment (Kaufman, 2004, p. 2). These notions will be elaborated upon in relation to foreign language teaching and learning and social constructivist learning theory (see Section 2.6). Discourse on 'autonomy and control, creativity and regulation, individuality and conformity, independence and interdependence' manifest variance in cultural attitudes within society at large (Irie & Steward, 2012, p. 4). The notion of autonomy still represents 'a challenge to cultural and educational tradition' even if it prevails within ideas on democratic citizenship or language education (Benson, 2011a, p.

71). The notion of learner autonomy as an individualistic characteristic has been largely contested. From a sociocultural perspective, autonomy is 'understood as the human ability to act through mediation, with awareness of one's actions, and to understand their significance and relevance' (Lantolf, 2013, p. 19). This understanding of learner autonomy purports the view that autonomous learners do not learn in isolation but rather operate within a socio-cultural environment. The notion of the learner as a 'socially constituted individual' (Assis Sade, 2014, p. 158) shifts the focus on to the sociocultural perspective of learning (Lantolf, 2013). Learner autonomy is furthermore conducive to the development and transformation of the cultural norms and values in society since 'in the course of their own development human beings also actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them' (Daniels, 2001, p. 1).

2.3 Learner autonomy and foreign language learning

Following the focus on the notion of autonomy illustrating the understandings of autonomy that informed my study, this next section discusses further elements linked to the notion of autonomy specifically related to foreign language teaching and learning inquired into during the study. I will start by looking at the active role of the learner and the various perspectives of learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning and language use. I will then discuss links between autonomy and motivation and the role of autonomy within a differentiated teaching and learning approach. I will conclude this section with a focus on the social constructivist perspective of teaching and learning, noting aspects related to interaction and interdependence of learning, the role of metacognition and metalinguistic talk in the FL learning process and affordances in learning.

2.3.1 Active involvement in learning: responsibility and control over learning

Autonomy is an attribute embedded within active engagement in learning that has been closely linked to language learner development (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Learner autonomy and the responsibility for learning required within such a process have proved significant in relation to FL learning gains (Legenhausen, 2003; 2001; 1999; Dam & Legenhausen, 1996). Language learning is essentially a matter of autonomous and active involvement (Little, 2007a; 2007b; Candlin, 1997). The central role learner autonomy plays in FL learning is attributed to

> […] the increasingly accepted view that high degrees of language proficiency cannot be achieved through classroom instruction alone […] and that successful foreign language acquisition depends upon learners achieving and exercising some degree of autonomy in respect to their learning (Benson & Huang, 2008, p. 424).

Furthermore, the development of that kind of learner who is able to guide the language learning journey forth and develop as a language learner and language user has been illustrated as a 'valuable goal' of language education (Vieira, 2009b, p. 18). Learner autonomy features as a necessary component within the process of guiding learners to develop their language learning skills and independent use of the language (Little, 2007a; 2007b). The general attributes of the autonomous language learner are widely recognised (Oxford, 2003; Wenden, 1991). As Benson claims, following the evaluation of a decade of research in the area,

> (a) [l]anguage learners naturally tend to take control of their learning, (b) learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it, and (c) autonomous language learning is more effective than non-autonomous language learning (Benson, 2011b, p. 16).

This discourse furthermore hinges on the current shift in terminology from ´teaching´ to 'learning curricula' that reflects current philosophical perspectives in teaching and learning (Assis Sade, 2014, p. 158). It has been argued that,

> the key-difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development [in foreign language learning] is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught (Nunan, 1988, p. 2).

This affirms the need for learner involvement and participation in the process of FL teaching and learning and the need that learners learn to accept and assume full responsibility for such a process (Holec, 1981). Such a process enables learners to pursue goals that they have determined and set within their capabilities (Locke, 1996, p. 123). FL learners need to develop their 'independent capacities in relevant domains' (Littlewood, 1996, p. 427). This refers to the learners' active participation in decisions on the content and process of learning, the use of the target language and to the way learners 'think, learn and behave' (Littlewood, 1996, p. 427).

One of the main aspects that underpins the tenets of this discussion is the consideration that autonomy is the ability to take responsibility and charge of learning (Little, 1991; Holec, 1981).

> We take our first step towards developing the ability to take charge of our own learning when we accept full responsibility for the learning process, acknowledging that success in learning depends crucially on ourselves rather than on other people (Little, 1991, p. 1).

In this vein, one needs to note that the development of autonomous learning hinges on the development of control over learning that, 'enable[s] the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning', and leads to personal growth (Kohonen, 1992, p. 36). Autonomy is reflected in the learners' ability to make independent choices in learning and to sustain the 'motivation and confidence' required to implement them

(Littlewood, 1996, p. 428). It is central to the development of 'skills of reflection and analysis that enable us to plan, monitor and be able to evaluate our own learning' (Little, 1991, p. 1). The various facets of autonomy relate to the managerial and organisational, as well as the cognitive, situational and social aspects of learning (Benson, 2011a). These aspects capture what has been referred to as the various levels of control of learner autonomy. The managerial and cognitive aspects are clearly expressed in definitions of autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' (Holec, 1981, p. 3).

One needs to furthermore consider 'the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning' (Little, 1990, p. 7). The cognitive and 'psychological relation to the process of learning' is expressed through the depiction of autonomy as a 'capacity – for detachment and critical reflection, decision-making and independent action' (Little, 1991, p. 4). Situational and social aspects are further aspects that need to be considered. The situational aspect refers to the freedom required by learners to be able to act autonomously and control their learning while the social aspect relates to the 'learner's ability to interact with others in the learning process' (Benson, 2011a, p. 49).

2.3.2 Autonomy of language use and language learning

Developing confidence in language use is a main aspect that needs to be addressed as learners are given space 'to generate own utterances' in the foreign language classroom (Macaro, 2008, p. 51). Learners need to assume responsibility for a process that enables them to 'move away from the language of others to the language of the self' (Macaro, 2008, p. 52). To achieve such competence, the meaning of language use cannot be merely viewed as the replication of structured dialogues or teacher-learner led utterances 'requir[ing] only brief

and formulaic learner contributions' (Little, 2007b, p.21). The development of foreign language proficiency requires learners to engage in the use of language through their own efforts as in the process of learning one's mother tongue (Little, 2007, p.21). To help learners within such a trajectory they need to be enabled to take responsibility and control of a process that connects aspects of classroom learning to 'the broader concepts of learners' lives' (Benson & Huang, 2008, p. 25).

2.4 Learner autonomy and motivation in language learning

Vital to this discussion is the close link between autonomy and motivation in language learning (Murray, Gao & Lamb, 2011; Dörnyei, 2001; Ushioda, 2011a; 2011b; 1996). Efficacy in learning is closely linked to 'social interaction and participation' as well as active and personal involvement in learning (Ushioda, 2011a, p. 221). Little affirms that, 'because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective […] conversely, all learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous' (Little, 1991, p. 2). Motivation hinges on the affective dimension in learning impacted upon by the learners' proactivity and commitment to learning linked to their thoughts, beliefs and emotions (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 118). Motivation in learning refers to both;

> affect (emotion) and cognition, it has been used as both a stable variable of individual difference (i.e. a trait) and a transient-state attribute and it has even been characterised as a process that is in constant flux, going through ebbs and flows […] a factor integral to the learner (e.g. individual curiosity or interest) and a factor externally determined by the sociopolitical set-up of the learners' environment (e.g. language attitudes influenced by the relationships within language communities) (Dörnyei, 2014, p. 519).

Motivation may consequently be described as the 'primary impetus' and the 'driving force' in the teaching and learning process (Dörnyei, 1998; p. 117). The need to help learners take

control of their own learning and to see themselves as the central agents in the management of this process is central to helping them persist in their learning. Fostering the learners' autonomy is central for the upkeep of motivation required in the process of learning a foreign language (Little, 2004, p. 106). Motivation is impacted upon by beliefs learners hold on their ability as learners often linked to their past experiences in language learning. This is referred to as 'perceived self-efficacy' and is one of the factors that impacts upon 'cognitive development and functioning' in language learning (Bandura 1993, p. 117). The development of learner autonomy is furthermore vital since even the best of learners require motivation to achieve 'long term goals' set through the most 'appropriate curricula and good teaching' (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 117). Learner autonomy is critical in helping learners persist at a process that helps them to remain self-determined and to gain control over learning especially when confronted with 'external constraints and pressures' in learning (Macaro, 2008, p. 56).

> Research has shown that autonomous motivation predicts persistence and adherence and is advantageous for effective performance, especially on complex or heuristic tasks that involve deep information processing or creativity (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 14).

2.5 Differentiation in teaching and learning

The field of learner autonomy has always been concerned with issues supporting views of learning that emphasise the learner's individual ways of learning. It is acknowledged that individuals have their preferred ways of learning and that there are various individual learner differences.

> Learners differ in their interests, attitudes, cognitive learning styles, learning strategies and rhythm, prior knowledge, motivation and affective idiosyncrasies. In other words the differences themselves are of a varied nature, namely cognitive, physical, affective, social, linguistic, and experiential among others (Jiménez Raya & Lamb, 2003, p. 14).

Neuroscience illustrates how the brain is organised in a unique way for each individual, illustrating why each individual views the world differently as a result of the experiences one goes through and their interpretation. This also accounts for the need of differentiation in learning and the analysis of the learner's 'learning profile' (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p. 13). Teachers ought to reflect on how characteristics which affect learning may be modified, and that others cannot and should not be altered (Jiménez Raya & Lamb, 2003, p. 14). A differentiated approach to learning attends to the fact that learners approach learning from varied starting points, bring different experiences to which they can connect new learning, work at different speeds, process information in a variety of ways and require different support systems in order to master the essential content (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

The notion of choice is central to helping learners gain control over learning at the stage they are at. This entails consideration of ways of how to help learners make choices in learning, that may be in relation to 'learning activities and resources in order to achieve their objectives […] monitoring and evaluation of progress […] helping the learner develop the ability to cater for his/her own individual needs' (Jiménez Raya & Lamb, 2008, p. 66). Fostering learner autonomy requires the teacher to enable learners to create their own on-going syllabus thus allowing for changing abilities, learning needs, and perceptions in the learners through involvement in the decision-making process over product and process of learning. Within such a process learners become more knowledgeable about their own preferred ways of learning and that of others. Language learners need to therefore be increasingly involved in activities which are not subordinated and regulated by others but are rather provided with the support required as they move from one level of understanding to the next (Vygotsky, 1978). The role of the FL teacher entails helping them to 'identify their ideal selves' as language learners

(Yashima, 2013, p. 75). This is a complex and highly 'unique […] individual process' (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p. 1), manifesting the 'unique characteristics' of the learner (Ushioda, 2011b, p. 12). In this vein, teachers, on their part, need to pay heed to learners' voices since,

> learners' voices offer clear but varied suggestions for teacher intervention with a view to empowering the learners to have control over their learning in ways that are sensitive to their diverse needs (Lamb, 2010, p. 98).

2.6 Social constructivist views of learning

Language learning is essentially embedded within a view of learning as an active process rather than one where the learner is a passive consumer of knowledge. Within this section I will discuss aspects related to the social component within this process, and the role that interaction and interdependence play within this social constructivist perspective (Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). The notion of social constructivism permeated the approach adopted for the research design of the study. Teachers engaged in critical reflective practice and sought understandings through a collaborative space of inquiry, with myself as researcher, the teachers participating in the study and the learners during classroom practice (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2, p. 64). The following section addresses social constructivist perspectives in language learning. The last two sections address the role of metacognition and metalinguistic talk and affordances in learning.

2.6.1 Social constructivist perspectives: interaction and interdependence in language learning

This next section focuses on understandings of autonomy in relation to social constructivist language learning theory. The view on the social process of learning emerged from the theory of social construction of knowledge and asserts that learning does not happen in isolation but

rather through interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). The 'social dimensions of learning' emerge as salient within the fields of learner autonomy (Murray, 2014; O'Leary 2014) and second language acquisition (van Lier, 2004). Language learner development necessitates a process which facilitates learner engagement and interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Within the Vygotskian perspective language learning may be depicted as a 'socially-mediated' process (Benson, 2011a, p. 38) rather than a purely cognitive one (Block, 2003, p. 4). The focus on the social nature of autonomous behaviour infiltrated definitions of autonomy formerly solely addressing the individualistic and cognitive aspect of 'control over learning' (Assis Sade, 2014; Oxford, 2003; Schwienhorst, 2003; Benson, 1997). A social constructivist theory of language teaching and learning focuses on the notion of negotiation of meaning and knowledge dismissing the notion that knowledge may be transmitted from teacher to learner, locating the individual meaning making mediated dimension of language learning within the social interactive perspective (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Autonomous language learning is consequently viewed as that kind of process which nurtures a 'social learning space' within which one learns 'with each other and from each other' (Murray, Fuyishima & Uzuka, 2014, p. 81). The role of the teacher in terms of support for learners is crucial in the fostering of learner autonomy as indicated in the following observation by Little,

> […] the teacher must be able to identify on a day to-day basis when it is appropriate to leave her learners to get on with their learning. Note that, in accordance with Vygotskian theory, the individual learner's capacity to exercise responsibility for his or her learning at a psychological level develops out of the interactive (and thus linguistically mediated) experience of shared responsibility for collaborative learning projects (Little, 2004, p. 22).

The understanding of the notion of learner autonomy as an interdependent process of learning complies with the Vygotskian notion of the zone of proximal development and

language development (Little, 2007, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). This is an area where theoretical perspectives on learner autonomy and second language acquisition converge (Lantolf, 2013). It is vital to note that such a process refers to both teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions. Learner autonomy may be enhanced through interaction with the environment or other individuals within that environment since 'individuals can only be autonomous in relation to some social context' (Murray, 2014, p. 4). Interdependence is the outcome of a process within which the learner as a social being juggles between dependence and independence (Little, 1991, p. 5). Interdependence is noted as the most advanced stage within the autonomous learning process since autonomy,

> […] cannot be pursued in a vacuum; it does not necessitate isolation from the ideas and experiences of others. Its exercise has a social context […]. Interdependence is an essential component of autonomy in action (Boud, 1981, p. 29).

Learners are furthermore involved in 'collaborative decision-making, defined as the constant balancing of an individual's agenda with everyone else's, as well as the balancing of particular goals with personal purposes and preferences for learning [that] calls for interdependent ways of working' (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 22).

2.7 Metacognition in foreign language learning

A further aspect to the development of autonomy and FL learning competences is that related to metacognitive behaviour. The metacognitive skills utilised by learners to manage and regulate their cognitive learning are essential for the development of learner autonomy (Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive knowledge includes knowledge and awareness of individual learner characteristics and preferences in learning, of possible ways of addressing learning tasks, identifying purpose and possible learning outcomes, as well as the use of strategies in

the process of learning (Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive competences are part of a process that fosters learner autonomy by encouraging learners to set goals and select materials and resources for learning as well as to monitor and assess their learning process (Holec, 1981). The 'metacognitive dimensions' of learning are considered as integral to 'three basic pedagogical principles' conducive to the development of language learner autonomy, namely learner involvement, learner reflection and appropriate target language use (Little, 2005; p. 2).

Metacognitive behaviour relates to the,

> […] learners' self-determination in learning, particularly with regard to how to chart their learning journeys and make adjustments along the way when and where any need arises for doing so [within] the social context in which cognition takes place (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 28).

While keeping in mind that metacognition is not to be perceived 'purely as a cognitive construct' in FL teaching and learning, one must necessarily explore the notion of autonomy as,

> [t]he ability to deploy a range and combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies such that task achievement or more general learning can occur either in complementary fashion with the teacher's approaches and techniques or independently of (or indeed in contrast to) the teacher's approaches and techniques (Macaro, 2008, p. 53).

The association between processes of cognition and metacognition in foreign language learning have long been documented as beneficial to the FL learning process (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). '[N]o matter how critical and insightful learners' understanding of contextual conditions, such understanding serves no purpose if learners do not translate it into action through metacognitive interaction' (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 38). Learners need to take control of various tasks while working within their zone of proximal development to

enhance their metacognitive and autonomous FL learning skills (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). language; Little, 2007). Through 'classroom discourse focus[ed] on learning' learners are involved in processes that get them to reflect about their learning to be able to plan and evaluate such a process (Crabbe, 1993, p. 449). The need to help learners 'optimise the cognitive and metacognitive processes within their brains, as well as to utilise any resources within the immediate settings and broad sociocultural contexts' is integral to our understanding of FL learners' metacognitive, 'strategic and autonomous' learning competences (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 38).

2.7.1 Metalinguistic talk

Metalinguistic talk involves knowledge and cognition about language indicating learners' awareness of language (Gombert, 1990). As the learner engages in metalinguistic talk, the learner draws on knowledge of past experiences with languages from one's mother tongue or other languages the learner is familiar with, seeking and defining understandings and constructing meaning and knowledge about language and linguistic structures (Bialystok, 1994). Within metalinguistic talk the learner expresses metalinguistic awareness of language in the form of explicit or implicit declarative knowledge of linguistic rules. It is for this reason that this kind of talk serves as a clear indication of learners' metalinguistic awareness and metalinguistic competences (Roehr & Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). This cognitive knowledge about language has been noted as central to the process of FL learning (van Lier, 1996; Sharwood Smith, 1981). Metalinguistic talk may thus be defined as that type of discourse that stands in sharp contrast to the ability to simply recall a grammar rule. It may be described as that kind of discourse that arises from communicative exchanges about language that

elucidate aspects related to metalinguistic competences during the process of FL learning (Ellis, 1995). It provides a clear indication of the extent to which the learner 'already has the language representations which are necessary foundations' for the acquisition of language they are working with or focusing on (Ellis, 1995, p. 136).

2.7.2 Affordances in learning

A broad view of cognition,

> argues that cognitive performances – and to that extent, our minds – are distributed over shifting assemblies or 'scaffolds' that include not only our bodies but also aspects of our physical and social contexts (Marsh, 2006, p. 700).

This view reflects the role of affordances for learning derived from the context of learning and points at how the learner learns through 'affordances' or 'resources' within the learning environment (Palfreyman, 2014; p. 190). The interplay between the learner and the learning environment and the affordances that manifest themselves for language learning may best be understood through an ecological perspective to language learning (van Lier, 2000). Such notions of language learning denote the role of affordances for learning derived from social and cultural factors within individual learning experiences (Nakata, 2009, p. 198). They may be defined as the result of the learner's own interactions and experiences related to 'the perceptual and social activity of the learner, and particularly the verbal and nonverbal interaction in which the learner engages' (van Lier, 2000, p. 246). Awareness of the kinds of 'contexts [which] support learner autonomy' and of the affordances for learning as the language learner 'interact[s] autonomously with his/ her context', may be drawn through the metaphor of ecologies of learning (Palfreyman, 2014, p. 175).

2.7.3 Addressing internal and external constraints

The development of learner autonomy in the school context, as in any social context, is often hindered by factors that are referred to as external or internal constraints (Trebbi, 2009; 2008). Seeking to find pathways that open up spaces for learner autonomy requires a 'framework for action' that unravels and seeks to address constraints (Trebbi, 2008, p. 36). As Trebbi claims, individual freedom is never free from constraining factors and 'conditions' that hinder autonomy within institutionalised settings are a product of the social cultural context they operate within (Trebbi, 2008, p. 36). External constraints feature in the form of predetermined curricula and teacher plans, pedagogical approaches determined by examination content and coverage of text book material, large classes and insufficient lesson time, amonst others. Internal constraints relate to beliefs about teaching and learning that stand in the way of the development of learner autonomy (Barfield & Trebbi, 2009). Fostering autonomy relies on the will and ability to attend to 'uncovering constraints and finding spaces for maneouvre' (Vieira, 2009b, p. 19).

2.8 Teacher autonomy

One of the main developments in the field of learner autonomy is the notion of teacher autonomy. There are several understandings of teacher autonomy that relate to the various 'dimensions' of this construct (Smith, 2001, p. 3). These range from the ability of the teacher to self-direct teaching (Little, 1995), the notion of freedom from control in teaching that entails freedom over professional action while working on the subject curriculum in the school context (McGrath, 2000) and the notion of teacher autonomy related to teacher engagement for the development and fostering of learner autonomy (Vieira, 2010; Sinclair,

McGrath & Lamb, 2000). The view of teacher autonomy that informed my study related to this latter dimension, encapsulating the need for self-direction within a process aimed specifically at the fostering of learner autonomy (Little, 1995). The view of teacher autonomy that informed my study related to this latter dimension, encapsulating the need for self-direction within a process aimed specifically at the fostering of learner autonomy (Little, 1995). It attends to the 'social turn in language education' that locates the need for teachers to redefine their roles and those of their learners in the foreign language classroom (Benson, 2011, p. 17). The exploratory approach to inquiry adopted in the study prompted teachers to tap on ways of how to foster learner autonomy, develop self-direction of the pedagogical journey and enhance their autonomy in the process. The framework of the process of this exploratory journey rests on the understandings constructed through a process of collaborative inquiry and critical reflective practice, discussed in Sections 2.9.1 and 2.10 below. The structure of this process, elaborated upon in the methodology section (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2, p. 64) and analysed in the discussion of findings in Chapter 5 (see Section 5.2, p. 174) rests upon the construct of autonomy and principles of pedagogy for autonomy and foreign language teaching and learning previously discussed in this literature review chapter.

2.8.1 Direction of the pedagogical journey and the fostering of foreign language learner autonomy

I will start by delineating the notion of teacher autonomy as a professional attribute that reflects the teacher's ability to take control of the pedagogical journey for the development of effective teaching and learning in the FL classroom. While learner autonomy refers to the ability of learners to take control of their learning, 'teacher autonomy involves responsibility

for teaching and control over the teaching process' (Benson & Huang, 2008, p. 428). This is a process that involves 'the individual dimension of autonomy (e.g. self-knowledge, responsible self-agency, self-regulation, self-direction) as well as the 'social dimension e.g. voice, respect for others, negotiation, co-operation, interdependence'. (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 1).

As previously noted, teacher autonomy may be denoted as a prerequisite to the fostering of learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning (Reinders, 2010; Lamb, 2008; Smith, 2003). I concur with Little's statement that teachers cannot be expected ´to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they do not themselves know what it is to be an autonomous learner' (Little, 2007, p. 27). The notion of teacher autonomy that informed my study relates to the teacher's 'capacity, freedom and/or responsibility to make choices' on teaching (Aoki, 2000; p.111). Such a competence is aimed at enabling learners to engage in the process of learning to develop competences for independent foreign language learning and language use. Such views of teacher autonomy maintain that teachers need to analyse and develop their own autonomy and the concept of autonomy they are to foster (Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2000). The teacher's capacity to work through and sustain an approach in the FL classroom that enables learners to navigate autonomously through the process of learning is considered fundamental to FL learner development;

> […] instead of being the sole source of knowledge responsible for all the decisions involved in designing and implementing a programme of study [teachers] help[…] learners to take those decisions themselves (Riley, 1987, p. 114).

The teacher's autonomous competences in this regard are considered central to creating a teaching and learner environment that is conducive to learner involvement in the decision making process, within an approach that explores the negotiation of product and process of

learning. Within this perspective the previous notions of autonomy as freedom from the control of others over professional action in the school context may be contested from the perspective that;

> […] teacher autonomy is *not* about being free from external constraints and acting according to one's desires; it is essentially about being willing to challenge non-democratic traditions and developing a professional sense of agency in teaching that is *directly* connected with developing the learners' agency in learning (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 23).

This leads us to the next part of the discussion regarding the need that teachers engage in a pedagogy for autonomy.

2.9 Pedagogy for autonomy

As noted in the first part of this discussion, '[t]he relevance of the notion of learner autonomy as a goal in formal education contexts has in turn produced a need for teachers to develop expertise in pedagogy for autonomy […] to tackle the resistance to pedagogical innovations that assign a new role to them' (Jiménez Raya, 2009, p. 221). Pedagogy for autonomy draws together the two fields of teacher and learner autonomy. In this respect teacher and learner autonomy may be perceived as 'two sides of the same coin, that is, the autonomy of teachers and learners develop simultaneously as they engage in the construction of more democratic pedagogies' (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 22). Pedagogy for autonomy is defined as a process characterised by 'the struggle to make teaching and learning more satisfactory with […] a vision of [foreign language] education as a transformative and empowering process' (Vieira, 2009a, p. 7). As Lamb suggests, the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy 'bring[s] together the different elements of freedom, capacity, reflection and political action' (Lamb, 2008, p. 15). It is a process that strives to instil in learners the ability

to ‘become partners in pedagogical negotiations, […] abandoning a reified notion of knowledge in favour of a view of knowledge as a dynamic construct of the knower’ (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 6). This aspect permeated discussions on teaching and learning and on the process of fostering learner autonomy in the study. It furthermore spurred the inquiry with the three participant teachers and the teachers’ inquiry with learners in class.

The rise of classroom based approaches in FL teaching and learning point at the diverse approaches that may be utilised to foster learner autonomy (Benson, 2010). While there are ‘no recipes for promoting autonomy in the classroom’ (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 26), principles related to processes conducive to its fostering have been defined (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007). The EuroPAL project succinctly defined such principles (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 58) within the aim of ‘promot[ing] reflection about the role of learner autonomy in school practice’ (Jiménez Raya, 2009, p. 221). These principles include; ‘encouraging responsibility, choice and flexible control, creating opportunities for cognitive autonomy support, creating opportunities for integration and explicitness, developing intrinsic motivation, accepting and providing for learner differentiation, encouraging action-orientedness, fostering conversational interaction and promoting reflective inquiry’ (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, pp. 58 - 66). It is vital to note that while the focus in the previous sections lay on principles of learner autonomy in relation to foreign language teaching and learning, pedagogy for autonomy embraces an ‘interdisciplinary value of autonomy as an educational goal’ and is therefore ‘not specific to languages’ (Jiménez Raya, Lamb, & Vieira, 2007, p. 6). The following section locates the role of critical reflective practice in pedagogy for autonomy.

2.9.1 Critical and reflective practice

The notion of teacher involvement in reflective practice has been advocated as integral to effective teaching and learning (Zeichner & Liu, 2009; Schön, 1983a; Dewey, 1933). The move towards an approach that prompted teachers to reflect on, analyse and question the underlying tenets of their own plans and actions rather than to replicate and 'perform certain behaviours' advocated in research, was a result of the shift away from the behaviouristic perspective of teaching 'as a technical process' directed by others (Zeichner, 2008, p. 535). It fits in well with our previous discussion on teacher autonomy. The notion of teacher reflection pronounced the need for teacher engagement in the construction and deconstruction of pedagogical practice and classroom experience, dismissing behaviouristic and technicist views of teaching. Reflection in teaching is associated with a process that enables teachers;

> […] to understand the reasons and rationales associated with different practices and with developing teachers' capacities to make intelligent decisions about how to act based on their carefully developed educational goals, on the contexts in which they were working, and on the learning needs of their learners (Zeichner, 2008, p. 535).

Such views are integral to our discussion on pedagogy for autonomy and the need for teachers to reflect on their role of fostering learner autonomy (Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2000). Teacher reflection is fundamental to a process that seeks to help teachers make decisions pertinent to their situations of practice in pedagogy for autonomy to be able to frame them within the broader goals of education. It is integral to help them 'adapt to new teacher roles' as they seek the insight required for the 'transfer of power from teacher to learner' in the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 5).

A critical reflective stance is required to link teaching practice to the broader educational vision one is working towards in pedagogy for autonomy. Critical reflection 'places the information gained about school processes in its social and historical context and provides a fundamental criterion for the direction for change and improvement efforts' (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986, p. 36). It is a process that seeks insight into 'the social and political meanings' of schooling rather than one that is solely focused on the individual teacher's practice and the closed confines of the classroom and 'makes possible a more fuller consideration of the implications of what is done in schools' (ibid). While reflection helps the teacher uncover the needs, interests and concerns of the learners, critical analysis of the internal and external constraints impacting on the practice of fostering of teacher and learner autonomy is furthermore central to the process (Trebbi, 2008). Such a process necessitates an inquisitive stance into situations of practice from diverse angles (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015). Such a process enables the teacher to link the contextual and situational aspects of practice to the broader factors that impact on them. One ought to note that 'teaching is not only governed by principles of effectiveness, but also by special normative, ethical, or affective considerations' and critical reflection is to be understood as the process that seeks to bring the social, moral and the political aspects of teaching practice to the fore (van Manen, 1995 ; p. 1). Such a process is moreover instrumental to pedagogy for autonomy in the process of helping learners become 'critical (rather than passive) consumers and producers of knowledge, co-managers of teaching and learning processes, and partners in pedagogical negotiations' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 6).

2.9.2 Critical perspectives and the teacher's role as educator and language teacher

As noted in the previous section, within the critical reflective view of teaching and learning in pedagogy for autonomy lies a holistic perspective on the wider goals of the education system and the role of the teacher as educator and language teacher (Benson, 2012). As Lantolf claims, teachers must

> not only prepare the learners to take responsibility for their behaviour in particular activities, but must also encourage them to seek out new abilities where their abilities can be brought out to bear (Lantolf, 2013, p. 20).

The teacher´s role as educator is prevalent in relation to the process of nurturing the construct of autonomy in the learner as;

> [t]he competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation (Jiménez Raya, Lamb, & Vieira, 2007, p. 1).

This demands that teachers act as 'agents of change' for the development of the FL learner in the language classroom (Sercu & St. John, 2007, p. 41). Their role entails helping the learner '[t]o govern oneself' and to address 'attitudinal dispositions, knowledge and abilities to develop self- determination, social responsibility and critical awareness' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 2). While grounded within a vision of FL education as a journey of 'self-expression' teachers' responsibilities are viewed in relation to the development of individual autonomy in terms of the social good (Benson, 2012, p. 37). For the FL teacher this implies developing a vision of FL teaching and learning 'oriented by democratic and emancipatory ideals' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira; 2007; p. 2). The teachers' observations about teaching and learning reach far beyond the immediate classroom learning environment, indicating the

proximity between the 'macro social context' and the 'micro social context of the classroom' (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 133).

2.10 Teacher inquiry and teacher and learner autonomy

In this section I will discuss the notion of teacher inquiry in relation to the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy that informed my study. Teacher inquiry may be described as a process of teacher engagement and commitment to seeking pathways into pedagogical practice through reflection and action (Vieira, 2010; 2000). Such a process of inquiry into practice sustains the capacities put forth in the definition of autonomy as 'detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991, p. 4). It has been stated that

> [p]edagogical inquiry starts with the identification of problems or dilemmas, which are transformed into plans for action that incorporate the promotion of teacher and learner autonomy (Vieira, 2010, p. 16).

One of the main aspects that needs to be noted is that one cannot prescribe a set of criteria for a process of teacher inquiry aimed at fostering learner autonomy. The view of pedagogical inquiry adopted in my study rests on a process that contains elements of exploratory practice, a process that seeks 'understandings of the quality of language classroom life' (Allwright, 2003, p. 114). Within such an inquiry the focus is on the process teachers embark upon while

> working to understand: (a) what they want to understand, following their own agendas; (b) not necessarily in order to bring about change; (c) not primarily by changing; (d) but by using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools, so that working for understanding is part of the teaching and learning, not extra to it (Allwright, 2003, p. 127).

A process of inquiry set on principles of exploratory practice may seem 'unsettling' due to the 'lack of precise prescriptive information about the whole structure of the process, and […] no

clear definition of the steps to be followed' (Lyra, Fish & Braga, 2003, p.152). Involvement in such a process demands 'more autonomy' on the part of the teacher (Lyra, Fish & Braga, 2003, p. 156). It has been stated that

> [t]his kind of research is especially suited to the field of autonomy, because it is, in effect, a form of autonomous learning, which can help us to develop our own autonomy as teachers (Benson, 2011, p. 202).

Through inquiry in pedagogy for autonomy teachers are encouraged to continuously re-interpret and re-construct their understanding of their thoughts and actions to foster their own and their learners' autonomy. As Jiménez Raya & Vieira state, '[a] teacher's practical approach to pedagogy for autonomy [….] will almost certainly involve choice [of] pedagogical principles' (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 28). Teacher autonomy in pedagogy for autonomy is consequently sustained by a process of inquiry that enables them to self-regulate their teaching in this regard. It enables them to help learners develop their capacity for autonomy and to facilitate the 'situational freedom' required by learners to enact and develop their autonomy (Lamb, 2008, p. 20). Pedagogy for autonomy prompts teachers to engage in uncovering situational constraints to understand the 'external circumstances prescribe[d] on them' and the contexts of teaching and learning (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 11). Through inquiry teachers are able to explore such a process as they seek 'to understand and explore the pedagogy for autonomy puzzle, […] uncover those forces, look at their ideas and action from new perspectives, and discover unconventional routes to follow' (Jiménez Raya, 2009, p. 224). Within pedagogy for autonomy teacher inquiry may consequently be defined as a tool that unveils factors that nurture or constrain the fostering of autonomy in the teaching and learning process (Lamb, 2000) while enabling teachers to self-regulate and direct themselves through the process. In this way,

> [t]eacher-initiated inquiry can help teachers become more critically aware of the justifications and implications of their practice, envisage alternatives that are more consonant with their espoused theories and aspirations as regards learner development, and become more empowered to develop a re(ide)alistic pedagogy (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 47).

It is through such processes that teaching becomes synonymous with research and that practice may be posited as a theory in its own right. The various stages of inquiry that form the basis of this exploratory journey within the study are illustrated in the methodology Chapter on research design (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2, Tables 3.1 and 3.2, pp. 68-69).

2.10.1 Collaborative inquiry – researchers, teachers and learners

The journey of teacher inquiry is grounded within 'the pervasive assumption that learning is […] an active construction of knowledge' and resides within the view that knowledge is co-constructed amongst individuals 'whose joint interactions and negotiations determine decisions and the solution of problems' (Reusser, 2001, p. 2018). A process of inquiry founded on negotiation and collaboration with others enables teachers to meander through understandings of the approaches they themselves self-regulate and direct. Such notions reflect elements of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and reflective practice (Schön, 1983a; 1983b). The idea of teaching as a 'skill that can be learned in isolation from, and then applied, in practice' has been challenged (Carr, 2004, p. 133). If this is the case it 'excludes substantive philosophical questions about the fundamental aims and values that should provide the intellectual basis for contemporary educational policies and practice' (Carr, 2004, p. 128). Research and practice in the field of inquiry for autonomy complement each other (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, Vieira, 2003).

Although research in the field of learner autonomy is proliferous (Benson, 2011b), autonomy remains a vision to work towards. Collaborative inquiry between researchers, teachers and learners portrays benefits of inquiry in-and-on practice through collective research efforts towards such a vision (Vieira, 2009a, Young, Hafner & Fisher, 2007; Kennedy & Pinter, 2007). This kind of inquiry gives prominence to the voices of the participants in the research: learners, teachers and researchers.

2.11 Conclusion

Within this discussion I have illustrated the underpinnings of learner autonomy, pedagogy for autonomy and teacher inquiry that my study was informed by. The complex and multifaceted construct of autonomy emerges as a central component of education and learning of any kind and permeated the vision of autonomy discussed in the study. Autonomy is defined as a construct embedded within interdependent processes of learning that may take different forms for different individuals and that is central to the development of foreign language competences. In the course of the discussion I have argued that teacher and learner autonomy are two sides of the same coin. This aspect was a main tenet of the study, supported by a research design that sustained teacher and learner autonomy. It was furthermore addressed through the overarching research question of the study that sought insight into the trajectory of this journey with the three participating teachers. The discussion in this chapter portrays the role of the teacher within pedagogy for autonomy as one committed to creating an autonomy-enabling environment while seeking to understand the local and specific situations of practice that sustain or pose constraints on teacher and learner autonomy. The section on teacher inquiry purported the need for teacher engagement in

collaborative practice for teacher and learner autonomy through inquiry in and on practice. This aspect supported my work with teachers in the study and the participating teachers' understanding of the process of inquiry. The next chapter illustrates the research methodology, design and implementation of the study and maps out the tenets underlying my own research journey of inquiry within the field of teacher and learner autonomy.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology and Implementation

3.1 Introduction

This chapter serves to outline my research design and the methodological choices made throughout the process of the study to inquire into the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy. It follows the discussion in the previous chapter on the principles that this process of inquiry was embedded in, namely the construct of autonomy, the notion of autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning, the fostering of teacher autonomy in relation to the development of learner autonomy, and the process of teacher inquiry itself. This chapter illustrates the research design and the structure of inquiry-in and -on practice as discussed in Section 3.2 below. The foundation of the journey of inquiry related to pedagogy for autonomy and critical reflective practice are illustrated in Chapter 2 in sections 2.8.1 and 2.9 of the literature review. Factors related to the inquiry process conducted with and by teachers are elaborated upon in Chapter 5, Section 5.2 in the discussion of findings (see Tables 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3). Principles on the notion of autonomy and foreign language teaching and learning discussed in the literature review section seeped into the discussions with teachers throughout the various stages of the study.

The study was grounded within an exploratory research approach to help the three participant teachers seek understandings and foster learner autonomy in their FL classrooms in three Maltese secondary state schools. I selected a research design that would facilitate my work with teachers through a bottom-up approach that placed them 'centre-stage', to

help them problematise and explore aspects related to their inquiry in the different classroom settings they worked in (Vieira, 2009b, p. 15). This chapter discusses the research design that enabled me as researcher to explore the process of inquiry to help teachers construct understandings of autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning and seek ways of how to foster it with their learners in class. Through the structure created to meet, discuss and critically analyse practice in this regard, teachers were enabled to move towards a closer understanding of 'the forces which [act] on their agency', that helped them broaden 'their explanations of phenomena' within the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy (Scotland, 2012, p. 13). Emerging themes on the nature of the inquiry process are illustrated in Chapter 5 in table 5.3 (see p. 212). The stages of the inquiry process are illustrated in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 below (see Section 3.3, pp. 68-69).

The study considered the following overarching question:

How may teachers direct their pedagogical journey and foster learner autonomy through inquiry in-and-on practice within their FL classroom settings? This question led to the following three research questions:

1. What aspects of teaching and learning did teachers problematise in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy during the course of the inquiry and what understandings were gained?
2. Which aspects of the process of fostering learner autonomy did teachers consider to be most conducive to FL teaching and learning during the course of inquiry?
3. What constraints and possibilities for the development of learner autonomy did teachers encounter within the process of inquiry in their FL classrooms?

I will proceed by delineating the rationale underlying the research approach and illustrate how the research design emerged from my epistemological and ontological assumptions. I will furthermore outline how the methodology adopted for the study helped me generate the data required for the study. Following this I will illustrate the rationale for my choice of research tools and describe how these were instrumental for the collection of data and the process of teacher inquiry. A description of how I managed, organised and analysed my data in the two phases of the study follows. I will then proceed with the discussion of ethical issues, considerations and issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research, addressing areas of credibility, dependability and transferability in relation to my study. I will conclude the chapter by delineating limitations pertaining to my study.

3.2 Rationale for research approach

In this section I will discuss the rationale for the research approach I adopted for my study and illustrate how the research approach ties to my research questions and research purpose. I will furthermore consider how it originated as a result of my positionality. I opted for a qualitative research approach for a study that sought understanding of meanings and purposes underlying human behaviour. This furthermore reflected my epistemological assumption that 'knowledge is not something static, but rather a dynamic and fluid process conducted by individuals and groups in particular social worlds' (Barfield & Brown, 2007, p. viii). My research reflected a social constructivist view of knowledge, which rests on an understanding of social phenomena through 'constructivist inquiry' influenced by researcher

and context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Understanding is gained in qualitative research through exploration of aspects under inquiry and their description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

My aim was to remain open to the multiple realities and meanings that emanate from experiences as a result of exploratory practice within specific contexts. I opted for an approach that embraces principles of exploratory practice to enable me to help the three participant teachers, referred to as Ben, Juliette and May, to take control of their own inquiry and seek understandings of situations in their daily practice related to the inquiry. 'Working to understand classroom life' does not require the teacher to follow set procedures but to rather work flexibility and follow their own scent (Allwright, 2003, p. 129). I sought a research design that would fit in with this philosophy of practitioner research that would enable the teachers to guide the research process on their inquiries in class.

3.3 The research design

The qualitative data for the study were gathered by means of interviews with individual teachers and during group meetings, as well as from my own and the teachers' written reflections documenting situations related to their inquiry. The study was conducted over two phases and was spread across two scholastic semesters. The first phase of the study was conducted during the last semester of scholastic year 2012 - 2013 while the second phase of the study spanned over the first three months of scholastic year 2013 - 2014. During the first part of the study teachers were introduced to the study and enabled to inquire into ways of how to engage learners in the process of learning and help them develop their autonomy as language learners and language users. At the end of the first phase of the study, teachers

were asked whether they were willing to inquire further into this practice, which they agreed to.

The first phase of the study initiated a process of critical reflection on practice through discussions held during individual and group meetings that spurred and supported the teacher's inquiry with learners in diverse classrooms. This phase was crucial to a process that sought to sustain teacher and learner autonomy. Through the individual and group meetings the study enabled the three participant teachers to take control of and self-direct a process of inquiry in-and-on practice. This framework of inquiry furthermore initiated discussions on principles of pedagogy for autonomy, and constraints and possibilities in relation to its fostering and was aimed at creating a collaborative space of inquiry between myself as researcher, the teachers, and the teachers with their learners in class. This process captured the notion of teacher inquiry in relation to the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy that informed the study (see Chapter 2, Section 2.10, p. 57). The second part of the study was founded upon a journey that both I as researcher and the teachers had gained first experiences and understandings of. It ensured that sufficient time was allocated to the development of understanding and interpretation of data through 'prolonged engagement in the field' and to the credibility of data generated in the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 219). The findings from the former part of the study informed the subsequent stages of the study. Teachers critically looked into examples of practice and experiences from their inquiry in the former phases of the study while discussing constraints and possibilities in their inquiry. They provided detailed descriptions of each situation of practice and learners they worked with.

While the exploratory and investigative approach adopted in the study, based on a reflexive approach sought to 'develop[…] situational understanding', it varied from action research (Allwright, 2003, p. 116). This was mainly due to the fact that teachers were not involved in doing research themselves, in terms of recording data gathered from their inquiries and documenting the various stages and cycles of their work through a systematic cycle. The two phases of the study provided a structure within which teachers were able to critically analyse and develop their own autonomy and the concept of autonomy they were to foster. As denoted in the discussion on critical reflective practice of the literature review (see Section 2.9.1, p. 54), this process is central to the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy (Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2000). To explore a process of inquiry, based on an iterative process of reflection, discussion, and action, the journey of collaborative inquiry with the teachers and that of the teachers with their learners in class was mapped across different phases. These stages of inquiry served as the vehicle that transported teachers, as learners, through the process. The tables below synthesise and provide an overview of the various stages of inquiry. Further insight into the process of inquiry that ensued in relation to the processes of inquiry-on-practice (the critical reflective process) and the inquiry-in-practice (exploration of aspects within classroom practice) is provided in Chapter 5 (see Section 5.2, p. 174).

Table 3.1 Overview of the first phase of the study

January – June 2013	**First Phase of the Study** **Testing the grounds and implementation of the first part of the study** Initiation of meetings and discussions on learner engagement in the FL classroom and learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning: locating the link between learner autonomy and effective language learning and language use. Aspects related to learner autonomy, FL pedagogy and pedagogy for autonomy were latched on to during the discussions/ interviews, arising from the teachers' own experiences and areas inquired into. This phase served as an introduction to the study and to conduct discussions/semi structured interviews with each of the three teachers in individual and group sessions.
January, 2013	Initial individual meeting with the three teachers: Informing teachers about the study and procedures of participation (meetings – individual and group interviews/ written reflections). Teachers' consensus to participate in the study is sought. Set date for first individual meeting/ interview.
February 2013	First meeting / individual semi structured interview: Introduction to the study and discussions on principles of teaching and learning and teachers' current situations of practice. Discussion on approaches to teaching and learning and the notion of engagement in learning. Awareness of the notion of autonomy in language learning is raised through reflection and critical analysis of practice. Discussion of areas around the research questions: Discussion on areas teachers problematised in view of their practice/ reflection on ways of how to address the issues raised. See Appendix A – Phase 1: Introductory meeting/ semi structured interview with individual teachers
March 2013	First group meeting/ semi structured interview to share principles of learner autonomy and foreign language teaching and learning which emerged from their first individual meeting and the process of inquiry embarked upon in that regard. Discussion addressed the areas teachers worked upon in view of how they understood the process of fostering their learners' autonomy. Discussion on areas which they found problematic, the struggles encountered, possibilities and aspects they found beneficial for FL teaching and learning. Discussion of way forward in view of aspects discussed and issues raised. Appendix B – Group meeting / semi structured interview
April 2013	Individual meetings/ semi structured interviews with the three teachers. Discussing teachers' experiences of inquiry following the first individual and group meetings. Critical analysis of practice in view of principles discussed, and setting the way forward. Aspects around the research questions are discussed through a semi structured interview. See Appendix C – Meeting / semi structured interview with individual teachers
May 2013	Second group meeting/ semi structured interview to discuss the process of fostering learner autonomy and enable teachers to give and gain support through the collaborative group discussion and sharing of experiences. Discussion on areas which they found problematic, the struggles encountered, possibilities and aspects they found beneficial for FL teaching and learning. Discussion of way forward in view of aspects discussed and issues raised. See Appendix B – Group meeting/ semi structured interview

June 2013	Closure to the first part of the study: individual meetings/ semi structured interview to discuss areas the teachers worked upon and note awareness gained through experiences of practice inquired into during this first phase. Discussion focuses on areas around the research questions. Appendix D – Closure to phase 1: Group meeting/ semi structured interview

Table 3.2 Overview of the second phase of the study

October 2013 – June 2014	**Second Phase of the Study – The way ahead** Review of experiences and reflections on issues and situations of practice emanating from the previous phase. Discussions and sharing of experiences, issues and principles emanating from the inquiry with learners in class. Reflection and critical analysis of practice.
October 2013	Individual meetings/ semi structured interviews held with the three teachers at their different schools and one group meeting. Discussion in meetings addressed: Evaluation of first phase of the study: a. Areas / issues teachers problematised and addressed b. Scenarios of practice within which autonomy manifested itself /benefits Focus on new situations of practice and transfer of knowledge/ awareness gained: a. situations of practice to focus upon b. discussion of aspects noted by individual teachers / principles emanating from discussions c. aspects of learner autonomy in practice d. discussion of pedagogy for autonomy in relation to areas of foreign language teaching and learning See Appendix E – Phase 2: Meeting / semi structured interview with individual teachers
December 2013	First group meeting/ semi structured interview of second phase of the study. Sharing of experiences and discussion of way forward. The discussion was focused around the three research questions, discussing areas teachers problematised during individual meetings, areas they found conducive to fostering learner autonomy, constraints encountered and possibilities sought during the process. I furthermore probed areas of the discussion which indicated knowledge, awareness and competences gained and asked teachers to elaborate on practical examples from practice. Appendix F –Group meeting / semi structured interview
January 2014	Individual meetings/ semi structured interviews with the three teachers. A semi structured interview format was utilised to help me address areas of inquiry the teachers had focused on in the past weeks and seek insight into principles of pedagogy for autonomy through teachers' experiences of the inquiry process and aid critical reflection in this regard. Appendix G – Meeting/ semi structured interview with individual teachers
April 2014	Second group meeting/ semi structured interview: second phase of the study. The group meeting semi structured interview format follows the same format as that utilised in the first group meeting. See Appendix B – Group meeting/ semi structured interview
May 2014	Individual meetings/ semi structured interviews with teachers and closure to the study. See Appendix H – Closure to phase 2: Group meeting/ semi structured interview

3.3.1 Position, organisation and data sets of the study

As noted in tables 3.1 and 3.2 in Section 3.2.1 above, the three teachers participated in ten interview meetings during the two phases of the study. Three individual interview meetings and two group meetings were held in each phase of the study. The data sets for the study, generated from interview meetings and written data from teachers' written reflections comprised data related to each of the three research questions. My own research diary was utilised to reflect on the exploratory journey embarked upon. This set of data draws together reflections on the process of inquiry initiated with the three participant teachers and is reported upon in Chapter 5 in my own analysis of the research journey (see Section 5.2, p. 174). From the various data sets I was able to 'assemble blocks or groups of data, putting them together to make a coherent whole' to address the research questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 462).

Table 3.3 Research questions and data sets

Research questions	**Data sets utilised** 6 individual and 4 group meetings My own written reflections Teachers' written reflections noted in between interview meetings were merged with this data.
Research question 1 What aspects of teaching and learning did teachers problematise in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy during the course of the inquiry and what understandings were gained?	Awareness of the notion of autonomy in language learning was raised in the first individual meeting. It was through this interview meeting that the discussion on areas that teachers problematised was initiated. Discussions that ensued in the individual and group meetings in each phase of the study generated data on aspects teachers problematised and worked upon in relation to areas explored during classroom practice.
Research question 2 Which aspects of the process of fostering learner autonomy did teachers consider to be most conducive to FL teaching and learning during the course of inquiry? **Research question 3** What constraints and possibilities for the development of learner autonomy did teachers encounter within the process of inquiry in their FL classrooms?	Data regarding possibilities encountered and explored, and aspects teachers found beneficial during the inquiry were gathered throughout the individual and group meetings. The second group discussion and the closure meeting to each phase of the study were used to further discuss and go through areas teachers had previously noted or discussed.

3.4 Methods of data collection

The qualitative data was generated by means of interviews with individual teachers and group meetings with the three teachers. I also kept my own written observations and teachers' written entries in the form of diary excerpts or e-mails sent to document situations of their teaching and learning process in relation to their inquiry. The interviews were conducted during the individual and group meetings and were held within the teachers' school schedule. I met each teacher for individual interviews at their school while group meetings were held at each of the participant teachers' schools on an alternate basis.

i. Individual and group meetings: the interviews

During both phases of the study teachers were interviewed during individual and group meetings set with myself, and in the case of group meetings, with the other two teacher participants. The interviews took place across the period of February to June in the first phase of the study. Interviews were held individually with all three teachers in February, April and June 2013. Two group meetings were held in March and May 2013. The next phase of the study included three meetings held individually with the three teachers in October 2013, January and May 2014, and two group meetings in December 2013 and April 2014.

The focus of the individual interview meetings lay on helping teachers problematise areas of practice and locate ways of how to direct their inquiry into fostering learner autonomy for effective language learning and language use, within their immediate and specific contexts of practice. The discussions prompted them to critically analyse their practice and seek understandings of such a process in their FL classrooms in this regard.

The process initiated in the individual meetings was sustained through the group meetings and led them to reconstruct knowledge gained, share what they had individually worked on and uncover the complexity of fostering learner autonomy in practice. They were vital within the iterative journey of critical reflection and inquiry into practice. They sustained a collaborative environment that established a space for teachers to 'join forces in making sense of and addressing challenges they faced individually or collectively' (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat, 2011, p. 9).

ii. Semi structured interviews

Although I entered the individual and group meetings with a research agenda, I allowed space within it for the teachers themselves to prompt the discussions. The semi-structured interview format enabled teachers to take control of the conversation prompted by the questions posed and enabled them to become participants in a research process aimed at helping them design their own agendas of inquiry. The semi-structured interviews were designed to help me address my research questions and to support the teachers' development and took the form of a conversation. Spurred on by my initial questions, the meeting with individual teachers sought insight into their practice and their inquiry with learners. This furthermore gave me the opportunity to probe the context and situations of teaching and learning described within an inquiry that constantly sought to enable participants to follow their course of action. This interview format set forth a communicative process whereby participants told their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This kind of interaction and questioning fitted in well with an explorative research stance that sought to

‘make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

At the basis of a study aimed at fostering teacher autonomy lay the premise of selecting research tools that would enable participants the space to be autonomous within each stage of the study. I required a research tool that would enable me to record a two way conversation during which participant teachers did not simply answer questions but could also discuss and probe issues. The interviews conducted in the study were semi structured to enable research participants to engage and participate during the meetings and took the form of an in-depth interview format (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 139). This furthermore sustained the construction of knowledge by participants and helped me as researcher meander through the paths that presented themselves along the various stages of the journey embarked upon. I noted that the various interviews conducted over the two phases of the study varied in the level of structure; there were times when a number of questions noted on my interview sheet were omitted due to the fact that they had already been answered in the conversation that ensued from the posing of one particular question. Furthermore, the fact that I knew the teachers as colleagues, albeit not working in the same school contributed positively to an honest approach and high level of engagement in the conversation. Semi structured interviews are subject to the impact of interpersonal skills and the trust shared amongst research participants (Opie, 2004). The interviews lasted an hour to one and a half hours.

iii. Teachers’ written reflections

Teachers were furthermore encouraged to keep written reflections on issues and situations of practice they deemed vital to the process of inquiry with their learners in between

individual and group meetings. Teachers expressed their preference to narrating their experiences orally or to sending disparate notes, rather than to diary keeping. One teacher sent a number of 'evaluations' by e-mail while the other two simply wrote diary entries which did not cover the whole period. I had considered diary writing as an unobtrusive form of data collection (Symon, 2004; Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003). However I was well aware of the difficulty this would pose in terms of them having to find the time to note down things due to their busy schedules and I did not want to impose this research tool on the participants. This caused me to rethink the use of reflective diary writing for the second phase of the study while not giving up on them completely. When discussing with them the format we had worked with during the first phase, they all agreed that the interview meetings were useful while commenting on their difficulty of setting aside time to note things down in the reflective diary. As a consequence decisions I undertook at the design phase of the study, such as the way teachers would record their experiences of practice were altered. I asked them to keep note of concrete examples of situations of practice in relation to examples of tasks and activities of foreign language teaching and learning which we then discussed during informal meetings. Teachers stated that they would either take this option or write directly to me to notify me of any observations they needed to communicate with me and I respected their decision in this regard. The teachers' reflective contributions, presented in e-mail or written note format, helped teachers 'document, monitor, enhance self-evaluation and theorise from experience' (Vieira 2007, p. 17).

iv. My own observations and reflections

My own written observations during the course of inquiry helped me keep note of aspects that I needed to address with particular teachers and to help me plan the journey further. I made note of areas that struck me as vital to the process, following discussions with teachers during meetings and interviews held, as well as a result of teacher feedback in between meetings. I noted down aspects that prompted me to discuss themes that emanated from the transcription of interviews at different phases of the study. These reflections helped me consider factors to bring up for discussion and to share during meetings held. I furthermore noted down requests by individual teachers to discuss particular aspects due to any issue they were faced with during their inquiry with learners in class. Such observations emerged from telephone or e-mail correspondence with the teachers during the two phases of the study.

3.5 Research procedures – selecting and gaining access to participants

I will proceed by describing how I selected the three secondary school teachers of German as a foreign language for the study. I selected teachers who worked in different school settings within different teaching and learning arrangements to obtain a picture of teachers working in different schools and consequently document data emanating from different teaching and learning scenarios. I selected three teachers who taught a range of year groups in a boys' and in a girls' school from three different colleges. One of the teachers also taught a group of learners within a co-educational setting. There were various teachers I could have worked with from the thirty four teachers of German as a foreign language in the state school sector overall, however these three teachers fulfilled the above mentioned criteria. I had already

had previous contact with these three teachers through my work on curricular matters with teachers in the state school sector. I consequently invited them to participate and explained that this would entail meeting the other two teachers and myself to discuss aspects related to the study. There was one teacher I approached who refused to take part in the study from the list of four teachers approached.

I visited the teachers at school to brief them about the study and asked them whether they would be interested in participating in the inquiry. They were ready to work on a process of inquiry that would help them look into ways of how to engage learners in the process of learning and to discuss aspects that would help them critically look into their teaching and learning in this regard. Teachers agreed, a priori to the commencement of the study, to attend three group meetings in each phase of the study as well as three individual meetings at their own school. I discussed the time frame for meetings and interviews prior to the start of the study and the aims of the study with their Heads of school. The latter welcomed their teachers' readiness to participate in the study and gave teachers permission to attend meetings in other schools. The first hurdle to overcome was a logistic one. A common time slot needed to be located to set up individual meetings. The teachers had to travel to the other teachers' schools and back in their free lesson time when group meetings were not held at their school.

3.6 Methods for data analysis and synthesis

The interviews conducted with the three teachers during individual and group meetings were recorded and fully transcribed. The language used in the interviews was Maltese, however I fully translated and transcribed them in English. I made note of aspects that emerged from

the data for each teacher and linked them to the research questions in the form of themes and sub themes. Such a process is employed in qualitative research to conduct an inductive thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). A process of coding identified and classified key concepts emerging from the data. I required these findings to share with teachers at various stages of the study.

A number of concepts and themes were elaborated upon at different phases of the study and were further inquired into. During the course of the study the data formed part of a picture that described the process each of the three teachers had embarked upon. The themes specifically identified and portrayed illustrations of practice related to each teacher's individual inquiry and the diverse classes and individual learners they taught. A process of interpreting and reinterpreting of data was initiated and the findings, initially linked to each of the teachers individually, were finally brought together in the form of themes related to each research question with sub-themes that reflected the various issues explored and factors that emerged from the inquiry of the three teachers. As previously noted, this ongoing analysis, conducted as a result of each transcription and data categorisation phase between interview meetings, was fed back to the teachers during the various phases of the study.

3.7 Ethical considerations

There were several ethical issues to consider prior to and while conducting the study. I will start by discussing access to participants and their acceptance to join the programme of study and move on to discuss privacy of participants and confidentiality of research findings. Teachers were informed about my research intentions, and the aims, nature and procedures of the research were made clear to them from the outset of the study (see Appendix I). They

were informed about the other teachers participating in the study and agreed to embark on a journey of inquiry that would require them to meet and discuss with myself as researcher, the other two teachers in the study and learners in their own classrooms. The programme and process of the study were further discussed. I furthermore illustrated aspects that I myself as researcher was bound to respect following the ethical review submitted to conduct the research. The purpose of the research and its contents were clearly listed on the informed consent forms teachers were provided with. Privacy with regards to their identification and confidentiality of findings relating to group and individual discussions and interviews was also discussed. I asked teachers for permission to record interviews held during each meeting. Their right to abstain from answering questions, to give their opinion or to withdraw statements made during individual or group discussions was made clear. Participants were ensured that all information gathered would be used solely for research purposes and treated in strict confidence. The fact that it was made clear with them that they could withdraw from the study at any time portrayed my commitment to their protection and well-being during the course of the study. They were made aware of the fact that they could contact my supervisor if they felt unhappy about any procedures which they felt were not being respected in any way. It was made clear during meetings that learners' wellbeing was to be safeguarded at all times.

An issue of concern was the fact that teachers may find the timescale for the project intense. I allocated time to visit them myself and kept to the agreed upon monthly individual and group meetings. The exact dates for individual and group meetings were negotiated and agreed upon from meeting to meeting so as to always be able to find the most suitable time for them and respect their schedules which varied due to school activities which were not

always pre-planned on the school calendars of the respective schools. I respected the teachers' hectic schedules and other commitments they had to work their way around to attend the meetings. Participants participated in the research within their normal working hours and were asked to attend meetings once a month at a school decided upon by the participants themselves. I visited the teachers myself at all other times. Permission for teachers to travel to different schools was obtained from their school principal. It was important to establish a reassuring rapport with the participating teachers since opting to take part in a research project across two consecutive scholastic years, entailed committing oneself over a long span of time. '[A]chieving goodwill and co-operation is especially important where the proposed research extends over a period of time' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 54).

I also needed to consider my interpretation and representation of data as researcher. I decided to ask participants to comment on the parts of the report that concerned them, to check that what they said was interpreted adequately. I was well aware of my position of responsibility as head of department in relation to the colleagues I was asking to form part of the study. Within this role, I worked with them mainly as a colleague and did not in any way lay down rules that they had to abide by but rather asked them to be open about any areas they felt they needed to negotiate. I was committed to open conversations throughout the phases of the study that led to the negotiation of the process embarked upon. Through the discussion and negotiation of the various aspects of the study; ranging from the set-up of the meetings, ways of recording their experiences and of conducting their inquiry in class, I sought to balance out any form of power-relations that might have been at play between myself and the teachers as participants in the study.

Another issue that needed to be discussed with the participants was the issue of data storage. Participants were reassured during the first group encounter that data collected would be used solely for the purpose of this research, during which time it would be solely in my possession and will be accessed only by myself and my supervisor when required. If data were to be included in a paper to be read at a conference the participants would be reassured that it would be used subject to their consent. In the latter case their anonymity would also be guaranteed. This applied for data recorded during interviews as well as any form of written notes. Data would be destroyed once the research project terminated. This information was stated on the consent form.

3.8 Issues of trustworthiness

While acknowledging my own voice as researcher, I set to bring to the fore the voices of the participant teachers and to make space for their observations and reflections. Representing those voices adequately involved portraying their experiences and understandings and perception of things accurately. In qualitative research this is coined as credibility, whereby research 'clearly reflects the world being described' (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Transferability is another feature which contributes to the trustworthiness of research in qualitative data. My study was not interested in making any sort of generalisations but did have the aim of portraying illustrations of practice related to teacher and learner autonomy that other practitioners would benefit from since 'experience is too precious to be limited in its benefits solely to the person who experienced it [and] [w]e need to move to a scholarly community of practice' (Shulman, 2004, p. 564). It is in this way that qualitative studies are relevant in broader contexts.

I worked with teachers in a familiar and trustworthy environment, built during individual and group meetings and through the contact kept throughout the study. As previously noted, I already had a good working relationship with the three teachers as colleagues and within my role as head of department, founded on collaboration, support and trust. I chose to listen and probe and to remain silent at times, rewording questions to monitor and seek to understand in depth participants' subjective perspectives and biases. At times questions addressing particular issues were reworded and posed again to check participants' as well as my own interpretation of processes and interactions with the participants or of particular issues previously discussed. In-depth detail of the localised context of teaching and learning provide trustworthiness in a study (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, I provided a rationale for all decisions taken in the process of the study through a reflexive process, providing the reader with a transparent record of findings and with what in qualitative research is coined as 'confirmability' (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 126). Moreover, I met teachers individually following the second part of the study and asked them to go through the research findings to verify data and validate research findings. The issue of trustworthiness of data will furthermore be addressed in section 5.2 in Chapter 5 while discussing the process of inquiry and outcomes of the study.

3.9 Limitations of the study

The aim of my study was to work through a bottom up approach to fostering teacher and learner autonomy which required a process of reflection and action. The research would have benefited from more group meetings where teachers would have had more time to share and to discuss their process of inquiry within a collaborative space (Wenger, 1998). This was

problematic in practice because teachers were not based at the same school and teachers had to find the time to travel to a common school and to get back in time for lessons. While respecting the teachers' readiness to participate in the study and find a way to meet I had to find time slots for meetings that were convenient for all. I kept close contact with the teachers to ensure that they could discuss any areas they felt they needed to beyond the time stipulated for meetings when required.

I was well aware of not being able to support my data through personal observation and sought to gather the data required through the process of inquiry with the three teachers. Through this process I sought an authentic and detailed picture of the situations of teaching and learning and of factors which impacted on them. The discussion meetings held at constant intervals during the study provided me with indispensable data and compensated for the lack of first-hand experience of data through classroom observations. The detailed accounts and vivid examples of the teaching and learning scenario on both context and participants were of vital importance in this regard. I sought to include authentic examples to back up the perspectives, understandings and processes of teaching and learning to elucidate and bring to life the teachers' retrospective accounts throughout each phase of the study. Comments about the learners and classes relate to the teachers' perspectives since I could not directly conduct classroom observations. The teachers' own engagement in the process of inquiry through reflective and reflexive processes was given priority and was one of the reasons why I chose to conduct the inquiry through semi-structured interviews as the main research tool. I discussed excerpts of the analysis of data with the participants and asked for their comments so as to be able to evaluate my understandings.

3.10 Conclusion

The study was conducted with three teachers of German as a foreign language in three state schools in Malta and portrays the outcomes of their inquiry into learner autonomy in their daily practice. This chapter presented a picture of the qualitative research methodology selected and research methods employed to conduct my study. The discussion illustrates the research methods selected to gather data on the teachers' inquiry. Besides being the main research tools they contributed to the process of teacher inquiry whereby teachers shared the outcomes and struggles of the process of fostering learner autonomy. An exploratory research design in search of understanding rather than one aimed at generalisations was adopted throughout the study. The next chapter moves on to the findings of the process of teacher inquiry in relation to the overarching research question of the study, illustrating how teachers addressed the process of fostering learner autonomy with the diverse groups of learners they taught. It furthermore provides the background to the study in terms of the Maltese educational scenario and the specific contexts of teaching and learning that the study was conducted in.

Chapter 4

Presentation of findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will present the findings of the inquiry conducted with the three participant teachers. This chapter illustrates data emerging from a process which prompted them to critically reflect on, discuss and inquire into the process of fostering learner autonomy in their FL classrooms. It illustrates how teachers directed their pedagogical journey and explored possibilities of fostering learner autonomy within various classroom settings through inquiry in-and-on practice. The data will be presented around each of the research questions according to emerging themes, and will depict illustrations of practice that provide insight into factors that impacted on teaching and learning during the inquiry. The interplay between questions enabled myself and teachers to look into the same theme from multiple perspectives. The findings will draw together the main aspects of the overarching research question as to how teachers directed their journey of fostering learner autonomy in their classrooms. They illustrate;

- aspects in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy that teachers problematised and inquired into during the course of the inquiry and understandings gained
- aspects of the process of fostering learner autonomy teachers considered to be most conducive to FL teaching and learning
- constraints and possibilities for the fostering of learner autonomy encountered by teachers within the process of inquiry in their FL classrooms

As noted in the introductory chapter, the questions were not necessarily addressed in a linear manner, however the findings will be presented separately. The overlap between the questions enabled teachers to look into the same theme through different perspectives while retaining a specific focus. The findings reflect nuances inherent within the themes, succinctly depicted within the illustrations of practice. The aspects selected to illustrate the themes depended on the focus placed by teachers on the various issues discussed during interviews, and discussions held with teachers during the different phases of the study. I will start by providing a brief overview of the educational system in Malta and the local and specific teaching and learning scenario of the classroom and school setting within which the illustrations of practice portrayed in this chapter are embedded. The following section will then describe the participants and the learners within their specific classroom settings.

4.2 Background to the local educational system: locating the study

This section serves as a backdrop to the classes teachers worked with in the study and the diverse contexts of teaching and learning. Learners in the state school sector leave their primary school and move to a secondary school at age eleven and spend five years in secondary education. A number of learners in the study entered secondary school prior to the current comprehensive College system introduced during scholastic year 2014/15. The former system selected learners according to academic achievement through the Junior Lyceum exam at the end of primary schooling and determined whether they would attend an area-secondary school or a Junior Lyceum. Learners who passed the Junior Lyceum exam will be referred to as JL students and attended one of the Junior Lyceum schools in Malta. Other learners participating in the study, referred to as area secondary students (AS), entered school

under the newly introduced comprehensive school College system. Following the period of abolishment of state entry Junior Lyceum examinations into secondary education and the introduction of the College system in 2005/6 learners were placed in classrooms according to benchmark examination results obtained during their final year at primary level in the subjects of Maltese, English and Mathematics and in similar group settings or mixed ability groupings depending on school policy or class size. This implied that all learners moved to the same College secondary school of the area they live in, irrespective of results obtained in their end of Primary examinations. The study conducted in the three different schools within three separate Colleges took place at a time when schools from the Junior Lyceum system were receiving groups of learners who were now entering secondary education without having to sit for the Junior Lyceum exam as well others who had entered after passing this exam. All teachers participating in the study were experiencing the change to the new system with the intake of the first learners from area secondary schools at Form 1 while one of the teachers had learners from an Area Secondary and others from the JL system in separate classes at Form 3 and Form 4. The school had students from the Area Secondary sector being taught in separate classes alongside its JL classes. There are ten Colleges in the secondary sector and the study was conducted with three teachers from three schools based within three different Colleges. Teaching and learning scenarios in the local context range from streamed to 'mixed-ability' classrooms. Most classes are streamed in the local school settings when there is more than one class of the same year group learning the foreign language. What is referred to as a 'mixed-ability' group refers to learners from different classes within the same year group brought together for the foreign language option class. A programme has recently been introduced in all Maltese schools that enables learners who did not do well in their foreign

language option during the first two years of secondary education to start the language again in a separate class. None of the learners taking part in the study formed part of the project that has now been launched at national level (Pace, 2015).

Form 1 or Year 7 refers to the first year of secondary school when learners are approximately aged 11. Learners are introduced to foreign languages in Years 5 and 6, the last two years of primary education, through the Foreign Language Awareness programme in Italian, French and German, consisting of ten lessons in each language. Learners choose one foreign language upon entry into secondary school and may opt to choose yet another language in Form 3. Numbers of learners taking the language as an option in the short three year course at Form 3 are minimal. Learners sit for half yearly and annual school based examinations in all subjects. During their last year at secondary school in Form 5, at age sixteen, they sit for their Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (Matsec). Although teachers encourage all learners to sit for Matsec examinations, learners may opt not to sit for certain subjects. These examinations serve as entry qualifications into higher education institutions in Malta however learners do not require all as entry requirements.

4.3 The context of teaching and learning: background to classes taught

In this section I will describe the local and specific teaching and learning scenario of each participant teacher within the study to localise the contexts of teaching and learning and better conceptualise each teacher's work within particular classes. This section draws on data I collected from interviews and meetings held with teachers. For the purpose of the study, certain groups or individual learners will be referred to in more detail during data analysis. As depicted in the following sections, classes taught include highly motivated learners to groups

of learners with low levels of motivation for school in general, large classes of up to twenty-six learners and small groups or individual learners. At the time of the study classes included single gender classes as well as co-education classes. The three teachers will be referred to as Ben, Juliette and May. The headings utilised within this section are indicative of the type of situations the three teachers addressed within the study. In the case of Ben, it was the number of unmotivated learners in his classes and for school in general, Juliette addressed the challenging situation of teaching mixed-ability classes while May presented a scenario of teaching different types of learners within mixed and streamed classroom settings in both small and larger groups.

4.3.1 Ben: teaching the 'weak and unmotivated'

The picture which emerged during discussions held with Ben portrayed a situation where he struggled to find ways of working with a large number of learners who were highly unmotivated and obtained poor marks in most subjects at school. Ben worked in a Secondary Boys' School that hosts 700 learners; learners from the previous Junior Lyceum system and College Area Secondary School, as well as learners entering the College system from primary school within the new system. He is in his mid-thirties and has been teaching German at this same school for around 12 years since graduating from University. During the time of the study there were another two teachers in the school teaching the foreign language. During the first year of the study Ben mainly taught groups of learners who displayed low levels of motivation for school in general including learners who were often absent from school. During the second year of the study he also taught groups of learners who displayed higher motivation for academic work at school, classroom and homework tasks.

Ben stated that he would gladly teach learners in what was referred to as a mixed-ability setting, however classes taught during the study were streamed according to examination marks obtained in end of year examinations. He maintained that all learners possessed the capability of performing better at school, however a number of learners lost motivation along the way and did not do well at school. A few of these learners encountered difficulties in reading and writing and the teacher stated that some of the learners who lacked motivation for learning were statemented as dyslexic. Ben attributed levels of motivation to learners' socio-economic background, which reflected the extent to which learners complied with the school culture. He demanded from them responsibility for learning in class and for homework tasks assigned, and supported all learners both in class as well as at other times at school, or through the class website, to help them catch up with their learning. The foreign language is taught in the 'German room', a creatively decorated space with wall charts on language items addressed in class, and displays of learners' work. The room is well equipped with an interactive whiteboard and other storage space where material is kept for reference when required. It is a spacious room where different kinds of tasks and activities may be organised in different areas of the room.

First year of the study

Class	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4	Form 4	Form 5
Number of learners	11 JL	5JL[2]	19 JL[3]	4 AS	12JL

[2] JL refers to learners who were placed in a Junior Lyceum after having achieved entry examination requirement

[3] AS are area secondary learners who failed the JL exam in Year 6 prior to the introduction of the College system. They were previously taught in a separate school, referred to as an Area Secondary School, however in this particular school groups of students from one of these schools were taught under the same roof as JL students. s.

Second year of the study

Class	Form 1	Form 3	Form 4	Form 5	Form 5
Number of learners	10*[4]	11 JL	5JL	19 JL	4 AS

All learners are boys except the Form 1 class in the second year of the study.

Figure 4.1 - Classes taught by Ben

First year of the study

The Form 2 class in the first year of the study was described by the teacher as highly receptive to classroom learning. Conversely, the group of Form 3 learners were referred to as weaker and unmotivated learners. The two Form four classes consisted of a Junior Lyceum class of nineteen learners, and four learners from an Area Secondary School class. These two groups of learners were placed in two separate classes. The teacher commented that difference in learning competences became insignificant as the two groups progressed from Form 1 to Form 4. Lack of motivation of learners in the 'Junior Lyceum class', who had been selected according to their examination marks, led to lower marks while competence levels of some of the area secondary learners improved or remained the same. The Form 5 group was a mixed-ability group whose levels of motivation for language learning and for school in general was greatly lacking.

Second year of the study

All groups of learners in the first year of the study moved to the second year of the study, except for the Form 5 group who were in their final year. The class of eight boys and two girls

[4] This group of learners entered secondary education without having had to sit for the JL entry examination. The same key (*) will be utilised to illustrate these groups of learners in the tables which follow.

in Form 1 were a group of learners from another College who were provisionally housed within Ben's College. They were a highly motivated group of learners.

4.3.2 Juliette: teaching small groups of learners in a 'mixed-ability' setting

During discussions held Juliette discussed the issue of working with learners at various levels of language competence in the same classroom. Issues of motivation and readiness for learning emerged as salient and characterised the teaching and learning scenario she described throughout the study. Juliette taught small groups of learners from different classrooms in a Secondary boys' school of around 800 learners. Similarly to Ben, she taught learners from the former Junior Lyceum system as well as learners entering the College system from primary schools within the new system. The higher Forms in both years of the study comprised classes who entered school through the former Junior Lyceum system while the Form 1 groups did not have to sit for entry examinations. Juliette is in her late twenties and has been teaching in the same school for around six years and was the only teacher of German as a foreign language in the school. As in previous years, during the study she taught one class of learners per year group. Learners in the Form 2 class in the first and second year of the study were all equally motivated to learn. She has always taught mixed-ability classes due to the fact that there is only one class of learners taking German per Form in the school, and competences of learners who passed Junior Lyceum exams varied. Juliette commented on the wider range in ability and motivation within the same class since the introduction of the non-selective College system.

> Formerly one used to say that German was chosen by the better learners but things are not like that anymore. This year I can say that I have all kinds of learners in front of me, those who are good, average

> and the much weaker ones, and those who are so very weak, a whole mixture. Try as hard as one may to make things interesting, a number of learners simply do not take an interest in things (Juliette, Interview, March 2013).

Juliette furthermore commented on the number of learners with limited writing competences in Maltese and English, from the learners who had entered school through the non-selective College system, delineating the number of learners with learning and writing difficulties. Commenting on lack of motivation and slow progress in learning, the teacher stated that these learners required constant support and stood in sharp contrast to others in the same class who were able to work independently. At one end of the spectrum learners worked so well that at times they obtained full marks, motivating themselves to work on and competing with each other to get the better grades in class. At the other end stood the disengaged learners, from their first year at school, who remained indifferent to low marks and teacher's comments. She maintained that they had no interest in learning the foreign language and displayed disinterest in learning academic subjects in general.

Juliette required all to work and to seek her support even beyond classroom time whenever required. She maintained that a number of learners constantly availed themselves of this support. She stated that while some groups were highly motivated, other groups she worked with required continuous support which she eagerly provided, working with different learners at different levels. The foreign language classroom accommodated up to 10 learners working in pairs or in groups with the same seating arrangement kept throughout the year. The small classroom was pleasantly decorated with wall charts, highlighting language for reference while providing learners with easy access to language learning material. The following tables depict classes taught in both years of the study.

First year of the study[5]

Class	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 5
Number of learners	8*	5JL	4JL	4JL

Second year of the study

Class	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4
Number of learners	6*	8*	5JL	4JL

All learners depicted in this table are boys except for the Form 1 class in the first year of the study and the Form 1 & 2 classes in the second year of the study.

Figure 4.2 - Classes taught by Juliette

First year of the study

The Form 1 class consisted of learners at various language competence levels. One learner in Form 1 was severely dyslexic. Juliette stated that three very keen learners from this class often remained after class to discuss matters with the teacher while others ran off as soon as the bell rang. Another learner from the same class often absented himself from school, unmotivated to work and sit still, constantly disturbing others. A different seating arrangement was required to address this situation allowing the learner to work on tasks set in previous lessons while seeking to minimise disruptions.

The Form 2 class consisted of a homogeneous group of learners who were all very motivated to learn. One of these learners was visually impaired. The Form 3 learners collaborated well in class, apart from one weaker learner who missed out on a large number of lessons and was offered extra support by the teacher to help him with tasks others worked on independently.

[5] The teacher furthermore taught on the Foreign Language Awareness Programme in primary schools during both years of the study.

Another learner, who displayed lack of motivation for school in general, outshone the rest of the class in listening and speaking competences, obtaining a good grade in examinations, owing to frequent exposure to the foreign language through television programmes. The Form 5 class were described as a small group of learners who lacked motivation for learning and for school in general.

Second year of the study

The small group of Form 1 learners were described as a hard-working and motivated group, constantly competing and criticising each other. The Form 2, 3 and Form 4 classes were the Form1, 2 and 3 groups taught in the first year of the study.

4.3.3 May: teaching across the spectrum of small and larger groups of learners in mixed-ability and streamed classrooms

May's teaching scenario was characterised by mixed and streamed ability classes with learners of varied motivation and backgrounds. The terms ability here refers to learner achievement levels in half yearly and end-of-year school examinations as referred to in Maltese secondary school settings. The teacher taught a mixture of large classes and smaller groups of learners in a girls' school of around 900 learners. She taught learners from the previous Junior Lyceum system and College Area Secondary School as well as learners entering the College system from primary school within the new system. She has been teaching at the school for twelve years and she is very enthusiastic about her job. May is in her mid-thirties. The teacher is passionate about her work and described her job as highly enjoyable. She taught the majority of Forms and learners since her colleague, who was not

taking part in the study, was assigned other curricular duties besides the teaching of the subject.

During the first year of the study she mainly taught 'mixed-ability' groups, however in the second year of the study her classes were streamed according to marks learners achieved in end-of-year examinations as a result of a change in school policy. As with Juliette, May commented on the low level of learners' linguistic competences upon entry into Form 1, requiring more support when compared with those taught in previous years. She however noted the high levels of motivation for learning displayed by a large number of learners, always eager to learn on, while others lacked the same kind of motivation and did not accommodate themselves so well to the school's culture. May offered all learners support through an online e-mailing system. She had no room available for the storage of material or to display learners' work or other material for reference and lessons were conducted in different classrooms according to a time-tabled schedule. She however carried a laptop along with reference material and made what she felt was effective use of the interactive whiteboard. May commented on her full teaching load and the physical school environment stating that;

> making one's way from lesson to lesson was too much to deal with at times. One must seek to keep afloat as one rushes from one lesson to the next with the material and resources at hand, carrying the laptop and whatever else one might require (May, Interview, March 2013).

She maintained that in terms of flexibility of material required and of responding to learners' immediate FL learning needs, a room equipped with resources would enhance possibilities for teaching and learning. An approach which sought to foster learner autonomy called for constant referral to material which needed to be flexibly retrieved to address aspects and

concepts off the planned agenda. May maintained that the classroom working environment needs to also be safeguarded from interruptions impacting on teaching and learning. The teacher stated that the lesson was abruptly halted at several intervals by notices on the school PA system, an unbearable strain on the flow of the lesson. The following tables indicate the number of learners and classes taught during the two years of the study.

First year of the study[6]

Class	Form 1	Form 2	Form 2	Form 3	Form 3	Form 5
Number of learners	29*	10*	19*	19JL	10JL	7JL

Second year of the study

Class	Form 1	Form 2	Form 2	Form 3 1st Year	Form 4 2nd Year
Number of learners	23*	23*	6*	1JL	4JL

All learners in this table are girls except for the Form 1 & 2 classes in both years of the study.

Figure 4.3 - Classes taught by May

First year of the study

The Form 1 learners in the first year of the study worked very well together and were grouped in the same class for all subjects. May met this group regularly as their class teacher. The larger Form 2 class were very motivated and worked very well both at home and also at home. The smaller group worked at a slower rate and although motivated to work in class, did not work so diligently on out-of-class homework tasks or participate in language activities and events as the larger group did.

[6] The teacher furthermore taught on the Foreign Language Awareness Programme in primary schools during the first year of the study

The learners in Form 3 were placed in two groups according to academic achievement at school. The larger group of learners were a motivated group who worked well both in class and on out-of-class tasks. The smaller group of learners were less motivated for language learning and education in general. Their bond with the teacher helped them engage in classroom learning, however while learners in the larger group exposed themselves to the language and engaged in extra-curricular events, May remarked that this group of learners remained disengaged from out-of-class learning. The Form 5 class consisted of both motivated and more passive learners within a mixed-ability group setting.

Second year of the study

The Form 1 class for German consisted of learners from different Form 1 classes with a wider range of abilities. Lessons with this class were scheduled in the afternoon and according to the teacher this impacted on the teaching and learning scenario. Notwithstanding their linguistic ability their enthusiasm prevailed although they lacked general basic linguistic knowledge and worked at a slower pace.

Learners from the large Form 1 class of 29 learners, now in Form 2, were regrouped into separate groups according to academic achievement in the second year of the study. Six of the learners, obtaining lower marks than their classmates in end of year examinations, were placed in a separate class with learners who obtained the same range of marks as themselves in the core subjects at school, namely Maltese, English and Mathematics. This class consisted of learners with different language options grouped in the same class. The rest of the group formed one larger class for the main subjects as well as for the language option. This Form 2 class of twenty three learners worked beyond lesson time, both individually and as a group,

while the smaller Form 2 class managed fewer activities, working at their own pace, mainly during classroom activities. May taught only one fourteen year old girl in the Form 3 First Year Option class who also studied Spanish at school from Form 1 and took private tuition in French. The girl was a very motivated language learner. The four learners in the Form 4 second year option group displayed varied levels of motivation and interest in the language and in language learning.

4.4 Research question 1: what aspects of teaching and learning did teachers problematise in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy during the course of the inquiry and what understandings were gained?

The first research question addressed areas teachers problematised and inquired into during their practice and depicts understandings teachers gained as a result of this inquiry. The process of teacher inquiry into practice was initiated in the second semester of the scholastic year at the outset of the study. The fact that teachers had been working with the various classes in the first semester facilitated the process of teacher inquiry since they were well acquainted with learners within the various groups.

The findings of this research question are presented under three subheadings that represent the salient themes that emerged from group interviews relating to the teachers' inquiry within their diverse teaching and learning scenarios. These headings represent aspects shared by the three teachers. The first area addressed was the shift in responsibility from teaching to learning. Within this section aspects on the notions of trust, participation and collaboration in learning and the need for an environment that allows learners to take risks in learning are addressed. The second section addresses diverse levels of learner autonomy and learner needs. This section illustrates aspects relating to respect and support for the various levels of

learner autonomy and the support required by the weaker FL learners. The last part of this section illustrates aspects pertaining to decisions on content and process of learning, the need to offer choice in learning and to listen to learner voices, the support and planning of learning tasks and the provision of appropriate resources and tasks for learning.

4.4.1 Shifting responsibility for learning from teacher to learners

This section addresses aspects that teachers problematised during the study in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy with their various classes. It features understandings gained as a result of discussions conducted that led them to reflect on the need to shift responsibility for learning from teacher to learners. The notion of trust in learner capabilities emerged as salient within the study. This section addresses the shift in responsibility required by the teacher to help the learner move away from teacher dependence in the learning process, the need to create spaces for learner participation and collaboration in learning as well as the need to enable learners to take risks in learning. It furthermore deals with the struggle to address learners' passive attitudes and their negative self-perceptions in learning. The following excerpt from a group interview meeting in the first phase of the study is one example which relates to aspects addressed in this section;

Me From what you are saying you are then trying to open up spaces for them and in contrast to traditional methods you are allowing them to take a more active role to engage in learning … we have discussed the fact that this is not 'an all or nothing concept'. You are looking at areas to focus on, and it might be that you would like to continue inquiring into the same areas …for instance you are now discussing how you would like them (learners) to take more initiative.

May A lot of the time an explanation in a lesson is abstract and therefore if one finds ways of involving them more then learning is more tangible…I never used to spend a lot of time on explanations but still I was afraid to hand over the say to them but now I say ..thank God I stopped now …I did not go on

myself….because when you go to the practical side of things, when they are in groups , you realise that learner A has understood while learner B has not really understood, and you have your feedback, your assessment there, it is immediate, ...

Juliette Yes, I agree, in one lesson when we were using 'der' and 'den' (masculine article) one learner thought they were interchangeable. This learner is very mathematical, so he needs things to be clear in his mind, and then through the discussion in class he realised that he was able to work on one concept at a time. The learner even told me that I was right, that he had not got the concept right – So one must give them the chance to work through things themselves (Group interview, March 2013, first phase of the study).

i. Trusting the learners 'to do the learning'

Following our first discussion meetings on the notion of autonomy in language learning, May noted that she would need to devise ways to enable learners to take control of their learning by shifting her approach to teaching in class to one where learners would be able to engage with tasks which she normally would present to them herself. This required trust in the learners, as she noted during the first phase of the study, that learners would be able to assume the role entrusted to them. This was central to the approach adopted in that it enabled learners to assume responsibility for their learning and to take control of tasks and participate in decision-making that was normally within the teacher's control. The notion of trust is illustrated in the following excerpt from the aforementioned group meeting held with all three teachers.

Me You referred to the element of trust in our discussion regarding the process of working with your learners. You remarked that you would be interested in finding out what May meant in our last meeting during the discussion, when she said that one needs to trust learners. Perhaps you would like to address this more directly now.

Ben Yes, what do you mean by this in practice?

May They have to be responsible for how much they will learn. One way for instance is that instead of giving an explanation to the full, I allow them more space be able to take over and explain themselves while working on things. Obviously I would have planned tasks but I try to minimise the amount of time during which I talk for instance, even if we have a plenary session.

Ben But how are they going to discuss something which they still have to learn?

May When working with different kinds of articles, in the Form 1 class, we had various activities; learners watched a video and had 'cut-out sentences', they could use pictures, they could use tasks on the interactive board. Normally it is me who explains through different examples, but this time round it was them who took over the explanation. This time round I decided to trust them and let them work through things and explain themselves. Learners asked each other more questions than they would have normally asked me and there were more questions amongst learners (Group interview, May 2013, first phase of the study).

While discussing work with the Form 3 learners, May reaffirmed that fostering learner autonomy was mainly the result of the trust placed in the learners and the working spaces created to enable learners to incorporate their own learning agendas, as manifested in a task with a particular grammar focus, within which learners were able to note down language items on their own initiative while working on a task in class. May's reactions and readiness to allow learners to work on such individual initiatives determined whether learners were able to take charge of their learning and shape their learning process.

> Yesterday for instance we worked in groups, and we were working on motion - accusative prepositions, and I had pictures in three envelopes of what can be found in three different rooms, and they worked with vocabulary, sorting words out. They actually engaged in tasks which were not pre-planned such as noting down vocabulary without my telling them to do so. They had for instance *Werkzeuge*, tools, and they placed them in the Garage section, noting down words they did not know. This was not intended when we discussed the task. My plan was to get them to work on where they are going to place the things; *ich hänge die Werkzeuge in die Garage,* I will hang the tools in the garage, or *ich lege die Werkzeuge in die Garage*, I will place the tools in the garage. They had verbs on the interactive whiteboard which we had already discussed, and they combined sentences like, *ich setze die Puppe auf das Bett,* I will put the doll on the bed. They combined sentences with the things they had on the IWB and the pictures, decided where to place the things and eventually today or during next lesson we will work on where the things are and move onto the dative case (May, Interview, December 2013).

This required trust on her part to enable learners to take responsibility for their learning and that of others.

> Today I trusted the Form 2 learners much more than usual, I enabled them the space to explain to others, who were absent from class, what we had been working on in previous lessons, to discuss homework and presentation tasks (Excerpt from May's written reflections, April 2013).

Following such reflections, she continued to seek ways of how 'to get the learners themselves to do the learning' (May, Interview, April 2013). May maintained that this required her to alter her pedagogical approach, from a 'present, practice' mode of teaching to one where learners were involved in the learning from the start of the lesson. Her aim was to enable learners to take charge of their learning from the start of the lesson, altering her introductory phase of the lesson. She sought ways of how learners would be able to work on language she would have normally introduced in a teacher-directed manner. May noted that when pressed for time, omitting the 'present-practice stage' from her lesson, where she introduced the language herself, had already proved successful. She noted that her previous approach was not challenging all learners to participate in the lesson since 'they knew they would get the language from the teacher' (May, Interview, April 2013). In an earlier interview May maintained that;

> The thing is that we do not trust our learners to work on their own; we think that they will not manage and one needs to take risks at times. I think that I will trust them that little bit more. Before I used to say, 'if I do not tell them this, then they will not manage things'. I will trust in them. It is like what I mentioned before with the Form 3 first year, I did the *Akkusativ*, I trusted them in the sense that they had to take control of the activities and to manage them. I sat and told them that I had forgotten all, and that they had to explain things themselves from beginning to end. I let them use the pictures I had prepared when normally I would do this myself (May, Interview, December 2013).

ii. Participation and collaboration in learning

May claimed that learners were asked to work in collaboration with their peers on language learning tasks rather than sit back during the teachers' presentations and clarification of

language. They were able to focus on the task of meaning-making through the use of material she had available in class to help them construct language themselves. She had plenty of resources for learners to work on and it was a matter of reorganising her approach to create an environment whereby learners could engage actively in tasks set. She commented on how she had made it clear to learners that she would not be giving the language to them herself and 'that they would need to take the responsibility of taking note of things in the lesson' while working with the material made available for their use. She reiterated that learners could no longer remain invisible in the lessons within an approach that refrained from providing them with 'ready-made' options for meaning-making in class.

> If the learners do not involve themselves they will not find me there to do the work for them, it is them who are placed in a position to actively take the initiative to work with the new language, and I would not have presented this language to them myself as I usually did through my own presentation of things and explanations (May, Interview, April 2013).

She remarked that learners who had worked together in previous years and who knew each other well were better able to collaborate and interact with each other and to share and gain from others' knowledge, while the younger learners were still not so confident to interact with other learners who they hardly had ever worked with in class. May was referring to learners in the Form 1 class who were from six different classes and were still getting to know each other in the second phase of the study in contrast to the Form 1 class in the first year of the study who were in the same class for all subjects at school. Furthermore May was also the latter group's class teacher and understood this group's dynamics well. Following individual discussions May continued to reflect on the fact,

> that participation lies at the core of how teaching and learning will proceed in class and that one needs to allow them to participate in this in different ways, depending on the different learners in class … however participation is the key word here (May, Interview, June 2013).

Ben reiterated May's observations stating that;

> The best way learners learn is when they feel they are at the centre of learning, where they learn to find their own ways of learning and of expressing themselves. For instance they learn how to work on a project, which resources to use, they decide which notes they need to write down and how to structure them … the teacher encourages this independence in learning… enables them to select homework tasks and activities to be conducted during the lesson, ensuring that they are able to reach their learning objectives (Excerpt from Ben's written reflections, February 2014).

iii. Enabling learners to take risks in learning

In individual meetings held, Ben reflected that one needs to consider that learners may be helped to develop their own responsibility for learning through a pedagogy which placed them at the centre of learning and allowed them to take risks. He maintained that a change in teacher mentality was required, in view of such a teaching and learning environment. He referred to the need to move away from traditional explanation of grammar and to encourage learners to figure things out themselves during language awareness sessions rather than waiting for an explanation of things from the teacher.

> A grammar lesson involving prepositions usually with reference to time in relation to months, seasons, days and so forth, is never easy, especially when I want learners to identify the rules themselves (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

Ben referred to comments made by colleagues who stated, 'what do you mean that we give them a chance to take risks? If you do not tell them to copy something they do not even do it, let alone take risks!' Ben contended that learner-centred processes of teaching and learning are not areas teachers can keep neglecting but rather ones they should work collectively towards. He reflected on the fact that rather than explaining everything to the last detail learners need to be spurred on to act autonomously. This led the discussion to the need to break the vicious circle of learner-dependence and teacher-direction, detrimental to

the development of the learners' autonomy in language learning and language use. The teacher remarked that this was not a process 'which will work out from day one, but rather a process that one will have to persist at…this will take time' (Ben, Interview, June 2013).

4.4.2 Addressing diverse levels of learner autonomy and learning needs

The second main area that emerged from the teachers' inquiry related to the diverse levels of learner autonomy and learning needs within different classroom settings and attendance to the needs of the weaker learners. Teachers addressed the diverse levels of autonomy learners demonstrated and looked into the support required within the process of fostering learner autonomy with individual learners in FL classrooms.

i. Respecting and supporting levels of learner autonomy

Catering for learners with different levels of autonomy within small yet highly diverse groups of learners was an area Juliette addressed in her inquiry. She constantly was faced with situations that required her to seek ways of helping learners persist with their learning and to find appropriate tasks to work on. Juliette realised that while learners required support to help them gather and implement ideas creatively, independent learners required freedom in this regard. Time was allocated in class to help learners work with others to discuss and decide what they were going to work on. While aware of the need to support learners who were less autonomous the teacher noted how the more autonomous learners cherished the opportunity to develop their own learning agenda. 'Do not tell me anything Miss, I will then show you my ideas at a later stage' (Juliette, Interview, December 2013). The teacher respected their wish to work independently allowing them to define their learning paths and

self-direct their learning. One learner, eager to work independently on project work was adamant not to listen to what the teacher was telling others stating; 'can I work on, on my own and not discuss now, so that I can then show you my own work and my ideas when I finish the work?' (Juliette, Interview, December 2013). Juliette noted that other learners competed with themselves and amongst themselves and that such learner attributes contributed to learning gains. This furthermore enhanced the move away from teacher direction. These learners were able to recall what they had worked on and to correct others while producing more than the other learners in class since they were more committed to practicing and using the language.

ii. Supporting the weaker learners

Juliette identified learners who required additional support in both classroom and homework tasks in various language skills. She was highly aware of the support they required to motivate themselves in the process, also conscious of the fact that certain learners unfortunately lost track of their language learning pathways and gave up on learning along the course of the scholastic year. She stated that a number of these learners accepted the support she provided to help them master tasks set. She affirmed that this enabled her to discuss and encourage pathways of learning that they were able to gain control of. She was able to negotiate the process of learning and embrace a less teacher-directed approach with them in class. Juliette offered learners the possibility of discussing and working with her on areas they were finding difficulty with. She worked with these learners during as well as beyond lesson time by opening up spaces for discussion on their work and allocating time for them to request more support on areas they were finding difficulty with.

She remarked that while the better language learners worked at a faster rate on tasks and material set, a number of learners could not master the same kind of tasks at the same level. Juliette realised that when previously working with all the group with one set of material or task these learners were not able to achieve much.

> One boy in the Form 2 class was working on a task on the theme *Berufe* (jobs) and while all others got very good marks and he got a zero, and I asked him what had happened. He said isn't it obvious Miss, I do not study things at home and cannot do this. I realised it made no sense for me to make him work on things that all others were working on (Juliette, Interview, April 2013).

This led her to introduce material in class that this learner and other learners in different classes were able to work with and led them to take control of the tasks at hand.

> He worked happily on his own tasks and also did well, as in the case of learners in the same situation in other classes who were at a different level of competence as others or who did not work at the same rate at home due to lack of responsibility for learning or learning difficulties (Juliette, Interview, January 2014).

Juliette recounted how one of her Form 4 learners in the second year of the study, considered the weakest in the group, admitted that the teacher´s constant support helped him make the effort to complete his homework tasks, notwithstanding problems he came across. The learner accepted additional support, appreciating the teacher's concern and determination to help him modify his work and learn on. While reflecting on the patience required during work with this learner, Juliette stated that this work kindled his motivation for learning. The learner expressed his respect for the teacher, stating that this was the only subject he persisted with at school, even though he often felt that certain tasks proved difficult to master. Without the support offered these learners struggled to autonomously accomplish tasks set. However not all learners displayed readiness to accept the support Juliette offered them to help them address areas they needed to further work upon.

Juliette sought to help all learners find ways to engage in learning by working on tasks that were within their capabilities. One learner in particular in the Form 2 class in the first year of the study, experiencing writing difficulties, was encouraged to look up and work with pictures to describe ideas about themes addressed in class, working on less challenging writing tasks through labelling and shorter texts. The ability to express himself on the topic at a level he could master compelled him to work on.

> I enjoyed this Miss. I first looked up the pictures and then I printed, said the learner. The sentences he produced were not precise, but he tried and at least he was not assigned a task he could not master at the risk of failure. (Juliette, Interview, June 2013).

Learners who were often absent from school were also offered individual support. Some responded positively while others viewed the teacher's interest in their learning as a form of punishment to make them work. While attempting to get learners to recover material they had missed out on, Juliette sought to help learners to tap into the support made available to them in class to help them gain momentum in learning.

In the same vein, May noted that the shift in responsibility from teaching to learning required her to distinguish between learners who required support to be able to work on, and others who were able to independently assume more control over learning. During the second year of the study May noted that while a number of learners in her larger class displayed independent language learning traits she commented that the smaller number of learners placed in a separate classroom worked at a much slower pace.

> The other group is made up of 17 learners. It is much easier to allow them to work independently than with the other group. I can trust them to work on their own since I know that they will achieve their aims, however it is a different matter with the other group. One needs to support them all the time. One has to work on different activities with them, and provide different tasks since 'learner A' is for instance weak in sentence structure and

therefore needs more tasks in that regard whereas other learners need less support (May, Interview, October 2013).

4.4.3 Decisions on content and process of learning

Factors related to the content and process of learning were further aspects addressed during the course of teacher inquiry. This section addresses the notion of choice in learning and the insight teachers gained through learners' voices. Supporting learners in the planning of learning tasks and ensuring the provision of appropriate resources and material for diverse learning needs are further aspects reported upon. The following sections portray the various factors that emerged from the findings as the three teachers sought to help learners gain control of their learning.

i. Offering choice in learning

To engage learners in the process of learning Ben entered into discussion with learners on the content and process of learning. While learners in his Form 4 class in the first year of the study remained mostly passive in discussions on tasks and activities that would help them learn in their preferred ways, Form 3 learners noted their need for revision of linguistic structures and suggested a quiz on particular language items. They demanded more video clips in class and station learning tasks which Ben agreed to. He however raised his concern at the fact that while learners proposed tasks they deemed as more enjoyable they were still unwilling to engage in certain productive tasks such as writing, a key area the teacher required them to focus on. He maintained that they needed to raise their productive competences and consequently sought to help them make more informed choices that would enable them to become better language learners and language users. Unaccustomed to participating in

decision-making regarding the content or process of learning, his Form 4 learners refrained from involving themselves in discussions in this regard. Ben realised that fostering learner autonomy was not simply a matter of offering learners choice in learning. He prepared tasks for station learning activities to help them work through their preferred modes of learning with peers in class. Moreover, he provided them with links to material to select from and work at improving their FL competences and enabled them to access material they had worked on in class by making it available on the class website.

Juliette similarly addressed the fact that the Form 2 class were not eager to work on written tasks and she therefore sought to find ways of how to provide learners with a choice of tasks and activities that would help them focus on the language through other ways.

> Today I am going to work with them on the imperative and they will be able to work through the theme of food and actually follow directions to prepare a simple recipe. There are tasks that contain flashcards and material with the language required. They are always asking me 'Miss are we going to write today?' since they simply abhor written tasks. This makes me look for different ways of how they may be able to work, that does not necessarily make them focus on written production (Juliette, Interview, April 2014).

Juliette noted that those unable to write longer texts produced visuals and were able to label and read out their shorter texts, while others contributed with longer texts, such as 'the Form 2 learner who wants to always show what he knows and wants to write a lot' (Juliette, Interview, December 2013). She ensured that each learner worked on tasks at the appropriate level of language competence.

Juliette's comments tallied with Ben's reflection on the need to address the learners' different working styles and preferences displayed for various classroom tasks in order to enable various entry points to learning.

> There are those who like to work on rotation tasks while others welcome pair or group work activities. Some enjoy watching videos in the lesson, some use

> them to avoid productive work while others, on the other hand, detest listening tasks since they continue to insist that they need to understand every single word (Ben, Interview, June 2013).

ii. Tapping into learner voices

May noted that by listening to the learners' voices she could help them address their needs, stating that she would not herself have addressed aspects that learners deemed as central to their learning had she not listened to them.

> Yes, sometimes in my class the Form 2 learners who work very well while working on new language around a theme, sometimes ask me, 'miss can we please work on a dictation?', which they feel is important for them to conclude the theme that we are working on. The other group would never come up with something of the sort. This is not one of the favourite things I would do personally as a teacher, however I understand their need for it, and they feel at peace with it, so I do it (May, Interview, October 2013)

Rather than following her own pre-set plans, May enabled the learners' voices to guide her decision-making process in class and was able to flexibly work around the teaching and learning agenda. She furthermore stated that she was able to listen to them while they worked together with peers in class. She gained awareness of how a number of learners in the Form 3 class aired their concerns when working in groups;

> Since obviously there are learners who differ in competence levels even in the larger class. They feel more confident in learning since they are being given feedback or corrections in the group and it is their peers they are dealing with rather than the teacher (May, Interview, October 2013).

Through dialogue with learners in class, May gained insight into learners' working styles and motivation for learning and ways to support them through areas they chose to work on. It was in this way that she attended to their needs, interests and attitudes towards learning in class, maintaining that this resulted in higher levels of learner engagement and productivity in learning.

Similarly, Juliette helped her Form 4 learners express their learning needs and discuss what they required support in. At the end of the first semester she addressed a request made by one of her best learners in the Form 4 class about listening tasks conducted in class, which the learner admitted he felt overwhelmed by. This learner asked Juliette to help him find a way to work on improving his listening skills which she eventually realised was an area all learners required support with. She reflected on her misconception that listening tasks were easily mastered by the better learners in class. She recalled having pointed out to learners that she expected them to do well in listening tasks in examinations, thinking that this was the skill that learners found the least challenging. Juliette stated how she promised the learner that she would reflect on the matter through the summer break. She came up with a programme for listening that she proposed to all learners and that all in the class benefited from (see Section 4.5.5).

iii. Supporting learners in the planning of learning tasks

May stated that learners needed support to plan their learning and she consequently allocated time to discuss with them what they required for the lesson on a particular theme or aspect they were working on in class. In one of her written reflections, May stated that she 'discussed ideas with them and allowed them to elaborate further on them' (May, Interview, December 2013). She focused on getting learners to expand on their own ideas to help them take control of their learning.

> I normally do something similar when they have to work on a project, giving them the choice of discussing what to work on and what is required in the process, to see how they themselves may start putting the pieces together (May, Interview, December 2013).

With the younger and more motivated learners, Ben similarly inquired into levels of support learners required to plan their learning tasks and execute their ideas. He raised this concern following a lesson on 'greetings, feasts and celebrations' where Form 2 learners were asked to come up with own ideas on how to present language around the theme.

> When I explained the task, they seemed very enthusiastic and started blurting out ideas. One learner told me he would draw a card; another said he would produce some kind of model; others said they would produce a Power Point or Word document to create a list of festivities and celebrations and elaborate on specific occasions (Ben, Interview, June 2013).

He realised that most of them did not produce what they themselves had proposed in class during the discussion session. He considered whether learners felt unprepared to work on tasks of their choice and what kind of support might be required in this regard. In view of this, he noted that he would need to dedicate time to brainstorm ideas in groups, encourage discussion of tasks and help learners better formulate aspects regarding learning outcomes envisaged by learners. He aimed at helping them monitor and plan their learning to achieve better learning outcomes.

In the same vein, Juliette stated that she allocated time during her lessons for learners to work in groups and discuss material brought to class related to their individual projects or activities. In this way she enabled them to assist each other in the planning of future learning tasks and to help those who required support in learning to amend their present work and ameliorate it. She maintained that learners were encouraged to collaborate with other classmates at various levels of language competences to plan their learning. She commented that 'this never took a lot of time to organise and at least those who were severely dyslexic or autistic were still doing something, since they were not restricted to work on classroom set writing tasks' planned in a teacher-directed manner (Juliette, Interview, June 2014).

iv. Providing appropriate resources and tasks for learning

Ben stated that learners gladly participated in station learning activities in contrast to other activities that were more teacher-directed. This applied to tasks set to help them identify and work with language and grammar rules, although he noted that this was a task they found challenging and that he needed to look further into, to ensure that they would be able to manage certain tasks set. While reflecting on the type of activities selected for station learning tasks on time prepositions in the second year of the study and the feedback he got from learners, he realised that he needed to carefully examine the level of tasks set and include more supportive material to help them self-direct their learning. Although familiar with the organisation of such activities, Ben noted that he needed more ideas on the types of tasks that enabled construction of meaning of language. Nevertheless, learners readily engaged in tasks that required their active involvement in learning even if the task was challenging. Learners continued to request tasks that enabled them to work with their peers and that enabled them to construct meaning themselves.

Juliette reiterated Ben's need to gain insight into how to provide learners with the appropriate tasks to improve their listening skills while discussing a situation in class where learners were confronted with listening tasks that they felt hesitant about.

> Yes, Ben is right when I use listening tasks in class it is the same thing, they remain with blank faces, So I do two readings, one with the CD the other I read myself, and this helps ….I tell them that for their Matsec examination this will be on CD, same with the form 4 classes, and little by little I remove my own reading and get them to listen to the authentic text. I see that they find the tasks that they have for listening too difficult (Juliette, Interview, May 2013).

The inquiry led Ben and Juliette to reflect on what they would need to modify in relation to enabling learners find their way around tasks provided for learning. Ben became more attentive to the level of tasks made available for station learning activities and Juliette

replaced her one-off listening lessons with a programme for listening that gave learners time to listen as much as required at home and to then discuss areas they needed support with in class. In this way the material provided for out-of-class use enabled learners to familiarise themselves with authentic language at the pace and level of competence they would eventually be tested upon and to develop listening competences in this regard.

May commented on the material she utilised with her learners in class that enabled them to work with their peers in class or individually beyond lesson time. The following excerpt from my research diary, depicts the transition in May's lessons in the use of online learning material and resources utilised in her lessons with her Form 3 groups of learners.

> As the interview proceeds, while describing a lesson on prepositions with Form 3 third year learners, May remarked that learners were able to take control of the learning situation when working with handout material provided, including the plan of a house and material to be organised in the different rooms. She explained how learners took note of vocabulary they came across during the task although this was not planned by the teacher. The larger Form 3 class enjoyed tasks that challenged them to work independently, selecting what to learn and how to learn. May is realising that they do not find work on tasks on the internet through a teacher-directed approach so useful in class when only one laptop is available and prefer to have access to the material for home use. This helped May alter her approach in class and to provide the material for home use. On the other hand she discovered how the smaller Form 3 group benefited from the possibility of making use of the laptop and the IWB board, them being such a small group. She noted how the two groups of learners had helped her modify her teaching and learning plans and that both had their own very self-determined ways of working (Excerpt from my research diary, March 2013).

4.4.4 Overview of findings for first research question

The following table gives an overview of the three main areas the teachers problematised and addressed during the inquiry in relation to the first research question. The main heading to each section in the table describes the area problematised while the subheadings illustrate understandings teachers gained as a result of the inquiry.

Table 4.1 Research question 1. What aspects of teaching and learning did teachers problematise in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy during the course of the inquiry and what understandings were gained?

Areas problematised during the process of inquiry and understandings gained
Shifting responsibility for learning from teacher to learners **The notion of trust in learners' capabilities** - Create spaces for learner initiatives: getting learners 'to do the learning' - Enabling learners to incorporate own learning agendas **A process of participation and collaboration in learning** - Enabling learner engagement in meaning-making tasks - Focus on material for learning and tasks with peers **Enabling learners to take risks in learning** - Break the habit of teacher dependence and culture of spoon feeding - Encourage learners to take initiative in learning
Addressing levels of autonomy and diverse learning needs **Respecting and supporting levels of learner autonomy** - Provide learners with the support or freedom required to work independently - Enabling learners to independently work on their learning agendas, flexibly self-direct their learning and move away from teacher-direction **Supporting the weaker learners** - Discussing and negotiating pathways of learning - Working with varied and multi-levelled material as opposed to one set of material for all - Opening up spaces for discussion and facilitating possibilities for support for the group as well as for individual learners
Decisions on content and process of learning **Offering choice in learning** - Discussion on tasks, activities and preferred modes of learning - Help learners make informed choices to address areas they need to focus on to raise their language competences - Help learners select and work on tasks at their level of language competence - Acknowledge variety of learning styles and enable various entry points to learning **Tapping into learner voices** - Help learners express their learning needs and accommodate learning plan to learner needs - Create space for learner to learner discussion to enhance learning and knowledge in relation to areas learners would need to address - Enable learner feedback to guide learning agenda and to modify own judgements on teaching and learning **Supporting learners in the planning of learning tasks** - Brainstorm, discuss and help learners plan and execute tasks they themselves set - Help learners monitor their learning and plan further tasks to accomplish goals set - Create a collaborative learning environment that supports learners plan and achieve tasks set **Provide appropriate resources and tasks for learning** - Enable learners to self-direct their work in class and to construct meaning with peers - Analyse choice and level of tasks set for activities in class: select varied choice of material and tasks appropriate to levels of competence - Provide possibility for collaboration on classroom tasks - Provide possibility for learners to work with material beyond lesson time: enable exposure to the target language to address gaps in learning and sustain the development of language competences (programme for in- and-out -of class listening)

Similar or interrelated aspects that feature under different themes or across the three research questions, reflect the interconnectedness between areas discussed and indicate that certain areas were focused upon from multiple perspectives.

4.5 Research question 2: which aspects of learner autonomy did teachers consider to be most conducive to foreign language teaching and learning during the course of inquiry?

This section addresses the second research question explored in the study, illustrating aspects teachers found beneficial to FL teaching and learning within their inquiry. These relate to clssroom interaction and the notion of interdependence in learning. Other aspects in this section address metalinguistic talk and the dialogic approach to teaching and learning that involved learners in constant interaction with the teacher and each other. Another set of findings relate to control over learning linked to the focus on process of learning, self-direction in learning and the integration of out-of-class learning and classroom work. Further aspects include the independent selection of tasks and resources for out-of-class learning, control over learning and motivation for learning. The last set of findings relate to learner involvement in construction of meaning and summative FL learning gains.

4.5.1 Classroom interaction and interdependence in learning

The process of fostering learner autonomy with the 'weaker unmotivated learners' in Forms 3 and 4, and the younger Form 2 learners in Ben's classes who were more eager to learn, gave rise to learner interaction in class as they engaged in learning with each other. Discussions arose during times when learners were actively involved in the construction of language with peers around themes they were working on in class. Ben noted that a number of learners

‘were even able to pass on their knowledge to others in class’ (Ben, Interview, June 2013). He claimed that the teaching and learning environment was enhanced through the affordances of human interactions in class. Ben described how processes of learning that required learners to collaborate enabled them to obtain the support required from peers and teacher alike to master the content of learning. Within such a scenario learners, who remained resistant to learning and did not actively participate as their classmates in tasks and activities in class, were prodded on by the flow of interaction in class. Although, their lack of active engagement impacted on the level of work they produced and their ability to continue their work independently beyond classroom time, they profited from the interdependent nature of the classroom environment.

The level and quality of learner interaction in the Form 2 class Ben taught hinged on the higher level of learners’ commitment to engage with and seek support from others. While working on building dialogues around themes on the themes addressed in class in previous lessons, his Form 2 learners worked with peers in groups on the task at hand. A number of learners sought and gained support from other groups of learners who were at a more advanced stage than them in their work. Learners who came to class with unfinished work or required further support on the work accomplished within their group listened in to their peers as they practised in class. They learned from others’ finished work and worked at their own pace within a flexible time frame suited to their level of language competence and expanded on their work. This was a fine example of how learners of varied learning competences interacted and how the teaching and learning environment was conducive to interdependence in learning. Ben drew attention to the fact that individual learners were supported ‘through the

jigsaw of learning experiences [and] the input of others better than them in certain skills and who possessed different capabilities' (Ben, Interview, May 2014).

4.5.2 Classroom interaction and metalinguistic talk

As a result of the inquiry Ben stated that he strengthened the quality of teacher-learner and learner-learner discussions on language that they were working on in class. He even sought to involve learners who returned to class after a period of absence from school in this kind of talk. This enhanced construction of meaning and discussion on language and gave rise to metalinguistic awareness. He remarked that this process enabled him to follow learners' metalinguistic thinking as they engaged in classroom talk, indicating how learners were able to recall and discuss particular language structures and grammatical aspects.

> Then there was one of them who was telling them …that is the verb…where is the person in the sentence? And the other one goes….ooooh I see, right right, the *du* pronoun is the person in the sentence …and I say ah ok ..at least they are getting there (Ben, Interview, May 2013).

Metalinguistic awareness became evident during learner-led classroom discourse focused on specific linguistic structures that the group or individual learners were working on.

This aspect was reiterated by May while referring to the insight she herself gained into learners' metalinguistic thinking through the spaces created for learner interactions in class where learners prodded each other on.

> During group work with larger classes the good language learners sustain the group, and when given the time to correct each other and peer teach, learners internalise things better because they are doing a lot of loud thinking as one hears them reason things out. This is the positive side of group work in large classes where one has mixed-ability learners (May, Interview, May 2013).

She noted that learner talk in group work helped her to follow what learners were actually aware of.

> and you can listen to their thinking …so [they say] ah yes *gehen* so that is requires the verb to have [in the past], so we need *sein* so they share their knowledge (May, Interview, May 2013).

A clear indication of the benefits of instances of metalinguistic talk in class was accentuated through the case of a Form 4 learner in one of Ben's classrooms in the second year of the study, often absent from school, refusing to keep note of classroom work or produce written tasks. The learner was kept continuously aware that he had a lot to offer in a class which did not only prioritise written outcomes but also valued his sharp and intuitive sense of meaning making. Ben made him aware that he expected him to contribute to the learning in class at all times. Ben described how examples expressed by this learner were referred to even when he was absent from class as the teacher accentuated the importance of each learner's contribution to the learning process.

Juliette commented that a focus on language awareness was central to helping her learners improve on and discuss sentence structure and past tense forms and proved more beneficial than their work on written homework tasks in this regard. She constantly sought to convince learners to work individually on further tasks at home to help them gain confidence with the language; however, she noted that metacognitive talk on language in class compensated for their lack of engagement in work on such tasks beyond lesson time.

4.5.3 Dialogic approach to teaching and learning

Ben discussed how he engaged in dialogue with the learners throughout the lesson and described his approach of teaching and learning as one that helped him build the lesson

together with his learners. This was his way of working with both the passive and disengaged groups of learners as well as with other groups who demonstrated readiness for learning in class. He sought to actively engage all learners and help them to participate in discussions on aspects they were working on in class. He described how he constantly sought to include and refer learners back to examples they had come up with themselves, prompting the learners who were present as passive observers to participate through teacher-learner and learner-learner dialogue. He utilised their contributions in lessons and commented on how such a process enabled them to expand on their own and others' knowledge of language. He intentionally utilised and referred learners to their peers' remarks about linguistic aspects expressed in former lessons, even in their absence. He referred to how he prompted learners to figure things out for themselves and with their peers. As noted in the comment below, learners also engaged in dialogic talk with peers regarding the areas they were working on in class. He accentuated one particular learner's words in this respect,

> Do you remember the box the teacher had brought to class, and the ball he placed in it, on it and next to it?, stated one learner, while seeking to help a classmate recall the use of *Wechselpräpositionen* (two-way prepositions) (Ben, Interview, January 2014).

Ben furthermore described how he engaged learners in recapitulation of language addressed in former lessons, enabling them to clarify aspects they had worked on and updating classmates on language and tasks the latter had missed out on or expressed doubt upon. He noted the involvement of learners at various levels of competence in the process of learning through such interactions 'helps them understand more what they are working on' (Ben, Interview, January 2014). The outcomes of the dialogic interactions created a localised classroom discourse for teaching and learning in class.

Ben maintained that these elements exposed learner capabilities in learning. He persisted at 'building the lesson together with the learners, valuing each learner contribution' and integrating it within the pedagogical dialogue in class (Ben, Interview, April 2014). In the process he ensured that even the weakest of learners was given attention and integrated in the lesson 'making them feel that what they were saying was important for me and that they could therefore succeed as language learners' (Ben, Interview, April 2014). The approach formed part of his pedagogical credo, embedded within all his teaching and learning encounters. As formerly noted, a large number of learners in Ben's classes displayed lack of readiness for school in general. Disengaged learners were kept in the spotlight through teacher-learner dialogue, helping them make sense of language rather than being instructed about rules and structures. Ben challenged the learners to remain focused even if unwilling to participate through traditional pen and paper tasks.

> In fact at times the learner who starts off talking thinks he is clear and then I jump in at times from the receiving end to ask someone else, 'how would you explain this to your classmates in a different way?, or what was left out in this explanation?, or how can we explain better?' And even if there is someone who I know did not really understand much, I give them a chance to join in ….and I ask through questions if I see that they are not on the right track (Ben, Interview, May 2013).

4.5.4 Control over learning: focus on process of learning and self-direction in learning

When discussing learners' engagement in dialogue building activities and project work on various themes addressed in class, Ben remarked that this was a process that involved learners in the discussion and planning of their tasks and activities. It focused learners' attention on the process of learning and helped them define outcomes they wanted to achieve more clearly and gain control of learning. The focus on the process of learning was

enhanced through the system adopted for allocation of marks to the process of learning at different stages of task development rather than solely to the end product.

May similarly noted how an approach that fostered learner autonomy enabled learners to assume control of their learning. Commenting on the weaker learners who were not as productive as the other learners in class, May remarked on how these learners took control of their learning for both in- and out-of-class learning. They printed and organised their own material for learning that they accessed through their classroom E-mail accounts. The more effective language learners demonstrated refined organisational skills in learning as they retrieved past material they had stored for reference, engaging in such a process independent of teacher-directed behaviour. Regrouped in a separate classroom in the second year of the study six of the weaker learners from the Form 3 group continued to demonstrate control over learning as they made use of the whiteboard in class of their own free will, eagerly noting things down and recording things on it as if it were their own notepad. This indicated that the learners were able to take control of their learning and to direct their learning during the lesson at their level of language competence. The aspect of self-direction in learning was closely linked to discussions on the process of learning focused upon in the following section.

4.5.5 Enabling learners to self-direct their learning

Organising material for classroom learning was central to helping learners self-direct their learning. While referring to his Form 3 learners, Ben recalled how learners assumed responsibility for the planning of the tasks they worked on, selecting language from material made available for them in class. The material served as input for self-directed learning and supported learners' creative construction and use of language in class. It enabled them to gain

control over the task they were working on and 'placed them centre stage and made them think and work things out for themselves and with their classmates in groups' (Ben, Interview, May, 2013). He remarked that learners were required to direct and negotiate this process with others within their group. Ben described how learners read through role play material, selecting areas to work on, creating their own dialogues to perform in class.

> Learners worked with four to five dialogue themes dealt with in previous lessons: *Berufe* (jobs), *beim Arzt* (at the doctors), *Wegbeschreibungen* (describing the way), am *Bahnhof* (at the train station). They selected who to work with. I gave them material to work with, such as role play transcripts and tickets for instance, and they had to formulate questions and answers, like *Wann kommt der Zug an*?, (when does the train arrive?), or they have the word *Verspätung*, (delay), and they formulate simple sentences; *der Zug hat Verspätung* (the train has been delayed), creating a variation of dialogues around the same theme (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

This led them to self-direct their learning both in class and out-of-class. It entailed meeting during break time, at home or online, and deciding how to work and what to work on while negotiating the formulation of dialogues. Learners were able to work individually or with others according to their plan of work within the group. Ben stated that at the heart of such a teaching and learning approach, 'it is the curriculum that has to accommodate itself to the learner and not vice versa' (Ben, Interview, April, 2013). Not all learners were willing or able to work within an approach that demanded that they let go of teacher led activities and that challenged them to think and act for themselves. As the teacher stated, one cannot expect learners to alter their learning behaviour from one day to the next.

Ben also set up a number of station learning activities that addressed themes addressed in class consisting of different tasks that enabled learners to self-direct their work in groups. When Ben asked Form 2 learners about the process of working on such activities, they explained that although it took them more time to manage the tasks themselves, they were

finally able to explain things better. Ben noted that self-directed tasks led learners to focus on linguistic concepts and increase in language use. He noted that they raised his awareness about the benefits of such processes of learning and that he would consider similar activities that enabled learners to self-direct their learning. He created opportunities for them to devise and plan out a task through project work.

> in projects learners also used to work together and present their work to their classmates. In the project about German cities one group shared information on Hamburg while obtaining information, from another group about Berlin. They exchanged information using simple language. I created more opportunities for learners to participate in similar activities as a result of the inquiry into learner autonomy (Ben, Interview, January, 2014).

May also claimed that learners profited from an approach that helped them self-direct their learning.

> The best way learners learn is when they feel that they are at the centre of learning, where they learn to find their own ways of learning and of expressing themselves.
>
> For instance they choose how to work on a project, which resources to use, they decide which notes they need to write down and how to structure them ...the teacher encourages this independence in learning …enables them to select homework tasks and activities to be conducted during the lesson, ensuring that they are able to reach their learning objectives. When learners feel that they themselves play a central role in their learning, they understand more what they are working on and are even able to pass on their knowledge to others in class (excerpt from May's written reflections, April, 2013).

May furthermore remarked that the process of fostering learner autonomy sustained learners' own ideas on learning, personalised learning to their needs and raised awareness of their learning requirements. She sought to decrease learner dependence on her own plans by creating possibilities for learner engagement in decisions regarding the process of learning. The weaker Form 1 group benefited from this approach, since they were able to work on

homework and classwork activities they selected at a slower pace thus taking control of their learning. She remained constantly aware of the fact that younger Form 1 learners required far more support than older learners within such a process. Younger learners' engagement in classroom tasks mostly increased if tasks were more to their liking. In reply to Ben's comments on learners' lack of interest in longer writing tasks, May maintained that writing frames led her learners to independently produce longer texts through an enjoyable task and that presenting an otherwise dreary task in a more approachable way, 'wins learners over' (May, Interview, December, 2013).

Juliette's approach in class also prompted a number of learners to readily engage in self-directed learning tasks and inquire into areas they required support with of their own free will. She expressed her satisfaction at certain learners' meticulous attention to detail and interest in self-directed learning, which did not fail to surprise her,

> One day a Form 2 learner said, 'Miss, may I talk to you please?' He took out a past examination paper which I did not give him myself. He said, 'this my mum found for me online and I printed it'. I said 'that is great, yes, do give it to me when ready so I correct it', and that is when he came up with the problem on the use of *einkaufen gehen* (to go shopping). 'And what shall I do with the other verb?' the learner asked, and I answered, 'what do we do with modal verbs?' And he said, 'Yes of course, place them at the end of the sentence. So this is what happens with the verb *gehen* (to go), we work it out in the same way, and then the other verb is like the modal verb' and then he took note of what we had discussed in his diary, without me telling him to do so. He wrote, 'BE CAREFUL when you have the verb, *gehen* accompanying another verb, treat it like a modal verb' (Juliette, Interview, June, 2013).

Enabling self-direction of listening tasks through a programme envisaged to help learners improve their work on listening skills beyond lesson time, enabled learners to take responsibility for such learning and to flexibly manage the process of learning at their own pace. The next section depicts how Juliette created a programme of self-directed practice that she amalgamated with her classroom scheme of work.

4.5.6 Integrating in- and out-of-class learning: a programme for listening

The following section illustrates how Juliette integrated a scheme of work for out-of-class practice in listening within her classroom agenda and how the two processes helped learners gain confidence through individual practice and classroom support. As illustrated in the former sections, learning is not confined to classroom tasks and activities. This particular teaching and learning arrangement with Form 4 learners, initiated as a result of a discussion on areas they problematised in their learning, proved beneficial for the development of listening skills. Juliette devised a plan to help learners work on their listening skills that the whole class was able to take on board, integrating it within her weekly and long-term scheme of work. She realised that all learners, including the learner who had initially indicated the need for support with listening tasks in class, welcomed such a plan. The listening tasks and accompanying material were made available on CDs to all learners as homework tasks along a two week timeline negotiated with the learners themselves. During this time learners listened to tasks at home, ensuring that all had the time to work adequately at their own pace. Learners benefited from the possibility of working independently on individual practice at home. This was followed by a feedback session in class discussing queries and checking comprehension of areas learners had difficulty with. Learners were able to discuss with others in class what they had understood and listen again to areas they were struggling with.

The programme itself was consequently amalgamated with the class scheme of work, maximising on classroom and homework listening tasks and established the need for a collaborative space in class that supported learners in the process of self-directed learning. This space took the form of discussions on the work and the listening material following learners' independent listening sessions. The work learners conducted during out-of-class

learning was discussed and expanded upon in class and helped learners develop confidence when faced with a listening task. The listening programme provided learners with the possibility of listening to the same text or to areas within the text as required. Learners could focus on areas they found problematic, listen at their own pace and check on meanings they were unsure of and to listen as often as required. This made up for the lack of time for listening at their own pace in the classroom. Learners utilised this possibility well and gained control of the tasks at hand. The teacher stepped back during the classroom sessions to allow learners to give feedback to peers and explain what they had understood, enhancing a supportive collaborative space created for the development of listening skills.

Juliette commented on how she combined themes for listening tasks with curriculum topics throughout the semester. She furthermore reflected on how teachers could work together, record and share material readily available in the form of exam transcripts by recording them instead of reading them out to learners in class. The teacher remarked that in this way teachers would contribute to the bank of teaching and learning material made available for self-directed learning tasks.

4.5.7 Spurring independent selection of tasks for out-of-class learning

Juliette maintained that spurring the 'autonomous language learners' in class to venture with learning beyond classroom set tasks challenged a number of learners to work independently on selected tasks. She sought to help learners gain awareness of types of tasks they could work on to help them devise individualised ways of working. She referred to two learners who were always able to venture a step further, constantly competing against each other to write

longer texts. She kindled their competitive spirit by spurring them to select and work on extra homework tasks, indicating that they were capable of mastering such tasks.

> I told them, this might be a little bit demanding, but do not worry if you find this task a bit difficult. However they did try things out and during the following lesson one of the learners asked, 'Did you try the task?', and the other learner answered, 'But of course I did!' (Juliette, Interview, April 2013).

Juliette gave all learners the possibility of working on optional tasks and a number of learners from each class worked independently on extra homework tasks. She stated that a Form 3 learner in the first year of the study approached her and said, 'I had free time this week and since you told us to select tasks to work on, I found this exercise from other internet sites relevant to the work you recommended' (Juliette, Interview, April 2013). This indicated that a number of learners were able to independently select and work on tasks of their choice. She remarked that the Form 2 group was an exceptional group in this regard.

Through the set-up of a website for classroom use, Ben forwarded material to learners electronically to help them select, work and revise what they had missed out on. Recording tasks for learners' personal use and sending them links to online learning resources was another way of encouraging them to use material and tasks to practice beyond lesson time and help them find their own pathways of learning. Learners printed material and worked independently through tasks posted on the class website. The learners' own work was utilised for others' reference and as reading material. Ben stated that learners took pride in finding their work displayed in class and on the class website and gladly made it available as material for independent use. Ben´s overriding aim during the process was to help them perceive language learning as a pleasant task, ridding them of the notion that FL learning is difficult to master.

May similarly commented on how certain learners do more than is required of them and that their autonomy manifests itself first hand. The large group of Form 3 learners in May's class demonstrated their ability to work autonomously at several instances. She sought to create space in her lessons which allowed them to express own ideas. When working on the Perfect tense they obtained information from a text on Albert Einstein creating sentences in the past tense and presented it through a poster chart. During such activities they were able to search for additional information, select and create own material for learning, while working individually and in collaboration with others in class and at home. On her part, May enabled them to work within a flexible timeframe negotiated in class.

May furthermore commented on the way she had facilitated access to materials and resources utilised in class and how learners relied on such material for out-of-class learning. The inquiry process led May to reflect on how learners expanded on classroom learning through tasks sent by e-mail that they selected and worked upon. She described how learners demanded access to resources they had used in class such as the interactive whiteboard (IWB) material compiled from notes and examples created during their lessons that some of the learners printed and filed for reference. Material ranged from listening tasks to powerpoint presentions and other material addressed or created during that week. While a number of learners from each class did not engage in additional work apart from that set by the teacher, the majority demanded revision work on topics addressed throughout the year.

> There are those who do not work like the rest of the class, but I still send them revision work for future or personal use. They worked on a four week plan prior to the start of the half yearly exams stating that this gives them a feeling of security in view of forthcoming examinations (May, Interview, January 2014).

The learners got used to having a choice of material to work with for revision purposes. They constantly demanded such material from the teacher according to areas they stipulated themselves, deciding how and when to work on such material.

Motivated learners in Juliette's Form 2 class, in the second year of the study, demonstrated interest in games and resources the teacher brought to class. One learner in particular inquired about games or books for individual use at home, asking his parents to buy similar material for himself and others interested in acquiring such material in class. Juliette could tangibly recognise how our discussions on learner autonomy tallied with examples of learner intrinsic motivation, responsibility and readiness to take charge of learning demonstrated by a number of learners in each of her classes, stating that;

> They are ready to do more things to learn, that is the responsibility which we are talking about, they know that there is the need to engage in some kind of task to learn (Juliette, Interview, January 2014).

4.5.8 Motivation for language learning through enhanced learner control over learning

May noted that creating a change in the presentation-practice phase of her lessons generated motivation for learning in the disengaged learners in class. She noted that the weaker and disengaged learners took a leading role within their group as the responsibility to construct meaning fell on them. Noteworthy was the fact that these learners were formerly coined as 'backbenchers', a term the teacher used to refer to their laid-back attitude in class. May remarked how they were now actively engaging in classroom tasks, constructing language formerly readily presented to them by the teacher. May commented on the rise in number and types of questions learners posed. She commented that learners became aware of the

fact that the teacher would not be doing any work for them, and that the change in approach required them to focus on the tasks at hand and take responsibility for their learning. The level of engagement of these learners was surprisingly high when considering their previous disengaged attitude to classroom learning. Their motivation and control over learning led to language gains demonstrated while constructing language in group tasks. May purposely checked on them during that week's lessons and realised that they were able to recall and use language they had formerly worked upon in former lessons.

Ben similarly noted that shifting responsibility onto the learners in his lessons resulted in higher levels of learner engagement. The smooth flow of activity during lesson time in the course of activities indicated high levels of motivation for learning in class. Ben documented learners' speaking activities on video and commented on how learners would then in turn always check whether their work would feature on the class website that all learners in class had access to. They had the option of ameliorating their work and producing their best piece of work.

> Their enthusiasm is enormous. Next time we will work on another topic. After I would have filmed them they wait for the weekend to see which clips I place on the website; 'will I be there?' they ask, because I try to upload scenes by different groups each time we work on such a task. I choose their best role play and they all feature somewhere, but they will not know what I have selected from the different dialogues performed until they check the website. They are eager to see what they have created and to observe what others have devised. This also means that they are listening to the language, and this is how one learns - indirectly. I no longer need to emphasise the fact have devised. This also means that they are listening to the language, and this is how one learns - indirectly. I no longer need to emphasise the fact that they should go and study (Ben, Interview, May 2014).

May noted further benefits within a process that led learners to take control over learning and learner motivation. A number of learners in the Form 3 class retrieved classwork and material utilised in the previous semester of their own initiative, spurred on by situations of

teaching and learning in class. While working on tasks dealing with prepositions of motion and the accusative case, learners independently worked with notes from the previous year, reminding the teacher of material they had worked with. Evidence of the impact of the approach on the better language learners in class and their motivation for learning was evident through the quality of preparation of work at home and their work on new language out of their own free will during classroom tasks.

In the same vein, Juliette noted how Form 2 learners in the first year of the study were able to take control of their learning creatively while working on story lines to help them focus on and consolidate their awareness of grammatical aspects of language addressed in class. Their motivation for such tasks led to higher levels of control of their learning during language awareness tasks;

> I always tell them, 'let us spend five minutes and invent a way of remembering this grammar point', and they all come up with a story they narrate. The theme is generally related to their interests. The other time one of them came up with a song stating that he learns through melodies, and I said that this was a good idea, while another learner with problematic eyesight said; 'I will get you something tomorrow Miss', and he got something which he drew and said I drew this in the form of a story. When we mentioned this point again I told the group, 'let us use the story which Simon made up', and they remembered it,' oh yes', they said, 'that was the story about Karate', and they enjoyed this so much. I always give them the possibility of creating their own stories which fills them with enthusiasm. This is the way they effectively learn grammar. I say, 'let us see who will come up with a story today', and this story always evolves from one learner to the other because they each process it in their own way, creating their own version of it. 'I am going to remember it this way', and I say, 'learn it in any way you like as long as it makes sense to you, but it is amazing , they will all have their different ways (Juliette, Interview, June 2013).

4.5.9 Involving learners in construction of meaning

As discussed in the former section, May's decision to trust learners to engage in learning led learners to engage effectively in a process which required them to construct meaning of language themselves.

> The teacher stated that she made it clear to Form 3 third year learners that she will not disclose to them the new vocabulary herself or introduce the vocabulary as she used to do in former lessons. They have to take the responsibility to work on vocabulary through different tasks or look up vocabulary they come across and note it down themselves (Research diary excerpt, April 2013).

This proved to be beneficial for learner engagement in construction of meaning when introducing new language and themes in class;

> When starting a new topic, for instance the topic *Kleider* (clothes) with the Form 2 classes, I normally introduce vocabulary to give them language to work with, but I did this differently this time because normally when you have vocabulary which is readily available for learners, then those who are always engaged in learning will work with the new language, while the others remain unmotivated and sit there passively (May, Interview, April 2013).

As previously discussed, disengaged learners in class 'totally engaged in this kind of learning' as the teacher involved the class in tasks which required them to collaboratively engage in construction of meaning. She commented that they normally were unresponsive during classroom tasks and did not participate in learning at the same level as other learners. She illustrated various instances when learners discussed in groups or pairs, using prompts such as; *es ist kalt heute*, it is cold today; *heute treibe ich Sport*, I am practicing sports today or *heute habe ich Turnen*, I have gymnastics today, to focus on language around clothing that included articles in the accusative. As the lesson developed May noted how they were able to use language communicatively to inquire about choice of clothing in daily situations. May

noted how they focused on form as they worked at their own pace noting down examples and requesting support or clarification on areas they struggled with.

Ben similarly noted that enabling learners to work autonomously led to learners' active involvement in meaning-making processes. Ben stated that his learners learned more effectively when they were placed in a position to figure things out themselves in contrast to when he presented language in a teacher-directed manner. He noted the following comments by learners held during a discussion in class where he was asking them about how they learned best;

> like the time when we were working on the Akkusativ and Dativ…it was us who managed to understand and that is better to just copying things down.
>
> I tend to remember things better than when I get to the answer myself.
>
> So as Matthias said it was good when the teacher gave us the things to work on and we worked together and that helped us understand better (Excerpt from Ben's written reflections, June 2014).

4.5.10 Summative assessment gains

Ben commented that the struggle to help Form 4 learners remain focused on learning paid off for those who at some degree or other assumed responsibility for learning during the second part of the study as they advanced to their fifth year. Fifteen learners from the larger Form 5 class sat for their Matriculation Examinations while only four did not. Eight from the large class passed while one from the small class of three also succeeded in this exam. Half of the learners managed to reach the level of competence required at Matsec level. In contrast, it came as no surprise that the remaining learners, who relied on the teacher to prompt them to work and lacked responsibility and commitment for learning, did not succeed to achieve the level required from them at this level.

Juliette realised that enabling learners to find pathways of learning that helped them take control of their learning, led them to master tasks set in examinations and resulted in summative assessment gains. She referred to the progress made by learners working on the programme for listening as they took charge and gained control of the tasks at hand (see section 4.5.5). She illustrated how both the better language learners and those considered weaker in their overall FL competences improved considerably in this skill. As a result of the programme she stated that they gained the confidence required to face and master listening tasks in class. Success in listening comprehension tasks at home and in class instilled in them the motivation required to continue working on their listening skills after experiencing the progress made;

> Whilst the weaker learners used to obtain 9 or 8 marks out of 20, now their marks increased to 13 or 14, no drastic changes, but there was an improvement and when conducting another test, the marks remained constant. A learner who was previously doing very well continued to get good marks while the learner who had asked for support now improved his comprehension skills and found the tasks enjoyable and moreover did not feel stressed during listening tasks in class. The other two learners who normally did not do so well said; 'Look Miss, the marks are much better this time round! (Juliette, Interview, January 2014).

Learners worked on tasks similar to what they would be tested on during their February half-yearly examinations. Following this process the best learner in class obtained full marks in the listening tasks. The learner reflected on the benefit of the approach adopted while discussing with the teacher his high marks in view of her comment on whether he felt that this was a question of luck; 'But you know, I really feel confident with listening tasks now and you know what, I don't get butterflies in my stomach during a test in class now', (Juliette, Interview, January 2014).

In May's class learners created tasks themselves, such as recording their own work in video clip format and utilised such material for out-of-class learning. This enhanced learners' exposure to the language on themes learners were working on; 'Miss we watched it a lot of times over the holidays' (Interview, January 2014). This resulted in summative assessment gains for the learners concerned. In one of the tests on the theme one of the weaker learners scored 46 out of 50.

4.5.11 Overview of findings on research question 2

The headings in the table below illustrate aspects teachers found conducive to fostering learner autonomy during their inquiry. The points underlying each heading denote how these aspects featured during the course of inquiry in classroom practice.

Table 4.2 Research question 2 – Which aspects of the process of fostering learner autonomy did teachers consider to be most conducive to foreign language teaching and learning during the course of inquiry?

Classroom interaction and interdependence in learning Rich teaching and learning environment: affordances from interaction with peers and teacher alike Sharing of knowledge and learning experiences amongst learners of varied language competences Engagement in discussion on language Supportive environment for learning: a flexible time frame to scaffold learning from peer input
Classroom interaction and metalinguistic talk Teacher-learner and peer interaction: rise in focus on language awareness through metalinguistic talk Gaining insight into learners' metalinguistic thinking through classroom interaction Expanding on and supporting individual and group learning through learners' metalinguistic talk
Dialogic approach to teaching and learning Build lesson together with learners through dialogue: integrating learners' contributions in the lesson Help learners engage actively in learning and participate through discussions Enable learners to figure things out and initiate dialogue on learning with teacher and peers Create a localised classroom discourse for teaching and learning: refer learners back to, recapitulate and build on their contributions to learning Encourage and acknowledge the range of learner competences in class: give voice to all learners Offer alternative entry points to learning: reach out to and acknowledge unconventional learner types Raise language awareness: engaging the disengaged

Control over learning: focus on the process of learning Discuss the planning of learning tasks Help learners better define intended outcomes of learning Provide feedback on learning: allocate marks for the process of learning at various stages of task development Enable learners to organise and manage their learning Encourage and acknowledge various degrees of autonomy during the learning process
Enabling learners to self- direct their learning Organising material for classroom learning: providing access to learning material Provide opportunity for learners to assume control of tasks in class Provide input to support learners' creative construction and use of language in class Increase learner focus on linguistic concepts and language use Enable learners to devise own pathways of learning and address learning needs: work individually or in collaboration with peers Move away from teacher dependence and work at one's own pace
Integrating in- and out-of-class learning: a programme for listening Devise a programme for learning for self-directed listening Development of language competences through resources made available for homework use Enable learners to work flexibly in their own time and at their own pace Integration of self-directed programme within the classroom agenda Provide adequate time for feedback and support during classroom sessions
Spurring independent selection of tasks for out-of-class learning Enable learners to venture with learning beyond lesson time: provide optional tasks for learning Encourage independent agendas and selection of tasks for out-of-class learning: raise learner awareness of types of tasks Raise awareness of learner capabilities to work on independently: help them select tasks appropriate to their level of language competence Help them address the need to recapitulate language addressed in former lessons: help them select and work on individualised learning tasks of their choice Enable learners to negotiate, select and create own material for learning within a flexible time-frame
Motivation for FL learning through enhanced learner control over learning Enabling learners to assume a leading role in learning Engaging learners in construction of meaning as opposed to the present-practice approach of introducing new language in class: enhancing engagement and focus on task Ability to recall language learners had constructed the meaning of in previous lessons High level of participation in learning and inquisitive attitude from learners who formerly displayed disengaged attitudes in class Smooth flow of activity and focus on task
Learner involvement in construction of meaning Altering 'present-practice' approach – enhancing (collaborative) learner engagement in meaning-making Increase in participation in learning: promoting an inquisitive attitude from the weaker learners Rise in language awareness: requesting support and clarification as opposed to passive dependence in teacher-led activities Enhanced focus on language: active involvement in meaning-making, focus on form and communicative use of language Focus on meaning and ability to recall language in future lessons
Summative assessment gains Weaker learners who assumed responsibility for learning, at varying degrees, were able to apply learning in summative assessment tasks Gains in listening competences by learners who participated in the programme of self-directed listening practice: rise in marks of learners at various levels of language competence

4.6 Research question 3: what constraints and possibilities for learner autonomy did teacher encounter within the process of inquiry in their foreign language classrooms?

This section addresses the third research question of the study. One of the major aspects discussed with the teachers addressed the need to work one's way around constraints that hindered the fostering of learner autonomy. The following two sections discuss the types of constraints teachers noted within their inquiry. The first part of this section depicts external constraints while the second discusses others of an internal nature. The last section illustrates possibilities teachers sought and worked towards within their practice with the diverse groups of learners they worked with during the inquiry. It links to discourse in pedagogy for autonomy that points at the need to critically analyse situations of practice and to seek insight into what stands in the way of the development of learner autonomy. This latter aspect relates to the aim of the inquiry in relation to the process of seeking 'spaces for manoeuvre', integral to the process of fostering learner autonomy. It presents a clear depiction of the vast array of factors that challenge the fostering of learner autonomy, and that prompted teachers to critically look into possibilities, and prepare the grounds for action. Issues that emerged during the inquiry regarding constraints and possibilities were interwoven at times within one and the same process and will feature around different themes in the sections that follow.

4.6.1 External constraints

This section presents external constraints discussed by teachers during the study. These constraints are related to factors impacted upon by the local educational teaching and learning scenario and indicate the impact of the socio cultural context on classroom practice.

These address backwash of examinations and curriculum content, the impact of a system based on summative assessment and learners' unsupportive family backgrounds.

i. Backwash of examinations and curriculum constraints

The impact of the examination system on the teaching and learning approach was a major issue addressed by all three teachers. Juliette's main concern within the process of fostering learner autonomy in the second year of the study was expressed through her frustration at the 'never ending' amount of content to be tested at Form 2 during half yearly and annual examinations. This Curriculum content and backwash of examinations highly impacted the teachers' approach to fostering learner autonomy with this particular year group. Starting off the year with the introduction of the perfect tense, formerly not dealt with in the Form 2 curriculum, in addition to the four themes to be addressed from October till January constrained her to rush through things and to retain strict control over the teaching and learning agenda.

> Learners were telling me in November, 'Miss this year we are working at such a fast pace!', and I answered that this was still not fast enough, 'we will have to go faster as the weeks go by', I replied. I returned to class In January after the holidays with the aim of working on the *Wechselpräpositionen* (two-way prepositions) and we had only lost four lessons! I needed at least two weeks to work on the theme of *Gesundheit* (health) and body parts, when normally we had time to play around with more activities and even do a test on prepositions. Learners told me, 'last year you used to do more things with us Miss', but it is obvious, because we did not have much time this time round. I feel that the curriculum pushed me to lecture them when time was against me. I knew they would have to deal with the content in the exam and therefore it was mainly a matter of helping them master the content, assuming that they would do their own learning at home. However at the end I realised they had not grasped things well and it felt like having to go through things all over again! (Juliette, Interview, April 2013).

As also stated by Ben and Juliette, May contended that time constraints due to the backwash of examinations limited the extent to which learners were allowed to steer the learning process. The working pace in class had to be accelerated due to fear of not managing to work through potentially examinable curriculum content and to be able to address certain areas of the curriculum within the timeframe of classroom and homework time available. This constrained her to rush through certain aspects of language learning which would have benefited from a more learner-centred teaching and learning approach. She felt saddened by the race against time, aware of the dilution of the teaching and learning experience in search of a quick fix due to the backwash effect of forthcoming examinations.

All three teachers maintained that while working on the shorter programmes of learning, as in the case of Form 5 programme, they were faced with the tasks of preparing learners for high stake examinations over the span of two semesters between October and March. They remarked that discarding learner-centred tasks and activities from the teaching and learning agenda due to curriculum and examination constraints diluted the teaching and learning experience. Peer teaching and pedagogical dialogue, integral to the approach adopted by all three teachers, were radically reduced due to constraints imposed by the loaded curriculum content.

The backwash effect of examinations in both years of the study also led Ben to discard enjoyable but rather time consuming tasks prior to half yearly and annual examinations and during Form 5, a scholastic year made of only two semesters. This impacted on his direct effort to foster learner autonomy in view of the lack of time to work with learners on content to be tested in examinations and their lack of engagement in learning beyond lesson time. He

felt that half yearly and annual school examinations impacted on teacher decisions with regards to content and process of learning and that working on exam oriented tasks was a struggle with a number of learners displaying lack of learner readiness and motivation to work in this regard.

ii. The traditional system of schooling

In the first part of the study Ben elucidated his daily struggle to engage learners in his classes. He described how a number of learners in his class felt stifled within the institutionalised system of schooling that they did not feel they could relate to and that this was reflected in their lack of motivation and interest in learning and school in general, and that educating them was a constant challenge.

> They are not interested in being at school and are only interested in discussing aspects related to what they do after school. They do not show interest in any of the subjects taught (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

Ben noted that the formal and traditional lesson format, reflected even in the overall structured seating arrangements in school classrooms, indicated a culture of schooling that served as a deterrent to more flexible teaching and learning environments that these learners felt more at ease with.

He remarked that it was most unfortunate that learners have become used to passive attitudes due to a system that requires them to listen to the teacher's directions and explanations to the last detail. He stated this was evident in the allocation of most homework and classwork tasks;

> … so that learners can then go home and say that the teacher has explained all to me and I am now able to understand the work set. This is the same attitude adopted in school where the system in class encourages them to sit back and become passive learners, not creating the spaces for them to take risks and to think for themselves, they are too much used to looking for the

> answer in the text rather than to understand and provide their own ideas (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

He claimed that the system of schooling is failing to bring about the change required in the disengaged learners;

> These learners lack ideas, they do not know how to study. You have to ask them, 'what would you like to do? How are we going to achieve our aims?' But most of the time they do not think, they do not manage this. They are so lazy, their mind is not there. At times, when I am writing a note on the board on something which they keep confusing, I have to tell the learners,' note it down on the copybook! But do you need me to tell you? Does it not occur to you to say, I do not know that, so let me write it down'. They are in Form 4, 15 year olds, how much more time do they still need until they decide to start doing things of their own free will?, (exasperated and upset while talking); Because they are brought up in a culture which allows them to sit back and to not participate unless the teacher tells them to do so (Ben, Interview, May 2014).

He claimed that learners who achieve lower school results in summative assessment cannot continue to be provided with less challenging learning experiences through spoon feeding in class.

iii. The impact of a system based on summative assessment

Ben vented his frustration at the prominence given to summative assessment within the local system of schooling and the fact that FL learner attainment was mainly recorded in the form of a half-yearly and end-of-year examination mark. This was disheartening and counterproductive to the teacher's struggle to encourage learners to learn. Progress resulting from their efforts remained unaccounted for by the formal assessment system, demoralising learners and impacting on learner motivation. Frustrated by the lack of support from the local education system in this regard, Ben was constantly caught up between making the syllabus relevant for them, working at raising their self-esteem, and preparing them for the aforementioned examinations.

Ben's determination to make a difference in learners' foreign language learning experience and school life in general had to filter through learner passivity and was, according to the teacher, not an easy task 'since their negative attitude to school life in general is ingrained in the learners' minds' (Ben, Interview, January 2014). He maintained that one cannot allow learners to 'remain unaware of the importance of what they are learning at school, be it in Maths, in History or in the foreign language, so as to help them learn and develop holistically' (Ben, Interview, April 2014).

Juliette's efforts to support learners with disengaged attitudes for learning at school reiterated Ben's claims about the impact of school examinations and learners' ingrained negative beliefs about their abilities and self-worth at school. Juliette contended that it was not an easy task to get such learners to participate in learning and improve on their language competences.

> For instance let me describe what happened with the project about Berlin. I told them that for the presentations on Monday, they have four minutes to present their work. There are some learners who said, 'Miss is it up to us to decide what to work on?', 'yes', I said, 'you decide, it is up to you'. There were those who came up with the idea of a model of the Brandenburg Tor and said they would do a presentation and get traditional food of Berlin. 'I will just write two or three lines', one learner said, while discussing project work, and he brought his work to class on a sheet which was not even presentable; and said, 'I have the project Miss'; 'are you serious!' I told him, 'is this your project?' And I tried to explain how he could improve on his work, but he said, 'no, I do not want to do that'; 'why not?' I replied, 'you will get a low mark', and he answered, 'I do not care Miss for the mark, I am not good at school' (Juliette, Interview, April 2013).

She noted that such a system impacted negatively on the weaker learners. While some of the learners took full initiative, working independently, Juliette struggled to find a way to help others find their learning paths. Juliette reiterated that the negative self-perceptions learners possessed are reflected in their approach towards learning.

iv. Unsupportive family backgrounds

Support from learners' home environment was a further obstacle Ben had to come to terms with. Further to indicating his concern about teacher dependence in learning, Ben attributed the culture of passive dependency at school to factors related to unsupportive and unaccommodating family environments for academic learning. He reiterated his concern that learners had, in his view, inherited a disinterested attitude towards school which he attributed to the lack of support learners received from their families in terms of academic learning. He maintained that school efforts to guide and encourage these learners required the backing of a supportive home environment, which valued and supported education and learning. He regretted not having their parents on board, admitting that this limited the extent to which one can work with learners. He maintained that,

> [i]t is history repeating itself. Their home background does not support the academic aspect of schooling and they do not see themselves as capable of achieving any qualifications, which perception continues to be echoed by their parents. Parents' expectations are so low that they actually dishearten learners (Ben, Interview, January 2014).

4.6.1.1 Overview of Research question 3: external constraints

The following table illustrates the external constraints that emerged as a result of the teachers' inquiry.

Table 4.3

External constraints
Backwash of examinations and curriculum Backwash of assessment system based predominantly on summative assessment Curriculum content, duration / number of lessons and flexibility to work around curriculum due to examined content Examination backwash and impact on teacher decision-making on process of learning: dilution of teaching and learning experiences; lack of flexibility in classroom agenda; Discarding tasks and activities learners deemed enjoyable: learners' disengaged attitudes to teaching and learning; negative impact on readiness and motivation for learning
The impact of a system based on summative assessment and lack of belief in self Negative self-image as learners: disheartened attitudes to learning Submissive learner attitudes in view of record of academic failure at school in general: ingrained beliefs about inability to progress in learning Learner progress evaluated according to summative assessment marks: progress made by learners remained unaccounted for Assessment at levels learners have not as yet mastered Counterproductive to interest and motivation for learning
Traditional system of schooling Supports passive attitudes to learning due to teacher direction and spoon feeding Teacher direction that impedes risk taking: providing the right answer rather than instilling critical and reflective attitudes in learning Lack of challenge in the teaching and learning experience and modes of learning Traditional format of lesson and lack of flexibility in teaching and learning
Unsupportive family environments Unsupportive and unaccommodating sociocultural environment for learning: lack of backing from parents for school and classroom learning

4.6.2 Internal constraints

This section depicts the constraints that teachers expressed during the initial phase of the study, as well as during the different phases of the inquiry, in relation to a number of learners in some of their classes who were reluctant to learn. The section portrays the internal constraints that challenged the teachers within the realities of practice to critically look into

and seek understandings of how to provide a beneficial teaching and learning experience for a number of learners within the same or separate classrooms. These illustrations of practice contrast with the positive experience teachers encountered in their inquiry with other learners in the same or separate classrooms. The section thus contributes to the overall picture of inquiry that contextualised the work with these learners and the 'the spaces for manoeuvre' the teachers sought. It is closely linked with the section on possibilities in the concluding part of this chapter (Section 4.6.3). It furthermore ties with the previous section on external constraints, indicating the impact of external factors on the learners.

Areas addressed in this section include learners' lack of responsibility and commitment to learning, passive attitudes and negative self-perceptions in learning, lack of engagement and commitment to out-of-class learning, lack of responsibility to set and follow learning agendas, lack of respect for the autonomy of others and lack of cross-linguistic knowledge.

i. Lack of responsibility for learning

This section addresses a mixture of factors that relate to learners' lack of responsibility for learning. Ben was challenged by the disengaged attitude of a large number of his learners in language learning and education in general. He sought to raise learners' awareness on the need that they acknowledge their future responsibilities by assuming their present ones. He maintained that his role as language teacher and educator was vital to their development both as individuals and as language learners. As from the first meeting Ben stated that he aimed at maximising spaces in class to discuss the process of learning and that he envisaged this would prove to be a challenging process in many respects. Form 4 learners lacked the

readiness to express their opinions when presented with different options on the content or process of learning. ‘‘They do not think, or want to think, insisting, ‘you know best Sir, you decide’’’ (Ben, Interview, May 2013). Ben described how difficult it was to come to terms with this passive attitude towards learning and how he sought ways to address this situation. ‘It will take time’, the teacher stated during a group discussion on this issue; ‘one will not see the change in them easily’ (Ben, Interview, May 2013). This is most evident in learners’ lack of initiative to note things down independently, the teacher having to get them used to the idea that,

> they cannot expect to be spoon fed the whole time. If I use a different colour when writing on the board, then they ask ‘do we change colour’? How much more time do you need until you decide to start doing things of your own free will? Because they are allowed to sit back and not participate unless the teacher tells them to do so (Ben, Interview, May 2013).

The process towards learner autonomy with these learners required a lot of support on the part of the teacher. Learners lacked the ability to transfer knowledge to simple writing tasks including self-introductions, family descriptions and information about their interests. Furthermore Ben realised that the problem of incomprehensible written work and lack of parental support in this regard complicated the situation. Lack of parental co-operation in view of negligent or missing work shocked the teacher, especially when learners or parents misinterpreted or disengaged from teacher’s efforts to address the situation collaboratively. Juliette also maintained that it was difficult to support learners to assume control of their learning if they were not ready to assume responsibility for learning. An example she mentioned in this regard, was that of a Form 2 learner who was often absent from school and displayed lack of readiness to work beyond lesson time, deeming the teacher’s support as a punishment or as extra work. Lack of readiness from the learner to listen to alternative

ways of working reflected disinterest in learning in general, irrespective of the fact that parents inquired about material their son was missing out on. While helping him focus on what others were working on in class she encouraged the learner to activate his knowledge of language through varied activities however the learner did not assume the responsibilities to be able to take learning that step further.

ii. Passive attitudes and negative self-perceptions in learning

Factors that concerned Ben in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy in his classes were the learners' passive attitudes and their negative self-perceptions in learning. Ben's classes consisted of learners who did not do well in school in general and a small group of Form 2 learners who were more motivated to learn. He however noted that he managed to build a relationship of trust with the learners that enabled him to get the learners to collaborate and work on various areas of the curriculum through negotiation in class.

The most disheartening battle he faced was that of confronting learners' doomed perception about their education and learning. He nevertheless deemed these learners worthy of his attention and care in terms of academic achievement and personal development. He embraced the support offered by this process of teacher inquiry especially in view of the disheartened educational experience of learners in his classes and the space he found to discuss his efforts in this regard.

Ben revealed how his own background bore on his pedagogical beliefs as he narrated accounts of his own past school experiences and the disinterest in learning amongst classmates in the state secondary school he attended, him being one of the few learners in class pursuing higher education. Obtaining a degree resulted out of strong will and personal

determination on his part stating that his family background did not encourage academic paths. He persisted despite being forced by an 'educator' to rethink his plans to pursue his course of studies in the language. In view of this he focused on the need to treat learners with care, guiding them forth rather than disheartening them, inquiring into possibilities of how to help them learn.

He stated that he sought to help them understand that education at school concerns their own personal development within the classroom and wider community. He profusely described efforts made during past scholastic years to instil in learners the awareness of responsibilities to educate themselves. He sought to raise their awareness of the responsibilities they ought to assume for classwork and homework tasks that they were to address according to their level of competence in the language. He described his aim of drawing learners' attention towards their future responsibilities and for their education at school. Ben was very much committed find ways around the particular situation of learners who were not interested in ameliorating their marks in summative assessment: Ben felt that this lay within his responsibility.

> Ben: And I have the Form 4 class, they are 19 in class, I have been teaching since form 1 […] the more the time goes by, their attention span is so low, ar need to do something because we are going to continue getting these generations of learners (Ben, Interview, March 2013).

In particular, his efforts were directed at altering learners' negative self- perception, insisting that they were capable of improving their skills and competences, while firmly stating that they cannot shed their responsibilities as learners in the foreign language classroom. He constantly sought to address their negative perceptions on education and learning, transmitted through phrases such as 'we know nothing' or 'we are not good at school'. He sought to show them that;

> learning is part of a journey, so when they are working on things, even if it is summative assessment that I am not normally basing my learning on, I try to tell them that what they are not getting right they should see as part of the process of getting to a destination, but it is not the destination itself that is important…. seeking …in getting things immediately right … (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

He stated that he made sure that all Form 5 learners in his class, even the most unmotivated, persisted with their learning even if they were not to sit for Matsec examinations at the end of their five year course at school, insisting that they work at obtaining good grades on their school leaving examination results.

> It is a constant struggle to help my learners realise that it is their responsibility to learn, and to take their education seriously, and that is my role […] to ensure that they educate themselves while under my care. In my class they know they are here to learn. No compromises (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

Aware of 'the culture' of passivity towards learning, Ben commented that learners' attention needed to be drawn to helping them expand their potential as language learners. He sought to help learners engage in discussion about the content and process of learning and to instil confidence in the learners by enabling them to draw on his own and peer knowledge and to adopt a participatory role in learning. He extended his work in this regard well beyond lesson time, as he noted in one of the interviews,

> You look out for them during break, in the corridor in between lessons and even during a scholastic year when you are not teaching them […], you need to show interest in them so that they feel that they are cared for (Ben, Interview, October 2013).

Ben's own personal experiences and struggles along academic learning paths at various levels of his studies concurred with the sensitivity and urge he displayed to support and guide learners along their learning paths. The teacher maintained that such a journey required constant persistence, and insisted that this ought to be a concerted and collective effort from

all teachers 'from day one till the last day that the learners are entrusted in [one's] care' (Ben, Interview, April 2014) since,

> Reality shows us that if learners display negative attitudes towards learning or if they have very low self-esteem one needs a lot …a real lot of time … and one cannot expect to change them easily, since their negative attitudes to learning are deeply ingrained in their roots. They do not believe in themselves and are not supported by their family environment … on the contrary, their feelings of failure are reinforced there; they are hardly ever praised. The fact that one chooses to place them in the spotlight in the lesson, does not automatically mean that they will display a positive attitude (Ben, Interview, April 2014).

iii. Lack of engagement and commitment to out-of-class learning

Ben expressed his concerns with regards to learner resistance to learning particularly with reference to their lack of engagement in out-of-class learning. He was concerned about how he would be able to trust the Form 4 learners along a journey which sought to develop their autonomous learning skills when they, in the second year of the study, hardly ever engaged willingly in homework tasks to maximise the classroom learning time required for their progress. Ben stated that the fact that most learners do not expose themselves to the language or have the opportunity to use it on a regular basis is a major constraint to autonomous language development. The lack of transfer of knowledge to a wider range of contexts remained problematic since learners did not expose themselves adequately to the language, limiting opportunities to familiarise themselves with the language. Ben maintained that they spend a lot of time on their play-station and browsing the internet where the target language is mainly English. He stated that efforts to expose them to the language and help them use it were not sufficient for the development of language proficiency;

> Today the learner says *guten Morgen* (good morning), tomorrow he will say *guten Tag* (good day), then we move to, *was möchten Sie trinken*?, (what would you like to drink?), as we start to deduct meaning from different phrases, learning and practicing, since it is through practice that one gets

> there; but the learners who do not practice will not get there if they do not do anything independently. The large number of learners who put in minimal effort have problems in contrast to those who work willingly. 'If you are going to keep this attitude' I tell them, and here I have in mind the form 4's I teach, 'even if you spend 30 years learning German, you will not learn it if you do nothing independently at home'; They do not read, listen or study anything; how can one get anywhere? (Ben, Interview, January 2014)

May recalled that when sending material for revision purposes and self-directed learning one girl always passed on the message that she did not need to revise anything. May noted the fact that this girl needed to work independently and it took her a very long time to get her to select material on areas she needed to work on. Such learners were not easy to work with since they seemed to block any initiative on the part of the teacher to help them work autonomously, and May stated that she had to persist at sending her the material, as she did with all others in class, even though the learner had passed on the message that she did not need to revise things. The teacher realised that countering such constraints required persistence and that her efforts did eventually pay off with this particular learner.

> A learner, always unwilling and aloof in view of the support I tried to offer in class, came up to me one day and said, 'Miss, I found a few things which I had not completed last year, I got them so that you correct them for me please'. She handed them over to me and said all this to me personally, not in front of the others but while I was collecting homework (May, Interview, January 2014).

Aware that some of the learners would never express their needs and concerns in class in front of classmates, May prepared material aimed at varied language competence levels, making the material available to all. She constantly made learners aware of the fact that she was ready to support them with their work at any stage as they worked with material she made available to them. A number of learners resisted this support and remained passive to her supportive stance, unwilling to take the initiative to work beyond lesson time.

Juliette faced individual learners' lack of readiness to engage in learning beyond lesson time in her small groups of learners in spite of support offered to help them work autonomously. She maintained that it was difficult to work with learners who constantly needed to be reminded and encouraged to engage in language tasks beyond classroom time. Juliette referred to the increasing number of learners displaying lack of readiness for out-of-class learning, commenting on the constant challenge of keeping them on track. She constantly encouraged learners to seek further support during their free time at school to complete out-of-class learning tasks. While aware of the extent to which teacher support is central to the process of autonomous learning, she was concurrently faced with situations where learners offer resistance to learning, threatening to bring their learning process to a standstill.

iv. Lack of responsibility to set and follow learning agendas

Juliette commented that small class size gave her the possibility to give the support required to help learners work on independently. Nevertheless she noted that certain learners' lack of responsibility limited her readiness to allow them to determine when to hand in work set as homework tasks. She consequently established rules with regards to deadlines to homework tasks in view of the extent to which learners were able to take responsibility for decisions in this regard. While intrinsically motivated learners were a pleasure to work with in this regard, others showed no interest whatsoever in work recommended to expose themselves to the language during out-of-class homework tasks, working only if instigated by the teacher.

> They tell me, 'Miss this was optional, I did not have to do it', and I explain that this would be good for them; 'you become familiar with learning sites and then can link to further sites and consequently you learn and can move up to a higher level' and they say, 'that is not necessary, what we do at school is enough'. So you realise that certain learners are more open to learning and

> are ready to learn; that is it, one has to be ready to learn (Juliette, Interview, April 2013).

Ben referred to the lack of learner responsibility to follow schedules for learning on several occasions. When commenting on lack of commitment in view of preparation for examinations learners were to sit for, he contended that 'if one wants to learn today one finds all that is required, it is at the learners' disposal, at the click of a button and they can learn through different means' (Ben, Interview, December 2013).

v. Lack of respect for the autonomy of others

Learning to respect others' learning space and learner autonomy was a further issue discussed by teachers in the inquiry. While aware of the need that learners ought to work together, Juliette claimed that not all learners were able to respect each other, admitting that she was at times wary of allowing them to work together in groups, conscious of the need to shield particular learners from being bullied. The latter gladly displayed their work in class even if classmates directly or indirectly mocked their efforts. Juliette commented that she always kept a watchful eye over weaker learners during group work, deeming it important to protect and support them. She noted that she had to shelter them from classmates who are not able to understand that they have not as yet acquired language competences at the same level as others in class.

Ben also commented that a learner-centred lesson format was not devoid of challenges, since most learners lacked the ability to deal and interact respectfully with each other, constantly having to be reminded to value and respect each other, and that comments such as, 'Are you stupid, or what? Did you not understand?' in peer to peer discussion were unacceptable. While this behaviour reinforced the need to educate learners to respect each other, it clearly

indicated such spaces created for classroom interaction led to learners' active involvement in meaning making and that helping them learn how to work within such a scenario was crucial to their development as learners and individuals within society.

vi. Lack of cross-linguistic knowledge

A further issue which raised teachers' concerns regarded learners' lack of cross linguistic and general conceptual knowledge of language, related to their mother tongue. May stated that the weaker learners' 'family background does not support them ... they are limited when compared to the other Form 3 class' and that they differed profusely from the latter in terms of how they presented themselves in simple profiles when compared to the other class in the same Form (May, Interview, October 2013). The teacher admitted that she was at time shocked to realise that their knowledge of language and concepts it represented was very limited. They were not conversant with language that other learners their age had long mastered and lacked knowledge about language used to discuss themes in class that she took for granted with their peers in other classes.

A further area of concern surfaced during language awareness discourse in class concerning the way learners expect to translate things literally. Juliette remarked on the need to get learners used to the fact that the process of language learning requires them to become aware of target language structures which are similar to, or vary from those in their mother tongue or other languages they know. Learner queries on the structure and format of the target language indicated the need to create more space for learners to discuss concepts learners constantly grappled with during language use. While referring to the weaker learners

the teachers noted how they struggled to come to terms with the form and structure of the target language.

> Learners told me, 'in Maltese one would not say that; why is the verb second idea in the sentence, but even in English we do not say 'at noon eat I so why is it like that in German?' And one tries to explain that grammar changes according to the language, and there are some who accept that German has its own grammatical structures while others are uncomfortable with this and you say to yourself, how will I manage with these learners? And this year it is even more so because I have many learners who are so weak, weaker than in previous years (Juliette, Interview, January 2014).

Juliette devoted time to raise awareness of linguistic structures that learners were familiar with and to help them focus on other aspects that were new to them. She contended that foreign language learning required different competences and knowledge than other subjects learned at school.

> While working on language awareness tasks using cut out sentences, I ask them, 'what do you notice here' and they answer, 'the red', and I ask 'what is that?', 'the verb', and then they say, 'ah yes, you are right, second idea not second place', and you give them the liberty to experiment with language, at times with the support of colour coded cards (Juliette, Interview, April 2014).

She sought to help learners understand that language learning goes beyond the translation of words or the internalising of content knowledge, and that each language has its own system. This notion was overtly projected during foreign language awareness tasks while discussing word order, sentence structure and other grammatical aspects, pooling in, discussing and helping learners analyse knowledge of different languages in this regard. A highly motivated Form 2 learner worked independently on past examination tasks which he brought to school and inquired about the verb *einkaufen gehen*, 'to go shopping', which the teacher related to former discussions on modal verbs linking to learners´ prior knowledge. ´Ah yes, now I understand´ said the learner in reply to the teacher´s comment on the

similarity of its structure to modal verbs, jotting down a note in his diary on the position of the two verbs in the sentence, without inquiring for further explanations. Rather than giving learners passive written tasks, the teacher constantly encouraged learners to construct own sentences highlighting verbs and adverbs and their position in the sentence, recognising nouns through capital letters, getting learners to identify language structures throughout the process of learning. At this point we discussed the fact that language awareness discourse in class encouraged learners to draw independent conclusions along the process, enhancing their metacognitive competences as language learners.

May noted that allocating time for construction of meaning and language awareness tasks required a lot of time with the weaker learners, even in relation to tasks on word order and constructing simple sentences in the present tense. She realised that she also had to address learners' lack of general knowledge in view of concepts which she took for granted while discussing themes from their curriculum in class, and that the process exposed learners' needs in this regard. She remarked that these learners' prior knowledge and experiences varied from those of other learners at their age in class. One such example was the time when she was required to stop and discuss means of transport with the Form 4 class of six learners while using a video clip with the theme 'Travelling –at the airport', aimed at assisting linguistic and intercultural knowledge through a video clip on Düsseldorf Airport. She realised learners had no concept of distance between Malta and other countries. One learner even had difficulty grasping the concept behind the word 'airline'. Such gaps in knowledge hindered learners from grasping language concepts presented in class in the foreign language.

4.6.2.1 Overview of research question 3: internal constraints

Table 4.4

Internal constraints
Lack of responsibility and commitment for learning Disengaged attitudes for language learning and for school in general Addressing present and future responsibilities for learning Lack of readiness to accept support in learning Lack of readiness to engage in decision-making on the process and content of learning
Passive attitudes and negative self-perceptions in learning Addressing learners' passive and negative self-perceptions in learning Lack of responsibility for learning: help learners work on areas they are able to master Clarifying aims and objectives of teaching and learning: a journey that all are expected to engage in and take responsibility for Constant support and encouragement
Lack of engagement and commitment to out-of-class learning Resistance to learning Lack of readiness to engage in out-of-class learning Lack of exposure to the target language Insufficient use of resources available for out-of-class learning
Lack of responsibility to set and follow learning agendas Lack of interest and readiness to set and follow out-of-class learning schedules Lack of responsibility and interest in making use of available material for Learning
Lack of respect for the autonomy of others Inability of learners to interact with respect when working with peers in class Need to help learners understanding and accept peers' lower competence levels Need to develop as individuals and as learners within society
Lack of cross linguistic knowledge Lack of knowledge on language and the concepts it represents Lack of knowledge about linguistic terms in one's mother tongue and other languages they are familiar with and how it compares with the target language

4.6.3 Addressing possibilities

This section addresses the possibilities the three teachers sought during the course of inquiry and provides insight into how they addressed the process of fostering learner autonomy in

their practice. It furthermore reflects teachers' understanding of this process and pathways they threaded in this regard. It revisits and delves deeper into themes discussed in section 4.5 in terms of how they latched on to what they deemed beneficial within the process. Although the findings on aspects they deemed beneficial and possibilities sought are presented separately, they were interwoven into one and the same process within the teachers' inquiry. This section provides insight into how this search for possibilities and understandings gained helped teachers empower themselves through the process.

Findings in this section illustrate how teachers sought to negotiate the teaching and learning agenda to address the shift required from teaching to learning. Related to this is how they discussed possibilities for learning, and what emerged as a result of their sensitivity to learner voices. Other aspects that emerged as central within their search for understanding of such a process relate to how they addressed the need for flexibility of the teaching and learning agenda and the positive and encouraging attitude required for confidence building in the foreign language learning process. Inherent to this process, aspects regarding the focus on the process of learning a number of other areas are discussed, namely learner engagement in construction of language and motivation for learning, listening to learners' voices to support and help learners seek pathways of learning, linking in and out of class learning, raising language awareness and focus on construction of meaning.

i. Negotiation of the teaching and learning agenda: tapping into learner readiness for autonomy

Ben sought to shift the focus from teaching to learning and get learners to assume control over learning by seeking to negotiate aspects of the learning agenda for both in- and out-of-class learning. As noted in the description of how Form 2 and Form 3 learners worked in

previous sections, these learners were more ready to engage in tasks that required them to assume more responsibility for learning than the older Form 4 and 5 learners. While negotiating type of tasks for the lessons, they demanded tasks that enabled them to work together with peers. Ben dealt with the situations that followed, such as the times they came to class without continuing the work, and allowed them more space to continue working with peers in class to gain the support required. Negotiating the learning process meant accepting learner limitations and not illuding oneself that learners will actually be able to sustain their learning independently 'as from day one' or that this would be a straightforward process with all (Ben, Interview, June 2014). He literally had to work against the grain to infiltrate the Form 4 and Form 5 learners' disengaged attitudes for learning. He was not ready to settle for a situation where learners with low motivation and low academic results decided that they were unable to learn the language, labelling themselves as failures. This was evidently not an easy struggle in view of the diverse baggage the learners brought with them to class and he had to settle for more subtle routes while negotiating teaching and learning. He illustrated how he persisted with his approach when lessons were scheduled after midday break, a challenging time of the day to work with such learners.

> I had a lesson with a class of learners who did not want to do anything, absolutely nothing, and I needed to work with them on the eve of exam week, although in reality I knew that they had not studied and they did not want to revise things. They did not want to work on writing or grammar revision, and I had two lessons, the last two lessons in the day when these learners came to class after break; one of them pushing the other, others running around using bad language while another learner had just stolen a bottle of water from a classmate who in turn showered him with the remaining water in the bottle; and I was greeted with, 'do not invent any tasks today Sir, we do not want to do anything today. We need you to give us two free lessons Sir'; and I had to spend the last two lessons with them! (Ben, Interview, June 2014)

In response to such situations Ben worked his way around the situation of teaching and learning, instigated by his own readiness to negotiate aspects related to lesson format, as the

learners dragged their feet to class. He was able to exercise his autonomy and to address the need to work with this class in a more relaxed way, unorthodox in the eyes of others.

> Ok now let us walk to the back of the class and sit in a circle; and I allowed them to sit and relax and I sat in the middle with my material and started using pictures to get them involved in describing things and they expressed themselves well in each situation presented to them. They discussed with each other, at times stating 'that is not how we say that'. I worked my way through revision of language in the past tense, differences between *seit* and *vor* (since and ago) while they were kept engaged the whole time, allowing them to keep their relaxed seating positions, and we did the best revision lesson of the week! Now had I gone in there saying, 'no, you have to sit there and you have to do as I say', then I would not have been able to start working (Ben, interview, April 2014).

Such ways of working led Ben to negotiate teaching and learning with this group by tapping into their readiness to learn through a less formalised lesson format and he remarked that the learners appreciated his efforts. He noted that he did not have to raise his voice once during such lessons since learners were engaged in tasks at hand.

May also focused on negotiating learners' preferred tasks and learning modes to integrate them within her teaching and learning agenda. This led Form 4 learners to work through their preferred ways, demonstrating high levels of readiness for autonomy. A number of learners recorded a video on aspects of language they needed to remember, using it as a resource for out of class learning. Learners, referred to by the teacher as the weaker group, worked on the perfect tense using a game on verbs, *Das große Spiel der Verben*, recording themselves while using verbs to describe what they did.

ii. Flexibility to manoeuvre around the teaching and learning agenda

As noted in the previous section, fostering learner autonomy required teachers' readiness to flexibly work around the teaching and learning agenda while negotiating the process of teaching and learning. Both Ben and May found possibilities of how to navigate around the

diverse language learning situations they were confronted with in the face of learner readiness for learner autonomy and what learners themselves proposed. Enabling learners to impact on the teaching and learning agenda proved beneficial in helping them assume more autonomy in learning. This took May in directions other than those that she had pre-planned. May sought to create the spaces required for learners to direct their learning paths and address their learning requirements. Teacher-learner dialogue was never suppressed in relation to what she had prepared for the lesson and she flexibly provided resources for learning as the need arose. May looked up material on her computer redirecting the lesson according to the learners' needs.

> It was not my plan on the scheme of work for that week, but we worked on numbers, days of the week and months as well as the ordinal numbers during this lesson, a lesson I would still have done at another time during the year. (May, Interview, December 2013).

May placed learner concerns and wishes ahead of her own pedagogical beliefs by agreeing to work with learners on tests or dictations requested by them at the end of a topic. Modification of her plans to address learner needs indicated her readiness to negotiate the teaching and learning process, ensuring that learners gained the security required along their learning paths.

> Sometimes learners who work very well with me in class, while working on vocabulary, ask me to do things according to how they feel they learn best; 'Miss can we please work together with you on a dictation?' This they feel is important to help them conclude the topic we are working on, however the other group of Form 3 learners would never come up with suggestions of the sort. A dictation is not a task I would normally come up with, however I understand their need for it, and I know they feel at peace if I include such a task, and therefore I comply (May, Interview, December 2013).

iii. Creating space for learner talk: listening to learner voices

Possibilities in the aforementioned sections hinged on the teachers' readiness and ability to navigate their way around learning requirements and learners' preferred modes of learning. Creating a learning environment that sustained learner talk proved beneficial within such a process. Opportunities to foster learner autonomy were unravelled through the emergence of the learners' voices and the teachers' sensitivity to them. This occurred in a number of ways. Ben and Juliette set time for discussion with the learners, discussing aspects that learners required support with and seeking to find out their preferred ways of working. They also sought to engage learners in decision making in the process of learning. During one of the instances when Juliette sought to help learners express themselves about aspects of learning that they found problematic, she discussed possibilities and provided them with support through tasks that helped them address gaps in learning and improve their language competences. The programme for listening for Form 4 learners evolved as a result of one of these discussions. Creating a space to listen to the learners' voices helped her facilitate a pathway of learning that learners eventually gained ownership of. Juliette managed to tap into an area the learners were willing to invest time on. She clearly recognised that learners required the learning material, time and space to progress in their learning. Through the learners' feedback on the programme, Juliette was able to relinquish the more guided approach of prior lessons focused on listening comprehension tasks. Form 4 expressed the benefits of being able to work flexibly at their own pace on listening tasks at home as a result of the tasks compiled by the teacher. Juliette was previously unaware that learners felt frustrated when presented with a listening task in class, and she was surprised that this concern was expressed by one of the best learners in class. He was the one who stated that

he found listening tasks in class overwhelming. Previous to the discussion held with learners on areas they needed to work on, she was under the impression that listening was the skill that learners felt most confident with.

Other possibilities to listen to the learners' voices were created through the various situations that fostered collaboration and interaction in class. All three teachers recounted instances that helped them gain feedback on learners' metalinguistic and metacognitive thinking. This spurred them to devise ways of helping learners through the next stage in their learning through tasks that they made available, or that they helped learners to select or create. Such situations reflected both teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions.

iv. Building confidence in language learning and language use

May maintained that a positive and encouraging approach impacted positively on learners' confidence in learning, stating that showing learners that she believed in their abilities convinced them to work on. She discussed tasks that they could work on to ensure that they were at a level they would be able to master. She tapped into knowledge of learners' preferred ways of learning and built on areas they felt confident in to encourage them to engage in further learning. Aware of aspects learners problematised in their learning, May presented learners with options for learning to facilitate their work on tasks they found overwhelming and helped them alleviate their disheartened attitude when presented with writing tasks. Working on a writing task through 'writing frames', helped learners deconstruct an otherwise challenging writing task through the support required to venture on with writing. The breakdown of the writing task into smaller components, introduced through the writing frame, allowed learners to play around with the parts to arrive at the whole. She

helped learners concentrate on various aspects of the theme, enabling them to develop their writing abilities and produce longer texts. Through writing games, such as the 'snake game', learners were required to write with their peers on aspects of the theme in question and managed to fulfil the task and to confidently master the writing experience.

Ben reiterated May's views as he described how a positive attitude was central within his struggle with the disheartened attitude of learners in a number of his classes. Clinging to the relationship of trust he had built with them during the foreign language lesson, the teacher planned to further instil confidence in their ability as learners. He supported them by showing them that these were tasks set at a level they could master, and that they would be able to improve their language competences and ameliorate examination marks if they persisted with the programme of learning. In the same vein, Juliette agreed on the need to create a positive attitude to learning in class and remarked that acknowledging her learners' creative as well as linguistic competences enhanced such an environment and helped them build confidence in learning;

> They were not only focused on the language but on what they were good at …in presentations through the use of the computer or through their artwork …one learner built a model … and this gave them confidence in front of others in class to demonstrate their work (Juliette, Interview, December 2013).

v. Linking in- and out-of-class learning

Possibilities that linked in- and out-of-class learning were reported upon by all three teachers and indicated how fostering teacher and learner autonomy entailed helping learners work independently on work initiated in class. As indicated in the former sections, a number of learners requested such work, while others were encouraged to expose themselves to the

language through tasks and activities they could select themselves. Ben noted the work on dialogue building around themes addressed in class that learners planned and managed in groups, while Juliette described the work on the programme for listening with Form 4 learners that helped them improve their proficiency in this skill. Moreover, Juliette noted the importance of enabling learners to amalgamate independent learning activities to classroom learning. Learners were encouraged to bring to class any work that they conducted independently linked to what they were doing in class. Learners were provided with and encouraged to find further links to themes and aspects of language that they were working on through online material that Juliette introduced them to. This was also the case with Ben's and May's learners. Juliette and May both noted how learners brought work they had independently worked in the form of powerpoint and other forms of poster presentations. Learners were allocated time to share this work with others in lessons. Juliette furthermore acknowledged knowledge that one particular learner brought to class through exposure to the target language on television.

May commented on the enthusiasm of learners at her approach of providing access to material and resources for classroom use and produced during lessons with the learners in the form of notes on the lesson. Although hindered by a full lesson load and lack of time to organise material at school, May found a way of making material utilised and created during lesson time available for learners' reference beyond lesson time.

> I used to save interactive whiteboard lessons and send them each evening but that was difficult on a daily basis, so I had to find a different approach once November started. I decided to send the weeks' notes over the weekend and there were learners who told me, 'but Miss if I see the notes on that day in the evening it is better', however I replied that one has to find a system which is manageable and works well within our limitations. This system maximised support even for those learners who were sick or had missed out on lessons for various reasons, giving them an idea of what had been addressed in class (May, Interview, January 2014).

In this way May furthermore compensated for the lack of possibilities available for individual or group work in class. May noted the challenges incurred due to the restricted time frame of lesson and teaching load and in terms of availability of resources in class and made up for this through the material she made available to learners for out-of-class use. The links created between in- and out-of-class learning counteracted limitations of access to technological tools in class. Learners literally grabbed on to this material for support and were able to take control of their learning, finding space and time to pose questions and to learn on.

> Yes, they actually come up to me and tell me, 'Miss, you are going to send the revision e-mails, aren't you, because that is how I study.' I do a kind of shopping list and note down what I need to send them, noting all of this down in an e-mail. I then attach the saved interactive lesson as PDF otherwise they won't be able to open it. Therefore if I have three lessons to send, I first save them in PDF format, then check if we did any listening tasks, power point presentations and video clips in class, and attach them. I send them to each class. Consequently if I have five different classes, different Forms, then I have to send material for each lesson conducted with them, plus the material used in the lesson as well as the e-mail brief and the revision e-mail work (May, Interview, January 2014).

Such an approach proved beneficial since although May worked well with both smaller and larger groups, she maintained that class size impacted on the teaching and learning approach. The out-of-class support was useful while working with larger groups when longer lesson time was required to be able to work adequately at a more comfortable pace. Conversely, learners in the smaller group constantly required her attention and May did not have the time required to address their needs within lesson time. Her inquiry helped her reflect on the kind of possibilities offered by the link between in and out-of-class learning that enabled learners to gain more control of their learning throughout the year in both smaller and larger groups.

vi. Cultivating respect and support for varied levels of learner autonomy

One of the main factors that emerged from the teachers' discussions related to their readiness and ability to work with learners at different levels of competence and motivation for learning within the same classroom, whether within a small group or a larger class. Juliette's attitude and approach to fostering learner autonomy reflected her understanding of the need to support and enhance autonomous competences of both weaker and better learners.

> For instance the Form 2 learners will work within such a plan, they get the worksheet, the CD, and they do their work at home but then there are others who come to school without their work. The latter do not bring any work to class however I realise that this is not due to carelessness but due to the fact that they are unable to work independently. In such an eventuality I would conduct an extra session with them at school (Juliette, Interview, January 2014).

Juliette realised that learners were not conscious of the need to support the autonomy of others in class to help them develop their language competences and move from the stage of learning that they were at. On one occasion at the beginning of the scholastic year, a group of learners in Juliette's classroom stayed on after class, perturbed by the fact that she had praised a learner of lower academic achievement. Juliette explained to them that her expectations of learning outcomes hinged on the learners' competences in the language, maintaining the need to support learners at different levels to enhance their learning potential. She furthermore demanded the better language learners' support and understanding in relation to classmates who required assistance in this regard and discussed different learning outcomes for different learners. Learners readily accepted the teacher´s mind-set and agreed that all efforts in class ought be respected and acknowledged not only by the teacher but also by themselves as classmates. More knowledgeable learners assumed the role of helping others with their work in mixed-ability groupings and were encouraged to

assume roles of responsibility to clarify things and interact with others in the group. In so doing, she encouraged learners to embrace an inclusive approach to teaching and learning, evident in the teacher's tacit recounting of situations of classroom practice which reflected respect for the autonomy of others.

Sensitivity and respect for learners' varied levels of autonomy was equally evident at several instances during May's inquiry within her work with the diverse learners she taught. May noted how she had altered her planning in view of the more effective learners' ability to take control of their learning. One such occasion occurred during the second part of the study when she gained access to internet in the classrooms and was able to make use of online resources during lessons. During a topic on food and drink the smaller group of Form 4 and Form 3 learners worked on online listening tasks, embracing the possibility of working on such tasks in class. However the larger Form 4 group of learners described by the teacher as more autonomous, felt demotivated when working with one laptop and interactive whiteboard in class preferring to engage independently on these tasks at home. May altered her approach with the groups stating that,

> in another topic, on the *Akkusativ*, I worked differently, providing them with links that I used in class with the smaller groups which [the larger Form 4 class] gladly accessed from home (May, Interview, October 2013).

May noted that enabling learners to take charge of learning rather than tying them down to her rigidly planned teaching and learning agenda, enabled the better learners to work at the level and pace that suited their needs and motivation for learning.

4.6.3.1 Overview of research question 3: addressing possibilities

The following table illustrates possibilities sought and uncovered during the process of inquiry.

Table 4.5

Addressing possibilities
Negotiating the teaching and learning agenda: tapping into learner readiness for autonomy Negotiating aspects of both in- and out-of-class learning: nurturing learner readiness Open culture of learning: embrace less formal teaching and learning environments Doing away with traditional approaches to teaching and learning in view of learners' preferred modes of learning: creating spaces for collaborative work following discussion with learners Devising ways of supporting learners through their work in class
Flexibility to manoeuvre around the teaching and learning agenda Enabling learners to direct the teaching and learning agenda and address their learning requirements Create space for learners to work on language areas they themselves propose Work with and provide a bank of material and resources for learning according to emerging needs Incorporating tasks that learners deem vital to their learning: providing learners with a sense of security in learning through the use of tasks of their choice
Creating space for learner talk: listening to learner voices Creating an environment that nurtures learner talk: sustain collaboration and interaction Help learners express language learning requirements and preferred modes of learning Tap into areas learners are ready to invest time on: provide material and support required Discuss, plan and give space for implementation of tasks Gain insight into spaces required by learners to direct their learning paths: help learners address gaps in learning they themselves problematise for the development of language competences Detecting areas to work on through teacher-learner and learner-learner dialogue
Building confidence in language learning and language use Building on what learners felt confident to help them venture with learning Negotiating tasks at a level learners can master Show learners how to break down tasks to master tasks set; eg. use of writing frames Tapping into individual learner capabilities; e.g. learner creativity
Linking in- and out of class learning Maximising time for learning: space and time required to help learners address their needs beyond lesson time Providing access to material and resources created by teacher and learners during lesson time Acknowledging and enabling learners to amalgamate independent learning activities to classroom Learning: encouraging learners to share their independent out-of-class learning activities with peers in class
Cultivating respect and support for learners' varied levels of autonomy Support level of autonomy of both the weaker and better learners: finding ways of working with leaners of varied learning competences and motivation for learning Nurturing the value of respect and support for the autonomy of others: raising learner consciousness of the need to support and respect the autonomy of others Discuss varied learning outcomes for different learners

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have portrayed illustrations of practice that emerged from the teachers' findings of inquiry in-and-on classroom practice around the three research questions of the study that addressed the process of fostering learner autonomy, namely that of:

- critically looking at aspects that they problematized in their practice in this regard and understandings gained as a result of the inquiry,
- outcomes and reflections from the inquiry regarding aspects teachers deemed conducive to FL teaching and learning during the course of inquiry,
- constraints and possibilities encountered during the process of teacher inquiry.

The chapter provided an overview of findings related to each of the research questions, however the overlap between the various aspects discussed point at the interrelation between the questions. The iterative nature of the inquiry process moreover points at a journey of inquiry that was not always initiated by the problematisation of factors. The non-linearity of the inquiry provided teachers with the opportunity to revisit a number of emerging factors from multiple perspectives.

The depiction of findings regarding constraints and possibilities indicate that while some learners learned to be more autonomous and benefited from the approach to teaching and learning adopted by their teachers, the process did not yield the same results with all learners at the same degree. Within such a picture, in particular with regards to the latter more reluctant learners, the teachers retained their focus through the knowledge that 'autonomy is not an all or nothing construct'. The next chapter brings together the various elements that contributed to the research journey and draws the conclusions of the study.

Chapter 5

Fostering the process of teacher and learner autonomy: analysis and discussion of findings, reflections, considerations and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

At the outset of this thesis, I discussed the aim of my inquiry with teachers, which was to explore the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy for effective FL learning and language use in Maltese secondary school classrooms. My aim was to help teachers take control of their pedagogical journeys through a process of inquiry into practice in the learning of German as a FL and enable them to explore the underpinnings of such a process. The findings of the study indicate that it is the 'teachers' understanding of what autonomy means, and their ability to implement it in the classroom' that has the greater impact on learner autonomy (Reinders & Balcicanli, 2011, p. 15). For teachers, this may be described as the development of a competence that is constantly evolving as teachers meander through the various and diverse situations they encounter in daily practice and critically look at how best to address them with their learners.

This chapter will be divided in two main sections that bring together the threads of my study. In the first section I will focus on the process that enabled me to inquire into the overarching question of the study into how to help teachers direct their pedagogical journeys and foster learner autonomy through inquiry in-and-on practice. This first section draws on data from my research journey with teachers, illustrating my reflections and observations on how I sought to foster this process of teacher and learner autonomy and how the process

developed. Within this process-focused overview, I will portray the sets of processes that characterised the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy in the study. I will firstly illustrate my own experience of the inquiry process portraying the various facets that sustained the conditions for the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy. Teachers' perceptions of their experiences of the process will also be illustrated. This first part of the chapter provides a bird's eye view of the research journey and encapsulates the processes that fed into the overarching question of the study. Following the exploration of the process of inquiry, the second part of this chapter concludes the thesis with a direct focus and overview of the teachers' inquiry against the backdrop of the three research questions (see Section 5.3). I will finally outline limitations of the study and present what I consider to be contributions for the field of teacher and learner autonomy. Implications and future directions for research, practice and policy will be proposed as a result of the study. This chapter furthermore serves to illustrate how the outcomes of the study inform my future research projects within the field of teacher and learner autonomy and FL teaching and learning.

5.2 Reflections on my research journey with teachers

Drawing on my research journal, this section brings together reflections on the research journey I embarked upon to help teachers navigate through their pathways of fostering learner autonomy in their diverse classroom settings. This was the result of a process of collaborative construction of knowledge through inquiry in-and-on practice between myself as researcher and the participant teachers, and the teachers with the learners in the various classes they taught. The findings illustrated in the previous chapter portray the outcomes of

a process that enabled them to 'encourag[e] responsibility, choice, and flexible control, providing opportunities for learning to learn and self-regulation, creating opportunities for cognitive autonomy support, creating opportunities for integration and explicitness, developing intrinsic motivation, accepting and providing for learner differentiation, encouraging action-orientedness, fostering conversational interaction [and] promoting reflective inquiry' (Vieira, 2009b, p. 25). The aforementioned principles characterise underpinnings of pedagogy for autonomy. My analysis of the conditions underpinning the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy in the study led me to the following set of processes:

Table 5.1 Processes of teacher and learner autonomy

i.	A collaborative inquiry-oriented space: a search for understanding through inquiry in-and-on practice within a collaborative social space, which leads to awareness of and competences in creating conditions required for teacher and learner autonomy.
ii.	Prior knowledge, experiences and possibilities: reflecting on, analysing and discussing teacher and learner experiences of practice to uncover and build on teachers' and learners' prior knowledge and readiness for learner autonomy while seeking possibilities within local and specific situations of practice.
iii.	Respect and support pathways and levels of teacher and learner autonomy: help teachers locate ways of how to involve learners in decisions on teaching and learning.

Prior to proceeding to describe the factors underlying the process of inquiry in the study I will briefly discuss the nature of the data generated in relation to issues of trustworthiness of data. In qualitative research such issues are addressed through the terms credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The research design selected for the study incorporated a structure for inquiry that enabled myself and the teachers to develop the understandings required through critical and reflective practice. This

practice was sustained through individual and group meetings held at various stages of inquiry that provided the social space required for all research participants to interact and construct understandings of autonomy while inquiring into the process of fostering it in practice. The focus on the twofold process of inquiry-in and -on practice that spanned across two different phases in the study, enabled myself and the three teachers in the study the time required to work through an exploratory process of inquiry and to critically analyse the outcomes at the different stages of the study. The selection of the interview as a primary research tool further contributed to the trustworthiness of data. The semi structured interview format was utilised to initiate and nurture a process of critical reflection sustained by the research participants through the social interactive environment created in the interview meetings. The outcomes of each stage of inquiry were discussed in the group and individual meetings. This was central to the process of inquiry embarked upon and to the generation of data the study set out to generate.

Questions on issues of transferability in interpretive research draw attention to the 'contextual factors that impinge upon the case' (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). As noted in the methodology section, the study did not aim to make generalisations but rather to depict illustrations of practice related to the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy in the particular contexts of teaching and learning described. The study was committed to providing in-depth detail of the context and factors impacting on the teachers' inquiry in this regard. A further aspect in discourse on the trustworthiness of data in qualitative research relates to the concept of confirmability. As noted in the methodology chapter my position to research was embedded within a social-constructivist view of knowledge. The process of inquiry described in the study may serve as a framework for collaborative research processes

aimed at fostering both teacher and learner autonomy in the field of pedagogy for autonomy (see Section 2.10.1, p. 59). The ontological view of knowledge in the study rests on the concept of knowledge as,

> multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures), and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons […] Constructions are not more or less "true," in any absolute sense, [and] are alterable, as are their associated "realities" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

The participant teachers were able to validate the reports on areas they had discussed and inquired into during the different stages of the study. Central to qualitative methodology and reliability of research outcomes is 'fidelity to real life, context and situation-specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005, p. 120).

Dependability is a further aspect addressed in discourse on trustworthiness of data related to clarity and transparency of the research procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The format adopted and structure created for the process of inquiry in the study is summed up in the methodology section related to research design (see Section 3.3, p. 65; Tables 3.1 and 3.2, pp. 68-69). These sections provide insight into the different stages of the study and tools utilised to inquire into the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy. The principles and concepts underpinning the study are drawn out in the literature review section. The latter served as the theoretical framework for the process of inquiry related to understandings of autonomy, the fostering of teacher autonomy and teacher inquiry. Discussion and analysis of the process follow in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 below. These sections provide an overview of

factors that manifested themselves along the journey and an overview of the processes of inquiry-on-practice (the critical reflective process) and the inquiry-in-practice (exploration of aspects within classroom practice), succinctly illustrated in tables 5.2 (p. 184) and 5.3 (p. 212).

5.2.1 Factors underpinning the process of inquiry with teachers

Drawing on data from my own research diary, the following section provides an overview of a number of aspects interwoven within the aforementioned analysis of the processes of fostering teacher and learner autonomy that emanated from the study. The areas selected portray my reflections on the research journey as well as the teachers' overall perceptions of the process embarked upon. They outline aspects related to teachers' readiness for inquiry into learner autonomy, the unfolding of teachers' prior knowledge and practice on learner autonomy, the nurturing of critical inquiry, the social constructivist space to foster teacher and learner autonomy, the nature of teacher inquiry and the understanding of autonomy not 'as an all or nothing concept'.

i. Teacher readiness for inquiry into learner autonomy

The first major step of the inquiry was that of helping teachers reflect on the notion of learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning. The discussions with teachers in the study tapped into areas related to pedagogy for autonomy in their practice and respected already existing knowledge, competences or skills teachers possessed in this regard. The teachers' disposition to address learners' concerns, ideas and queries through the inquiry and to integrate learner views and propositions about FL learning within the teaching and learning agenda emerged as particularly strong. Reference to learner engagement and learner-centred approaches to

teaching and learning in curriculum documents were latched on to (Ministry of Education, 2015; 2012).

ii. Teachers' reflections on the inquiry process

When asked about their participation in the study, all three teachers remarked that the study did not add any extra burden to their daily classroom practice and they could incorporate it well into their teaching and learning agenda. I was initially concerned with the fact that the teachers would have to set time aside for the study and this was an aspect that I specifically discussed. My aim was to help them integrate the inquiry in their daily classroom practice. Their responses confirmed that they had managed to find a way of conducting their inquiry while following their own agendas and 'working with emerging understandings' (Allwright, 2003, p. 123). This involved them in engaging with a process of inquiry over time where taking action and reflecting on emerging understandings formed part of an interrelated process. This aspect was central to our discussions on how 'taking action [would] not necessarily [be] the starting point' but rather a result of a process founded on an inquiry-based attitude in class (Allwright, 2003, p. 121). This was central to the design of an inquiry process that sought to pave the way for collaborative inquiry to be able to foster the teachers' own autonomy.

iii. Unfolding teachers' prior knowledge and practice on learner autonomy in foreign language pedagogy

My role was to help teachers detect areas within their daily practice that sustained learner autonomy and to critically analyse such practice in relation to helping learners learn the FL effectively. During the inquiry I sought to help teachers note the benefits of autonomy

displayed by learners in their classrooms and to inquire further into how they may be able to nurture such competences with other learners.

iv. Nurturing critical reflection and inquiry

Most encouraging was the fact that teachers readily engaged in reflection and critical analysis of their daily practice in relation to effective FL teaching and learning and shared experiences from their daily practice related to the inquiry. The individual and group meetings with teachers created the space required for critical reflection and inquiry in this regard. The discussions held during these meetings were fundamental in helping teachers reflect on areas in their practice which complied with or contradicted such principles.

v. A social constructivist space to foster teacher and learner autonomy

One of the main aspects that I considered crucial was the setting up of a process that would be able to sustain a social constructivist space of interaction to support the process of inquiry with teachers. Discussions initiated in individual meetings, gained a wider audience during group meetings with the other teachers taking part in the study helping them define areas to inquire into and gain understandings of. They were instrumental in helping the teachers direct their pedagogical inquiry and sustained the process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy. 'The promotion of teacher autonomy requires that teachers are directly involved in the (de/re)construction of professional knowledge' (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 83). The individual and group meetings sustained the teachers' autonomy through the interdependent nature of autonomy and the misconception that autonomy implies learning

on one's own (Little, 2007b). The changes in teaching and learning as a result of the teachers' inquiry professed the idea of learning as 'a process which takes place in a participation framework, [rather than] in an individual mind', and pointed at the benefits of inquiry into the 'kinds of social arrangements which provide the proper context for learning to take place' (Hanks 1991, p. 15). In this way I set about creating a space that sought,

> a partnership [within] a collegial learning environment, […] conducive to independent/interdependent learning [and] the development of the ability to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in a constructive way [involving] the willingness to take responsibility for one's conduct in a social context (O'Leary, 2014, p. 21).

The process of teacher inquiry was an experience that offered teachers the support required through a process of 'discursive interaction with others who understand its meaning' (Mascolo, 2009, p. 10). I considered the process of co-construction of meaning, knowledge and understanding between myself and the teachers in the individual and group meetings as 'autonomy-enabling' (Toohey, 2007, p. 232). It was furthermore founded upon processes that portrayed 'the human ability to act through mediation' (Lantolf, 2013, p. 19).

vi. The nature of teacher inquiry

The inquiry process clearly indicated that teachers did not require any kind of induction through top-down processes into the field of pedagogy for autonomy since they already possessed a 'language to talk about their own profession' in this regard (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 84). What the study maintained was the need for a process that critically enabled them to look into how their own practice may constrain or create possibilities for the fostering of learner autonomy and supported teacher readiness in that regard. Central to this process was the fact that rather than relying on 'conceptual knowledge' alone they would be

involved in 'practice-on-inquiry' (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 38). The teaching and learning community established through the inquiry process with teachers and learners provided 'multiple perspectives [and] powerful tools for understanding learner learning in classroom settings' (Borko, 2004, p. 4). This led to the teachers' realisation that, 'yes, one has to admit that some things in one's previous way of working need to be changed and that is a good thing' (May, Interview, April 2014).

vii. Understanding varying and shifting capacities for autonomy

One of my main concerns was to help teachers steer away from the idea of autonomy as a process of 'progression from heterenomy to autonomy' (Schmenk, 2006, p. 87). Understandings of autonomy as a developmental process projected the notion of a non-linear continuum as teachers constantly sought ways to discuss and negotiate the process of teaching and learning in relation to learners' divergent learning needs, attitudes and behaviours in learning. This was an area brought to the fore in discussions with teachers on the nature of autonomy, challenging the idea of autonomy as 'an absolute concept […] a continuum in which different degrees of self-management and self-regulation are possible at different moments and in diverse aspects of learning' (Jiménez Raya, 2009, p. 3). This notion was raised at various points during the study while teachers revealed their concern on the levels of support required by diverse learners in class. This is also reflected in the evidence of constantly varying and shifting capacities and practices of autonomy amongst the learners, as evidenced by the data presented in chapter four.

5.2.2 Overview of the process of inquiry

This section concludes this first part of the chapter and synthesises the areas that characterised the process of inquiry and that fed into the overarching research question of the study. The process that evolved during the study illustrated the iterative nature of the process of inquiry in terms of discussion, reflection, analysis, and practice. It portrayed a process that enabled teachers to locate their own ways of fostering learner autonomy impelled by emerging themes from classroom inquiry. The iterative process of reflection and inquiry into practice hinged on the interactions with and amongst participants; the teachers and myself, teachers amongst themselves, and teachers with learners. The discussions during group meetings helped teachers understand that fostering autonomy does not follow a definite set of criteria and may best be envisaged as a process which may best be coined as 'pedagogy of experience' (Vieira, 2010, p. 14). The following table illustrates aspects that evolved from the journey of inquiry in relation to the processes of inquiry-on-practice (the critical reflective process) and the inquiry-in-practice (exploration of aspects within classroom practice). While presented separately as a twofold process, both areas were inherently interrelated. The table below provides an overview of the outcomes of the process that fuelled the journey between myself as researcher, the teachers, individually, and within the group, and of the teachers with the learners.

Table 5.2

Fostering teacher and learner autonomy through inquiry in-and-on practice
- Raising awareness and unveiling teacher understandings of foreign language teaching and learning and principles of teacher and learner autonomy - Enabling teachers to express and develop own understandings of how the concept relates to the teaching of foreign language teaching and learning - Discussing principles related to language teaching and learning hinging on the social interactive process of language learning and locating the role of learner autonomy within such a process - Problematising the social and individual dimensions of learning and experiences with different learners in class in relation to the role of the learner within such a process - Evaluation of locus of teacher and learner control over the process of FL learning - Linking the process of learning to the broader contexts which impact on it: Notions of responsibility and control over the learning process in view of a holistic educational learning experience - Tapping into and critically reflecting on levels of readiness to teacher and learner autonomy and control over content and process of learning
i. The process of inquiry in group and individual meetings - Facilitating reflection on learner engagement and control over learning for both in-and out-of-class learning. - Latching on to situations related to learner autonomy in teachers' daily practice - Critical reflection and sharing of experiences in relation to possibilities for inquiry and constraints that present themselves during the process of inquiry
ii. Classroom inquiry: the teacher's role - Addressing aspects in classroom practice in view of principles critically reflected upon - Involving learners in the inquiry process in view of areas problematised and helping them address areas they themselves wish to address - Sensitising oneself to learner levels of autonomy and support required to help them engage in autonomous language learning and language use - Looking into ways of countering constraints and seeking possibilities in this regard - Looking into the impact of one's actions on learners' autonomy for both in- and out-of-class learning

5.3 Fostering learner autonomy through teacher inquiry: insight from the research questions

The next sections focus specifically on the outcomes of the teachers' inquiry in-and-on practice and present a summary of findings that enabled me to address the three research questions of the study regarding areas teachers problematized and understandings they gained, aspects they deemed conducive to foreign language teaching and learning, and constraints and possibilities encountered during the process of inquiry.

5.3.1 Research question 1: what aspects of teaching and learning did teachers problematise during the course of the inquiry in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy and what understandings were gained?

This first research question looks into aspects the three teachers problematised in their practice and which they inquired into during the study, thereby gaining deeper understanding. Through current and past situations of practice, in discussion with myself and the other participant teachers, they analysed issues and factors prevalent in their practice and raised issues related to their own learners and contexts of teaching and learning in their diverse FL classrooms. Based on the areas that teachers initially found problematic, the following summary reveals the ways in which their inquiries afforded deeper understanding of these issues.

5.3.1.1 Shifting responsibility from teaching to learning

A major aspect the three teachers problematised was the need to relinquish control over learning and entrust learners with the responsibility to 'play an active role in their own learning' (Nunan, 1988, p. 2). This prompted them to consider the shift in approach this

incurred in practice and to detect ways of involving and negotiating aspects of teaching and learning with their learners in class. They considered ways of entrusting the learners with responsibility regarding decisions on process of content of learning and on how such a process led to empowerment in learning. The focus on this process led them to alter their 'presentation-practice-production approach' (Criado, 2013) that resulted in learners assuming responsibility for meaning-making and construction of language through tasks that were formerly teacher-led. Inherent to the success of such a scenario was the sense of responsibility required and displayed by learners within the teaching and learning processes. As one of the teachers affirmed, learners were made well aware of the duties expected of them in class; 'they know that I am not one who makes them necessarily do what I say, however this does not mean that they can opt not to learn or do as they please' (Ben, Interview, April 2013).

i. The notion of trust

A major issue that emerged from the teachers' reflections and analysis of practice in relation to the fostering of learner autonomy related to the notion of trust. Teachers noted that the notion of trust in the learners' capacities in learning was central to the shift in responsibility from teaching to learning (Breen & Mann, 1997). Enabling control over learning was a result of the trust placed in learners to engage in their learning through an autonomy-enabling and supportive teaching and learning environment. This helped learners build confidence in their capabilities as learners in the foreign language classroom and at school in general. It entailed working in a symbiotic relationship of trust with the learners, negotiating and testing the grounds for learning.

ii. Participation, collaboration and risk taking

Through discussion and reflection on how to help learners venture from teacher dependence in the foreign language classroom teachers noted the culture of dependence learners were accustomed to within the educational setting. This led teachers to discuss participation in learning through collaboration with others and the need to allow learners to take risks in learning. Getting the learners to do the learning, as one of the teachers described the process, required teachers to enable learners to involve themselves in the co-construction of language and in meaning-making tasks. Getting them to participate in learning and in the use of language entailed a degree of risk taking on their part integral to the process of language learning and language use. Learners at various language competence levels contributed, in the Vygotskian sense, as more knowledgeable others to the teaching and learning in different ways in class (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners who stood on the fast lane of the autonomy continuum were furthermore able to participate in learning through the creation of their own material and to share this with peers in class.

5.3.1.2 Addressing levels of autonomy and diverse learning needs

The three teachers discussed the diverse teaching and learning scenarios where levels of autonomy varied and were impacted upon by language competence and motivation for learning. The inquiry reflected the struggle of working with learners who displayed passive and disengaged attitudes to learning. Such factors were prevalent within mixed-ability group settings and proved more challenging in streamed classroom scenarios. The process of fostering learner autonomy emerged as that kind of process that nourished and sustained learners' efforts to learn and that incurred the 'ability to understand the learners' needs and

the ability to support them in developing their autonomy' (Reinders & Balcicanli, 2011, p. 17). Teachers helped weaker learners identify areas to focus on and to gain support for learning within and beyond lesson time by latching on to the support available to them through peers, teacher as well as resources for learning. They created the space required for independent learners to undertake their own approaches to learning and developed awareness of the fact that learners cannot be kept at the receiving end if they are to grow as language learners and language users.

5.3.1.3 Addressing the content and process of learning

Central to a process that sought to accommodate the teaching and learning agenda to the learners' needs, motivation and interests was the creation of an environment that enabled learners to find their way around the content and process of learning. The teachers' inquiry led teachers to focus on how to help learners make informed choices in learning and to attend to the learners' voices to gain insight into how to best engage them in such a process. The dialogic process with learners on the teaching and learning agenda enabled them to gain immediate feedback on learner needs and to support learners in the planning of learning tasks. This helped them become aware of the need to allocate time to expand on learners' ideas in a collaborative teaching and learning environment. In the two sections below I will address two of the main issues that emerged in this regard, namely the question of choice in teaching and learning and the allocation of time required for learners to gain the support required.

i. Helping learners make decisions and choices in learning

Learners were guided to reflect on their learning paths and to engage in decisions on FL learning, a process that raised teachers' awareness that learners 'need a great deal of preparation and support before they are comfortable with and able to assume greater responsibility for their learning' (Reinders, 2010, p. 42). Moreoever, such a process brought about the realisation that this process did not simply entail offering learners opportunities for 'freedom of action and choice', but also entailed providing learners with 'explicit examples of strategic behaviours necessary to carry out complex learning tasks' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 61).

ii. Allocation of time for task planning, selection of supportive material for learning, and to listen to learner voices

Teachers noted that learners readily engaged in tasks that enabled them to learn independently. They remarked however that apart from providing learners access to learning material one needs to allocate time and space for engagement in the planning of learning tasks to help learners take control of their learning. Teachers helped learners brainstorm ideas and helped them set, monitor and reach learning outcomes to sustain autonomous learning competences and also considered the space learners required in class to seek support to prepare and accomplish tasks set. The process led them to listen to the learners' voices since 'the realisation that learners approach learning tasks in different ways […] led to an interest in what learners themselves have to say about their learning' (Reinders, 2010, p. 42). It furthermore brought about the realisation of the need to select appropriate material and tasks that are related to the learners' level of competence and that offer space for collaboration and choice in learning.

5.3.2 Research question 2: which aspects of the process of fostering learner autonomy did teachers consider to be most conducive to foreign language teaching and learning during the course of inquiry?

The findings of this research question provided insight into the benefits of a process that fostered learner autonomy and FL learning gains. Aspects conducive to FL learning indicated that 'learners need to exert control over both their learning environment and their own learning process' to become effective language learners (Raya, Lamb, Vieira, 2007, p. 61).

5.3.2.1 Classroom interaction and interdependence in learning: supporting the process of learning

The inquiry reflected an array of interactions within the approaches adopted by teachers in class, and the benefits such interactions afford, portraying elements of 'the acquisition rich classroom' (van Patten, 2008). The inquiry led learners to prod each other on and to engage in peer teaching, sharing and inquiring into aspects of language and contributing to the teaching and learning process in class. Such characteristics, depicted through the findings, pointed at the interdependent nature of the teaching and learning experience that ensued from the direct focus on pedagogy for autonomy and FL teaching and learning (Lamb, 2008). The notion of support and interdependence was a central aspect that emerged within discussions on benefits of the inquiry process in relation to approaches that fostered learner autonomy that may be linked to the Vygotskian notion of the zone of proximal development (Lantolf, 2013). The process of inquiry was indicative of the fact that to help learners develop their language competences teachers did not simply provide adequate learning material and resources for learning but rather, and predominantly, facilitated the conditions within which that learning was supported and sustained (Reinders, 2010). This entailed negotiation of the process of learning that helped teachers gain insight into the support required by learners in

this regard. Lack of proactivity in learning was noted when such support was lacking even after learners had discussed and brought forth their own creative ideas.

5.3.2.2 Classroom interaction and metalinguistic competences

Fostering autonomy proved beneficial in terms of the spaces created for the development of metalinguistic competences. The affordances from interactions in class between teacher and learners, and learners amongst themselves, contributed to the richness of the teaching and learning environment. While engaged in classroom interaction learners were able to discuss linguistic concepts and raise their level of language awareness that led to 'internalisation' of language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 203). Furthermore, such situations led to natural and authentic language use and reflected a process whereby learners worked with language meaningfully. This depicted learners' ability to intervene and direct their own process of learning and that of their peers through metalinguistic talk. Most significant in this regard was the contribution of learners who were normally not compliant with a pen and paper approach to teaching and learning.

Dialogic interaction with learners formed part of the teaching and learning approach employed by all three teachers at various degrees during their inquiry with learners in class. As Ben stated, this helped him build the lesson with the learners. Learners' contributions were integrated in the lessons as a result of the dialogic interactions between teachers and learners. Moreover, it was a tool that was used to focus weaker learners' attention on the recapitulation of language addressed in former lessons that required learners to engage interactively in the process of learning and raise their awareness on various linguistic aspects. Learning gains were evident as teachers inquired into their learners' ability to retrieve and

use newly learned language in future lessons. Learners in the diverse classrooms shared their knowledge by referring back to examples and tasks from previous lessons and were able to clarify aspects related to themes they had discussed and tasks they had worked on. The findings portrayed 'the socially mediated nature of […] development [on] individual language learner[s]' (Kehrwald, 2013, p. 93). From a social constructivist perspective they indicated that fostering learner autonomy led teachers to engage in dialogue that sustained the 'social interrelations' and 'forms of interactions in which autonomy […] develop[ed] and flourish[ed]' (Zembylas & Lamb, 2008). This entailed helping learners focus on the learning process and raising their awareness on 'learning how to learn' as well as developing the 'capacity to reflect on and verbalise own learning through *metalearning* activities in order to improve their learning effectiveness' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p.60). This capacity to engage in dialogic interaction with learners was vital within the approaches adopted by teachers in view of the need to help learners find ways to learn effectively and sustained possibilities for transformation of learner behaviour towards autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning. Teachers were in this way able to work towards the 'vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation' (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 2).

5.3.2.3 Control over learning, construction of meaning and motivation for learning

The reference to the notion of control was an indicator of learner autonomy, 'present within a range of observable behaviours that we readily associate with autonomous learning behaviour' (Benson, 2010, p. 79). Learners were able to select or create own material for learning, to engage in tasks with peers in class to construct meaning and to use of the

language. Control over learning was evident as learners explained what they planned to work on and presented their outcomes to the rest of the class through various tasks. In the process teachers gained awareness that learners were able to work out things for themselves and to grasp underlying concepts on language and language use. It was now more likely that learners, who normally assumed a laid-back attitude in class, would engage and motivate themselves in learning, through the possibility they were offered to construct meaning themselves. Teachers observed the need to provide time and space in class for feedback throughout the different stages of planning of such activities for learners who required more structured support. Their interventions proved central in helping learners plan and reach negotiated or self-defined learning outcomes and to show them how to work at their level of language competence.

5.3.2.4 Integrating in- and out-of-class learning, independent selection of tasks for learning and self-direction in learning

The process of learning did not solely focus on learning as an activity related to the confines of the classroom walls and led teachers to integrate self-directed practice and out-of-class learning to help learners address their learning needs. Teachers enabled learners to work on diverse language competences through resources made available for homework use and others that they were encouraged to create or to select themselves. The integration of self-directed programmes with the classroom agenda helped learners expand on their learning while providing them with the feedback and support required within the classroom community. Learners required support to learn, in as much as they at times required

independence to construct their own understandings while engaged in processes of learning that enabled them to work flexibly at their own pace.

5.3.2.5 Summative assessment gains

Both the good and the weaker language learners in Juliette's Form 4 class obtained better marks following the negotiation of a programme of learning between teacher and learners to address their need of developing their listening competences. Juliette maintained that the increase in marks by learners was due to the responsibilities the learners assumed for independent and self-directed out-of-class learning, which resulted in clear summative assessment gains. Teachers maintained that an autonomy-enabling classroom environment helped weaker learners gain better summative results in classroom tests as well in school examinations even if not at the level of the better language learners.

5.3.3 Research question 3: what constraints and possibilities for the fostering of learner autonomy in the FL classroom did teachers encounter within the process of inquiry?

In as much as teachers displayed readiness for teacher and learner autonomy in the FL classroom, they also envisaged a number of constraints in relation to fostering learner autonomy. The search for possibilities to counter constraints while helping learners develop their autonomy as FL learners and language users is inherent to a teaching and learning approach grounded within pedagogy for autonomy (Trebbi, 2008). This research question looked into external and internal constraints within such a process and how teachers gained insight into 'the impact of such constraints on the facilitation of learners' learning' (Lamb,

2008, p. 275). This was vital in a process where findings depicted that constraints deprived the language learner's 'right to autonomy' and that possibilities sought helped teachers counter the constraints 'that inhibit[ed] the exercise of this right' (Jing, 2006, p. 39). External constraints relate to aspects concerning the educational context, such as curricula and examinations, while internal constraints refer to beliefs on teaching and learning (Trebbi, 2008).

5.3.3.1 External constraints

The constraints that teachers commented upon in the study reflected observations on external constraints on autonomy in relation to backwash of examinations and curricula, the traditional system of schooling, the impact of a system based on summative assessment, illustrating that 'autonomy goes against the dominating school culture' (Trebbi & Barfield, 2009, p. 11). It furthermore denotes that the Maltese educational system, as many '[e]ducational systems in many societies put[s] constraints on the teacher and learner' (Trebbi, 2008, p. 36). A further constraining factor that teachers in the study commented upon related to unsupportive family backgrounds.

i. Backwash of examinations: curriculum race against time and attitudes towards learning

One of the major areas addressed in the inquiry was the impact of school examinations on the teaching and learning process. The inquiry process helped teachers reflect on the negative impact of the exam-controlled system on teaching and learning. It depicted how the weaker learners' attitude and disposition towards learning clashed with a culture of schooling based

predominantly on summative assessment. Teachers noted the dilution of teaching and learning experiences and lack of flexibility in the classroom agenda at the expense of tasks that learners deemed as more enjoyable for learning. The inquiry process threw light on the fact that summative assessment as the sole indicator of learner performance in the language may be viewed as a major 'institutional constraint' of developmental learning and of learner autonomy (Benson, 2000, p. 116). Such constraints concurred with literature maintaining that '[i]nstitutional factors such as a fixed curriculum were also seen to limit learner autonomy' (Borg & Al-Bushaidi, 2012, p. 2). Teachers noted that within a system resting predominantly on summative assessment, efforts and competences gained by weaker learners were threatened by the onset of examinations halfway throughout the scholastic year and at the very end of it. Preparation for examinations ranked high on each teacher's agenda and raised levels of anxiety in terms of expected outcomes in view of content specified for the particular year group and the actual level the learners were capable of working at.

ii. Traditional system of schooling

Teachers noted that learners' reliance on teacher direction and spoon feeding were prevalent within a system that produced complacent attitudes towards learning. They reflected on the need for approaches to teaching and learning that instigated reflective attitudes and nourished critical thinking. The lack of challenge and risk-taking in the traditional lesson format constrained learners' ability to develop and learn autonomously. The lack of internet facilities and access to technological tools in class also constrained the type of tasks that learners could work on in class.

iii. Unsupportive family backgrounds

Reflection on learners' negative approach towards learning transpired through the ingrained beliefs and dispositions for learning that learners brought to class. Teachers were particularly sensitive to issues which prevented such learners from adapting to classroom life, portraying their awareness that learner 'behaviours are socially conditioned or constrained' (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p. 8). While constantly challenged by the daily struggle of lack of motivation and responsibility for learning, Ben was greatly perturbed by the fact that a number of learners were deemed as failures of the system, due to their low academic performance and achievement at school. Ben stated that these learners clashed with the school culture and that their socio cultural background continued to impact on their learning.

5.3.3.2 Internal constraints

This section addresses internal constraints that teachers encountered during the process of inquiry with learners during the study related to lack of responsibility for learning, passive attitudes and negative self-perceptions in learning, lack of engagement and commitment to out-of-class learning, lack of responsibility to set and follow learning agendas as well as lack of respect for the autonomy of others, lack of cross-linguistic knowledge and conceptual knowledge.

i. Lack of responsibility and commitment to in- and out-of-class learning agendas

One of the main areas that the process helped teachers reflect upon was the issue of lack of responsibility for learning and the need to make learners aware of their duties as learners,

and in relation to their education in general. Observations were made in relation to learners' lack of readiness to engage in out-of-class learning in order to gain additional exposure to the target language and learners' insufficient use of resources made available to them for out-of-class learning. The findings illustrate that the success of each situation for learning hinged on the responsibility learners willingly assumed within each particular task or activity.

ii. Passive attitudes and negative self-perceptions in learning

Learners' negative perspectives on learning were linked to their low self-esteem and their 'socialisation into a school culture that still favours transmissive approaches' to teaching and learning (Vieira & Moreira, 2008, p. 266). Teachers persisted with the task of scaffolding learners' pathways beyond teaching and learning schedules to help learners understand the need to assume responsibility for language learning and their education in general. They sought to instil confidence in their abilities as learners and to raise their awareness of engaging in their responsibilities in the FL classroom as well as in school in general.

iii. Lack of respect for the autonomy of others

As the study unfolded the teachers' role as educators was constantly brought to the fore as they sought to create a teaching and learning environment within which learners were expected to respect the autonomy of others in class and to learn to accept diverse competence levels and ways of working in class. The teachers maintained that this was one of the challenges of daily practice.

iv. Lack of knowledge: linguistic and general knowledge

Concerns on cross linguistic knowledge and general knowledge about concepts and themes discussed in class were raised by all three teachers in the study. At various instances teachers reported that learners were not able to brainstorm ideas on themes, understand conceptual ideas of linguistic terms and struggled to accept linguistic variance across languages. Lack of exposure and engagement in activities and tasks beyond lesson time were perceived as a deterrent to language learner development in this regard. The process of inquiry into learner autonomy furthermore helped teachers reflect on the relationship between knowledge related to linguistic aspects in the mother tongue and learners' linguistic skills.

5.3.3.3 The search for possibilities to counter constraints

It was through this search for possibilities that the three teachers empowered themselves within the pedagogical journey of fostering learner autonomy. The findings indicated that the process teachers embarked upon through the inquiry reflected situations of teaching and learning that featured autonomy as an attribute worth striving for.

i. Negotiating and flexibly working around the teaching and learning agenda: listening to learner voices

The inquiry led teachers to consider ways of how learners approached FL learning and to negotiate aspects of both in- and out-of-class learning. This helped them gain understandings of 'learners' attitudes to learning and their ability to manage the learning process' (Reinders & Löwen, 2013, p. 7). Rather than restricting learners to follow pre-determined tasks set on a one-size-fits-all approach, teachers respected learners' needs, interests and motivation for

learning and flexibly modified their teaching and learning agenda. Creating space to listen to learners' voices enabled teachers to help learners express learning requirements and preferred modes of learning and tap into areas to work on. They were better able to help learners problematise areas in their learning. They discussed and helped learners plan tasks that helped them address gaps in their learning.

ii. Linking in- and out-of-class learning and expanding on lesson time: building confidence in language learning and language use

Teachers gained awareness of the support required by learners to improve their language competence levels and helped learners combine in- and out-of-class learning activities. Discussions held with the learners in class exposed the support they required on tasks that enhanced their skills while engaged in learning individually or with their peers. Lessons in class were planned to include feedback on work conducted by learners in self-directed learning. The programmes of learning which integrated in- and out-of-class listening tasks, the work on dialogue building activities, the revision material sent to learners, the uploading of learners' work on the class website and the online FL learning links and tasks were fine examples of such a process. Learners readily assumed control of tasks entrusted to them, although at times requiring support in the process, reinforcing the view that one needs 'to stop teaching learners' to enable them to get on with their learning (Sturtridge, 1997, p. 71). The teaching and learning environment sustained individual capabilities within classroom and out-of-class learning, helped learners progress with their learning and build confidence in language learning and language use.

iii. Respecting, supporting and enhancing different levels of autonomy

Teachers recognised the benefits of tapping into and supporting learners' autonomous learning capabilities to help them work at levels that they were able to master and noted that this raised confidence in learning. Teachers noted that learners were at times not able to assume the responsibility they were entrusted with and were only able to progress when the learners obtained the individual support required. This process enabled learners to obtain the skills required to develop confidence in learning, as in the case of learners working on the programme for listening in Juliette's class and that of the learner who struggled on with homework tasks, confident that the teacher would support his efforts and help him master tasks set. Through their support, teachers helped learners gain confidence to work at their own pace and self-direct their learning, reduced anxiety levels during classroom or summative tasks and enhanced their FL learning competences. Such a process benefited both the better and weaker learners. Understanding the need for various levels of support in learning and independence in learning was an aspect teachers became increasingly aware of.

5.3.3.4 Synthesis of findings related to the three research questions

The previous sections drew together the findings of the three research questions in relation to the themes discussed and the areas that teachers problematised within the journey of inquiry into the fostering of learner autonomy, the understandings they gained, the aspects most conducive to learning, the constraints encountered and the possibilities sought. The research questions encompassed aspects that were interrelated in nature. Similar themes have emerged in the analysis and portray different ways of viewing the theme. The process of inquiry was not one that demanded a chronological order of investigation according to a

set order of criteria. This was rather a process that was more dynamic in nature and the emerging themes, at times one and the same, were addressed from different perspectives. Hence, the inquiry process did not necessarily search for a point of departure in terms of problematisation as a first step towards reflection and action taking (Allwright, 2003). The findings related to the questions were presented separately, however the recurring themes were invariably addressed through the facets of the three research questions. To elucidate this point further one may note how the theme related to learner voices illustrated in research question three, in the section on possibilities sought, emerged as a sub-theme in research question one within the discussion on aspects problematised by teachers in relation to how to involve learners in decisions on learning. It furthermore emerged as an underlying notion within the section on classroom interaction and metalinguistic talk in research question two. The research questions hence provided a different way of viewing the issue, revisited the themes from different perspectives. The illustrations of practice presented in the findings reflect the multi-layered perspectives and the multifaceted ways of how the themes in question were addressed.

5.4 Strengths and limitations of the study

The study benefited from a research approach that enabled participant teachers to explore and direct their own inquiries into the fostering of learner autonomy and seek understandings of areas inquired into. The study fostered teacher and learner autonomy by creating the conditions required for teachers to take charge of their own inquiries. This process was one that enabled them to meet and discuss within a collaborative environment where all participants were able to share and discuss aspects related to the study both individually and

within a group environment. As noted by Vieira & Barbosa, 'it seems reasonable to assume that collaborative networks can greatly enhance critical reflection and action towards challenging dominant traditions and finding alternative routes (Vieira & Barbosa, 2009, p. 161). The study furthermore embraced the underlying tenets of pedagogy for autonomy since it enabled teachers to embed the micro decisions in localised and specific situations of practice within a macro level perspective that attended to the concept of autonomy as an educational aim and a prerequisite of FL learning. The discussions and reflections with the other research participants, and the inquiry with the learners in their classrooms, helped teachers uncover the forces that impacted on classroom learning.

I was well aware of not being able to support my data through classroom observations, however the data gathered in the form of ex post facto research was not only related to examples of practice from teachers' inquiries in class but also to the search for understandings into such a process. Teachers were asked for detailed accounts of what such a process involved in terms of situations of practice, the context of teaching and learning and the learners involved in the process. They were made aware that this was not an all-or-nothing process and were encouraged to voice their concerns and to illustrate factors that ran counter to the process they were seeking to promote with their learners in class. The research would have benefited from more frequent group meetings to nourish the collaborative reflective space. This was problematic in practice due to the fact that teachers were not based at the same school and had full teaching loads. Moreover, the fact that teachers were allocated freedom and flexibility in between meetings to individually inquire with their learners and explore the process of fostering learner autonomy was in itself a strength of the study.

One further aspect concerns the fact that I conducted the study with three teachers who were willing to participate. Originally I had asked yet another teacher but she did not accept to take part in a study that involved her own direct participation through discussions and meetings. This teacher was apprehensive of the fact that the study would entail having to discuss her daily practice and she did not feel confident to commit herself as participant. While working with teachers, who gave consent to participating in the study, indicated their readiness for autonomy, this very same factor posed a limitation in terms of how this would work with other teachers. The very same process might have taken other routes had it been conducted with teachers who were less open to the fostering of such a process. One final remark regards the teachers' overall perceptions of the study. Although the teachers' perceptions regarding the study were discussed during a number of individual and group meetings, the study would have benefited from time allocated within each meeting to discuss their overall perceptions on this process. The time available was however mainly allocated to discussion of their own inquiry with learners in relation to the main research questions of the study.

5.5 Implications and recommendations for policy and practice in foreign language teaching and learning in the Maltese context

This section looks into how issues and factors emanating from the study may inform policy and practice with regard to the need to foster teacher and learner autonomy in the Maltese secondary school context. It addresses the shift required from teaching to learning in FL classrooms and indicates how teachers' readiness may be gained through a process that instigates critical reflection and action through collaborative inquiry between teachers, learners and researchers. The study attests to the need for structures that may be able to

reach larger groups of teachers within various FL departments and provide the framework for continuous professional development, addressing the change required in the Maltese context in this regard.

As attested through the findings, teachers themselves require the freedom to be able to navigate autonomously through their pedagogical inquiries with learners in class. This demands that they are able to work flexibly with curriculum, resources and material for learning rather than with pre-defined and set curriculum plans. Such a process enables teachers to explore a process that enables learners to gain control over learning and seek understandings of the underpinnings of such a process. This calls for processes that enable teachers to 'share experiences, and work collaboratively towards educational change' (Vieira & Barbosa, 2009, p. 161). This is an approach that prompts FL teachers to critically look into their practice and problematise it in the context of the wider aims of education.

This discussion builds a case for inquiry in-and-on practice through the lens of pedagogy for autonomy within and across FL departments. It is in this way that one may be able to move away from teacher-controlled practices in the Maltese educational and FL teaching and learning scenario. Placing such processes as the foundation of practice contributed to the assembling of the puzzle in search of understanding (Allwright, 2005), and to a 'more rational, just and satisfactory' pedagogical process in the local Maltese setting (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007, p. 51). In this way 'each [teacher] becomes part of a community of inquiry where new points of departure for personal growth are collectively construed' (Vieira, 2007, p. 163). This requires consideration of structures that enable inquiry into practice 'on an on-going basis for a wider group of teachers' (Young, Hafner & Fisher, 2007, p. 207). The study indicates

how the locus of control in FL pedagogy may be shifted back into the teachers' hands through teacher involvement in inquiry processes.

The need to help teachers shape pedagogical approaches in the FL classrooms and to inquire into and address issues that impact on the quality of classroom practice in relation to language learning and language use is fundamental to FL learning gains. It is in this way that curricular reform in FL teaching and learning may be enacted and sustained, enabling teachers to address constraints related to the backwash of examinations and lack of responsibility for learning amongst others. Furthermore, the study indicates the need to help teachers address issues related to the impact of examinations on the teaching and learning process and the benefits of creating a teaching and learning environment that focuses on the process of learning rather than one where the major concern lies solely on the end product. As the inquiry with teachers indicates, teachers need to look into ways of how to help learners engage in the process of learning to counteract the negative impact of summative assessment and to utilise the learning process itself as a means towards more formative types of assessment. The multiple ways through which teachers and learners obtained and shared feedback on learning points at existing possibilities for self-directed, teacher or peer-led forms of assessment through a pedagogy that centres teaching on learning.

The focus on the link between in- and out-of-class learning emerges as instrumental to the development of foreign language skills and competences in this regard. Programmes of learning in the foreign language classroom need to acknowledge varied ways of learning, that move beyond tasks stipulated and set by the teacher. Opportunities for learning ought to be grounded within an approach that offers choice in learning and that enable learners to self-direct their learning according to their own pace, motivations and interests and help them

locate preferred ways of working. It is in this way that language learning may be transposed from a classroom activity to one that embraces opportunities for language learning and language use beyond the boundaries of the classroom walls. Merging out-of-class learning with the classroom agenda is one way of helping learners bridge this gap while offering learners the support required to work at their own pace and level of language competence.

5.6 Future directions for research on practice that foster teacher and learner autonomy in Malta

The role of the teacher has emerged as vital within an approach that acknowledges the benefits of learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning. Research in the Maltese context needs to address the fact that the shift from teaching to learning, propagated in curriculum and policy documents, requires teachers to seek ways of fostering learner autonomy to help learners engage effectively in and gain control of the FL learning process.

- The study purports the need to invite teachers to engage in inquiry into the benefits of the construct of autonomy on the 'cognitive, linguistic, affective and sociocultural aspects of learning' (Van Patten, 1993, p. 435). It is in this way that teachers' skills and competences in the teaching of foreign languages may be collectively nurtured and developed. This furthermore serves to help teachers critically analyse their beliefs and approaches in FL teaching and learning and to evaluate their impact on practice.

- The study furthermore indicates the need to help teachers raise levels of learner engagement, motivation and FL competence through a collaborative inquiry-oriented approach to teaching and learning that enables them to construct, share and build

knowledge, skills and competences on FL teaching and learning in their contexts of teaching and learning.

- It sustains the need for a co-ordinated structure of systematic inquiry in-and-on practice across foreign language departments on a national level to nurture teacher and learner autonomy and the skills and competences required by FL teachers to sustain pedagogical processes in this regard.

- In this vein, the study points at the need to furthermore explore how teachers may be able to create a collaborative teaching and learning environment with their learners in class that enables learners to actively engage in their learning and take control of the learning process.

- Illustrations of practice that provide further insight into the factors at play within the process of fostering learner autonomy in Maltese secondary school FL classrooms may be collated through collective research efforts, illustrating emerging possibilities for practice and constraints on autonomy within the Maltese context.

Furthermore, the study informs my future research and serves as a platform for my work in teacher development within my present role of support, design and implementation of curriculum, with teachers on a national level. In the light of these observations I am in the process of:

- working with all teachers of German as a foreign language, in cluster groups and individually within all Colleges in Malta to gain ownership of teaching and learning programmes and help them transition from text-book led and directed approaches to

FL teaching and learning to more open forms of pedagogy that sustain active learner engagement and participation in the learning process. This includes the design of new forms of assessment for teaching and learning that enables learners to self-direct their learning and to help gauge their progress in learning.

- supporting teachers to locate, analyse, design and compile material and resources for in- and out-of-class learning that enable learners to self-direct their learning and address their needs, motivations, interests, skills and competences in the foreign language.

- exploring possibilities for learner autonomy with all teachers in the state school sector along principles and the framework of inquiry that emanated from the study. A systematic structure for collaborative inquiry into the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning may be sustained through cluster groups and individual meetings with teachers on a national level.

5.7 Contribution to research on teacher and learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom

The outcomes of the study reflected the four macro competences of pedagogy for autonomy which entail, '[d]eveloping a critical view of (language) education', '[m]anaging local constraints so as to open spaces for manoeuvre', '[c]entring teaching on learning', and '[i]nteracting with others in the professional community' (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2011, p. 6). In this way, the study:

- adds to the existing body of literature, illustrating a process of critical inquiry in FL teaching and learning that enabled teachers of German as a foreign language to seek understandings of the process of fostering learner autonomy in Maltese secondary school classrooms.
- illustrates the underpinnings of a process that enhanced teacher and learner autonomy through teacher inquiry within a collaborative yet individualised setting.
- provides insight into possibilities sought to counter constraints in FL classrooms within the Maltese educational context depicting illustrations of practice from within localised scenarios of practice.
- conveys how the collaborative nature of the inquiry between myself, the teachers and the learners was facilitated through what may be coined 'a twofold process of inquiry', namely; inquiry within group and individual meetings with the teachers, and the teachers' classroom inquiry with learners.
- supports the view that '[t]eachers' knowledge about teaching is not merely an extended body of facts and theories but it is instead largely experiential and socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come' (Jiménez Raya, 2011, p. 154).

The study articulated the benefits of facilitating teacher and learner autonomy in FL classrooms as a process that strengthens the 'pedagogical partnership between teachers and learners' (Nunan, 2003, p. 203). It provided insight into how teachers' beliefs about the need to foster learner autonomy may be enhanced through a process that enabled them to deconstruct and construct their own understandings in this regard. The table below:

- illustrates key factors from the teachers' inquiry through which the pedagogical partnership was enhanced,
- depicts a process that focused on the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy and the impact of the development of teacher autonomy on learner autonomy,
- presents the fostering of learner autonomy as a process that entails teacher control of the pedagogical journey,
- sustains the notion of teacher and learner autonomy in relation to the fact that teachers need to be enabled to experience the process of developing their own autonomy while themselves in the process of fostering it with their learners (Lamb, 2000).

Table 5.3 Key factors from the teachers' inquiry

Emerging themes from the process of teacher inquiry in the FL classroom
- Trust in the learners' ability to take control over learning: seek alternative ways to teacher-directed settings. - Raise levels of awareness regarding the nature of FL learning: help learners flexibly manage situations of language learning and language use - Sustain an environment that enables learners to expose themselves to various forms of interactions in class: enable learners to work within their zone of proximal development. - Counter lack of responsibility for learning: encourage learners to assume the support required and to move on to the next stage in learning. - Language awareness through dialogic processes aimed at diminishing learner dependence on teacher-directed approaches: foster interdependence in learning. - Support learners to assume control of their language learning process through meaning-making tasks, metacognition and spaces for social interaction: spaces for interaction in class to aid cognitive and metacognitive processes and language use. - Seek alternative ways of working with language in and out of class: guide learners to try out different pathways of learning to accommodate learning within their daily agendas and to learn to seek support in learning. - Create a learning space in class that fosters learner interactions, central to the development of metacognitive activity and to the notion of interdependence in FL learning. - Engage in discursive interaction with the learners as part of the teaching and learning approach: sustain teacher- learner and learner-learner interactions. - Hand over responsibility for learning during the lesson at various degrees (e.g decisions on teaching and learning / metacognitive thinking): reconsider and reconstruct approaches to teaching and learning. - Enable learners to flexibly work at their own pace and according to the stage of learning they are at.

The principles illustrated in the table above may be utilised as the basis for further research into the fostering of teacher and learner autonomy. They may serve as a framework to facilitate further inquiry and access more illustrations of practice.

5.8 Final remarks

The need for teachers themselves to develop their own pathways of fostering learner autonomy was central to a process that was aimed at helping them develop the autonomy of their learners. The study enabled me to inquire into and seek understandings of this process while navigating through the journey with the teachers themselves. Helping teachers foster learner autonomy entailed a process that:

- raised teacher awareness of the interdependent nature underlying this notion while addressing issues of responsibility and control over learning.
- enabled me as researcher to gain understandings of the constraints such a process presented as well as possibilities sought. This is an aspect that I will further deliberate upon in future research in the field.

The emerging findings raised my awareness of the need to:

- create further spaces to help teachers reflect on the central role they play in the development of learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning and the impact of their decisions, beliefs and approaches to teaching and learning.
- continue to link my work in the development of curricula for the teaching of German as a foreign language related to discourse on teacher and learner autonomy that emerges as central to proposals and approaches to curriculum and assessment practices aimed at placing the locus of learning on the learner.
- create a stronger and systematic structure that supports teachers through individual and group meetings that enhance the link between curriculum development at policy

stage and help them empower themselves and gain control of their pedagogical pathways in this regard.

The role of the teacher in this regard cannot be neglected. The research furthermore raised my awareness of how creating a collaborative space for inquiry was central to raising teachers' awareness of the role of learner autonomy in language learning and language use and the need to:

- expand on the work initiated in the study to create a larger community of practice and inquire into further ways of how to foster teacher and learner autonomy with all the teachers of German as a foreign language within the Directorate of Education in Malta. My aim is to work with teachers in cluster groups within a bottom up approach as indicated in the study, to enable teachers to problematize areas of practice and foster their autonomy.
- further build upon the bank of illustrations collated in this study to depict the multi-layered processes of teacher and learner autonomy.
- utilise the illustrations of practice with student teachers on teacher training courses at University to critically reflect upon aspects from diverse yet specific and localised situations of practice.

It is in this way that I will seek to draw the threads together of a process that sought to develop teacher and learner autonomy and cultivate a community of practice to explore and raise teachers' consciousness of the interrelation between the two fields. This involves commitment to an ongoing journey of inquiry into practice. I will seek to enhance the collective and inquiry-oriented teaching and learning experience initiated within this study,

through a structured format of meetings and discussions with teachers of German as a foreign language, to propel forth the notion of teacher and learner autonomy as a prerequisite to FL education within the Maltese educational scenario. It is in this way that I hope to help teachers shift from a culture of dependency on top-down approaches to curriculum design towards one of empowerment and control over pedagogical practices and teacher development. Key elements from my present study will serve as a foundation for the next stage of inquiry, namely:

- a bottom-up approach that allows teachers to problematise areas of practice attending to the development of teachers' own autonomy within the process of teacher inquiry.
- raising awareness of principles of pedagogy for autonomy within situations of teachers' daily practice in the FL classroom in view of benefits inherent within such practice.
- nurturing a collaborative community that critically reflects upon and inquires into individual and collective teaching and learning experiences in search of understandings of the fostering of learner autonomy.
- reflection on pedagogical areas individual teachers require support with.

The creation of the conditions within which to foster the teachers' autonomy as a prerequisite to the development of learner autonomy within a structure that traditionally has led teachers to accommodate their pedagogical approaches to external forces related to curricular matters may in this way be challenged. It is in this way that one may be able to help teachers to critically analyse beliefs on teaching and learning that they bring with them to the profession and enable learners to develop competences required for FL learning and language use.

Appendix A - Phase 1: Introductory meeting / interview with individual teachers

The aim of this first meeting is to introduce the three teachers to the link between learner autonomy and effective FL teaching and learning, and to the process of inquiry on- and –in practice. This meeting will be held with each individual teacher and discuss ways of how to address the aim of fostering learner autonomy in their daily practice in relation to effective FL learning. A further aspect is to help teachers problematise aspects within their practice in this regard.

Vital to the discussion is the introduction of the process of inquiry on practice. The guidelines below will be utilised to guide the discussion, however they do not necessarily have to be addressed in chronological order. Questions added to the interview format reflect the need to follow what the teacher is discussing in relation to specific situations of practice.

It is made clear to teachers, that they will not be required to work on all aspects discussed during the meeting. The aspects discussed serve merely to raise awareness about the need to critically reflect on one's practice and on how one may work towards principles of foreign language teaching and learning through pedagogy for autonomy. Awareness is raised about the various ways of fostering learner autonomy and approaches that may be adopted. The points below serve to help them reflect on the inquiry process in this regard.

It is made clear that this is a process in search of understandings and pathways of how FL learning is not something that can be 'done to learners' but rather a process that learners need to actively engage in and take control of.

Pedagogy for autonomy and foreign language teaching and learning:

Principles on the notion of autonomy and pedagogy for autonomy, as discussed in the literature review section, are latched on to following teachers' comments and issues raised.

1. Guiding learners to become independent in their learning; learner control over learning

    - Within our curriculum we speak of 'learner centred education'. What do you think of the fact that learners need to be involved in learning and that they need to take responsibility and initiative to learn?
      Here we discuss how we at times plan everything for the learners, leaving little space for them to actually engage in learning.

- We will begin by discussing the importance of helping learners take control of their learning and how we as teachers may be able to facilitate this process.

- How can learners be encouraged to participate in the learning process, in taking control of their learning in class? Can we think of this with respect to how we may involve them in decisions on the content and process of learning? How might this be possible?

- You will be inquiring into this; we will be meeting the other two teachers to discuss and seek to understand teaching and learning situations which foster the learners' autonomy in the learning process. We will seek to understand what such a process entails on our part and on that of the learners.

- Learning competence
  We speak of learning competences. Learners need to learn about different ways of learning and strategies which they might utilise in the process of learning. How may we facilitate a process through which learners discover what helps them learn and use the FL?

  Discuss the individuality of the learners and their specific ways of learning as teachers recount experiences with the various learners they work with.

2. Fostering learner autonomy; diverse ways of fostering autonomy in practice and learner involvement

   There are different ways of how to foster learner autonomy, that is, there is not one specific way of how to help learners gain control of their learning. It is our job to inquire into this with our learners.
   Discuss the fact that learners need to be involved in the inquiry – we are inquiring with them, and thus we need to share the process of inquiry with them.

3. Learners' construction of knowledge through active engagement in learning. Learning as a proactive and interactive process

   - How can one make space for learners to engage themselves in constructing language?

   - How do we envisage teaching and learning in this regard? How can this process be facilitated in class?

   - Can you think of how you could work in class to ensure that learners are given the possibility to construct language themselves?

- Can you think of ways of how you may be able to help learners become more proactive in their learning in class?

- Can you think of how you can maximise activities in class through which learners have more space to learn autonomously?

4. Tapping on the willingness of learners to seek out learning opportunities and take initiative in learning
   - How can we help learners seek out learning opportunities and encourage them to take the initiative to learn? What motivates them to learn?

5. Managing constraints
   - We will have to work around a number of constraints when seeking to foster learner autonomy. It will be a matter of reflecting on possible ways to work towards developing learner autonomy within the constraints. What constraints do you envisage? How do you aim to counter these constraints?

6. The inquiry process until our next meeting
   Within the inquiry you will be taking note of various aspects of the process as you seek to understand the process of teaching and learning; You will note things down in your reflective diary.
   - You will take note of what we intend to work and focus upon with regards to fostering learner autonomy.
   - You may note down what you need to understand within such a process.
   - Can you specify an area which you would like to focus on; an issue you have identified in our discussion which you would like to work on with your learners?
   - How can you involve your learners in this process?

Teachers are encouraged to contact me if they have queries or issues which they would like to discuss prior to our next meeting.

Appendix B - Group meeting / interview with teachers

The aim of the group meetings:

The group meetings are intended to help participants discuss the process of fostering learner autonomy in their FL classrooms. They are asked to share aspects which emerged from individual meetings held in relation to the process of inquiry embarked upon in that regard. Participants are asked to illustrate their understandings of the construct of learner autonomy and its fostering. They share insight into the various facets of the process of inquiry with their learners and provide background information of context and situations of teaching and learning and classes and individuals learners they worked with.

Discussion addresses:

A. Areas teachers worked upon in view of how they understood the process of fostering their learners' autonomy in the diverse classrooms taught.

B. Aspects they found problematic, and the struggles encountered, and areas they found beneficial.

C. The way forward in view of aspects discussed and issues raised.

Participants are asked to:

- Describe classes they work with.
- Illustrate approach/es adopted in class to help learners engage in their learning process and foster their autonomy as language learners and language users.
- Discuss aspects conducive to language learning in this regard – examples from inquiry into practice.
- Note areas they find challenging within the process of inquiry with the different classes / individuals within those classes.

Appendix C - Meeting / interview with individual teachers

Discussing teachers' experiences of inquiry following the first individual and group meetings and setting the way forward. Teachers are asked to elaborate with examples of situations of practice, individual and groups of learners.

- We will first start by discussing how you set about engaging learners in the learning process; what approach did you adopt? How did you set about working with the different classes?
- To what extent were learners able to assume responsibility for learning?
- Where there instances when learners assumed control over learning? Can you describe situations in particular which reflected this?
- Did you work with all classes in the same way? What was the reaction in the different classes you teach?
- What challenges did you encounter? What challenges did the learners encounter within the process?
- Were there instances which you found aided language learning in particular?
- How did learners profit from such an approach?
- What areas / aspects do you feel that you would need to focus on in the next weeks?

Appendix D - Closure to phase 1: Group meeting / interview with teachers

After having conducted the first phase, I would now like to discuss with you the process which we have gone through. We are always in the process of constructing our understanding of the process of fostering learner autonomy and we are continuously inquiring into the area with our learners to reconsider how to proceed with our inquiry. This is a process which is constantly evolving. At times we feel stuck and decide to move to other grounds and at times we get back to certain areas through alternative pathways. This is a process that helps us gain insight into the various realities of the teaching and learning situations we experience daily and the various kinds of learners we work with as well as other factors which impact on the scenarios we work within.

- Allow time for any comments from the teachers' side

1. How do you feel this process has impacted on your practice?
2. Did you address this process of fostering learner autonomy in the same way across the different phases or did you try out different approaches?
3. Now that you are gaining awareness of certain underlying aspects of pedagogy for autonomy what can you identify from your previous practice as being conducive to learner autonomy?
   a. We have worked through different phases. One of the main aspects was to reflect on how to address the concepts which we were discussing in practice. You addressed areas of concern from your own practice. We discussed the need for learner involvement in their own process of learning. How if at all, did learner voices impact on what you were working on in class?
   b. Were there times when learners led the way?

4. What challenges did you encounter during this process?
5. What aspects did you consider beneficial for FL teaching and learning? Mention concrete example/s on your inquiry with learners in this regard.
6. Where there any difficulties that you encountered in the process?
7. At the start of the study we discussed that during our inquiry into how to foster learner autonomy we would find our own way of how to work with our learners in the different classes. What kind of process was this for you? In what way did you adopt concepts from this study for your everyday practice?
8. In what ways did you experience the 'concept of autonomous learning' or 'autonomous language use' during the study?
9. At other times we have stopped to comment on the fact that fostering learners' autonomy is at times a struggle, but we have also commented that it is our job to facilitiate a process that encourages their engagement in the learning process. How challenging was it for you to create the spaces required to foster such learning?
10. Would you be interested in conducting further inquiry with your learners in the second phase of the study?

Appendix E - Phase 2: Meeting / Interview with individual teachers

Discussion with teachers to review aims of first phase of the study and to discuss the next phase

Questions / aspects for discussion:

1. Brief discussion of aspects which emerged from the first part of the study according to the teachers – how and what they felt they mostly worked on in the first phase. Latch on to principles of pedagogy for autonomy which emerged during the first phase, as the teachers discuss their experiences, and while they problematise areas within their context/s of teaching and learning in this regard.

- We will be discussing the main areas you worked upon during the first phase of the study. How did you go about engaging learners in their process of learning?
- Which aspects did you find challenging in this first phase of inquiry?
- What possibilities emerged during the process of inquiry with your learners in class?

2. Discuss how to proceed.

- Following last year's work with learners, which area do you feel you need to focus on?
- How will you focus on this in class?

3. Discuss diary writing for the next phase of the study illustrating the need that teachers make note of specific situations or aspects of teaching and learning during their inquiry.

Appendix F – Group meeting / interview with teachers

During this meeting I will ask teachers to discuss and share views of how they addressed the notion of 'fostering learner autonomy' in the weeks following our individual meeting. Information about the learners they worked with forms an integral part of the discussion. How have teachers helped learners take control of the learning process, and to what extent have they experienced an impact on FL learning through their inquiry?

(Some of the questions will repeat aspects addressed in previous questions and give teachers the opportunity to elaborate on previous answers. Some questions may be eliminated if teachers have already referred to them extensively in the discussion that ensues).

1. I will start by discussing our role as teachers in helping learners to take control of the learning process at their level of FL competence. What situations come to mind from your inquiry in the various classes you teach? How did you work in the past weeks with your learners in this regard?

2. Tell us about your learners and the support they required in the process.

3. Were there learners who took on more responsibility for learning? In relation to what aspects of learning did they assume more responsibility for learning?

4. How you feel that they learned best? Were there and learners / groups of learners who come to mind? What tasks did they work on?

5. What concerns do you have in relation to your role of fostering learner autonomy and to the inquiry with learners in class? What aspects did you find problematic in the past weeks?

6. You have learners who do well and others who do not do well – what leads to this, what marks in exams do they get

7. As discussed, our role as teachers impacts directly on the extent to which learners will be able to exercise their autonomous learning skills. How do you intend to keep on inquiring into this in the next weeks?

Appendix G – Meeting / Interview with individual teachers

This meeting is aimed at helping participants discuss and share aspects which emerged from their process of inquiry with learners following the discussions of the first two meetings both individually and as a group. Participants are asked to share insight into aspects they problematised at the outset of the inquiry and during their work with their learners and to provide insight into situations of learner autonomy fostered with the groups and / or individual learners they taught.

Discussion addresses:

a. Areas teachers problematised and addressed in the past weeks in their diverse classrooms.
b. Aspects they found problematic, struggles encountered, and factors they found beneficial to FL teaching and learning.
c. Discussing teachers' experiences of inquiry following the first individual and group meetings and setting the way forward. Teachers are asked to elaborate with examples of situations of practice, individual and groups of learners.

1. We will first start by discussing how you set about engaging learners in the learning process during the past weeks ; how did you set about transferring responsibility for learning on to the learners? How possible was this?

2. How will you try to work from this point on? Are there areas you feel you can work on or would like to try inquiring into with your learners?

3. Can you recall instances when learners assumed control over learning? What kind of support was required. We have discussed that this is not 'an all or nothing process' and that we need to see how learners may need to be supported along their learning paths.

4. What challenges did you encounter within the different classes you teach? We have discussed the need that learners engage actively in their learning. What did the learners themselves feel in relation to the role they were entrusted with?

5. What areas / aspects do you feel that you would need to focus on in the next weeks?

Appendix H - Closure to phase 2: Group meeting / interview with teachers

After having conducted the second phase of the study, we will discuss aspects you looked into during this second phase and what you found beneficial during the inquiry. This is a process which is constantly evolving and therefore we should not feel that we should have brought the process to a closure in any way. This is a process that helped us gain insight into the various realities of the teaching and learning situations we encounter, the different learners we work with and how we sought to help them become better language learners and language users. We will seek to draw together the main factors that impacted on teaching and learning as a result of the inquiry, both those conducive to FL learning as well as the struggles we had to face. (Allow time for any comments from the teacher's side).

1. How do you feel this process has impacted on your daily practice?

2. What areas did you problematise in relation to the inquiry of fostering learners' autonomy within the diverse classroom settings you work in. You may comment on particular areas you worked on with diverse groups of learners.

3. Any areas that you deem particularly beneficial to the process of FL learning?

4. How did learners react to any change in approach from your part? Can you note aspects that demonstrated their capability to take control of learning?

5. What challenges did you encounter during this process? Was it always possible to foster the learners' autonomy? What stood in the way?

6. Where there any particular difficulties that you yourself encountered in the process? Was it difficult for you as a teacher to shift responsibility to the learners? How did you experience this?

7. What possibilities did you not envisage while starting out on the process of inquiry? Any concluding comments?

Appendix I – Ethical consent form for participation in the study

Participant Consent Form

Title of Project:

Fostering the process of teacher and learner autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning through inquiry-in and -on practice

Name of Researcher: Alice Micallef

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Dear Participant,

The aim of my research is to document a process of fostering teacher and learner autonomy in FL teaching and learning. This process will be discussed in meetings held individually and in group meetings with two other participant teachers. You will be asked to maintain information disclosed during meetings in strict confidence. The study will be conducted between January and June 2013 (Phase 1) and October to May 2014 (Phase 2) during which there will be three individual meetings and three group meetings in each phase of the study. All meetings will be recorded in order to help me process the documentation of data. During the course of the study you will be reflecting on your own practice and recording your own observations in a reflective diary. All information and data gathered will be kept confidential. If data in the form of recorded interviews or written notes are required for the purpose of an academic paper to be presented at a conference your permission will be required. My research supervisor may request to view the data at any time. You are to ensure that when passing data concerning learners involved in this study, these learners are described in such a way which does not make them recognisable. All data which may refer to you or your school will also be anonymised. This data will be destroyed once the project terminates. You may withdraw from the project at any time without having to disclose reasons for doing so. You may also contact my supervisor if you are unhappy with any procedures agreed upon.

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter (delete as applicable) dated *[insert date]* for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. *Insert contact number here of lead researcher/member of research team (as appropriate).* ☐

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. ☐

4. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
(*or legal representative*)		
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)		
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant		
_____	_____	_____
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.

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