Imaging the Second Language Autonomous Learner: A Study of the Relationship Between ESOL Learners' Autonomy and Identity Development in the UK

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the relationship between the learner autonomy and learner identity of English for Speakers of Other Languages (henceforth, ESOL) learners in a further education college in Southeast England.

It stresses the significant influence of ESOL learners' autonomy development and identity construction on their language learning in the UK. Specifically, it endeavours to explore (i) how ESOL learners perceive and develop their autonomy and identity; (ii) how ESOL teachers perceive and enhance learners' autonomy and identity and (iii) the challenges faced in developing learners' autonomy and constructing their identities. To address the research questions and achieve the aims of the study, a qualitative methodology was used. Classroom observations and semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were conducted with ESOL learners and teachers, and an interpretivist approach using thematic analysis employed.

The findings revealed a significant direct interrelationship between learner autonomy and learner identity and on influencing language learning. It was found that how learners perceived themselves throughout the learning journey either enhanced or restricted their autonomous learning, and that as learners gained a better understanding and control of their learning and developed their proficiency, they constructed more positive and desired identities. This, however, was not without challenges, such as limitations resulting from past traumatic experiences, past educational background, low levels of competence with technology and the restrictions of the COVID 19 pandemic. The study showed that the learners' autonomy and identities changed at different levels in different learners at different times. Furthermore, although the learners seemed to have the ability to control their learning and identity, they were mostly unaware of this ability and the extent to which their actions and inactions influenced their language learning. It also revealed that the teachers supported the learners based on their perceptions of the learners, and that both learners and teachers faced challenges in helping learners to transition through different phases of their autonomy, identity and the language learning process.

The originality and contributions of this study lie in its exploration of the relationship between learner autonomy and learner identity of young adult ESOL refugee and asylum seekers in the UK, something which the literature seems to overlook. The study sheds light on various aspects of language learning, including two stages of learner motivation – initial and successive

motivation; positive and negative learner autonomy; silent learning in adult language learning; and “guided autonomy”, defined as the support provided to language learners to take more control of their language learning consciously and effectively.

In light of the findings, the study has implications for ESOL teachers to be more conscious of learners’ autonomy levels and identities to ensure that their learners are aware of and reflect on their abilities and responsibilities, and so can take informed and deliberate actions towards their learning and management of self-perceptions. For researchers, there is a need to further probe into the relationship between young adult refugee and asylum ESOL learners’ autonomy and identity development in the UK, in different settings and on larger scales, to better understand how the relationship between these constructs influences language learning.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to My Lord and Saviour, JESUS CHRIST, the One who sustained me throughout this journey. Thank You, Faithful Heavenly Father. You started with me and took me to the end, just as You promised. This is for You. Philippians 1:6.

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My special appreciation to my family for supporting and encouraging me throughout the journey, especially my Mum who has been my greatest inspiration. Thank you for your endless prayers and love. I am blessed to have you.

Declaration

I declare that:

• The work presented in this thesis is my own and embodies the results of my research during my period of registration.

• I have read and followed the University's Academic Integrity Policy and that the thesis does not breach copyright or other intellectual property rights of a third party. Where necessary I have gained permission to reproduce copyright materials.

• Any material which has been previously presented and accepted for the award of an academic qualification at this University or elsewhere is clearly identified in the thesis.

• Where work is the product of collaboration the extent of the collaboration has been indicated.

Signature: *Courage Njeatih* Date: 28/03/2023

List of Abbreviations

ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages

ESL – English as a Second Language

L1 – First Language

L2 – Second (other) Language

LA – Learner Autonomy

LI – Learner Identity

TL – Target Language

ELL – English Language Learners (Learning)

SLL – Second Language Learning (Learners)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Autonomy and identity in English as a Second (or more) language (ESL) learners are increasingly perceived as significant influences on achievement in language learning (Huang and Benson, 2013; O'Leary, 2018; Tajeddin and Fereydoonfar, 2022). For an effective increase in the management of learner autonomy and identity in ESL learners to achieve higher productivity in language learning, it is important to understand the relationship between these factors and its influence on ESL learners' learning, and the challenges encountered throughout the learning process in developing learners' autonomy and identity. In this study, a qualitative and holistic perspective was used to explore the relationship between learner autonomy development and identity construction and its impact on language (ESOL) learning in the UK. Observation was carried out and interviews (individual and focus group) conducted with ESOL learners and teachers in a further education college in Southeast England. This chapter highlights the background to the study (1.1), contextualises ESOL in the UK (1.2), introduces my personal motivation for studying ESOL learners' autonomy and identity development in the UK and my positioning (1.3), presents the research aims and questions (1.4) and outlines the structure of the study (1.5).

1.1. Background to the study

For many years, learner autonomy and identity have been of interest to researchers in language education. With a variety of changes in the field such as moving to learner-centred learning, there has been increasing attention towards learner development in and out of the classroom, with learner autonomy and identity gaining more attention (Ushioda, 2003, Lamb, 2011; Huang and Benson, 2013; O'Leary, 2018; Tajeddin and Fereydoonfar, 2022). Learner autonomy has been extensively researched and a basic description that has been acknowledged as learner autonomy is learners' capacity to take control of their learning (Benson, 2011). By this, learners take the responsibility of setting goals, determining the purpose, content, and method of learning, and monitoring their learning progress and evaluating its outcomes (Holec 1981; Byram, 2004) while interacting with others (O'Leary 2018). The development of autonomy is said to contribute to the enhancement of language acquisition and life-long learning (Deci, 1995; Ushioda, 2003, 2011; O'Leary, 2018). Based on this belief, many research practitioners, language institutions and teachers are adapting their research, curricula, and teaching practices in preparing learners to develop autonomy and become life-long learners.

Another area of interest which is gaining more ground in language education is learner identity. For decades, several researchers (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987; Norton, 2000; van Lier, 2007; Dorney, 2005, 2009; Karam, 2018; Tajeddin and Fereydoonfar, 2022) have explored the term *identity.* However, due to its multi-dimensional nature, there has been limited consensus as to what 'identity' means. Researchers have defined the term in different ways with some common relationships. Identity has been referred to as a sense of belonging, as hybrid and multiple. A similarity in the various ideologies refers to identity as a way in which learners perceive themselves and are perceived by others, and this is inextricably linked to the social context from which it arises (Norton, 2000). Identity is, furthermore, constructed through a mixture of varied social practices in which individuals get involved in their daily lives (Norton 2000; Pritchard and Woodward, 2013). Language, which is a social practice, is considered a construct of learner identity (Tippins et al., 1993; Huang and Benson 2013). As learners interact with one another, their teachers, and the rest of the world, they create identities which reflect how they see themselves in relation to others, how these relationships are constructed and shaped across space and time, and how they (learners) understand possibilities for the future.

The relationship between learner autonomy and identity is yet an area of interest which has been under-researched. Some studies have explored these concepts from different and similar angles, for example, learner autonomy and agency (Huang and Benson, 2013), learner motivation in autonomy and identity (Lamb 2011), teacher autonomy and identity (Huang and Benson, 2013) and learner identity and voice (van Lier 2007). How learners perceive their learning purpose and personal relevance in a language and during the learning process, has been found to influence their attitudes toward their learning and autonomy (Chik, 2007; Huang and Benson, 2013). Some studies (Ushioda, 2003; Byram, 2004; O'Leary, 2018) found that learners express the desire to take control of their learning and demonstrate the ability to manage and regulate their learning from their perceptions of identity as learners. Language classrooms that promote learner autonomy encourage learners to develop and express their own identities through the L2, that is, who they are, and to create future identities of who they want to become (Lamb, 2011; Huang and Benson, 2013).

By contrast, where autonomous learning is not encouraged, learners shy away from expressing themselves both in and out of the classroom (Deci, 1995). When learners are given the opportunity to have and use their voice in the learning process, they tend to construct, shape and reshape their identities as they take greater control of their learning (Huang and Benson,

2013). Studies such as Huang and Benson (2013) indicate that learner autonomy is linked to learner identity and learner identity influences autonomy in language learners. Both learner autonomy and identity have been widely agreed (Little, 1994; Lamb, 2017; O' Leary, 2018) not to be based solely on the individual learner but are built on their interrelationship with other learners and teachers. This study, thus, explores the relationship between ESOL learners' autonomy development and identity construction and how these individual variables and their relationship influence learners' language learning. Most previous research studies conducted on learner autonomy and learner identity have investigated adult English learners. The contribution of this study is its exploration of these constructs with teenagers and young adults learning English in the UK. Furthermore, the learner participants in this study are mostly refugee and asylum seekers whose learner autonomy and identity have been under-researched. This study also highlights the relationship between learner autonomy and identity development, a significant relationship in language learning.

In a more contextual sense, this study was conducted in a further education college in Southeast England, UK, specifically in the Department of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). At the time of research conduct, the department consisted of three entry levels: Entry Level 1, Entry Level 2, and Entry Level 3. Prior to being enrolled into the department, learners are expected to have a basic knowledge of English and are assessed on their productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (reading and listening) skills. The initial assessment determines the level at which the learners will be placed with those with lower language skills (A1) at Entry One and the more proficient learners at Entry Two (A2) and Three (B1) as per the assessment criteria (CERF). English language learners on this course constitute a mixture of a variety of cultural, geographic and linguistic (L1) backgrounds. Most of the learners on this course (and in this study) are refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and results from the study show significant influence of this background and experience on the learners' language learning. In addition to the general experiences in English language learning, how the learners' personal backgrounds and experiences have influenced and are influencing their learning is explored. The participants in this study include female and male English language learners across the three levels of the ESOL department aged 17 to 20 and four teachers (all female) in the department (see Section 3.4.3 for more detail).

1.2. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the UK and immigration

This section attempts to paint a picture of ESOL provision in the UK and particularly in Southeast England where the study was conducted. For many years, the UK has received non-English speaking immigrants who have enrolled onto English courses across the country. English courses are composed of language learners of all age groups; however, this study focuses on young adult ESOL learners. For general integration purposes and as a basic proficiency requirement to proceed into mainstream courses, English language learners in the UK from 16 years and above are considered to be studying ESOL. This is as opposed to younger learners whose language learning is mostly referred to as English as an Additional Language (EAL) as they are mostly in school settings and English is being learned alongside other subjects.

The ability to communicate in English has been an essential feature in integration discourse and a condition for citizenship for migrants intending to live and study in the UK and for many economic migrants entering the UK. A clause in the Home Office's integration policy, *Integration Matters,* highlights the importance of language for integration: "Two factors are overwhelmingly important: the ability to communicate effectively in English and gaining employment appropriate for their skills and abilities" (Home Office 2005, 20). English language skills are crucial for integration in the UK. Both academic and policy makers have acknowledged that gaining employment is largely dependent on language ability (Phillimore and Goodson, 2008; Phillimore, 2011). A primary indicator of integration into the UK is the level of English language competency that refugees attain over time (Home office, 2005). Research (Phillimore and Goodson, 2008; Phillimore, 2011) has found that language is a major barrier to integration and employability.

ESOL courses in the UK generally have a vast diversity of learners and first language (L1) backgrounds which can pose challenges. To pursue education (and for integration purposes), non-English speaking immigrants are required to undertake ESOL courses to improve their proficiency skills before enrolling into other courses. This helps them to better integrate into the society, pursue their desired courses and apply for jobs. The courses generally cover a range of topics, such as developing life and employability skills; English for the workplace; developing literacy skills; and technological integration. Lessons based on real-life, day-to-day and ordinary events are central to ESOL, for example, calling the doctor or plumber, applying for a job or course and writing an email to your employer. ESOL education in the UK is fully

sponsored for refugee and asylum seekers between the ages of 16 to 18 or who began the course before 18 or are above 18 and are unemployed (Adult Education Budget, 2021).

Not being able to communicate in English in the UK poses a major barrier to social inclusion for non-English migrants and ESOL learners. With limited skills to communicate outside the home, ESOL learners, migrants and refugees find it hard to integrate, can feel socially isolated and struggle to find employment. Learning the English language is vital to living a more inclusive life in the UK. Asylum seekers and refugees are often particularly vulnerable; their limited English language in addition to past traumatic experiences prior to arriving the UK and needing to move houses and go through challenges of seeking settlement status, poses a weakening social safety net, increases stress and may exacerbate feelings of isolation and identity conflicts.

To assess refugees and immigrants' integration, it is essential to monitor their language achievement. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses are the primary route to learning English in the UK and the only route for welfare refugee seekers (Phillimore, 2011). It is of crucial importance for ESOL courses to deliver the communication skills needed for migrants and refugees to integrate and live independently. The Learning and Working Institute (L&W) and the South East Strategic Partnership for Migration (SESPM) (2017) that focus on young ESOL learners between the ages of 16 to 19 provide a six-step checklist for resettlement coordinators, refugee stakeholders and ESOL providers to assess the services they provide to ascertain if they can meet ESOL learners' needs. These include:

- Initial assessments: conducting thorough initial assessments through gaining critical information such as previous education/learning, factors that may affect learning (such as learning disabilities and or difficulties), current language skills, and personal needs such as health, faith, family, and vocational skills.
- Provision and delivery: providing a variety of delivery options, such as classroom/non-classroom, formal/alternative- based provisions; creating a sense of belonging through encouraging peer interactions, offering non-formal learning opportunities, and promoting student representation opportunities; and non-ESOL provision activities.
- Partnership working: liaising and working with multiple agencies, considering who to involve ensuring multiple needs are met, such as building partnerships/links with other schools, health services, youth organisations, faith groups and local authorities and refugee agencies; tapping into existing networks; and sharing knowledge and resources.

- Accessibility: ensuring that support and services provided are accessible, and engagement is maintained by considering things, such as transport options and costs coverage, accompanying young people to services when required, and ensuring they have access to heathy food and pastoral and peer support.
- Employment-related support: providing and making accessible career and employment information, opportunities, advice, and guidance and preparing them for work and to ultimately secure good work. These could be done through providing one-to-one support and embedding employability skills and working with local employers.
- Workforce development: training staff to understand learner/client group and key information about their circumstances and needs, ensure access to trauma training, ensure there are mentors in support teams and to know their cohort.

This study set out to examine ESOL learners' language acquisition in relation to how they take control of their learning and their identity construction in integrating into the UK system and how that impacts their learning. Below is a map of ESOL provision in Southeast England, the broader setting of where this research is conducted. It shows a fair distribution of ESOL provision by various sectors. [ESOL map Southeast England]

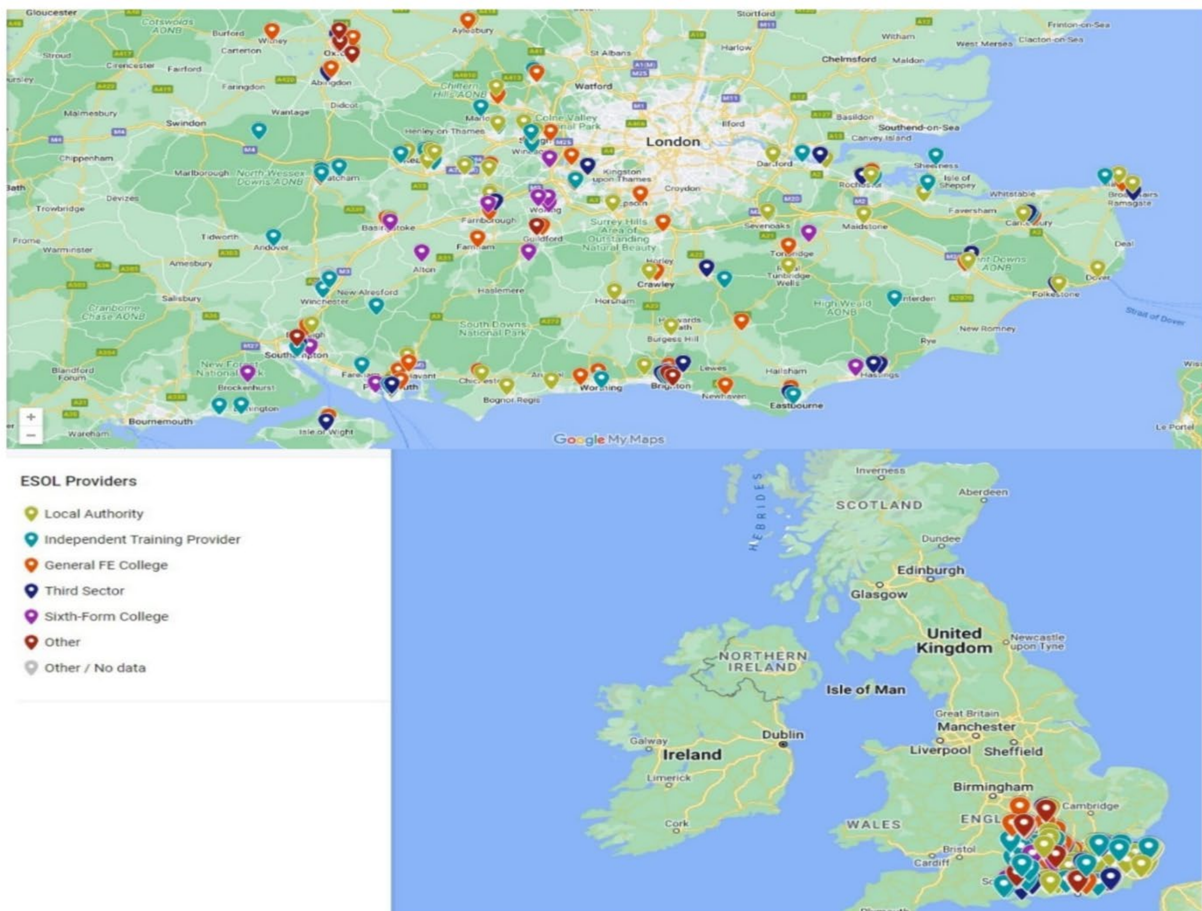

Figure 1.1: ESOL provision map – Southeast England. Map data ©2022 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009), Google, Inst. Geogr. Nacional.

1.3. Personal motivation and positionality

This section portrays my story behind conducting PhD research on autonomy and identity. This research into ESOL learners' autonomy and identity at a UK further education college arose from my personal interests and experiences to gain insight into how and what challenges ESOL learners at a particular college faced in their language learning journey in developing their autonomy and constructing their identities.

My first interest, I believe, in teaching English to second (or other) language speakers arose from my first job as an English language teacher after my first degree. I taught English to both English and French speakers in my country, Cameroon. During this time, I saw the challenges French L1 speakers faced in learning English as a second language (L2), and my challenges in teaching them as compared to the English speakers. This was where my initial interest in second language learning and teaching was developed as I tried to develop strategies and approaches to navigate the challenges, which seemed to be beyond the language barriers to how they perceived themselves. There is a significant distinction between how English and French language speakers are perceived in the country and the language classroom is not an exempted setting. These differences cut across several boundaries including historical, geographical, psychological, cultural and personality aspects, which contribute to identity differentiation.

Also, as an English-speaking Cameroonian, learning the French language was a challenge. I remember learning French in school (EFL), in my English education, and finding it very difficult as I did not use the language out of the French lessons. My autonomy in using the language probably only increased when I moved to a French region for my first degree. One would think that this was the perfect opportunity to finally learn the language in the environment (ESL). However, because I studied an English degree (English Modern Letters), the pressure of learning the language to succeed in my academics was removed as compared to friends who studied other course such as History or Geography, which were taught in French.

Adding to the lack of pressure to learn the language was the neighbourhood in which I lived which was dominantly inhabited by English-speaking Cameroonians. With little or no pressure from my immediate environment and university course – the two main settings – the autonomy to learn the language derived from obligation was missing. To interact with the few French-speakers in the environment, I employed very little autonomy to learn and use the language.

This autonomy slightly increased when I had my own business which required communicating with French-speakers more often. However, my identity as a non-French and limited proficiency French speaker usually hindered me from maximising the affordances to learn and use the language. I also noticed a difference in my increased self-confidence and perception when I correctly used the language, especially when it profited my business. The desire to increase my sales proved a positive motivation to my enhanced autonomy in learning and using the language. I, however, was not 'autonomous enough' to use the language when I did not need to. Challenges such as the fear of making mistakes and being mocked also contributed.

Furthermore, although I grew up speaking English as my first language, I struggled with my identity as an English speaker in the UK, as I felt that I did not fit into the traditional 'native speaker' identity and tried to change or modify my articulation and language parlance to better fit into this 'British native speaker' desired perspective. Engaging in discussions and receiving questions such as "Is that English?" and comments such as "I can't understand you" fuelled this "inadequate" English speaker identity. As someone who had spoken English all my life – a native speaker – and even worse, a teacher of the same language, which could 'not be understood', this took a significant toll on my identity as a speaker of English. I later learned that some people had conditioned their minds not to understand or pretend not to understand "non-native English speakers" without first listening. This was mostly the case in my experience when I received such questions and comments. I remember overhearing someone being criticised by a friend for pretending not to understand my accent when they laughingly said they intentionally did that to make me look stupid. I also later learned that the UK has English variants in accents and expressions. These realisations, in addition to the changing "native speakerism" discourse, helped me regain my confident and adequate identity as an English language speaker and teacher over time. I wondered if ESL learners/speakers faced similar challenges and how they handled them.

In desiring to understand what other immigrants and English language learners faced in integrating into the UK, while undertaking my Masters, I was privileged to gain access into a further education college in Southeast England and engaged in observation and assisted teaching in an ESOL department. Learners in this department were from a variety of geographical and linguistic backgrounds studying English as a second or more language for different purposes including integration, further education, and employment. Most of these learners were refugees and asylum seekers and had been through a variety of personal and language learning experiences. This exposed me to a broader view of the challenges L2 English

learners face in learning English. Having seen some of the learners encounter similar challenges to mine in both their autonomy and identity development, directly and indirectly influencing their learning, further interest was spurred in understanding the language learning journeys and experiences the learners encountered, particularly refugee and asylum seekers, in taking control of their learning and constructing their desired identities in the UK.

Consequently, seeing the learners manage their identity challenges and changes, and how the decisions they made each day contributed to their learning outcome, was a solid motivation for my interest in researching how ESOL learners' autonomy and identity influence their language learning.

Positionality

The above motivation to undertake this study alongside other aspects, which are stated in this section, position me in this study as an insider-outsider researcher. Studies (Herod, 1999; Mohammed, 2001; Chacko, 2004; Holmes, 2020) have acknowledge the possibilities of researchers being both insiders and outsiders in their research as they cut across different boundaries.

In locating my positionality in this study, I take the stance as an insider-outsider as I reside in several positions. That is, being an insider in certain aspects and an outsider in others. As an insider, I identify with some of the participants' experiences as follows: Firstly, being an immigrant and my previous experience of struggling to develop my learner autonomy and confidence in my identity as an English language speaker provides insider knowledge of autonomy development and the strive through identity crisis. Secondly, as an English language teacher and having previous familiarity with the setting and some of the learners in the department understudy, provides insider knowledge into teaching ESOL and seeing learners develop their autonomy and identity alongside other learning aspects.

However, not having the experience of learning the English language as a second (or other) language, as the learner participants, and learning the TL in the UK alongside other language learners, positions me as an outsider. Secondly, not having the experience of trauma and struggle to flee from war, travel through dangerous routes and settle in the UK as a refugee or asylum seeker, further moves me into an outsider position. Thirdly, given that I am older than my learner research participants, I might not fully understand the struggles they face juggling different experiences and challenges of transitioning from teenage to adulthood identity alongside others. Fourthly, a more subtle yet important aspect, not being their teacher, although

spending a considerable amount of time during the data collection process, might have caused me to miss certain significant details about the participants, unnoticed in the collection process, which a closer insider position might have provided, have all contributed to me being an outsider.

As an outsider, a researcher can mostly only believe what they have been told and have witnessed. Some experiences, to which I believe, can only be understood when experienced, such as fleeing a war and settling in the UK as a refugee, and even when experienced might not be fully understood as experiences are subjective to the experiencer. A gap in such knowledge and experience, I believe, makes me an outsider. These circumstances have all been found to significantly contribute to shaping learners' autonomy and identity development and language learning.

As a reminder, the data collection and analysis in this study were not aimed at confirming or negating my initial perspectives and experiences, but to understand the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The study is about the participants, not me. Although as a qualitative researcher, it is impossible to completely detach myself and influence from the research (Ormston et al., 2014; Dubois, 2015), careful attempt has been made to tell participants stories as they are, told by them.

1.4. Research aims and questions

Based on the above-mentioned issues, the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the relationship between the learner autonomy and learner identity of English language learners taking ESOL courses in the UK. It seeks to understand the learners' perspectives on their autonomy development and identity construction during the process of second (or other) language learning and the influence of these variables on their language learning outcomes. In addition, the study looks at how ESOL teachers perceive their learners' autonomy and identity and how they support them in their development. Furthermore, it investigates the challenges faced in developing learners' autonomy and identity.

The investigation in this study is based on the following research questions:

RQ: What is the relationship between learner autonomy and learner identity in ESOL learners in the UK and how does this relationship influence second language learning?

Sub RQ1: How do ESOL learners perceive and promote their autonomy and identity?

Sub RQ2: How do ESOL teachers perceive and promote learners' autonomy development and identity construction?

Sub RQ3: What challenges do ESOL learners and teachers face in promoting learner autonomy and identity?

The study generates more insight into the field on the perceptions and influence of learner autonomy and identity of ESOL learners' language learning in the UK. It contributes to understanding learner autonomy and identity and enabling language learning more meaningful, enjoyable, and long-lasting for English language learners.

Generally, it is believed that autonomous learning enhances language acquisition and life-long learning. Life-long learning is of interest to researchers and teachers, expressed in their desire to develop learners who are not only able to take charge of their learning but can equally develop skills for life-long learning. This is seen in the growing interest in the research and implementation of strategies which encourage autonomous learning in L2 learners. With the changes in methods of instruction and learning across the globe, it is essential to understand the growing influence and relevance of autonomous learning and to develop learners who are more conscious of and able to manage their learning.

Furthermore, exploring learner identity enhances insight into the identities learners construct, shape and reshape about themselves. Language learners' identity throughout their learning is said to significantly influence their learning. Researchers (Norton, 2000, 2011; Dorney, 2005, 2009) believe that learners conceive identities of themselves during the learning process and possible future identities, which have a direct or indirect relationship to how they learn a second/foreign language. These conceived identities have been said to either enhance or restrict language learning.

Based on these, the study sheds light on the influence of learner autonomy and identity in the UK on enhancing learners' language learning; the challenges they face; and how these are managed, by exploring different perspectives through learners and teachers' voices in individual interviews and focus groups. The study is useful in informing researchers, language practitioners and language providers about these aspects.

1.5. Mapping the thesis structure

Having given an overview of the study in terms of the background to the study, ESOL in the UK, my personal motivation and positioning and the research aims and questions, this section outlines the structure of the study.

Chapter two: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to the study along three main areas: learner autonomy, learner identity and learner autonomy and identity. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the literature in the field and how it aided me to understand the targeted areas. It informed my positioning in the research, decisions on choosing the appropriate methodology and theoretical frameworks and in knowing the further research needed to be addressed in the field.

Chapter three: Research Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology employed to undertake the research. It explains the influence of the Postmodern and Social Constructivism qualitative paradigmatic positions, the research design and how it draws insight from Phenomenology. It also offers an overview of the research participants; data collection tools, procedure, and analysis; and finally, the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the research.

Chapters four, five and six: Findings chapters

These chapters detail the findings of the study. It follows the qualitative approach which analyses and discusses findings simultaneously and relates them to the literature. The chapters provide insight into ESOL learners' autonomy development and identity construction through learners and teachers' perspectives looking at factors influencing language learning, such as the influence of learners' motivation, the environment and technology; perceiving the second language autonomous learner through learners' self-imaging, learning preferences and challenges faced; and teachers' perceptions and roles in developing learners' autonomy and identity.

Chapter seven: Further discussion and conclusions

This chapter harmonises the findings and the discussions from the three chapters paying closer attention to the main themes and new insights into the field. It provides a concluding review

addressing the research questions, reflections on the study, implications, and finally, limitations.

The study ends with the References and Appendices sections.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses the literature on learner autonomy and identity in Second Language Learning (SLL). It highlights the literature in the field related to the targeted areas in this study and informs my positioning and decision making in the research to identify and address the further research needed in the field. The chapter is structured into three main sections which are further divided into subsections. The first section 2.1 addresses learner autonomy in second language learning and is followed by section 2.2 which focuses on second language learner identity construction. The last section in the chapter 2.3 examines the relationship between and co-construction of learner autonomy and learner identity in language learning.

2.1. Learner autonomy

This section discusses several aspects of learner autonomy in language learning. It provides an overall reflection on learner autonomy (Section 2.1.1.); analyses learner autonomy in relation to personal relevance (Section 2.1.2); addresses some contributions to learner autonomy (Section 2.1.3); discusses some concepts related to learner autonomy (Section 2.1.4); examines the role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy (Section 2.1.5) and addresses proposed strategies for the development of learner autonomy (Section 2.1.6) and the influence of technology in autonomy development (Section 2.1.7).

2.1.1. Conceptualising learner autonomy

Autonomy has been acknowledged as a useful and multidimensional concept that cuts across several fields. Within the field of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics, it continues to gain increasing interest and attention to researchers, teachers, educational institutions, and individual learners. In mapping its etymology to ancient Greece, the word ‘autonomy’ consists of two parts: autos (self) and nomos (self-ruled), which denotes a state that is self-governed or self-ruled (Boud, 1981). Although a basic understanding of learner autonomy could be seen in the literature, due to its multidimensionality, there have been slight differences in the definitions of learner autonomy among theorists and researchers. Amongst the wealth of definitions on the topic, Holec’s (1981) and Benson’ (2011) definitions have been the most cited over the years. Driving from Holec’s (1981) standpoint, autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (p. 3). By this, learners take responsibility of setting goals,

determining the purpose of their learning, the content and methods of learning, as well as monitoring their learning progress, and evaluating its outcomes.

In a similar light, Benson (2011) views autonomy as a learners' capacity to control of their own learning (p. 58). He adopts the term 'capacity' to refer to what an individual has the potential to do, rather than what they actually do, and 'control' to refer to individuals' power to make decisions and choices and to act on them (Huang and Benson, 2013). By controlling the course of the learning with influence from other factors such as teachers and institutions, learners tend to explore, activate and utilise the potential within them to learn more effectively. Huang and Benson (2013) believe that learners' capacity to control their language learning implies that they have certain study skills (which are expressed in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning) and sufficient knowledge of the target language to control the learning task (p. 9). By taking responsibility over their learning, Benson (2006) proposes that autonomy "involves abilities and attitudes that people possess and develop to various degrees" (p.1). Therefore, autonomy is an innate characteristic that needs to be developed, although it might differ from learner to learner.

Language learners tend to acquire autonomy in different ways and at different degrees depending on individual characteristics and learning conditions within which they find themselves (O'Leary, 2018). While language learners take control of their learning as Benson (2006) highlights, "Autonomy is about people taking more control over their lives – individually and collectively… over their learning in classrooms and outside… over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them" (P.1), the degree to which learners are autonomous differs. These degrees, however, change over time as learners tend to either enhance their autonomy or fall back on the level of control they possess and exercise. From this, one sees the different degrees to which autonomous learners are and how these degrees change over time as learners tend to take on more responsibilities related to their learning. For example, when active learners self-initiate their actions rather than being controlled or commanded by their teacher or the system, their intrinsic motivation and autonomy become stronger (Ushioda, 2003). This enhances the feelings learners have of being the agent of their own action (autonomy), relating back to Deci and Flaste's (1995) view that without learners having the feeling of ownership, self-determination and agency, autonomy cannot be developed. Autonomy has been referred to as the 'cornerstone to successful lifelong learning' (O'Leary, 2018).

The general concept of learner autonomy is rooted in the natural tendency of learners taking control of their learning. Although some researchers claim autonomy to be an inherent skill which is suppressed as learners go through the processes of educational institutions (Benson 2006), a majority of the practitioners in the field agree that autonomy is a skill that is available to all and can be developed in any learner given the right conditions and preparation. However, this is expressed to different degrees and in different ways according to unique characteristics of each language learner and learning situation. It is also agreed that autonomous learning is more effective in enhancing language learning than non-autonomous learning (Benson, 2011).

2.1.2. Autonomy and personal relevance

In discussing autonomy and personal relevance, the capacity to control learning in L2 learning implies learners' capacity to make their learning of personal relevance, to align with their needs and purposes which they have personally identified, or through a negotiation process, have voluntarily agreed with which to identify (Huang and Benson, 2013). In language learning, when referring to ability in autonomy, according to Huang and Benson (2013), it is primarily the ability of learners to make informed decision and choices and to act on them in order to make learning of more personal relevance to them which relates to their desire and freedom to learn something that is personally relevant.

Furthermore, personal relevance in learner autonomy research is linked to learner agendas and affordances. Learner agendas refer to "learners' goal-setting and action-planning to manage their own learning" (Huang 2006a, p.100). Learners' ability to establish personal agendas for their learning is considered a defining characteristic of their autonomy (Littlewood, 1990; Little and Dam, 1998; Huang, 2006a). When learners follow their own agendas other than that of their teachers, they need to find personal relevance or reason for studying in executing their own agendas. Huang (2006b) argues that "autonomy is concerned with the expression and exploration of learners own meanings and purposes." The informed decisions and actions they make in their learning reflect their purposes.

Littlewood (1999) highlights that learners' capacity to establish their personal learning agendas is a proactive rather than reactive autonomy. He refers to proactive autonomy as one in which the learners create the learning objectives, select the methods and techniques for learning and evaluate their progress. This type of autonomy affirms learners' individuality and sets up directions in the world they have partially constructed. On the other hand, reactive autonomy is that which learners do not determine their own directions but are able to take control of

organising their resources when these directions which have been initiated in order to achieve their goals (Littlewood 1999, p. 75).

In addition, related to personal relevance is learners' affordances. These are the opportunities and possibilities for action within an environment which are perceived by the learner (Gibson, 1979 in Huang and Benson, 2013). Learners who find personal relevance in their learning have a higher possibility of perceiving affordances in their learning contexts. Learners tend to perceive different possibilities and opportunities for learning within particular learning situations and contexts (Huang and Benson, 2013). In Murray's (2011) study of students on a self-directed learning course, she found that the course offered several opportunities for students to personalise their learning, experiment with the learning goals, find learning strategies and materials, directly engage in the learning process, reflect on their experiences and seek support from the learning environment when required.

The aim of promoting autonomous learning is to make learning more personal and focused (Huang, 2006b). Consequently, there is higher outcome achievement, since learning centres on learners' needs and preferences, in contrast to the traditional teacher-led approach in which the teacher makes most of the decisions. Therefore, to achieve autonomous learning, learners need to be actively involved; there needs to be a provision of options and resources; leaners need to be offered choices and decision-making opportunities; to be encouraged to reflect on their learning and there needs to be support and guidance for the learners. In classrooms where autonomy is encouraged, the teacher becomes more of a facilitator and less of an instructor; learners are encouraged not to rely on the teacher as the primary source of knowledge; leaners are encouraged to maximise their capacity to learn for themselves, learners' awareness of their learning styles is highlighted and learners are encouraged to develop learning strategies that best suit them (Huang and Benson, 2013; Murray, 2011). Learners intending to develop autonomy are encouraged to regularly assess their 'why' for learning, set goals and self-assess their learning.

2.1.3. Some contributions to the understanding of learner autonomy

Throughout the research on autonomy in language learning, several researchers have proposed definitions of learner autonomy, with some addressed here. The most cited is Holec's (1981) description of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning… to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (p. 3). When learners can harness and control the decisions related to the aspects of their learning process,

Holec refers to them as being autonomous. Thus, a learner is considered an autonomous learner when they can assume responsibility for their learning without intervention from the teacher (Kaltenbock, 2001). This responsibility not only includes the learner determining the purpose, content and method of learning, but equally monitoring his/her learning progress and evaluating its outcomes (Byram, 2004). In the trend of encouraging learners to become independent learners, researchers and language practitioners aim to help learners become life-long learners, a skill that can be transferred and applied to other areas of life and learning (O'Leary, 2018).

Little (1991) addresses the notion of autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p. 4) wherein, learners evolve from complete dependence on teachers and teaching materials and begin reflecting on and critically analysing their learning progress, making independent decisions and acting towards enhancing their learning. This can be a guided process through formal learning (teacher and peer support) or independent process (out of classroom context) to autonomy. Little (1994) further includes "relatedness" to the concept of learner autonomy and states that learner autonomy is "the product of interdependence rather than independence" (p. 435), including the role of social interaction in developing learner autonomy. Little (1991, p.4), as highlighted by Benson (2001, 2011), adds another (psychological) dimension to the Vygotskyan view of autonomy which regards autonomy as a phenomenon that incorporates 'individual cognitive' and 'social interaction' notions, includes 'interdependence' and adopts freedom and choice (ibid). Thus, emphasising the relevance of social interactions in promoting learner autonomy, stating that autonomy is equally a social construct. Little (2009) equally describes learner autonomy as learners' ability to "set their own agenda and follow it through, to feel competent in what they do and to be assured of their relatedness to other people" (p. 223). Thus, emphasising the importance of willingness, agency and confidence in developing autonomy.

Gathercole (1990) delineated autonomy as "when the learner is willing to and capable of taking charge of his own learning" (p.16). The role of 'independence' is important as learners should be able to choose their own materials, tasks, methods, resources and set goals willingly. Thus, Gathercole's (1990) perspective on learner autonomy relates to the exploration of how, what and why learners are able to learn independently. Language learners should be encouraged to ask and answer these questions to enhance their understanding and gain greater control of their learning.

Another view which has been well acknowledged and has made significant contributions to the notion of autonomy in language learning is Benson's (2011) definition of learner autonomy as the learner's "capacity to control their own learning" (p. 58). By referring to learners' *capacity to control*, Benson points out that learners have the potential needed to become autonomous and that they need to control this potential by making choices, taking decisions, and acting on them. Holec (1988) explains that "the autonomous learner is not automatically obliged to self-direct his learning either totally or even partially. The learner will make use of his ability to do this only if he so wishes and if he is permitted to do so by the material, social and psychological constrains to which he is subjected" (p. 8). Therefore, learners' ability, desire to act and freedom (the extent to which learners are 'permitted' to control their learning by the stake holders in the learning process and learning conditions within which they find themselves) are significant considerations in the development of learner autonomy (Huang and Benson, 2013).

Benson (2011) discusses three dimensions of control in learners' autonomous learning as learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. Huang and Benson (2013) further explain that learning management refers to the daily practices which the learner is involved in that make up the language, that is, the "how", "where" and "when" of learning, for example, making a study plan or incorporating language learning into daily routine. They refer to cognitive processes as being concerned with the "how" of language learning in a cognitive sense, for example, attending to language input, noticing and reflecting on the language learning. Learning content involves "what" and "how much" of the language is learned and it is linked to the "why" (learner's purpose) of language learning. Proposedly, in working towards achieving autonomy, these dimensions need to be considered.

2.1.4. Concepts related to learner autonomy

Autonomy has been associated with and sometimes misrepresented by other related concepts in language learning such as self-directed learning, independent learning and self-access which are discussed here.

Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning is often used as a synonym for autonomy. In 1993, Stephen Brookfield, from a perspective of Critical Pedagogy, talked of self-directed learning as an "alternative form of practice that began as a challenge to institutional adult education provision" (p. 228). This form of learning was later seen as technical and accommodating and is common mainly in adult

education. He opines that, self-directed learners attempt "to acquire skills, knowledge, and self-insight through educational experiences that they are responsible for arranging" (1986, p.149). In recent years, self-directed learning has gain increasing ground in theory (research) and practice with the changes in language learning methods, strategies and technological learning platforms and equipment. This type of learning has similar characteristics to autonomous learning. Cotterall (1998) states that this self-directed learning usually takes place out of formal classroom-learning settings and mainly in the learner's own time whereby the learner takes on the roles of both the instructor and the proficient learner. Similar to autonomy, she states that these learners display different degrees of autonomy (ibid).

Knowless (1975), who is considered the chief proponent of andragogy (adult learning), felt that adults become increasingly self-directed as they mature. Knowless (1975) refers to self-directed learning as "the process in which individuals take initiative to diagnose learning needs, set goals for meeting those needs, figure out resources and strategies to make learning happen, and evaluate the process" (Hawkins, 2018). According to the Council of Europe's (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CERF) self-directed learning entails "raising the learner's awareness of his or her present state of knowledge; self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives; selection of materials; self-assessment" (¶ 1.5). The learners are, therefore, involved in the entire learning process. Merriam and Bierema (2014) state that self-directed learning is "a hallmark of adult leaning" (p. 62).

Furthermore, Benson (2006) reaffirms that practitioners agree that autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of 'self-education', self-access', 'self-instruction', 'out-of-class learning', or 'distance learning.' He argues that these terms basically refer to the various ways and degrees to which learners learn by themselves and not necessary demonstrating abilities and attitudes, which he believes are what autonomy involves. By this, he highlights that learning by yourself is not a proof of having the capacity to learn by yourself although as compared to others, autonomous learners may demonstrate a better capacity of learning by themselves, but do not necessarily have to learn by themselves.

Independent learning

Independent language learning (ILL) has been closely associated with self-directed learning and learner autonomy. The concern for the individual learner, learner choice, control, and responsibility are seen as central to the idea and practice of independent language learning (White, 2008; Ghannam, 2019) and links to learner autonomy in the expectation that the

language learners can be independent. This expectation also underlies much of the writing on self-access learning (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001), distance learning (White, 2003; Murphy, 2005), and self-directed learning (Bierema, 2014; Hawkins, 2018), which are believed to be closely linked to learner autonomy.

Luk (2012) chooses to adopt an understanding of independent learning as any work done by students to improve their English ability, wherein the work is not assigned by the teacher and is done outside classroom time. It has been deemed essential in complementing classroom learning, but also in reflecting a movement towards more learner-centred learning approaches which view learners as individuals who have rights and needs and can exercise and develop responsibility for their learning (White, 2008). Cotterall and Reinders (2001) point out that ILL is essential in increasing efficiency in learning and view it as a means of developing learner autonomy. In a bit to encourage out of class learning, there has been a rise in the establishment of language resource centres (Reinders and Lázaro, 2007) and platforms wherein learners are encouraged to learn independently. These centres and platforms are aimed at encouraging language learners to take more responsibility for their learning and have access to a wider range of resources other than that provided in the classroom.

Some of the principles which have been stated (White, 2008) to underpin independent language learning are: extending or optimising learners' choice, focusing on individual learners' needs, it is not the interest of an institution or a teacher, and decision-making is diffused to learners. This puts the learner at the centre of the language learning journey, helping them to be more aware and knowledgeable of themselves, their motivation and beliefs, their learning preferences and needs and the learning strategies they use to enhance their target language competence. White (2008) argues that the primary challenge in ILL is "for learners to develop the ability to engage with, interact with and derive benefit from learning environments which are not directly mediated by a teacher" (p. 1). She further argues, drawing from distance language learning conceptualisations, that learners can largely develop this ability when they construct an interface which is personally meaningful with the learning environment and create strategies, which she believes play a key role in this development.

Three broad interpretations of independent language learning have been explored (White, 2008). The first refers to the learning context or setting (Wright, 2005) for language learning where learners develop skills in the target language often, but not always, individually. Here, emphasis is on the independence of the learners learning from the mediating and influencing

presence of a teacher during the learning course. It also highlights the degree of freedom learners have to select learning opportunities, make choices, and use resources based on their needs. The second dimension of ILL refers to a philosophy or approach to learning in ILL which aims at fostering and developing independence in learners who may (or may not) be in independent learning settings. In 1991, Candy argued that independent learning can both be a process and a goal, that they are both intertwined. Dickinson (1994) later argued that the most effective way of promoting favourable attitudes towards independence is when language learners are equipped to think about their objectives and needs and then learn how to effectively structure their learning to meet these needs. The third dimension refers to the learner's skills and attributes, which is linked to learning strategies and instruction strategies.

Independence involves developing the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and strategies learners need to take actions in dealing with their learning. In this sense, independent learning is based on learners' understanding of their interests and needs, fostered by the creation of experiences and opportunities which encourage self-reliance and learner choice and promote the development of metacognitive knowledge and learning strategies (White, 2008).

Self-access learning

With the increasing changes in language education and socio-economic and health challenges, the increase in self-access learning has been noticed in several countries and language learning research (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001; Reinders and Lázaro, 2007; Javdani et al., 2011). Developing their perspective on self-access language learning, (henceforth, SALL), Gardner and Miller (1997) define it as "learning in which students take more responsibility of their learning than in teacher directed settings" (p. xvii). Cotterall and Reinders (2001) partially disagreed with this based on their experience saying that learners do not necessary assume more responsibility for their learning when they engage in SALL. Gardner and Miller later approached SALL as "an approach to learning language" (1999, p. 8) and related it to the development of learner autonomy in that it offers guidance in varying degrees in different contexts but encourages learners to advance towards autonomy (1997, xvii).

Cotterall and Reinders (2001, p. 2) based their understanding of self-access language learning as the learning that takes place in self-access centres (SAC) and has the potential of promoting learner autonomy. They suggest four way through which self-access language learning (SALL) can enhance learner autonomy: Firstly, the provision of facilities which enable learners to pursue their own interests and goals while accommodating idiosyncratic differences in learners

learning style, pace and level; secondly, resources in SALL are able to make learners more aware of the learning process through highlighting aspects relating to learning management such as monitoring learning process and setting goals; thirdly, SALL can serve as a bridge between the teacher-directed learning process in which the target language is studied and practised and the "real world" in which learners use the language in communication; and finally, where learners are obliged to or prefer to learn without a teacher, SALL can enhance their learning autonomy by supporting their learning where an organised language course is absent. These help learners to be more aware of their learning, choose what, when and how to learn based on their reasons (why) for learning, and help them to become active participants in their learning journey through being able to set goals, manage and monitor their learning in their own learning styles and levels leading to an increase in their autonomy.

Studies (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001; Javdani et al., 2011) found that self-access centres were useful in helping learners learning specialised English and in learning to learn. Learners, however, expressed difficulties in finding the right materials and the harder they found the search, the less helpful they found the self-access centres in supporting them become more independent learners. Whereas, those who found the centres helpful for learning English, and there being the presence of a helper, acknowledged its fostering of their independent learning and learning to learn knowledge (Javdani et al., 2011). Cotterall and Reinders (2001) emphasised the need to enhance the resources and training provided in self-access centre for learners to be better supported in meeting their needs and make self-access learning more efficient.

Self-directed learning, independent learning and self-access learning are, therefore, seen to be closely linked, but not the same as, learner autonomy. As suggested, these could all lead to the promotion and support of learner autonomy, but it does not necessarily mean that learners engaged in these types of learning can be considered autonomous learners. Other related concepts include distance learning, self-instruction (Little, 1991; Hughes, 1997), self-regulation (Brown, 2009) and language learning beyond the classroom (Reinders and Benson, 2017; Bendebiche, 2022).

2.1.5. The role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy

Autonomous learning over the years has been researched from different domains, and in recent years, following criticisms on the focus on the individual learner, there has been interest in the role of the teacher and peers in encouraging autonomy, a move from individual to interpersonal.

This section discusses the role of the teacher in enhancing language learners' autonomy; highlighting what autonomy is not, different terminologies used in describing the role of the teacher in autonomous learning, and how teachers can effectively maximise their role.

There is a common agreement among researchers (Masouleh and Jooneghani, 2012; Kelly, 2014; Gao, 2018Ahmadi and Izadpanah, 2019) that autonomy is not a teacher-less learning process and state which a learner achieves, as the role of the teacher is crucial in guiding learners to achieving autonomy. A misconception which has arisen from Holec's (1981) description of autonomy and has received criticism is the absence of the role of the teacher in guiding students to become autonomous learners. It is important to note that the literature (Masouleh and Jooneghani, 2012; Kelly, 2014) emphasises that autonomy is NOT a *teacherless* learning, and that the place of the teacher in assisting learners to become autonomous is crucial and cannot be ignored. In the journey to developing autonomous learners, the teacher has been identified by various terminologies some of which are manager, counsellor, resource and facilitator.

Some researchers such as Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) emphasize that learner autonomy is not a teacher-less learning process and state a learner achieves, as the role of the teacher is crucial in moulding learners to achieving autonomy. Little (1991) highlights some useful statements on what autonomy is NOT: First, it is not a synonym for self-instruction, that is, it is not limited to learning without the help of a teacher. Second, in the context of the classroom, autonomy does not imply an abandonment of responsibilities on the part of the teacher and letting learners proceed with learning to the best of their ability. Third, autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners, that is, it is not another teaching method. Fourth, autonomy is not a single, easily described behaviour. And fifth, autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners. Autonomy is, therefore, something both the teacher and learner work together towards achieving. The Second Language Teacher (SLT) needs to be able to accept and understand the need and possibility of their leaners to become autonomous, as they take decisions and actions that best suit their needs and abilities with the teacher being there as a facilitator to support the learning process. Some terms have been used to describe the role of the teacher in enhancing learner autonomy.

In 1988, Higgs proposed that, "the teacher should act as a manager of the learning programme and a resource person in autonomous learning in which the learner works on a learning task or activity and is largely independent of the teacher" (p.41). Although the learner, to an extent, is

working independently, the teachers, acting mainly as a *resource base,* is there to provide support and guidance when necessary. In later years, Weifen (2001) stated that, "in the process of autonomous learning, teachers should assist learners in cultivating their abilities of setting goals, of selecting learning contents, of determining learning paces, of choosing learning methods and skills, of monitoring learning processes and of assessing learning effects. Therefore, teachers should act as counsellor, facilitator and resource person". The multidimensional role of the teacher in the language classroom emphasises its importance in promoting learner autonomy. In a similar light, Gardner and Miller (2002) summarise the role of the teacher in what they term self-access learning as an authentic language user, information provider, counsellor, materials writer, manager, administrator, organiser and assessor who supports the language learner to automaticity.

Fumin and Li's (2012) study on the roles of teachers in facilitating learner autonomy grouped teacher's roles into learning regulator, resource facilitator, study guide and classroom organiser, and found that learners see teachers more as resource facilitators. In this light, they suggest that teachers should realise learners' potentials to learn the L2 through multi-dimensional channels and thus should recommend a variety of helpful English learning books, resources and websites and to encourage learners to read English magazines and newspapers and listen to English news. They opine that the provision of multimedia and network technologies to teachers in this era of information is indispensable (p.53).

The idea of developing learner autonomy centres around the need to reduce the role of the teacher in the learning process and give the learner more responsibility over their own leaning, moving from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred learning. To achieve this, Borg and Al-Busaidi, (2012) emphasise that teachers need to provide opportunities for learners to make choices and decisions concerning their learning. By asking learners to choose, for example, the learning activities, learners develop a sense of assurance and pride in themselves from the acknowledgement and consideration of their opinions thus, developing the confidence to make more choices regarding their learning. Apart from asking learners to give their own suggestions, teachers could provide a variety of resources, tasks, lesson plans and strategies for learners to choose what they prefer to use for the lesson while the teachers serve as a guide in the leaning process. In guiding learners through their preferential choices and control of their learning, van Leir (2007) suggests that pedagogical scaffolding *(handover/takeover)* is an effective way of promoting learner autonomy. Belland (2017) refers to scaffolding, which is related to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as temporary support that

is provided to students as they engage with problems, and is aimed at enabling students develop skills to be able to independently perform the target task in the future (Pea, 2004; Belland, 2014). As teachers attend to the skills and knowledge emerging in the learners and increase learners' roles in the learning process, they permit learners to take on more responsibilities regarding their own learning.

Several teachers who promote learner autonomy regard autonomy as an important facet of their teaching and employ a number of strategies to realise it in their learners, such as carefully analysing the needs and choices of their learners, introducing and modelling independent learning strategies for learners, teaching learners techniques to use to monitor their learning, regularly consulting with learners to assist them in planning their learning and encouraging learners to use self-access centres where a variety of resources for self-directed learning are available (Jinfen and Li, 2004; Busaidi, 2012; Huang and Benson, 2013). Teachers need to give learners choice, responsibility, freedom, independence, promote learners' thinking and learning skills (creativity, digital literacy, learning to learn, critical thinking) and social and emotional skills (communication, collaboration, emotional development, social responsibilities) to help the learner attend autonomy. Huang and Benson (2013) propose that for teachers to assist learners in noticing, learning and processing features of language, they need to provide noticing cues by helping the learners control their attention processes and attending to their language input.

2.1.6. Proposed strategies for enhancing learner Autonomy

In the field of language teaching, teachers scaffold learners towards independence using various strategies to help learners develop autonomy, since the capacity to take control of one's learning according to Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) is not innate but must be taught. Some of the proposed strategies noted in this section include encouraging learners as partners in the learning and decision-making process; developing learners' skills (cognitive, social, psychological, political and metacognitive); promoting learners' agency; encouraging teacher autonomy; developing a learning plan and other practical strategies.

The main idea relating to learner autonomy is that if learners are involved in the processes of decision-making regarding their own language learning, there is a greater possibility for them to be more enthusiastic about the learning, thus, resulting to a more focused and purposeful acquisition of new knowledge (Menegale, 2019). A general acknowledgement in learner autonomy is that its development in the language classroom entails learners being actively

involved in making decisions concerning their own learning with the process requiring a change in the roles of teachers and learners and a transfer of responsibilities form the teacher to the learner. Jinfen and Li (2004) suggest that English teachers should help learners gain confidence in learning English and in regulating their learning by implementing learning strategies which promote autonomy such as using self-access centres and interacting with other learners on various topics and in different ways.

In 1997, Benson distinguished three broad ways in which learner autonomy in language education can be discussed. First, he addressed a 'technical perspective' wherein he emphasized skills and strategies involved in unsupervised learning and specific kinds of activities or processes that are involved in learner autonomy such as 'metacognitive', 'cognitive' and social strategies. Next, he referred to a 'psychological perspective', highlighting cognitive abilities and broader attitudes which enable learners to take responsibility of their learning. Lastly, a 'political perspective' wherein learners are empowered and emancipated by being given the responsibility to take control of their learning (Masouleh and Jooneghani, 2012).

Learners need to develop strategies with which they are comfortable and believe will help them to attain their goals, and teachers need to encourage learners to develop these strategies, helping them become more autonomous (Balchin, 2012). In Ueno's (2019) study, the participants were found strategizing ways in which to best engage in fluent conversations with their interlocutors. Although there was a lack of fluency in their first conversations, they individually devised metacognitive, social and affective strategies which were utilised to negotiate meaning, making incomprehensible input comprehensible, resulting to an increase in proficiency. Because learners understand themselves best, learning becomes more effective when they, with the guidance obtained from their teachers, employ strategies which they believe best suits their learning. Harmer (2007) argues that irrespective of how good a teacher may be, learners will face difficulties in learning a language unless they aim at learning outside alongside during classroom time (p. 394). The effective participation of the learner is key in developing their autonomy and training the learner on how to use, develop and use these strategies is essential.

The social dimensions of autonomy in the learning process have been stressed highlighting that developing a capacity for autonomy involves interaction with peers and teachers (Raya and Lamb, 2008; O' Leary 2018) as well as working independently. In discussing the social aspect of enhancing learner autonomy, the use of interaction between peers and teachers have been

considerably acknowledged. Kao (2007) proposes developing learner autonomy through a peer teaching experience. By exposing learners to a peer teaching and evaluation experience, they are encouraged to not only reflect on the work which is being done but equally on their skills in analysing their thoughts and those of others. Learners develop the ability to critic, evaluate and reflect on their work, the works of others, and what they read in and out of the classroom (Kao, 2007).

Similarly, research on action-based pedagogy promotes autonomy as it encourages agency (learners acting on their learning) and learners working individually and together on projects to construct and shape the path of their own learning. Supported by the cognitive and constructivist view to language learning, learners' active involvement in their own learning, independently or interdependently increases their learning motivation and develops their autonomy (Benson, 2011; O'Leary, 2018).

Another way of developing learner autonomy which has been found useful is by promoting teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy has been described as teachers' "capacity to improve their own teaching through their own efforts' and 'freedom to be able to teach in the way that one wants to teach" (Lamb, 2008, p. 275). Teacher autonomy has also been acknowledged as central to teachers' efforts in enhancing learner autonomy (Gao, 2018).

The development of an individual learning plan (ILP) for students wherein the teacher assists the students in developing a plan to guide their learning process has also been found useful (Gao, 2018). Learners have tutorial sessions with their tutors to discuss their progress. The learning plan promotes learner autonomy as they set goals which they can always refer to, look at, and take informed and conscious steps (agency) towards achieving. The teacher provides oral and written feedback to guide the students in their learning.

Balchin (2012) suggests three practical ways in which learner autonomy can be developed in English language learning with the aim of complementing, rather than replacing existing classroom practices. These strategies are subdivided and include: First, making language learners more responsible for their own learning. Here, he suggests personalised language learning in which learners use the target language to refer to things that are personal and relevant to them, making it more meaningful to their lives and increasing their personal investment in the language, in turn encouraging more autonomous use of the language. Also, peer teaching in which learners learn the language through teaching it; negotiated syllables wherein learners can partner with the teacher to decide on some areas to focus on; collaborative

learning with other learners in pairs or groups; vocabulary notebooks in which learners are exposed to a board range of vocabulary, document details of new vocabulary and revise them and engage in dictionary work wherein learners are encouraged to use dictionaries, for example, to find different meanings and pronunciation of words.

Second, learners should engage in reflection tasks wherein learners think about learning, for example, through documenting what they liked or did not like about a lesson and what they would like to dedicate more time on; keep learner dairies and journals which can help learners to further reflect on their learning, practice authentic writing, and initiate learner-teacher discussions; and asking learners to develop specific, realistic and measurable plans at the beginning of the year/programme/term on how they would like to enhance their learning within a specific time period.

Lastly, developing autonomy outside the classroom through self-access resources, language learning websites and other technology. Balchin (2012) notes that the use of these resources, especially technology-based resources in promoting learner autonomy is to a large extent dependent on the degree to which the technology is available and can be used.

As seen, over the years, several strategies have been proposed for the development of learner autonomy in different contexts and for different learners. These strategies have equally been found to produce different results in different learners at different times across the language learning journey. It is important for teachers to assess which strategies are effective for their learners.

2.1.7. Autonomy and technology-assisted learning

Passing years have witnessed a continuous increase in the use of technology, online and self-access platforms. With the outbreak and prevalence of the COVID 19 pandemic across the globe, learning was inevitably moved to virtual spaces and the use of technology in language learning was significantly increased, acknowledged and essential than ever before (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020; Dutton, 2021). Technology here includes all forms of technological advancements used in assisting language teaching and learning.

There has been an increase in technology-assisted language learning and the use of self-access facilities in educational institutions in recent years. The provision and availability of self-access and online platforms and resources motivates and encourages learners to partake in more learning in and out of the classroom and at their convenience (Dutton, 2021). The development

of varieties of technology has had a significant influence in language education which continues to grow through the years with the development of novel hard and software. The importance and use of technology and online platforms in L2 teaching and learning has been acknowledged (Fummin and Li, 2012; Duttan 2021), however, the need to train both teachers and learners on how to use these new learning equipment, techniques and strategies has been emphasised by language researchers and practitioners.

Fumin and Li (2012) opined that the provision of multimedia and network technologies to teachers in this era of information is indispensable. The use of these technologies will help teachers to use what learners are used to in their everyday life, thus, motivating them to engage in and control the learning (Karam, 2018). Teachers maximise the use of these platforms and learners' motivation and engagement to develop learners' autonomy. Fumin and Li (2012) further assert that there is a need to adopt a curriculum and teaching model which encourages learners to learn English free from the constrains of space and time and built on modern technology to get learners always involved in learning including during their regular daily activities. The increase in the availability of language learning resources over the years have created more possibilities for the promotion of learner autonomy than in previous years and has made 'autonomy', as a topic, more relevant and of greater interest than it used to be.

2.2. Learner identity

Learner identity has been a significant aspect of discussion and research in language teaching and learning for many years. This section addresses aspects of learner identity in language learning including an overview of learner identity (Section 2.2.1), identity and the L2 self (Section 2.2.2), identity in the immigration context (Section 2.2.3) and teachers' roles in learners' identity development (Section 2.2.4).

2.2.1. Conceptualising learner identity

Attention to learners' sense of identity as L2 learners has increased in recent years. A general conceptualisation of learners' identity in language learning is discussed here including different perceptions of identity, viewing identity as constructed through and constructing language learning, and discussing ascribed, attained and pluralistic identity construction.

Norton (2000) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p.5). In general, the concept of identity may simply

be regarded as "our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world" (Kanno, 2003, p.3). In a similar view, Daielewics (2005) refers to identity as "our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are" (p.10). Identity construction from Norton's view begins from the individual shaping their place in the world (local or global) to their construction and reconstruction of that identity influenced by the change of time and context and lastly, their visions of what they hope or desire for the future.

Constructing identity through language and the society

Identity and language learning go beyond the concerns of linguistic input and output in Second Language Learning (SLL) to the relationship between the language learner and the broader social and cultural context within which they find themselves and beyond. From a recognition of language as a social practice, identity expounds on language as both constructs and is constructed by a variety of relationships. Hawkins (2005) defines this concept of identity formation as follows:

> Identity formation can be described as an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social context or environment, with particular attention paid to operant cultural and power relations. Individuals bring lived histories to activities and events in situated environments, and it is through communications and interactions with others in these environments that learners negotiate and co-construct their views of themselves and the world. The activities and contexts, however, are imbued with and represent specific values and ideologies (which privilege certain practices over others), and these shape the dynamics of the interactions (p.61).

The nature of identity in the literature on identity in second language education and social sciences has often been described as changing, multiple, fragmentary, elusive and contradictory; it can be transformative and transformational and constructed, negotiated and maintained to an extent through the social, political and historical discourse and language of a given context (Huang and Benson, 2013).

Language learning has been referred to as a process of identity construction (Paiva, 2011). Thus, as learners engage in the process of learning a new language, they are constructing or reconstructing their identity. In constructing an identity while learning a second/foreign language, van Lier states that, "learning an L2 involves a struggle to forge a new identity that is true to the self" (2004, p.47). This newly constructed identity is one where the learner is able to see themselves through who they intend to be by learning the new language. Identities according to van Lier (2007) are in constant construction, relocation and change as learners'

lives change as a result of learning a second language. New identities, which reflect the self to the new words and world are forged to bridge the gap between what they know and the new knowledge.

Identity as learners' lived experiences

While learning a L2, the learner does not only learn to communicate but is knowledgeable of their past (this is where I come from), clarifies their present, (this is what I am doing now) and establishes a vision for their future (this is where I want to go) (van Leir, 2007). Learners' identities are a construct of who they are and echoes their experiences as Wenger, (2000) argues that "an identity is not an abstract idea or a label, such as a title, an ethnic category or a personality trait. It is a lived experience of belonging (or not belonging)" and that "a strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments" (p. 239). Thus, when language learners incorporate themselves within the context where the target language is spoken, they tend to go through and share different learning experiences, affections and commitments which contribute to shaping their identities as learners and speakers of the target language.

Ascribed and attained identities

In discussing identity, Brophy (2009) distinguishes two types: ascribed and attained identities, with the former being those that are implemented upon learners by the genetic makeup or social circumstances within which they find themselves (for example, ethnicity, race, nationality, sex, socio-economic status). Attained identities on the other hand, relate to those that echo personality and personal interests which are attained through individualisation and choice (such as identifying oneself as a pianist, artist or doctor), they are self-created, chosen. Language learners could sometimes either choose to learn a language mainly in order to be identified as speakers of that language and to interact with its native speakers or could be obliged to learn the language based on the conditions within which they find themselves. When learners deliberately learn a new language, they attain new identities.

A pluralistic identity

Ushioda (2006) talks of a pluralistic identity and that the individual pursuit of this identity is not problematic. Learners may choose to learn a new language for the desire to have more than one linguistic identity (multilingual identity or global citizenship). In a similar light, Lamb (2004) discusses the effects of lingual globalisation on individual identities. Drawing from his

research on English learners in Indonesia, he speculates that learners' motivation to learn English may be partly due to a desire to pursue a bicultural identity, that is, on one hand, a global citizen, and on the other hand, a sense of their national identity as an Indonesian.

Learners can choose to learn a language just for the desire to extend their identity beyond their first language to associate and identify themselves on a broader platform to the world. Thus, according to Lamb (2004) individuals may aspire to "a vision of an English-speaking, globally involved but nationally responsible future self" (p.16); a bilingual identity, wherein they do not lose a sense of who they are (L1 identity) but are able to relate to the world through a more global language. This is mainly common in foreign language contexts as opposed to second language contexts where the need to integrate into the target language society is primordial.

Identity in simple terms is what distinguishes and/or unites people. Bamberg (2010) sees identity as including a contradictory attempt to both 'differentiate and integrate a sense of self' in different personal and social dimensions, such as race, gender, age, socio-economic status and regional territory (p.1). Learners develop collective as well as individual social identities to interact and express themselves differently and in different contexts (Eccles 2009).

Identity influencing language learning

In as much as language learning impacts learners' identities, learners' identities equally influence language learning. Norton (2000) believes that language learners are not unitary and fix personalities, but individuals who possess complex and changing identities, and who constantly interact with the society. The fragmentary and elusive nature of identity influences learners' investment in language learning. Identity can positively or negatively impact language learning. For example, learners who have a low sense of learner identity might present a resistance to language learning or choose not to participate during the language learning process whereas, learners with a high positive sense of identity might invest more effort in learning the language. Hirst (2007) added that when learners feel a disconnection between their desired learning community and the actual leaning community, they might tend to resist language learning.

2.2.2. Identity and the L2 self

The development of an L2 identity has been closely discussed in relation to the L2 self. Here, an understanding of the concepts of *self* is addressed in relation to language learners' identity construction. Some of these selves include the possible self, the ideal self, the ought to self, the

imaginary/desired self, and the learning experience. It further discusses the concept of Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) in language learning.

The relationship between learner identity and language learning is related to the development of the ideal self which is based on earlier theories of Possible Selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) and Self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). The theory of 'Possible Selves' which Markus and Nurius (1987) refer to as *Selves* represent 'individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming' (p. 157). Learners create a picture of these selves throughout the learning process. Dörnyei (2005) suggests that a vision of oneself as a proficient L2 speaker might be one of the components of one's future ideal or possible self.

Dörnyei (2009) further expands on the concept of selves in his Motivational Self System model wherein he distinguishes three components of the self: the ideal self, the ought-to self, and the learning experience. The ideal self is regarded as the strongest component of the model and is referred to as an outstanding motivator to language learning. The belief is that the envisioning of this future self/identity might be the basis for which learners are motivated to learn the target language (TL) and take control of their learning and not necessary as a desire to identify themselves with the group of TL native speakers. Learners, therefore, might have different reasons for choosing to learn a language and construct identities in that language depending on their individual motivations for learning. There is need for concerted efforts to be made to reduce the misalignment between the actual self and the ideal self to enable learners achieve self-actualisation.

Literature on identity in SLL has been conceptualised in different ways across various studies on learner identity. An example of such diverse conceptions is in the relationship between the L2 self and identity. It is sometimes used as separate terms, synonyms (Taylor, 1989) and as a hybrid (self-identity), as van Lier (2007) simply puts, "identities are ways of relating the self to the world". Identity is conceptualised as "the self" (Taylor, 1989), or in broader terms as "who one is" (Gao, Li and Li, 2002, p.95) or as "who we are" (Kanno, 2003, p.3). Identity is a multi-layered ongoing process which involves questions such as 'who am I' as a learner. Teng (2017a) regards identity as a verbally enacted discursive product which benefits social positioning. In 1991, Lave and Wenger opined that learning is an inseparable and integral part of social practice that involves the construction of identities which are "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice" (p.53).

The notion of the period of time in constructing an identity and relating with other people of the society are highlighted. They define a community of practice as, "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). That is, in relation to this, learners associating themselves with others (in a group) who share the same or similar objectives.

Gao et al. (2002) and Huang's (2003) study with Chinese EFL learners revealed that they have the potential to extricate themselves from the limiting psychological constraints and advance beyond the level of instrumental language skills in order to construct their self-identity. This provides basis for which the question "who am I?" can be rephrased in a range of discourse styles, which encompass a construction or selection of inner pursuit, self-perception of learning competencies or/and a social role. Here, the context of the L2 learning has a significant influence on the learners' selection of selfhood. In EFL contexts, the immediate learning context may play a dominant part in the construction or formation of learner identity. Beyond the primary need for a sense of control, it is essential for EFL learners to understand a sense of identity, which may serve as a deep drive in their learning (Teng, 2019).

In discussing identity, it is essential to mention Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) theory of the L2 Motivational Self System which highlights the concepts of the *Ideal L2 self* (that is, what the learner would like to become as a speaker of the target language) and the *Ought-to L2 self* (which is the attributes the learner believes s/he should possess in order to meet expectations). Bearing in mind the concept of the *L2 self,* learners create identities of who they want to be or hope to be through the learning process which influences their learning directly or indirectly.

van Lier (2007) sees identities as "ways of relating the self to the world" (p. 58) and "the core of identity is voice" (p.47). A reflective consciousness of having a self comes with being human, as the nature of the self is at the core of being human (Lewis, 1990). Baumeister (1997) presented an illuminating perception of the self as a general term which represents "the direct feeling each person has of privileged access to his or her own thoughts and feelings and sensations" (pp. 681-682), highlighting that the self consists of physical, affective and cognitive aspects.

Traditionally, a person's self-concept has been seen as a summary of their self-knowledge related to how they view themselves at present. Markus and Nurius' (1986), first proposed in their theory, centred around the concept of 'possible selves' that the self regulates behaviour by setting goals and expectations. Contrary to the usual assumption of the self-concept as

consisting of information resulting from people's past experiences, Markus and Nurius's notion of possible selves is concerned with how individuals conceptualise their as-yet unrealistic potential of themselves, drawing on wishes, hopes and fantasies of "what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Dorney, 2009), denoting a self-dimension that refers to future self-states rather than current self-states.

In this sense, possible selves serve as 'future self-guides', pointing forward to conceptions that aim at explaining how an individual is moved from their present self towards the future self, wherein, at the centre lies a complex interplay of the individual's current and imaginative self-identities and their impact on purposive behaviour (Dorney, 2009; Yowell, 2002). Learners, therefore, set goals and expectations influenced by the visual image they have of their future selves and this visualisation in turn regulates their behaviour and attitudes toward their L2 learning.

Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs)

Moving on from viewing motivation simply as 'a springboard for action' to being "a uniquely self-renewing and sustainable process" (Dörnyei, Henry and Muir, 2015), a new concept was introduced termed Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs). It was introduced as a conceptual framework which "depicts unique periods of intensive motivational involvement both in pursuit of and fuelled by a highly valued goal/vision" (Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim, 2014, p. 9). DMC is aimed at enabling language learners to go beyond a focused behaviour in a single activity to engaging in intensive long-term motivation for the achievement of the language goal.

The language learner involved in a DMCs is maintained at this heightened motivational state through important facilitative structures including feedback reinforcement loops, the maintenance of positive emotions, and the expectation of arriving a new operational level. Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim (2014) believe that the implementation of DMCs in L2 learning can energise learners to exceed expected performance including across timescales, several levels, and in long-term engagements.

The key feature of the Directed Motivational Currents is believed (Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim, 2014) to be its *directional nature*, as it is powered by a well-defined goal, outcome and target, which drives the language learner, provides cohesion for their efforts and focuses their energy on the achievement of the final goal. With this, the DMC is manifested throughout the entire learning duration, stimulating and supporting a long-term behaviour in the learner, and fuelling

the sustainability of the motivation. Learners experiencing DMC are usually functioning at a heightened productivity state and can perform with enhanced intensity above and beyond what they believed they possibly could (Muir and Dörnyei, 2013; Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim, 2014; Dörnyei, et al., 2014). It increases the velocity at which a learner is transported towards the goal (see Section 2.3.2).

2.2.3. Identity in the immigration context

The English language has been learned across different contexts and environments, mainly grouped into the second or foreign language context. The former here refers to that in which a language learner is learning the language in a country where the target language is the main medium of communication, for example, learning English in the UK, America, Canada and Australia, while a foreign language context includes countries, such as China, India and Japan where English is not the first language. The immigration context is one in which the language learner has moved to and are learning the target language of that country. This section discusses three aspects: target language communities, power relations in L2 contexts and imagined communities.

2.2.3.1. Target language communities

Some studies conducted in second language immigration contexts have focused their research on a number of 'deep issues' which have significant effects on learners' sense of "who one is" and learners' membership in a given target language social group or community (Norton, 2000, 2001, 2011). Some of these issues include: learners' access to desired resources and the social networks of their living communities; access to their participation in events and activities of their target language communities and school practices; representation among target communities (including images, archetypes, or stereotypical identities by which immigrant students are labelled) and positioning in relations of power, negotiating membership and entry in target language communities; negotiating their participation in dominant and academic discourses, socialization and resistance and nonparticipation (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton and Toohey, 2000; Norton 2000, 2001; Toohey and Norton, 2003; Morita, 2004; Hawkins, 2005). Studies on identity in border-crossing contexts in second language education generate rich insight into the relationship between language acquisition and personal identity formation.

Studies show that learners' experiences as a learner and speaker of a second language generates personal fulfilment which tends to strengthen learners' identities (Norton, 2000; 2001). Here, identity is related to learners' personal pursuits and fulfilments and their self-perception.

According to Day (2002) identities are shaped when language learners engage themselves in classroom activities or when they learn the target language in socially shaped classrooms which is in line with Vygotsky's argument of learning being most effective in social interaction. L2 learners immersed in the target language social contexts have more opportunities to learn the language from social interactions with those of the society, beyond the classroom. In a similar light, Toohey (2000) notes that learners' identities are constructed, negotiated and shaped in the process of learning a language. These studies highlight the idea that language learning is not solely a cognitive academic activity, but a process of social interaction wherein learners learn from others in the social context and identities are constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed.

Language learners' expressing themselves in the TL are often exposed to ridicule, projecting a vulnerable self before their peers and other native speakers who find fun in counting their mistakes. However, expressing themselves in the second language can be an excellent tool for exploring their identity, particularly in an age wherein identity exploration is of pivotal importance (Ushioda, 2011; Tylor, 2013). The aspect of ridicule is often common in the L2 language context where the greater population knows and speaks the language. Learners' errors can easily be noticed by other proficient or native speakers. This can serve as a barrier or a motivation to learning the language in some learners. For example, learners who are generally shy, introverts or do not like being made fun of may tend to avoid engaging in discussions or participating in class activities for fear of being ridiculed. Other learners on the contrary with a more courageous personality or are more determined to learn the language may use ridicule as a motivation to learn the language faster. This could positively or negatively influence learners' identity and self-perception.

2.2.3.2. Power relations in second language immigration contexts

An issue in learner identity which has been found to dominate ESL learning context as opposed to EFL contexts is the influence of power relations on learners' identity. Norton's studies are mainly focused on contexts within which interaction in the target language occurs between native and non-native speakers. She suggests that the most salient issue within these contexts is the issue of power relations between language learners and native speakers (Norton, 2000, 2011, 2013). Teng (2019) notes that the issue of power relations may not be prominent in foreign language contexts as there are likely not many native speakers physically around to influence, dominate or direct the words, actions and/or feelings of other learners and individuals in communities of practice.

In creating identity through positioning in social discussions and interactions, Karam et al. (2020) state that one cannot simply assume a role that they desire as power relations among participants can often determine what positions and roles are available and possible to assume. Thus, individuals create their identity positions themselves or are positioned by others, highlighting the variability in the formation and co-formation of identities. Learners or other English speakers in social contexts (including classrooms) wielding greater power, for example, having better language proficiency and/or social skills may assume dominant identity roles as compared to less fluent or sociable learners leading to learners having to adopt what is left or construct a lesser identity of themselves which could be different from their imagined/desired identities.

Processes, such as assigning labels, creating stances and presuppositions, lead to the discursive construction of one's identity by another. For example, the deficit perspective of refugee English Language learners (Shapiro and MacDonald, 2017) and the stereotypical labelling of Arabs as violent terrorist (Yoder, Johnson and Karam, 2016) can lead to misconceptions of and discriminatory practices against the entire communities. Furthermore, the presupposition that learners are 'Limited English Proficient' speakers (Karam et al., 2020) shifts the focus to limited or lack of English rather than other skills/abilities and language resources that learners may have. Here, teachers' presuppositions and perceptions of their students play a major impact on the development of learners' autonomy, identity and language learning.

Also, learners' stance, how they position themselves and others in relation to how they feel, what they know, their judgment of who they are and what they do, has a powerful influence in determining their access and engagement and in mediating their understanding and experiences in the classroom (Karam et al., 2020). For example, in a study on twelve-year old Fawzi's learning, positionality and social interaction, Karam et al. (2020) present different positionalities drawn from the study. While Fawzi's teacher positions him as an isolated student who does not like interacting with the other students and prefers to work alone, Fawzi positions himself as one with "lots of friends" and who likes answering questions in class. Their classroom observations and Fawzi's classmates' positionality concur with Fawzi's self-positionality, as one who is engaged and actively contributes to the entire classroom discussions on several occasions, and one who is friendly and could be approached for assistance respectively.

Power relations, therefore, exist in people's perception of language learners, language teachers and educators and among language learners themselves, and the different positionalities learners have of themselves, which all contribute to shaping their identity construction and language use.

2.2.3.3. Imagined communities

Language learners' desired and actual membership in "imagined communities" have been argued to influence their learning trajectory, agency, motivation, resistance and investment in English language learning in relation to five different identity clusters including ethnic, postcolonial, gendered, global and multilingual identities (Anderson, 1991, 2006; Norton, 2001; Pavelenko and Norton, 2007). In general, *imagined communities* in language learning have been referred to the ideal communities or groups of people, not immediately accessible and tangible, which learners wish to get engaged in or are connected to through the power of the imagination (Kanno and Norton, 2007; Norton, 2013). It, therefore, does not only deal with the identity of the learner in real-time setting but also the identities created and defined through the learner's imagination. In this, learners equally construct an imagined identity which reflects their desired or ideal self that they wish to become in the future (Luong and Tran, 2021). This set of imagined identities has been said to be what governs learners' investment in meaningful language learning practices (Nghia, 2020).

Hirst (2007) noted that when learners feel a disconnection between their desired learning community and the actual leaning community, they may tend to resist language learning. In other words, once learners find themselves in communities that are not similar to what they had imagined (reality is different from imagination) they might find themselves disconnected form the learning which might influence their learning and identity construction. Kanno and Norton (2003) describe identity construction as a process whereby learners view themselves in relation to others while referencing past, present and future imagined communities within which they have been, are in, or would like to be or ought to be.

In 1991, Lave and Wenger opined that learning is an inseparable and integral part of social practice that involves the construction of identities which are "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice" (p.53). According to Hawkins (2005), the process of constructing identity is a continual negotiation between the individual and the society in the communities within which they find themselves. Learners bring their lived experiences and histories to events in situated environments, and

then co-construct their views of themselves and the society through their interactions and negotiations with others in these contexts. Gao, Li and Li (2002) found that the context which they define as the macro and micro-level context influenced learners' identities. In their study, both context of situation (the immediate learning context) and context of culture (the broader socio-cultural context) significantly influenced learners' selection of selfhood. They proposed from the findings of their study that the immediate learning situation might play a more salient role in EFL language learners' identity formation than in ESL contexts. Murray and Kojima's (2007) study of a Japanese learner of English and German found that when learners learn a foreign language in their own cultural context, they realise a sense of self.

Learning a new language means learning a new identity (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Kellman, 2003). Learners not only identify themselves as speakers of their L1 but can identify themselves as English language speakers in different communities. Learning as an adult or getting into adulthood, learners are equally involved in juxtaposing their new adolescence identity with their new language identity and with those of the society and macro and micro communities within which they find themselves.

2.2.4. Teachers' roles in enhancing learners' identities

Lamb's (2011) study shows that the learners expressed the desire to take control of their learning and demonstrated the ability to manage and regulate the learning from their perceived identity as learners. He equally noticed that their identity, partly moulded by their autonomy, was closely related to their motivation to learn. However, this is significantly compromised when learners' identity is challenged by increasing teacher control. Therefore, in classes where autonomy is encouraged, teachers are to assess the amount of control they have over the lesson in order not to both limit learners' opportunities for developing autonomy and negatively affect learners' identities.

In ESL contexts such as that in the UK, where teachers are the main source of formal learning from whom learners expect to receive the 'correct' forms and input of the language, teachers' perceptions of their students are essential in determining the effects of their contributions in helping learners with their identity construction. To help learners develop their learner identity, teachers can encourage their language learners to reflect on their language learning through assessing certain aspects, such as how far they have gone, what they are yet to learn, their acquisition speed, what they missed, and what they did well on. They can also ask questions such as, are they meeting their goals and what additional help is needed? Furthermore, teachers

can encourage learners to create and keep a planning and self-evaluation record and a research dairy or study journal, which will help them not only reflect on their learning and language change but equally on how these changes influence their identity in the target language (Lamb, 2011, Everhard, 2015a).

Learners' perspectives of how their teachers perceive them are equally significant in their self-perception. A change in assessment practices in L2 classrooms is argued to be instrumental in empowering learners (Everhard, 2015a). This, however, requires exerting enough effort and time.

2.3. Learner autonomy and identity

This study has so far explored the individual components of learner autonomy and learner identity in language education. This section goes further to discuss the relationship between and co-construction of autonomy and identity in English language learners and its influence on their language learning. It explores learner autonomy and identity (Section 2.3.1) and moves on to examining motivation in language learning (Section 2.3.2). It goes further to address agency and voice in autonomy and identity development (Section 2.3.3) and examine factors affecting the development of learner autonomy and identity (Section 2.3.4). Finally, it discusses learner autonomy and identity in the period of COVID 19 (Section 2.3.5).

2.3.1. Exploring learner autonomy and identity

Literature on learner autonomy and learner identity in second language learning have identified influences of learner autonomy and identity on language learning. This section attempts to thread the two concepts in relation to language learning through examining learners' exposure to the target language, their self-perception, learners' agency and voice, and teachers' influence.

The degree to which learners are exposed to a language and how they use that language influences their identity perception and construction. Ushioda (2011) opines that, "language classrooms that seek to promote autonomous learning… encourage students to develop and express their own identities through the language they are learning, that is, to be and become themselves" (p. 227). Tylor (2013) further adds that, "expressing yourself in a foreign language can be an excellent tool for identity exploration" (p.15). When students develop the ability to control their learning, they tend to explore the target language, and both assume and adapt their identities to relate to the language and the culture.

How learners perceive their identity in a language influences their attitudes toward learning and thus their autonomy. When learners can identify themselves in a target language as being part of the language and not just foreigners or intruders, they develop the motivation to learn the language better (Ushioda, 2011). A development of identity in a language promotes autonomy in that language and vice versa where the learner's autonomy facilitates the language acquisition process (Ushioda, 2011; Taylor, 2013). For example, in language classrooms where learner autonomy is not encouraged, and there is little or no practice of authentic conversations and use of authentic materials, learners would be unable to and shy away from expressing themselves and their identities both in and out of the classroom (Duda and Tyne, 2010). This poses a direct negative effect on their self-confidence and language acquisition.

While autonomy is agreed to facilitate language acquisition, learners can take charge of their learning and construct a voice in building their identities in the language and sociocultural milieu. Martina in Norton's ((Norton Pierce, 1995), 2000, 2011) research had to find a voice with which to express herself and create the identity she wanted to be addressed by, and not the one which had been imposed on her due to her limited knowledge and fluency in the L2. To reshape this identity, she became more deliberate about her learning, taking greater control, motivated by personal relevance, and was able to construct her desired identity. Thus, learners' personal relevance and motivation, like in Martina's case, to attain a desired level of language proficiency or a desired identity propels them to take charge of their learning.

In constructing identity and enhancing autonomy through interaction, van Lier proposes (2007) that, "learners will be working together to construct projects and increasingly shape the path of their own learning" (p.58). With this, he focuses on learners' identities, not solely as future speakers of another language, but equally as autonomous learners and, also on how this identity is nurtured (or not) by the learning environment (Lamb, 2011).

Lamb, in his 2011 study, found that learners expressed the desire to take control of their learning and demonstrated the ability to manage and regulate the learning from their perceptions of identity as learners. He equally noticed that their identity, partly moulded by their autonomy, was closely related to their motivation to learn. However, this is significantly compromised when learners' identity is challenged by increasing teacher control. Therefore, in classes where autonomy is encouraged, teachers are to assess the amount of control they have over the lesson in order not to only limit learners' opportunities for developing autonomy but also not to negatively affect learners' identities. Moreover, providing opportunities for learners

to plan ahead to work individually or collaboratively on projects or performances creates room for learners to develop both voice (identity) and autonomy as they work on articulating their thoughts, structuring/reorganising resources, committing to a point of view and action with their peers or teachers (Leir 2007).

Huang (2006b) argues that "autonomy is concerned with the expression and exploration of learners own meanings and purposes". In identifying and establishing personal motives for desiring to control the learning process, learners not only take hold of their learning but equally create identities around this desire. The learners' motif for learning a language could be a result of a desire to create an identity that comes with the language. Benson (2007a) states that, "the construction of individual identities and the achievement of personal autonomy are often interwoven in stories of long-term language learning experiences." (p.30)

Karam (2018) noted that for serious learning to take place, students need to achieve identification and a sense of belonging. In a case where students feel isolated and unable to fit in to the context, he proposes that it is the teacher's responsibility to help students use language beyond traditional classroom means and create multimodal opportunities for learners to interact with their peers, experiment on the language and engage in agentic moves of creating identities that promote their selfhood and imagined/desired identities.

2.3.2. From motivation to language learning and identity construction.

Motivation has been researched in Second Language Learning and said to be a significant driving force for the development of learner autonomy and identity. In this section, motivational concepts are discussed including the L2 Motivational Self System, Direct Motivational Currents, motivation through technology and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in autonomy development and identity construction.

The starting point was Gardener's (1988) conceptualisation of motivation in language learning as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, stating that motivation was both a product of personal interest or internal attribute and an external attribute, influenced by external factors such as a teacher's or family's expectations. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) later extended the theory on motivation in language learning, investigating different learning contexts with the introduction of the L2 Motivational Self System with the aim of discovering learners' reasons for learning a second language. This system is based on the idea of *possible selves*, how language learners' future desires influence their present actions (Murray, 2011). These ideal selves are categorised into three: the ideal self, the ought-to self and the L2 learning experience.

Firstly, the ideal L2 self refers to the ideal image a learner desires to have in the future which is related to acquiring language skills such as being fluent in English. Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh (2006) define the Ideal L2 self as a real image towards which a learner portrays attitudes as an L2 self. Learners' positive attitude towards the L2 community will help them in developing their Ideal L2 self. In creating a mental image of this Ideal self and striving towards attaining it, learners' motivation to learn is increased and they in turn are likely to take more charge over their learning to meet their goals (Dörnyei et al. 2014).

Secondly, the ought-to self refers to self-guides and targets learners feel they should be or should become. These selves are typically concerned with a feeling of responsibility to avoid negative outcomes and meet others' expectations (such as the teacher's or parent's). It can be linked to Gardner's extrinsic motivation; aimed at achieving an instrumental outcome. With these expectations the learners have a required self which they need to attain. Some learners become agentic in their learning and take on more responsibilities to reach this expected identity.

Thirdly, Dörnyei, (2019) refers to the L2 Learning Experience as "the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with various aspects of the language learning process" (p.19). It is concerned with the learner's present experiences and situated motives related to the immediate learning environment. The L2 learning Experience is conceptualised as the most powerful predictor of motivated behaviour (Dörnyei, 2019). Because learners have different learning experiences, in addition to other factors, such as their personalities, their construction of their identities and their degree of responsibility over their learning equally tends to vary among learners and at different levels.

The Ideal L2 self and the Ought-to self, conceptualised as future self-guides along the lines of Markus and Nurius's (1986) Possible Selves theory, have evolved towards developing a self-based approach in language motivation which seeks to probe into what energizes learners to both initiate and sustain their motivation through the long journey of acquiring and mastering a second/foreign language. As earlier mentioned, (in Section 2.2.2) Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim (2014) propose the implementation of a Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) in the language learning process which they describe as "an intense motivational drive which is capable of both stimulating and supporting long-term behaviour, such as learning a foreign/second language" (p.9).

In DMCs, the proposition is for teachers and institutions to create conditions under which motivational pathways can be created, leading to the emergence of a motivational Jetstream capable of transporting learners to and beyond situations where hope of progress had been fading (Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim, 2014). They further opine that the self-propelling nature of a DMCs put in place will drive learners to become immersed in the powerful flow of motivation, thus advance towards achieving their learning goals and creating their possible self. With this, learners focus on achieving a well-defined set goal and their focus on the goal in addition to the motivation promotes confidence in both their abilities and identity in the target language.

In a later work, Dörnyei (2019) claims that the experience of learning a second language (L2 Learning Experience) is the most powerful predictor of motivated behaviour wherein he refers to the L2 Learning Experience as "the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with various aspects of the language learning process" (p.20). When the learning process is made meaningful and enjoyable, it becomes easier to go through the experience of learning the language.

Technology has served as a major influence in the development of English learners' motivation to learn. The development of computer, technology and online platforms in use in language education has been said to considerably influence L2 motivation and in turn language acquisition (Stockwell and Reinders, 2019; Tavakoli, Lotfi and Biria, 2019). With the presence of variant and multiple English language learning platforms, English Learners have resorted to their use in and out of the classroom, promoting autonomy. There is a significant recognition of an increase in English language learners' autonomy resulting from increased motivation while using technological or online platforms to learn (ibid).

Karam's (2018) study found that the English language learner developed a confident identity when communicating with other English speakers online as opposed to face-to-face interactions. He appeared to be more motivated to learn and use the language when using multimodal platforms and engaged in extra activities and strategies to express his desired future identity. There is an existing wealth of online resources available for learning English; language apps and websites are readily available for anyone having an internet connection and the knowledge of how to use them.

The humanist approach to learning emphasises individuals' desire to develop themselves through shaping their own learning experiences (Atkinson, 1993; Stevick, 1980). It emphasises

that students need to have a motivation for learning that will drive them to achieving their goals. The approach further suggests that learners need to have intrinsic (internal/self) motivation, which is linked to developing autonomy, identity and achievement (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). There is a need to not only rely on extrinsic (external) motivation but find inner purpose and pursuit to arriving at desired goals. Learners with intrinsic motivation and desire to attain certain objectives are more likely to find ways to achieve their goals and to develop their knowledge and skill, unlike just waiting for learning to come to them, thus, developing and exercising their autonomy (Legault, 2016). In the agentic individualised pursuit for knowledge, learners not only employ their autonomy in learning but develop an independent and self-reliant learner identity.

Furthermore, in language learning, intrinsic motivation is developed, amongst others, through meeting learners' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. That is, learners need to have "control over what they do, be sufficiently able to do it, and have the opportunity to relate it to other aspects of their lives" (Lamb, 2011, p. 71). In O'Leary's (2010, 2018) study, the participants argued that for one to be a good language learner, s/he needs to be self-motivated; have the desire to learn not only in class but individually at home. Learners' conceptualisation and construction of future development (future identity) such as career orientation (Huang and Benson, 2013), can be a trigger to and driver of leaners' control over their learning, and a formation and pursuit of desired identities.

A selection of activities which engage language learners in active learning are beneficial in enhancing their motivation to learn. Learning activities introduced into language classrooms have been said to have a significant influence on learners' levels of engagement and participation and eventually their achievement (Karam, 2018). Petty (2014) opines that learning methods in which language learners are passive (such as listening) have very little effect on improving weak learners' learning and understanding and that both weak and strong learners profit more form active learning methods and activities. Learners, here, are given the responsibility to actively participate in the development of their own learning and success which could serve as a motivation, increasing their feeling of belonging, relevance, desire and self-confidence to learn more, including in the absence of the teacher.

Motivation is, therefore, principal to the understanding and development of language learners' autonomy and identity. Learners' source their motivation from several aspects and how

motivation works in learners varies according to each learner and at different levels of their language learning in supporting their learning achievement.

2.3.3. Agency and voice in learner autonomy and identity

Autonomy and identity have been said to change and differ in levels across individuals and are a construct of action by oneself and the influence of other factors present or absent. Just like motivation, learners have been found to exhibit their agency and voice in their language learning in different ways and at different times of the learning in constructing their identity and exercising their autonomy, which has been found to impart their learning process and achievement. Learners' development of their autonomy and identity through their agency and voice in relation to their implemented responsibility, perceptions, personal relevance and learning affordances is examined here.

van Lier (1996) earlier proposed motivation and autonomy to be two sides of the same coin of agency and later (2007) builds on this in his action-based teaching research and approach that "puts agency at the centre of the learning process" (p. 46) wherein "learners will be working together to construct projects and increasingly shape the path of their own learning" (p. 58). With this, he focuses on the learner's identity as both a future speaker of another language and as an autonomous learner, and on how this identity is nurtured (or not) by the learning environment.

Implementing responsibility

In addressing the concept of leaner autonomy, Teng (2019) argues that autonomy is a 'construct of capacity' which should not be considered an inborn capacity, but that it involves learners having and acting on their willingness to take responsibility of their own learning. In line with Little's (1990) statement that autonomy is "not a single, easily describable behaviour" or a "steady state" (p.7), Teng (2019) agrees that autonomy is unstable and changing, can occur both within and outside the classroom, and can only be promoted if one is consciously aware of the learning process. This positioning highlights that autonomy is not something that every learner already has and can exercise at any time, but one that requires the learner's consciousness and agency in constructing and developing their capacity to take charge of their learning. The essence of learners' agency, derived from their willingness to control their learning and construct their selfhood is highlighted.

In their study, Gao, Li and Li (2002) refer to agency as the extent to which learners take action to shape their context in the pursuit of their chosen goals. Opportunities for learners to position themselves as active and agentive participants in the language classroom, despite the limits posed by the curriculum and task design, are important facets of identity construction needed to achieve the feeling of belonging and facilitate learning (Karam, 2018). Ushioda (2011) highlights the importance of context in fostering autonomy through choice, social participation and negotiation and suggests that it is in such enabling contexts that "people's motivations and identities develop and emerge as dynamically co-constructed processes" (pp.21-22) as learners are able to better participate in the learning process.

Learners' perceptions

In shaping learners' relationship to the world through the development of self and identity, van Lier (2007) sees perception as central. He proposes that "[t]he core of identity is voice" and that "voice implies agency" (p. 47) supposing that learners need to be agents in constructing their identity through their voice. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Learners should not only mimic or imitate the teacher in trying out the L2 voice but must be encouraged to act out the new sounds and meanings to make them their own and act on their own decisions.

Personal relevance

Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) explanation of agency as entailing "the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events" in addition to "voluntary control over behaviour" (p. 143) emphasises the need for individuals to find and know their personal relevance in learning and constructing their identities. In 1995, Luck and d'Inverno argued that autonomy is distinct and is achieved by motivated agency. Agentic attributes need to be motivated and developed in students to propel them to act towards enhancing their autonomy and desired identity. Learners' desired proficiency and identities cannot be achieved without them acting on their learning and taking some level of control over their learning outcome. Learners' past experiences can provide an understanding to learners achieving agency (Priestley and Biesta, 2013).

The capacity to control learning in L2 learning implies learners' capacity to make their learning of personal relevance, to align with their needs and purposes which they have individually identified, or through a negotiation process, have voluntarily agreed with which to identify. Benson (2007a) notes that agency can be seen as the starting point for the development of

autonomy, while identity may be regarded as one of its essential outcomes (p.30). In support, Huang (2009, 2011) suggests that identity conceptualisation and construction can also be a starting point for autonomy and that personal meaningful and relevant agenda might result in the exercise of agency, which in the long run, might lead to autonomy in their learning and identity construction, assuming greater control of their own learning and personal life.

Learning affordances

In enhancing EL learners' autonomy and identity, it is helpful when learners are provided with opportunities to exercise their agency such as in negotiating their engagement in class and out of class activities. Karam's (2018) study found that the English language learner's (research participant) resistance to classroom tasks turned into engagement when engaged in multimodal tasks that aligned with his interests and desired identity. Learners tend to become more active and take conscious steps in engaging in and enhancing their learning when they find a window of opportunity that aligns with their interests and selfhood. Teachers may not always know or rightly assume what every learner's interests are (Karam, 2018) thus the provision of opportunities for learners to contribute to their learning through proposing varied tasks, learning strategies and materials has been seen as a productive way to engage learners' attention and action.

Multimodal opportunities can help English learners develop their autonomy, share their experiences and construct their desired identities in an agentive manner (Johnson and Kendrick, 2017; Karam, 2018). It is essential for spaces to be created where students can exercise their agency in using multimedia and multimodal forms of language, positioning themselves in a creative and empowering manner (Shapiro and MacDonald, 2017; Karam, 2018). Karam (2018) argues that multimodal-dimensions classroom tasks can potentially transform learners' resistance to engagement in classroom activities and that providing opportunities for learners to share their imagined identities, goals and abilities with the peers and teachers can boost their agency.

Oxford (1990) commented that "good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning" (p.140) which suggests that successful language learners manage and control such emotions as self-doubt, limiting beliefs in their potentials, anxiety and self-image resulting in an increase in their language learning achievement.

2.3.4. Factors affecting the development of learner autonomy and identity

Despite motivation and agency being significant boosters of language learners' autonomy and identity development, several factors have been identified as reason for a limitation in the development of learner autonomy and identity. Some of these factors addressed here are grouped into four main categories: the language teacher, educational systems/institutions, the language learner and the host society. These include asymmetric power relationships, teachers' autonomy, restrictive educational systems, dependent learners and learners' cognitive and metacognitive awareness/knowledge.

The language teacher

Asymmetric power relationships between learners and teachers in relation to conflicting emotions have been identified to influence learners' negotiation of their identity (Yuan and Li, 2016) and the development of their autonomy. The unequal power relations between learners and teachers mostly leave learners vulnerable to several negative emotions (Bloomfield, 2010). At times, teachers may fear a loss of their status and power in class which might result to teachers not listening to learners' suggestions or not trusting their capacity to control their learning. In a bid to maintain their authority and role in class, teachers may dismiss or suppress learners' discontentment and feelings without providing opportunities for learners to dispute or suggest their opinions (Teng, 2019). This could reflect on learners' identities as obedient English learners and might prevent learners from forging an identity they desire and may shy away from making decisions that will help them take control of their learning, thus reducing their perceived L2 identity and autonomy. The presence of asymmetric power relationships in language classrooms between learners and teachers force learners to disguise their feelings which might cause a detrimental effect on the development and construction of their learner identity and autonomy.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) added that teachers are sometimes regarded as obstacles where they do not believe that their learners have the capacity to be autonomous. Due to this disbelief in learners' capacity to control their learning, teachers tend not to invest time in promoting learner autonomy. Considering development in sociocultural perspectives on learner autonomy, the teacher is seen as a principal agent in mediating language learners' development. Consequently, multiplying the roles language teachers are expected to assume such as counsellors, language facilitators, resource agents and advisers. Gao (2018) opines that this

constitutes a challenge for many language teachers who have limited experience and skill on how to execute these roles to enhance learners' autonomy.

Language teacher's autonomy and identity equally plays a significant part in the development of learner autonomy and identity. It is questionable for a teacher with a limiting teaching self-image and autonomy to encourage and develop learners' autonomy and identity. Teachers' perception of themselves tend to impact their perception and management of their language learners (Bhushan, 2018). Where teachers' autonomy and identity are not developed, there will be a little or no development of learners' control over their learning and desired identity construction as the teachers might not believe in or promote learners' ability to control their learning and pursue their desired identities. Teachers engaging in continuous professional development are likely to possess higher autonomy and positive identities and to enhance the same in their learners (Huang and Benson, 2013; Bhushan, 2018). According to Huang (2010), while the development of teacher autonomy depends on their identity construction and exercise of agency, the development of teacher autonomy can lead to the enhancement of teacher identity and agency.

Educational systems/institutions

Also, systems in educational institutions influence the development of language learners' identities and autonomy. For example, language institutions such as those in the traditional context with tightly hierarchical and organised structures influence educational practices. In such contexts, teachers adopt a top-bottom method of instruction which is teacher-centred, textbook-focused, exam-oriented and follows a grammar-translation method (Teng, 2019). This could cause negative emotions in learners, as learners may feel unconfident in class and portray non-participatory traits and prefer to listen to the teacher and not ask or answer questions or take initiatives to enhance their learning experience (Karam, 2018). In this case, the classroom which is part of the institutional system may not be a pleasant and motivating environment for learners to build self-confidence in their identities as users of the language and in their ability to make decisions that will help them learn better (autonomy).

In addition to the unconducive classroom atmosphere, learners are faced with pressure to meet school policies and examination requirements which may cause learners to lose a sense of self, freedom and control as learners. In close relation to institutional systems are learners' hidden conventional English language practices which have a significant impact on the realisation of their ideal self, wherein some learners may display a strong sense of the 'ought to' self in line

with them believing that they ought to (are expected to) possess certain attributes as English language learners (Dörnyei, Maclntyre and Henry, 2015). This ought to self might equally source from the pressure from the institution to "produce" learners that are able to effectively use the language.

Furthermore, most curricula provide little or no opportunities for teachers to assist learners to become autonomous. In trying to follow and complete the curriculum, teachers tend to take out/miss out on opportunities which they could maximise to promote learner autonomy. In this case, teachers feel that the curriculum is full and restrictive and that it limits the extent to which they can promote autonomy (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012). This has been an issue of criticism over the years and several stake holders have been working on redesigning language education curricula to promote room for developing learner autonomy. In explaining what a curriculum should be, Barnes made an important note in 1976 which still applies today:

> When people talk about the school curriculum, they often mean what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn. But a curriculum made only of teachers' intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school. By enact I mean come together in a meaningful communication, talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry with one another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more than intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an institution, the talk and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings even when they quarrel or cannot agree. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication. (Barnes 1976, p.14)

Knowledge here is created and recreated in the dialogic space of the language classroom (Yandell, 2020). With this, he highlights the need for a curriculum which meets learners needs, is meaningful, enacted by both teachers and learners through meaningful interaction, collaboration, and communication and involves authentic learning and experiences. Curriculum to him is a form of communication and is true in today's education as learners are seen to interact better with the curriculum when it includes them, meets their needs and is meaningful.

The language learner

The development of learner autonomy and identity have met with challenges from learners limited autonomous abilities and lack of learning resources. In Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) study, the language teachers reported that learners have limited ability to take control of their learning due to learners' previous educational background of total dependence on teachers for knowledge. For example, learners limited experience of autonomy when they get into higher education institutions from secondary school, they lack incentives and motivation, and they are

dependent on the teachers for knowledge. Also, the unavailability of resources or prevalence of limited learning resources in some areas serves as a major hinderance to the promotion of learner autonomy. This is mostly common in "developing" areas and countries where there are limited resources and learning is still largely dependent on the teacher (Smith, Kuchah, Lamb, 2018).

Furthermore, the level of cognitive awareness of language learners has a significant influence on their identity construction and autonomy. Higher levels of cognitive awareness in language learners play a vital role in the formation and development of their learner identity as well as their autonomy and language learning (Teng, 2019). In addition, learners' ability to accommodate and assimilate cognitive processes is essential in progressing to the next stage (Allison and Huang, 2010). Teng (2019) defines assimilation as "the process of fitting in new stimuli from the environment into a pre-existing mental schema" and accommodation as "the utilization of new information for modifying pre-existing cognitive structures while facilitating developmental growth" (p. 41). Unlike learners with a high cognitive awareness, who can take greater control of their learning and constructing their identity, learners with a lower level of cognitive awareness may tend to be sceptical of their self-perception and ability to control their own learning and may resist confronting the conflicts on their identities. Thus, a limiting self believe in their abilities will restrict their agency and autonomy.

In addition, language learners' metacognitive knowledge has been said to play a significant role in the development of their language learning, autonomy and identity. In 1985, Flavell (in Lamb, 2011) referred to metacognitive knowledge as "knowledge about the self as a learner (person knowledge), the tasks involved in learning (task knowledge), and the strategies which can be called into play in order for learning to take place (strategy knowledge)" (p. 72). This calls to essence the need to analyse the knowledge learners have in order to develop informed language learners. Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) suggest that learners "have expertise as insightful commentators on teaching and learning" (p. 12) proposing that given that the learner is the one consuming the knowledge, their thoughts and suggestions on the teaching and learning process, based on their learning preferences and perspectives, are essential in determining the effectiveness of the processes and learning outcome.

Lamb (2011) followed this positioning to structure his research around the metacognitive knowledge framework on the premise that for learners to be able to effectively manage their own learning, they need to have control both over aspects of their learning environment and

over their cognitive processes. It has been suggested (Wenden, 2001; Lamb, 2009, 2011) that for learners to have and use this control, their metacognitive knowledge needs to be developed. With this, both the nature and process of language learning are explored in consideration of learners' sense of identity as language learners and what they find as motivating or not.

The host society/country

Learners' autonomy development and identity construction have been found to be significantly influenced by the host/target language country/society. For example, in contexts where learners have faced a negative L2 learning experience in which they have not found their environments to be very welcoming and sportive in developing their language learning, they have either forcefully created their desired identity or developed a negative L2 self and attitude towards the target language. Norton (2011) explores the experiences of an East European English language learner in Canada and the struggles she faces for not being a fluent English language speaker as her co-workers and their children, who are native speakers. She is seen as a dehumanised and inanimate 'broom' who is unable to use the language and thus is treated with little or no respect by her co-workers. In order to reframe this identity, she claims the right to speak (agency and voice) and re-establishes the identity she wants to be known by – not sub-human, but as everyone else and with respect. The investment she places on her language learning and re-constructing her identity, and the need to learn the language to take hold of executing the parental responsibilities of her family, motivate her to take control of improving her language learning and impressing her interlocutors, changing their perception (identity) of her.

Block (2007) comments that when individuals move across psychological and geographical borders and immerse themselves in new cultural and social environments, they realise a destabilisation of their sense of identity and will have to go through a struggle to arrive a balanced state. Here, identity is seen as being contested in nature wherein the struggle is not seen as adding the new identity to the old or as a half-and-half of what they were and half of what they have been exposed to, but as the *third place* (Bhabha, 1994; Hall,1996). This Phase is referred to by Papastergiadis (2002) as a negotiation of difference wherein the past and the present "encounter and transform each other" in "the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions" (P.170), creating a new identity which incorporates both the past and present selves.

2.3.5. Learner autonomy and identity in the period of COVID 19

In the last quarter of 2019, the outbreak of COVID 19 which rapidly spread into a pandemic became a serious global concern in the early weeks of 2020. To control the virus, several restrictions were imposed, but the disease travelled, infecting and killing millions of people around the globe. The virus impacted and left a variety of economic, social and political challenges, consequences and lessons for several sectors (if not all) including education (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020; Mirhosseini, 2022; WHO, 2020a, 2020b).

The period of COVID 19 had a significant effect on the educational system worldwide. A major challenge brought about by the pandemic was the rapid and unprepared switch to online and digital education formats and the increase in 'remote' forms of learning and teaching as a result of the extensive closures of educational institutions (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020; Yandell, 2020; Chang, 2021). Face-to-face learning, distance learning, and research in education and across other fields had to adjust and adapt to the changes that arose with the pandemic. In the field of education, educating students during a global pandemic required education leaders to be more aware, attentive and responsive to a variety of access and equality challenges (Al Ghazali, 2020; Maru et al., 2021). With schools shut across the world, the pandemic brought about changes to strategies of teaching and learning, and both teachers and learners had to adopt and adapt to new methods of teaching and learning, which mainly included a move to online learning and/or blended learning.

Education has experienced a higher growth and adoption of computer and technology into education as a result of the pandemic (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter, 2020; Chang, 2021). There has been a surge in the use of and investment into global education technology and online education projects since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic. Schools have worked towards providing devices and internet to enable students study online. With the availability and surge in language learning devices and apps, learners have had greater opportunities to utilise language learning apps and online resources to learn, in addition to their teacher's resources, enhancing their confidence (identity) and autonomy in contributing to and controlling their learning (Chimi and Kemtong, 2020; Maru et al., 2021). There has equally been an increase in motivation and engagement in learning in some learners while learning online during the pandemic.

The COVID 19 pandemic, however, brought challenges in education (Mirhosseini, 2022). Yandell, (2020) argued that the experience of online teaching, especially at the beginning of

the pandemic, turned to be a “poor substitute for the real thing” (p.263). The rapid and unplanned switch to online teaching and learning with little or no training, insufficient bandwidth, limited resources, and little preparation, resulted to a poor user experience and posed challenges for both teachers and students. Many students without reliable technology and/or internet access struggled to engage in digital learning – this gap ranges between countries, income brackets within countries and students from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds. While some governments and educational institutions were able to provide digital equipment and bandwidth to students in need, many were unable and concerned with the digital divide that may widen due to the pandemic (Al Ghazali, 2020; Maru et al., 2021).

With access to online learning platforms during the pandemic, research has shown some advantages to online learning. On average, student retention rates are said to be higher when learning online as compared to face-to-face classroom learning. Some reasons for this are claims of students being able to learn faster online than in face-to-face contexts. Furthermore, students can learn at their own pace, skip or re-read materials, watch the classroom videos, if recorded, and accelerate through taught and new concepts. Students can also find new materials online to support and enhance their learning. Some teachers, for example, have found it easier to reach out to/access their students more effectively and efficiently through various platforms such as video meetings, group chats and document share (Yandell, 2020; Chimi and Kemtong, 2020). Research has equally found that teachers have noticed that their students have found it easier to communicate and express their strengths and limitations while online than in face-to-face contact (Johnson and Kendrick, 2017; Karam, 2018).

The effectiveness of online learning, nevertheless, varies amongst age groups as learning online comes with a wealth of possible online distractions (Yandell, 2020). Younger learners, for example, require a structured environment to keep them focused. The use of a range of engagement methods and collaborative tools which promote inclusion and intelligence is of recommended benefit for the bosting of learner’s focus, relevance and sense of achievement in online learning. Yandell (2020) argues that lockdown during the COVID 19 pandemic brough about a complicated social understanding of what schools are for, and an opportunity to reflect on the most valuable aspects of school life, stating that they far exceed the vision of mere transition of knowledge as “learning and development happen in and through the interactions that constitute the experience of schooling” (p. 263). He adds that if these reflections on the valuable aspects on school life have been done, then the lockdown has equipped others with

the change to develop an essentially different vision of schooling – one that is preferably suited to the constraints and affordances of online learning.

Furthermore, with the challenges faced during the COVID 19 pandemic and the lessons learnt, researchers (Mirhosseini, 2022; Yandell, 2020; Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020) have suggested a change in ideologies and approaches towards theories and strategies in language teaching and learning. Mirhosseini (2022) suggests that “rather than insisting on traditional teaching practices and research trends, the field needs to reconsider some of its basic theoretical and practical orientations in order to become/stay relevant to real-world language education” (p. 4). The need to rethink the teaching curriculum and strategies used and their effectiveness in helping learners acquire the required knowledge and skills have been called. Mirhosseini (2022) claims that language aspects such as grammar and vocabulary learning are still facing the same challenges and calls for teachers to be more proactive in creating their own strategies rather than waiting for traditional ones to be handed down to them.

Summary

This chapter has investigated the literature in the field on learner autonomy and identity. It began by looking at aspects relating to learner autonomy and moved on to examining learner identity. Finally, it explored the link between learner autonomy and identity, discussing different aspects related to both factors.

The following chapter presents the methodological approach used in conducting the study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological approach used in the research. It begins by restating the research questions (3.1) and moves on to discuss theories (3.2) that have influenced the study (Postmodernism and Social Constructivism). Section 3.3 presents the philosophical assumptions (interpretivist approach and qualitative methodology), while section 3.4 outlines the research design (Phenomenology, participants selection and participants). Section 3.5 presents the tools used in data collection (observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups) and section 3.6 explains the initial data collection phase. Next, section 3.7 presents the data analysis, and finally, section 3.8 discusses the trustworthiness of the study and its ethical considerations. This chapter provides a roadmap on how the study was conducted, painting a picture of how, why and what decisions were made to better understand, conduct and present the research.

3.1. Research questions

As discussed in chapter two, with the growing interest in developing autonomy and exploring identity construction in language learning, the variables have been vastly researched individually across a variety of contexts. However, the relationship between English language learners' autonomy and identity and the influence of this relationship on language learning requires further research. The literature to indicate the possible interrelationship between the autonomy and identity of English language learners, has not been given much thought. Given that an identity is arguably the most essential part of every human and learner in specific, the day-to-day experiences of language learners contribute to shaping this identity. It is important to understand how autonomy, being a significant part of language learning and evolution, contributes to this constant daily identity construction and reconstruction. Also, a desire to achieve and develop capacity to control learning is interwoven in the identity held by language learners of themselves and their environment.

In this light, this study sets out to understand this interrelationship between learner autonomy and identity in English language learning, the challenges faced in developing both, what is being and can be done to overcome the limitations and how all these influence learning outcomes. The following research questions are, therefore, investigated:

RQ: What is the relationship between learner autonomy and learner identity in ESOL learners in the UK and how does this relationship influence second language learning?

> Sub RQ1: How do ESOL learners perceive and promote their autonomy and identity?
>
> Sub RQ2: How do ESOL teachers perceive and promote learners' autonomy development and identity construction?
>
> Sub RQ3: What challenges do ESOL learners and teachers face in promoting learner autonomy and identity?

The aim of the research and the research questions provided basis for the research approach and design used to conduct the study.

3.2. Theoretical underpinnings of the study

This section examines the theories which have been used to help understand the scope and data in this study. Insights from Postmodernism and Social Constructivism in language learning and identity construction have been examined in the understanding of the study. It is important to emphasize that the theories used are intended to understand, not analyse the findings and discussions. The study is also not grounded on these theories but influenced by them. It, therefore, does not follow them prescriptively but reflects on their concepts to support analysis.

3.2.1. Postmodernism and language learning

This study set out to examine the relationship between English language learners' autonomy and identity development and how this relationship influences their language learning in the UK. The pursuit of an understanding of individual experiences are prioritised, at the same time examining shared experience. To attain this understanding, the study is influenced by tenets of Postmodernism. Postmodernism seeks to deconstruct the ideology of metanarratives (Sahibzada and Zaidi, 2018); there is no one explanation for phenomena and treats every entity as an individual voice (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014; O'Leary, 2018). Postmodernism seeks to reflect the plurality of perspectives (for example, learners individual voices) rather than trying to arrive at a definitive consensus. It stipulates that there is no one truth. In line with this thought, the study aimed at exploring the perspectives of individual learners, based on their experiences in L2 learning on developing their autonomy and constructing a learner identity. Individual teachers' voices in relation to their personal experiences in teaching English language learners were also aimed at being understood.

Identity has been researched from several perspectives since its introduction into the field of Applied Linguistics. Traditionally, identity was viewed as a unitary and fixed phenomenon. However, recent literature (Kouhpaeenejad and Gholaminejad, 2014; O'Leary, 2018) has followed a postmodernist approach to exploring and addressing identity. From a generalised, postmodern world, identity is regarded as multiple, fluid, dynamic, varied, diverse and shifting, contradictory and subject to change. It is considered to be socially organised and reorganised, constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed continually through language and discourse. Identity has also been seen as being unstable, negotiated, flexible and ongoing. It is a collection of social positions or roles and a mixture of social influences and individual agencies (Omoniyi and White, 2008; Zacharias, 2010; Kouhpaeenejad and Gholaminejad, 2014).

Postmodernism emphasises relativity; meaning is centred around individual perceptions and constructions and not general ideologies or theories (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). This, however, has formed a basis of its criticism (Coghlan, 2014) as it fails to provide definitive principles upon which the theory is based, and it argues the existence of a global or shared experience. It has equally been criticised for its over-relativity of concepts. O'Leary (2018) suggests using a moderate postmodernist approach (a thought seeking a rationality appropriate to the now postmetaphysical and posttranscendental age), to provide useful insights into a phenomenon by avoiding the limitation or restriction of ways in which the participants can think of themselves, freely express their perspectives and be understood from the beginning of the research. The data collection methods used in this study were aimed at achieving this perspective. Moderate postmodernism attempts to incorporate rationality in its analysis. Postmodernism celebrates and accentuates the heteromorphous narrative of life and discourse, a multiple reality; each learner's story of their English language learning journey and experiences in building their capacity to control their learning, and construct and reconstruct their desired identities, which aligns with the aims of the study.

According to postmodernists (Sarup, 1993; O'Leary, 2018), there is an arbitrary relationship between words and meaning (the signifier and the signified) as a single word can mean several things to different individuals. There is a shift in meaning from one person to another depending on their individual perspectives and experiences. Postmodernism emphasises the plurality of meaning; there is no single truth or meaning to a given phenomenon (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014) as 'truth' is socially constructed and changes. What might be true for one is not true for another. In light of this study, the literature shows that autonomy and identity in language learners differ from one learner to another based on a number of factors such as

learners' agencies and environmental conditioning. There is no single autonomy or identity in all learners as their experiences differ. Individual learners have the ability to make individual decisions that inform and influence their learning both in relation to and independent of other learners' experiences and other external factors such as teachers' influences and environmental factors. However, there are some similarities in learners' individual experiences. To capture the 'reality' of individual learners, and analyse the multiplicity of meaning, the use of multiple data collection procedures was necessary, capturing both individual meaning to concepts and meaning generated in shared spaces. Reflexivity was also a major part of understanding learners' and teachers' experiences and perspectives. Observing the participants and reflecting on my own knowledge and practices also contributed to creating meaning.

This was possible because Postmodernism, while considering individual 'voices,' provides the opportunity for the researcher's voice to be 'heard', for example, through diary entries and reflection notes (Creswell and Poth, 2018). By adopting a qualitative postmodernist stand, the researcher is able to probe into learners' experiences while being influenced by their own beliefs and voices in relation to the study. The researcher's experiences equally inform the researcher and influences the way in which the study is conducted and analysed. Holliday (2016, p. 16) highlights the main beliefs of the qualitative postmodern stand stating, "researchers are part of the research setting" and "investigation must be in reflexive, self-critical, creative dialogue". By this postmodernist paradigm, the study cuts across a 'reality' which is co-constructed by both the participants' understanding of language learning and teaching and learners' experiences at the time of the research conduct, and my interpretation and understanding of their contributions.

Furthermore, reflexivity has been a significant part of the study from the beginning and spanning throughout all phases, including the possibilities considered and decisions made. The study is influenced by a Phenomenological inquiry which seeks to understand the lived experiences of the learners and their teachers in learning and teaching the English language in the UK respectively. Therefore, the phenomenological aspect is more prevalent than the reflexive in terms of the writing as focus is on the participants' contributions, their experiences and perspectives and how they choose to relay this information. This, however, does not mean a lack of reflexivity as this has driven the entire process from choosing this research enquiry to deciding on the questions to ask and be answered, the relevant literature, what methods to use and how the data was analysed, discussed and concluded. It was essential to find a balance between the two to project participants experiences and contributions, not mine, which is the

aim of the study. To achieve this, I allowed the data (mainly learners and teachers' perspectives/voices) to lead the progression and development of meaning through individual voices, how perspectives changed or were modified in shared spaces and through shared experiences. My reflexivity helped me make sense of these in analysing, discussing in relation to literature and drawing conclusions.

A postmodernist view of identity is one which identity is plural, heterogenous, fractured and largely socially determined (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014; O'Leary, 2018). This contrast previous conceptions of individuals' identities as stable and continuous throughout a person's life. Contending that identity is fractured and plural is arguing that individuals are made up of a multitude of socially available and possible identity positions some of which are not assumed or more easily assumed than others (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). Postmodernists tend to adopt a 'subjective' rather than an autonomous self to emphasise the socially constructed nature of identity and to reference the plural 'identities' rather than identity, to highlight that, "an individual is always a composite contending with multiple identity positions" (ibid, p.3). However, to avoid the use of both forms that might obstruct understanding or the smooth flow of ideas, 'identity' rather than 'identities' is used in this study. It is, however, important to note that the study acknowledges and shows learners' possession of more than one identity and the change of these identities throughout their learning journey.

Moreover, Lyotard's (1979, 1986) argument on postmodernism is that it is an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (p.24), and that a postmodern knowledge works on refining our sensitivity to differences, deconstructing societal norms, and reinforcing our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Whilst experiences of language learners may be similar across several platforms, a postmodern view holds that each learner has a language learning journey which is in some ways unique to them, influenced by a variety of factors based on their experiences. These differences in learners' experiences are what influences their language learning. A postmodernist proposition is to be sensitive to these beliefs that learners are different in order to capture these individual experiences through the learners' voices. In Postmodernism, emphasis is placed on facilitating understanding by respecting individual differences rather than co-constructing a single meaning (O'Leary, 2018).

Considering the argument that autonomy is an innate attribute that can be developed (Benson, 2006, 2011), and that identity is multiple and socially constructed, individual voices

(relativism) on this development are explored to understand its relationship to language acquisition and learner autonomy and identity.

3.2.2. Social Constructivism and language learning

Social Constructivism, as pioneered by Vygotsky, emphasises the importance of social context in language learning, proposing that learners' construction of knowledge is a result of their social interaction and the interpretation and understanding derived (Vygotsky, 1962). In other words, knowledge is socially constructed as social interactions are the primary means by which learners construct meaning (Vygotsky, 1998). Candy (1991) provides a broad description of Constructivism as "a cluster of approaches which hold that knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner" (p. 252); the learner's knowledge of the language and the learner's knowledge of themselves (identity). Thus, the acquisition of language according to Social Constructivism exceeds passive reception to active construction through interaction, for example, learner-teacher, learner-peer and learner-society interactions.

Benson (2001), in citing Paris and Byrnes (1989), highlights that "Knowledge is produced through socially conditioned processes of interpretation" (p.36). Thus, knowledge, for example, on enhancing autonomy and forming identities in language learners is constructed through learners interacting with other people, which could include those in and/or out of the formal learning environment. The literature on learner autonomy and identity highlights the vitality of social interaction in developing learner autonomy and identity (Lamb, 2017; O' Leary, 2018). The social dimensions of autonomy in the learning process have been stressed, highlighting that developing a capacity for autonomy involves interaction with peers and teachers (Raya and Lamb, 2008; O' Leary 2018) as well as working independently. Little (1994) further includes "relatedness" to the concept of learner autonomy and states that learner autonomy is "the product of interdependence rather than independence" (p. 435), emphasising the role of social interaction in developing learner autonomy.

Social Constructivism further emphasises the importance of learners' active involvement in their learning and a shift from teachers' traditional role as the source of knowledge to that of learning facilitators. Promoting learner autonomy in language learning is encouraging learners to be more involved in their learning. In relation to Vygotsky's view of knowledge construction, the language learner must be engaged in the learning process. Pritchard and Woodward (2013) opine that for learning to be effective and lasting, the learner needs to be engaged in social activity. Language learners co-construct knowledge through social

interaction and exchange. Therefore, in the language classroom, learners need to engage in activities such as group work and role play to develop a sense of responsibility, individual thought and self-relevance in the construction of knowledge. Supported by the cognitive and constructivist view to language learning, learners' active involvement in their own learning, independently or interdependently increases their learning motivation and develops their autonomy (Benson, 2011; O'Leary, 2018). O'Leary's (2010, 2018) studies on learners' perspectives of a good learner reveals that the participants believed that for learners to learn effectively, they need to have the ability to work independently and with the awareness of the benefits of peer collaboration. Social Constructivism encourages the co-construction of knowledge through collaboration with others, between the learners, their peers and their teacher. This was also realised through the focus group method used in the study.

In examining Norton's (2000) definition of identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5), the construction and reconstruction of identity in isolation and interaction is highlighted. Learners construct knowledge of their language learning and of themselves (their identities) during their interactions with other people in their language learning context and the society and this knowledge differs from learner to learner.

Constructivism as a theory in general suggests that learners construct knowledge by giving meaning to their experiences. According to Tippins et al., (1993) Constructivist learning is "an active process in which learners construct knowledge in a way that makes personal sense. And it is a subjective process, as learners draw on their own background experiences to make sense" (p. 223). This indicates that knowledge must already exist for constructivism to take place in the learning context. New learning is gotten, understood and interpreted in the light of past experiences, as learners use their experiences and individual perceptions to construct their knowledge of themselves, their language learning and the contexts around them. These differences in learners' experiences and knowledge constructions can be linked to the differences in learner identities and autonomy. In seeking to understand the relationship between learners' autonomy and identity construction in this study, enquiry was made not only into learners' current but equally previous experiences to paint a more holistic picture.

The social constructivism perspective in this study relates to how knowledge was constructed by the participants from their social interaction with one another during their learning in an out

of the classroom, with others in the society and during the data collection phases. I noticed that during the focus group interviews, for example, some learners' perceptions about themselves, their language learning process and other language learners were influenced and seemed to change due to the presence of the other participants and their perspectives on the issues discussed. The interaction of these learners in social contexts, therefore, appeared to influence individual perception and led to the co-construction of knowledge of learners' perceptions, identity and autonomy.

3.3. Philosophical assumptions

In conducting research, the researcher's beliefs and assumptions guide their choices and decisions. Qualitative research requires researchers to choose a paradigm that aligns with their assumptions on the nature of reality; what is regarded as knowledge and how knowledge claims can be justified (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, the value of the study runs through the research. This study is informed by qualitative relativist ontological (reality is multiple and changes from person to person) and emic epistemological (knowledge and reality are subject to individuals) assumptions, which are consistent with the interpretivist paradigm. The theories of Postmodernism, which propound the subjectivity of knowledge to individual experiences, and Social Constructivism, which views knowledge as being derived from social interactions, have influenced the study to the understanding of language learners' autonomy and identity. This section discusses the interpretivist approach (3.2.1) and qualitative methodology (3.2.2) used in the study.

3.3.1. Interpretivist approach

This study adopts an interpretivist approach to the understanding of the relationship between learner autonomy and learner identity in second language learning. I chose to employ an interpretivist approach to this study to avoid distancing myself from my participants (an objective method) while trying to understand their perspectives. I believe that to truly understand the thoughts and experiences of my participants, which is the aim of the study, I needed to give them an opportunity to express themselves through their own voices. Interpretivism, which is more exploratory and flexible in nature, provides a framework for researchers to gain deeper knowledge and in-depth understanding (Creswell and Poth, 2018) through the study of learners' and teachers' perceptions and actions, thus, a more suitable and accurate approach to the study of language learners' autonomy and identity.

Interpretivism is open to a possibility of change and multiplicity of reality across individuals and contexts (Thomas, 2017). It is an understanding of this change and multiple realities and experiences in learner autonomy and identities that the study set out to achieve. It provides subjectivity to truth; truth is not what every learner and teacher needs to go through or adopt, but what each learner has gone and/or is going through, which can best be expressed by the leaners themselves and what every teacher practises or deems is effective for the development of their students.

Furthermore, Interpretivism holds that knowledge is everywhere; all kinds of information are worthy and valid to be considered as knowledge, including thoughts in the mind; it is socially constructed, and specific accounts contribute to informing each other; and that in trying to construct knowledge, it is essential to consider the knower's own position of value (Thomas, 2017). Interpretivism incorporates human interest, including the researcher's, into a research study and acknowledges the differences between people as in this study.

In interpretivist research, focus is on understanding specific topics and issues; research procedures are sensitive to participants and contexts as participants' personal experiences and the research sites are explored respectfully, reciprocity is provided, and focus is placed on multiple-perspectives stories told by individuals and the respect of individual differences. Moreover, Interpretivism provides ground for the co-construction of knowledge by the participants and researcher. Researchers' ethical practices recognise the essence of the subjectivity of their own lens and acknowledge their powerful position in the research as information collected is jointly constructed by the researcher and participants. This knowledge does not only define the frame of this study but informs it throughout the entire research process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In asking the interview questions, building up on learners' responses, questions and non-verbal language, and seeking clarity and deeper understanding of their perspectives, a knowledge-building process between the participants and I, as the researcher is being constructed.

3.3.2. Qualitative methodology

In choosing an interpretivist approach, the study follows a qualitative method to data collection and analysis. Following my aims and objectives for the study, a qualitative method, which follows primarily a subjective approach to finding the 'truth' and capitalises on the need for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences, was an appropriate option. I could use a mixed method approach by employing both a survey and an interview method, however, as

earlier explained, I wanted to get to know my participants and them know me, and to get a better understanding of their thoughts, experiences and actions which could not be gotten by them ticking boxes. I, therefore, chose to follow a qualitative approach because it gives researchers the opportunity to derive an in-depth understanding of the enquiry understudy. It equally provides the opportunity for researchers to gain more details by building rapport with the participants, as they can reflect on and react to what participants have said. Details will then help in producing a rich description of the event, individual and social context, highlighting verisimilitude and conveying the process of change (Bryman, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach has a strong interest in subjectivity and authenticity of human experience (Silverman, 2017). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe qualitative interview as "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world" (p.3) as in this study.

Qualitative research methods are concerned with collecting and interpreting non-numerical information (for example, observations, narratives, descriptions, conversations) which emphasise subjective experiences and how the nature of reality is socially constructed (Creswell, 2007; Silverman, 2009). It seeks to understand experiences, thoughts and actions of the participant and the context, to elucidate the specific, rather than needing generalisable facts which could be applied in other contexts, such as in quantitative research. An observational and conversational approach to understanding learners' experiences is adopted for this study. Interest in people's experiences, thought patterns and actions requires their telling. Interviewing the participants in individual and shared spaces enabled this. Furthermore, there is a reciprocal relationship between the individuals and context studied; individuals both construct and are constructed by reality, thus, theorising multiple versions of knowledge and reality (Bryman, 2015). Some of the most common methods used in qualitative research are semi-structured or unstructured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, direct observation, case studies, participant observation, focus groups, and various document studies (Thomas, 2017). This study adopted semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus group methods.

Qualitative research adopts an inductive reasoning and a holistic process-oriented approach to the study of a phenomenon. Rather than being objective and distant, the researcher in a qualitative study is central in forming the sense and meaning that is made, as both the participants and researcher are considered co-constructors of fluctuating and complex meaning (Creswell, 2007; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Similarly, reflexivity is a key concept in qualitative

research – both personal reflexivity (the acknowledgement of how the researcher's values and individuality can and will influence the research process) and functional reflexivity (a continuous critical examination of the research process) (Banister et al, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2018). However, the researcher's immediate involvement and subjectivity in the study in qualitative research has been criticised by some as a danger to the quality of the interpretation (Holmes, 2020), as it could increase bias. The qualitative approach is employed to this study to understand the relationship between learner autonomy and identity.

Some limitations of qualitative research are its dependency on the researcher's skills and abilities to effectively conduct, analyse and discuss the results. Also, the volume of material leads to time consuming coding, analysis and interpretation. It is often criticised for not being scientific and can lead to bias; the researcher's presence can influence the respondent's behaviours, ethical issues can arise, anonymity and confidentiality can present challenges and findings cannot always be presented in a visual or an accessible way.

3.4. Research design

This section presents the influence of phenomenology on the conduct, analysis and understanding of the study (3.3.1), the process employed in selecting the research participants (3.3.2) and details of the participants (3.3.3). It also presents some challenges faced during the data collection process and how these were addressed (3.3.4).

3.4.1. Phenomenology

The study draws on phenomenological perspectives to understand English language learners' lived experiences of their autonomy and identity development during their language learning journey, through their perspectives and those of their teachers.

Phenomenology, as the movement and a new way of doing philosophy was first formally inaugurated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) over a century ago. It set off as "the phenomenology of the experiences of thinking and knowing" (1970, p. 249) when discussing the need for a wide-ranging theory of knowledge. In later years, many other original practitioners of Phenomenology deviated from Husserl's methodology paving their own paths, the most prominent of whom were identified in Moran (2000) as Max Scheler (1874-1928) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). With phenomenology gaining new thoughts, it became seen as a deviation from Husserl (Husserlian Heresies) and Heidegger in his 1927 lecture course on *Basic problems of Phenomenology* commented, "there is no such thing as the one

phenomenology" (Moran, 2000). Moran (2000) in his *Introduction to Phenomenology* provided an understanding of Phenomenology:

> Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. As such, phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense or, indeed, from science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within (p.4).

By this, he refers to phenomenology as an attempt to capture a phenomenon as it is to the experiencer, uninterrupted by external conceptions. Phenomenology follows the understanding of phenomena through subjective reality (Qutoshi, 2018; Shudak, 2018). That is, reality is what the individual who has lived the experience says it is. Interpretive phenomenology builds on this by trying to understand individuals' lived experiences from their understanding and perspectives of the phenomenon. This study attempts to understand English Language learners' experiences of developing their autonomy and constructing their identity during their learning journey by letting the participants tell their story.

Moran (2000) insists that through phenomenology, the explanations and interpretations that arise from individuals' lived experiences should result from an understanding of the phenomena, and not imposed before an understanding of the phenomena from within. With this, the researcher needs to be cautious of not drawing conclusions before the research is undertaken, causing their biases to influence the truth or reality of the phenomena. To avoid pre-study conclusions and conceptions to explain the data, I let the participants' perspectives lead the analysis. That is, not presenting what I thought the participants' experiences were, but what they said their experiences were.

Phenomenology, as a methodology, adopts a qualitative approach, placing primary importance on systematically studying subjective experiences through methods such as interviews, observations and discussions (Leach, 2014; Shudak, 2018; Quotos, 2018) on a small scale. As other qualitative methodologies, this has formed part of its criticisms as it has been said to not be considered scientific as it does not proceed from an experimental base (for example, it lacks hypotheses and replicability as results are subjective) despite the researcher's objectivity, and results are usually not considered generalisable. Bracketing is important to reduce researchers'

preconceptions about the phenomena (phenomenological reduction) to open themselves to possibilities that the phenomenon understudy appears unencumbered (Shudak, 2018).

With this, being able to observe and interview participants to tell the story of their experiences and perspectives helped me gain deeper understanding of how English language learners' autonomy and identity are related, what challenges are encountered in developing these variables and how these influence their language learning.

3.4.2. Selecting participants

Three considerations in conducting research in social sciences are the decision of who to select as participants (or site/context), the specific sampling strategy and the sample size for the study. The two types of sampling in social research are probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling which is concerned with random selection of participants is impracticable for this study and is usually not of interest to qualitative researchers. Non-probability sampling, on the other hand, as used in this study, does not include random selection. The availability of willing participants and the researcher's subjectivity in this sampling technique are said to possibly interfere with the target sample selection (Bryman, 2015). Non-probability sampling is used in qualitative research and includes purposive, convenient, snowball and voluntary sampling. There is a similarity in the participants, that is, it is important that all participants have an experience of what is being studied and serve as a representation of the entire population (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

A good sample is one that is representative of the entire population and provides each entity an equal chance of being chosen. The quality of non-probability sampling in qualitative research is defined more by the characteristics of the sample than its size. Some researchers have, however, argued that the number of participant selection is based on the characteristics of the chosen sample. For example, considering variables such as gender and age of participants (Wilmot, 2005) and research based on specific life experiences that might influence the number of participants as it will involve in-depth analysis (Bryman, 2015). Purposive sampling is chosen for this study following the criteria set out for the study; to examine the relationship between ESOL learners' autonomy and identity and its influence on their language learning. The criteria are established based on the research questions and aims (Bryman, 2015).

Purposive sampling involves the researcher using their own judgement to select individuals and sites that are purposefully informative for the understanding of the research problem understudy (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This decision aligns with who or what will be sampled,

the number of people or sites needed and a consistency of the sample to the approach used (ibid). This was useful as I had to carefully select my learner participants from the setting whom I believed were able to better participate in the study mainly based on their language level. Marshall and Rossman (2015) note that sampling can change during the research and propose the importance of flexibility in researchers. A criterion sample which “seeks cases that meet some criterion” (p.159) is used in this study.

Criteria set for selecting research participants using purposive sampling were aimed at answering the research questions and aims. For this study, the criteria for learner participants included language learners taking an English language course in the UK as a second language (or more language as some learners are multilingual speakers); the English language learner (ELL) should have learned English over a period of at least a year. This had to be modified as due to certain reasons such as time of entry into the UK and restrictions of the COVID 19 pandemic, some of the students had only been learning formally in the UK for some month. Learners who had been learning for at least six months in the UK were chosen as they at this point were considered as having had a standard experience of studying English in the British Educational system. The teachers required for the study needed to have had at least a year’s experience in teaching English as a second or foreign language and were active ESOL teachers at the time of conduct. After my first interview, I realised that I had to choose learners whose language proficiency was high enough for them to understand the questions and express their perspectives, experiences and contributions to the issues discussed. This then became a criterion for choosing the learner participants.

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) suggest that learners “have expertise as insightful commentators on teaching and learning” (p. 12) proposing that given that the learner is the one consuming the knowledge, their thoughts and suggestions on the teaching and learning process based on their learning preferences and perspectives are essential in determining the effectiveness of the processes and learning outcome.

3.4.3. Participants in the study

Two groups of participants were used for the study – English language (ESOL) learners and teachers. The first group (learners) was drawn from the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programme in a further education college in Southeast England. I initially aimed at interviewing 10 to 15 male and female ESL learners across the ages of 16 to 19 years. The study finally recruited 13 participants for the individual interviews because of age and

fluency challenges (as explained in Section 3.4.4). The ESOL programme (at the time of data collection) is completed over a period of 3 years. Year one is known as Entry level one. Learners at this level are assessed as Entry level learners and are at Elementary level (A1) according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CERF). Year two is called Entry level two. Learners at this level are assessed as Pre-intermediate (A2) learners. Year 3 is the last, Entry level three. Learners at this level are considered Intermediate (B1) learners and can enrol into Level 1 English or mainstream programmes after their final exams.

Learners are assessed at the beginning of the programme and are placed in different Entry levels depending on their level of language proficiency. The learners are generally diverse based on their historical/geographical (learners from different counties and continents) and linguistic (first language (L1) and English proficiency) background and identity. The diversity in the learners' identities and experiences in English language learning makes the sample of interest and convenience to the study as it cuts across a variety of experiences. The study focused on the most proficient learners as they had a greater ability to better communicate their perspectives. This, however, might have limited the opportunity to 'capture' the rich experiences and perspectives of the less proficient learners. A table depicting the learner participants (including focus group participants) in the study is shown below.

Table 3. 1: Describing the learner participants

Pseudo name	Age	Gender	Entry level	Country of origin	Years in the UK	Years studying English	Number of Languages spoken
Tula	17	female	2	Shri Lanka	2	6 months (ESOL) 12 years (EFL) 1.6 years mainstream school UK	2
Aban	19	male	2	Guinea	2.6	8 months	7
Ian	19	male	3	Sudan	3	3 years	2
Stan	18	male	2	Iraq	2	7 months	5
Aman	20	male	2	Afghanistan	1.6	8 months	3
Romeo	18	male	2	Turkey	1.6	1.6 years	2
Lana	20	male	3	Iran	3	2.6 years	2
Kuna	18	female	3	Bulgaria	3.6	3 years	3
Steven	19	male	3	Bulgaria	3.6	3 years	5
Dan	20	male	2	Morocco	2.6	2 years	4
Mah	20	female	2	Cyprus	1.4	1.3 years (ESOL) 10years (EFL)	3
Hammed	19	male	1	Iran	1.4	1 year	3

Tigs	18	female	2	Eritrea	2	1.9 years	3
Kirti	18	female	2	Ethiopia	2	1.9 years	5
Marks	18	male	3	Latvia	1.9	1.8 years (ESOL) + EFL	3
Chris	19	male	2	Russia	2	2 years	2
Nam	18	female	3	India	3	3 years	2

The second group of participants were English language teachers in the same department (ESOL) of the further education college. The department has three English teachers for the three Entry levels and a Mathematics teacher, covering all Entries. The Maths teacher is expected to teach subsidiary English lessons before and during each lesson to introduce English-Maths' vocabulary and expression to the students. Teaching experiences varied among the participants as they had had different number of years in service and places of service as L2 English language teachers, but all teachers had had experience in teaching ESL learners for at least two years.

Table 3. 2: Describing the teacher participants

Pseudo name	**Entry level**	**Subject**	**Experience (years)**	**First Nationality**
Rachel	2	English	15	Romanian
Lili	3	English	10	British
Tania	1,2,3	Maths	20	German
Anne	1	English	3	British

The ESOL department in the college is on the third floor of the central wing of the college. There are other departments on the same floor, thus, the English language learners meet and interact with other target language speakers studying different courses. The possibility for learners to see, meet and interact with other students in the college provides more opportunities for them to use the target language, learn the English and other cultures, and set goals for themselves which might act as a motivation for them to learn better. However, the decision to interact with other TL speakers and use the TL is dependent on the learners. The learners also shared spaces with other students at the college who spoke the TL such as the canteen, welcome and relaxation areas on the ground floor at the entrance to the college, the library, kitchen, toilets and relaxation areas outside the buildings.

During the data collection phase, the department had four teachers, three English language and one maths teacher (who also had some English language lessons with the students). There are

usually about a hundred number students are accepted each year. The number has increased over the years as more learners have been found to apply to learn the TL, possibly a result of an increase in integration/resettlement in the UK as seen in the recent influx of Ukrainian migrants due to the war. Each level had classes at least three times a week, from 9 am to 5pm. These were scheduled into 3 to 4 lessons a day incorporating English, maths and functional/ employability skills.

The classroom is usually rearranged to better support each lesson, for example into groups, horseshoe or roundtable positions to enhance or reduce interaction depending on the lesson. However, during the Covid 19 pandemic, learners had to be placed approximately two metres apart from each other to avoid and reduce the spread of the disease. This caused a reduction in interaction between the learners and learning in groups, for example, was more difficult or restricted. With this, learners missed out on the benefits of group activities and interactions.

The teachers had a 'teachers' room' in which they sat at the end of the day or during free periods to do administrative work, reflect on their teaching and undertake continuous professional development training. This provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching, share experiences and ideas and learn from one another and other teachers from other departments.

3.4.4. Some challenges encountered during the data collection process

In conducting this research, challenges were encountered which influenced the data and study in general such as obtaining access to the research site, signing parental consent forms, learners' limited fluency and finding convenient time and space to conduct the interviews.

After obtaining ethical approval from the university to proceed with data collection, I faced a major delay in gaining permission to access the research site. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic and the lockdown of several institutions, the college, like many others, declined access to outsiders. I spent three months trying to gain access into the research site. Due to health and safety reasons, my requests were declined and postponed for several months. I was finally granted permission with the promise to adhere to safety procedures such as taking a COVID test every week and before I went into the college. To increase the possibilities of being granted access, I decided to receive the vaccine, as taking it was considered safer. Furthermore, help from the teachers in the ESOL department who advocated for me was the main reason I was finally granted access. I had worked as a volunteer teaching assistant in the department two years prior and was familiar with the department and some of the staff and students. This was

significantly helpful as it provided more confidence that I was in some way part of the team and was trustworthy to adhere to the safety rules provided. I was initially permitted to go into college once a week. This increased to three days in the later weeks.

After gaining access into the research site, obtaining consent from learner participants was the next challenge. Since most of the students were under eighteen, parental consent was required. A majority of the students were refugees and asylum seekers and thus, had social workers as their guardians. It was not possible to gain access to these social workers to sign the consent forms as it required several more procedures which were difficult to fulfil. The first interview I conducted was from a student who required parental consent and who at the end was the only one able to sign a parental consent form because she lived with her parents and was happy to sign and participate in the study. Other students either never returned with their forms or did not want to give the forms to their parents or guardians, although some were interested in participating. However, they could not participate as a parental consent form had to be signed as per ethical procedures. This was explained to them. To solve this challenge, I chose to interview students who were eighteen and above and could provide consent following ethical procedures. The students I approached were happy to participate and provided their consent. Some of the students, however, were not as proficient as those who needed parental consent.

Furthermore, the learners' proficiency was a major challenge in collecting the data. The general English language proficiency of the students was low as they were classified as Entry level students; that is, Elementary (A1), Pre-intermediate (A2) and Intermediate (B1) English learners according to the CERF. The students faced difficulties in explicitly expressing their perspectives, although some of the students were more fluent than others. Several times, some mentioned that they wanted to say something but did not know how to say it (e.g Hammad). Some tried with prompts, aids and rephrasing of the questions to express themselves, but others did not want to try further. At times, some used very short sentences or just agreed and disagreed with a yes and no or a nod and shake of the head and would not explain further. To help navigate the challenge, I employed strategies such as choosing the more fluent students, being attentive to body language, using shot simple sentences, rephrasing questions and summarising what they had said and asking for clarity to be certain I had received their right intentions. This was extremely helpful to get the students to say more. Also, I conducted a group interview with two students who had low English proficiency but shared the same L1. This was significantly helpful as they complemented each other and help explain and interpret for each other in their L1 when they faced difficulties.

Moreover, the period within which I was provided access to the participants was during the Muslim feast, *Eid Mubarak*. Many of the students were Muslims and thus were fasting during the Ramadan period. The students, therefore, seldom came to college or chose not to speak a lot to save their energy. The students not coming meant I could not conduct the interviews as I had intended. Also, the week following the end of *Eid* was the examination week where students needed to concentrate on their exams. After exams, students did not come as often to college. This posed challenges on how to get enough students to conduct focus groups. I initially intended to include only students who had participated in the individual interviews. However, with students not coming to college, it was difficult to have more than two students at once on the same day. I, therefore, had to include other students who had not previously engaged in the interviews. I informed students prior and organised times within which they felt will be convenient for them.

A convenient time and space to conduct the interviews was another challenge. Due to the teaching schedule, there were no free periods or rooms where I could interview students. Given that I was on a red visitors' lanyard and always had to be accompanied by a staff member, I could not easily take students to the library or other study rooms for interviewing. With students' consents, interviews were conducted during their breaks in the classroom. For confidential purposes, the teachers had to leave the classrooms during the interviews. I equally had to conduct interviews in the staff's lunch areas when teachers had to use their classrooms. As challenging as it was to conduct the study, it was very rewarding, and all contributed to the development of the study.

3.5. Data collection tools and procedure

The study made use of individual interviews with ESL learners and teachers and focus group interviews with a smaller selection of the ESL learners, some of whom participated in the individual interviews. Some of the data was collected from class observations. Data was collected between April and July of 2021. The data was collected and analysed using a taped-based analysis, that is, using an abridge transcript based on attentive/careful listening of the audio recorded tapes and a note-based analysis. The data collection procedure included participant observation throughout the data collection period. It commenced with individual interviews with the learners first and later focus group interviews with the learners and ended with individual interviews with the teachers. This section first analyses each data collection tool and later explains how these were used in the study. Section 3.5.1 presents the observation

procedure. This is followed by the focus group interviews (3.5.2) and finally the semi-structured interviews (3.5.3).

3.5.1. Observations

The aim of the study was to understand the relationship between ESOL learners' identity and autonomy development and its influence on their learning throughout their learning journey. In better capturing this understanding, the study made use of observation as a source of data collection and for the general understanding of the participants understudy. Observation is one of the primary tools for data collection in qualitative research. In simple terms, observation is watching carefully (Thomas, 2017), employing your senses and recording (notetaking) important facets of each stage for the study. It is essential for the researcher to have a preconceived understanding of what they want to observe which will serve as a guide during the observation and provide detailed description and prevent distraction or partial analysis. These aims will help in determining what type of observation is good for the study in addition to other factors and possibilities.

An observation could be participant or non-participant wherein the researcher is known by and engages with the participants (complete participant), participates in the activities (participant as observer) and records notes in the process, or the researcher does not participate in the activities but observes from a distance (observer as participant) or is not known by the participants (complete observer) during the observation process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Observation is usually done in the natural setting. I took the place of a participant observer in this study. Due to my past relationship with the teachers and the ESOL department at the college a few years back, working as a volunteer teaching assistant, my time there during my data collection was similar as I helped as teaching assistant during class activities, sitting down with the learners and walking around assisting the learners when needed during tasks while observing. This provided a better understanding of the learners' abilities and the difficulties they faced. The observation period equally helped me select the participants I felt were most suitable for the study and could provide enough data needed.

The first two weeks in the data collection process were dedicated to observation. This was mainly to familiarise myself with the participants, practices and context to prepare me for the data collection process and to provide an opportunity for the participants to meet and get familiar with me prior to the data collection in order to build rapport and reduce discrepancies and limitations that may arise as a result of fear or anxiety from unfamiliarity. I wanted the

participants to feel normal having me around, not as an intruder but as a part and normal addition to the whole, and to discuss freely with me, as the rapport and what the participants choose to share with the interviewer can influence the data collected (Prior, 2017). Rapport has been defined from various perspectives but is generally understood to entail the researcher building empathy and an affiliation with the research participants, and rapport varies between researcher and research participants (Prior, 2017).

Furthermore, most of the consent forms were distributed on the first day after introducing myself and study to the learners. I, therefore, had to wait for the consent forms to be signed before I could begin the interviews. This provided opportunities to concentrate on the observations. The subsequent weeks included a mixture of interviews and observations. I was eventually permitted to go into the college three times a week and each day I carried out observations in all the classrooms. I shuffled between the classrooms and observed all the teachers and learners being taught by the different teachers. This provided a broad spectrum of all the teachers and learners. Observation notes were usually recorded during breaks or at the end of the day as I did not have enough time to record notes during the lessons while acting as a participant observer and helping students during activities. I equally did not want the students to feel anxious or suspicious about me taking notes about them during their lessons as this might have negatively affected their attitudes towards me and the information they provided.

3.5.2. Semi-structured Interviews

As my objectives were to explore ESOL learners' experiences in learning English in areas of autonomy and identity and teachers' opinions and actions on how they view the influence of these variables in their learners and how they manage them, using interviews seemed more appropriate than questionnaires. My aim was to explore more in-dept perspectives which would, hopefully, elicit the data based on feelings, emotions and experiences (Denscombe 1998). Thomas (2017) suggests that most people are more interested in and responsive to helping and providing their opinions (to less personal sensitive topics) when discussing in interviews than in responding to questionnaires. The interview process provides room to relate with respondents and establish rapport; listen to and understand what they are saying; decode non-verbal language and nuances of their behaviour, which can give important clues on how they feel; check for understanding and use words or gestures to encourage them to say more or less. Creswell and Poth, (2018) suggest that the process of data collection in phenomenological studies involves primarily in-depth interviews which can describe the meaning of the

phenomenon for the few who have experience it. All these can help in informing the research, which questionnaires will not provide.

Considering that knowledge is constructed in social interactions (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), interviewing, which is considered as a type of 'social interaction based on conversations' (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p.163), is a useful strategy to construct knowledge through the interaction between the researcher and participant, and simultaneous engage in reflection processes, providing a deeper understanding. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that the interview questions are rephrased sub-questions of the research study that the interviewee can understand and might be regarded as the core of the *interview protocol* that begins with questions that invite the participant to open up and talk and end with comments appreciating the participant for their time and input.

Semi-structured interviews were selected for the study as they provide mediated benefits between structured and unstructured interviews; allowing me to ask supplementary and additional questions based on participants' responses to gain further clarity while being guided by predetermined questions. They provided flexibility for both me and the participant to discuss the research issues and gain more understanding while reserving the caution of straying off topic. This structure reminds the researcher of their aim and themes but does not constrict them (Thomas, 2017), allowing them to elicit responses relevant to meeting their research objectives while providing room to further probe and deviate from the questions as the need arises.

Interviews, however, are time consuming and sometimes considered intrusive and uncomfortable by participants, especially when addressing sensitive topics. The process of scheduling and conducting interviews and transcribing the data collected requires considerable amount of time and planning on both parties.

The interview questions in this study were developed for English learners and teachers to address the main concerns of the research, namely the relationship between learner autonomy and identity, how English learners and teachers perceive and develop learner autonomy and identity and the challenges faced in doing so. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews to permit participants to voice their perspectives and experiences unrestrained by other perspectives from findings in the literature or the researcher's beliefs (Creswell, 2020). Questions used in the interviews were developed as a guide and based on my understanding of the concept of learner autonomy and identity, and informed by the literature and underlying

theories. The piloting of the questions, considered in this study as initial data collection, aimed at testing their effectiveness in collecting the required data.

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with English learners and individual interviews with teachers. I began with the learner participants and ended with the teachers. The first interview was conducted with the first student who returned with their parental consent form. The student was in Entry level two and met the criteria for participation. The interview was conducted during break, and she expressed her satisfaction with having it at that time. The interviewee was provided insights into what the research was about, how it was to be conducted and why she had been asked to participate. I provided a prior explanation of key words and phrases in the study. This first interview was considered the pilot study (initial data collection). Twelve other students were later interviewed with ten interviews being independent interviews and one group interview with two students.

Prior to each interview, I requested and scheduled times with the students in advance to ensure it was suitable and convenient for them. The interviews were mainly conducted in the students' classrooms during break for security and convenience and one other interview was conducted at the teachers' lunch area due to the lack of a free classroom. Following ethical procedures, the students were informed about the study and provided information sheets and consent forms. All the participants involved in the study signed their consent to participate. Before commencing every interview, they were reminded of their anonymity and confidentiality, and that their participation was not related to their studies and was not going to affect their grades. Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and included questions covering students' background and the main questions for the study. Due to students' low proficiency, I conducted a group interview with two student who had the same first language. This was useful as the students helped in interpreting the questions and each other's answers when they faced difficulties in understanding or expressing their perspectives.

The study included 4 teacher interviews. The interviews were conducted at the end of the learner interviews as it was easier to organise and meet the teachers than the students. I equally wanted to concentrate on the students first as I found it challenging to switch between the learners and the teachers, and there was no time to interview the teachers while interviewing the learners as well. There was no specific order to the interviewing as I followed the teachers' availability and convenience. Information sheets and consent forms were provided to the

teachers, and they were reminded of their anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews lasted between 40 to 65 minutes and were conducted in the teachers' classrooms.

Some changes made to the interviews after the initial data collection phase were, questions that were not clearly phrased to suite the students' English proficiency level were reconstructed and simplified for students to easily understand. I equally noticed from the pilot study that the ideas in some questions were repeated, thus, were either combined or removed. The initial time allocated for the entire interview, from collecting participants' background information to conducting the interviews, originally scheduled to be 25 to 30 minutes, was increased to 30 to 45 minutes to avoid having to rush through or skip some questions and to provide allowance for interruptions and for students to freely express their perceptions at their speed.

It is generally recommended that at the end of the interview, interviewees should be given the opportunity to ask questions or comment on the topic (Talmy, 2010). I asked my participants at the end of each interview if they had any questions or comments on the topic, in case they had any queries or wished to add their own input. This question was vital to hearing the interviewees reflections and recommendations. Most of the students, however, stated that they did not have any questions or comments although some used the opportunity to ask about personal concerns. One student was concerned and shared his worry on there being a possibility of another COVID 19 lockdown and how that had affected his studies.

The experience of collecting data was valuable, and the participants and I enjoyed my presence there throughout the observations and the dynamic face-to-face interviews. The participants enjoyed using the language as they perceived it as an opportunity to practise their authentic language speaking skills and the teachers enjoyed having a *helper* around and expressing their perspectives, desires and plans for the department. Managing the interviews with all participants was challenging, but mostly enjoyable and constructive as Hermanowicz (2002) points out that interviews are an enjoyable data collection method but could be "deceptively difficult".

In framing the interview questions, guidance was obtained from the issue needed to be understood. The questions were phrase to help answer the research questions. Further guidance was gotten from salient issues arising from the literature on English language learners' autonomy and identity. Given that the study adopted a semi-structure interview approach, there was, therefore, room for questions to arise based on new literature, personal objectives and participants' responses. Not all the questions in the original guide were asked to all participants

based on the flow of the interview and other questions arose in independent interviews which further provided inside into issues I had not thought of or had not seen in the literature. Some of these questions were asked to other participants while others were individual-based, and both provided valuable insight into the study.

3.5.3. Focus groups

In a bid to further delve into the ESOL learners' autonomy and identity and to capture shared experiences and opinions about the issues raised in the study, I believed using focus groups was a good way to enable participants (learners) to listen to, learn form and contribute to each other's knowledge and/or provide opposing views. With focus group interviews, the researcher is able to examine if participants have similar views, agree or disagree with one another on topics raised or build on each other's knowledge and opinions. Thomas (2017) equally suggests that a group is likely to display a 'risky shift phenomenon' wherein there is likelihood for a group to make a riskier decision, discuss or respond more confidently to a question or topic which an individual would not, as there is a feeling of 'safety' in numbers. Most of the participants in the focus groups appeared more confident and better discussed their perspectives.

Focus groups are suggested to be important when interviewees are similar, cooperative with one another, may be hesitant in one-to-one interviews and when interaction among interviewees is likely to yield the best information and data collection time is limited (Krueger and Casey, 2014). In focus group interviews, participants can be interviewed over more lengthy periods, a larger sample size can be accommodated, and more opened and heated exchanges can occur. It is likely to be more interesting and motivating for participants to contribute their ideas. The focus group discussions involved participants in reflecting on experiences in their past and their present, and projecting their future learning goals, autonomy and identity. This worked out well in the study as participants were provided more time to discuss their ideas and comment on each other's perspectives. Shyer students seemed to be more comfortable to speak when they saw others freely discussing and when prompted to contribute. The sample size of the first group (eight), however, caused challenges in the smooth flow as some participants kept interrupting others and not providing time for others to speak.

The challenges with focus groups are that some participants may become more or less talkative; some might take the lead and others turn to follow or agree with whatever they say (Marshal and Rosmann, 2016). This was the case with the first focus group in this study. Later groups

were re-arranged to avoid this. In some cases, some individuals might be shy to speak if their opinion contradicts others or might get annoyed if others disagree with them. It is important to create a comfortable environment when conducting focus group interviews, to encourage all participants to speak and monitor individuals who may tend to dominate the discussion.

The study used focus groups to identify ways of thinking and feeling and perception that differed and were similar among participants. I originally intended using the same participants who took part in the individual interviews as a continuation of knowledge and obtaining a greater depth of their experiences and perspectives. However, due to some limitation and challenges faced, other learners were included. This eventually resulted in positive outcomes as I was able to obtain a broader scope of learners' experiences and perspectives.

The study included three focus group interviews. The interviews were initially intended to include 4 to 6 participants per group for greater diversity in students' shared perspectives, and in supporting and or contradicting one another. The first interview, however, included 8 participants as it was conducted after a class and 4 students who had not participated in individual interviews insisted on joining the interview. They were provided with information on the study and signed their consent to participate. Due to the large number of participants, the interview became extremely rowdy, and some students did not want to speak while others overshadowed the rest and kept digressing and interrupting. From the low efficacy of the first interview resulting from the number of students, I decided to conduct the last two interviews with three participants each. This proved much more effective and productive. Again, the interviews were conducted based on the convenience and availability of the students.

3.6. Initial data collection phase

Piloting the study is essential for refining the interview questions, plans and procedures. Some pilot studies, as in this research, are considered initial data collection stage, as information obtained from the studies are used as part of the data. The initial data collection stage equally provides room to develop the research instruments, frame and reframe questions, assess degree of observer biases, adapt research procedures and collect background information (Yin, 2014). The participant can be selected on the bases of convenience but must be a representation of the main participants. The interviewees were selected on a non-probability basis, relying on convenience and availability, however, were a suitable representation of the entire population.

In this study, all the first interviews conducted (individual and focus group) were considered as the pilot studies (though used as initial data). The interviews helped in organising and

restructuring some questions and the collection procedure. For example, the first individual interview provided insight into learners' proficiency level, which I realised were lower than I had thought and, thus, I had to rephrase most of the questions to be easier for the participants to understand and answer. Also, I introduced other strategies to conduct the other interviews such as increasing the interview time and conducting a group interview with some students. The initial teacher interview gave me broader insights into aspects I had not originally thought of investigating and training on how to mind-shift from a scaffolded-like learner interview approach to a more articulate and advanced-speech teacher interview approach. The first focus group interview conducted helped me to decide on a more accurate number of students to include in the subsequent interviews to ensure greater effectiveness in both me and the learners being able to listen to each other's perspective and shared experiences, which was not the case with the pilot interview as the participants were too many, thus, overshadowing one another.

3.7. Data analysis

This section includes an understanding of the collection, transcription, coding and creation of themes of data collected from the ESOL learners and teachers. The data was derived from individual interviews of English language learners and teachers, shared perspectives in learners' focus groups and observation sessions (see Section 3.5).

First, the individual interviews were collected and transcribed simultaneously. I also began coding the interviews while collecting, transcribing and coding focus group interviews. The coding and theme creation were inclusive of data collected during observation and supported by an understanding of participants' perspectives and information from the literature and underpinning theories. Teacher interviews were the last to be collected, transcribed and codded. The data was transcribed word verbatim. This was to gain a full picture of the data provided, to include a context, to familiarise myself with the interviewing process and attain skills needed for coding and theme creation. I equally wanted to have a complete understanding of the data and to have it in scripts so I could read often and refer to it as I engaged in reflexivity, creation and recreation of the themes. The transcripts were equally very useful during the data analysis and discussion.

Preliminary analyses were conducted with individual data sources to obtain a general understanding, to think about the data organization and to examine whether more data would be needed (Cresswell, 2008, p.250). The analysis included a cross reference from the different data sources collected which provided similar or supporting perspectives. The data was later

coded, and themes created and developed, analysed and discussed to answer the research questions.

The themes were created based on salient issues on LA and LI arising from the data, informed by the literature and underpinning theories. The aim was not to prove the theories right or wrong or to find patterns that aligned with the literature but to use the literature and theories to understand, rather than analyse the data. Some of the themes aligned with literature, to connect it to the broader field, but more importantly added to knowledge and provided fresh perspectives to the body of knowledge. In creating and choosing the themes, I let the data lead the findings, analysing individual perspectives, looking at similarities in experiences and understandings and synergising the data across the data sources to understand the issues understudy. Because the study intended to explore ESOL learners' individual experiences and perspectives in relation to their identity and autonomy in achieving their learning goals, some themes were constructed, paying attention to learners' individual experiences while portraying how these perspectives and experiences were similar and different across the learners and teachers.

The themes were equally informed by my engagement in continuous reflexive and reflective practices. In as much as the data was derived primarily from the participants' perspectives, experiences and actions, the development of themes and discussion of the finding were influenced not only by the literature and underpinning theories, but my own reflexivity. Silverman (2017) states that data never speaks for itself; it is the researcher's understanding and interpretation based on experience that gives it life. My interpretations are based on my understanding and experiences as an insider-outsider (see Section 1.3), observation of the participants and contexts and engagement in continuous reflectivity, reflexivity and critiquing. These contributed to analysing the data and discussing the findings to answer the research questions and contribute to the broader field of knowledge. Reflectivity and reflectivity were essential as they helped me to gain a better understanding of the study, the practice of learning and teaching ESOL and the process of conducting research.

After basic interpretivist procedures, themes were labelled after data collection and adjusted several times throughout the analysis process depending on their effectiveness as descriptive tools as a means to organise the issues developed from the data. Although dominantly emergent from the data, original preoccupations, conceptions and research aims and questions significantly influenced the analysis.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is not a singular approach but a cluster of approaches (Coding reliability, Codebook (early theme development) and Reflexive TA), which sometimes conflict or diverge in procedure and underlying philosophy but share similar interests in recognising and capturing patterns in data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reflexive TA, a cluster of TA, captures the researchers' subjective skills brought into the research process and fully embraces the values of qualitative research. This analysis follows the interpretative reflexive process and includes open and organic coding with no compulsion in the use of a coding framework to generate themes for reliability in quality. Themes, in this, are considered the final 'outcome' of data coding and iterative theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Knowledge and meaning in Reflexive TA are understood as contextualised and situated, and the researchers' subjectivity is used as a knowledge-production resource which inevitably contributes to sculpting rather than threatening the credibility of the knowledge produced. It reflects the value of organic and recursive coding processes and deep engagement with and reflection on data. Themes are generated through the interpretive engagement with the data. This highlights the important and active role of the researcher in the theme creation process and the provisionality of initially developed themes.

Coding, theme creation and reflexive analysis

In creating themes, I colour coded and analysed the data as I transcribed – writing down my initial analysis in a different colour next to the transcripts. I chose red because it is conspicuous. I also colour coded in blue important words and sentences in the data that I thought were central or carried messages I felt I needed to focus on in the main analysis. I did not wait to read the entire dataset before noting thoughts and themes because whenever I followed that pattern, I realised that I could no longer remember the ideas I had initially developed from my reflexivity. Also, I changed my initial colour coding and reflexive colours from red to green whenever I felt I had considerably used that data or idea in my main analysis. However, I always returned to them as I progressed in the reflexivity and analysis. The change in the colours was mainly to prevent me from getting confused and easily identify what aspects of the data I had already analysed, and which were yet to be analysed. The themes were created from the main issues generated from the data in line with the need to answer the research questions. I equally kept a research diary in which I wrote some of my reflexive thoughts and initial analysis, especially when I had not yet had the right space to include them in my main body of work. A continuous

revisiting of these reflexive thoughts proved useful throughout the data collection, analysis and writing process.

3.8. Issues underlying qualitative design

This section demonstrates the trustworthiness of the data collected (3.6.1) and discusses ethical considerations (3.6.2) that have been maintained to ensure research integrity.

3.8.1. Trustworthiness

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that the process used in collecting, interpreting, and representing the findings in this study are trustworthy. The term *trustworthiness* is used as its purpose in qualitative research is to underpin the claim that the study's findings are significant and worthy of attention (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Quantitative research, on the other hand, uses the terms 'validity and reliability' to connote the positivist concepts which generates and evaluates findings following specific procedures, creating a degree of objectivity. For example, hypotheses are created and tested using validated instruments and results are statistically evaluated. Qualitative research is acknowledged as necessarily interpretive and subjective (Barkhuizen, Benson and Chick, 2014, P.88).

As a starting point to trustworthiness, "descriptive validity" used by Maxwell (1996, pp.285-286) notes the completeness and accuracy of the account of a study to ensure its credibility. He notes that qualitative researchers are first concerned with the factual accuracy of their account; ensuring that they are not distorting or making up what they hear or see and reporting participants' true data. Related to this, Silverman (2010) talks about the essence of an honest and open account of the research supported by the provision of a full description of what was done in terms of the methods and participants chosen, data collection and analysis and the explanation and justifications of the decisions made. Similar to this is Dörnyei's (2007, p.60) reference to "research integrity" in the research process, which highlights the need for researchers to enhance their integrity as a way of ensuring that their study is trustworthy through, for example, avoiding the falsification, fabrication and misrepresentation of their findings. He suggests doing this through employing strategies such as providing reflective and detailed accounts of the procedures used, using 'thick description' to present the findings in rich contextualised detail and identifying possible researcher biases.

I chose to interpret the participants' data credibly and accurately, and in a way which represents the data authentically through employing an approach proposed by Rallis and Rossman (2009,

p.269) to enhance trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research. This approach includes: "prolonged engagement", "triangulation", "participant validation", "using a critical friend", and "using your community of practice" as presented below.

"Prolonged engagement": Using observation as a method of data collection permitted me to be in the research setting to observe the participants in their natural and authentic state. The data collection period lasted for three months, between late April and mid July 2021, which was sufficient to understand my participants' experiences and perspectives about learning and teaching English. During these months, in and out of classroom observations were undertaken and a total of 19 interviews were conducted with the participants. This involved a prolonged and repeated engagement with the participants at times when I was both actively collecting data and just interacting with them off research purposes.

"Triangulation": The study made use of three main methods of data collection: observation, individual interviews and focus group interviews at different points in time throughout the collection process that enabled me to build an understanding of the setting and participants, and in turn aid my interpretation and analysis. It also helped me construct a 'thick description' of my findings, providing contextualised details showing the depth of the data and my interpretation of it.

"Participant validation": To reduce my biases as a researcher and ensure that what I had received is what the participants intended to say or do, due to my prolonged presence in the research setting, I was able to individually discuss with some participants the issues addressed during the interview process. Participants were not provided with complete transcripts as they were not very interested in the transcripts as much as their desire to read the completed report. They were, however, happy to look at them on my laptop and discuss any issues they felt they wanted to highlight. Also, some aspects noted during the observations were discussed with participants to confirm if what I thought was agreed with their interpretation of what had happened. With this, participants were able to validate or clarify my understanding.

"Using a critical friend": My main critical friends in this case were my supervisors who commented on the different stages of my data collection and analysis, from choosing the interview questions to emerging and concluding analysis during tutorials, reviews and seminars. Receiving critical and constructive feedback from some of my fellow PhD researchers on my initial themes and analysis was also very useful.

"Using your community of practice": Throughout the research process, especially during the data collection and analysis stage, I engaged in several critical discussions with trusted participants in the setting and well-established academics in the field who helped me check and validate my evolving impressions while in the field and asking questions and making sense of what I was doing. Also, engaging with my local community of practice in open discussions and sharing my themes in departmental seminars and other research conferences provided the opportunity to receive constructive feedback which helped me rethink how I viewed and represented my findings, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

To make the study of potential use to others as advised by Rallis and Rossman (2009, p.285), I have tried to provide detailed description of the research design, framework, data collection and implementation procedure, the setting, findings and analysis of the study.

3.8.2. Ethical considerations

It is essential that research is conducted ethically and sensitively. This section discusses these issues and how they were addressed in the study.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 271) distinguish two levels of ethical considerations in research – 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' where 'procedural ethics' involves the formal procedures required to conduct research such as receiving approval from the university's ethics committee, and 'ethics in practice' are the issues that arise during the research referred to as "ethically important moments" (ibid). Dörnyei (2007, p.72) notes that a flexible and contextualised approach is needed to make ethical decisions that rely on the professional integrity and reflexivity of the researcher to maintain high standards. Richards (2003) observes that "the ultimate arbiter of what is right and decent is your own conscience" (p.139). He outlines five ethical issues which researchers need to be mindful of: honesty, consent, ownership, harm and privacy (p.140).

I started by following the university's standard procedure of obtaining ethical approval to undertake the research. Following this, I had to obtain approval from the gatekeepers in the research setting to undertake the study. With the restrictions of COVID 19, this was a difficult stage as appropriate care needed to be taken to ensure the safety of those in the setting, and particularly the participants I intended to research. After providing all relevant documents and information related to the research, waiting for three months, adhering to pre-access requirements and receiving approval from the college, I was able to meet the participants. Being mindful of ethical issues, I was introduced to the learner participants and my reason for

being there was made clear to them. Because I already knew three of the teachers, I had to be introduced to just one new teacher. All participants, including the other learners in the department, were made aware of my intention to observe their learning. They all gave their consent to this through verbal and body language.

During data collection, I ensured that I applied standard procedures, informing all participants what my research entailed and why they were being asked to participate, reminding participants that it was completely voluntary to take part and that their unwillingness to participate was not going to affect them in any way and was not going to affect their study or work in the college. They were equally informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Information sheets and informed consent forms were given to the participants to read and provide their consent before any data collection commenced. Parental informed consent forms were also provided to underaged participants for consent and verbal consent obtained from them after their parents signed. I ensured that the language used in the forms given to the participants was clear for them to understand and that it reflected what was to be done. Words learner participants did not understand were explained and their questions answered. Participants were informed of their right to the transcript of their interview and access to the final report.

Furthermore, to ensure that the participants were kept from harm, they were informed of their anonymity, for example, through the use of pseudonyms, and confidentiality of the data provided, to protect their identity. Also, interviews were conducted at participants' convenience and in safe areas such as their classrooms where they felt comfortable and relaxed. Assuring that my research was not evaluating them and avoiding making any judgmental comments during the interviews seemed to provide further reassurance of safety for the participants.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the research methodology used to conduct the study. It situated the study within the Postmodern and Social Constructivist qualitative research paradigms and discussed the phenomenological influences, explaining how the data was collected and analysed and the trustworthiness and ethical procedures considered.

The next chapter discusses the first part of the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Factors influencing LA and LI: Motivation, the environment and technology

The previous chapters presented an introduction to the study (chapter one); examined literature on learner autonomy and identity in the field of Second Language Leaning (chapter two); and discussed the methodology employed in collecting and analysing the data (chapter three). This chapter is the first of three data chapters based on qualitative data collected through three research methods: individual interviews with ESOL learners and teachers, focus group interviews with learners and participant observation. It is the longest as it focuses on some salient aspects of language learning in the lives of ESOL immigrants in the UK such as the place of motivation their learning (4.1), the influence of the environment in the development of their autonomy and identity (4.2) and their use (or not) of technology in enhancing their language learning (4.3). An understanding of these salient aspects in the lives of the language learners facilitates the understanding of their perception and construction of the autonomous second language learner self (chapter five) and how their language teachers help (or not) in this construction (chapter six).

The chapters facilitate the understanding of ESOL learners' autonomy and identity construction in relation to their language learning through exploring learners' and teachers' perspectives and the challenges faced in developing learners' autonomy and constructing their identity in the L2 context. The findings represent learners' experiences which shape and reshape their learning journey and connects it to the literature in the field, adding to the understanding of LA and LI in L2 learning. The themes developed from the data are defined and explained though participants' perspectives and words and influenced by my positioning and reflexivity following ethical considerations (Braun and Clark, 2021). The participants' quotes produce lived reality which contributes to the research.

The analyses in this chapter are framed into three main themes. The first (Section 4.1) highlights learners' motivation in autonomous language learning and identity construction. This is further divided into looking at motivation in terms of language as an integration tool (4.1.1) and learners' personal relevance for learning (4.1.2). The second (Section 4.2) highlights environmental influences in the construction of learner autonomy and identity, looking into learners' immediate environment (4.2.1) and their self-perception in the L2 context (4.2.2). Lastly, analysis on the use of technology in developing learners' autonomy and

identity is portrayed in section 4.3. Participants' responses communicate individual experiences as well as constitute to the social discourse of ESOL learners in the UK.

4.1. "Language is key to everything": Motivation, learner autonomy and identity construction

Motivation was found to be a key aspect of the L2 learners' language learning, autonomy and identity construction. The learners reported their motivation from various reasons to learn the language, most of which related to their desire to integrate into the host country's society and culture (Section 4.1.1) and their personal drives and possible benefits achieved for learning the language (Section 4.1.2). Whichever motivation learners were influenced by at each stage of their learning helped them in making decisions. These decisions expressed the level of control they exercised over their learning and how they constructed their identity in the second language and context. As argued throughout the data and analysis chapters, it is not only learners' positive decisions towards their learning (as mostly seen in the literature) that account for their exercise and development of their autonomy and identity, but every informed decision made throughout their learning. As earlier stated, this section addresses the two salient aspects generated from the analysis of learners' motivation in their learning: language as an integration tool, which is further analysed under initial and successive motivation, and learners' personal relevance for learning the TL.

4.1.1. "Because I'm in the country named UK… I need to speak English": Language as an integration tool

Learners' view of language as an integration tool, linked to integrative motivation, was prominent in the data. All the learners believed that to integrate into the UK context, one needs to know how to speak the target language as it governs every aspect of life. This was evidently the core of learners' motivation to learn the TL and construct their identity. Learners' motivation was found to arise from two angles which this study refers to as 'initial motivation' and 'successive motivation'. An understanding of learners' initial motivation, here, refers to their original reasons for choosing to learn the language while successive motivation refers to motivation developed along the language learning journey from learners' experiences. These motivations were found to both influence the learner to begin the learning and maintain a progressive curve and are analysed in this section.

Initial motivation

The learners all had an initial motivation to learn the language for the need to socialise, participate and identify with the community and culture and become a part of their new host society. Their responses highlighted the need to learn the language as it is the language of communication and governance. In explaining his primary motivation to learn the TL, Lana highlighted that:

> Because I'm living in England. So, if I want a better life, a better job, an easy life, I have to learn English. To live in England without speaking English is difficult, isn't it? So, if I have all the Kurdish friends, but when you go to the shops, when you go to the public, you have to speak English. So, if you don't learn English, you'll have a short say. If you want to get a future, you have to learn English especially if you are living in England. The first language in England is English. So, I'm slowly learning English and the culture and everything.

Stan had a similar perception:

> Because I'm in the country named UK. All people speaking English. I need to speak English and when I'm not speaking English, when I'm going to buy something, I can't buy, I can't talk and I can't go somewhere, I can't do anything. When I'm speaking very well, I can do anything.

Lana and Stan, alongside others, highlighted the significance of their current environment – the UK, in their motivation to learn. They were not in their L1 country, thus, had to learn to adapt. Their new host country had a different language, culture and way of life, and the only way to learn and live in this context as everyone else was to learn the language which governs every area of life. To complete simple daily activities such as shopping, engaging in conversations, travelling and understanding important public announcements were difficult and sometimes impossible without a comprehension of the target language. Thus, the need to develop this new language competency and identity was essential.

The inability to speak the language was not only seen as a limitation, but an obstruction to effectively interacting and living a comfortable and fulfilling life in the UK. Thus, living in the UK mandated their learning as they considered the language learning as not just a requirement but an obligation: As Aban stated:

> It's not my choice. Because I am in the country. Any country you are, you have to learn to speak the language. If you don't speak the language, it's hard to get anything, even to get friends, it's not easy. You can't really do anything. That's why I don't have choice. If you get missing, how will you find yourself? You can't speak like deaf.

Ian added, highlighting the need for independence, that:

> You suppose to speak English with the people. No one can speak my language. Everywhere, I don't need interpreter. I came here to learn English because the English people, they speak English.

The need to integrate into the society to meet the basic needs of living in the TL context underpinned learners' initial motive for learning the language. In reflecting on their learning, they expressed how frustrated and stressed they were at the beginning of their learning journey. The feeling of being unable to do simple daily activities created a self-sufficiency void and lesser confidence in their capabilities. Norton's (2000, 2011) participant, Martina, had a similar experience when she moved to Canada. Furthermore, being unable to undertake the most basic activities such as shopping, attending college, asking for directions and even getting the bus or train, caused considerable emotional distress and instability in identity development as Lana stated: 'I really like to have English like a language. I really want to speak English all the time but it's difficult. Sometimes when you don't know something, you just feel disappointed.' Dan added: 'I remember first time, I can't talk, I can't do nothing, I'm feeling very bad… language is key to everything.' Thus, to evade dependence on other people for translation, which is not always convenient, learning the TL was essential.

In addition to learning the language as a necessity, Marks emphasised that added to the need to learn the language in order to integrate was the vital need to develop an interest in learning and in the language. This aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2008) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation wherein learners are not led solely by external requirements and motivation to learn the language, but equally by personal desires and motivation. To Marks, learning a language initially or eventually needs to be driven from the platform of a want and desire to learn, not just a necessity. He noted:

> I wasn't really interested in learning languages till I completed my sixth grade. But after I moved to England, it changed me a lot, but I've understood that if I won't learn the language, then I won't be able to speak to people, I won't be able to understand them. And if I want to live in this country, I have to do everything that I can to just become a citizen. I'm learning the language now because I have to and because I want to, because I am interested. Then I will be able to speak like English people. I was interested in English culture, and I like the accent and I was always trying to pronounce it correctly. I think if you want to learn a language, you have to deep your mind into the culture and try to understand it and at the same time, try to be interested in it.

The learners who learn the target language not only because they have to, but equally want to learn, exercise more autonomy and agency in developing their proficiency and constructing their identity. To Marks, learning the language with interest not only psychologically simplifies the learning, but also engages the learner to delve into deeper research into the understanding

of the culture of the host country. Addressing language learning from interest and not solely obligation for ESOL learners introduces another phase of essence in learning motivation and informs language teaching in that teachers can reflect on and implement strategies which help learners develop interest in the language as it is not enough to learn the language just because they have to, but also because they want to. There is a spur of agency in developing autonomy and constructing identity emanating from the motivation to learn the TL from the desire to learn the TL. Marks and Stan, for example, who highlighted the need for interest in learning, were noted by the teachers (during my observation interactions on 9/06/21) as the most improved learners. The learners indicated that because they learned from interest in addition to the need, they exercised their agency in engaging in a variety of individual learning to enhance their proficiency, demonstrating their autonomy. Stan stated that:

> I'm learning to speak in English at college and when I'm going home, I'm learning as well to speak in English from the community and from people who understand each other… Also, in YouTube with my phone. Before, when I live in Ashford and I'm not good speaking English, after one month, they ask, 'how do you do that? Are you going to college?' and I said, 'I'm just watching the YouTube and after one month, I can speak English.

Marks also reported that, in addition to YouTube videos and English movies which he often watches to improve his language competency, "I live alone but I usually speak to myself in English and on the mirror". Due to their desire to learn the language, they choose to invest more efforts into taking responsibility for their learning. Language learners should be encouraged to develop a desire and willingness to learn the language beyond the obligations as this will make learning easier and enhance their motivation and agency towards taking control of their learning and identity construction. As Marks highlighted:

> Interest is very important, because if you do not have an interest, then it will be very hard for you to learn. You will learn because you have to and not because you want to. And it is the worst part of learning; doing the things you have to do, not that you want to do.

By this, he implies that in developing interest in the target language, it becomes a desirable and less tedious process.

Successive motivation

Successive motivation was another strand of motivation constructed from the data as the learners were found to develop a greater level of motivation to learn the TL as they progressed in their language competency. Learners do not only depend on their initial motivation to learn but develop new motivations in the course of their learning. These new motivations

predominantly arose from the learners' individual experiences, both positive and negative. While explaining their experiences in learning, most of the learners indicated that the increased ability to do more and become more independent in their day-to-day lives, and the feeling that resulted from this independence, motivated them to want to learn more. Stan notes:

> Because I'm not speaking English before, I say, for example, 'Give me coffee, please.' But it's not nice. But now, I say, 'Can I have a coffee, please?'. But before now, when I'm thinking now, I'll say, 'what!'… Now, I see myself like a smart boy.

This portrays a changed identity to a more independent, confident and desired one, enhancing the feeling of competence and self-determination. The learners, having learned more of the TL, and developed their communicative competence and ability to complete basic daily activities that they were unable to complete before, are motivated to keep learning as this gives them a better sense of belonging, access, liberty and integration into the community. The learners felt accomplished as they learned new language structures and became more independent, increasing their motivation to learn more.

In contrast to the successive positive motivational currents developed along the learning journey, as a result of positive experiences and enhancement, some learners highlighted negative experiences which propelled them to want to learn the TL in order not to find themselves in similar situations in the future. Lana, for example, narrated his experience:

> The first year when I was coming to college. I remember there was a day I took the bus to come to college. I had a bus pass and the driver told me 'Your bus pass is fake'. At this time, I couldn't speak no English, I didn't say nothing. He just say, 'it's fake, you are not allowed to come…'. I remember now what he say but before, I did not understand. So many people were there, and this guy is like insult me and it's really really embarrassing. So, I told myself, 'No, I have to do something. I have to learn to speak to answer people like this'. So, he took my bus pass, and he didn't take me to college. So, I had to take the next bus to college. I couldn't speak anything. I didn't even understand what was 'fake'. I was coming to college and tell Rachel (the teacher), 'Someone took my bus pass and he say is fake. What is fake?' I don't understand what is fake. And she say, fake is like unreal, you make false something, you make it up. Yes. I don't understand everything now, but I know what the guy mean. I know how to answer, even I know how to sort out my problems as well.

Tula had a similar experience in which she developed a stronger motivation to learn the TL from the struggle she faced in calling and communicating with the ambulance service in an emergency:

> First time, I very struggling because people can't understand my English. If I say something, they get wrong. I struggle to talk in phone calls, in appointments or any problem I want to talk in English, they

> don’t understand. I had a problem in my stomach, I called ambulance, but they don’t understand anything. Then they arrange the translator to me, after he understand my language, but they take too much time to reach me. Then I said I need to study more about how to speak in the phone, how to do interviews, how to do appointments, lot of that, then I learn.

In these two instances, learners’ motivation was developed from negative experiences in the host country due to their limited language competence. Lana’s experience triggered his motivation to learn the TL to enable him to defend himself in future circumstances and to create a better identity that he deems secure. Tigs and Kirti similarly noted that they wanted to learn more to feel secure and independent, and that they obtained this feeling as they developed their language proficiency. Tula, on the other hand, felt her life threatened by her limited ability to effectively communicate and get help for herself in an emergency. The desire to avoid a similar situation from reoccurring, enhanced her motivation to develop competency in the TL. This suggests that learners do not depend solely on their initial integrative motivation throughout their learning but discover and develop new integrative and instrumental motivations during their learning, which keeps them on a progressive course. These new motivations, developed during the learning process, encouraged the learners to take actions towards learning more, both in and out of college, and developing more desired identities and future selves.

In general, the learners’ responses highlighted a change in their identity resulting from a change in their proficiency levels. This changed identity from a limited or non-speaker of English to a more proficient and confident speaker over time highlighted a feeling of joy and fulfilment in the learners, further motivating them. Ian mentioned that:

> “Ahh, before, if you don’t know something, I guess you go and ask, but now, I can speak with anyone. Anything with anyone, I can speak. Before, when I say something, I say it in different way but now, I can speak anything.

A change in identity to be able to express oneself freely than before, has constructed a confident self-identity in the use of the target language, enhancing the feeling of belonging and ‘voice’ in the UK. The learners are able to create and own their place in the UK as they develop confidence with an increase in their language skills, thus, motivating them to learn more to cement their place and ‘voice’ in the society, fostering a more personal reason for learning.

4.1.2. “This is how it will help me”: Personal relevance for learning

It was found that besides learners’ need to integrate into the UK, they had personal reasons for choosing to learn and develop themselves. Embedded in learners’ motivation to learn the TL

was their personal relevance for learning. Learners were motivated by their understanding of how competency in the target language not only influenced their general integration into and stay in the UK, but equally their personal lives. These reasons reflected learners' personal goals and objectives which fostered their determination and action to take responsibility for their learning and develop their L2 identity. Lana, for example, stated:

> I want to stay in England forever. So, I have to learn the language and the culture and everything about England. So, when I'm studying, I'm slowly learning English and the culture and everything. So, this is how it will help me… Also, because I'm living in England. So, if I want a better life, a better job, an easy life, I have to learn English. To live in England without speaking English is difficult, isn't it? So, if I have all the Kurdish friends, but when you go to the shops when you go to the public, you have to speak in English… If you want to get a future, you have to learn English especially if you are living in England. The first language in England is English, so…and I want to open my own business.

Having friends who speak his L1, he mentions, is useful, however, with a 'bigger picture' and long-term goal to permanently reside in the UK and acquire an identity as a citizen, he understands that he cannot depend on interacting and being friends only with those who speak his L1 as this will be a major hinderance to accomplishing his overall future self as a proficient speaker and UK citizen. With this in mind, Lana not only invests in learning the language but also the culture and way of life of the host country, which he deems essential. Thus, focussing on a 'bigger picture' and goal, his motivation to learn is further enhanced by his desired personal future achievements, which will result from not only acquiring the language, but equally understanding the culture and way of life in identifying as a citizen of the country. Setting personal relevant goals for the future, gives learners a clearer perspective on their desired future accomplishments, and pushes them to take control of their learning and self-assess their progress towards achieving these goals and future selves. Other learners such as Marks and Tula shared a similar motivation. In Chik's (2007) research, her participants' ability to create a well-grounded learner identity in which she desired to construct a 'speaker identity' in the foreign language motivated her to take control of her own learning through creating individual spaces and actively participating in out-of-classroom English oral activities to attain this identity and facilitate her learning.

Furthermore, two common reasons among learners' perspectives in choosing to learn the TL, and what drives them to develop their proficiency were their future educational and professional goals and identities. Most of the learners were motivated by the need to further their education beyond ESOL in their desired fields and to accomplish their desired professional identities. They believed that to attain these goals and identities, developing skills

in the language, which were required in pursuing these goals, was useful. These future goals and identities are linked to their instrumental motivation and personal relevance for learning. In talking about her next educational step, Tula explained:

> When I came here, Rachel (the teacher) said, 'your English grade is good, you can choose another course'. I said, 'No, I want to improve my skills. That's why I'm studying. When I get fluent in English, then I study another course… this is how it will help me. Before, I study, I don't understand anything… Now, I want to become an accountant. Maybe I will change my mind. If I don't understand English, how can I study? And when working, if someone give me documents, I want read, if I don't understand, how can I do the job?

Tula was driven from the outset of her ESOL learning journey by the desired language goals and future identity she had set for herself. She was in a mainstream school for the previous year and a half and had faced numerous challenges in understanding and following the lessons. Her limited language proficiency had equally caused her to experience bullying from a group of girls in school and difficulty in making friends: "I had a problem in school, some two girls locked me in the bathroom, somebody came and helped me… I didn't have any friend." With this experience, she took responsibility for her learning and decided to register and attend ESOL classes to develop the language competence needed to return to mainstream education and continue pursuing her goals with the aim of avoiding further hurdles resulting from her limited L2 proficiency. To be able to assess her language abilities and make deliberate decisions to enhance her L2 proficiency and identity shows that learners, when engaged in setting and assessing their current and future selves and academic and professional goals, are instrumental in determining their L2 autonomy and identity construction. Other learners equally set similar academic goals:

"Yes, I need to finish all my education, you know. If I get chance to get the Uni, I'll try." (Ian)

"So, I know how to communicate… also for when starting another course, next year we will start another course, future study, so we need to learn English and also to do everything." (Tigs).

Although some learners mentioned that they had not set definitive goals on what they intend to do in the future, academically, they were certain that whatever their plans will be for the future, it required them learning the language. Thus, their desire to create a solid foundation by acquiring the target language skills and ESOL certificate, which will enable them to pursue, more easily, what they choose to do in the future, even if not directly related to education, motivated them to continue learning. In desiring to become footballers, for example, Aban and Stan highlighted that it was still useful to learn the TL:

Researcher: What are your future plans?

Aban: I want to be a soldier and a boxer. Maybe footballer also.

Researcher: Is learning English going to help you to get that?

Aban: Yes, because, if you don't speak the language, you can't really do anything. Like football, sometimes they are speaking fast. If you don't know the language, you can't understand what they are saying.

Stan: Umm, my future plans… I don't have any plans about study, but I love playing football. I want to be a football player, a good player… but I will still need English.

Whatever personal goals learners set, therefore, generated motivation to learn the language of the host country. Other learners, on the other hand, intended to return to their home country after completing their education to pursue their professional identities. Kuna stated that she wants to study midwifery here in England to work as a midwife in her country and she needs to know English to help her accomplish this dream as it will also provide several other opportunities:

> I like to learn English because that's very important to me when I'm go back to my country and if I don't have, for example, now I want to study to be a Midwife. In my country, if something happens and I don't have that job, if I know English, I can help the tourist, I can work in hotel or something like that. And I want to be more, to know more and more... I want to be in England for my future and I want to be a midwife and I think it's very important to learn English, if I don't know English, I can't become a midwife, I can't take my exams or levels which I need. To become a midwife, I have to have level three and if I do not understand what they are tell me, I cannot do anything.

Motivated by her desired future identity as a Midwife, Kuna invested into autonomously enhancing her learning such as through creating 'environments' to continually practice the target language, as is further explained below, to construct her L2 identity, which will enable her to achieve her desired professional identity. She set her learning goals on a broader spectrum – around the growing importance of English in the society across the globe. Acquiring English language proficiency seemed to be a 'ticket' to a plethora of opportunities and an 'insurance' to securing a job in the future in case she is unable to accomplish her desired profession and identity. Others, such as Marks and Hammed, were equally motivated by this understanding:

> English, because I'm learning English, and I just got used to this language and I've realised that this language has potential. For example, if you go to Spain and speak English, people will understand you

> as opposed to Russian which mostly only Russians and a few other people know…also because I know the consequences of not learning. If you don't learn English here in England, I think you are messed up. You will have to work in factories and in low quality jobs where they are going to pay you minimum wage and you will not progress anywhere. You might live in a good country but what is the point of living there if you don't understand the culture and you don't understand anything and you are just here for money? (Marks).

Further stressing on the significance of being competent in English in the global context and its importance to their professional life and identity, Hammed added:

> I want to speak English. Speaking English is very good because you use it in every country, you know. No problem if you don't know French, Spanish, German. But if you know English, you can use it in any country. In my country, there's English. Everybody speaks English, I want to learn English… I want to learn more. I just want to perfect my English. Now, I can't working, because I need English good. If my English not good, I can't get a job. So, first, learn English, then get a job, then get anything.

This relevance of the TL in the learners' lives, therefore, seemed to be a 'key' aspect in acquiring not just the host country's privileges, but international openings. They were also mindful of the consequences of not learning and their understanding of gaining a stable, high quality and desired professional stand in future. Also, the possibility of thriving in other nations served as a vital motivational push in taking greater responsibility for their learning and making positive and progressive decisions to enhance their L2 proficiency and identity.

In addition to future goals and the need to integrate, Tula mention that she is working hard to learn the TL in order to teach her siblings who are also learning the language.

> When I'm speaking with my brother and sister, I need to speak English because they just now start to learn English. We can't speak only just my language. If I speak always only my language, they can't study English… they can't speak very well… so they wanted me to study more. That's what my Mum and Dad said, "You also need to speak English in this house". I speak English with them all the time. They don't understand something, then I'm explain.

Her personal motivation to learn is, therefore, propelling her to make decisions and take deliberate steps to learn the TL and construct this proficient English speaker identity, not only for herself, but for her family as well. Other learners had personal reasons which motivated them to learn the language and increase their proficiency such as getting a girlfriend and enhancing their confidence:

"One year and three months I'm here and I don't have a girlfriend because my English is not good. When I'm talk to some girl, I'm shy because my English is not good." (Hammed)

“To get everything… everything is easier… it makes you feel confident. You can feel confident everywhere, you know.” (Ian)

The desire to increase their confidence in the L2 to get what they want was relevant to them. The learners’ developing proficiency increases their confidence and feeling of belonging in the UK. The learners develop confidence to learn more and use the language to create an identity they desire as their language proficiency increases. An increase in the learners’ confidence seems to lead to an increase in their motivation to learn. If learners are taught effectively and given strategies which can help them acquire the language more effectively and develop their proficiency, their motivation and confidence to learn and use the language outside of the classroom is likely to increase. From the study, the learners’ L2 confidence increases through an increase in their language proficiency, and they are able to use the language more fluently and better integrate into the UK context and culture. Their desire to develop this newly acquired identity and freedom increases, thus, they put in more efforts to learn more. Personalised learning (learning from personal relevance) leads to higher outcome achievement according to Benson (2006b), Murray (2011) and Huang and Benson (2013) who hold that the aim of promoting autonomous learning is to make learning more personal and focused.

In conclusion, motivation is seen to play a key role in learners’ reason for learning, agency in taking responsibility for their learning and identity construction and through their personal relevance for learning. When learners comprehend the benefits of learning, set personal goals and increase their confidence in the TL, their learner autonomy and L2 identity development is enhanced. Also, whether for general or personal reasons, learners were found to have initial motivations for learning the target language and to develop new ones during the learning process from their experiences (successive motivation) which drove them to keep learning.

Furthermore, deeply rooted in learners’ motivation was a drive emanating from goals learners set for themselves in the target language. Whether it meant integrating into the target language context or for personal motives at the beginning or in the course of the learning, learners were found to be driven by set short and long-term goals for themselves, which mostly kept them on an extended motivated learning thread. This motivational drive emanating from set goals relates to Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim’s (2014) Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs), which they argue that learners involved in DMCs undergo unique periods of intensive motivational involvement which extends over the entire learning process, stimulating and supporting a long-term behaviour in the learner in pursuit of and fuelled by a highly valued well-defined vision or goal. They add that a language learner involved in a DMCs is maintained at this heightened

motivational state and can be energised to exceed expected performance including across timescales, several levels and in long-term engagements. Given that the learner participants in this study had been studying English for at least seven months and were still motivated to continue learning the language based on goals set from their initial and successive motivation, they could arguably be said to be in or getting into DMCs. Motivation was, therefore, found to be significantly influential in the learners' L2 learning journey.

4.2. Environmental influences in the construction of learner autonomy and identity

Moving on from motivation in ESOL learners' learning in the UK, the environment has been found to significantly influence ESOL learners' learning, autonomy and identity. The environment here includes the immediate context within which learners find themselves such as the L2 classroom, their family, home and social/friendship groups and the broader L2 context – the host community and country. In analysing the influence of the general UK context, the learners have had a shared experience on their language learning as English is the language of communication in the UK. Given that the primary language of communication in the UK is English, the learners have all had the need to learn the language to integrate and progress as Stan states: "because I'm in the country named UK. All people speaking English. I need to speak English". This has generally influenced their language learning, autonomy and identity.

This section analyses two aspects: the influence of the immediate context (Section 4.2.1) and the influence of learners' self-perception in the UK setting (Section 4.2.2) on their language learning, learner autonomy and identity construction. The significance of the UK setting is analysed in learners' need to integrate into the context and culture. Although being in the UK influences all learners' language learning, the ways in which learners position themselves in the community, their motivation and level of interaction with the TL speakers cause a variation in learners' level of language acquisition and identity construction. Findings on the influence of the immediate environment in influencing learners' autonomy and identity and their self-perception in the L2 context are analysed in the following sections.

4.2.1. The immediate environment

The immediate environment within which learners find or position themselves was found to significantly influence how they constructed their autonomy, identity and language competence. This environment(s) includes learners' families, homes and social friendship

groups. Three main ‘environments’ were highlighted: the influence of the family, the people with whom learners live and the friends with whom learners mostly associate. The learners stated diverse experiences of the influence of their immediate environment on their learning and how they respond in such circumstances to exercise their autonomy and construct their L2 identities. One participant (Tula) highlighted that her family plays a significant role in helping her to learn the TL and develop her L2 identity. She explained that at home, although she does not speak English with her parents, who speak very little English, she is not allowed to speak in her first language with her siblings as they are learning English as well:

> More time I’m speaking my language, Tamil. In my house, my Mum and Dad, not good at speak English. But when I’m speaking with my brother and sister, I need to speak English because they just now start to learn English, we can’t speak only just my language. If I speak always only my language, they can’t study English… they can’t speak very well. They just now understand a little. They can read but they don’t know the meanings of them. So, they wanted me to study more. That’s what my Mum and Dad said, ‘You also need to speak English in this house’.

Tula’s family creates opportunities for her to engage in the TL. The creation of this TL-prevalent ‘atmosphere’ at home, where she spends most of her time, prompts her to engage in actively using the language. With the obligation placed on her to communicate in the TL with her siblings, Tula has adopted two identities: an English language learner and teacher. She not only constructs an L2 learner identity while engaging in the learning process but also adopts the identity of an L2 teacher for her siblings and has taken on the responsibility for teaching her siblings. As she states: “I speak English with them all the time. They don’t understand something, then I’m explain.”

These L2 learner and teacher identities exercised by Tula demonstrate her agency in promoting her autonomy and identity in the TL. She exercises a positive agency in deliberately promoting her learning and L2 identity with the affordances provided by her environment. The assumption of a tutor-like identity enables the practice of what is being learned and challenges her to develop her language proficiency through enhancing her agency and autonomy in her language learning. Another opportunity Tula mentioned she receives from her family in learning the TL is through her cousin:

> I have a cousin in here, she help me a lot. Because I came here two months, I didn’t went to school… then I started school here. While I stay in them house, because they are born here, they can speak very good English. While I stay there, they start to speak slow English with us. Then I, she helped me a lot. I like speaking with my cousin because she is very good and corrects me.

Here, the learner positively maximises the presence of other TL speakers in her immediate environment to enhance her learning. This experience is contrary to two other learners whose experiences report a negative influence of their family on their L2 autonomy and identity.

It was found that learners' immediate family environments can have different effects on learners' learning. Unlike Tula, who maximises her immediate environment to exercise positive autonomy and identity creation, Mah and Chris' reports present negative autonomy and identity development. Positive autonomy here refers to decisions learners make which help in promoting their language learning and L2 identity construction, while negative autonomy entails learners exercising their agency in limiting opportunities for the learning and practise of the TL. Mah, for example, demonstrates negative autonomy in choosing not to speak in the TL (English) when she is with her family:

> I speak Turkish at home, but they communicate in English. I don't speak English at home maybe because I'm shy…. Like me, I cannot speak English at home, but I speak in college. My family speak English, but I can't.

Here, although Mahs' family provides opportunities for her to use the TL, probably more than Tula's does, she chooses not to use it. Autonomy involves learners' taking responsibility for their learning and making decisions that affect their learning. Mah is, therefore, exercising her autonomy here, although negatively as she demonstrates her ability to take control of her learning and is aware of her ability and responsibility towards her learning. With the various definitions of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981, 2001; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2006, 2011; Little, 2009; Huang and Benson, 2013) focusing on the learner taking greater responsibility of their learning and deciding on how to learn, what to learn and when to learn, it could be argued that Mah's decision to not speak the TL at home, although detrimental to her learning, is an exercise of her autonomy. She, however, tries to explain the possible cause of this decision:

> The first time when I was here, I am singing one song and my sister is laughing at my accent. That's why I'm shy to talk with someone because I know my sister is going to be laughing at my accent.

Mah's negative agency over her use of the TL in her immediate environment seems to have resulted from the negative experience she had with someone in this environment. Her choice, therefore, to not use the TL at home to avoid a repeat of such experiences, could be a product of the restrictive shy L2 identity created by this experience, which has in turn affected her autonomy in the TL. Chris shares a similar experience in which, although he might want to use

the TL while a member of his family is around, he finds himself in a situation where he forgets how to use the TL as effectively as he would in another environment:

> I really can't speak in English when I'm speak with my brother or somebody who know my language and speaks English. I don't know why. I'm scared and confused. I don't know why. But I can speak when alone. Like my brother, we go to the shop. He talk with one person and he speak English. I want to say something, but I can't. I don't know why. But if my brother was not there, I can say it. I will talk with people, but if my brother is here and talking in English, I can't. I can't speak normal when I go out with my friends or brother who know my language, I can't speak English. It's like I've forget the language. In my head, my English is not very good.

Chris' 'inability' to fluently use the TL when he is with someone who knows his L1 shows the influence the presence of an L1 speaker can have on some learners' agency and ability to use the TL. From this, although learners' environments can provide opportunities for them to learn and practise the TL, if learners are not ready to use it, they will not. Therefore, there is an extent to which the learners' environment can influence individual learners' agency in taking responsibility for their learning as they can exercise both negative and positive autonomy based on their individual decisions, which are strongly related to their self-perception.

Furthermore, learners were found to create 'psychological' environments within which to maximise their use of the TL when their immediate environments provided little or no opportunities. Siblings, Kuna and Steven, whose family does not know nor use the English language at home, exercised a positive autonomy in promoting their L2 learning. They have two other languages (Greek and Bulgarian) which are used at home. Thus, they do not have affordances as Tula and Mah, limiting the times within which they can engage in practising the TL out of the classroom. As they explained:

> Not exactly… because my parents doesn't very well understand English and if I want to say something, I have to talk in my language. And always I need translate and then I have to help them… It depends because sometimes my parents will talk with me in Bulgarian and then sometimes, I'm going to answer in Greek and sometimes in Bulgarian. It depends how I want to talk. Because some words I don't know in Bulgarian and others I don't know in Greek. But I always speak English with my brother (Kuna).
>
> But here, everywhere, we talk in English. Only in the house we speak in Greek and Bulgarian. My parents don't know English very much. I use English with my sister. In college, I'm speaking only in English with my sister because I want to learn (Steven).

With the limitations in their immediate family environment, Kuna and Steven decided to create a more positive environment to enable them to continually engage in the TL to enhance their learning and proficiency by choosing to communicate solely in English when speaking to each

other, irrespective of where they are – college, work or home. They, therefore, construct this "environment" around each other which promotes the use of the TL, demonstrating positive learner autonomy. This shows that the environment can both automatically provide opportunities for language learners to engage in the TL or limit these opportunities. In Kuna and Steven's case, they decided to construct an "environment" where it is possible to maximise their use of the target language. Exercising this positive autonomy shows the positive identity they have constructed in the TL to attain their language goals.

Furthermore, given that most of the learners are refugee and asylum seekers, their accommodation (home) in the UK is changed by the government over their learning period, according to their status and age. Most of the learners experienced being moved from one house to another and either lived alone or were placed with housemates who spoke both the TL and/or other languages. Marks, for example, mentioned that he lived alone and had no one to speak the TL with while at home. Thus, he designed a strategy with which to continually engage in the TL while out of the classroom:

> At home, there's no one to talk to, I go to my mirror and talk to myself. Sometimes, I write down my thoughts on my notebook and when I overthink, I write in English. Sometimes, I can practise some grammar or what we learn here, and I can do it at home when I'm interested.

In choosing to talk to himself in the mirror so as to continually engage in using the TL, he exercises positive autonomy in developing his language proficiency. Marks not only practises speaking, but equally writing spontaneous personal thoughts in the TL. He seems to place himself in circumstances where he not only speaks in the TL but also thinks in it, deeply rooting himself in the language and culture. He also mentions his practice of classroom lessons while at home. This appears to shed light on the teachers' acknowledgement of him as the most proficient TL learner in the department (observation notes, 9/6/2021). Similarly, Stan, despite being moved into different accommodations, mentioned that although he speaks Kurdish when housed with other Kurdish speakers, he maximises the presence of a TL housemate whenever he is around: "Yes, when the English guy is coming back, I'm speak English". Their agency in creating strategies through which to use the target language at home and maximise the presence of other TL speakers in their environment highlights their positive autonomy in enhancing their learning. Most of the other participants who live with their L1 counterparts, such as Tigs and Kirti mentioned that, although they sometimes attempt to communicate in the TL, it usually feels strange and when they face a difficulty in using the TL, they immediately switch to their L1 and choose to keep using it.

> Researcher: What language do you speak at home?
>
> Tigs: Many time in my language because I need to explain good. So, when I'm struggling in English, I use my language.
>
> Kirti: We communicating in English with others. Sometimes, we are mixing English and my language when communicating with her (Tigs).

Choosing to use their L1 when communicating with others who use the same L1 in their immediate context limited the use of the TL. This was equally common among other learners.

Another immediate environment that was found to influence learners' autonomy and identity development was the social groups within which learners positioned themselves. Besides being in the classroom and at home, the learner participants stated that they spent most of their time with friends or at work. Most of them reported their use of the L1 when with friends or other social groups who spoke their L1. The choice to use the L1 was both deliberate and subconscious, depending on whom they spoke with, and they tend to switch language codes. Aban and Ian, for example, used both English and their L1, but tend to use mainly their L1 when communicating with other L1 speakers, mostly because they found it easier:

> Researcher: Which language do you use when speaking with your friends?
>
> Aban: It depends. At times, when I am with my friend from the same country, we speak French, but when I am with others who do not speak my language, we have to speak English.
>
> Researcher: Do you ever speak English with your friends who speak French or any other language you know?
>
> Aban: Yes, we speak English sometimes. But we don't speak a lot because when you say something that is not good, they'll be laughing at you. That's why we don't speak English together.

Ian shared a similar experience:

> Well, the most is our language, but sometimes, we mix it, Arabic and English… some of them I speak with them in English, some of them I speak only Arabic. But I have many friends who do not speak my language, Arabic, I speak with them in English. But my Sudanese friends, they speak 80% Arabic.

Learners' social context and association influences their choice of language. It was found that learners choose to use their L1 when communicating with other L1 speakers until they make a deliberate choice to use the TL. Every choice learners make reflects the control they have over their learning and TL use and relates to their identity. In these cases, the greater percentage of the languages the learners choose to use is their L1, although they try to use the TL. This is,

however, mostly when they communicate with friends who do not speak their L1. There is an aspect of code switching (Lin and Li, 2012; Lin, 2013) integrated into learners' language use. Code switching, here, refers to learners switching between their L1 and the TL when communicating with others. Learners will tend to switch to their L1 when communicating with friends of the same L1 and switch to the TL when their interlocutor does not speak their L1. A reason learners choose to use the L1 was said to be the ease involved and to avoid being laughed at as Aban mentioned. Others, however, rise above this fear and engage in the TL with their L1 counterparts such as Kuna who states:

> Sometimes, I choose to speak in English with my boyfriend because he is five years here, so he knows better than me, that's why. He is from Bulgaria (as Kuna). I just like to, because when you speak one language more and more, you are studying new words.

Focusing on what she will learn if she uses the target language (TL) instead of her L1, Kuna chooses to practise it with her boyfriend, who also speaks her L1, whenever she can. She was found to have a habit of creating opportunities to maximise the use of the TL, such as the psychological TL environment she created with her brother. This portrays her positive attitude towards developing her autonomy and her identity in the TL. Also, when learners befriend TL speakers who do not speak their TL, they tend to generate more opportunities to practise the TL as Steven says:

> I've got friends that have been here long time and they born here. I speak English with them too. It's very good for me because I'm just trying to talk something and when I do some mistake, they are telling me the mistake. (Steven)

> Yes. When I'm out, I speak in English. I have friends from different countries, they don't speak my language, so we speak in English. (Kuna)

In other instances, some learners do not have people who speak their L1 and are obliged to use the TL. Tula mentioned that she does not have any friends who speak her first language in the UK: "English, because I don't have any Tamil friends here". Therefore, she is obliged to speak in English and has more opportunities to engage in, learn and use the TL.

The study, therefore, found that learners' environment played a significant role in the development of their L2 learners' autonomy and identity and that some of the learners were able to perceive and utilise affordances (opportunities and possibilities for action) in their environment more than others. To some, it provided more affordances than others. While some learners maximised (positive autonomy) the learning affordances in the environment within which they found themselves, others were found to limit their use (negative autonomy) and

practise of the TL. Others as well were found to create opportunities and strategies to maximise the use of the target language where the environment provided little or none. Huang and Benson (2013) note that learners who find personal relevance in their learning have a higher possibility of perceiving affordances in their learning context, highlighting the essence of learners linking their learning to their personal reason for choosing to learn the language which will better help them recognise these affordances. It was also noted that learners will perceive different possibilities and opportunities for learning within particular learning situations and contexts as seen in this study. Learners' self-perception and attitude towards the learning was seen to be an essential factor in determining learners' perception and use of affordances in the environment.

4.2.2. "I used to see myself very bad before, but now, I see myself very good": Self-perception in the L2 context on language learning and identity construction

Given that the immediate environment was found to have a significant influence on L2 learners' learning, autonomy and identity development, understanding how learners perceive themselves during their learning journey in the UK and how this contributes to their autonomy and identity construction is essential. This is discussed in this section. Some of the learners had had previous experiences of learning English as a foreign language in their countries. However, the experience, as they stated, was different from that in the UK as English was not the main medium of instruction and communication in which to complete daily activities. Living in the UK entailed learning the TL, which was needed in every part of their lives in the host country. With this, examining how learners perceived themselves in this new social and cultural context, while learning the TL, was essential in understanding the identities they constructed of themselves, how these identities changed (or not) over their learning journey and how this influenced their learning. Some aspects highlighted include: learners' changing self-image and agency, learners' confidence building, passive language learning and goal orientation.

Learners' changing self-image and agency

When asked how they think English learners see themselves in the UK, they all initially projected a negative and restricting self-image. They provided their perceptions based on reflecting on their own identity when they first arrived in the UK and how that identity has changed over their learning journey. Some of these self-perceptions mentioned were that upon their arrival and early learning stages, they felt scared, anxious and strange:

> Tula: I think, first they are anxious and see themselves different because their first language is not English. So, their accent is very different from the English people… Now, I see myself very good.
>
> Nam: When I came to UK, I don't know how to speak English. I was not good. But now, I can speak well. I see myself very good, very excellent.
>
> Stan: Before, I see myself as not smart. Now, I see myself as a smart boy.
>
> Mah: Strange. Because we come from other country and when we here, it's strange.
>
> Chris: Before I was scared but now, I know English, not very good.

The learners took turns in expressing their perceptions on how they perceived themselves and felt when they first arrived in the UK and started learning English, and how this self-perception and feeling has changed over their learning journey. While Tula, Chris, and Mah had a restrictive identity of anxiety, fear and strangeness respectively, Nam and Stan possessed negative identities of not being good or smart enough. These identities, arising from their need to acquire a new L2 identity, seemed to affect their personal identities as they appeared to exercise these limited selves not only in the L2 classroom and language, but equally in their daily lives in the UK, dominated by the TL. Learners, therefore, seem to have a form of 'identity crises' at the beginning of their stay in the UK and their language learning journey, which affects both their language learning and other areas of their lives. This differs from EFL settings as the TL is not the primary language in the country, and language learners would not have the fear of feeling different or the pressure to learn the language to integrate into the society and function as everyone else. The teachers seemed aware of this restricted, shy identity learners had and mentioned that it not only restricted them in the community, but equally in the learning environment (classroom and college), limiting their learning opportunities:

> Sometimes, some students are so scared of looking silly that they, even within the college environment, rely a lot on students with the same first language as them. Sometimes, students learn very little in spite of being in college. (Anne)

Despite the limitations on learners' identity at the beginning of their learning, there seemed to be light at the end of the tunnel. A key aspect of learners' identity mentioned was that it changes over their learning journey, thus, the argument in the postmodernist view on learners having more than one identity (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014; O'Leary, 2018), referring to it as identities. In addition to other areas of learners' lives (their other identities), learners, over their language learning journey, have several identities, and they adopt and 'drop' these identities throughout different learning phases.

All the learners demonstrated a sense of relief when reflecting on their past and current identity, which is directly related to their language proficiency. It was found that an increase in learners' language proficiency had a direct positive effect on their self-image. From observing the learners while they reflected on and spoke about their changed identity, owing to a change in their language proficiency, they all expressed a sort of physical and psychological relief, and shift from negativity and downcast to enlightenment and fulfilment. Although they were still learning, as stated, how they perceived themselves as *'very good', 'excellent'* and *'a smart boy'* significantly influenced their moods, L2 selves, attitudes towards the learning and personal identities.

Based solely on identity and language proficiency, learners' identities changed at different levels of proficiency as those at higher proficiency levels seemed to possess higher self-perceptions and confidence and were willing to engage in class and other social interactions and conversations more effectively than those at lower levels. This analysis excludes other factors such as personality traits, affordances, motivation and current mood, which are major influencers of learners' identity, agency and autonomy. A mixture of learners with different proficiency levels in the focus groups portrayed the levels of engagement. Most of the lower proficiency learners had to be prompted to speak or were more interactive when grouped with others who spoke their L1. Romeo, for example, was often prompted by me or the other participants to contribute to the discussion. When asked by one of the participants why he was not speaking, he said: "Teacher, because I'm shy". He had not been learning English for as long as the other group participants and so, still possessed the shy identity that most of them admitted they had at the beginning of their learning. This was identified as a temporary identity as he seemed to demonstrate less of this shyness when discussing issues and engaging in class activities related to his interests–arts/drawing. Similar to this, Karam (2018) in his study found that while the language learner (research participant) engaged in multimodal activities, especially those of his interests and which aligned with his future self as a digital bricoleur, he was usually more engaged in lesson activities and learning. Learners, therefore, are more likely to exercise a more confident identity and engage more when the learning targets their interests.

Similarly, Tigs spoke more confidently when her friend who spoke the same L1 was around. This was reflected during in and out of class discussions and during their group interview. From the group interview, I noticed that at the beginning, Tigs was very shy and mostly quiet. She relied on Kirti to translate most of the questions and explanations for her and to begin sentences. However, as the interview progressed, she slowly gained confidence and led most of the

answers. The presence of her friend seemed to boost her confidence and helped her speak more. This might not have been the case if Kirti was not present. Their language proficiency affected their identity and agency to participate in the discussions.

From shyness to confidence – learners' confidence building

Language learners' confidence is a key factor in the construction of learner identity and development of learner autonomy. In assessing the effects of this negative and limiting self-image on learners' autonomy, identity construction and learning, their confidence and goal orientation were highlighted. Learners' self-perception was found to have a significant influence on their confidence and agency in the TL. This influence was found to change over time. All the participants admitted that they were shy at the beginning of their learning, which prevented them from engaging in conversations with other TL speakers, especially in the community. The level of shyness and how quickly they overcame this shyness played a significant influence on their learning. Marks explained that:

> I used to be very shy when I spoke something incorrectly. But now when I say something incorrectly, I just don't care because I know English is not my first language. You don't have to be afraid of your mistakes, you have to learn from them.

Marks was commended by the teachers as the most proficient learner in the department. He had studied English as an additional language in his country in school for a few years but had learned just a few basic concepts and vocabulary. He mentioned that although he was not very interested in learning English while in his country and did not devote attention to it, his perception and investment in learning the TL changed and increased when he arrived in the UK. Throughout the data collection process, he emanated a positive and progressive sense of L2 identity and autonomy. One of the methods Marks mentioned he uses, which demonstrates his investment in the TL to develop his L2 confidence and language proficiency, besides attending classes and engaging in social interactions, was talking to himself on the mirror in the TL when he had no one else with whom to communicate to practise the language. This might have contributed to building his confidence and showed his determination to learn the TL. Lana mentioned that one reason language learners are shy to engage in conversations with other TL speakers is due to the fear of being mocked when they make a mistake. However, this fear reduces with time, mainly from an increase in learners' proficiency and confidence:

> You know, sometimes when you are shy to speak with a lot of people and they are from English, and you are shy to say something incorrectly, scared to make a mistake, you are not very confident, that's the problem with speaking […] Yeah, I get more confident. I think first even I couldn't speak with you.

> I was such a shy person but now I'm okay […] Something like this because you know some people when you make a mistake, they will make fun of you, or they will laugh or whatever they want to do. But now I'm okay if they have a laugh as well, I don't care. But now I think I have the confidence to speak in public. (Lana)

Mah shared her experience of being laughed at, reason she got shy:

> The first time when I was here, I am singing one song and my sister is laughing at my accent. That's why I'm shy to talk with someone because I know my sister is going to be laughing at my accent.

Stan added:

> Before, when I was not good at speaking English, I'm shy and I don't want to talk. When I'm talking, I'm shy because I talk to someone and he said, 'Are you not good at speaking English, why are you not learning?' That's why I'm shy. But now, I'm good at speaking English after one year and I'm not shy to speak to someone very nicely and I can do anything.

Learners progressed from shy passive learners to confident active learners as their language proficiency increased.

Passive language learning

Learners' shyness at the beginning of their language learning causes them to engage in more passive than active learning. The study found that adult English language learners at the beginning stages of their language learning engage in passive learning more than they do in active learning. Stan, for example, stated: "before, when I was not good at speaking English, I'm shy and I don't want to talk." Passive learning, here, refers to the absorption of language input when exposed to the target language, without necessarily practically using it. This is mainly due to being shy to make mistakes and for fear of being laughed at or mocked, which prevents learners from engaging in communication with other speakers, as they would prefer to listen and learn silently from observation and speak when ready.

Stephen Krashen (1981, 1982) in his Second Language Acquisition research speaks of the acquisition-learning distinction in which he refers to acquisition as "picking-up a language" subconsciously and learning as "conscious knowledge of a second language" (Krashen, 1982, 2009, p.10). His acquisition-learning hypothesis claims that adult learners are able to both acquire an L2 as their ability to "pick-up" languages is not lost in puberty and can also consciously learn a language by "knowing the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them" (ibid p.10). Related to passive learning, it shows that the learners were involved in both language acquisition and learning (but not necessarily using it in practice) at the

beginning of their learning as they were immersed in the target language setting. By being exposed to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985, 1989), the learners were able to learn passively and acquire some language vocabulary and structures to use in active learning and language production.

Other studies (MacDonald and Frank, 2016; Alzahrani, 2018) have examined passive learning in the formal learning context (classroom). That is, learners' engagement during lessons. I have not found studies that have examined adult passive language learning before and at the beginning of the learning process, both in and out of the language classroom. This does not focus on whether learners engage or not during lessons, but on the passive "up-pick" of the TL vocabulary and basic language structures prior to knowing how to use them and actually using them productively. Based on experimental task research, MacDonald and Frank (2016) found that in both experiments, although active training helped learners to better learn the target concept, "passive-first" learners performed better than "active-first" learners (p.1). With this, they stated that related to different sequences of passive/active learning, for some tasks, passive-first learning can be useful and effective in equipping learners with better task representation, enabling them to be more effective active learners. Passive learning, according to this study, seemed to have helped the learners to equally learn the language first-hand, reduce their shyness and engage in more active learning.

This study argues that when adult language learners are exposed to the TL setting and receive high quantities of comprehensible input directly and indirectly from their environment, they tend to engage in passive and unconscious learning, familiarising themselves with new words, expressions and pronunciation. Learners also engage in both passive and active learning when they access platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Google translate and other language apps and websites, and learn from social contexts. Although they might not practically use this new language (vocabulary, expressions, pronunciations, etc.) at the initial stage, when they are ready to use it, their constant exposure to the TL will help them in using it effectively, as Ian and Lana stated: "[…] listening to radio, you hear what they say and repeat, repeat then one day, you will get better". "Sometimes outside on the streets when I walk, there's people who speak. I learn every day. And sometimes on the films as well". The learners highlighted their initial resistance to use the language when they just arrived in the UK and at the beginning of their learning for fear of making mistakes, being mocked and treated differently as some learners stated: "before, when I was not good at speaking English, I'm shy and I don't want to

talk" (Stan). "Yeah, I get more confident. I think first even I couldn't speak with you. I was such a shy person, but now I'm okay" (Lana).

This shyness to use the target language was expressed differently by different learners. While they all had difficulties communicating in general in the TL at the beginning, some learners indicated that they are still shy to speak in the TL when they are beside family members. This shows that learners' identity can change depending on the interlocutor and context within which they find themselves. Despite possessing a general confident L2 identity, which they had constructed with an increase in proficiency over their learning journey, Mah and Chris mentioned that the L2 shy identity still manifests when they are with family members, and they choose not to use the TL because they believe that they will not be as good as when in different company. This might equally be due to the expectation they feel those around them have of them to be able to produce a certain level of language proficiency that they think they might not have:

> Mah: I speak Turkish at home, but they communicate in English. I don't speak English at home maybe because I'm shy.
>
> Chris: I really can't speak in English when I'm speak with my brother or somebody who know my language and speaks English, I don't know why. I'm scared and confused. I don't know why. But I can speak when alone. Like my brother, we go to the shop. He talk with one person and he speak English. I want to say something, but I can't. I don't know why. But if my brother was not there, I can say it. I will talk with people, but if my brother is here and talking in English, I can't. I can't speak normal when I go out with my friends or brother who know my language, I can't speak English. It's like I've forget the language. In my head, my English is not very good.
>
> Mah: Like me. I cannot speak English at home, but I speak in college. My family speak English, but I can't.

Unlike some learners, such as Tula, whose immediate environment motivates her to use the TL, Chris and Mah said their immediate environment creates a barrier for them to use the TL as they are unable to speak English when with family or friends who know their L1 and also speak English. They become shy to use it for lack of confidence in their ability (limited self-perception) to use the TL correctly. They choose not to use the language like in Mah's case or forget how to speak in English like Chris who explains, "It's like I've forget the language". Their limiting self-perception causes them to exercise a negative agency and autonomy in choosing not to use the TL in these contexts.

Furthermore, learners' confidence was expressed in how far they were willing and ready to challenge themselves to learn. Some stated that they were not confident enough to learn beyond their current language Entry level, while others believed that self-belief was essential in activating autonomy and learning beyond their current level:

> Tula: They choose what they want to learn. For example, if I'm in level one, I want to learn level one practice exercise, I don't want to learn level two because if I go higher, it's very harder, I cannot understand anything. I can't control.
>
> Stan: But when you try and you are learning, you can control. You need to believe in yourself.
>
> Tula: I want to be confident. If I am not confident, I will be lazy and not want to study. Also believe in self, don't let anybody tell anything bad about your language, accent or pronunciation. They can say, 'that's wrong', and we also know, but they don't want to say always. That's very hurting. Some people always saying, 'why you want to study?' Some people hear everyone advice and will be shy to speak.

Tula seemed to have modified her perception after Stan reminded her that she needs to believe in herself and keep trying. She understands that being confident in the L2 is essential for learning progress. She further mentions that blocking out and dismissing the negativity from others on their L2 proficiency is important in constructing a confident identity. Stan demonstrated a lot of determination to learn and agency in his learning. He had been learning English for nine months and had had several interruptions to his studies in college, including the COVID 19 lockdown and changing accommodation due to his refugee status. However, because he had a high personal and L2 confidence and determination, he engaged in lots of autonomous learning while away from college and significantly enhanced his L2 proficiency. Having experienced the benefits of self-belief and persistence in learning, he was able to encourage Tula and the others to believe in themselves to construct a confident L2 identity, which he believed would help in enhancing their language learning, as Lana stated, "now I think I have the confidence to speak in public."

Goal orientation

Another area influenced by learners' self-perception was their goal orientation. The goals learners set for themselves seemed to change as their L2 proficiency increased. The learners had set goals for themselves even before beginning the course. Learning the TL helped them to further shape these goals and create new ones. The need to create and establish a future in the UK through learning the language was most prevalent. They knew that to be able to achieve

their goals, learning the language of the host country was essential. This meant being ready to invest in the learning and ignore negative perceptions. As Steven highlighted:

> When I came to England, I knew that if I want to do something with my future, I have to learn English. That's why I started. After, when I want to do conversation with someone else, I didn't care about how I talk with someone else. I just starting and talk. I didn't care about the mistakes.

Here, realising the personal relevance for learning the language helped the learner gain confidence in themselves to face challenges such as making mistakes and being mocked, so long as they progressed in their learning to achieve their desired goals. This helped them change the perspective they had of themselves from a shy and unable to a confident and able self-image. Thus, the new identity helped them to 'ignore' the consequences they may face from making mistakes when speaking or using the language to being able to take risks to use the language despite the possibilities of being mocked.

Learners' goal setting ranged from academic to career and personal. With these new identities and goals, learners are better able to construct a 'voice' and dream in the TL. When asked if their changed self-image had influenced the way they learned and the decisions they made towards their learning, Chris responded:

> Yes, sure…I feel too much better now. My English is a lot better and I'm feeling very good. I want to finish ESOL, and I want to go to university.

Mah added:

> 'It made me to want to learn English'.

> I think everyone wants to learn English because without English, you can't do anything. You can't get normal job. If you get normal job, you can buy a new house and any piece of information. (Chris)

With learners having developed a better self-perception with a change in their proficiency and confidence, their desire to learn increases and they are able to set better goals for themselves. They are able to dream in the TL. With this, learners begin to better manage their intentions for future selves, goals and expectations with an increased self-confidence as Tula explained: "I need to speak fluently without any mistakes. That's my goal… when I finish ESOL, I will know good English."

Moreover, the desire to gain independence in the TL was also found to be an essential goal for learners. Learners resented their initial low TL proficiency and identity which made them depend on other people or not fully express themselves. Thus, their desire to be able to defend

and do things for themselves, and have a secure identity like other TL speakers, was a goal most of the learners set for themselves at the beginning or during their learning, overcoming the challenges and constructing new secure identities. Hammad, for example, explained that:

> Last year, when I'm leaving in Ashford, some people were talking very bad to me and shouting, but I don't understand what they say. But now, if they talking to me, I can reply. I know some English.

In a seemingly transformed perception, Tula and Nam further explained:

> Tula: One time I call ambulance, but they don't understand what I'm trying to say. Then they get the translator. But the ambulance took too long.
>
> Nam: We have difficulty to communicate with others. Before we had a lot of problems, but not now because we can communicate with others, we don't have the problem.
>
> Tula: We don't want to depend on anyone. So, we want to do ourselves every work, so we have to learn.
>
> Nam: We are independent now and are very happy… Always I had to say, 'sorry, please repeat it.' I used to see myself very bad before, but now I see myself very good.
>
> Tula: Yes, very happy because if you need help from anyone, they sometimes think we are annoying and they suddenly refuse, that hurts. Everyone scold us 'you don't understand, are you deaf?' because we don't know how to speak. We have to learn step by step and face lots of problems with English people. If they speak bad word to us and we don't understand, then when we learn step by step and know that word, we are really feeling bad. We face lots of difficulties to reach the goal.

Learners' challenges throughout their learning and their restricted initial identities helped them to set goals for themselves to live more independent, fulfilled and secured lives in the UK. Other personal goals were equally set. Hammad, for example, mentioned that due to his language proficiency, he is not confident enough to begin a relationship. Thus, one reason he aims to be proficient in the TL is to be able to develop the confidence required to get a girlfriend, which will result from developing his TL proficiency. When explaining how learning English will help him, he highlighted:

> For everything. To get a girlfriend. One year and three months I'm here and I don't have a girlfriend because my English is not good, when I'm talk to some girl, I'm shy because my English is not good. (Hammed)

Learners also develop a sense of belonging and homeliness in the UK, as Marks noted:

> I kind of got used to this language. I don't know why, but I feel like I am at home although this is not my country. But now, I speak English more than Russian and Latvian… I really like it. This feeling is really nice because, when I first arrived here, when I moved here, at the moment I had not moved to another country except for holidays. I always dreamed to move to another country because of not liking

> my country. So, when I arrived here, I slowly was getting used to this. I think every country has their pros and cons.

With new and desired future selves in the TL and a sense of belonging in the host country, learners can refocus their attention on setting new goals and investing into their learning and life in the UK.

4.3. "It is good if you know how to use it": Technology in developing learner autonomy and identity

Besides motivation and autonomy, technology has been resourcefully significant in language learning. The use of technology in L2 language learning is analysed here. Studying in the UK, necessitates learners' awareness and use of technology in and out of the classroom to enhance their language learning. Given that the learners were from different countries across the world and had experienced diverse methods of education, or none at all, understanding how they maximised the use of technology was important in understanding their autonomy and identity in this area. Some aspects discussed here are learners' limited technological knowhow, negative perceptions towards online learning and positive remarks on technology in L2 learning.

In discussing the importance of technology in language learning and its influence on their individual language learning journeys, the learners all reported that it was significant to some extent in helping them develop their language proficiency, both in and out of the classroom. Technology, here, includes all computer-assisted learning devices and platforms, the internet, learning apps and social media. Some learners found technology easy and profitable to use as they mentioned that it had significantly aided their language learning and helped in developing their L2 proficiency. As Stan stated:

> Yeah, using technology… I use my phone. Learn on YouTube. The YouTube is so good. I know many things from YouTube and I'm learning a lot of words from YouTube. I have subscriptions to YouTube English teaching channels.

However, most of the learners indicated that despite the presence and importance of technology in aiding language learning, it had not been of much benefit to them for various reasons.

Limited technological knowhow

They mentioned that they do not use technological devices to learn English as they do not deem them effective in developing their autonomy and language learning. Ian and Aban, for example,

indicated that although technology is good, they had limited knowledge on how to use technology such as laptops and internet platforms, thus, did not consider it of much significance in helping them develop their autonomy. Most of these learners were from "lesser developed or developing" countries where the availability and use of technology in general and in education specifically is often low or limited. Thus, they had had little or no previous access to devices and platforms and so had little technological knowledge and skills to use in their current learning. With this limited knowledge, learners faced difficulties in using these devices and platforms and, therefore, did not find them very helpful in their personal TL learning experiences. Ian explained the difficulty he faced in using technology in learning during the COVID 19 lockdown:

> They sent us Zoom login. It's the mistake from her (the teacher). I don't know, but everyone wanted to log in, but they can't. All the lockdown until we back here, I don't know how to login.

The learners had not received training on using such online platforms and technological devices. Thus, when the need arose to use them, they were unable, leading to a reduction in their learning opportunities. Some of the learners, such as Ian and Hammad, stated that they had not had the opportunity of possessing most of these devices prior to studying in the college, and others stated that they had not been to school before, thus, were not literate in this area. Hammed explained:

> Computer. I use it sometimes. I just like watching on YouTube. I have not use computer before but now I have a computer. It's not easy to learn on computer, to use it not easy. I don't know how to use it before but now it's better. When I go on YouTube, Google. See my phone. It's difficult before but now it's better, little, little.

He added that:

> In lockdown, I was not learning nothing because I don't know how to use the computer and Zoom. In my country, I don't have like this smart phone. My country is poor.

In explaining the difficulties he faced and previous experiences of accessing and using technology, not just in learning the TL but as a whole, there was an understanding that providing these devices and means of learning or making students aware of them is not enough. Assessing learners' previous knowledge on using these platforms and their current understanding and skills, is essential to provide the required support to learners and ensure that they maximise their learner autonomy in technological spaces to enhance their learning. By not providing training for the learners and yet asking them to access these platforms to learn, when this was seemingly the 'only' means to learn formally during the COVID 19 lockdown period,

highlighted a flaw on the part of the teachers and institutions in meeting learners' needs to maximise their learning. Anticipating possible challenges from assessing the learners' skills and preparing them ahead of time is essential for evading circumstances in which learners' learning will be hampered, slowed down or stopped, although some circumstances might not always be anticipated.

Tula mentioned a similar case of her previous limited exposure to technology because of her country's culture: "When I was in my country, we can't use phone. You have to be over 18 or 20 or so, then you can use phone. But here, everybody using phone."

In analysing learners' previous cultures and education, teachers can develop an understanding of how to adapt and structure their curriculum and resources to meet the learners' needs. Unlike some learners who had a better understanding of using their phones and other technological devices to learn before beginning the course, others mentioned that they had not had that opportunity. Some learners, such as Hammad, had not had the opportunity in their countries or during their stay in the UK to develop the knowledge and skills required to effectively learn with technology. With this, learners were unable to effectively maximise their learning when their language learning relied on technology. Considering the availability of learning resources for language learners in their previous and current learning and its influence on their learning outcomes is thus essential.

Three teachers confirmed during the interviews the struggles learners faced in learning with technology, especially during the COVID 19 lockdown. When asking one teacher (Rachel) about their use of technology, she explained:

> Researcher: What kind of technology do you use to promote learners' learning and autonomy?
>
> Rachel: They can use tablets in college. The college provides these. We are trying to teach them how to use Zoom. Because of the lockdown, we had to use Zoom. So, next year we are trying to teach that in class. Apps on their phones, laptops, the whiteboard, projector.
>
> Researcher: What level of ability do you think your learners have in using all these technological devices to learn?
>
> Rachel: Not much. I think their skills and abilities are quite limited when it comes to learning and using technology. So, we need to work on that. Even by accessing an online platform, like the esolcourses.com website, takes them quite a while sometimes to access or just check their emails. So, I think we will be embedding more lessons from now on. Have a proper ICT lesson a week where they learn English by computers. We show them now, but I think we need to be more deliberate at teaching them. Many during

> the pandemic did not have any internet access so that was the biggest problem but even those with internet access sometimes struggled to access the online work that we set up for them.

The difficulties in teaching and learning the TL during the COVID 19 lockdown helped the teachers to recognise the knowledge and skill gap the learners had. Most of the teachers shared similar perspectives on learners' difficulties and ability to use technology to learn, which aligned with learners' explanations on the difficulties they faced. In resolving this, the teachers set out to include ICT lessons in the curriculum the following year, since the current year had come to an end, and be more deliberate in training ESOL learners on how to use technology to learn and acquire these essential skills. It was, however, interesting to listen to the perspective of the E3 teacher, Tania, who felt that the learners were all technologically savvy and had no problems using it:

> Researcher: Do you think that they have any challenges in using these technologies to learn?
>
> Tania: No, I don't actually. Because I think my students are far able better than me to use technology because they just grew up with internet, mobiles and all these technologies. I think my students are much savvier with technology than I am.

She believed that since young adults and teenagers are believed to be versatile with the use of technology nowadays, the ESOL learners, who fell among these groups, were no different. The learners were, therefore, categorised as 'every other' technologically knowledgeable person, with little consideration and assessment of their individual educational and technological background knowledge. This understanding of her learners as technologically savvy created an understanding of learners being independent in effectively using different platforms and devices to study, which was not the case, thus, limiting opportunities for her to help the learners in developing skills in this area to maximise their autonomy and learning. Given the growing popularity and use of the internet and technology in the world and for language studies, it is essential for teachers to be cautious about generalising learners' abilities. They should instead assess each learner, and if necessary, train them on how to use these platforms to integrate them into the rapidly evolving educational system for their language learning.

Negative perceptions of online learning

The learners had a negative perception of online learning and preferred face-to-face lessons. They felt that they do not learn effectively when learning on online platforms like Zoom. Some learners stated that in online learning, they are mainly passive learners as it provides limited opportunities for effective engagement and provision of feedback. One participant (Lana)

commented: “it’s like watching a film, you just absorb and it’s not good.” Steven agreed saying, “I don’t like online because it’s not normal. I don’t get it. It’s like I’m watching film”.

Most of the learners stated that they do not feel motivated when learning online and so seldom engaged in online learning alone or independently. Learners’ unfamiliarity and inability to use online platforms and resources in learning English was a key reason for their limited engagement in online learning, causing a challenge in them exercising their autonomy. Aban argued that: “No, no. I don’t like online studying. It’s not easy to understand and it’s not easy to help you understand what you want to learn […]. It is good if you know how to use it.”

He explained that his main reason for not independently engaging in online learning was due to his limited knowledge and understanding of how to do so. And that for it to be desirable and helpful, one has to know how to use it. He, therefore, did not consider it instrumental in developing his autonomy. Ian reported that he could not attend classes during the COVID 19 lockdown period as he was unable to sign into the Zoom lessons, thus, missing a considerable number of language lessons, which affected his learning. Hammad shared the same experience. Aban proposed that for English learners to be able to effectively learn on their own on online platforms, and find it fulfilling, they need to be trained on how to do so. Hammad affirmed this, stating the need for help: “Yes, technology is good, but I need somebody to help me.”

Participants further stated their dislike for online learning as they argued that they cannot focus, and do not feel important or have a feeling of belonging when they are constantly being distracted and have little or no one-to-one attention or feedback from the teacher. To them, the teachers are not able to pay close attention to their needs and/or easily check that all the students are on the same page. Steven stated that:

> Face-to-face is better because I know that I am at college. I know that I am here, I am for something here. But when I am on the phone, you don’t know what I’m doing. For example, here, if someone takes my attention, you’ll tell him, “Please, stop” but if someone else takes my attention on phone, you can’t see that he will take my attention and we cannot hear what you’ve said. So, I’m able to focus in college.

In addition to the dislike the learners had sourcing from their limited experiences in online learning and the use of technology in learning, the general challenges that come with online learning further contributed to the difficulties, for example, limited productivity, connectivity problems and a general dislike of online and technology-based learning.

The teachers were also concerned about the negative effects that technology has on TL use. As Lili explained:

> It's mostly 'text-speak' which is creeping into their writing. They mostly generally don't use academic English in texting and so they end up including online text language in their writing.

With the learners' writing showing traces of "text-speak" language, presumably incorporated from informal texting social platforms and language used in the society, she was concerned that this was negatively affecting their comprehension and use of their academic writing skills.

Furthermore, like some of the learners, Lili mentioned that she discouraged her learners from using translation apps such as Google translate because it makes them dependent on the apps reducing their willingness and capacity to try to understand the TL independently/unaided. She further mentioned that learners might be misdirected by the variety of meaning of certain words when using these translation apps causing them not to understand meaning in context, thus receiving the wrong answers. She recommended that learners should be encouraged to use the context to understand the meaning of the word as much as possible. Using phones in class for translation is discouraged as it distracts the learners as they will mostly digress to something else. With this, the provision of hard-copy dictionaries in the classrooms proved useful and the teachers usually asked learners to use them. Balchin (2012) proposes the use of dictionaries as an effective strategy to help learners develop their vocabulary and autonomy in the TL.

Positive remarks on technology in L2 learning

Despite the negative perceptions towards using technology to learn, there were some positive remarks. The use of language learning apps and YouTube was prevalent among the language learners. Most learners noted that they have at least one language learning app or learn English on their own by watching YouTube videos, including YouTube English language teaching channels. Many of them stated that they have subscribed to one or more YouTube English teaching channels from which they learn every time a new video is posted. Other apps such as translation apps were common among the participants. Tula indicated that, in addition to the translation app she uses, she engages in TL learning on websites: "I use Seneca and Study Room to learn English. They are very good. They help a lot."

Stan emphasised that YouTube videos were a significant part of his language learning. While unable to attend ESOL classes for some months due to accommodation reasons, Stan stated that he decided to subscribe to English language teaching channels on YouTube and studied using these channels for at least three hours a day:

> Before, when I live in Ashford and I'm not good at speaking English, after one month, they ask, 'how do you do that? Are you going to college?' and I said, 'I'm just watching the YouTube and after one month, I can speak English'. (Stan)

Engagement in the use of English language learning apps, websites and videos required the decision (autonomy) and action (agency) of the learners, which in most cases was inspired by the need to and impact of learning the language using these platforms. Learners' self-perception was equally instrumental in that, when they believed that they were able to use the platforms to learn, they engaged more on using them.

In discussing other online learning platforms, some of the learners stated that they were shy to use the language when speaking, however, they felt more comfortable and confident to communicate in the TL with other TL users on online chat platforms. They explained that they found it a lot easier because there is no fear of being ridiculed when they make mistakes as their identities are anonymous. According to Lana:

> Sometimes, when you are shy to speak with a lot of people and they are from English, and you are shy to say something incorrectly, scared to make a mistake, you are not very confident, that's the problem with speaking. When you are on the chat, no one with you. If you make a mistake, it's okay because there is no one to see you there.

Online platforms seemed to provide a 'safe space' for learners to experiment with the target language and practise it freely. The option for anonymity provided by some online chat platforms proved useful as learners found it 'safe' to use the TL and felt confident in being able to make mistakes while learning without the fear of being identified, looked at or ridiculed. This aligns with Karam's (2018) study which found that the English language learner was more confident in exercising his autonomy and portraying and owning his desired identity as a digital bricoleur when he engaged in multilingual/multimodal literacy on virtual platforms (e.g., online chats) as compared to his shyness, withdrawal and resistance to engage and participate in class activities.

Furthermore, the use of technology was prevalent in the classrooms. Teachers used projectors, whiteboards, video and audio recordings, websites and games to teach the learners. The institution also provided laptops and iPads which learners could access, use and take some home. The learners equally enjoyed playing online games such as Kahoot. As one student stated: "I like playing games… like Kahoot, because it's good" (Kirti). Another added, "[…] play Kahoot, because it's practice" (Chris). The teachers equally used the games to consolidate lessons or as a refresher at the end of the week. My observations enabled me to analyse how

students reacted to and engaged in these games. It was always interesting to see how engaged the students were, especially when competing to win the highest score. There were, however, times when some learners chose not to engage in paying the games or did not have a phone on which to play. One of the teachers provided her phone for a student to use during one session, and he was visibly grateful and excited to participate. The provision of Wi-Fi in the college, also proved useful. One teacher (Lili) listed some positive influences of technology on their learners' learning:

> Also, positively, you've got the aspect of subtitles which are useful, switching them on or off and there are some brilliant websites they can use. And you equally have the voice reader which reads texts, and they can listen to and follow up and practice along.

The use of recordings for listening exercises that included both native and non-native speaker accents was found to have a significant influence on learners' perception of the TL, their agency and identity. Some of the learners mentioned that they liked that the teachers also used recordings of people who did not have a British accent as it made them feel more confident in their own accent and less pressured about the need to acquire a British accent. One student, during a lesson, jokingly laughed at the accent of someone on an audio recording, saying his accent was much better than the person on the recording. Although he analysed it as a joke, I could see a sense of self-pride and confidence emanating from his voice, body language and words, and a sort of release from the pressure of needing to 'fit' into this 'standard British accent' to be thought of as communicative enough. This resonates with my experience of journeying through my identity crises as a 'native English speaker' and gaining confidence in my non-received pronunciation (RP) accent. One participant (Kuna) developed this understanding, stating:

> The first time when I was here, I am singing one song and my sister is laughing at my accent... now I'm okay because you know, the more people in England are from different country. All of us we talk in different accents and now I'm okay with that.

With this understanding, she developed more confidence in her accent and found it comfortable to express the target language in her own identity. This portrays a kind of hybridity in identity in that, although she is learning another language, it is acceptable for her to use her own (L1) identity to express herself in the L2. Researchers (Norton, 2000; Ushioda, 2006; van Leir, 2007) have argued the presence of this hybridity and multiplicity of identity(ies).

Learners also mentioned that they enjoyed and preferred videos to audios as they can both listen and see, and so can focus to better understand and read body language and subtitles:

Tigs: Sometimes she plays video for listening and it's good because it helps me improve my listening. English pronunciation is very difficult so when you get video, it's good.

Kirti: Because with video you can see and listen, and you concentrate, but audio is difficult.

It was, therefore, found that, although the learners find technology effective and helpful in language learning and that some learners exercised their autonomy by engaging in learning with technology both in and out of the classroom, there were considerable challenges in the use of technology among the learners. While most of the learners faced difficulties and had very little or no knowledge of and skills in effectively using technological platforms and devices in autonomously learning, others mentioned that they found them helpful. Chat platforms were found useful in experimenting with the language and practising it without the fear of being mocked when they made mistakes. Using technology in the TL classroom was effective, to an extent, in enhancing learners' learning, and the use of both native and non-native video and audio recordings had a positive impact on learners' learning perception and self-image. Not assessing learners' abilities to maximise the use of technology, and so having a limited perception of their abilities, limited opportunities for teachers to help learners with their struggles and to maximise their learning. Teachers should be encouraged to engage learners in anonymous chat platforms where they can use and experiment with the TL without fear of being criticised and ridiculed if they make mistakes. Mistakes should equally be welcomed in ESOL classrooms, as was found in this study, as this might help in enabling learners better engage in making positive decisions about their learning, carving out and projecting their desired identities, and enhancing their learning.

In conclusion, the above aspects of language learning, from learners' motivation to the influence of the environment and the use of technology in L2 learning, have all been found to significantly influence language learners' learning, autonomy and identity development, and to inform both the learning and teaching of the second language. Considering such aspects is useful, not only in trying to understand L2 learners, but equally in helping to maximise learners' learning and language development.

Chapter 5: Perceiving the L2 learner: Autonomy and identity

This chapter attempts to 'create' an image of the L2 autonomous learner through the voices of English language learners and teachers. Understanding this helps in providing opportunities to better support SLLs during their language learning journey. It adds to the findings of the previous chapter in that in addition to understanding how learners' motivation, environment and technology influence their learning, a further knowledge on learners' perceptions on English language learners and their abilities (Section 5.1), their learning preferences (Section 5.2) and the challenges faced in learning the L2 (Section 5.3) will further inform the interrelationship between L2 learners' autonomy and identity development and language learning.

5.1. Learners' perceptions of English language learners and their abilities

Learners' perceptions of themselves and other English language learners (ELL) was found to be a significant influence on the decisions learners made toward their learning and the limits they placed on themselves, which helped them to take more or lesser responsibility for their learning and construct more or lesser confident identities of themselves and their abilities (learning and personal). This section focuses on understanding the image(s) L2 learners have of themselves and other language learners, teachers' perceptions of their learners, and how these images (identities) influence their learning and change (or not) over their learning journey. It begins with learners' perception of a good language learner (5.1.1) and goes on to analyse learners' abilities to take control of their learning (5.1.2).

5.1.1. "I am a good learner": What makes a good L2 learner?

Being a good language learner is beneficial for language learning. The learners perceived a good English language learner in several ways which can be summed up as using the language in practical situations and learning more of it, either in class or on their own. Some perceptions incorporated considerations such as what level of determination and work they invested into their learning, how much they had learned over a given time, the target goal (proficiency and self) they had set for themselves and the strategies they used to learn.

Chris noted that:

> If you want to learn English, you speak with people and every time you talk, maybe write a letter or so. If you just sit back and don't say anything, you cannot learn.

Mah added: "You can watch more films, apply job and get into conversation with customer."

The learners emphasised that to be considered a good language learner, you need to not only learn the language, but also use it in different contexts, such as in class, in the community and at work. Writing, listening and reading skills were equally highlighted by the learners as a necessity to be improved to be considered a good language learner. However, more emphasis was placed on speaking, as they perceived it as the most essential language skill for integrating into the English-speaking community.

In explaining her perspective during the group interview on what makes a good English language learner, Tula chose to self-project, stating that she considers herself as a good language learner for having progressed from where she used to be in her English proficiency to where she is now, stating: "I am a good learner. When I came here, I don't understand anything. I never speak with anyone. But now I am speaking and writing. Everything is good."

Therefore, to her, progress in learning is considered as good language learning and the learner a good learner. Tula had been learning English for two years, although she had been considerably affected by the COVID 19 pandemic wherein several months of classes were lost. Her views incorporated the fact that, despite the significant interruption to her learning, she had been able to acquire as many language skills as she had, thus, considering herself a good language learner. In this light, Nam added that: "[a] good learner is one who can learn quickly. We can watch English movies so we can improve our English."

She mentions a salient aspect of language learning – time, and emphasises its importance in success in language learning, suggesting that it is not only about making progress, but equally about what level of progress is made over a given period. Raising the question, will someone who has learned English, for example, over a considerably longer period and yet is unable to meet certain expected proficiency levels still be considered a good language learner? Hammad compares himself to his friend saying although he does not yet consider himself as a good ELL because he has set a goal he wishes to attain before considering himself as one, he affirms that he has learned a lot and progressed significantly during the one year four months he has spent learning the TL, as compared to his friend whom he does not consider a good language learner due to his limited progress:

> I have a friend and he's coming to college with me but he don't know nothing. When he call his social worker, he calls me. I told him, "brother, look, me I know better because I'm coming to college". He said, "leave me". But it's his life.

The difference between Hammad and his friend could be a result of several factors. One which is highlighted as taking responsibility for his learning and making positive decisions and investment in attending language classes to enhance his language proficiency. His agency in choosing to take control of his learning, setting target language goals and acting on this decision, shows his positive autonomy and enhances his learning.

Adding to Nam's good language learner learning strategy, Tula and Stan proposed: "[a] good learner is one who needs to find out which way is easy to learn and learns online. Also, one who reads more easy books and listen to stories" (Tula). "And one who learns to speak English outside college and everywhere" (Stan).

To this effect, to them, being a good ELL entails finding strategies which best suit and accelerate one's learning and practising them. This highlights the importance of the place of learners taking responsibility for their learning in promoting their autonomy, identity and language learning. Learners' agency is pivotal in researching strategies that are more convenient and effective for their learning. This agency could be exercised in them asking for help from their teachers, peers and other sources and/or finding other resources independently. Simple decisions such as deciding to attend language classes were highlighted as important as in Hammad's friend's case and deciding to speak English out of their 'safe space' such as out of class and everywhere.

The overall impression of most of those who participated in the focus group interviews was that they considered themselves good ELLs and acknowledged their noticeable progress. They had good perceptions of themselves and their ability to learn, not only with the help of their teachers, but also due to personal efforts. The results from the group interview slightly differed from that in the individual interviews in that learners were less confident of affirming their identities as good ELLs during individual interviews. They mostly attributed this identity to their set future-self goals, one in which they are fluent and can communicate effectively with anyone. The presence of others during the focus groups seemed to have positively influenced learners' identities to gain more self-confidence in their identities as language learners based on their learning progress. One of the study's aims in using focus group as a data collection method was to see how learners' perceptions and presence influence one another in group discussions, as in this case, agreeing with the literature that learners' knowledge and identities

are co-constructed in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1998; Norton, 2000, Pritchard and Woodward, 2013, Thomas, 2017). O'Leary's (2010, 2018) studies on learners' perspectives of a good learner reveals that the participants believed that for learners to learn effectively, they need to have the ability to work independently and with the awareness of the benefits of peer collaboration. In this study, while reflecting on how much they had learned, learners' tone and body language radiated a sense of achievement and desire to achieve more of this new identity.

In this light, learners' knowledge of their self-perception and abilities is essential for their learning progress as this affects their attitude towards learning. Some learners, during individual interviews, stated that they did not consider themselves good learners because they were not yet as fluent in the TL as they wished to be. Here, their goals, self-expectations and imagined identities could be considered a factor for learners seeing themselves as either good or not so good language learners. It was important to understand how this perception influences their language learning. When I asked one participant if he considered himself a good learner, he replied: "[no], when I talk with you and I understand everything, then that's good. Maybe in 3 or 4 years." (Hammed)

He further explained that to arrive at this good-learner self-perception and goal, he invested more time an effort into his learning:

> I'm working very hard to learn English. I have two page in my Instagram that I'm learning English. Yesterday, I learn 'still' and 'no longer' like in 'I still trust you, I still love you' and 'I no longer believe you'. Different, opposite. I learn on my phone on Instagram, a page - Learn English with Melissa'.

Therefore, in this case, not considering his current self as a good learner but having an imagined future good-learner identity which is proficient in the TL motivates him to take greater responsibility of his learning and become an agentic and autonomous language learner. Similarly, Aban was not certain if he should consider himself a good learner or not: "I don't know, maybe. It's not easy, you know. I've lived here for the past two years so I've learned."

Considering that he had been able to learn the TL as much as he had within the last two years, he felt he had learned well, however, was unsure if that was enough to consider himself as a good language learner or not. Ian rated his learning from his level of English proficiency: "I don't know. But some people they say that my English is good but I'm not seeing it good enough. I'm not bad, you know. But still not good enough. Yeah, one day."

Another participant rated himself as 50%:

> I'll say 50%. Because English is so hard, you know. It's not my first language so. When I came here, study is so hard but when I study, study, it's going higher. My English now is better than before.

Other participants stated things that need to be in place to be considered a good language learner:

> Respondent 2 and 3: You have to study, work hard, do homework.
>
> Respondent 4: Basically, you have to practice after each lesson when you get home so you can memorise it.
>
> Respondent 1: Even watching English movies with subtitles and without subtitles.
>
> Respondent 3: For me, every single day before I go to bed every single night, I learn, reading book, watching English programme, TV.

The perception of a good language learner was person-dependent and varied amongst the learners based on how they viewed themselves, other learners and their individual perception of what they need to achieve to be considered good learners. Most of the participants admitted that although they still had a long way to go with learning the language, they had learned a considerable proportion of the target language which made them good learners. This confident identity provided a sense of self-fulfilment and desire to progress. The study also found that learners have set ought to and imagine selves of who they are to be or want to be as TL speakers respectively, which motivates them to take responsibility for their learning and work hard to achieve this identity. Learners' attitudes toward assessing their identity as good ELLs were generally positive irrespective of whether they currently considered themselves good learners or not so good learners as they all showed that this perception motivated them to learn more to either improve this identity or attain it.

Being a good language learner, therefore, entails determination and work on the side of the learner. That is, engaging in conversations in the TL in and out of the classroom, practising the TL after lessons and in authentic contexts, doing assignments and regular self-study and having a positive study mindset and self-image. Having generally perceived themselves as good language learners, there was an essential required reflection on the abilities of a good ELL.

5.1.2. "We have to think which one we need to study": Learners' abilities in taking control of their learning.

From the previous section(s), the learners generally felt that their current level of proficiency in the target language, judging from where they were at the beginning of their language learning, could justify them as good language learners. With this, understanding learners'

perceptions of their knowledge of the responsibility and autonomy they have towards their learning progress was essential for this study. This is discussed in this section. Some aspects they considered in assessing their abilities included: learners' self-beliefs, decisions made towards their learning, challenges in individual/self-directed learning and reflections on personal experiences.

Learners' perceptions of English language learners' abilities in taking responsibility for their learning and learning autonomously were varied, but gradually change to be broadly positive. Initially, when asked about their ability to take control of their learning, from the learners' gestures, facial expressions and responses, it was indicative that they either did not know what learner ability was or were unaware that they have the ability to take control of their language learning through their decisions, thoughts and actions towards learning. Tula stated: "learners cannot control their learning. If I am in entry one, I can only do entry one exercise. I cannot do entry two because I don't know."

This perception was important as it highlights learners' perceptions of their learning abilities and the challenges some learners are ready to take in their language learning, depending on how they perceive their abilities. It was necessary to reflect on what learners perceive are their abilities to learn at different levels and reflect on questions such as: Are ELLs ready to challenge themselves to learn higher than their perceived current levels? Further explanation of learners' ability to take responsibility for their learning and learning on their own helped the learners better understand their own role in the learning process. With this, Stan affirmed that learners could take control of their learning and learn on their own when they become more aware of and experienced in this. Making known to learners their responsibility towards their learning was found to be extremely important in propelling them to make positive decisions towards their learning and being conscious of the consequences of not doing so. Tula stated that: "We have to think which one we need to study".

This indicated that learners need to engage or be engaged in reflective and self-assessment practices on their learning throughout their learning journey, to make deliberate decisions on what is profitable for their learning and what to learn, as simple steps such as deciding on what to study or not study is instrumental in influencing their learning progress. It is equally a way of being autonomous in their learning. Nam added: 'like read books, find words we don't know and use the dictionary.' Balchin (2012) proposes encouraging language learners to use dictionaries as one of the strategies for promoting learner autonomy.

While discussing the different ways in which learners can become more autonomous in their learning, they acknowledged that the decisions they made or did not make, whether big or small, contributed to how much they had learned. Thus, they saw this as their ability to take control of their learning. There was, however, evidence that learners were not conscious of the power they wielded in controlling their learning based on their actions, inactions and self-perception. An explanation of this power and responsibility proved that learners, when conscious of their responsibility, will take more deliberate steps towards enhancing their language learning and L2 selves. Reminding learners of this responsibility is, therefore, an important recommendation.

After gaining a better understanding of learners' responsibilities and control over their learning from each contribution and reflecting on his autonomous learning, Aman stated that: "Yes, I think that English learners can learn on their own because before September, I was not in college. I try on my own on YouTube and I learn." Aban added: "You can learn English everywhere, you know."

Drawing from his own experience, Aman believes that English learners have the ability to assume this responsibility to take control of their learning and learn on their own if they are determined and put in the work. Aban, having the understanding that being in the country where the TL is used everywhere, it is possible to engage in learning wherever one is, thus, maximising every opportunity to learn. This learning relates to Krashen's (1982) acquisition-learning hypothesis as learners being emersed in the TL setting are likely to learn the TL both consciously and unconsciously. Stan added to Aman and Aban's perceptions saying: "Yes, when you do more practice." Chris agreed with this, however, stating its challenges in comparison to assisted learning saying:

> If you try to learn English on your own, it's possible but it's very hard. Because you just make telephone, and you use papers and that. But here, teacher explain you. But if you just reading, maybe you can't understand but when teacher explain you, it's better.

Despite believing in their abilities to take responsibility for their learning and learn better, they highlighted that developing this ability and learning autonomously was not easy and came with dedicated time and efforts. Another participant believed that the ability to learn autonomously equally entailed joining or creating English social contexts and friendships, which can enable one practice the TL regularly: "One good friend to speak with is enough."

Reflecting on their personal experiences, the learners were positive about English learners being able to learn on their own and their ability to control their learning. Nonetheless, they equally insisted that, although it is possible for them to learn on their own, it can be difficult and will not be as good as having English lessons or coming to college. This entailed that successful learning is facilitated through input from learners' personal efforts in autonomous actions towards their learning and on receiving more structured input from their teachers. The general agreement was that, considering that decisions such as coming to college, which they had to make independently, significantly affected their learning, they had the ability to take control of their learning to some extent, either negatively or positively, to attain their learning objectives in the TL. Krashen (1982, 2009) proposed that it is essential to make deliberate effort to make learners aware of the language acquisition (unconscious) process to enable them to continue improving on their own. This study adds to this highlighting that enabling learners to be aware of their responsibilities in the learning (conscious) process will further enable them to enhance their autonomy, self-assessment, reflectivity and learning.

As above, learners, based on their learning experiences and progress, generally perceived themselves as good English language learners and believed that despite the difficulty faced in independent learning, English language learners can be autonomous and learn on their own when they apply the required work and dedication.

5.2. Language learning preferences

From listening to and observing the struggles learners faced in using technology to learn, it was interesting to find out how learners preferred to learn and how these preferences influenced their autonomy and identity development and learning. The findings cut across the 'how', 'where' and 'with whom' of learning. The participants highlighted the different strategies they preferred and found effective to use in learning, including the environment (physical and virtual) and language learning partners, and their influences on their autonomy, self-perception and language learning.

As earlier noted, there was a significant preference of face-to-face learning to online learning. During interview discussions with the learners, most of them mentioned that they prefer face-to-face learning to online learning as learning online is less engaging and there is limited focus as compared to in-class learning. To them, they learn better and are more determined to learn when learning face-to-face than online. Some reasons for the dislike of online learning were stated:

> No, face-to-face is very good. Because you can ask anything here, but in Zoom, every peoples need to be quiet for teachers to hear everyone and in Zoom class, not speaking with other people. (Tula)

> No, in class, because in class, you can focus with the teacher but online, you can put your phone online, but you don't care. You just leave it. But in class, you are in front of the teacher. I don't like online even. (Ian)

> Face-to-face is better than online. In online, it's not like real, it's like watching film; you don't feel anything, you don't feel like you are very close to the people. Sometimes, the internet is bad. Sometimes, you can't hear people. But face-to-face everything is different. (Lana).

From my observations, the learners enjoyed playing online computer games such as *Kahoot* and *Matching Pairs*. However, in terms of taking actual classes online, they tend to have lower learning interest and progress. This might be due to the reasons stated above or other factors including: the learners are not used to learning online; they have limited competence on how to use online learning resources; and the limited interaction and lack of actual physical presence on online platforms which does not provide the feeling of belonging and motivation. Kuna indicated that: "when you are face-to-face, you are more confident." The learners believed they can better take control of their learning in face-to-face contexts and that face-to-face learning not only provided the benefits of having a tangible feeling of learning with other learners but gave a sense of place and focus, which they found was important in helping them concentrate and participate.

Also, the learners found it more productive and enjoyable to learn in groups and with others than individually. When learning with others, they said, it is easier and more motivating. It challenges them to take more control of their learning and rate of progress. Aban stated that he likes learning with others:

> Because, if you learn like here, you'll have more energy to learn because if you come here every day and you don't do well and then you think about your neighbour what they are doing, you have energy to come and learn, trying to do good.

To him, it was not just about the learning but about the feeling that came from the learning environment and how influential that presence was to success in learning. He referred to a form of energy which is derived from a corporative learning environment but absent in lone learning, reenforcing Vygotsky's (1962, 1998) claims on the benefits of learning in social contexts and O'Leary's (2010, 2018) proposal on learners learning effectively when they are aware of the benefits of peer collaboration. The presence of other learners in the learning environment served as a motivation to generate learners' desire and agency to learn. Corporative learning

provided opportunities for the learners to challenge themselves to want to learn more as looking at other learners performing well challenged them to become better than their current selves and even better than their peers. Lana added that:

> In college, you see someone is learning and this one is learning, and you want to do better as well […] I like to learn in groups. It's better because you can have some conversation.

Learning with other learners, therefore, generated a form of self-challenge in learners to take greater responsibility of their learning to progress as their peers and even do better. With this, the learners further mentioned that it was not only about having others learning in the same learning environment but engaging in learning together such as in group activities and projects. In interacting with one another during the learning process and class activities, they derive motivation and agency to learn more as they create and share knowledge in learning interactions with their peers and can practise their speaking and listening skills. The learners found group activities very useful in enhancing their learning as they took more control of the learning, challenged and helped one another, and developed confidence and self-fulfilment in being able to help others. The positive impacts of group and corporative learning highlights the importance of social interaction in promoting learner agency, autonomy, identity construction and language learning through peer influence. Ian added that: "I do like learning in groups because it helps. If he does not know, I will, maybe I knows and another guy, maybe he knows, and I like work together."

The learners showed a positive attitude towards each other as they found it more helpful learning with others, believing in themselves and others' abilities to help correct, share ideas, motivate and enhance each other's learning. The presence of other learners seemed to boost their confidence as they knew that they had someone to turn to and ask for assistance if they did not know or understand what to do and did not want to ask the teacher. Their ability to help others equally provided a sense of joy, worthiness and fulfilment as Kuna stated:

> I feel very happy because I know someone is next to me to help me. I know how that feels, for example, when someone comes and I see him or her and I know that they need help, I give up myself to help them.

There were both practical and emotional benefits they stated that they derived from learning with others. Stan, when asked why he prefers learning with his friends, responded: "I don't want to do it on my own because I'm gonna be bored."

Adding to the motivation, support and a sense of fulfilment and self-worth derived from learning with others, learners' level of interaction in the learning process was also found to increase. Learning with others reduced the possibilities of getting bored and disengaged in the learning as they could listen to others, ask questions and move the teachers' focus to and from them. These were beneficial in promoting their desire to learn and influencing the responsibility they took over their learning.

In 1994, Little included the aspect "relatedness" to the concept of learner autonomy stating that, learner autonomy is a product of interdependence between the learner and other people in the learning environment rather than independence. In this, he adds a psychological dimension of autonomy to the Vygotskyan view of autonomy as a phenomenon that incorporates both 'individual cognitive' and 'social interaction' notions, includes 'interdependence' and adopts freedom and choice (Benson, 2001, 2011). In as much as they found individual efforts in learning effectively, the participants here were found to enjoy and prefer working with each other in the learning process as they believed that their interdependence was useful for the physical provision of support, psychological comfort and the encouragement of having someone else on whom to rely.

The teachers seemed to agree with the learners' perspectives saying:

> "[a]lthough autonomous learning is independent learning, it is not necessarily an individual thing. They'll often be learning together and from each other through speaking and shared experiences outside the classroom and different cultures as well" (Anne)

They agreed with the social dimensions of autonomy and language learning and highlighted the benefits it had on their language learners. Teng (2019) states that autonomy incorporates both a social and an individual dimension. Autonomy is not only developed by individual efforts of the learner but can be developed in social interactions with other language learners, instructors and speakers. When asking another teacher about her thoughts on her learners' social learning skills and interactions with one another, she replied saying:

> Yes, they love that. We haven't been able to do that recently with the COVID and everything. But before, we used to have a lot of group activities and we could have people from different backgrounds, culture, religion in each group. It's the way they approach a task. They will approach it differently. They learn from each other. For example, if they have to write sentences, one will write it differently from the other. Yes, they learn from each other when they work together. They like helping each other and if they don't do it because it doesn't come naturally, we would always prompt or suggest they do that and encourage them to work together. (Rachel)

The general understanding to this point, therefore, was learner positivity towards cooperative learning in that learners learn more in group exercises and enjoy working together. However, some of the learners did not find it that simple and straightforward.

Although perspectives towards cooperative learning appeared broadly preferable and positive, some of the learners carefully analysed the consequences of learning with others and highlighted that learning with others was not completely positive and effective as it had its disadvantages. Although Steven and Marks indicated that they enjoyed learning with others, they were insistent on the importance of the influence of the learning partner and its effectiveness on their learning. To them, learning with those who are focused and determined to learn and considering what language item or skill they want to learn are more important consideration than having a learning partner. This highlighted the fact that, it is not just about learning with others, but who learners are learning with and what they are learning, which will determine the results that would be produced and the influence on their desire to learn and learning progress. Marks highlighted that:

> It depends. If you want to learn listening and writing, then I prefer to be alone but if I want to practice my speaking, I prefer to learn with others. If there is no one to talk to, I go to my mirror and talk to myself.

Steven shared a similar perspective:

> In the class, when they are many people, it's not good. It depends on the people, you know. If they are noisy and are just coming to college to be laughing, it's not good. If there are many people in the classroom and if they all want to learn English, then it's good. Last year, we were 21 in the same classroom, and we didn't have any problem because everyone wanted to learn. There were about 2 or 3 guys, they didn't want to learn. They just coming to college for laughing and stuff like this. But when the guys that they want to learn are more, it's better.

Thus, learning with others was effective depending on the TL skill being taught/learned and the seriousness of the learning partner(s). The size of the class was mentioned as an important consideration and the motivation and determination of the learners in the classroom were equally important. The presence of learning partners who were not interested in learning and less devoted in a particular lesson or their classroom learning journey in general, were seen more as a distraction than a resource. Bearing this in mind in the learning and teaching process is essential for both teachers and students, especially for teachers in grouping learners during class activities and in learners choosing learning partners during their self-learning times. Lana pointed out that although learning with others is good, it can be distracting as they tend to

discuss different things other than what the teacher is teaching. They highlighted the strengths and limitations of group/pair learning and the importance of personal relevance, determination to learn and the learning partner on the effectiveness of learning.

Furthermore, engaging in communication was found to be learners' preferred strategy for easily learning the TL. They indicated that to quickly become part of the society, it is important to know how to speak the language first and then learn the other skills later or alongside. The most effective strategy to learn the language which they found effective was through engaging in conversations with other TL speakers.

> Speak to people. When I'm watching videos or audios, that's not good because I'm just absorbing. When I speak to people, I can observe their uhm because they are speaking English, I'm also speaking English. If I make a mistake, they can correct me. If they make a mistake, I can correct. So, that's good for the speaking. Speaking is a very good way to learn. (Tula)

Although they found communicating with others the most preferred and effective strategy to quickly learn the language, there was an admittance that it was not always easy, especially at the beginning of their learning journey. The apprehension of making mistakes and being mocked was a significant challenge and limitation. Communicating with other TL speakers requires confidence which the learners stated they did not have at the beginning and, thus, seldom associated with or spoke to others. However, as the learners' proficiency and familiarity with the TL context and culture increased over time, their engagement and communication with other TL speakers improved simultaneously. Learning in social contexts with other language speakers helps learners to build and exercise their confidence in using the target language and reduces the fear of using the language, which can be a barrier to speaking and identity development as a confident English speaker. The UK context, which is dominantly English-speaking, provides the learners with more opportunities to easily interact with TL speakers as opposed to their countries. The location of the ESOL department in the college on the fourth floor with other general departments equally gives learners the opportunities to meet and interact with other TL speakers.

Generated from the data was the understanding that the learners preferred face-to-face learning as they found it more engaging and motivating. Also, they preferred and enjoyed learning together, particularly with those who were serious and determined to learn. Furthermore, it showed that the learners learn better when they have a strong determination and personal relevance for learning; their concentration is higher, thus, they are more attentive to 'picking up' and retaining new learnings and making decisions about their learning. Learners found it

more effective to communicate with other TL speakers as a strategy to quickly learn the language.

5.3. Challenges in developing learner autonomy and identity (RQ3)

As enjoyable and self-fulfilling as it seemed for the learners to learn a new language and develop a new identity, the learning and teaching process came with several challenges. Many of these challenges are embedded in the previous analysis in this study and more discussed here. Most of the learners in this study were asylum and refugee learners. Their past and current personal experiences posed significant challenges in their lives in the UK and language learning journey. In addition to the 'common' challenges faced in learning a language, these learners faced more difficulties due to their previous experiences, which is the focus of this section. Challenges were found to be a significant part of the learners' language learning journey, autonomy development and identity construction in the UK, which influenced their learning outcomes. Some of these challenges included accommodation and settlement difficulties, past traumatic experiences, limited L1 literacy, limited support and class attendance, institutional constrains and the Covid 19 pandemic.

Accommodation and settlement difficulties

All the participants had been in the UK for three years and less and felt that they were still integrating into the UK; learning the language and culture and gaining 'stable' lives. Learners faced challenges in integrating into the UK and developing their autonomy and identity. Some of the challenges affecting their learning were the stress and anxiety posed by the difficulties of getting comfortable and stable accommodation; applying for visas and permanent residency; looking for jobs; understanding the culture; making friends and the fear of not knowing what decision will be made on their residency status. These sometimes deprived them from effectively engaging in positively taking control of their learning, constructing their desired identities and developing a voice and required confidence during their early stages of living in the UK. Stan mentioned that due to being moved from one accommodation to another, it was difficult for him to get to college as where he was sent to was far from college. This caused him to miss several English lessons: "They changed my house. They sent me to Ashford. You know where Ashford is? Is far from college. So, I could not come to college for some weeks. I was learning on YouTube."

Several considerations determine which accommodation is offered to refugee and asylum seekers, including their age, reason for applying and the availability of accommodation.

Another (refugee) participant, due to his advanced age, lost his residence at his previous accommodation and was moved to another accommodation in a different county, far away from college. Given that he could no longer travel to college, he was forced to start following lessons through Zoom, which he reported to not finding them as effective as coming to college, but had no choice. One aspect which they mentioned that helps them navigate through these challenges is the provision of social care workers for refugee and asylum learners by the government. This has been significant in helping learners throughout their learning and with integration as well as reducing their stress and anxiety. The assigned social workers assist the learners with applications, appointments, finding accommodation and other settlement needs. Newbigging et al. (2010) found significant problems refugee and asylum seekers encounter in accessing social care provision and highlighted the important benefits quality social care provision has on these groups of people.

Past traumatic experiences

In the case of refugee learners in the UK, making the decision to go to college to learn is an agentic development of their control over their learning. Refugee ELLs generally have faced traumatic experiences prior to coming to the UK, which still tends to affect them years after being in the UK. One student mentioned, during an after-lesson interactive conversation, that she had to travel through several countries and dangerous routes to get to the UK, and that she lost her aunt on the way. She mentioned that the memory of their journey and aunt dying in front of her sometimes distresses her, especially when she feels lonely and faces difficulties. With this trauma, concentrating on learning and constructing a confident desired identity was not always easy. However, most are determined to learn English to construct a new identity for themselves which is better than their current or past identity and experience.

Other participants reported their difficulties in coming to college or concentrating on their learning due to their past experiences. During my observations, many students usually came late to class and in explaining to their teachers why they were late, they said they had difficulties falling asleep at night mainly due to their past traumatic experiences, making it difficult for them to wake up early to be at college on time, even when they wanted to come. During my observations, a learner walked into the classroom late. He was equally absent the previous day. When later asked by the teacher about his absence and late coming, he responded: “Teacher, I cannot sleep very well in the night. You know, I told you why. I still worry. It’s difficult.” (Notes 28/04/2021).

He was referring to his previous traumatic experiences of the war in his country from which he had fled but still gave him nightmares and sleepless nights, in turn affecting his college attendance and learning. Many learners' absences from classes were traced to similar challenges in addition to others. Government funding lessons for refugee and asylum ESOL learners was found to be a good support, motivation and opportunity for the learners to make important decisions concerning their language learning as they do not have to stay away from college due to lack of tuition nor worry or work to pay for their language lessons.

Limited L1 literacy

Furthermore, a significant influence on some learners' language learning was their limited L1 literacy skills, which was found to pose a major challenge in their language learning. Some of the learners had little or no educational experiences in their L1. They had either never been to school or had been for just a few years before taking ESOL courses in the UK, thus, had little or no L1 literacy skills. This created additional learning difficulties, especially at the beginning of their language learning journey. Ian mentioned that: "When I came here, I had zero English. I have not been to school before I came here." Lana shared a similar experience: "No, I've not studied before, just picked from community, friends, work, teacher, you and so. For person, if he has not study before, it is also difficult." When talking about a movie he enjoyed watching to help improve his English, Hammed explained that: "No, it's just English, I can't read Kurdish. I went to school just two years in my country. I learn to write only my name and my father's name. I can't read."

The lack of L1 literacy prevents learners from applying learning strategies such as using translation apps. In several observed cases, when learners faced difficulties in expressing themselves or could not remember a word or phrase in English, they translated it from their L1 to English and were able to better learn and memorise the word or phrase: "Yes, I use translate. If I don't know some word, I translate to my language and then I understand" (Tigs)

Tula explained, with a smile, that being able to write in her language and use translation apps to translate into English helped her to share her writings and ideas with others:

> Tula: I like to do drawing, dancing, singing, and uhm you know writing poems, stories, I like to do that.
>
> Researcher: When you write, which language do you use?
>
> Tula: When I was schooling here, I write in my language then translate it. I show my teacher, she said, "Can I have one copy?" she liked it. I have Google translator in my phone.

> Researcher: Do you learn a lot of English out of class like, when you hear other people speaking or read something on boards?
>
> Tula: Yes. If they say something, then I translate on my phone what they speaking. If I watch subtitles movies or dramas, I want to find out what's that word and I translate it.

By being able to read and write in her L1, Tula exercises more positive autonomy in learning the TL as she finds it easier and is able to translate from her L1 to the TL and vice versa when comprehension is hindered. This also enables her to learn outside the classroom, in the community, for example, from public posts, signs and conversations. Alan stated that:

> Yes. I learn on my own, out of college. For example, when I'm watching film, I see a word I've never seen before, I will translate it to my first language. Then I'll say it two three times in my mind then I'll get it. It's not very quick but I'll learn.

L1 literacy helps in promoting learner agency and autonomy. Learners who have had an educational experience and are literate in their L1 find it easier to transfer their learning skills to the TL as opposed to those who have never been to school. Learning a new language requires the basic skills of learning without which there is a greater possibility of higher difficulties in learning. Due to this limited L1 literacy, the learners, to some extent, faced challenges in exercising their autonomy, especially at the beginning of their learning journey as they were unable to translate to their L1 for better comprehension when facing difficulties, leading to a disruption or obstruction in learning and the use of the TL. They will sometimes need to rely on those around them, for example, the teacher and friends for meaning or translation into voiced texts.

During an interview with a learner, he tried to express himself but could not remember or did not have the right words to use in English which led to an obstruction in communicating his idea and perspective:

> Hammed: Because… I don't know. I know, but I don't know how I can say it.
>
> Researcher: Would you like to use Google to translate it from your first language, from Kurdish to English?
>
> Hammed: I cannot. I don't know how to write or read Kurdish. I did not go to school. I can only speak and hear it.

A basic yet implicit assumption in bilingual studies is that the development of literacy proficiency in the L1 will facilitate and transfer literacy development in the L2 (Durgunoglu and Oney 2000; Durgunoglu, 2002). This, therefore, suggests that when learners have learning and literacy skills in their L1, it helps them to transfer similar skills into the new language they

are learning. Durgunoglu and Oney (2000) highlight that this deduction might be more complicated as a weakness in L2 reading, for example, might be complicated to decipher if it is a language problem or a reading problem. However, a lack of L1 learning skills, as in the case of some participants, poses additional challenges in learning the language as they may face difficulties in understanding the basics of language construction and use. Also, they will find it more difficult to engage in self-study as they may not know how to read and write, which might in turn affect the development of their new identity in the TL.

During one of my observation sessions, a task required learners to write a group of words in their L1. I noticed a learner who was not writing and asked why he was not writing. He said he did not know how to write in his L1. He had never been to school, so, he had not learned how to spell in his L1. The teacher provided a different task for him to do alongside other students who had already completed the exercise in a previous lesson. From a close observation of his expression, he appeared to be distraught for being unable to complete the exercise and participate in the activity with the other language learners. This might have affected his self-perception and learning output. Lili shared a similar perspective on learners struggle in adjusting to the new educational system:

> I think it's first a struggle when they first come into a classroom education especially for those that have not had education before, or it has been a completely different kind of education. So, like Entry one, when they first come, it will be a hard time for them to get used to everything. So, at the beginning, their limited identity as a learner, they probably don't realise the autonomous learning they had done before is valued because it's not what we are doing. And it influences the way they learn. They have to adapt to college learning and college life.

She believes that because the students might have had a different educational system experience (or none) from that in the UK, they face challenges in adapting to the new one and concentrate on scaling these difficulties which causes them to have a limited learner identity and somehow fail to realise the autonomy they have and are exercising.

Limited support and class attendance

Learners experience personal struggles which prevent them from fully investing in their learning and identity construction. Most of the participants, as earlier mentioned, were asylum and refugee seekers. They either lived on their own here in the UK, guided by social workers or were in foster homes. This reduced their level of support and family stability, which the other learners presumably have, causing challenges in their personal lives and affecting their learning and growth. Aspects such as limited parental guidance, the feeling of belonging to a

‘stable family’, being closely disciplined in their studies and creating guided future goals, seemed to be lacking or less in these learners. A casual reflective discussion between two teachers at the end of the academic year during my observation period explained part of the reasons learners found it difficult to perform better than they were doing:

> A discussion at the end of the academic year between two teachers (Anne and Rachel) engaged in reflective thinking on the strengths and limitations of their learners. Anne asks Rachel what she thinks is the greatest limitation of their students in performing better at learning and managing their individual activities which will boost their learning. Rachel suggests that the students struggle because of a lack of routine, and it is difficult for them to have this routine because most of them lack a ‘parent’ figure in their lives here in the UK to help them get into a routine and be disciplined in maintaining it. Anne seems to agree with Rachel. (Notes, 07/07/2021)

According to the teachers, this ‘absence’ of close support and guidance created a limitation in the learners effectively taking better control of their learning and identity construction to enhance their language proficiency, future goals and selves.

Learners’ attendance was equally found to be a challenge for teachers to effectively support their learners. “The pressure of what we’ve got to cover and the attendance, when they come, we try giving to them while they are here physically. It’s not usually a priority for some students” (Lili). For several reasons, including pass trauma, lack of motivation and discipline, personal responsibilities and travel distances, some learners had poor attendance records which caused a form of inconsistency on how much support the teachers could provide as most of those with low attendance turned to miss important lessons and activities and fell back on certain aspects as compared to others. This proved a challenge for the teachers to effectively develop the language skills and autonomy in the learners.

Institutional constrains

Furthermore, the teachers explained their desire to do more extra-curricular and out-of-class activities with the learners which they believed would benefit the learners. However, they felt limited by several factors including the need to complete the curriculum and the bulk of administrative and non-teaching work they were expected to complete: “I think one of the things that prevented me from thinking outside the box is that mainly to help me to get through and coverup everything we need to do” (Lili). The teachers were found to be pressured by the need to complete the curriculum and felt they did not have enough time to include other activities which might have been beneficial. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) noted this as a

significant hindrance wherein teachers feel that the curriculum is full and restrictive and that it limits the extent to which they can promote autonomy.

In tackling this, the teacher participants emphasised the benefits of working "organisationally between us three teachers" which helped them "keep track of what each teacher is doing so we don't duplicate" (Lili). With this, it is important to emphasis the relationship (professional and possibly personal) teachers or instructors in language institutions have with one another as this appears to have a direct effect on learners' learning progress through the support provided to them. It is important for teachers to develop a healthy work relationship and assess how their relationship with one another and with their learners influences their practice and their learners learning. Lamb (2011) notes that in cases where teachers are pressured for their classes to achieve good examination grades (and complete the curriculum), there are dangers of teacher control increasing and a concomitant loss of learner autonomy, as seen in this study.

Moreover, the process involved in obtaining permission to take learners out of college or invite external practitioners was a challenge. "We have some restrictions here. We need to have risks assessments each time we step out of college. We've done some activities outside organised by other projects, but we haven't done much" (Rachel). Despite the limitations to engage in out-of-class activities, the teachers acknowledged that these were useful for placing learners in authentic contexts in helping them notice and use the language and develop these skills. These hinderances, which were mainly institutional, highlighted the importance of not only language teachers but equally institutions assessing their policies, support and affordances provided to and for language learners. Institutions providing and supporting English language lessons need to continually assess the support they provide to maximise the quality of learners' language learning. The teachers organised cooking sessions with the learners (during the data collection period) and the learners always seemed to enjoy working with one another in this environment and using kitchen vocabulary and expressions in English which they might not be able to use at home.

The size of the class (number of students) was stated as an essential consideration in assessing how teachers can better promote learners' autonomy. Lili mentioned that to consider what strategy to use to teach and promote learners' autonomy, she had to carefully consider the number of learners she had, without which she felt her efforts might not be effective. To her, the bigger the class, the fewer the frequency of including certain activities, as it will be harder to find something in which all the learners had interest in effectively engaging. She drew this

understanding from her current and previous experiences of teaching English language, maths and other lessons in different settings including prison. Deducing knowledge from her previous teaching experiences was found to help and influence her current practice, decision making, and teaching methodology in maximising the importance of learners' interests and preferences in promoting positive control of their learning. In referring to her experience of teaching prisoners, Lili explained: "I did a project with them, and it was a subject they felt really strong about. It was absolutely brilliant, and I got some absolutely good results even from reluctant learners" (Lili). She, therefore, understood the benefits and effectiveness of teaching from learners' interest and the difference between teaching a small and a big class.

The Covid 19 pandemic

Furthermore, the Covid 19 pandemic and lockdown was found to have significant negative effects on the ELLs and their learning progress. Language learning and teaching during this period was moved online and both teachers and learners faced difficulties in adapting to these changes. Some of these difficulties have previously been stated in the study, such as the loss of lessons due to the lockdown and limited technological skills to sign onto zoom lessons, as Tula explained: "I could not come to college and missed some lessons last year. But this year, they are doing Zoom" (Tula).

When asked how the pandemic and lockdown affected their learning, learners stated that it was mostly negative as they felt that they learned less or did not learn anything:

> Aban: Honestly, I didn't learn anything.
>
> Lana: Uh, it was very bad. I just don't like to go to social media to learn English. You know, because like when you are home, you are alone. It's not like when you was with the people, they give you energy.
>
> Steven: Bad, very bad
>
> Mah: It slowed down.
>
> Hammed: I was not learning nothing because I don't know how to use the computer and Zoom.

Negative perceptions were prevalent toward the lockdown. The participants were, however, asked if they tried to learn on their own since they could not go to college for a while and faced difficulties learning online. Most of the responses showed that the learners either did not learn, but wished they did or employed strategies to learn autonomously.

> Aban: No. But I would like to, I hope I will do, but not yet.

> Steven: Yes. My elder sister used to help me because last year, she was entry level three. So, she will give me things like do this, don't do this. She make me some questions and adjust.
>
> Tula: We are doing self-study.
>
> Mah: I talk to customer, I play Duolingo, I talk to people and learn.

Some of the participants, therefore, stated that although they could not go to college as before due to the restrictions, they tried to maximise and create opportunities to learn the TL. Others did not.

Furthermore, while some of the learners found their teachers helpful in transitioning this period: "They sent texts at home, PDF, teach online and homework. It was helpful" (Mah), others felt that their teachers could have done better to help them better navigate the difficulties: "They sent us homework. They sent us Zoom login, it's the mistake from her (the teacher). I don't know but everyone wanted to log in, but they can't. All the lockdown until we back here, I don't know how to login" (Ian). The teachers admitted to not getting their learners ready enough to use these online learning devices and platforms but planned to incorporate the training into the next curriculum. They further concurred with these difficulties, stating both their struggles in teaching and learners' in learning despite the support they provided:

> "Many during the pandemic did not have any internet access so that was the biggest problem but even those with internet access sometimes struggled to access the online work that we set up for them." (Rachel).

The COVID 19 lockdown helped the teachers understand the lag of these skills in most of their learners and thus, planned to include IT lessons in the following years to develop learners' skills and promote their autonomy through online learning and the use of technology. Furthermore, the pandemic limited activities that could be done in and out of class with the students to promote their learning, for example, pair, group and social activities.

Despite the negative effects of the Covid 19 lockdown period, some of the participants indicated that it might have encouraged them to engage in more self-study. Some learners with more technology-accessible knowledge and agentic attributes seemed to have exercised greater autonomy in managing their English language learning during this period as Marks stated:

> When we had lockdown and college was close, I think I progressed with my English with online studying because everything got messed up with COVID 19 and there were certain things that were not understandable, so, I think I prefer more face-to-face. I learned everything by myself at that time. I was just watching YouTube videos and increasing my listening skills." (Marks)

The participants' experiences differed during the Covid 19 pandemic. While some appeared to have had a breakdown in their learning leading to them exercising lesser positive autonomy, the others who appeared more determined to learn were agentic, creating and maximising opportunities to manage their learning and learned considerably despite the lockdown. Marks' initial argument on learning from interest and not obligation propelled his agentic attributes to manage his learning and continually learn even in difficult circumstances, and create the identity he desired to see of himself. He reported that this was a conscious and deliberate decision he made "because I know the consequences of not learning." In addition to his understanding of the consequences of not learning the TL, his interest and goal orientation helped him sustain a continuous learning curve.

Researchers (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020; Yandell, 2020; Chang, 2021) have researched and discussed the challenges that came with the Covid 19 pandemic and have suggested a number of things including the need for education leaders to be more aware, attentive and responsive to a variety of access and equality challenges (Al Ghazali, 2020; Maru et al., 2021); the effects of the use of online and technology devices in enhancing learners confidence (identity) and autonomy in contributing to and controlling their learning (Chimi and Kemtong, 2020; Maru et al., 2021); a call to rethink the social understanding of what schools are for, and a reflection on the most valuable aspects of school life, which far exceed the vision of mere transition of knowledge (Yandell, 2020); and a change in ideologies and approaches towards theories and strategies in language teaching and learning to meet more real-world language education (Mirhosseini, 2022).

This chapter has attempted to provide an understanding of ESOL learners' self-perceptions on good language learners and their abilities in taking control of their learning. A gap was noticed in learners' knowledge of their abilities and the degree to which their decisions affect their learning, which have influenced their language learning progress. Learners' language preferences were also discussed and the challenges learners face in their learning journey in the UK. A need to pay closer attention to these aspects to better support learners was found essential.

Chapter 6: "The teachers help us": Teachers' perceptions and roles in developing learner autonomy and learner identity

While the previous findings revealed that although learners have the ability to take control of their learning and identity construction, and teachers have a significant role to play in the development of this autonomy and identity, the present chapter addresses ESOL teachers' perceptions of and role in promoting learner autonomy and identity. It looks at teachers' understanding and implementation of autonomy in their classrooms (Section 6.1); their perceptions of learners' abilities to control their learning (Section 6.2); presents a suggested guided-autonomy strategy to the effective development of learners' autonomy (Section 6.3) and addresses teachers' understanding of learners' self-perception and its influence on their autonomy development, identity construction and language learning (6.4).

6.1. Teachers' knowledge and implementation of learner autonomy in the L2 classroom

As revealed from the perspectives of the learners and teachers, support from language teachers in developing learner autonomy is crucial. It was, therefore, important to first understand what knowledge teachers had of learner autonomy and how they implemented it. This section, thus, delves into an understanding of language teachers' knowledge and perspectives of learner autonomy and how they support their learners with this. All the teachers demonstrated an understanding of what learner autonomy is, stating their understanding of the term as learners' taking control of their own learning or learning independently: "From how I understand it, it's that the students take control of their own learning" (Tania) and "[…] students learning independently" (Anne). Despite the general understanding, some stated that although they understood what I meant, they were not familiar with (nor used) the term 'learner autonomy': "Yes. I'm not sure I actually called it that" (Lili). The use of the term 'learner autonomy', therefore, might not be commonly understood or used throughout the L2 teaching platform, but its understanding and use in practise, which is more important, appears better comprehended and implemented.

Implementing learner autonomy

Having established that the teachers understood what learner autonomy was, investigating if they implemented this in their practice to support their learners' learning was important. It was found that all the teachers both unconsciously and deliberately incorporated this aspect into their daily teaching as Lili emphasised:

> Within my teacher training and practice, I try and teach them to learn by themselves. As well as teaching them, I try and enable them to be able to access learning themselves during and after the class and for future times when they have finished studying with us just to create people who can access learning themselves.

To her, promoting learner autonomy in the L2 classroom involves teaching the learners to learn independently and equipping them with skills to access other learning resources, both in current and future time to furnish their learning. Her aim is to encourage and 'create' life-long learners with transferable learning skills. The other teachers shared similar perspectives stating that they try to encourage their language learners to learn more and better participate in the learning process. Implementing learner autonomy was also seen to be "encouraging them to learn inside and out of the classroom in a number of ways" (Anne).

The ways in which the teachers stated that they encourage learners to develop their autonomy ranged from in-class to out-of-class activities, some of which are providing learning resources such as homework, books, DVDs; learning websites such as esolcourses.com; encouraging them to watch English TV and movies; use YouTube, language apps and social media and do group activities. These, they highlighted, they found useful in helping learners engage more with the target language both in and out of the classroom and at their convenience. With this, was found the practice of Fumin and Li's (2012) suggestion that teachers should realise learners' potentials to learn the L2 through multi-dimensional channels and should recommend a variety of helpful English learning books, resources and websites like those the teachers in this study mentioned and encourage the learners to use them.

One teacher (Anne) emphasised that autonomous learning does not necessarily mean learning alone, as learners learning together and sharing ideas was found significant and useful for them to reflect on their different experiences, practise the language in social and real-life context, and learn from one another:

> Although autonomous learning is independent learning, it is not necessarily an individual thing. They'll often be learning together and from each other through speaking and shared experiences outside the classroom and different cultures as well (Anne).

The teachers, therefore, believed that they promoted autonomy in their learners by using diverse strategies to provide opportunities for their learners to participate in their learning and learn in and out of the classroom.

The learners' found their teachers' support in enhancing their proficiency very significant, "the teachers help us. Before, I did not speak English, but now…" (Ian) and seemed to agree with their teachers, from their responses, when asked how their teachers help them learn better and away from class: "yeah, they are sending reading books and watching English stories, films, and use the online learnings" (Tula) and "reading, listening to radio, you hear what they say and repeat, repeat then one day, you will get better" (Ian). The learners had a positive attitude towards the extra work and resources provided to them and found them useful. Most of them reported that they would like to receive homework from their teachers, "homework is good for reminder" (Tigs), and have been receiving, although do not often request or do them, as was reported by some of the teachers: "Well, if we are talking about homework, not all of them will complete their homework. That's why we don't have compulsory homework, it's optional" (Rachel).

In as much as the learner participants stated that they liked receiving homework, some of them highlighted that they preferred to be given only language materials at their level, while others preferred to be asked what they would like to do and be given activities and assignments that will challenge their language level, motivating them to study more. While Tula, for example, at one point felt that she was not ready to challenge herself beyond her language entry level, because she felt she will not be able to complete higher level tasks, but still wanted to be provided the opportunity to make requests, Marks emphasised that if the teachers intended to provide assignments for them to complete at home, they should be challenging, to push him to work harder, otherwise, "there is really no point". When asked if he likes when his teachers provide homework, he replied:

> Marks: It depends on the work. If it is really simple and I know that I get everything that is there, then there is really no point.
>
> Researcher: So, you prefer that the teacher gives you something more challenging to do, and if they do, will you, do it?
>
> Marks: Yes. Yes, I will.

Some learners were ready to 'push' themselves to learn. It is important for teachers to be mindful of and assess the level of difficulty of language tasks and assignments provided to

learners as learners are better motivated differently to engage in learning based on the level of challenge posed by the language tasks, as in this case. Asking learners to suggest tasks seemed useful. Providing assignments in the ESOL department was not mandatory. The learners were provided with the option to choose if they would like to be given take-home assignments or not. During my observation, teachers asking learners if they wanted work to do at home and what they would like to do, always proved useful. A variety of resources were always made available and placed on the teachers' desks, visible and accessible to learners to select from or ask for more to be printed, if unavailable. Some of these learning resources, besides worksheets, were books, movies and songs in English which learners seemed to enjoy collecting to watch and returning for more. This enabled the teachers to tailor extra learning resources to meet the learners' needs at the levels they knew learners will be motivated enough to engage in learning out of class. The provision of resources to meet learners' desires further provided opportunities for learners to employ their agency in choosing to either request for learning resources to use in out-of-class learning or not. The decisions learners made to request or not request for extra work and the level of challenge they were willing to take in their learning all contributed to the level of responsibility they employed over their language learning.

6.2. Teachers' perceptions of learners' abilities

As discussed, autonomy was found to be an aspect known and practised in the L2 language classrooms. This section discusses what perspectives the teachers had of their learners' abilities to take control of their learning and arrive at their desired goals. Some aspects highlighted were teachers' idiosyncratic perceptions on learners' abilities, the time learners took to learn the language at different stages and learners' proficiency, health and maturity.

The teachers highlighted that being in the UK, their learners take advantage of the environment which provides a vast platform of authentic language for them to learn the TL out of the classroom: "They are definitely absorbing language wherever they are" (Anne). This projects the environmental benefits of ESL contexts as opposed to EFL contexts where there is more opportunity for conscious and accidental language learning. For example, while walking on the road, shopping and traveling, learners hear and use the TL. Also, some learners mentioned that they had jobs which they said provided opportunities for them to engage in conversations with other target language (TL) speakers and see or hear the TL around them, providing more exposure to the language. Thus, they both found and placed themselves in TL speaking

environments, enhancing their language learning. “So, I think learning happens every minute of the day, but they probably don’t know. They are still practicing what they’ve learned in class” (Rachel). Learning is a daily continual process for English learners when emersed in the TL environment; learners learn consciously and unconsciously from their continual exposure to the TL in what they hear and see, even when not engaged in interaction with other speakers, which is referred to here as accidental or silent learning. Krashen (1982) refers to this type of ‘learning’ as language acquisition.

Learners’ abilities were believed to be varied as the learners took charge of their learning in different ways. From the beginning of the course, there are usually a large number of registered learners who at the beginning are enthusiastic about learning. However, as the course progresses, some learners drop out or have significantly low attendance for several reasons. During my observation, some of the reasons learners stated for either not coming to class or for coming late were that they were too sleepy to wake up, did not feel as coming to college that day or chose to go to work. From findings, this could be attested to reduced motivation, changed priorities, past traumatic experiences, current integration and settlement challenges or increased language skill needed to integrate into the society providing more independence. Other important reasons such as attending appointments, ill health and transportation difficulties were equally stated. In taking control of their learning, while some learners preferred learning from theory (in class) to practice (in the community), others chose applying the practice till they learn. Anne stated that:

> “As a teacher, I try to make them see that there isn’t just one way of learning and there isn’t a right or wrong, it just depends on a) what they want to study, and b) how they approach it. I try to encourage them as well that we don’t necessary expect them to learn in a particular way which might be how they think.”

Inherent in learners’ priorities, experiences and challenges were diverse strategies employed in taking charge of their learning and reflecting on their abilities. Some factors considered while reflecting on learners’ autonomy were learning time, learners’ proficiency, health status and maturity.

The time factor and learner autonomy

In reflecting on learners’ responsibilities in their learning and on teachers’ role in guiding the learners, Anne explained her thoughts on LA as:

> I think of learner autonomy as the learners having some choice in their learning. We give them ideas on learning outside of the classroom. It's more of them taking control and giving them guidance rather than instructing them to do this and do that.

Autonomy to her is learners being given the choice to have a say in their learning and make decisions on their learning and for them to be guided, not instructed, through these decisions. When asked if she believes her learners have the ability to take control of their learning and learn out of the classroom, she affirmed saying:

> Yes, they are definitely absorbing language wherever they are… I think they do want to do that; they all want to learn English because they are in England. Different students do it differently, they all do that to an extent. (Anne)

Anne believes that the learners have enough reasons to want to learn the language and will take advantage of the opportunities they have to learn, to certain extents and differently.

There was a common belief that learners have the ability to learn autonomously, but whether they used this ability was dependent on them. Lili believed that when ESOL learners start learning, they maximise their learner autonomy, but this decreases mainly due to the duration of the course and an increase in their proficiency as they become more proficient:

> Referring to the E3 students who I teach, I think by the time they get to the third year, a majority of them have done lots of study at home before starting the class…and they just slug. I think they do run out of steam by the third year. I think three years is too much…I think they did have it, but they've probably not used it recently, because to get here to study E1, they've had to have done some independent learning before, especially the unaccompanied migrants. They'll be in reception centres, and hostels, and places like that, where they wouldn't get a lot of teaching. So, they would have done a lot independently there. They were really enthusiastic at that stage, but now, after being here for three, four years. So, I think for them going through the process, they would have had it but now, they aren't using it. They just want to get on with life. (Lili)

According to Lili, the more proficient learners have the ability to control their learning and learn on their own, but are not using that ability. This might be an overgeneralisation but reveals her perspective on how learners choose to use their autonomy or what happens to learners' autonomy over their learning journey. She believes that when they get to entry level three (E3), they get tired and bored of studying and no longer put in as much effort to learn or study independently as they had done previously. And that the learners have the ability to control their learning and learn more independently at the beginning of their language learning journey, however, this reduces along the way. She supposes this could be due to them possessing the basic skills of the TL enabling them to integrate into the community sufficiently and

independently, "so, that reduces their motivation" (Lili). Thus, as the learners acquire more of the language skills, mainly speaking, their motivation to study decreases as they are able to sufficiently integrate into the society and meet basic needs necessary for living in the UK.

Lili further believes that their needs analysis determines their motivation and as long as they do not deem skills such as writing as an immediate necessity for integration and comfort, their motivation to study in class or autonomously to acquire those skills reduces, thus, a negative control of their learning sets in. To her, this motivation is, however, rekindled when learners set new goals and meet new requirements for the necessary skills. As long as the learners set goals which require the different language skills, their motivation to positively control their learning and learn autonomously will be sustained and developed. Most of the other teachers equally stated that learners' goal-setting and future plans and selves were significant influencers of learners' abilities and attitudes towards their learning. "Yes. Basically, my students, because many of them are adult learners who have goals and visions in life" (Tania). These goals act as a driving force in promoting their autonomy and learning progress.

Proficiency and learner autonomy

Contrary to Lili's perspective, Rachel felt that learners' development of abilities and assumption of responsibility over their learning increases alongside their proficiency:

> It depends what level they are in their English. I would say Entry 1 students, I don't think they can control their learning as much as Entry 3 students would. For instance, just by watching TV in English is controlling and using your skills to understand what's happening in that programme. E1 students will swap to programmes in their first language automatically, but E3 will continue and will make notes. So, I think the higher the level they are in English, the better they can control their learning.

According to Rachel, learners' abilities to control their learning is dependent on their language skills proficiency level. This perspective assumes that there is a direct proportional relationship between learners' ability to learn and their language proficiency, that is, the higher the language skills, the higher their ability to learn autonomously. It was interesting to see these contrary perspectives as it also gives insight into the different perspectives of language practitioners, their idiosyncratic beliefs about their learners and how they support their learners based on their perspectives. It was commonly agreed that learners' abilities changed over their learning journey, but the choice to use these abilities in enhancing their learning differed. The learners affirmed these changing abilities. Their responses equally supported the two perspectives of their teachers as some were found to be more deliberate in taking responsibility for enhancing

their learning positively, while others appeared more relaxed and less interested in following previous strategies which they had employed in developing their language skills. For example, during my observations and discussions with some of the ELLs, it was noticed that some chose to stop coming to college mainly because they had developed the basic necessary language (fluency) skills to go about their daily activities.

Anne, in her own perspective, believed that the learners all have the ability to learn and use their abilities, but they do so in different ways:

> It's very different for different students. They will see different things as being important…it depends on their preferences. The more studious types will think it is more important to sit down and study in a traditional way and keep going over grammar, reading and writing at home. Other students will go out and get a job, speaking with lots of people within that job or just going out and making friends and speaking with friends within that group, then they are taking control. Some of them will think that they are doing it wrong, but it's not wrong because it's all them wanting to learn; they are taking control in a certain way.

In this light, whether learners learn traditionally or communicatively, it is them exercising their ability to take control of their learning. Learners following their learning preferences is controlling their learning; deciding on what, where and how to learn (or not) based on what is important, easier and available for them. This relates to Benson's (2011) three dimensions of control in learners' learning: learning management, involving learners' daily practices (the 'how', 'where' and 'when'); cognitive processes, concerned with the 'how' of learning in a cognitive sense and such as noticing and reflecting on the language learning; and the learning context involving 'what' and 'how much' of the language is learned and linked to the 'why' (learners' purpose) of learning (Huan and Benson, 2013). The learners were found to control their learning in different ways. This supports Rachel' emphases on them (teachers) letting learners "control what they do" when trying to promote their autonomy. She states that although they suggest and provide learning platforms and resources for learners to use, "we don't tell them they have to do such and such activities. You have a look at the whole platform, and you decide what you want to do and what you need to do" (Rachel).

Rachel explained that her understanding of learners being autonomous is "about how a student learns individually without any support at all… So, ways and means and skills they've got to be able to learn something independently without any learner support at all." She stresses the requirement of learners taking the lead on directing their learning till being independent of the

teacher, and still being able to learn. This will entail them employing their skills, knowledge and strategies to ensure progress in their learning even without the help of the teacher.

Anne's explanation of autonomous learning as learners "learning using their own minds as opposed to being fed information" emphasises Rachel's point. Thus, to encourage learners to develop these skills and know the ways and means of learning when the teacher is not present, they not only teach their learners the lessons they need to enhance their language proficiency, but equally encourage them and implement strategies to enable learners participate in and take more responsibility for their learning. The choice to use these opportunities and resources, however, is dependent on the learners and their agency in the decisions they make towards their learning:

> So, what we do, we teach them lessons, but also when we set up homework for them, it's the way they handle it. You know, some of them will just answer questions in short answers. Some of them will write in more compound and complete sentences. So, they handle and complete their homework individually and differently. So, I think this is when they use their own skills and ability to learn to answer those questions. They are different from one to another. (Rachel)

Thus, in letting learners choose what they want to study and seeing them decide on how and when they want to complete the activities, the teachers believed that, although learners have the ability to take control of their learning, the levels and ways in which they use these abilities change and differ across learners and the learning process. Giving them the opportunities and responsibility to make their choices was found to be effective in letting them exercise these abilities. It was, however, cautioned that developing effective autonomy in language learners required guidance; guiding the learners through their development and maintenance of a positive autonomy to enhance their learning and identity construction. This guidance strategy is further addressed in Section 6.3.

Health status and learner autonomy

Another area of assessing learners' abilities to take control of their learning which the teachers found significant was the learners' health status. One teacher believed that because none of her language learners had health challenges which affected their learning, they had the ability to effectively control their learning: "Because we do not have students who have health challenges here, I think they all have the ability. I just think many choose not to take or use the ability." (Tania)

Supporting Lili's argument that it is not just about learners having the ability or not to control their learning, but about using this ability, Tania added that given that the learners do not have health challenges, they are naturally supposed to have the abilities required to take control of their learning. This makes me reflect on if teachers are aware of the knowledge learners have of their ability to take control of their learning and the effects of their use of this ability or not. This emphasises that not only is it important to reflect on and assess ESOL learners' abilities to control their learning, but also on how much of this ability they know they have and use.

Furthermore, it is important for teachers to analyse if the learners are aware of the ability they have or do not have in controlling their learning. Ushioda (2011) opines that language classrooms that promote learner autonomy provide opportunities for learners to express their identities in the foreign language. However, I have not seen literature emphasizing the need for teachers to explicitly help learners be aware of their ability and the extent to which it influences their learning outcome. Seeing the effects of learners using their abilities or not on their learning, it is crucial for both teachers and learners to be aware of this power. Asking ESOL learners questions in this regard will help teachers better understand the point from which they can assist their learners towards enhancing their autonomy and constructing their identity. Data from the learner participants show that they, to some extent, understand their ability to take control of their learning, but do not necessarily reflect on this ability, except when pointed out. Highlighting this to the learners during the interviews helped them reflect on these aspects.

The teachers believed that the learners' abilities increased over time, although how they chose to use these abilities differed: "I have already seen certain changes over time with students who put effort" (Tania). It raises the questions: 'Who is to put in more effort: the teacher or learner?' And 'who has more responsibility?' The teacher (Tania) emphasises the crucial importance of learners needing to put in the effort, noting that, no matter how much the teacher tries, the learner has the final say, the end results lie with the learner. From this, in addition to researching and developing autonomous learning strategies, it might be a better efficient consideration for teachers to invest time in helping their language learners understand their power and the part they need to play in developing their autonomy. As important as the teachers' input is, it is even more important for learners to know and understand theirs.

Maturity (age) and learner autonomy

Added to this is teachers' expectations of learners as adults to be able to complete tasks and have a certain level of understanding:

> I have seen their English improve, and their use of mathematical vocabulary improve. Like in my maths classes, although it is maths, they need the English to understand the questions and instructions…They know the signs but if they do not know the word subtract…then it creates an issue. This is where I want to see more person-responsibility. Because it is really just learning one word for more international signs which I think adult learners should be able to. (Tania)

She appeared to frustratingly explain her students' struggle with understanding mathematical English vocabulary which is directly affecting their maths learning as they face difficulty in understanding the terminology and vocabulary used, hindering them from understanding and answering the questions. This highlights the difficulties the learners face with their proficiency in other areas of their learning. Their limited understanding of the language not only affects their English classes and development, but other educational goals, in this case passing maths exams. Tina equally expresses her high expectations for the learners saying, given that they are adult learners, she expects them to understand certain things which they do not seem to understand. This high expectation might be the root of her frustration. However, in reflecting on this, one could ask: are the learners supposed to understand these just because they are adult learners or is it a similar/general challenge faced by ESOL learners with low proficiency? Is the challenge a language-caused challenge or an age-expectation challenge? Will younger and older ESOL learners face the same challenge, or will they be different? Probably addressing these in future research might provide more insights.

Furthermore, given that the learners in this study and department are teenagers and young adult learners, it is important to note that this stage of their lives had a significant influence on their learning. As one teacher mentioned: "They are young people. So, their moods and dedication are dependent on what is happening in their lives" (Lili). This presumably differs from language learners in other age groups as their life-experiences and occupations differ. The learners in this study have to deal with the challenges that come with being teenagers entering adulthood and learning and adjusting to these new identities and the responsibilities that come with it. This is in addition to their limited experiences and knowledge of life and career (which adults might have) and their past traumatic experiences and refugee statuses. With an interrelationship between these aspects in the learners' lives, many were found to be sometimes overwhelmed. Striving through these changes influenced the goals learners set for themselves and their understanding of how their current actions and decisions will influence their future.

Despite the diverse perspectives on learners' abilities and autonomy, all the participants advocated for the promotion of learner autonomy in L2 classrooms, believing that it can lead to better language learning:

> Because once you become more independent in your learning, you can organise yourself and assess what your needs are and then you know that you need to learn more in that field. So, this is you knowing what you can, knowing your abilities and then, going into more details into the field you are lagging in. So, yes, they become more organise and more conscious about what they need to improve. (Rachel)

With increased autonomy, learners can better take informed decisions about their learning. It helps learners to acquire and develop abilities that can help them become more independent; they have the conscious ability to choose to organise themselves, find resources, set goals and assess their learning to find what they are lagging in to improve it, or not, based on their informed choices. This aligns with what Holec (1981) referred to as learners' ability to take charge of their learning in which he meant learners taking responsibility for setting goals, determining the purpose, content and method of learning, monitoring their learning progress, and evaluating its outcomes. Benson (2011) chose to adopt the term learners' "capacity", to buttress on what learners have the capacity to do, and not necessary what they actually do. From this study, it has been shown that, although learners do have the ability to take charge of their learning, they do not necessarily do so (positively). Therefore, learners' autonomy is not only about what learners do, but also about what capacity they have to do what they (need to) do. This study argues that capacity, here, also includes their knowledge of this capacity or ability they have. Thus, it is not just about the 'control' or 'take charge' factor, but also the 'capacity' or 'ability' factor.

The teachers, therefore, believed that learners' abilities to take control of their learning increases as their proficiency increases. However, their perspectives differed on the ways in which and how much of this ability learners actually put into use to develop their learning. To some teachers, learners' positive autonomy increases alongside their proficiency, while others tend to adopt a more negative autonomy along their language proficiency journey. It is important to question if it is their ability that increases or the consciousness of the ability which they possess in controlling their learning that increases, or both. The learners' responses showed an increase in both their abilities to take better control of their learning from aspects such as an increase in their proficiency, confidence and agency, and an increase in their knowledge of the responsibilities they have over their learning. The teachers equally emphasized that although they believed that the learners have the ability to take control of their learning, they can only encourage the learners to do so and "wait for them to realise that themselves" (Lili). Guiding learners in their autonomy development was, therefore, deemed essential.

6.3. Guided learner autonomy

Although there was a common consensus that learner autonomy was practised in the classrooms and encouraged in the learners, a way to manage this to effectively enable learners develop their autonomy and take part in the decisions guiding their learning was proposed. This section discusses a suggested strand of autonomy – Guided Autonomy, what it is and proposed strategies in implementing it.

A term used to describe the perspective the teachers felt was the effective way of developing autonomy in the language learner is Guided Autonomy. Guided autonomy refers to the support provided to language learners to take more control of their language learning consciously and effectively. That is, learners are provided with the necessary resources and conditions favourable for developing their autonomy and guided through the decisions made by providing sufficient required knowledge and resources and letting the learners make informed decisions concerning their learning. It was suggested (Tania) that it is not only about encouraging learner autonomy, but also about how it is encouraged, which determines how effective it will be for different learners:

> I think it depends on how you encourage autonomy. If, for example, you say, 'here's a task, I would like you to return it to me in three days' time' and that's all the instruction you give them. Here, you give them the autonomy to choose 'Okay, when will I do the task, will I do it in the morning, in the afternoon or later?' But also, you guide them and say I would like to have your results back. So, yes, they have a certain amount of autonomy to choose when to do it, how to do it. But you also must ensure that it is back (Tania).

Guiding learners and keeping them accountable, she believes, is a more effective way of enhancing the effectiveness of their autonomy. That is, teachers providing opportunities for learners to exercise their autonomy, being able to make certain decisions that influence their learning, and at the same time, guiding the learners to make positive decision towards their learning. However, there should be a level of responsibility and accountability placed on the learners to ensure that they are practising the autonomy offered to them.

When learners have an understanding and a sense of responsibility that although they have been given the choice of how and when to engage in their studying or invest in certain aspects of their learning, which will directly or indirectly affect their learning outcome, they tend to exercise more intentional and informed decision-making towards their learning. Therefore, placing a level of accountability on learners is a possible positive strategy to promote their autonomy while giving them a sense of independence and responsibility towards their learning.

When learners attain this level of understanding about their responsibilities towards their learning, one can then begin to analyse what kind of autonomy (positive or negative) the learner has. Until then, the uninformed learner cannot be said to not have autonomy as this might arguable only be due to their little (or no) knowledge of their responsibilities towards their learning, and the effects of their decisions and actions on their learning based on how they handle this responsibility. Based on the observations and results of the learner participant interviews, this study assumes that learners' levels of autonomy can change if their knowledge of their autonomy is changed.

Holec (1988) and Huan and Benson (2013) discuss a similar perception, taking it a step forward and stating that the autonomous learner will make use of his abilities if only he wishes to, but is equally subjected to permission from the material, by social and psychological constraints as well as the stake holders in the learning process. Suggesting that learners' autonomy is determined and guided, not only by the learner and teachers, but equally by the resources, affordances and constraint in their environment.

This guided autonomy could be done through a guided followed-up autonomy wherein teachers not only guide learners on making conscious, informed and positive decisions about their learning, but equally follow-up and provide feedback on learners' autonomy, to ensure their effective development. The teachers believed that promoting learners' autonomy is giving them an extra learning 'tool'. However, reflecting on her 20 years of teaching experience, Tania was sceptical about how effective this 'tool' on its own will be in the learners. To her, giving learners the "opportunity to avoid learning, they will take this possibility" (Tania) rather than encouraging themselves to do extra work:

> I think the majority of students even though they have the ability will choose not to because it's nicer to go outside for a walk and not work. Also, it's two sided because I think giving the students the possibility to autonomously learn gives them also the possibility to say, 'I don't want to'. Whereas guided learning, which many students perceive as rather enforced learning, gives them the possibility to learn in regular bases, controlled and also receive feedback (Tania).

Tania questioned how effective encouraging learners to learn on their own can be. She believed that although the learners might have the ability to learn on their own, they might choose to do more interesting things such as going out for a walk rather than blogging an extra hour or two to study. She advocates a guided-learning strategy which she deems more effective. Understanding the dynamics of learners' willingness to learn and deliberately putting in more efforts in their learning is important. Earlier findings in this study showed that it is mostly

highly motivated learners and those with a clear understanding of their personal relevance for learning and definitive goals that invested in extra learning in developing their reading and writing language skills. Many others preferred to engage in social interactions, which appears to be the easier and less time-consuming choice. Although this might develop their speaking and listening skills, they may tend to face challenges with their writing and reading.

To effectively implement guided autonomy, some strategies were proposed as important considerations including, teachers as resources, developing learners' confidence, providing clear instructions, using authentic materials and teachers as role models.

Teachers as resources

In addressing guided autonomy as more effective, some participants provided strategies that were used in guiding learners to make decisions which promoted their autonomy, equipping learners with the required knowledge and resources and giving them the choice on how to manage their decisions:

> Yes. Basically, my students, because many of them are adult learners who have goals and visions in life, I say to them, 'your education is your responsibility. You need to work and achieve. I can help you to achieve by helping you work.' So, the students need to know that the responsibility to control their learning is theirs. I am the helping tool, but I don't make them learn (Tania).

With this, one way of effectively guiding learners in their autonomy development is to consider herself as a *'helping tool'* to the learners and believe that towards the learners' success, her power to influence their learning is limited to being their knowledge provider, motivator and assistant. She helps her learners to understand their responsibility towards their learning, and that the actual work lies with them to implement consciously and deliberately what they have received to achieve success. Another teacher stated a similar perspective:

> We've got an ESOL platform (Esolcourses.com) and we ask them to access it whenever they want to do that in order to promote independent learning. And yes, some of them do that and tell us, 'I've done some beginner/pre-intermediate activities. So, they control what they do. We don't tell them they have to do such and such activities. You have a look at the whole platform, and you decide what you want to do and what you need to do. We provide the platform and then they decide what they want to do. We give them the resources and they go through them and decide what they need to do (Rachel).

Here, the teachers are resource providers in promoting learner autonomy. They provide the platforms and resources for learners to do and give them the responsibility and choice of choosing what they want to do and how much practice they want to engage in, guiding them in making informed decisions in developing their autonomy. This adds to the discussion on the

importance of learners as partners in the learning process, shaping and reshaping their language learning. Seeing learners as partners and encouraging them to effectively participate in their learning provides a sense of self-relevance and fulfilment in their learning. Whelehan (2020) believes that the long-term and medium effects of COVID 19 are likely to impact educational approaches leading to a more student-centred approach wherein staff and students could work collaboratively as partners. Developing a Student Partnership culture has also been identified as a means of tackling and working within resource constraint environments in maximising educational experiences for both students and staff. More attention is being given to a student-centred approach and student partnership in which learners should play an equal (partnership) role in shaping the design of their education, its implementation and review (Bovill and Bulley, 2011; ESG, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016; Shaw et al. 2017; Deeley and Bovill, 2017; Whelehan, 2020).

Developing learners' confidence and the 'safe space'

One teacher (Anne) believed that the first step to guiding learners in developing their autonomy is to help them develop confidence. She believed that learners' lack of confidence was one of the primary aspects restricting them from exercising positive autonomy. By improving their confidence, they can proceed with other aspects of their learning. She explained that she tries to do this by praising them, helping them recognise their strengths, supporting them to reach the next step and acknowledging their efforts despite how small or big it might be. Also, helping them recognise that small steps lead to bigger steps, and for them not to concentrate only on what they do not know but to reflect on their progress and ability to learn more.

Furthermore, developing a 'safe space' for the learners in the classroom by encouraging both teachers and learners to get "to know each other well" and discouraging learners from making fun of and talking down on one another. Stating an example, Anne mentioned that at times she meets some of her learners in the communities and they seem very shy in their interaction with other target language speakers, whereas they are quite confident in class. When she enquires why they are behaving that way, their response is "it's different in college" implying that the learners feel that their classroom is a 'safe space' in which they can better express their language skills because of the atmosphere created in this environment. It is important for learners to have at least one 'safe space', a comfortable environment, not necessarily physical (as explained in Section 4.2.1), in which to practise their TL skills. I recommend that teachers should try to create this 'safe space' in their classrooms for their learners. It is, however,

important for learners to be cautious of not letting this 'safe space' become a restriction for them using the language in other spaces. With this thought, it is assumed that when learners become too comfortable in their 'safe spaces', they might tend to develop the fear of using the language out of this space which might end up being a hinderance, rather than an affordance to their language learning and use.

Clear instructions

Furthermore, providing clear instructions and directions on task completion was stated to be essential. That is, how teachers understood their learners, provided instructions to different learners at different levels, the level of detail and extra support offered, and learners' autonomy were significant:

> […] I know some of them need spoon-feeding, and they say, 'Miss help, Miss help!' We try to say, 'look this is the information you've got, this is what you have to do. How can you use this information to do what you have to do to complete your work?' So, we just have to give them the rope and the tools to be able to become more independent and they usually do that (Rachel).

Therefore, it was not just about providing the resource and platforms but providing clear instructions, directions and expectations which all culminated in producing desired results. That is, how to complete tasks, for example, encouraging the students to use the information to arrive their desired goals, and giving them the opportunity to employ their ability to make independent choices regarding their learning.

In providing this guidance, the learners stated that their teachers will be more helpful and the learning process more enjoyable and successful, if the teachers are patient and accommodating:

> Teacher, they have to calm down, not get angry quickly. Like maybe some word you cannot spell… the teacher will help you spell like five times, you don't understand. If teacher is angry, that's not good. Teacher have to tell you more, more, more (Aban).

While teaching and guiding learners in developing their proficiency, perceiving how learners feel and what they understand about the teaching is important in helping teachers know how to better support their learners.

Authentic material

It was also important that as much as possible, everything thought in the classroom should be linked to reality; life out of the classroom. Providing learners with authentic and useful materials, information and skills was important to the teachers. The Math's teacher (Tania), for

example, specifically stressed on the application of lessons in real-life experiences wherein she stated that she habitually encourages her learners to apply maths in every aspect, for example, during shopping, to recalculate the prices on the shopping list to ensure they are correct, look at the VAT, thus, practising in-class lessons in real-life contexts:

> I sometimes give some quizzes for them to solve or apply what they learn even out of class like when they go for shopping, for example, they should check if the prices were correctly calculated and the VAT. So, the connection to learning in real life situations is of massive importance to me, and this is where I encourage my students to autonomously learn to basically apply what we learn in the classroom to real life outside. (Tania)

With this, she believes they are exercising their autonomy. While Gardner and Miller (2002) refer to the language teacher as an authentic language user, Duda and Tyne (2010) add that in language classrooms where there is little or no practice of authentic conversations and use of authentic materials, learners would be unable to and shy away from expressing themselves and their identities both in and out of the classroom, emphasising the need for learners to be exposed to authentic relevant content in the TL.

Teachers as role models

Another strategy used in guiding learners to develop their autonomy was self-projection. Two of the teachers were of non-English first language origin. Although they had attained 'native speakerism', the teachers stated that, being once English language learners themselves, they understood what it meant to learn a new language. This both helped them in their teaching and their learners in using them as examples of successful language learning. Tania, a German first-language English and Maths teacher, explained that she usually uses herself as an example to encourage her learners to take more responsibility of their learning and believe in the possibility of successful proficiency in their TL:

> I think I am an example myself because I am not a native speaker. So, the students are aware, 'There's a moment she didn't speak English. But now, she is a teacher teaching foreign students English and Mathematics. So, I think this is quite encouraging. In terms of their own learning, I tell them that I learned English by mixing with English speaking people, by avoiding speaking my own language as much as I could and by reading English as much as I could. (Tania)

She uses first-hand experiences and examples which the students are able to see and relate to, providing a more palpable example and evidence for them to follow. Rachel, a Romanian first-language English teacher, shared a similar perspective:

> English is not my first language. So, I know exactly what they go through to achieve what they want to achieve. So, I can see myself in them. So, I always give myself as an example. 'I've been you before, I've done what you're doing now and it's going to work. So, probably seeing me and where I've got probably gives them the courage and motivation they need to continue to succeed. So, I'm teaching from experience, and I always tell them that and they feel motivated.

Teaching from experience of being a learner of English at a time in their own language learning journey, helps in providing an understanding of some of the challenges the ELLs encounter. This leads them to teach from empathy, and to create and propose learning strategies to support learners from a more authentic, relatable and reliable foundation upon which their learners can emulate and develop their language learning and identity. Their attempt seems to be to create a more positive L2 learner identity in the learners in which, by being taught by once English language learners and being reassured by them of the possibilities of attaining proficiency in the TL, this will possibly shape the learners' mentality and attitude towards the language and create a believing personality (identity) in the learners of developing this same proficiency and being more in control of their learning.

Thus, in implementing such strategies, the teachers felt that they were better able to guide learners in developing their autonomy while bearing in mind that success in their guidance is significantly dependent on learners' agency: "[…] but as I said, I can only encourage my students to take control of their learning" (Tania).

6.4. "They become a new person": Teachers' understanding of learners' self-perception on influencing their language learning and how they support them.

Seeing that the learners spent most of their formal language learning time with their teachers and having established that learners' identities are significantly influenced by the language and their learning progress, understanding teachers' perceptions of their learners' identities, which this section discusses, provides insight into how they support learners through these identity changes and construction. When reflecting on this and asking the teachers, I was not very sure what perceptions they will state they have on their learners' identities. Having been with them for a while, I had noticed the empathy they had for their learners, especially those with past traumatic experiences and present statuses as refugee and asylum seekers. Their approach to these learners in this light was generally empathic, yet firm. In expressing and understanding these perspectives, some aspects were considered including transitioning boundaries, identity

reconstruction, language interlocutors and error awareness, limited self-confidence, culture and the language learner, educational backgrounds, language mastery and learners' self-perception.

Transitioning boundaries (places/spaces)

One teacher (Tania) suggested that to understand what identities learners have of themselves here in the UK and how these identities affect their learning, it was important to first understand what identities they had of themselves in their countries and how these identities affected their identity construction in the UK. Have they carried that same identity to the UK or has the identity changed? How and why? I did not think about this when discussing with the learners and this might have been a significant influence on the responses they provided. Although some answers on other issues provided slight insights on this aspect, a more deliberate probing into this might have proved useful.

Having grown up in the 'western' part of the world and reflecting on her identity as a European, Tania feels that her identity will differ from those of Asian and Eastern European countries mainly due to the cultural differences:

> I think that is a difficult question because as a European, having grown up here, I have a certain image of myself. But thinking of Asians, for example, how do they perceive themselves in their own countries to start with? So, we often say in Arabic countries, for example, men are rather controlling. They are the people who make the decision, they are the heads of their family. You know, if a boy or man says something, it's a fact but if a woman says the same thing, it's like come on, I'm not even sure if this is the truth. But this is what I believe about the middle Eastern culture. So, I would not know.

There is a significant play of culture and identity in her perception of how the learners will perceive themselves based on the different cultures within which they grew or from where they are. She believes that these culture-constructed identities 'follow' the learners to the UK and influence how they both perceive themselves in the society and relate to the language, and this differs per learner. She states that she cannot be certain on what learners' identities are and says her thoughts of their identity are mainly on her assumptions and observations as these could be different to the learners. With this, she explains, "I think many have doubts about their ability to master English and I think many of these young people feel insecure about how do they communicate in this community?" (Tania).

Carefully using the words 'I think', she raises the aspects of confidence and security which most of the learners stated that they lacked at the beginning of their learning. As earlier seen, all the learner participants stated that they had a limited self-confidence at the beginning of

their learning and some (Lana, Tigs and Kirti) mentioned the insecure identity they had which might have resonated from their experiences, now reflecting on their background, was mainly from their low proficiency, which they stated was the main cause. Because they did not feel confident about being able to freely interact with those in the society to defend themselves, and their perceptions on how others will perceive them and treat them for not being able to effectively communicate in the TL, they stated that they felt insecure. This, to most, was a motivation to enhance their proficiency, which helped them develop more confident and secure identities as it improved.

Others believed that the learners try to maintain their identities while adopting new ones in the new context which they deem necessary for effective integration. By just speaking the TL, the learners undergo a significant identity change or addition. They equally believe that, given that the UK is multicultural, and learners learn with people from many other linguistic, historic and cultural backgrounds,

> Most of them keep their identities, but in time you can see changes. So even if they keep their identities, they need to adapt to the society here. So, they make changes in their lives just by speaking English. That's a massive change in their identity. And then if they mix with students from other countries, they pick up things from others, food, dressing, way of speaking. I like to think that they think that it's progress, and not that they are forgetting everything about their culture. So, they learn other things. (Rachel)

Rachel believed that in as much as the learners try to maintain their identities, for them to effectively integrate into the new society, they need to adopt new identities of the society. By just learning and speaking English, they are adopting a new identity in addition to their first (other) language(s). Also, by simply mixing with these people in this new society, learners tend to consciously and unconsciously 'pick up' new aspects such as ways of dressing and speaking, food and cultural diversities from multiple nationalities and cultures that not only contribute to shaping their language learning but identity as well. The learners, thus, tend to adopt a multi-cultural identity, not just the British's. Block (2007) comments that when individuals move across psychological and geographical borders, and immerse themselves in new cultural and social environments, they realise a destabilisation of their sense of identity and will have to go through a struggle to arrive a balanced state. Here, identity is seen as being contested in nature wherein the struggle is not seen as adding the new identity to the old or as a half-and-half of what they were and half of what they have been exposed to, but as the *third place* (Bhabha, 1994; Hall,1996). This Phase is referred to by Papastergiadis (2002) as a negotiation of

difference wherein the past and the present "encounter and transform each other" in "the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions" (P.170), creating a new identity which incorporates both the past and present selves.

Identity reconstruction

Furthermore, Anne believed that learners experience a mental identity deconstruction and reconstruction when they first arrive the UK. When learners encounter several other cultures in the UK than they might have previously imagined, their identity becomes multiculturally shaped:

> I think that when they first come, they see themselves as being outsiders and different and that they don't fit in and I think they expect to not be accepted by other people, expect to stand out [...] they are surprised at how much they are accepted in England because it is multi-cultural. And they don't stand out because everyone who lives in England is used to seeing and knowing people of different nationalities [...] and when they have discovered that, that improves their sense of identity. (Anne)

The learners, in Anne's opinion, seem to go through some sort of cultural 'shock' in that they not only transition differences in their culture and that of Britain, but see how the British culture incorporates and functions alongside other cultures, and how their preconceptions of the UK might have been different from their actual current experiences. How learners think they will be regarded prior to coming to the UK tends to be different from what they actually experience when they arrive; their previous thoughts of not being accepted, to an extent, does not align with their experiences. This, however, is debatable and significantly different from other learners' experiences who might have felt a form of rejection and side-lining such as in Chris' experience at the bank where he was treated unfairly and shunned by the teller, who bluntly asked him to go and find a translator without attempting to understand what he was trying to say: "When I go to the bank the first time with my mum, I said to this person can you please speak slowly and she answered me, 'No, bring a translator with you and goodbye'" (Chris). He explained that he felt very bad but was even more motivated to learn the language to avoid having a similar experience.

Anne further explained that she believed that with living in the UK and learning the culture and other aspects, learners start feeling British. Moving from mostly mono-cultural backgrounds, learners tend to adopt and develop new multicultural identities including mainly British, which most strive to be like, thus, becoming part of them. Most of the learners attested to this saying they wanted to attain British citizenship and not only know the English language

but equally speak like Brits. While the multiculturality might help learners in developing their culture, beliefs and sense of identity, Anne expressed her concerns that this might equally be very confusing for learners as they are exposed to several other perspectives, practices and ways of life which might sometimes conflict their pervious understanding causing them to get confused on what to believe or how to self-perceive and project. Thus, requiring them to adjust, adopt and learn to cope with the new experiences. However, she believed that this is a process learners have to go through and possibly grow through while constructing their identity as it keeps changing, adopting and adapting to some and rejecting others. This is what helps them in constructing their own identities which they can look back at and appreciate the process of self- development.

Language interlocutors and error awareness

Learners' nationality was deemed significant in understanding the learners' choices on how to interact and with whom to interact while simultaneously constructing their identities. They mentioned that learners' self-perception and readiness to communicate with other TL learners and speakers is also influenced by their nationality. Rachel believed that those from countries such as Afghanistan and Kurdistan are less afraid to speak up and demonstrate more confidence because they are more "out-going" than those from Portugal or France. She further assumes that this might be because the latter might have studied English previously and thus are more conscious of their mistakes, thus, choose to be

> […] very quiet in speaking and listening but very good in reading and writing […]. Whereas students from Kurdistan, they don't know they make mistakes, they just speak in English, and they think that whatever they say is comprehensible. (Rachel)

Nationality, culture and previous target language (TL) background, therefore, were believed to have a significant role in learners' identity construction and language use, especially at the early stages for their language learning journey.

Adding to this, learners' consciousness of their mistakes was found to be a major hindrance to their use of the TL, especially at the beginning of the learning. The teachers stated that one of the main barriers that obstructs learners from exercising their L2 identity is when they are being conscious of their mistakes and language proficiency. When learners are aware of and reflect on their limited proficiency at the start of their learning, especially when communicating with proficient TL speakers, they tend to self-create barriers for them using the language because they feel they are not *'good enough'* to express themselves in the language. This causes them

to limit interaction or not engage in communication with some TL speakers, "[…] because they know they make mistakes and they'll rather be quiet and absorb information and when they feel they are ready then they start communicating" (Rachel).

With this, it could be said that learners go through a silent period of language learning. This is where learners 'absorb' the language without (necessarily) using it and when they feel they have acquired a considerable amount of the language skills, they then feel more confident to try to use it slowly in few 'safe-space' communications. The learning during this silent period is referred to in this study as Passive Learning (see Section 4.2.2). These number of skills and 'spaces' of communications then increase as learners acquire more vocabulary and language skills and become increasingly confident to use them. This lack of confidence, however, differs between interlocutors. It was noticed that when learners spoke with other language learners, they appeared to be more relaxed and confident in using the language as opposed to speaking with proficient TL speakers. The teachers believed that as there is a shared learning-experience bond between the learners, as they go through similar or same challenges in the learning process, they are more confident to experiment with the language. This is as opposed to proficient interlocutors, which learners feel have to get everything right and are more conscious of their errors, thus, will choose not to engage in communication:

> I think they feel relaxed and comfortable talking to peers that are going through the same thing with them and they also feel uncomfortable when they speak to an English person. They are quite conscious of their actions and the mistakes they make. (Rachel)

With this understanding, teachers can better support their learners through their silent learning period, navigating the challenges and changes, and finding suitable and effective strategies in each period to help the learners construct their desired identities and develop their autonomy. The silent period here refers to when the language learner chooses to engage in the absorption of the target language without necessarily using it or with minimum usage until they are ready to actively engage in communication with other language users. "They will listen, think about the information, digest it and then use it later in communicating with others." (Rachel).

In a similar light, Lili believed that the learners will mostly remain silent and not interact with English 'native' speakers altogether or will try to avoid interaction as much as possible because "they would see themselves as completely different" (Lili). Learners' fear of making mistakes when communicating with other people (in spaces where there are more proficient TL speakers) is, I believe, is more of a psychological than linguistic 'problem' which might be related to the lack of confidence in their linguistic competence. This is because, their language

use in the presence of other language learners is different; they are more daring and readier to use the language. This limitation, therefore, needs to be addressed, not just linguistically but from their psychology, requiring a psycho-linguistic transformation. From my observations, the teachers encouraged the learners when they made mistakes, and encouraged them to try again. One teacher had a note on her wall in the classroom which served as a reminder to the learners that mistakes are a part of the learning process.

Figure 6.1: Accommodating learners' mistakes

Being accommodating of learners' mistakes helped them use the TL with lesser fear, developing their confidence in and use of the TL and transitioning the silent period faster. Evidence of a silent period in childhood second language acquisition has been documented (Goldstein, 2002; Roberts, 2014; Goldenberg, Hicks and Lit, 2013). Roberts (2014) refers to the silent period, stage or phase as "a period of time following introduction to a second language during which children do not orally produce the second language" (p.23). This period has also been referred to as the receptive, nonverbal or preproduction stage or phase (ibid). Roseberry and Mckibbin (1995) suggests that the silent period in children could last for about 3-6 months. The child, during this period, is said to be involved in actively gathering information on how they can communicate with adults and peers in the new language. Also, at this non-verbal stage, the researchers have noted that children may choose to isolate themselves and act as observers or spectators and may practise newly learned words in 'safe' environments such as solitary play (Tabors, 1997; Brice, 2002; Roberts, 2014). This silent period in children is very similar to that found in the adult learners in this study as they engaged in more silent than active learning at the beginning of their learning, listening and observing and using it (in public) when ready.

Limited self-confidence

Another aspect that was stated to be a significant hinderance to learners effectively constructing their identities and developing their autonomy was their limited believe in their abilities – lack of confidence. Learners' approach to tasks and using the language in general was found to be imbedded in how much they trusted their abilities to actually complete the tasks and effectively

use the language. The teachers mentioned that it was imperative for learners to build trust in their own abilities without which they were most likely to adopt negative perceptions and autonomy towards the tasks and language. Thus, in reflecting on how learners had approached pervious tasks, they aimed to analyse how learners' self-confidence might have been a contributing factor and how they can better handle this in future lessons: "[…] when a student doesn't trust in their own ability, then this has impact on how they approach tasks too. And there is a likelihood that they don't trust themselves or they don't trust their ability to master a task' (Tania). This further relates to learners' limited self-confidence. Therefore, the teachers were found to be aware of learners' self-perceptions on influencing their autonomy and learning outcome and on learners' changing identities from a restrictive shy identity to a confident and more interactive one, and how they tried to support learners in transitioning these identity phases and autonomous levels.

Lili had a slightly different perception on learners' identities and self-perception in the UK. She believed that the learners "mostly do have confidence in their own abilities" thus, making them very "self-reliant and resourceful". She appeared to have derived this perspective from her reflection on learners' journey to getting to where they were geographically, psychologically and emotionally in comparison to other young adult British citizens. With this, she stated that with the consideration of what the learners had been through; experiencing several traumatic experiences in their countries (war, abuse, etc.) throughout their travel to the UK (with and mostly without parents), and their 'survival' (stay), adaptation and integration into the UK, they have significant "survival mechanisms" which they might know or not know they possess. She believes this makes them more mature and confident in achieving their desires and tackling challenges. "Most of them have very gifted speaking skills and I've also noticed that unlike native English speakers in classes, these young people, if they want something from you, will use complimentary and engaging tactics to get what they want" (Lili). With experiences they have been through and learning about themselves and abilities in the new environment, some learners have learned to adopt strategies to 'get them by'. She attributed most of these to learners' social skills which she believed they have and use to complement their limited language skills. It has broadly been identified that language learners with higher self-confidence turn to be more successful and produce positive outcome in the learning than those with lower self-confidence (Norton, 2000; Dessi and Zhao, 2011; Xu, 2011; Tunçel, 2015).

In my reflection on learners' social skills in enhancing their confidence and learning, and on insights from observing the learners, it was noticed that when 'spaces' where learners can feel free to exercise their language skills are created, both by the teachers and the learners themselves, they tend to exercise more language skills and control. Although some are mostly shy when conscious of their language proficiency while discussing with other English speakers, they tend to be more social and fluent when speaking freely. When the learners are in a comfortable 'safe space', where they do not need to worry or are not conscious of their language proficiency, they tend to interact more freely and use their skills better than when they are careful of not making mistakes. Throughout my data collection, the learners, in my perspective, interacted with me freely and were usually ready to ask questions, tell stories and jokes, both academic and non-academic related. The initial introduction of the learners to me (previous familiarity), my 'looking' like them – physically and as an immigrant, might have supported the rapport. Observing the learners interact with other students and staff in the college in this 'safe space' with their proficiency-conscious guard down, they portrayed confidence and control of their learning. Helping learners to get to this point is useful in them being more responsible for their learning; learning the language even when they are not thinking about it, and in constructing more positive and desirable identities.

Culture and the language learner

Culture was found to be a key aspect in shaping learners' identities. Experiencing a new culture is inherent to moving to a new country. Most of the learners expressed their experiences of the British culture stating that they enjoyed some but found others extremely different from theirs. Some of them mentioned their interest in some British meals and were fascinated that some meals were linked to specific days such as fish and chips on Friday and Sunday Roast dinners. During one of my observation sessions on a Friday, while we were all having a general friendly informal discussion in the classroom, one student who was getting ready to go out for lunch with his friends said, "teacher, we'll eat fish and chips today because is Friday". He went on to speak about his love for the meal and some other new meals he had tasted in the country which were not necessary British. An incorporation of the usual Friday meal into his weekly meal planner projected his assimilation into/adaptation of the British culture and way of life into his identity which he had learned and chosen to adopt and with which to identify. It had become a part of his life.

The multiculturality of the UK further shaped learners' identities. Moving to the UK, the learners seemed to not have been aware of how multicultural the country is. Learners were found to enjoy the presence of many other cultures and languages in both their classroom and community. They seemed to always be willing to share their cultures and discuss the similarities and differences of their different cultures including Britain's. Tania also noticed this:

> From my experience, many of my students like to convey the difference of their countries to England's. How cultures, holidays and relationships etc are different. What I really enjoy and find interesting is the development of my students in this respect, their acceptance, their tolerance and their willingness to share their history and sometimes even emotion. (Tania)

The teachers shared this perspective when discussing their perceptions on learners' self-mage. To both the learners and teachers, the multicultural dimension of the UK, to some extent, helped the learners to better construct more desirable identities under lesser pressure of needing to copy and be like the Brits. The teachers helped them with this. For example, through permitting and supporting the learners in "them sharing their own country's culture aspects" (Lili) and creating cross-cultural activities. "One time we did the national anthem of each country, playing them on YouTube. They were very engaged and interested" (Lili). Engaging learners in partnering in the learning process and contributing to the class dynamics and development with things personal to them and led by them, makes them have the feeling of relevance and belonging. Their lives and culture are not being ignored and concentration placed solely on the TL language and culture. This equally enables them to compare between their culture and the TL culture, be curious about more similarities and differences and learn more on integrating and developing their identities. They feel acknowledged and as part of a whole, creating the feeling of belonging, importance and visibility (which could mean to say, you are there, I see you, you are important and a part of this as everyone else). This relates to what Shaw et al. (2017) Deeley and Bovill (2017) and Whelehan (2020) mean by the need to build a culture of learners being partners, not spectators, in the teaching and learning decision-making and process.

Educational background

The teachers' reflections on learners' educational background and how that might influence their current autonomy and identity construction was found to have an impact on how they supported their learners. They understood that some of the learners, (as earlier discussed in Section 5.3), had not had a pervious educational background, or had had one different from

that in the UK. Thus, most of the teachers were considerate in their expectations of learners' knowledge and performance. For example, by not being insistent on learners knowing or understanding things that they might not necessarily know and understanding the further support they needed to provide to some learners to bridge the learning gap. With an understanding that they might need to put in more effort with some of their learners and understand why they might make certain comments or remarks about themselves, they are able to provide valuable learner-specific support through these stages. Lili explained that where learners lacked or had limited previous (classroom) educational background, they tend to possess a "limited identity as a learner" (Lili), which causes them to struggle more than the other learners, especially at the beginning of their learning. She believed that to be at the language stage in which they were at that moment, meant that they had been autonomous and had indulged in autonomous learning, however, may not have realised this due to their limited self-perception and the difference in their previous TL learning strategies to what they currently had in the classroom. The learners found most of their tutors helpful in supporting them to transition these educational identities, in constructing and reconstructing their learner identities.

Language mastery and learners' self-perception

In order to tackle some of the challenges that learners faced, it was assumed that learners' awareness of their increasing language mastery will be of significant benefit to them re-assessing and re-constructing their perceptions of their identities and abilities in the target language which will help in developing more positive and enabling ones. Learners develop an increasingly secure, comfortable and confident identity as their language proficiency increases. Tania, like the other teachers, believed that success in language learning go in tandem with identities learners hold of themselves in that, when a learner feels that their language proficiency is improving, they tend to feel better about themselves and can better take control of their learning:

> I think once they realise they are mastering learning English, they find a method that works with them in terms of the climbing language. Because, for example, some people learn vocabulary in a different way from others. (Tania)

Although Tania acknowledged how important it is for learners to gain understanding of their increasing mastery of the language, she emphasised that it is a "process that goes over time", highlighting that teachers should not expect learners to easily and quickly 'pick up' and adopt

these qualities when addressed, but need to be patient in supporting learners through the process.

Furthermore, this realisation of language mastery and language control aligns with the earlier discussion on learners' abilities to control their learning wherein the teachers' believed that learners do have the ability to take control of their learning but how they manage this control differs among the learners (Section 6.2). Having developed better mastery of the learning and self-perception in the language, learners will mostly choose the learning strategies they find more effective and comfortable for them to use. A similar case was found by Norton (2013) in her research where the participants adopted new methods and strategies to learn certain concepts and develop identities with which they wanted to be seen by. They found this effective as it not only aligned with their goals, but equally because there was a sense of control in them creating these strategies which they perceived they better understood and could maximise: "[…] once they have found a way and see the success that learning has, that they have achieved something, I think their self-esteem also increases" (Tania). Thus, with learners being more autonomous and developing a sense of achievement in their learning success, how they perceive themselves increases positively. A change in learners' identity as a result of an increase in their awareness and realisation of their learning progress leads to an increase in their learning. That is, an increase in their language skills perception will lead to an increase in their self-confidence (identity) and in turn an increase in their learning achievement.

Figure 6.2: Relationship between learners' proficiency, self-confidence and learning achievement

Another suggested way of helping learners develop a more positive self-perception and approach to language learning is in the guidance provided to them. The teachers believed that teachers' attitudes towards their learners had a significant influence on learners' identity construction and as earlier established, language learning. Tania believed that words spoken to the learners were important. She suggested that in "guiding them, reassuring them and encouraging students to maintain wanting to achieve a goal and to just be a good person" was effective throughout learners learning, including how learners transitioned identity, autonomy and learning stages; set goals; related to other language speakers and led other areas of their

lives. To her, teachers are in a strategic position to provide this support to learners and influence learners' self-perceptions.

In conclusion, the teachers' general perspective on learner autonomy and identity in the classroom both differed and were similar to some extends as above. However, they all acknowledged the benefits of enhancing learners' autonomy and sense of identity, and emphasised their agreement to its incorporation the L2 classroom, stating that it will not only consolidate their learning but equally help learners to develop a positive sense of themselves and their future. They emphasised that teachers need to be aware of learners' identities when they begin the course and build on them, stating that although they had done this before, they need to be more conscious and intentional about improving it and reflecting on their practices and influences. Furthermore, while guiding learners, teachers need to provide more independence for learners to use their skills and abilities, which they might not know they have; boost learners' motivation and confidence; individualise approaches to supporting learners to target personalised difficulties and strengths and encourage self-reliance and positivity in their learners.

The following chapter discusses some of the main themes that arose in the findings, harmonising and paying a closer attention to new insights in the field, and concludes, addressing the research questions.

Chapter 7: Further discussion and conclusions

This thesis set out to examine the relationship between the learner autonomy and learner identity of English language learners taking ESOL courses in the UK. The study found a significant interrelationship between learners' autonomy and identity development, including individual influences of the variables on learners' language learning outcome as discussed in chapters four, five and six. This final chapter presents further discussions of the key findings in this study (Section 7.1); provides a conclusion, more closely addressing the research questions (Section 7.2); presents some reflections on the study (Section 7.3); recommends implications for researchers and teachers (Section 7.4) and addresses limitations of the study (Section 7.5).

Learner autonomy and learner identity have been widely researched individually and found to be salient aspects of second language learning. However, further research is needed with regard to the relationship between learner autonomy and learner identity and how this relationship influences language learning, which is the focus of this thesis. It explores the relationship between ESOL learners' autonomy development and identity construction in the UK using learner, teacher and researcher observational perspectives. The study found a mutual and direct interrelationship between learners' autonomy development and identity construction. Some of the key findings are discussed below.

7.1. Further discussions

This section presents a synthesis of the key findings in the study, highlighting the relationship between learners' autonomy and identity development. The themes discussed include initial and successive motivation; positive and negative autonomy; a shifting learner autonomy and identity; passive learning, the silent period and the 'safe space'; learners' confidence and agency and guided autonomy.

7.1.1. Initial and Successive motivation

In exploring learners' autonomy and identity, motivation was found to be key in the decisions learners made regarding their learning and how this contributed to the changing identities they had and constructed throughout their learning journey. The exploration of motivation in second language learning over several decades has found significant aspects and contributions such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985), integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner, 1979), and Directed Motivational Currents (Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim,

2014) which have mostly focused on the *what*, *why* and *how* of learners' motivation. That is, what types of motivation do learners have, why do they do what they do based on their motivation and how can their motivation be enhanced to foster learning. Building on this knowledge, this study found that in addition to previous discoveries, there is a *'when'* of motivation. That is, timing in motivation; when learners develop motivation in their learning journey.

Central to learners' progressive development of their autonomy and identity was found periods in which learners developed different 'motivations' which assisted in sustaining a learning curve. A closer look into this found that learners were not only motivated to learn the language at the beginning of their learning journey (termed here as initial motivation), but also developed new 'motivations' (referred to here as successive motivation) from their learning and living experiences in the UK, as well as increasing in their language proficiency and goal orientation.

Looking into this, the learners stated initial reasons for deciding to learn the language such as, "Because I'm in the country named UK. All people speaking English. I need to speak English" (Stan). The learners were found to initially preoccupy themselves with the need to integrate into the UK, controlling the decisions they made towards their learning to ensure they constructed their desired identity which aligned with their settlement in the host country. This desire to 'fit-in' and be a part of this new society (and develop the required identity to do so) motivated them to invest in learning the language, taking crucial steps toward their learning, portraying a form of initial autonomy. Language was seen and used as an integration tool. It is mostly highly motivated learners and those with a clear understanding of their personal relevance for learning and definitive goals that were found to invest in extra learning in developing their language skills of reading and writing.

Nested in the relationship between their autonomy and identity were new and refined 'motivations' learners developed throughout their learning journey, mainly based on their experiences of living and learning in the UK. While living in the UK, the learners explained that they had several experiences, both negative and positive, that refined their attitudes towards their learning and how they were perceived or wanted to be perceived, further motivating them to learn the TL. Lana and Tula, for example, mentioned negative examples they had on the bus and in calling the emergency services, which they believed were unfair and life-threatening respectively, and could have been better handled if they had had higher proficiency in the target language. Facing negative experiences from not having the L2 identity

and skill as a proficient speaker of the TL caused them to take more control of their learning. Lana explained his experience of a limited L2 self which led to his decision to take more control of his learning and develop his TL proficiency: "So many people were there, and this guy is like insult me and it's really really embarrassing. So, I told myself, 'No, I have to do something. I have to learn to speak to answer people like this'". On the other hand, Stan's enhanced positive self-perception developed from his experience of efficiently using the TL to order a cup of coffee provided a sense of self-pride, joy and fulfilment, and a desire to have more of this proficient ideal self, thus, his increased control over his learning: "Because I'm not speaking English before, I say, for example, 'give me coffee, please', but it's not nice. But now, I say, 'can I have a coffee, please?'. But before now… when I'm thinking now, I'll say 'what!'… Now, I see myself like a smart boy." This interrelationship between learners' autonomy and identity was, therefore, found eminent in their motivation.

Understanding that learners develop motivation at different levels which contribute to shaping their autonomy and L2 identity, contributed to calling for a rethink of how learners can be supported throughout their learning in developing new 'motivations' to help them progressively learn the language, especially when they seem to be 'running out' of motivation to learn. Understanding individual learners and creating opportunities and environments in which learners can develop new or reignite previous motivation could be a possible strategy. I, however, understand that this is not an easy process, especially with large groups, but it could be a possible starting point. One teacher highlighted that learners' motivation is rekindled when learners set new goals and meet new requirements for the necessary skills. As long as the learners set goals which require the different language skills, their motivation to positively control their learning and learn autonomously will be sustained and developed, as also suggested by Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim's (2014) Directed Motivational Currents' claim.

Other key aspects of learners' motivation in knotting their autonomy and identity were in their personal relevance for learning, which varied per learner, and their goal setting, which mainly developed from their progress in their language proficiency. As learners' proficiency increased, their current self-perceptions were found to change, causing them to envision better future selves and both create new and readdress previous future goals, giving them a clearer personal reason to take more control of their learning through their decisions, actions and inactions toward their learning. To enhance this, addressing language learning from interest and not solely obligation for ESOL learners was highlighted by some of the learners as essential. This introduces another area of interest in language learning motivation and informs language

teaching in that teachers can reflect on and implement strategies which help learners develop interest in the language, as it is not enough to learn the language just because they have to, but also because they want to. The learners' interest-learning approach seemed to spur their agency in developing their autonomy and constructing their identity in the TL.

7.1.2. Positive and negative autonomy

A key finding in this study was the different types of autonomy learners exercised toward their learning and identity construction. Literature on learner autonomy has explored and discussed how well learners are able to positively take control of their learning. This study goes a step further to highlight and argue salient aspects of learner autonomy – positive and negative autonomy. The general argument from the analysis in this study is that, learners exercise two main types of autonomy which are referred to here as positive and negative autonomy. These are extensively discussed in Section 4.2.1 and throughout the rest of thesis. Positive autonomy was addressed as decisions learners make which help in promoting their language learning and L2 identity construction, while negative autonomy entailed learners exercising their agency in limiting opportunities for the learning and practise of the TL.

As stated, literature has focused on how well or not learners take positive control of their learning to enhance their language learning. The learner participants in this study demonstrate that their exercise of their autonomy not only entails the positive control they wield but also the conscious and deliberate decisions they take to not use the TL for various reasons in certain situations, demonstrating their autonomy. One of the learner participants, for example, stated her conscious decision not to use the TL at home despite the affordances available: "I speak Turkish at home, but they communicate in English. I don't speak English at home maybe because I'm shy" (Mah). She is aware of this decision and the limitations it places on her practice and use of the TL, yet she chooses to maintain it because of her personal reasons. With the various definitions of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981, 2001; Benson, 2006, 2011; Huang and Benson, 2013; Littlewood, 1999, Little, 2009) focusing on the learner taking greater responsibility for their learning and deciding on how to learn, what to learn and when to learn, it could be argued that Mah's decision to not speak the TL at home is an exercise of her autonomy. The study equally found that the learners exercised positive autonomy, especially those who decided to keep investing more time in coming to college and efforts in requesting and researching study materials. Also, the teachers' believed that learners have the ability to take control of their learning, but how they manage this control differs among the learners.

Furthermore, it was noticed that learners' exercise of their autonomy was closely linked to their identity. In Mah's case, her main concern for deciding not to use the target language at home was because of the limited shy L2 identity she had of herself. She spoke the TL with other speakers, but in front of her family before whom she had this shy and restrictive identity (like Chris) to use the TL. The study assumes that this was more of a psychological barrier than a linguistic one as they mentioned that this perception resulted from a specific immediate environment – family, as opposed to other environments where they did not have or had less of this negative identity. Learners' self-perception was, therefore, found to have a significant influence on the control learners took over their learning based on the environments within which they found or placed themselves. Therefore, it is not only learners' positive decisions towards their learning (as mostly seen in the literature) that account for their exercise and development of their autonomy and identity, but every informed decision they make throughout their learning. In this light, whether learners learn traditionally or communicatively, it is them exercising their ability to take control of their learning. Learners following their learning preferences is indicative of them controlling their learning; deciding on what, where and how to learn (or not) based on what is important, easier and available for them. The study suggests that a shift from or an extension in the understanding of autonomy as the extent to which learners control their learning to how learners choose to control their learning, positively or negatively, is required.

Also, from the study, although learners' environments can provide opportunities for them to learn and practise the TL, if learners are not ready to use it, they will not. Therefore, there is an extent to which the learners' environment can influence individual learners' agency in taking responsibility for their learning as they can exercise both negative and positive autonomy based on their individual decisions, which are strongly related to their self-perception. The study also shows that the environment can both automatically provide opportunities for language learners to engage in the TL or limit these opportunities.

7.1.3. A shifting learner autonomy and identity

Similar to the literature (Norton, 2000; Ushioda, 2006, 2011), learners' autonomy and identity were found to change in different learners and at different levels. These changes all significantly influenced the learners' learning progress. I begin, here, with a reflection on the changes in learners' autonomy in this study. The analysis of the study shows that the learners were not aware of or had limited knowledge of their autonomy. Most of the learners did not

seem to understand the significance of their responsibility toward their learning, nor the responsibility in taking control of their learning and how this influenced their learning outcome. This deficiency in learners' knowledge of their ability to take control of their learning was found to considerably limit their level of positive autonomy.

Although some learners demonstrated their awareness and exercise of this autonomy, most appeared not to understand this ability nor how they used it in their learning and how it affected their learning. Asking learners about their ability to take control of their learning and how they used this ability during their learning formed an observation of the importance of how deliberately equipping learners with this knowledge helps them reflect and reassess their thoughts, attitudes and decisions toward their learning. Based solely on information provided during the data collection process to learners about their abilities and responsibilities toward their learning, learners' perceptions and exercise of their autonomy were found to change considerably. The informed learner appeared more deliberate and certain of their abilities and responsibilities in their perception and exercise of their autonomy than the uninformed learner. The provision of more study resources and technology-learning skills also saw the learners taking more control of their learning. It is on this basis that the study argues that learners cannot be said to not have autonomy when they have not been provided with sufficient knowledge of their abilities and responsibilities in their language learning and resources to exercise their autonomy.

Furthermore, to some teachers, learners' positive autonomy increases alongside their proficiency, while others tend to adopt a more negative autonomy along their language proficiency journey. It is important to question if it is their ability that increases or the consciousness of the ability which they possess in controlling their learning that increases, or both. The learners' responses showed that both their abilities to take better control of their learning from aspects such as an increase in their proficiency, confidence and agency and their knowledge of their responsibilities toward their learning increased. The teachers equally emphasised that although they believed that the learners have the ability to take control of their learning, they can only encourage the learners to do so and "wait for them to realise that themselves" (Lili).

Learners' identity, on the other hand, was found to experience a similar transitioning. Postmodernism (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014; O'Leary, 2018) refers to learners' identity as 'identities', arguing the plurality of learners' identities. Learner identity is said to be fluid,

hybrid, multiple and changing over the learning journey as learners have been found to 'pick up' new identities, add to and modify their previous identities and drop others (Norton, 2000; Ushioda, 2006; van Leir, 2007). The learner participants in this study witness a transition from non-speakers/users of English to developing-proficiency English language users, and from a restrictive shy and insecure identity to a more confident and secure identity. The learners seemed to have had a form of 'identity crises' at the beginning of their stay in the UK and their language learning journey, which affected both their language learning and other areas of their lives. However, as their proficiency in the TL increased, they experienced a change in their self-perception which led to an increase in their willingness to learn the TL and their positive control of their learning.

7.1.4. Passive learning, the silent period and the safe space

From the study, adult English language learners' shyness at the beginning stages of their language learning causes them to engage in passive more than active learning. Passive learning in this study refers to the absorption of language input when exposed to the target language, without necessarily practically using it. This study supposes that when adult language learners are exposed to the TL context and receive high quantities of comprehensible input directly and indirectly from their environment, they tend to engage in passive and unconscious learning, familiarising themselves with new words, expressions and pronunciation and later use it when ready. Krashen (1982, 1985) refers to the 'unconscious picking-up of language' as language acquisition. The learners expressed their initial unwillingness and non-use of the target language at the beginning of the learning phase, mainly because of limited self-confidence and fear of making mistakes: "Before, when I was not good at speaking English, I'm shy and I don't want to talk." (Stan)

The period during which passive learning occurs is referred to in this study as the silent period, which has mainly been found in young learners (Saville-Troike, 1988; Roberts, 2013). It could be said that adult learners go through a silent period of language learning as well. This is when the language learner chooses to 'absorb' the target language without (necessarily) using it or with minimum usage until they feel they have acquired a considerable amount of the language skills and are more confident and ready to try to use it gradually, first in few 'safe-spaces', in active communication with other TL users. These skills and number of 'spaces' of communications then increase as learners acquire more vocabulary and language skills and

become increasingly confident to use the TL. One teacher perceived that learners are ‘silent’ during this period:

> “[…] because they know they make mistakes and they’ll rather be quiet and absorb information and when they feel they are ready, then they start communicating. […] They will listen, think about the information, digest it and then use it later in communicating with others” (Rachel).

Even with increased proficiency, the learners still found themselves getting into periodic ‘silent periods’ at certain phases of their learning and requiring ‘safe spaces’ to use the TL more effectively and confidently.

It was, therefore, noted, as essential, for learners to have at least one ‘safe space’; a comfortable environment, not necessarily physical (as explained in Section 4.2.1), in which to practise their TL skills. I recommend teachers to try to create this ‘safe space’ in their classrooms for their learners. It is, however, important for learners to be cautious of not letting this ‘safe space’ become a restriction for them using the language in other spaces. With this thought, it is assumed that when learners become too comfortable in their ‘safe spaces’, they might turn to develop the fear of using the language out of these spaces, which might end up being a hinderance, and not an affordance to their language learning and use.

7.1.5. Learners’ confidence and agency

Language learners’ confidence is a key aspect in the construction of learner identity and development of learner autonomy. All the learners confessed not having confidence to use the language at one point or the other in their learning, especially at the beginning, which significantly impacted their current and future self-perceptions. Confidence in the TL was said to build over time, mainly from increased proficiency and understanding of the language and British culture. This was also dependent on the interlocutor as learners’ confidence levels changed even with increased proficiency when they spoke with different people. A direct relationship was found between learners’ confidence and their learner autonomy and identity construction. That is, as learners developed greater confidence in using the TL, they exercised more control over their learning (mainly positive) and constructed better selves, as opposed to when they exercised low confidence. Learners’ confidence was also found to be boosted by their engagement in topics of interest, wherein their engagement levels increased simultaneously. Learners further gained confidence in their acceptance of and comfort in using their L1 identity (e.g. accent) to communicate in the TL, portraying a kind of hybridity in their

identity in that, although learning another language, it is acceptable for learners to use their own (L1) identity to express themselves in the L2.

A change in learners' confidence was closely linked to their agency. Learners' agency in actualising their imagined identity and controlling their learning was significant as their decisions to act or not, whether consciously or unconsciously, all greatly influenced their learning outcome. Most of the learners were found to largely depend on their teachers and on the level and quality of support they provided, exercising lesser agency. Some, however, were found to be more agentic learners in both their actions towards their learning and constructing their desired identities. Some learners, like Tula, Stan and Marks, for example, were found to take initiative in requesting study materials and create strategies to frequently and effectively use the target language everywhere. These decisions were fuelled, among others, by learners' motivation and goals in the target language and desired identity. In a somewhat negative perspective, it was found that learners choose to use their L1 when communicating with other L1 speakers until they make a deliberate decision to use the TL. Learners' agency is pivotal in researching strategies that are more convenient and effective for their learning. This agency could be exercised in them asking for help from their teachers, peers and other sources and/or finding other resources independently.

7.1.6. Guided autonomy

There was a general understanding and implementation of autonomy among the teacher participants, although the term 'learner autonomy' was not commonly known. The teachers believed that, although they can promote their learners' autonomy, they are limited to being resource providers and guides. With this, a guided autonomy strategy was recommended as an effective way of promoting learner autonomy. Guided autonomy is defined as the support provided to language learners to take more control of their language learning consciously and effectively. That is, learners are provided with the necessary resources and conditions favourable for developing their autonomy and guided through their decisions made, by providing sufficient knowledge and resources, and letting the learners make informed decisions concerning their learning. This guided autonomy could be done through teachers not only guiding learners in making conscious, informed and positive decisions about their learning, but equally by following up and providing feedback on learners' autonomy, to ensure their effective development. The teachers believed that promoting learners' autonomy gives learners an extra learning 'tool'. With this, one way of effectively guiding learners in their autonomy

development was considering themselves as a *'helping tool'* to the learners and believing that their power to influence learners' learning is limited to being their knowledge provider, motivator and assistant. However, the actual work lies with the learners consciously and deliberately implementing what they have received to achieve success.

When learners have an understanding and a sense of responsibility that, although they have been given the choice of how and when to engage in studying or invest in certain aspects of their learning (which will directly or indirectly affect their learning outcome), they tend to exercise more intentional and informed decision-making towards their learning. Therefore, placing a level of accountability on learners is a possible positive strategy to promote their autonomy, while giving them a sense of independence and responsibility towards their learning. When learners attain this level of understanding about their responsibilities towards their learning, one can then begin to analyse what kind of autonomy (positive or negative) the learner has. Until then, the uninformed learner cannot be said to not have autonomy as this might be due to their little (or no) knowledge of their responsibilities towards their learning and the effects of their decisions and actions on their learning based on how they handle this responsibility. Based on the observations and results of the learner participant interviews, this study assumes that learners' level of autonomy can change if their knowledge of their autonomy changes.

However, I have not seen literature emphasising the need for teachers to explicitly raise learners' awareness of their learning abilities and responsibilities, and the extent to which these influence their learning outcome. Seeing the effects of learners using their abilities on their learning, it is crucial for both teachers and learners to be aware of this power. Asking ESOL learners questions in this regard will help teachers better understand the point from which they can assist their learners towards enhancing their autonomy and constructing their identity. Data from the learner participants show that they, to some extent, understand their ability to take control of their learning, but do not necessarily reflect on this ability, except when pointed in this direction.

The teachers believed that the learners' abilities increase over time, although how they chose to use these abilities differed: "I have already seen certain changes over time with students who put effort" (Tania). It raises the questions: Who is to put in more effort: the teacher or learner? and who has more responsibility? The teacher (Tania) emphasises the crucial importance of learners needing to put in the effort, noting that, no matter how much the teacher tries, the

learner has the final say, the end results lie with the learner. From this, in addition to researching and developing autonomous learning strategies, it might be a better efficient consideration for teachers to invest time in helping their language learners understand their power and the part they need to play in developing their own autonomy. As important as the teachers' input is, it is even more important for learners to know and understand theirs.

7.2. Conclusion

This section is based on concluding comments around the research questions.

RQ: What is the relationship between learner autonomy and learner identity in ESOL learners in the UK and how does this relationship influence second language learning?

There was found to be an intricate, implicit and mutual relationship between ESOL learners' autonomy development and identity construction in the UK. Both learner and teacher participants believed that developing learners' autonomy and identity construction aids language learning and makes it more enjoyable, especially when it meets learners' individual needs. While the learners believed that being good language learners entailed making consistent progress through being actively engaged in the learning process and developing a good attitude and perception towards the language, teachers added that learners setting goals and deciding to work towards achieving the goals and being confident in their identities creates a good L2 autonomous learner.

This study particularly notes that ESOL learners require confidence, motivation and agency as they move through their preliminary insecure and passive learning journey to navigating shifting identities and developing control over their learning and identity construction in achieving their goals and objectives.

Sub RQ1: How do ESOL learners perceive and promote their autonomy and identity?

The learners were generally not conscious of the ability and power they had over their learning until it was explicitly pointed out to them, which appeared to have limited their autonomy. Learners' autonomy is not only about what learners do, but also about what capacity they have to do what they (need to) do. This study argues that capacity here also includes their knowledge of this capacity or the ability they have. Thus, it is not just about the 'control' or 'take charge' factor, but also the knowledge 'capacity' or 'ability' factor.

With learners having developed a better self-perception with a change in their proficiency and confidence, their desire to learn increases and they are able to set better goals for themselves. With this, learners begin to better manage their intentions for future selves, goals and expectations. This, however, is a process which takes time and requires support.

Sub RQ2: How do ESOL teachers perceive and promote their learners' autonomy development and identity construction?

All the teachers believed that promoting learners' autonomy and identity in the L2 classroom is useful in enhancing learners' language learning outcomes. However, tailoring it to accommodate individual learners' needs and learning styles is more effective. Although it is recommended that autonomy should be encouraged in ESOL courses, it is proposed that learners should be individually assessed on the level of autonomy effective and productive for them rather than setting every learner with diverse skills, motivation and abilities on the same autonomy provision. That is, some learners might be effective with simply providing resources and opportunities for them to study and control their learning, while others might be more effective when a guided autonomy system is used to help encourage their autonomous learning.

Furthermore, teachers believed that learners' limited identity portrayed in their fear and low confidence to use the language was mainly derived from their error awareness. To salvage this, a change in learners' identity as a result of an increase in their awareness and realisation of their learning progress, they believed, leads to an increase in their learning. That is, an increase in their language skills perception will lead to an increase in their self-esteem (identity) and in turn an increase in their language use and learning achievement. The teachers' explained that they supported their learners in developing their autonomy and identity, and will do more where they had not, nevertheless, the greatest agents of change are the learners, and they can only support.

Sub RQ3: What challenges do ESOL learners and teachers face in promoting learner autonomy and identity?

English language learners in the UK, especially refugee and asylum seekers, face significant challenges which impact their learner autonomy, identity development and language learning. Some of the challenges identified in this study include past traumatic experiences, limited technological knowhow and accommodation, settlement, and travel difficulties. While some learners appeared to better manage these challenges, others struggled. For example, in explaining the difficulties faced and previous experiences of accessing and using technology,

not just in learning the TL, but equally as a whole, there was an understanding that providing study devices and means of learning or making students aware of them is not enough. Assessing learners' previous knowledge on using these platforms, as well as their current understanding and skills is essential to provide the required support to learners and ensure that they maximise their learner autonomy in technological spaces to enhance their learning.

Other challenges experienced by the teachers in developing learners' autonomy and identity included pressure to complete the curriculum, students' low attendance, institutional constraints and learners' dependence on teachers. It was emphasised that for learners to be autonomous and construct a strong identity for themselves, they need to realise the need to do so themselves. The teachers are limited on how much self-control they can help learners develop as the final decision to act lies with the learners. And until learners realise this responsibility, they might not develop positive control over their learning and identity construction or might take a longer time to do so. Learners need to be reminded that the power to control their learning lies with them and they need to take and use this responsibility to achieve their learning goals and desired/imagined selves.

Finally, I argue two main points in terms of the literature on autonomy. First, learners should not be held responsible for not using their autonomy if they do not know what that means. The learners first of all have to be aware or made aware of the responsibility and power they have over their learning, and secondly, whatever informed decisions learners make in relation to their learning, it is them exercising their autonomy. The question, here, is not only about whether learners are taking responsibility for their learning in setting goals and evaluating the content and learning progress, but also on the decisions they take to not do all these things as well; to choose to not study, even when there are affordances and opportunities, is them taking responsibility for their learning. They are making decisions, even if not necessarily those which will help them learn the TL better. However, it shows their agency in making these decisions (especially when informed) and acting on them. There needs to be a shift from investigating whether learners have autonomy or not (because they do, if/when they are aware of it and have the affordances and opportunities to learn) to what type of autonomy learners are employing towards their learning (positive or negative autonomy) and how this is influencing their language learning outcome.

7.3. Reflections on the study

This section presents reflections on the data collection, results and discussion of the study. A series of reflective questions are asked, which could provide insights into future research to better understand the points of enquiry.

The learners found it challenging to expressively talk about their identity, some either because they struggled with their limited vocabulary and proficiency, while others appeared not to understand what their identity was. This made me reflect on whether the situation would be different if more deliberate awareness is given to ESOL learners to consciously and frequently reflect on their identity and how it influences not only their learning and stay in the UK, but also how this known or unknown identity influences the decisions they make, the goals they set and their relationships with other people in the society. This reflection leads to me asking questions such as, 'should teachers be encouraged to include reflective sessions in their lessons on identity awareness for learners' self-evaluation?'

There was a significant gap in learners' knowledge of their ability and the use of this ability, leading to the question, is it about learners having the ability or about using this ability? One teacher believed that they have the ability, but they just do not use it or choose not to use it positively. This ability was also found to change over time, leading to the question, is it their ability that changes or their knowledge and consciousness of their ability or both? This makes me reflect on whether teachers are aware of the knowledge learners have of their ability to take control of their learning, and the effects of their use of this ability, or not. It also emphasises that, not only is it important to reflect on and assess ESOL learners' ability to control their learning, but also on how much of this ability they know they have and use. Thus, in assessing language learners' autonomy, it is important to ask: Are learners well informed of their abilities and responsibilities in controlling their learning? And are there sufficient resources (affordances) available at the learners' disposal to enable them to engage in positive autonomy if they choose to do so?

To some learners, progress in learning is considered as good language learning and the learner a good learner. A salient aspect of language learning – time – is emphasised, as well as its importance in successful language learning, suggesting that it is not only about making progress, but equally about what level of progress is made over a given period. Raising the question, will someone who has learned English, for example, over a considerably longer

period, and yet is unable to meet certain expected proficiency levels, still be considered a good language learner?

It is assumed that a confident learner will take risks to use the language, irrespective of their limited skills or the possibility of being made fun of, compared to a less confident speaker. Is it language confidence or personality confidence? Benson (2011) believes that learners have the potential needed to become autonomous and can control this potential by making choices, taking decisions and acting on them. This study shows that this is not always straightforward as learners need to be knowledgeable of their abilities, responsibilities and influences on their learning, and overcome limitations such as fear and limited self-perception to arrive at a point where they can make positive choices and take decisions and actions to enhance their learning and identity.

Moreover, the idea of creating a 'safe space' for learners to freely practice the TL with little or no inhibitions proved to provide both opportunities and restrictions for learners to develop their autonomy. How can this be better managed to limit the restrictions on learners using the language outside their 'safe spaces'?

7.4. Implications for researchers and teachers

This section presents implications for researchers (7.4.1) and teachers (7.4.2) in second language learning (and teaching) and learner autonomy and identity development.

7.4.1. Implications for researchers

Researchers researching autonomy in language learning should move towards understanding what knowledge of autonomy language learners have. That is, are learners aware of their abilities and responsibilities towards their learning or not? Where have they obtained this knowledge – their teachers, course handbook, self-study? Are the decisions they make informed decisions or not?

Also, how do learners' autonomy change (if any) when their knowledge and understanding of their autonomy changes? In addition, there should be more research on how learners choose to exercise their autonomy, how they do it and why they make those choices or take those actions. This study has found that learners have and exercise both positive and negative autonomy towards their learning.

7.4.2. Implications for teachers

Teachers and language educators should include deliberate actions in their practice to inform learners about their autonomy, and to give learners the knowledge on how to manage their autonomy while providing the required support and resources for developing learners' autonomy. There was evidence that learners were not conscious of the power they wielded in controlling their learning based on their actions and self-perception. An explanation of this power and responsibility proved that learners, when conscious of their responsibility, will take more deliberate steps towards enhancing their language learning and L2 selves. Reminding learners of this responsibility is, therefore, an important recommendation.

Learners also require (positive) self-management in learning to develop their autonomy and identity, but some learners might need to learn and develop this skill (Little, 2007) and teachers cannot assume that all their learners will have a learner identity conducive to learning in set ways. Therefore, they are to offer opportunities for the development of metacognitive knowledge and strategies, and a permissive environment enabling learners to be more involved in their learning, nurturing their identity as learners capable of taking control of their learning. Knowledge about themselves, their abilities, increasing proficiency and the affordances in the learning environment is key in promoting control over their own learning and identity construction.

Furthermore, assessing learners' previous knowledge on using technological platforms and their current understanding and skills, is essential to provide the required support to learners and ensure that they maximise their learner autonomy in technological spaces to enhance their learning. Foreseeing possible challenges from assessing learners' skills and preparing them ahead of time is essential for evading circumstances in which learners' learning will be hampered, slowed down or stopped, although some circumstances might not always be anticipated. In analysing learners' previous cultures and education, teachers can develop an understanding of how to adapt and structure their curriculum and resources to meet the learners' needs.

Given the growing popularity and use of the internet and technology in the world and language studies, it is essential for teachers to be cautious about generalising learners' abilities, and should instead assess each learner, and if necessary, train them on how to use these platforms to integrate them into the rapidly evolving educational system for their language learning. Teachers should be encouraged to engage learners in anonymous chat platforms where they

can use and experiment with the TL without fear of being criticised and ridiculed if they make mistakes. Mistakes should equally be welcomed in ESOL classrooms, as was found in the study, as this might help in enabling learners better engage in making positive decisions about their learning, carving out and projecting their desired identities and enhancing their learning.

In addition, teachers should expose learners to vast amounts of comprehensible input, especially at the beginning of their learning and encourage learners to place themselves in environments where they can get much authentic input. With this, learners will be involved in both active and passive learning.

Finally, teachers should teach from learners' interests, making the language learning more meaningful by helping learners find personal relevance in their learning and practicing the language through topics and activities of interest. Also, it is important for teachers to be mindful of and assess the level of difficulty of language tasks and assignments provided to learners as learners are better motivated differently to engage in learning based on the level of challenge posed by the language tasks as seen in this study. Asking learners to suggest tasks seemed useful.

7.5. Limitations

The study was conducted in a limited time frame and subject to restrictions such as the access and interaction limitations posed by the COVID 19 pandemic. A longitudinal study and more time spent with the research participants might have provided deeper insights into the enquiry. The possibility of conducting more than one interview with each research participant, if there were more time, might have equally proved useful. Collecting data through multiple sources was helpful in bridging some of these gaps.

Furthermore, qualitative research is subject to the researcher's biases as it permits the researcher to be part of the study, giving room for the researcher's perspectives to influence the data collection, analysis and discussion of the results directly or indirectly. As an English language teacher, familiar with the participants and research site, my previous knowledge and personal perspectives might have in some way influenced participants' responses and/or the analyses. Quoting participants and letting their perspectives and suggestions lead the data development helped in reducing possible biases. Engaging in continuous reflexivity throughout the process was further significant in bracketing and limiting biases from interfering with the originality of participants' voices and experiences.

Moreover, this study was limited to a particular set of learners and teachers in a specific institution in the UK. Due to the limited demography and geography used in conducting the research, findings and analyses might be different or not applicable in other settings. Although not initially intended to be generalised across the second language learning field in the UK, the results are acknowledged to be limited. However, findings tallied with previous literature, to some extent, indicating that there are possibilities of generalisation beyond the setting of this study.

Finally, possible areas of research which were not explored by this study such as gender in learners' autonomy and identity development, the differences between refugee language learners and other learners, translanguaging and the influence of 'imported identities' from country of origin, might have been fertile soil to provide more insight into the subject. An exploration of these areas in the future might be useful.

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Appendices

1. Teacher Interview Questions Guideline

Name: …….……………………………

Age: ………... Entry level: ……….

Number of years teaching ESOL: ……………

Date: ………….……… Time: …………...

A) Teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards LA, LI and English Learners' abilities.

1. Have you heard of learner autonomy? Is it something you use/encourage in your teaching?
2. Do you think your students study out of class (/out of what you teach them in class?) (Try to control their learning, contribute to their learning?)
3. What level of ability in your understanding do you think the students have in controlling their learning? Has this changed over time? If yes, how. If not, why do you think that is the case?
4. Do you think the development of learner autonomy can lead to better language learning? In other words, if students become more autonomous, would their language learning improve?
5. What identity do you think ESOL learners have of themselves here in the UK? In what way do you think the learners' identity is linked to the way they learn and their ability to learn on their own.
6. What are your thoughts about your students' feelings in discussing with English 'native speakers' or more proficient English speakers? Does this feeling change when they speak with same or lower proficiency English speakers? In what ways? Which do you think they prefer?
7. Do you think learners being able to learn on their own will influence the identity they hold of themselves as English learners? In what way? If not, why? What of how they see themselves, how does that influence their learning?
8. Does the development of learners' identity lead to better language learning? (will they take more control of their learning/ learn better out of class/ on their own/ want to contribute to their learning?)
9. In your opinion, is it a constructive idea to promote learner autonomy and identity in ESOL courses in the UK? Why? How would you suggest?
10. In what ways do you think learners' autonomy and identity are related?

B) Teachers' influence on developing LA and LI.

1. Do you encourage your students to study out of what you provide for them and out of the classroom? How often?
2. What strategies do you use to encourage learners to study out of what you provide for them and out of the classroom? (-How do you assist your English language learners in developing a learning autonomy?)
3. Do you think you influence your students' language learning identities? In what ways? (How they see themselves as English language learners). B) How do you help in promoting your English language learners' identity?
4. Do you see yourself as an influencer of learners' language learning autonomy? What role do you play (as a knowledge provider and skill developer -mentor, resource base) in your language classroom)

C) English learners and social interaction on developing LA and LI.

1. What is the social relationship of the students in your classroom? Do they enjoy interacting and learning with one another (e.g group/pair work) or not or only some people?
2. How do the students help in building one another, both in learning English and in being English language Learners?
3. How often do your students use their L1 in the classroom? How do you handle this? Is it useful in developing students autonomy and identity?
4. Do you involve your students in out of class activities that help in moulding or shaping their learner identity or learning autonomy (language proficiency)? Which/e.g? Do you think involving students in out of class activities will be beneficial in developing the language learning and identity?

D) Use of multimodal strategies in language learning.

1. What multimodal strategies do you use in teaching English? How do students respond to them?
2. In your opinion, what influence does technology have on students' ability to learn independently and on their identity as learners?
3. In what ways did the COVID lockdown influence/impact your students' language learning? Do you think they engaged in learning English on their own during the lockdown?

E) Teacher autonomy and identity.

1. What identity do you hold of yourself as an English language teacher? How does this identity influence your professional development?
2. Do you engage in personal and professional development (e.g attending seminars/training courses/etc)? What of those that are independent of your work/institutional requirements or not connected to work/institutions recommendation? Examples? How does this influence your teaching practice?

F) Challenges in developing LA and LI.

1. What challenges do you face in helping learners develop their autonomy?
2. What challenges do you face in helping learners develop their identity?

G) Do you have any comments/questions on the topic?

2. Learner Interview Questions Guideline

Name: …….……………………………………………….

Age ………. Sex ………..… Entry: ………

Country of origin……………………….

Languages spoken: ……………………….

Number of years in the UK………....

Number of years studying English: ……….

Date: ………..… Time: …………....

- Language learning experiences
    - Can you tell me about your experiences of learning English?
        - Locations
        - Different types of experiences
        - Changes
        - Easier
        - Learning on your own
        - Learning in the classroom
- Language use
    - Which languages are spoken in your home?
        - Who with
        - How often
        - Preferences
    - Which languages are spoken with your friends?
        - In/out of class
        - How often
        - Preferences
    - What is it like to use English in England?
        - E.g. in shops, cafes, college
        - Treated
- Language learning preferences
    - Can you tell me why you have chosen to learn English?
        - Future plans
        - Hobbies
        - Learning goals

- What are your favourite ways of learning English?
    - Alone
    - With friends
    - Face-to-face/Online
    - Out of class
- Attitudes and perspectives towards LA and LI
  - Do you ever learn English on your own?
    - When (Why)
    - How often
    - Changes
  - How do you see yourself as an English learner?
    - A good learner
    - Can become fluent.
    - Effects on learning
    - Prefer a different image?
  - How will learning English benefit you?
    - Better course
    - Future plans
    - Feeling of belonging
- Technology in developing LA and LI
  - What is your experience of using technology to learn?
    - Preference (Learn better/or not)
    - How often
    - Distraction
    - Types used
  - How has COVID influenced your learning?
    - Changes in learning
    - New learning preferences
    - Use of learning tech/apps/websites
- Language learning in social contexts
  - Can you tell me about your relationship with other English speakers?

        - Enjoy speaking with others
        - Preference of English speakers
        - Experiences/a story
    - What do you think about learning in pairs/groups?
        - Learn better
        - Motivation to learn
        - Preference on how often
        - Out of campus learning
- Teachers' influence in developing LA and LI
    - What do you think is your teacher's role in helping you learn English?
        - Give you everything
        - Ask you to contribute
        - Encourage you to learn independently
    - How can your teacher help you
        - Control your learning
        - Achieve your goals

3. Focus Group Interview Questions Guideline

Names of participants: …………………

Entry levels: …………….

Date and time: …………….

A) Learners' perspectives of English language learners.

1. Who do you think a good English language learner is?
2. Do you think English learners can learn effectively on their own?
3. How do you think English language learners see themselves in the UK? Will this be different in another country? Why? How?
4. Do you think the way English language learners see themselves affects the way they learn? In what way? Will this change if they see themselves differently?

B) Teachers' contributions to the development of LA and LI.

1. In what ways do you think your teachers can help you learn more on your own/take more responsibility over how you learn)/(learn how to take more control of your learning or learning more independently)

2. What do you think your teacher can do to help you create the identity (image) you want of yourself as a learner and speaker of the English language?

C) ? Language learning and social interactions.

1. Do you think English learners learn more when they learn on their own or with others? Why?

D) English learners' abilities to develop LA and LI.

1. Do you think English learners can control their learning?
2. How do you think English learners can improve the control they have over their learning?
3. Do you think when English learners are able to learn more on their own, the way they see themselves changes or not? In what way and Why? What if English learners change the way they see themselves, will this affect their learning?

E) Challenges in developing LA and LI.

1. What are the challenges you think English language learners in the UK face in taking control of their learning?
2. What are the difficulties you think English language learners in the UK encounter in constructing the identity/image they want of themselves? (Confident self-image, having a feeling of belonging).

F) Do you have any questions or comments?

4. Classroom Observation Checklist

Name of the teacher: ………………

Entry level: ……….

Number of students: …………

Lesson title: ………….

Date and time: …………….

	Activities to be focused	Remarks
1	How is the status of classroom facilities	Is the classroom convenient for the promotion of learner autonomy and identity?
2	How is the students' sitting arrangement in the classroom? Is it arranged by the teacher or students on voluntary basis? Does the arrangement change?	What is the condition for such arrangement?
3	Is there any background difference among the learners regarding readiness for the classroom environment?	

4	How often do the learners use their L1 in the class? Does the teacher prohibit the use of learner's L1? How does the teacher deal with learner who use their L1	Why and how often?
5	Does the teacher sometimes speak learner's informal language (for digression or to emphasise a point) or does s/he stick to formal language	
6	Do students prefer to form their own language independent identities or to copy that of the teacher (and the "native speaker"?	Are learners trying to replicate a "native speaker identity, (accent)or to create a personal EL identity which they feel more comfortable/confident with?
7	What is the participatory level of students in class? Are they interested in finding answers to questions or prefer waiting for the teacher to explain everything?	Are learners interested in guessing the right answer to questions before being assured of the correct answers?
8	What strategies does the teacher use to make the content of the lesson clearer to the students?	
9	How do students use their other languages in the classroom? E.g when speaking to another L1 peer, when asking for further explanation, when distracted and digress from the lesson.	
10	What language do students use when on break?	
11	What type of interactions do students have with other English speakers on and off campus? Are learners comfortable speaking with more proficient learners of English?	Why and if not, why?
12	Which students are more engaged and active in the language lessons – more or less proficient learners?	
13	What strategies does the teacher use in promoting LA?	
14	What strategies does the teacher use in promoting LI?	
15	Which language(s) do students use to communicate with their peers in the classroom or during pair work or group discussion?	
16	Is there any side talk among students and what language(s) do they use for such purposes?	

5. Sample Transcript

Interviewer: How often do you speak English with your siblings?

Participant: I'm always. All the time. They don't understand then I'm explain. Agency – learning by teaching.

Interviewer: Okay, that's nice. So, do you prefer to speak English or Tamil?

Participant: Both language now. Before, I'm only prefer for Tamil. But now, I'm prefer two languages. Identity construction. She now enjoys and confidently uses the two languages to communicate. Language preference change.

Interviewer: That's good. And when you are with your friends, which language do you speak in college?

Participant: English.

Interviewer: And when you are out of college?

Participant: English, because I don't have any Tamil friends here. Reflection: will this be different if she had Tamil friends, will she still prefer to speak with them in English or Tamil?

Interviewer: What is it like to use English in England. Like when you go to the shop, café?

Participant: First time, I struggle to talk English in phone calls, in appointment or any home problem I want to talk to in English, they don't understand. I had a problem in my stomach, I called ambulance, but they don't understand anything challenges of integration/importance of learning English in the UK to use for daily living. Then they arrange the translator to me, after he understand my language. Then I studied more about how to speak in the phone, how to do interviews, how to do appointments, lot of that. Then I learn the importance of teaching authentic English for real day-to-day usage. Before that, very struggling because people can't understand my English. If I say something, they get wrong. Motivation to learn from struggle to communicate in TL.

Interviewer: So, it's easier for you to use English in the UK than before because you have learnt more. identity

Participant: Yes, I'm learn more. In my country, I'm not. I'm just saying, 'yes, no, okay, thank you, byebye.' That's it. (Laughs) With my friends. But here I'm always speaking English.

portrays confidence and a change identity from not knowing how to speak English to be a better English language speaker. Identities, and acknowledges transitioning.

Interviewer: That's good. So, before you were able to speak English this good, how did people use to treat you when you don't speak English well like in shops?

Participant: Yeah, yeah, I had that problem. If I say… ask something, they say, 'say again, pardon' that's when I say, okay. I want to tell that word twice. Say I want to give orders to my phone, they are asking two times. challenges

Interviewer: Have you ever had anyone try to help you say what you are trying to say? Or say, 'I don't understand what you are trying to say, please repeat it?

Participant: I have a cousin in here, she help me a lot. Because I came here two months, I didn't went to school… then I started school here. While I stay in them house, because they are born here, they can speak very good English. While I stay there, they start to speak slow English with us. Then I… she helped me a lot. Motivation and external help from family to integrate. Positive power relations/environmental influence.

Interviewer: That is really good. Can you tell me why you have chosen to learn English?

Participant: ESOL?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: Because in this UK everyone want to… need to speak only English. Relevance, motivation Some countries are speaking lots of language, they can understand everything. But here, lots of countries peoples stay here, they are only speaking English. The need to integrate. When I came here, Letitia (the teacher) said, 'your English grade is good, you can choose another course'. I said, 'no I want to improve my skills. That's why I'm studying. Agency – taking deliberate decisions to develop English language proficiency skills. Personal relevance – to improve skills.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you are learning English because everyone in the country speaks in English and…

Participant: When I get fluent in English, then I study another course. Personal relevance- goal orientation/ future self. Before I study, I don't understand anything.

Interviewer: Okay, so you also want to study English so you can get into a better course.

Participant: Yes.