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Learner Autonomy and Voice in a Tertiary ELT Institution in Oman

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Volume I

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Abbreviations Used in this Thesis

SQU -	Sultan Qaboos University
LC –	Language Centre
ELT –	English Language Teaching
ELLT -	English Language Learning & Teaching
EFL –	English as a Foreign Language
L1-RGCs -	First-Language Reflective Group Conversations
GRJs –	Guided Reflective Journals
MK -	Metacognitive Knowledge

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Structure and Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis reports on a major project conducted over a period of four years on language learner autonomy and voice in the Omani context. The entire project can be seen as comprising three main stages:

1. Research planning and field work
2. Data handling and analysis
3. Discussion and interpretations of the findings

The thesis is made up of three main parts, each describing one of the three stages outlined above. The content of these three parts unfolds in eight chapters which make up the entire thesis. The thesis is divided into two volumes: the first volume comprises chapters 1 to 5 and sections 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 of chapter 6, while volume II comprising the rest of chapter 6, chapters 7 and 8 in addition to the references and appendices.

Abstract

Learner autonomy was first defined as the learner's capacity to take charge of his or her own learning (Holec, 1981). It has become part of the current orthodoxy of language learning and teaching research and practice (Benson, 2009a). However, issues such as what learner autonomy might mean, how it is practised and how it may contribute to language learning, *especially from learners' perspectives*, are under-researched in the Omani context. In addition, research on how Omani learners themselves define their roles in language learning and how their definitions might link to their behaviour in and outside the classroom is seriously lacking. This study therefore is an attempt to explore such issues in the Omani context through listening to the learners themselves.

The main goals of this study were to find out what we could learn from students' voices about their language learning and language learning context and how learner autonomy might manifest itself through these voices. Drawing on constructivism and interpretivism traditions, the study employed First-Language Reflective Group Conversations (L1-RGCs) and Reflective Journals to gain qualitative data from a sample of fifteen post-foundation undergraduate students in a tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) institution in Oman.

Unlike the research on English Language Learning and Teaching (ELLT) in the Omani context, which suggests that learners are teacher dependent and lacking the capacity for autonomous learning, the findings of the present study suggest that students' actual capacities for language learning have been largely underestimated and misrepresented. Students *do* appear to be metacognitively aware of the benefits and conduct of autonomy in language learning and *do* exercise their agency in language learning, for example in out-of-class language learning situations. Students' autonomous learning behaviour, however, has been found to be greatly conditioned by the learners' own learning needs and agendas as well as the learning environment itself. The present investigation also revealed a disparity between how the students perceive their roles in and responsibility for learning and how they actually experience them in their daily learning situations. The present study points to avenues for additional research on learner autonomy, especially on ways of exploring students' awareness (or insider perceptions) of their roles in and responsibility for language learning and how such awareness could help them become more reflective learners.

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PART ONE

SETTING THE SCENE AND DRAWING THE RESEARCH BOUNDRIES

- **Introduction to part 1**

The first part of the thesis reports on the first stage of the research project: research planning and field work. It aims at setting the overall research scene and drawing its boundaries. It comprises chapters 1 – 4. Chapter one sets the broader context of the research while chapter two identifies the main enquiry of the research and sets out the specific research questions. Chapter three offers a focused and critical literature review on what has been found on the main issues and concepts under investigation. The last chapter offers a detailed account of the methodologies and specific methods adopted for the purpose of obtaining responses to the research questions.

Chapter One

The Broader Context of the Research

1.1. Introduction

This chapter aims at describing the broader context in which the research has been conducted. This includes highlighting the key concepts which have been explored in the research and describing the specific features and characteristics of the context in which the research was conducted. This is seen as useful introductory highlights putting the reader into the picture of what is being researched, and in what circumstances.

The chapter includes eight sections, each highlighting a specific aspect of the research background. It begins by highlighting what voice and autonomy mean and how they are interpreted from an Islamic and cultural perspective. The chapter then offers a brief panoramic view of how voice and autonomy have evolved in the Middle East region in general, and Oman where the present research was conducted, in particular from a political, social and educational viewpoint.

For the purpose of the arguments and discussion in this chapter and the following ones, the acronym (ELLT) will be used to denote “English Language Learning and Teaching” where the learning aspect of the process is emphasised. However, the acronym (ELT) will be used as usual to refer to English Language Teaching as a profession.

1.2. Voice and autonomy in society: an Islamic and cultural perspective

Autonomy and voice can have different meanings and interpretations depending on the political and sociocultural context in which they are used. I will therefore attempt in this section to briefly highlight what voice and autonomy mean from an Islamic and cultural perspective. The discussion will then develop (in the next section) to encompass the social domain too. At this initial section, however, I will use the term autonomy to refer to one’s freewill and agency to make choices while accepting responsibility for such choices.

As is the case in other Divine faiths, autonomy and freewill are original and fundamental notions in Islam. All people are born free and equal. Autonomy, whatever shape or version it takes, be it personal, intellectual, political, social, or educational, remains a basic human right which has been guaranteed and maintained by Islamic law (Shari’a) to all individuals in society. Regardless of the different interpretations and practices of the concepts, individuals

in Islam are free to make their own choices regardless of their colour, sex, ethnicity, etc. In fact, we are held accountable for only what we are given choice over and all religious rituals and acts of worship become obligatory only for mature and rational individuals who have and can exercise their agency and freewill. Such acts of worship and rituals become meaningless if conducted under force or absence of sincere conviction of their original aims. The Qur'anic interest in guaranteeing people's freedom is clear in its emphasis on free thought and religion. Allah the Exalted says in the Holy Qur'an:

“There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error” (chapter 2, verse 256).

Nonetheless, absolute autonomy and voice do not exist. They are always understood and practised within a religiously and culturally defined framework of duty, accountability and responsibility. These concepts remain fundamental in Islam besides one's right for having autonomy and voice. A Muslim individual has a duty and responsibility to fulfil towards self as well as other members of society. This inseparable relationship between freedom and accountability has been emphasised in several occasions in the Qur'an. The following are example verses:

- *“Did We not give him two eyes, a tongue, two lips, and point out to him the two clear ways [of good and evil]?”* (chapter 90, verses 8-10).
- *“Whoever has done an atom's-weight of good will see it, and whoever has done an atom's weight of evil will see it”* (chapter 99, verses 7 & 8).
- *“We have guided him to the right path, whether he was grateful or not”* (chapter 76, verse 3).
- *“By the soul and how He formed it, and inspired it [to know] its own rebelling and piety! The one who purifies his soul succeeds, and the one who corrupts it fails”* (chapter 91, verses 7-10).

In addition, while Islam recognises individuals' autonomy as well as their needs, individuals are also expected to cooperate and communicate with each other effectively (Rayan, 2012). At a social level, individuals seek to achieve their personal as well as communal benefits through such a balanced system of and approach to coexistence. So we can see that a culture of 'interdependence' (rather than independence) is emphasised. Rayan (2012) notes that this balanced approach is clearly evident in worship. That is, there are individual acts of worship and rituals such as giving charity, and there are also communal acts of worships and ritual where a group is required to perform the worship as it is the case with congregation prayers in mosques.

My research can be understood as theoretically and methodologically underpinned by the Islamic as well as related cultural perspectives on autonomy and voice described above. That is, these perspectives have had important implications for the research design and ethics as well as data collection and interpretation. An initial application of this can be seen, for instance, in the research participants being given choices and options over time, venue and ways of self-expression.

1.3. Voice and autonomy in the region and the significance of the year 2011

The year 2011 and the few years which followed have indeed been symbolic and exceptionally unique in the Middle East. This is due to the dramatic political and social developments which have taken place in the region since then, following what has later become known as the 'Arab Spring'. In an insider report on the political and social changes in the Middle East after 2011, Manfreda (2014) writes:

“The Arab Spring’s impact on the Middle East has been profound...protests that spread across the region in early 2011 started a long-term process of political and social transformation” (para.1).

Such a political and social transformation has been witnessed in various areas including public pressure on governments to begin real reform, fight corruption, improve their profile on human rights and allow more room for public participation. According to a Middle East Policy Council’s report by Alhargan (2012),

“The space for citizens to pressure the government from below and to contest government policies has become larger. Key local actors... have all had increasing impact...The voices and activities promoting constitutional reform

and advocating for civil society have increased significantly, and they have been joined by a wide swath of society” (p. 137).

In addition, the presence of local human rights groups in most of the Middle East countries has been an essential feature that has distinguished the period following the Arab Spring. In this respect, Alhargan (2012) maintains that

“Local human-rights groups, have been engaging in the promotion of human rights mainly through monitoring rights practices, documenting abuses and advocating for freedoms. They have been challenging the practices and violations of government institutions... They have also been aiming at establishing a culture of civil society and spreading awareness of rights” (p. 137).

Regardless of how the political and social situations have ended up in the region, it is hard to deny the fact that back in 2011, people in most of the Arab countries went out demanding more justice and greater voice and autonomy. The Arab Spring uprisings and their aftermath have provided a new context in which public awareness of rights has developed, which soon has transformed into strong demands and aspirations for justice, voice and a greater space for involvement in decision making. This awakening has taken different shapes and sizes and manifested itself at various levels across the region.

1.4. Voice and autonomy in the Omani context

The consequence of what has happened in the region since 2011 and the years which followed has spread across the region, and in one way or another has also reached Oman. However, a number of articles on regional and local affairs describe Oman as having its own ‘spring’ (see for example Al Hashimi, 2011; Worrall, 2012), for it has resulted in a number of positive developments in the country in a number of domains including political, economic and social. Nevertheless, one of the most notable developments has been the emergence of a relatively new public awareness and healthy dialogue in the Omani society about people’s rights and responsibilities. According to Al Hashimi (2011):

“It is clear that the Omani people’s awareness of their rights and duties has deepened, along with their desire for a comprehensive programme of constitutional, economic, social, and political reform” (p.5).

Such awareness has manifested itself in people's demands for a greater voice and role in deciding how essential sectors in the country such as employment, labour force, education, etc. are run. Public demands for developments have also included providing more jobs, improving pay scales in both the private and general sectors, establishing labour syndicates for the workers in the private sector, establishing student councils in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), promoting education and training, and improving the overall infrastructure and services provided to the public. Public expectations of more competitive and better quality services have also become higher (Al Hashimi, 2011; Al Rubei, 2011; 'Students Speak Out', 2011; Worrall, 2012).

However, the Omani version of the Arab Spring, or the recent regional wave of public demands, has been distinguished by the swift, effective and wise response of His Majesty the Sultan to the legitimate demands of his people. Royal directives were sent to the cabinet to work on achieving people's demands. Most of the public demands have now been met while others are underway. Most importantly though, a relatively bigger margin of freedom is now being witnessed in society than before. Youth, including students, can now express themselves and voice their concerns to officials more openly than before, which, I think, can be useful for both students and policy makers.

Although some people think that the changes which have taken place locally may not directly link to the recent developments in the region, one fact however stands: we are part of the region and will inevitably continue to be influenced by what is happening around us.

1.5. Voice and autonomy in the Omani educational context

"The ultimate goal of education, according to Piaget, is for the individual to develop the autonomy of thought to create new, original ideas rather than just recycle old ones."
(Jimenez Raya, 2008, p.6)

Being the largest sector of the Omani population, youth have always demanded new and improved services which touch their everyday life. Students in particular have been demanding important and real improvements in their education. Such demands, however, have become stronger after the developments which the region has witnessed in 2011 and the years which have followed. Amongst the students' top demands are the establishment of student councils; provision of more and better learning resources and practical training; and

most importantly, having a greater voice in how their HEIs are run (Marie-Therese, 2011). Such demands by students can be seen to fit well with the above quote by Jimenez Raya (2008) on the ultimate goal of education. In an article on students' demands for the establishment of student councils, Dr Said Al Rubei, Secretary-General of the Scientific Research Council, acknowledged the validity of students' demands and presented a cogent argument in support of their demand for establishing student councils in HEIs in Oman. He emphasised that

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

Embarking on a PhD project on learning and teaching in such an atmosphere of public demands for a greater voice and involvement in decision-making would inevitably have its own implications for the research focus and approach. This could even become more obvious in a research like this one, where issues of autonomy and voice are key elements of the investigation. As such, I could not help but to commit myself to accommodating my participants' expectations of greater room for self-expression. I will say more on how I have done this in chapter four.

1.6. English as a Foreign Language in Oman

Oman is one out of many developing countries around the world which have valued English as an important international language and a tool for achieving their development plans (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011a). Since 1970 (the year when His Majesty the Sultan took power), English has been recognised as the only official foreign language in Oman and has been adopted as a school subject in the official national curriculum since then (Al-Issa, 2006). Oman has recognised the need to communicate with non-Arabic speaking countries in order to expand their bilateral relations, especially after 1970 when Oman started to establish powerful political and economic ties with other non-Arabic speaking countries. Since Oman has a considerable number of non-Arabic speaking expatriates who work in various positions, mostly in the private sector, English has also maintained an internal function besides its external function as a language of international politics and business (Al-Jadidi, 2009).

Internally, English is a Lingua Franca used by individuals in Oman who come from different linguistic backgrounds. It is also the dominant written and spoken language in some sectors such as oil, aviation, business, banking and health, a situation which has created a pressing need for effective plans to be in place to teach the language to young Omanis and equip them with the necessary language skills required by the local labour market, within a global view of education, economy and wellbeing (Al-Issa, 2006; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011a; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2012). The following section will therefore describe English Language Learning and Teaching (ELLT) in Oman.

1.7. ELLT in Oman

Almost all non-English speaking countries have adopted policies that promote the teaching and learning of English. Oman is no exception. Because of the essential role it plays in major sectors such as industry, trade, oil, health and education, English in Oman is considered by both the government as well as elite as a means for socioeconomic development. Students are now required to acquire a certain level of proficiency in English in order to gain access to higher education or the labour market. As such, English language teaching receives political, economic and legislative support from the Omani government (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011a). This recognition can be evident in the government's heavy spending on the development and implementation of the educational reform, which was translated into the gradual implementation of the 'Basic Education System' at the school level since 1997. According to the Ministry of Education Portal [www.moe.gov.om],

“The education system adopted by Sultanate of Oman is well-founded scientifically and pedagogically, developed with all its input, without any elimination of any features, provides basic educational needs of knowledge and skills, and the development of attitudes and values that enable learners to continue in education or training in accordance with their abilities and interest” (para. 14).

The new reform covers various aspects of the educational system, including ELLT. Borg (2006) maintains that “nowhere has this reform been more evident than in the teaching of English” (p.1). Perhaps one of the remarkable changes in the new reform in ELLT in Oman has been the teaching of English from grade one. Since the inception of the Basic Education System, children have been learning English at the age of six (grade one), compared to age ten (grade four) in the previous system. More importantly, the new curriculum aims “to

reflect contemporary thinking in ELLT by, for example, emphasising meaningful and purposeful language use, promoting self-assessment, and providing a variety of interactive and motivating language learning experiences” (Borg, 2006, p.11).

English is also considered to be indispensable to success in higher education. With a few exceptions, English is the language of instruction in all higher education institutions in Oman. The aim is to increase graduates’ employability, a strategy which has been adopted in the wider world, as well as boost ‘Omanisation’, a government scheme for gradually replacing the skilled labour force with Omanis (Al-Jadidi, 2009). In addition, a good command of English is a prerequisite for secondary school leavers to qualify for the government’s annual grants and scholarships earmarked for such students to pursue their higher education both in Oman and abroad. Thus, there has been an increasing demand for different types of ELLT courses at different levels of proficiency by the local community. As such, English language teaching centres and institutes have recently flourished across the country and ELLT has become a thriving business in Oman. Nevertheless, one of the largest English language teaching units in Oman is the Language Centre (LC) at Sultan Qaboos University, where the present study took place. The next section offers an overview of the teaching and learning situation at the LC.

1.8. ELLT in Tertiary Education in Oman

1.8.1. Teaching and learning at the Language Centre at SQU

With a student body exceeding 4000 and more than 200 instructors from 30 different countries, the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University is considered one of the largest language teaching centres in Oman and the Gulf region. It is the gateway for all university students towards their degree courses. The sole responsibility of the LC is to help students to improve their English language so that they are better prepared to meet the requirements of the English-medium courses in their subject areas.

The LC offers two major English language programmes: the Foundation Programme English Language (FPEL) and the Credit English Language Programme (CELP). Students normally progress from the FPEL to the CELP. After they successfully pass the FPEL, students pursue their degrees in their respective colleges and take the CELP courses which are of the nature of English for special/academic purposes (CELP Curriculum Document, 2011).

The FPEL operates a six-level system in which students are placed at one of the six proficiency levels according to their performance in an in-house Placement Test (PT) administered to all students at enrolment. The foundation courses follow a skills-based curriculum that covers the four language skills together with study and research skills. These courses are taught in six levels ranging from beginner to upper intermediate. Each level lasts eight weeks and consists of 20 weekly contact hours. A range of formative and summative assessments is employed (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

In regard to the aims and expectations of the FPEL curriculum, the curriculum is based on learning goals which state the skills and strategies that learners are expected to acquire upon completing the programme. The FPEL curriculum is set to reflect what students need to learn in order to succeed at the university. This is translated into various study projects which students are engaged in, ranging from creating a basic learning portfolio of their course work, making reports based on interviews and surveys, individually-researched projects on a topic of their choice, to oral presentations, and to library/internet-based work (FPEL Document, 2011). Success in the FPEL is determined by a combination of continuous assessment throughout the semester and a final examination at the end of a semester. A sample of fifteen male and female students who had completed the FPEL represented the study sample of this research.

Moving on to the CELP programme, the courses here are intended for students who have passed the FPEL and are in their respective colleges. The nature and focus of the CELP curriculum is summarised in the CELP Curriculum Document (2011) as follows:

“The CELP LP curriculum is a flexible guide to instruction, emphasising what our students should know and be able to do as they progress through the various courses relevant to their college studies. The curriculum focuses on themes and concepts rather than isolated facts and stresses thinking and problem solving skills more than memorisation and recall of information. Various skill-based and task-based approaches are used for maximising students' use of English and a combination of varied assessments is carried out to measure students' learning and achievement. Emphasis is also placed on study skills to make students more effective learners” (P.6).

Materials and tests for both the FPEL and CELP programmes are developed in-house. However, some commercial materials are also used to supplement the main course materials in some courses or set as a self-study component in others. The Curriculum Development

Unit (CDU) at the LC is in charge of producing and evaluating materials for the FPEL while the Assessment and Evaluation Unit (AEU) is responsible for producing and administering tests.

1.9. Concluding remarks and reflection

This chapter has been devoted to describing the broader context within which the research has been conducted. Key research concepts such as autonomy and voice have been presented first, from an Islamic and cultural perspective and later, from a political and educational perspective. The chapter has also pointed to how the overall political, social and educational context has been evolving in the region and Oman, particularly after 2011, and the implications this has had for the main areas of investigation as well as the design of the research. ELLT in Oman has also been described as the specific area within which the research falls.

Finally, it is useful to note that the ideas I presented in the first part of this chapter concerning the significance of the main research areas, especially the concepts of voice and autonomy in relation to the overall political and social climate in the region and Oman, have been inspired by my internal examiners through the comments they made on my early work during the upgrade viva. This in itself has indeed been a valuable learning experience.

Chapter Two

Identifying the Research Focus

2.1. Introduction

Having described the political and social context in which the research was carried out, this chapter aims at describing the specific personal and contextual elements which triggered and shaped the investigation. I draw on my past learning experiences as a language learner and later as an English language teacher and reflect on the current English Language Learning and Teaching (ELLT) practices in Oman and show how my experiences at these two stages and the ELLT situation have influenced how I wanted to carry out the research. The chapter then poses the research problem and the main questions which have guided the investigation. The chapter concludes by highlighting and stressing the significance of the study in light of the circumstances which originally inspired the research.

2.2. Over a decade of teaching, and learning!

I was appointed as an assistant language instructor at the Language Centre (LC) of Sultan Qaboos University soon after I had completed my BA in TEFL in 1998. I taught for a year and then left for the UK for my Master's, which I completed in 2000. Since then I have taught various language courses in both the Foundation Programme English Language (FPEL) and the Credit English Language Programme (CELP). The past twelve years I spent teaching (and learning) at the LC have indeed enriched my professional as well as personal life.

The experience has been rewarding at all levels. Working in a vibrant and diverse environment such as the one of the LC, has given me the opportunity to meet and deal with different types of students and teachers. Throughout my years of teaching, I have developed critical awareness about my own perceptions of and abilities in learning and teaching in relation to my students' diverse learning styles, habits and most importantly perceptions of learning. My experience at the LC over the past years has also been enriched by dealing with and interacting with the many teachers who come from different backgrounds and hold diverse views and perceptions of teaching and learning which were reflected in their practices. This has had deep impact on the way I began to think about and understand my

professional life. It has also helped me to reflect on my own perceptions and practices. For instance, I have become more aware of what it means to teach and learn a language and of my professional and moral commitment toward my students. I always emphasised to my students that learning is a personal pursuit and that maintaining an active role in their learning remains essential for learning to be effective and enjoyable. I did not present myself to my students only as a language teacher whose job is to exclusively deliver to them the content of the language curriculum, but to try to help *them* learn.

The most apparent effort I put into my teaching was perhaps helping my students to learn how to lessen their overdependence on me as a teacher and develop greater independence, self-management, self-direction and confidence in themselves as learners through various discourses and activities. In other words, I wanted them to take greater control of their own language learning through giving them the opportunity, whenever possible, to choose what and how they wish to learn and engage them in activities which involve reflection and the development of thinking about how they are learning (a form of metacognitive knowledge). I believe that such effort succeeded to some extent with some students who appreciated the new role they were given. The effort I had made to help my students experience the value of their own role in language learning stemmed from my own personal experience and awareness of the importance of self-management and control in learning, which I describe below.

2.3. Developing awareness in learner autonomy

Although the exact terms were unfamiliar to me then, my awareness of self-management and control in learning has been shaped by my experience as a learner, my teaching and later, perhaps more academically and in a more sophisticated way, my readings for my PhD studies. I will describe these three stages in turn.

In one of the applied linguistics courses at the BA level, the lecturer asked each one of us to choose a partner and work on a topic of our choice relating to our course. Each pair had to research their own topic and then present the findings to the class. It was my first experience with the concept of “choice” as decisions that concerned our learning were usually taken by the teacher. I therefore ‘chose’ to pair up with one of my close classmates and together we decided to investigate ‘passivisation’ in Arabic and English. We defined our project aim as to find out how the passive form is formed and used in English and Arabic so as to find ways to

make learning, and thus using this structure, an easier job for the students. We were involved in planning, researching and organising our project entirely on our own while the teacher was more of a guide and a resource person than anything else. That was exceptionally a new experience to me as I was learning to use my self-management strategies. For example, my classmate and I were actively engaged in planning our project in terms of deciding on the aims, structure and organization of the information, monitoring our progress with data gathering and data organization in line with the time allotted for our project, and then evaluating the outcome of every stage of our project. No doubt we were intrinsically motivated, for we saw the need for what we were doing and appreciated the opportunity to practise our 'agency' as learners. Two weeks later, we presented our findings to the class and it was a success. We got an A- (90%) for our work as a pair and I kept the project file until I had become a teacher. The experience was heart-touching. After this incidence, I started to critically reflect on my other classes where the lecturers were in control of almost everything including what and how we learned. This kind of reflection had then developed and shaped into a personal conviction that for learning experiences to be more effective, personal and longer-lasting, the learner has to be actively involved in what he/she is learning.

Another personal experience which had helped me to develop a greater sense of responsibility for and control over my own learning was my experience with self-initiated and self-directed out of class learning. As a student majoring in English language as a profession and career, I had realised the importance of having initiative for finding my own learning resources and opportunities for practice. I knew that my classroom learning opportunities remained limited and did not satisfy my hunger for exploring and practising further the language I was learning, and would be teaching. For me, language learning could not be simply reduced to the task of memorising sets of rules and then reproducing them. By the end of my degree, it was clear to me that much of the language skills and intercommunication strategies which I had developed came about mostly as a direct result of my own initiatives and self-management of my out-of-class language learning. This included reading various materials in English, interaction with native speakers and other students, taking part in discussion groups, and even reading shop signs.

Much of my teaching after I had completed my Master's was in the 'English for Business' Programme. One of my first observations was the passive roles the students assumed of themselves in the learning process and that they expected more from the teacher and course materials than they did by putting their own skills into practice. Being a member of my

students' sociocultural environment, I was able to identify the potential reasons for such a problem: their previous schooling experiences which were mostly teacher-led as well as their perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for language learning as passive recipients of teaching (or at least this was my initial understanding of the situation then). I therefore used to share my own learning experiences with my students as a way to encourage them to take a more active role in their learning and emphasised that learning is a personal and autonomous activity more than anything else and that this type of learning is more personal, more effective and longer lasting.

After I had started reading for my PhD, I was able to slowly construct my own understanding and conceptualizations of self-management, control of one's own learning and the related concepts as strategies leading to autonomy in learning. It should be brought to the fore at this stage, however, that the series of supervision meetings I have had with my supervisor since I have begun this research journey have also contributed significantly to my understanding of these concepts. My initial research proposal was quantitative in design and aimed at measuring the level of autonomy in the students in my context. It was not long before I came to realise that autonomy had so far been researched mainly quantitatively and that there had been a major shift in research on autonomy in the recent years towards a more contextualised view of autonomy with a major role attributed to the local culture and settings in the understanding of autonomy (Benson, 2007; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1999). The sociocultural component of autonomy is also another important dimension to the study of autonomy (Benson, 2011; Murray, 2014; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). I have now come to realise that autonomy is a construct which is too complex to be measured quantitatively using Likert-type scales or anything similar. I will provide more details on the nature of autonomy in the literature review chapter (see chapter three) but now I would like to offer a critical evaluation of the ELLT situation in Oman in order to contextualize my research and identify a focus for my investigation.

2.4. A critical view of ELLT in Oman

The purpose of this section is to problematize some of the prevalent beliefs and practices of both students and teachers at various levels of the educational system in Oman as an entry to my positionality and research problem statement.

Among the many important developments which education in Oman has witnessed over the past forty years has been the introduction of the Basic Education System at the school level, which characterizes a massive educational reform in recent years. According to Borg (2006), the new reform “reflects contemporary thinking in ELT by, for example, emphasising meaningful and purposeful language use, promoting self-assessment, and providing a variety of interactive and motivating language learning experiences” (p.11). The new vision of education in Oman assumes more interaction in the classroom between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves who are assumed to play an active role in their learning. However, one inescapable fact is that the reality of language learning and teaching in Oman remains far from what the policy documents preach.

Despite the massive investment and the tremendous efforts spent on ELLT, the outcomes fall short of official expectations and the demands of the labour market (Mahmoud & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Moody, 2012). According to Mahmoud and Al-Mahrooqi (2012), “a majority of Arab learners of EFL fail to achieve an adequate level of proficiency in the language even after more than ten years of English study at school” (p.11). The examples of the disparity between theory and practice of education in Oman are many. For instance, Goodliffe (2005) contends that there is an overemphasis on the product (passing exams or gaining a degree) rather than on the process of learning. Clearly, exams still dominate the assessment scene in the Omani educational system in the sense that high stakes exams are still a prime determiner of students’ failure or success in such a “swim-or-sink” situation, a tradition which can affect teachers’ performance and learners’ perceptions of their language learning. In fact, research findings suggest that many teachers consider exams as a prime yardstick for achievement and progress in learning (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011a). In addition, Mahmoud and Al-Mahrooqi (2012) list lack of motivation and opportunities for daily interaction in English as well as poor methods of teaching and feedback amongst the important factors responsible for the low level of English proficiency amongst school leavers. Furthermore, Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a) surveyed the perceptions of 141 freshmen at Sultan Qaboos University (which is the university where the present research took place) about the teaching and learning at the Basic Education System. One of their key findings was that the actual conduct of lessons remains highly teacher-led and test-driven. ‘Spoon-feeding’ is also the prevalent practice and pupils have very few choices to make. Unfortunately, learning has been motivated by getting high grades and passing examinations while the whole process has made very little contribution towards developing the learners’ ownership of learning, motivation and self-direction. In the same vein, Moates (2006, cited in Al-Issa &

Al-Bulushi, 2011a) also postulates that despite the massive reform the educational system in Oman has witnessed, and as far as teaching and learning are concerned, many of the teachers do not seem to be teaching communicatively. Other findings of Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a) also include the observation that teachers lack reflective skills, adopt a transmission-based approach to knowledge when handling content, marginalize the role of students as dynamic and active constructors of knowledge and deprive them from any thinking space by encouraging memorization, training students for exam purposes and confining learning to the textbooks. Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a) end their paper with the conclusion that “ELT reform in Oman has changed in theory but has been largely otherwise in practice, and that disparity between theory and practice still exists and persists” (p.30).

With reference to some of the practices in higher education, Goodliffe (2005) observes that “the majority of students in Oman come to higher education with a background of teacher-centred instruction and skills in rote learning” (p.5). This is echoed by Borg and Al-Busaidi’s (2012) observation that although activities for promoting autonomy in language learning such as independent study projects and portfolios are built into the courses, there is a general sense among teachers that the existing strategies for promoting autonomy are not achieving the desired results. In their informative study of teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy at the Language Centre, where the present study took place, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) found that

“Teachers were in theory positive about the potential of LA to support L2 learning and that they strongly associated LA with the concept of learner choice; however, they were more cautious...in assessing the extent to which learners could in practice be involved in course decisions. Teachers were split on the issue of how autonomous their learners are...Student involvement in decision making was seen to be most feasible in relation to materials, topics, and activities but least feasible (and indeed not particularly desirable) in relation to choices about objectives and assessment” (p. 287).”

Amongst the common assumptions teachers make about their students are that they lack motivation and skills for taking control of their own learning as well as their low expectations of what they can achieve (Al-Kalbani, 2011; Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012). It is useful to note here that the autonomous learning project on passivisation in Arabic and English which I quoted earlier was exceptional and remained as an individual incident throughout my four-year long studies at the BA level. Apart from this, my overall experience as a learner at the BA level was in line with the findings of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) which clearly signify

the types of belief teachers hold about the abilities of their learners. (For a detailed critical account of the teaching and learning situation in Oman, see Al-Sadi, 2012).

However, my experience as a learner, and later as a teacher, has shown me that learners may be able to adopt a more active role in their own learning, which can result in more effective learning. While seen as possible and even desirable, the adoption of such an ‘unusual’ role needs to be carefully thought through and gradually introduced within a framework of critical cultural and contextual understanding. This is part of my conceptual stance towards teaching and learning, or positionality, which I describe below.

2.5. Positionality

The above critical review of the teaching and learning situation in Oman highlights two major areas: underestimation of the students’ ability to take greater control of their own learning and absence of students’ voices. As these two issues constitute the core of my investigation, I will describe my positionality towards them in turn. My positionality here is based on my own reflections on and experiences with language learning as a learner and later as a teacher.

One of the areas which emerges from the above critical review of the teaching and learning situation in Oman is the assumptions teachers make about their students as lacking the ability to take greater control of their own learning. One of my beliefs about autonomy is that we as human beings are autonomous by nature and that we “choose” to act autonomously when we see the need for doing so. According to Thomson (1996, cited in Benson, 2011), we are born self-directed. We therefore, tend to resist naturally external forces especially if these forces do not comply with our needs and comfort. Students are no exception. They do exercise their autonomy in general life settings, including learning. In this sense, autonomy is regarded as a natural attribute (Benson, 2011). As a matter of fact, the concepts of autonomy and voice are original notions and ways of conduct in Islam (see chapter one for more).

My twelve-year teaching experience has shown me that learners in general appreciate being given choice over what they like to learn and how they like to learn it. In the case of making presentations, for example, students appreciate being given the opportunity to choose their own presentation topics, partners and mode of delivery. I have also found that autonomy and self-direction are inner capacities in all students to a lesser or greater extent and that such

capacities can be promoted when appropriate conditions are created for them to emerge. This view is in line with Smith's (2003) 'strong version' of pedagogy for learner autonomy which is based on the assumption that instead of viewing learners as deficient in autonomy, they are already autonomous and are already capable of exercising this capacity.

So I believe that control, which is an inner capacity in all learners, can lead to more effective learning and that one way to help learners to take greater control of their learning, and thus become more effective learners, is by capitalising on such existing capacities. This can be done by, firstly, raising their awareness about such capacities and, secondly, creating optimal conditions for such capacities to emerge in the classroom. In this respect, Scharle and Szabo (2000) offer a useful framework for a gradual transfer of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learners. Autonomy development, of course, is not an easy job but it is worth the effort (Dam, 1995; Reinders, 2010).

Another area which emerges from the above critical review of the teaching and learning situation in Oman is the absence of learners' voices. I shall aim at a rather loose definition of learners' voices at this stage: they can be understood as opportunities for students' involvement in decision making concerning their learning. Learners' voices can be a powerful tool in encouraging higher levels of learner engagement in learning leading to greater achievement. Engaging learners' voices and allowing them greater roles to play in the learning process is gathering momentum as a key way to improve teaching and learning and transform education (Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Benson, 2007, 2011; Benson & Voller, 1997; Lamb, 2006; Little, 1991). According to Kohonen (2006), "students are a significant source for their own learning as well as for each other's learning" (p.38). I therefore take the position that learners' voices can reveal much about the nature of learning and so should be heard and privileged. However, to me, acknowledging learners' voices is not only limited to addressing their needs, listening to their opinions or giving them some responsibility, but should also involve accessing their knowledge about the learning process manifested in their perceptions about learning (Benson & Lor, 1999; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Schunk & Meece, 1992) and metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998, 2001), which may be defined here as the knowledge students have about themselves as learners and about the learning process. It is therefore insufficient for teachers to only allow spaces for students to express their voices concerning what and how they learn, but should also encourage students to systematically reflect on the beliefs they hold about themselves as learners and about learning. Such

investigations have been found essential by a growing body of research in the area of learner voice and learner autonomy. According to Kenny (1993),

“Autonomy is not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations, or making pupils responsible for the activities they undertake, but of allowing and encouraging learners, through processes deliberately set up for the purpose, to begin to express who they are, what they think, and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves” (p.440).

In a much broader sense, I am a keen believer that education should aim at promoting learners’ critical thinking, interdependent learning and autonomous actions. Education should not be viewed as something that is ‘done to’ the learners but rather as something that *they* are part of and so *their* voices are essential in the whole process. In addition, learners should be encouraged to reflect on what they are learning, how they are learning it, and with what results (encouraging metacognition). This is perhaps more obvious in out-of-class learning as in such a situation, learners are free to choose while at the same time assume responsibility for their choice. They are also self-directed and tend to evaluate the results of their endeavours and plan their future actions, i.e., using their metacognition.

In a nutshell, I would like to argue that learning could be enhanced by encouraging greater autonomy in learners which, in turn, is a result of learners’ capacity for systematic reflection on their perceptions about learning, metacognition and ability to exercise greater control over what and how they learn, while at the same time making spaces for their voices to be heard in our planning and teaching. These issues are clearly reflected in my research questions which specifically address an important gap in research and in the context under study. I discuss this in the next section.

2.6. Problem statement

This section aims to problematize the current research on language learner autonomy and student voice, in general, and, more specifically, in the context under study. It will also address the research problem, present the specific research questions and finally discuss the significance of the study.

The link between enabling learners to take greater control of their learning (which is what autonomy means) and effective language learning is well established in the literature (Benson, 2011; Dam, 1995; Little, 1991; Sinclair, 2000), as is the contribution of learners' voices, perceptions and metacognitive knowledge in understanding the complex nature of the learning process and, as such, helping to adapt teaching and learning in a way to develop greater autonomy (Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Ellis, 1998; Kohonen, 2006; Lamb, 2010; Sinclair, 1999; Wenden, 1998, 2001). I have attempted to loosely define metacognitive knowledge in the previous section as the knowledge students have about themselves as learners and about the learning process. However, little research exists which looks into the shape and value of learners' perceptions of their language learning and their roles and abilities in language learning at the university level, especially in non-western contexts. According to Lamb (2010), "there is still a great amount of work to be done to explore the nature and roles of metacognitive knowledge and learner beliefs in language learning, particularly in specific contexts" (p.102). Ellis (1998) describes metacognitive knowledge in language learning research as the "missing dimension" while Wenden (2001) describes it as the "neglected variable". Lamb (2010) also asserts that gaining access to learners' metacognitive knowledge and beliefs about language learning can help adapt teaching and learning in a way to develop greater autonomy. Moreover, Benson (2011) views metacognitive knowledge as one of the underdeveloped areas of interest within the field of autonomy. He links it to the learners' capacity to take control over his/her learning. What is clear from this literature then is that in order to develop understanding about the language learning process in a particular context and how autonomy could enhance such a process in that context, learners' perceptions of their roles and their metacognitive knowledge need to be accessed and brought to the fore. However, amongst the challenges which research still faces include:

- a) Finding ways of accessing learners' voices
- b) Finding out what these voices mean
- c) What we can learn from them
- d) How they could be integrated into our planning

In section (2.4) above, I have showed that learners' voice and choice are almost missing in the educational system in Oman. Students' perceptions about their roles in and responsibility for language learning as well as their metacognitive knowledge have also been under-

researched. My own experience as a teacher over the past twelve years at tertiary level has shown that learners' involvement in what and how they learn had been seriously lacking. The common practice was, and still is, that by the end of each semester, students are given "course and teaching surveys" whose aim is to gather students' views about the course and teaching. The results of such surveys were reported back to the teachers but had no actual impact on the overall design and conducts of a course or programme. Apart from these surveys, no serious attempts were made to gain access to the students' perceptions of themselves as learners or how they perceive language learning and teaching in their context either at school or university.

On the research and publishing side, indeed there is paucity in research in Oman on what learner autonomy might mean to the students, whether they are allowed to exercise control over what and how they are learning and whether they see autonomy as relevant or appropriate in their unique context. Understanding learners' conceptual stance towards learning at the university level, especially at the time of entry, can help us gain useful insight into the nature and characteristics of their learning (Moore, 2010), explain some of their learning behaviours (e.g., decision to adopt a passive role in certain classes) and, as such, find ways of helping them to develop greater autonomy and enhance their language learning (Lamb, 2010). I will say more on paucity of research on learner autonomy and voice in the Omani context in chapter three (see sections 3.3.6 and 3.4.6).

2.7. Aims of the research

This study aims to achieve a number of related aims. The overall aim of this study can be defined as to consider critically students' voices about language learning in the context under investigation and the potential insightful results which can be gained by listening to the students talking about their language learning experiences, their learning context, as well as their capacities for language learning, as a gateway to encouraging greater autonomy in the students and, thus, enhancing their language learning. I approached this through exploring students' perceptions of their roles in and sense of responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom as well as their metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about learning). In addition, the study explored students' perceptions of the potential internal (student-related) and external (contextual) constraints on their language learning and their perspectives on ways of having a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning. In short, the study

considered learners' unique voices: the language they used to describe themselves as learners, their lived learning experiences and how they learned and viewed teaching.

This study is also set to offer first-hand and authentic learner data on the nature and characteristics of language learning in this particular context as well as about the students who have passed the Foundation Programme English Language (FPEL) at the Language Centre (LC) which should be a valuable data source for a number of stakeholders including policy-makers, curriculum planners and, of course, classroom teachers. This justifies why I did not anonymise the Language Centre in this study.

At a contextual level, the present study aims to offer a context-sensitive understanding of learner autonomy and explore its relevance and appropriateness to the Omani context from the students' perspective. In particular, the study aims to investigate whether learners in the context under study experienced autonomy, what shape this autonomy took and how it manifested itself. I was also interested in exploring if students view autonomy as a desirable goal and if so, the ways they see appropriate for promoting it in their context within the various constraints imposed by this context.

In a broader sense, the study hopes to contribute to the existing literature and knowledge on language learner autonomy by offering a fresh view of autonomy from the learners' perspectives and the role culture (in its both specific and wider sense) plays in shaping such autonomy in the students.

Methodologically, the study aims to explore the potential impact which the research methodology and data collection methods (reflective group conversations and reflective journals) might have on the students' awareness about themselves and their learning. The assumption is that students may be able to develop some awareness about themselves as language learners and the language learning process as a result of taking part of the reflective and interactive sessions designed for data collection. Suggestions could be made that the approaches and the specific methods used could be integrated into language courses which aim at developing greater awareness and autonomy in the students. The investigation of students' perceptions and capacities for autonomous learning is seen as essential for any endeavours attempting to promote greater learners' involvement in their learning and develop any theory of learner autonomy in similar contexts.

Finally, the study aims to contribute to the current debate on how learners' voices and autonomy in language learning can be accessed and researched by proposing the investigation methods used in this study as a valid and context-sensitive method of research of (and also *for*) learning.

2.8. Specific research questions

The present study aims to respond to the following questions:

- 1. How do post-foundation undergraduate Omani students perceive their language learning at tertiary level in and outside the classroom?**
 - a. What are the nature and goals of language learning at tertiary level as perceived by the students?
 - b. How do they perceive their roles in and responsibility for language learning at tertiary level, in and outside the classroom?
 - c. How do they perceive the teachers' roles in and responsibility for language learning at tertiary level?
 - d. What are the internal and external constraints on language learning in the context under study as perceived by the students?
- 2. What metacognitive knowledge do the students report having at tertiary level in and outside the classroom?**
- 3. From the students' perspectives, what might enable them to take more responsibility for and have a greater voice in their learning? What are their perspectives on improvement in their language learning context?**
- 4. How does this research impact on students' awareness of themselves as language learners and language learning as a process? How does such awareness manifest itself in students' voices throughout the investigation?**
- 5. What could we learn from students' voices on language learning in the context under investigation? How does learner autonomy manifest itself in such voices?**

2.9. Significance of the study

The present study makes important theoretical, methodological and contextual contributions to the current thinking and practices in second/foreign language learning, learner autonomy and research methodologies.

At the theoretical level, the findings of the study contribute to the ongoing dialogue in the literature on learner autonomy whether the notion of autonomy is appropriate / inappropriate to non-Western cultures (Littlewood, 1999; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Zhoulin, 2007). In this respect, the study emphasises the **cultural** and **contextual** dimensions of learner autonomy as essential ingredients for researching and understanding language learning and autonomy in any context. In this respect, the study offers unique understanding and experiences of autonomy of a sample of Omani students at a tertiary language institution, a context where learner autonomy has largely gone unexplored. In addition, drawing on Lamb's (2005) **three categories of voice**, which include students' knowledge about and perceptions of language learning, their involvement in and management of their own learning, and their struggle for having a voice (see chapter three section 3.2.2), the present study is not limited to exploring only the first type of voice, i.e., perceptions and perspectives, but also the second and third types. Furthermore, drawing on my positionality in viewing and approaching autonomy in learners (see 2.5 above), the study sheds more light on Smith's (2003) theory of **strong version of autonomy** as my investigation of autonomy is based on the notion that it is a capacity which learners already possess in one way or another rather than something that they are deficient in. In terms of the **complexity and multidimensionality** of autonomy as a construct in both theory and practice (Benson, 2011; Jimenez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007; Little, 1991), the study also reveals unique characteristics and new dimensions of autonomy in a language learning context which has been under-researched, at least qualitatively. Last but not least, the present study sheds light on learner **autonomy in out-of-class learning** and the students' perspectives on ways of harnessing such learning to their classroom experience.

Methodologically, since the present study is informed by **constructivist** tradition in research (see chapter four, sections 4.3 and 4.4) and adopts a **qualitative methodology** in both research design and data analysis, and given the lack of this type of research in language learning and learner autonomy (Lamb, 2005), the study makes important contributions to the field of qualitative research methodologies by highlighting the potential of such methodologies and methods in research on language learning in general and learner autonomy in particular. The study also points to avenues for further investigations of language learning and learner autonomy employing qualitative methodologies such as the ones suggested by this study. Finally, one of the major strengths of the present study is perhaps the fact that it draws on the tradition of '**naturalistic inquiry**' (Bailey & Nunan,

1996) where qualitative data have been gathered in a natural setting and not as classroom experimentation.

At the contextual level, given the paucity of research on learner autonomy in the Omani context, the present study makes important contributions to the ELLT research in Oman in general, and to the area of learner autonomy in particular. This contribution unfolds through the insights the study offers into students' voices on their language learning in their context, an area which has largely gone unexplored in the Omani context. Since "students are a significant source for their own learning as well as for each other's learning" (Kohonen, 2006, p.38), the study therefore provides a first-hand and authentic account of the students' experiences of language learning in the context under study. Finally, the findings from this study can be a useful data source for curriculum planning, classroom practices and evaluation.

2.10. Concluding remarks and reflection

The purpose of this chapter was to identify the specific research focus and enquiry. It offered an overview of the specific personal and contextual elements which triggered and shaped the investigation. I have drawn on my past learning experiences as a learner and later as a teacher and showed that my experiences at these two stages have contributed to shaping my interest in and understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. I have also presented a critical view of ELLT in Oman and my positionality in relation to the main research enquiry and showed how they have also informed the enquiry.

My research questions focus on and target the specific elements of learner autonomy as derived from the literature as well as my own experiences as a learner and teacher. Taking into consideration the aims and questions which the research is set to explore, I think the study has the potential for providing useful insights students' voices as well as practical suggestions for the improvement of language learning and teaching in the context under investigation.

Chapter Three

Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

A critical review of literature at this stage of the thesis is seen as useful. This review should serve two main purposes. First of all, it describes the conceptual framework of my research by defining the key research concepts, placing them within the broader fields of research and justifying their importance and relevance to the overall research aims and questions. In this respect, I will briefly highlight what the term ‘voice’ means in general and in educational settings in particular. The discussion will then critically feature concepts such as learners’ voices, learners’ perceptions, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, metacognitive knowledge, autonomy in non-Western context and the major constraints on the development of learner autonomy. Secondly, the chapter offers a critical review of some of the recent studies which have been conducted on learners’ voices, learners’ perceptions and language learner autonomy in Oman and beyond. I will discuss the main findings of these studies and point to the commonalities and differences between them in addition to the areas of greater connections to my own study. This will also include a critical note on the different methodologies used in each study and their impact on the quality and relevance of the findings against the original aims set for these studies.

3.2. Learners’ voices

3.2.1. *What is voice?*

The term ‘voice’ has been used in different settings to mean different things. For example, there is learner voice, patient voice, workers’ voice, etc. There is also a personal voice, social voice and political voice. Within a broader institutional and educational context, voice very much lends itself to concepts such as freedom, empowerment and agency which individuals possess (or should possess) as part of their civil rights. According to Juffermans and Vanderaa (2011), “voices, in education and elsewhere, are always situated, socially determined and institutionally organised” (p.1).

Earlier on, Fox (1993) defined voice as the actual speaking or writing of one's own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, questions and experiences. Linking the concept of voice to educational settings, Fox considers voice as a vehicle for reflective practice which results in ongoing learning. He stresses that voice should be central in curriculum development. In the same vein, Canagarajah (2004) defines voice as “a manifestation of one’s agency in a discourse through the means of language” (p. 267). For him, voice is a manifestation of selfhood which has to be negotiated in relation to one’s identities, roles, responsibilities and subjectivity. However, Maybin (2012) adopts a more social perspective in her discussion of the concept of voice. She views voice as “intrinsically dialogic” (p.1). She stresses the *dialogic* nature of voice which shapes its emergence and sociocultural dynamics. She further explains that she

“... also see[s] voice or, more accurately, voicing, as intrinsically dialogic, incorporating elements of addressivity and responsivity both in relation to speakers in a specific interaction and also in relation to voices from past experience and in the surrounding environment” (p. 1)

Such a view of voice is particularly relevant to the kind of voice which this research aims to explore in students, i.e., the voices as emerging through their reflective dialogues and interaction in their reflective group conversations as well as through their past learning experiences (see chapter four for further details on the research methods). I will elaborate on the concept of learners’ voices in the following section.

3.2.2. Defining learners’ voices

The term ‘learner voice’ (or learners’ voices) is usually used in a generic manner in the literature to refer to a number of related concepts such as beliefs (Kalaja & Barcelose, 2003; Cotterall, 1995), perceptions (Schunk & Meece, 1992), conceptions (Benson & Lor, 1999), experiences of language learning (Benson & Nunan, 2002), conceptualisations (Breen, 2001), constructions (Ellis, 2001; Oxford, 2001), attitudes, etc. Finally, Drennan (2007) defines learners’ voices as “the views of learners on what, when and how they learn” (p. 66). Nevertheless, I will not restrict myself to a specific view of the term but rather adopt a fairly loose definition which includes most of these concepts.

As I have stated in my positionality (see chapter two, section 2.5), my conception of voice is not only limited to learners’ needs, opinions or even responsibilities, as it is usually

understood in my context at least, but extends to include learners' inner belief system and knowledge about the learning process which can be manifested through their perceptions (Schunk & Meece, 1992), metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998, 2001) and conceptions of learning (Benson & Lor, 1999; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). This understanding of voice essentially refers to learners' knowledge about and perspectives on language learning, which is the first of three categories of learner voice offered by Lamb (2005) which I will elaborate on in the next section. However, my research questions extend the investigation to explore Lamb's second and third categories of voice as well, taking a 'dialogic' or social stance to interpreting learners' voices. It is useful to note here though that although individual perceptions and viewpoints of the participating students will be acknowledged and privileged, the overall aim of this research is to get an amalgam of students' voices rather than individual voices or viewpoints, i.e., analysis will not be carried out with the individual student as the unit of analysis, but rather will reflect the voice(s) of the students as groups, with the group as unit of analysis (see the introduction to chapter six).

3.2.3. Categories of learners' voices

Lamb (2005) has offered three useful categories of learner voice. The first category of voice refers to **learner's knowledge about and perspectives on language learning**. This knowledge includes both cognitive and psychological aspects of learning such as metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1999), learner beliefs (Cotterall, 1995; Wenden, 1999), learner representations (Holec, 1987; Wenden 1996), experiences of language learning (Benson & Nunan, 2002), conceptualizations (Breen, 2001) and constructions (Ellis, 2001; Oxford, 2001). The second category of voice concerns the **learner's involvement in and influence over the management of learning**. This knowledge, according to Lamb (2005), relates to self-management in contexts where learners can have a voice, make choices, plan and evaluate learning. This type of voice is mostly about the ways in which the environment enables learners to have a voice in their learning. The third category of voice relates to the **radical concepts of agency and resistance**. This is the type of voice learners would resort to in contexts where their voices are not usually heard so they would need to struggle for it. This research aims to explore how these three types of student voice manifest themselves in the context under investigation.

3.2.4. *Significance of learners' voices*

Engaging learners and allowing them a greater voice and role to play in the learning process is gathering momentum as a key way to improve teaching and learning and transform education (Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Benson, 2007, 2011; Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Dahl, 1995; Kenny, 1993; Kohonen, 2006; Lamb, 2005, 2006, 2010; Tse, 2000; Wesely, 2012). For example, students' voices on how they learn and prefer to learn can help teachers change the way they think about their teaching as well as the way their students learn in terms of what motivates them in learning. In addition, learners' voices can be a powerful tool in encouraging higher levels of learner engagement in learning leading to greater achievement. According to Kohonen (2006), "there has been a significant shift of emphasis on the significance of the *students' own contributions* to their language learning through initiative-taking and active involvement" (p.37). He emphasises that "students are a significant source for their own learning as well as for each other's learning" (p.38). Tse (2000) also postulates that "students' perceptions of their FL learning classroom experiences have important pedagogical and programmatic implications and have been theorised as having an effect on linguistic outcome" (p. 69). Beyond the field of language learning, Fielding (2001) edited a special edition of the *Forum* (Vol.43, No.2) which was entirely devoted to addressing the significance of learners' voices. The articles in this volume report on various successful projects carried out in British schools featuring students as key players in their learning. The significance of learners' voices in understanding learners and the process of learning was also evident in the AILA symposium at the 14th World Congress of Applied Linguistics in 2005 which was entirely devoted to exploring learners' voices (Lamb & Reinders, 2007). The symposium explored the following questions which relate to the theme of learners' voices:

- What does 'voice and influence' mean in different contexts?
- How can we access learners' voices and integrate them into our planning?
- What can we learn from our learners' stories about their language learning?

Last but not least, Lamb (2006) investigated voices of young learners in an urban secondary school in England. He concluded that students' voices offer many useful insights into ways in which teaching and learning could be improved in a way that supports greater independence in the learners.

3.2.5. Place of learners' voices in current practices: a critique

Although there is a growing body of research which emphasises the significance of learners' voices in language learning, learners' voices are rarely heard in language programmes (Barkhuizen, 1998; Kenny, 1993; Lamb, 2005), which echoes a general neglect of learners' voices through education in many contexts including the one under investigation. According to Rudd et al (2006), students are seldom consulted and their voices remain largely unheard. In the words of Brooker and Macdonald (1999), "most often in curriculum-making practices in the Western schools, student voices have generally been marginalised. At best, learners' opinions are sought only after significant decisions...have already been made and the curriculum has been determined by officially approved persons" (p.83). Klein (1989, cited in Brooker & Macdonald, 1999), argues that curriculum has tended to be something 'planned for' and 'done to' the students. Locally, my own observation as a language instructor at the tertiary level in Oman for over a decade is that learners' voices are, too, seldom considered. The dominant perception amongst teachers is that learners are incapable of making decisions about their own learning. Experience has also showed that many teachers dismiss the potential use of learners' voices because they believe that students' voices are either mostly personal or useless to teaching. As such, students are not usually involved in decisions made about the content of language courses, how such courses are to be delivered, nor how learning gains are to be assessed. Listening to students' voices is simply interpreted as and translated into offering the students preferences over choice of learning peers and topics, such as in the end-of-semester presentations, which is far from being sufficient in today's language classrooms. Furthermore, the context lacks a system for investigating learners' perceptions of themselves as learners, their abilities, roles in and responsibility for learning and of the learning environment as a whole – hence the current investigation. Passivity then grows stronger in the learners as they progress through the education ladder, for most language programmes, according to Breen and Mann (1997) and Little (1996), are not autonomy supportive.

Nevertheless, works by, for instance, Dam (1995), Ellis (1998), Lamb (2005, 2006), Sinclair (1999) and Dahl (1995), suggest that learners are capable of expressing their thoughts, describing their learning as well as managing their own learning in such a way that gives indications of their beliefs, metacognitive knowledge/awareness and perceptions of learning. According to Dahl (1995), "voices can be heard and understood, they are not obscure and hidden, too soft to be documented" (p.130). To summarise, the literature suggests that

learners are indeed able to express their voices and influence what happens in the classroom but they do not often have the opportunity to do so.

3.3. Learners' perceptions

It is not my intention to separate perceptions from voices or to view them as a construct in their own right, but rather as one aspect of students' voices besides beliefs, perspectives and metacognitive knowledge.

3.3.1. Defining learners' perceptions

Learners' perceptions are rarely distinguished in the literature from other interrelated concepts such as learners' beliefs and attitudes (Wesely, 2012). Schunk and Meece (1992) define students' perceptions as thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about persons, situations and events. They view perceptions as factors that are influenced by personal attributes and situational cues which affect one's own behaviours and how he/she perceives the actions of others in the environment. Perceptions of learning, according to Benson and Lor (1999), are what the learner thinks the objects and processes of learning *are*. Like beliefs, perceptions are understood as relational and responsive to context and are changing over time rather than static. In the context of foreign language learning, perceptions of learning can be viewed as what the learner thinks a foreign language *is* and the processes involved in learning such a language *are*.

Wesely (2012), on the other hand, draws a slight distinction between perceptions and beliefs. For her, beliefs relate to what learners think about themselves, about the learning situation and about the target community, and have often been assumed to be more overarching and pervasive than perceptions, which tend to focus on specific experiences. The interrelated nature of these concepts is therefore clearly manifested in how they are closely defined in the literature. As such, it is not the intention of this study to view these concepts as different constructs, but rather as closely related and together they form learners' voices.

3.3.2. Learners' epistemological beliefs

Recent research in applied linguistics has emphasised the significance of learners' and teachers' educational beliefs and assumptions for their classroom conducts (Kohonen, 2006). Beliefs are defined by Kalaja & Barcelos (2003, cited in Kohonen, 2006) as "opinions and

ideas that learners (and teachers) have about the task of learning a second/foreign language” (p. 37). According to Benson and Lor (1999), beliefs are concerned with what the learner holds to be true about the language and how it is learned. They are relational, responsive to context and are made manifest in approaches to learning.

There has also been a growing interest in identifying how students conceptualise knowledge and learning (which is what epistemological beliefs are) and the influence of such conceptualizations on issues like approaches to learning and attainment. One of the research pioneers in epistemological beliefs is Schommer (1990, 1994). She views epistemological beliefs as a complex, multidimensional construct, consisting of a system of relatively independent beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning. Jehng, Johnson & Anderson (1993) defined epistemological beliefs as “socially shared intuitions about the nature of knowledge and the nature of learning ... a person’s epistemological beliefs establish a context within which intellectual resources are accessed and utilized” (p.24). Perry (1968, cited in Schommer, 1990) suggested that students go through stages of development of epistemological beliefs. In the early stages, students view knowledge as either right or wrong and believe that authority figures know the answer. They are also found to enter college with the beliefs that knowledge is simple, certain, and handed down by authority, while in the later stages of their college study, students realise that there are multiple possibilities for knowledge. Research then found that some students have a predominant belief that intelligence is a fixed entity, whereas others believe it is incremental- that is, it can be improved, and learning is quick or all-or-none.

Schommer (1990, 1994) addressed two main dimensions of the nature of knowledge: *structure* (simple vs. complex) and *source* (handed down by authority vs. coming from reasoning). For the nature of learning, there are also two dimensions of belief: speed of learning (quick vs. gradual) and ability to learn (innate and fixed vs. can be improved over time). Although essential, such information about learners is not usually available to teachers such signifies the importance of investigating how learners perceive knowledge and how it is developed. I will say more about the significance of research on students’ perceptions in section (3.3.5) below.

3.3.3. Dimensions of perceptions

Research has identified various dimensions of students’ perceptions. These include students’ perceptions of themselves as learners and of the learning situation (Wesely, 2012). Much

earlier, Schunk and Meece (1992) identified a number of types of students' perceptions which operate in the classroom. These include:

- **Self-perceptions:** which involve perceptions of students' own abilities, self-concepts, goals, competence, effort, interests, attitudes and emotions.
- **Social perceptions:** which refer to students' perceptions of their peers' abilities, self-concepts, goals, etc.
- **Perceptions of various qualities of their teachers.**
- **Perceptions of tasks and other classroom factors** such as task difficulties, effective learning strategies and environmental factors which help or hinder learning.

Research on language teaching and instructional processes has committed itself to exploring learners' perceptions of control, roles, power, competence, attributions, teachers, peers and metacognitive knowledge (Benson, 2007, 2011; Lamb, 2005; Nicolaides, 2008; Schunk, 1992; Wenden, 1998, 1991). From an information-processing perspective, Schunk (1992) views learners' perceptions as types of metacognitive processes which he categories into two types: one type helps learners to regulate activities necessary for learning, and includes planning, organizing information and monitoring one's level of understanding; and the other type is to do with what learners know and do not know about the material being learned and the process involved in learning it.

As far as the present study is concerned, students' perceptions of specific issues about their language learning and teaching in tertiary education are explored, which is seen as an important dimension (Moore, 2010), yet missing in my context. The areas investigated include students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibilities for language learning as well as those of the teacher, how they perceive themselves as learners in and outside the classroom, their perceptions of competence in language learning in and outside the classroom, the concept of control, and metacognitive knowledge. The later concept is explored through its basic components which include knowledge about self, task, strategies and the learning environment (Wenden, 1998, 1991; Sinclair, 1999). However, an important contribution of this study should be the cultural aspect of the investigation, i.e., how students perceive and understand language learning and teaching in *their* context. In other words, the research should offer insight into how autonomy (detailed below) is perceived and practised

by learners in their context and how such perceptions are influenced by the type of social and cultural context in which learning and teaching takes place.

3.3.4. *Learners' perceptions of their roles*

Another aim of the present study is to explore how students in the context under study perceive their abilities as learners as well as their roles in and responsibility for language learning. Students' perceptions of their roles in learning have been recognised as a key issue in and an important determiner of effective learning (see for example Benson & Lor, 1999; Chan, 2001; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Kinchin, 2004; Kohonen, 2006; Schommer, 1990).

Research has showed that learning experiences of the learners contribute to how they perceive their own roles in learning as well those of the teacher. Kohonen (2006), for example, emphasises the importance of finding out how learners perceive their roles as language learners in and outside the classroom in terms of rights, duties and opportunities and helping them to reflect on such roles, for reflection is essential for awareness-raising. However, the exploration of learners' role in and responsibility for language learning in any learning context can be problematic if the investigation was limited to or was largely based on observable behaviours rather than (also) on the learners' beliefs and perceptions. Learners may well be aware of the importance of taking on an active role in learning (when investigated, that is) but choose to exhibit a rather passive role as a response to the teaching methods, task demands or as a result of the learners' conceptions of the importance of the learning task itself. Chan (2001), for example, surveyed the beliefs of a class of 20 students in Hong Kong about the aims of and motivation for language learning, perceptions of the teacher's and their own roles, learning styles and preferences and perceptions of autonomous learning. Despite the prevalent view which characterises learners in Hong Kong as syllabus dependent, lacking in intellectual initiative, inclined to favour rote learning, her results showed that learners have a highly positive attitude towards learning autonomously and definite views of the nature of learner autonomy and its demands. Another study which merits attention in this regard is the 'concept cartoons study' by Kinchin (2004). She investigated beliefs of 349 students from two secondary schools in south-east England about their preferred role as learners. The results indicated an overwhelming preference among the students for a *constructivist learning environment* where they play an active role as 'builders of understanding' rather than passive receivers of information. Finally on the importance of studying learners' beliefs and perceptions in learning, Kohonen (2006) maintains that since learners' conceptions about their roles are unconscious and covert, they can easily remain

unnoticed and can be taken for granted, yet they exercise a powerful invisible influence on the learning/teaching culture. The following section says more on the significance of learners' perceptions in learning.

3.3.5. Significance of learners' perceptions

The motivation for studying learners' perceptions and beliefs (including my own study) has been the assumption that any mismatch between learners' perceptions and expectations of learning and those of the programme can inhibit students' learning and success in higher education (Chan, 2001; Jehng et al, 1993; Kinchin, 2004; Kohonen, 2006; Moore, 2010; Schommer, 1999). In this regard, Moore (2010) calls for the investigation of students' conceptualizations of higher education upon entry to higher education institutions so that they are psychologically and academically supported and are ready to cope with the demands of the new learning environment. In addition, studies on learners' epistemological beliefs and cognitive activities revealed that epistemological beliefs do influence performance and comprehension in important and predictable ways (Chan, 2003; Schommer, 1990). In the same vein, Benson and Lor (1999) argue that the literature on second language acquisition is inadequate to capture the complex nature of learner's thinking about language learning and propose an analytical framework based on three levels: **conceptions, beliefs and approaches**. They sketch the relationship between the three variables as follows: conceptions of language and learning are proposed as a higher level category which 'condition' specific beliefs, while approaches to learning (surface vs. deep) are seen as a manifestation of learners' beliefs in specific contexts. The underlying assumption is that the information on learners' beliefs and perceptions of their own learning may help predict the type of approaches students may adopt in learning. As such, understanding learners' perceptions of learning at an early stage of their enrolment into higher education (as postulated by Moore, 2010) and the relationship between their perceptions, beliefs and learning approaches (as suggested by Benson and Lor, 1999), is of a paramount importance. This involves understanding students' epistemological beliefs as well as their conceptions of their abilities as well as their roles in and responsibility for learning. It also involves exploring students' voices, autonomy and self-direction in higher education.

Essential learner data like this is *not* usually readily available to teachers and so they tend to plan their teaching in a way that reflects their own beliefs as well as those of the programme.

Such planning, however, might be in a conflict with students' beliefs. In this respect, Kinchin (2004) warns against creating a mismatch between the teachers' classroom philosophy and students' learning approaches (epistemological gap), for such a mismatch is anticipated to have a negative effect on the quality of learning.

The foundation of research on learners' perceptions has been laid by the contemporary cognitive theories of learning, motivation and instruction which view learners as active processors of information rather than passive recipients of knowledge. As such, there is no automatic link between the information presented and how it is perceived by learners (Schunk & Meece, 1992). Perceptions on the part of the learner have important theoretical, pedagogical and programmatic implications (Tse, 2000). Theoretically, as Tse (2000) argues, certain attitudes and beliefs derived from students' perceptions can have a profound impact on the affective state of the learners, which plays a central role in the learning process. Pedagogically, students' opinions and attitudes toward specific classroom activities and interactions can affect decisions on how best to modify or employ various methods and techniques in the classrooms.

Another motivation to researching learners' perceptions has been their role in explaining achievement-related outcomes beyond the effect of students' abilities and environmental factors. Wesely (2012), has put together a useful review of the current literature on learners' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes which establishes a clear link between perceptions and learning outcomes. Perceptions also play an important role in mediating teaching (Barkhuizen, 1998) as they provide unique insights into the important factors which influence learning such as motivation, level of anxiety, etc. Research has also found that learners' perceptions of learning tasks and the overall goals set for learning do not always match teacher's assumptions (Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Wesely, 2012) and often surprise the teachers (Barkhuizen, 1998). Kumaravadivelu (1991) postulates that "the more we know about the learners' personal approaches and personal concepts, the better and more productive our interventions will be" (p.107).

Research on learners' perceptions becomes more desirable when attempts are made to explore how students perceive their learning in contexts, like the one under study, where learners' voices are not commonly considered in programme planning and teaching. I would therefore like to argue that many of the obstacles which face both teachers and learners may be overcome if learners' perceptions are properly explored, understood and seriously

integrated into planning and teaching. At the micro-level, teachers would be in a better position to support their learners and understand potential obstacles of learning, while at the macro-level, understanding learners' perceptions would enable us to consider the challenges which any pedagogical shift can face (Lamb, 2008).

Finally, the little research which is available on learners' beliefs and perceptions of their own learning may help predict the types of approach (surface vs. deep) students may adopt in learning as well as their level of understanding. However, the nature of such a relationship is not yet clear. Researchers such as Chan (2003), acknowledge the lack of research on how epistemological beliefs relate to learning approaches. She emphasised that "studies exemplifying the relationship of epistemological beliefs and study approaches are still scarce, particularly in non-Western culture contexts, resulting in a great demand for such studies" (p.39). The present study therefore responds to such a call for further research in this area by attempting to explore students' perceptions of language learning in their local context and how such perceptions might impact their learning approaches.

3.3.6. Research on learners' voices, beliefs and perceptions in Oman

A large proportion of the literature available on ELLT (English Language Learning and Teaching) in Oman has tended to focus on pedagogical aspects of language learning and teaching such as curriculum, modes of delivery, assessment, etc., using quantitative methodologies. While the significance of research in these areas cannot be overlooked, studies which look specifically into the 'inner' voices of students, i.e., the voices which encompass the second and third types of students' voices suggested by Lamb (2005) (see section 3.2.2 above), are seriously lacking in the Omani context. These include studies on students' involvement in and capacities for managing their own language learning (type two) as well as their struggle for having a greater voice and autonomy in their learning (type three). Furthermore, research on students' metacognitive knowledge (knowledge one has about learning) is also lacking. Methodologically, much of the available studies tend to draw on positivist traditions and employ quantitative surveys as means for data collection and analysis (see below for example studies).

In fact, in Oman there has been a notable paucity of publishing in ELLT in general, and on learners' voices and autonomy in particular. Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011b) report on a study in which they investigated the potential reasons for such a phenomenon amongst ELLT

teachers at tertiary level in Oman. Amongst the top reasons for such scarce publishing included teachers being overburdened with administrative and technical responsibilities and assigned a heavy teaching load. Another reason was the perceptions some of the teachers held about publishing “as being a demanding and challenging process due to reasons related to their professional competence or the work culture and environment they belong to” (p. 2).

Other reasons which may explain why research on areas such as learner autonomy and voices is lacking could include lack of attention paid to such areas in the educational context in Oman. This in itself may be related to the intricate nature of such issues and ways of exploring them.

In sections (3.2) and (3.3) above, I have discussed the significance of students’ voices and perceptions to the study of ELLT and emphasised that learners can (and should) have an important contribution to their own (language) learning. This research therefore aims to explore students’ **voices about language learning in their context**, including their perspectives on **how they may learn better**.

It is timely and useful at this stage to review some of the studies which I was able to locate on EFL students’ perceptions and beliefs about various aspects of their language learning in the Omani context. To begin with, as far as students’ opinions are concerned, Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011a) surveyed the opinions of 141 freshmen at Sultan Qaboos University about the implementation of the Basic Education System at the school level, which was first implemented in 1997. The investigation targeted students’ opinions regarding the effectiveness of the new system by looking at certain aspects of their language learning including development in their language proficiency, class-size, classroom interaction, diversity in the topics learned, methods of teaching and evaluation, etc. Based on students’ opinions, the authors concluded that there had hardly been any significant improvements in students’ language proficiency after the implementation of the new reform mainly due to implementation shortcomings.

One of the few studies which have surveyed Omani students’ attitudes towards the use of IT as a means of fostering language learning was the one by Al-Jahwari (2012). This study aimed at surveying Omani undergraduates’ attitudes toward the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication and Web-forums to improve their reading and writing skills in English. The results showed that students generally expressed a positive attitude towards both modes of communication and no significant difference in attitude was noted between male and female students.

As for perceptions, Al-Hajri (2013) investigated students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the assessment methods employed in their college foundation English curriculum. The overall findings showed that students perceived assessment as generally effective but they were ill-informed about its content and nature. Students also wanted to have different methods and instruments of assessment in their learning.

Another study on students' perceptions was conducted by Al-Bulushi and Al-Issa (2012). They surveyed university students' perceptions about the strategies which they thought had helped them to improve their English when they were at school. The students reported using a variety of strategies and sources to improve their English. However, students reported adopting more passive or receptive skills which involved listening and reading than active or productive strategies, which is considered by the authors as counter to the ELLT policy in Oman. The study calls for teachers in any EFL context to create opportunities for their students to help them practise their written and spoken English too in and outside the classroom.

Al-Saadi, Tonawanik and Al-Harthy (2013) also explored EFL Omani students' self-perception of the difficulties they faced in speaking English. The study was conducted with students at the school level. The findings showed no significant variation in perceptions amongst the students gender-wise but they perceived themselves as generally having difficulty expressing themselves using English.

The study by Al-Barashdi (2012) is an example of the few studies which have attempted to gain access to students' deeper thinking and strategies. It aimed at exploring the types and range of strategies which first year students employed when processing reading texts and solving comprehension problems. The findings showed that students perceived vocabulary as the main difficulty in comprehension while syntactic elements of the text were not thought to cause a major difficulty. In addition, students reported using a number of solving strategies when handling reading in English.

Finally, the study by Ali (2012) investigated teachers' and students' beliefs and assumptions about a CALL programme at a tertiary education college in Oman. The study revealed that the greater majority of both the students and teachers viewed the CALL programme as

interesting, motivating but could be more useful and effective by allotting more time and facilities and incorporating smart boards and blackboard platforms into assessment.

Methodologically, while these studies remain useful in the sense that they offer insights into the breadth and depth of the ELLT research in Oman as well as the types and nature of the issues and challenges which (language) learning in Oman is facing, they remain limited in number, as Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011b) contend, and tend to over rely on positivist traditions and quantitative methodologies. With the exception of the study by Al-Hajri (2013), which employed a mixed-method approach whereby a questionnaire was utilised to survey students' perceptions coupled by gender-specific focus groups to glean qualitative data, all other studies employed a pure quantitative approach to data collection and analysis. In chapter four (see section 4.4), I offer a critical review of the dominant research methodologies within the field of language learning and argue that drawing on positivist traditions when attempting to research students' beliefs and perceptions can raise serious concerns about the validity of such methods, and thus their results . As such, I make the case for a more learner centred form of qualitative enquiry.

Although employing a different methodology to the one utilised by my study, the above cited studies still link to my study from the viewpoint that they privilege students' opinions and perceptions and contend that students can have a say in what and how they learn, and that their voices are essential in making learning more effective. Such an ethos needs to be encouraged in the context under investigation.

3.4. Learner autonomy

This section on learner autonomy is the last but an important part of the literature review chapter, for it is a focal point in the present investigation. Drawing on my research questions, I will attempt in this section to reflect on some of the often-cited definitions of autonomy as well as some of the recent discussions, arguments as well as debates in the literature such as the argument for autonomy in language learning, the role of metacognitive knowledge in autonomy, autonomy in non-Western contexts and the potential constraints on the development of learner autonomy. I will finally review critically some of the studies on learner autonomy in the Omani context and the Arab world, highlighting areas of greater theoretical and methodological connections as well as gaps to my study.

3.4.1. Defining learner autonomy

Over the last thirty years, learner autonomy has become one of the major research interests for scholars in the field of second language learning. As an approach and way of thinking, it has gained wide popularity among educators and practising teachers (Benson, 2011; Benson & Voller, 1997; Dam, 1995; Little, 1991; Pemberton et al, 1996; Pemberton et al, 2009).

Defining autonomy, however, is not an easy task (Benson, 2009; Chan, 2001; Reinders, 2010) due to its multidimensionality (Benson 20011) and complex nature (Little, 1991; Paiva & Braga, 2008). As such, it may be both easier and more meaningful from a pedagogical viewpoint, as Reinders (2010) argues, to attempt a definition of the behaviour that characterises autonomy instead, which I will attempt in the few lines below. In the field of language learning, autonomy was first defined by Holec (1981) as the learners' ability to take charge of their own learning. The term 'ability' in Holec's definition is understood as a "potential capacity to act in a given situation - in our case learning - and not the actual behaviour in that situation" (p.3). Holec defines the autonomous learner as someone who has the capacity to exercise some control over the learning process in terms of determining the objectives of his/her own learning, choosing the content, selecting the techniques and methods of learning, monitoring his/her own progress and evaluating what has been acquired. In a seminal text, Little (1991) added cognitive factors to the characterization of the autonomous learner. These include a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, independent action, psychological relation to the process and content of his or her learning, and finally transferring what he or she has learned to wider contexts.

Nevertheless, in a recent critical article, Reinders (2010) has critiqued the above definitions by Holec (1981) and Little (1991) for missing out on the role of 'consciousness' in the learning process. According to Reinders (2010), the previous definitions of autonomy regard autonomy as a 'capacity' and 'ability' and tend to ignore the actual action of the learner as, he continues, having the ability to do something but not doing it is hardly useful.

A further cognitive dimension to the definition of autonomy has been suggested by Sinclair (1999). She defines autonomy as the learners' capacity to make 'informed' decisions about their learning. She argues that autonomous learners are not only able to make choices but also are able to provide 'rationale' for their choices and describe 'alternative' strategies which they could have used. In other words, they are conscious about what, how and why they are

learning. However, Sinclair (1999) finds observable behaviour to be a poor indicator of autonomy. My own view of autonomy, and on which the present investigation of learner autonomy is based, is that it is difficult to investigate autonomy based on the observable behaviours of learners, for autonomous acts in most cases are context-bound. There are many contextual factors which determine the exhibition (or inhibition) of autonomous actions such as the learners' perceptions of his/her roles as well as those of the teacher, their assumptions about learning, the materials, motivation, classroom atmosphere, teaching design, teaching methods, etc. I base my understanding of autonomy on research findings cited throughout this thesis including Benson (2010, 2011); Breen and Mann (1997); Dam (1995); Lamb (2005, 2010); Little (1991); Pemberton et al (1996, 2009); Sinclair (1999); etc.

In the context of my study, therefore, autonomy will be investigated through the exploration of learners' own experiences in language learning in and outside the classroom, through their perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for language learning, and their approaches to language learning, again in and outside the classroom. With reference to Reinders' (2010) argument about the learners' actual actions, it would be methodologically and practically difficult to observe their autonomous actions given the constraints of the methodological design of the research as well as those of time.

Beyond such a debate over definitions, it is clear that autonomous learning goes beyond rote memorization of a series of facts to involve active and conscious metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about learning). This knowledge should enable learners to exercise some control over the learning process, and gradually achieve self-reliance and reduce their dependency on the teacher. I discuss how metacognitive knowledge links to autonomy in section (3.4.5) below.

3.4.2. Social dimensions of autonomy

The social aspect of autonomy has always been a prominent agenda item for research on autonomy in language learning (Benson, 2011; Murray, 2014; Smith & Ushioda, 2009). This is mainly because autonomy does not take place in isolation but, on the contrary, is being increasingly recognised as a social construct or a construct of constructs where individuals actively interact with one another and with the environment surrounding them (Tassinari, 2008). Riley (2009) postulates that "the overall thrust of the work conducted over the last decade or so has been to show that becoming autonomous is an essentially social business"

(p.45). In the same vein, Jimenez-Raya et al (2007) maintain that the promotion of autonomy is inescapably linked to belonging, which is the individual's perception of him/herself being involved or committed to their social groups. Within the language learning and teaching arena, Murray (2014) has edited a valuable volume which explores the social dimensions of autonomy in language learning. The chapters included in this volume emphasise that autonomy in language learning is socially mediated, constituted and also constrained and is best developed in contexts which encourage *interdependence* and collaboration between learners.

The concept of 'dialogue' is of special relevance to my current research on learner autonomy, for learners' voices were essentially 'socially' constructed through the dialogue they engaged in in the various reflective group conversations they had (see chapter four for more details on research methods). In this respect, Vygotsky (1986, as cited in Riley, 2009) has demonstrated that reflection is essential to learning and it consists of an internal dialogue between the self and 'me', between the individual and the member of society. As such, according to Riley, such an interpersonal dialogue remains particularly essential for developing the skills for creating a more effective dialogue and social interaction amongst individuals. Either taking place in the classroom or in the wider community outside the classroom, the concept of 'social space' (Murray, 2014) is now recognised as a key factor for the promotion (or hindrance) of social dialogue amongst individuals (including learners).

Within the classroom environment, dialogue, either amongst learners or between learners and their teachers, constitutes an essential element of the 'dialogic' or social interaction which is necessary for the promotion of autonomy in learners. However, the kind of dialogue, decisions and choices learners are making in relation to managing their own learning (and hence promoting and exercising their autonomy) will very much depend on the social interaction and cultural influences and the ways learners respond to such influences. According to Murray (2014), such social and cultural influences stem mostly these days from social media and popular cultures. It follows then that such interdependence and interaction may mean that the development of autonomy in learners presupposes its development in teachers (Little, 1995). (I will elaborate the concept of teacher autonomy further in section 3.4.4 below). Regardless of the claim that the development of learner autonomy is dependent on teacher autonomy, the current interest in researching the connections between learner and teacher autonomy reflects the degree to which learner autonomy is now viewed as socially and institutionally contextualised. I will refer to this very argument in the course of my data discussion and interpretation in this thesis (see chapter seven).

In short, beside other dimensions of autonomy such as political, emotional and, more recently spatial, learner autonomy is also increasingly recognised as a social capacity which is developing in contexts of learner interdependence and collaboration.

3.4.3. The argument for autonomy in language learning

Autonomy in language teaching and learning has seen a remarkable growth since the turn of the century and become part of the current orthodoxy of language teaching and learning research (Benson, 2009). Reinders (2010) counted at least 17 conferences dealing with autonomy or related topics in less than two years. No doubt that such popularity and attention to autonomy in language teaching and learning are motivated by the fact that autonomous learners are likely to be successful learners (Chan, 2001a, b; Chik, 2007; Dam, 1995; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Krishnan & Hoon, 2002; Littlewood, 1999; Murray & Kojima, 2007; Smith, 2003; Zhoulin, 2007).

There are many cogent arguments which support the adoption of an autonomy-based approach in learning. To begin with, Lamb and Reinders (2005) consider that the development of autonomy in today's learners has become essential as a response to the numerous changes which have taken place in recent times, not only in education but also in other domains of life. They postulate that change has taken place in three main dimensions: the learner, teaching institutions and society as a whole. They give the following specific examples of changes:

- emergence of ICT and its personal, educational and social applications (and implications)
- unprecedented availability of information
- impact of globalisation
- political, economic and pedagogical developments world-wide
- expansion in student enrolment
- changing needs of the work place
- need to respond to new technologies
- need to respond to changing learner needs
- increasing need for communication between people from different parts of the world.

In the same vein, Crabbe (1993) argues in favour of autonomous learning from three perspectives: ideological, psychological and economic. Similarly, Grow (1991) observes that “the goal of the educational process is to produce self-directed, lifelong learners” (p.127), while Kenny (1993) forcefully argues for a much larger place of autonomy in education.

Grow’s and Kenny’s views of the role of education are also echoed by Trim (1997, cited in Benson, 2010) who stresses that the role of the school should not only enable pupils to reach a worthwhile level of proficiency in their subject matters, “but also to equip learners with the attitudes and skills which will enable them to continue to plan, carry out and monitor their own learning once all the supporting and disciplinary structure of institutionalised learning are withdrawn” (p.95).

Pedagogically, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. Dickinson (1995) notes that taking an active, independent attitude to learning and undertaking a learning task independently are beneficial to learning, as personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. In the same vein, Little (1991) stresses that “when responsibility for the learning process lies with the learner, the barriers to learning and living that are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures should not arise” (p.8).

Finally, Littlewood (1999) and Benson (2011) postulate that learners need to develop the ability to exercise control over learning, i.e., to become autonomous. This view is also justified by the need to develop the ability to continue learning after their formal education. This view of learner autonomy as an essential aid for lifelong learning is also supported by Cotterall (1995), who stresses that helping learners become autonomous should be regarded as an essential goal of all learning, as no student will have teachers throughout his/her life. It has therefore been widely accepted that autonomy in learning is a key for achievement as well as a goal and outcome of higher education (Fazey & Fazey, 2001).

3.4.4. Connections between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy

The interest in teacher autonomy and its connections to learner autonomy has stemmed from the social view of autonomy which assumes that autonomy develops through interdependence as well as dialogic and social interactions between learners and their teachers (Benson, 2011, Little, 1995). The role of the teacher is hence well recognised in the process of promoting autonomy in learners. In the words of Murray (2014), “the exploration of learner autonomy as

a phenomenon developing in contexts of learner interdependence and collaboration, dispelled notions of solitary learner learning without the help of a teacher” (p. 6).

A number of definitions have been offered of teacher autonomy in the field of language education. However, like learner autonomy, teacher autonomy is a highly complex concept and has been defined variously (Jimenez-Raya et al, 2007). There is no consensus among researchers and authors as to what teacher autonomy precisely means. Another area of debate in the field concerns the question of whether teacher autonomy is a pre-requisite to the development of learner autonomy.

The literature offers various definitions of teacher autonomy. Thavenius (1999, as cited in Benson, 2011, p.188) defines the autonomous teacher as the one who is able to reflect on his/her role and who can change it. For Thavenius, the autonomous teacher is the one who can help his/her learners become autonomous and who is independent enough to *let* his/her learners become independent too. Furthermore, Smith (2003) and McGrath (2000) emphasise the sense that teachers are also learners and it is their ongoing experiences of professional self-directed learning that contribute to their ability to promote autonomy in their learners. It is evident through these definitions that the concept of teacher autonomy is very much connected to learner autonomy, an argument which is further emphasised by Jimenez-Raya et al (2007). As such, they offer a common definition of both teacher and learner autonomy and view them within a broader social and political perspective. Their definition features the ‘*interconnectedness*’ of teacher and learner autonomy as follows:

“The competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation” (p.48).

Teacher autonomy has also been viewed as the ‘capacity’ which teachers have to control their own professional development within the constraints imposed on their practice and the way they respond to such constraints (Benson, 2011, Lamb, 2000).

Pedagogically, experience showed that in the school as well as tertiary education context, learner autonomy cannot exist in a vacuum, i.e., the teacher will either support or hinder the development of autonomy in his/her learners. The framework of pedagogy for autonomy in language education proposed by Jimenez-Raya et al (2007) assumes that teachers need to

have experienced autonomy themselves in order to be able to understand it and support it. The definition above includes both teachers and learners – both have to question their assumptions about teaching and learning critically. That is, if teachers did not have the opportunity to experience autonomy in their own learning, they at least need the opportunity to reflect critically on their beliefs and practices, which is central to the development of teacher autonomy. Such critical reflection should also involve finding spaces for manoeuvre in relation to the internal as well as external constraints.

I will now turn to discuss basic components and requirements of autonomy: metacognitive knowledge and awareness.

3.4.5. Autonomy and metacognitive knowledge

Learners of different ages, experiences and varying levels of proficiency develop their own knowledge about learning. This knowledge influences two basic things in learners: a) their perceptions of and approaches to learning, and b) their expectations about the outcome of their learning efforts (Wenden, 1998). This knowledge which one has about his/her learning is referred to as ‘metacognitive knowledge’. For Wenden (1991), metacognitive knowledge includes beliefs, insights and concepts which learners have developed about language and language learning processes. So far, little research has explored metacognitive knowledge and its role in learning (Lamb, 2005). According to Reinders (2010), “the relationship between metacognitive awareness and learning gains has yet to be explored” (p.43). Such lack of research in this area could be related to the complex and multifaceted nature of metacognitive knowledge itself, making it difficult to identify its interrelated constituents and, thus, access it in the learners. Another reason why research on metacognitive knowledge is seriously lacking is the absence of a clear, valid and empirical methodology for the exploration of such an area and its impact on learning in general, and language learning in particular. Research by Ellis (1998), Sinclair (1999) and Wenden (1998, 2001) is an example of few, but important, research available in this area. This research has investigated the possible role of metacognitive knowledge in autonomous learning. Similarly, Reinders (2010) asserts that in order for learners to take charge of their own learning, they need to be able to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning, i.e., they need to be aware of their metacognitive knowledge.

The literature usually categorises metacognitive knowledge according to whether it focuses on the learner (person knowledge), the learning task (task knowledge) or the process of learning and the strategies learners employ in learning (strategic knowledge) (Wenden, 1991; 1998). Person knowledge, is the general knowledge which learners have developed about themselves as learners and about the human factors which may facilitate or inhibit learning such as age, learning aptitude, motivation, learning and cognitive styles, personal traits (e.g., extrovert/introvert), etc. Task knowledge has three facets: a) what learners know about the purpose of the task, b) what they know about the nature of the task, and c) what they know about the task demands. Strategic knowledge refers to the general knowledge about what strategies are, why they are useful and how and when to use them. This type of knowledge plays an important role in processing and regulating learning rather than planning it. These three categories of metacognitive knowledge are further explored in this study.

But how can these three types of metacognitive knowledge be accessed and understood? The available literature tells us that there is a strong relationship between metacognitive knowledge and language learning but the nature of such a relationship is not yet clear. However, one thing is clear to me: learners themselves remain the main source of information on the nature of this relationship. The current research is therefore designed to investigate autonomy in language learning in the context under investigation by involving the students themselves in the investigation.

3.4.6. Constraints on learner autonomy

Autonomy development is not easy. It is a lengthy process, and its successful implementation is largely dependent on the context (Reinders, 2010). Teaching and learning (and hence the development of autonomy) are undoubtedly facilitated or constrained by personal as well as environmental factors (Chan, 2001; Littlewood, 1999; Smith, 2003; Vieira, 2003). As such, addressing constraints in teaching and learning contexts can contribute positively to understanding both the characteristics of learners as well as the teaching and learning environment and, thus, counteracting dominant educational practices (Vieira, 2003).

There are various types of constraints which can impede the development of autonomy in learners. These include internal (student-related) as well as contextual (relating to the learning, teaching and sociocultural context). Chan (2001), for example, considers cultural conventions, political aspirations of the society, knowledge and the attitudes which learners have about learning among the potential constraints on autonomy development, while

Littlewood (1999) lists cultural and educational traditions, learners' past experiences and the contexts in which learning takes place among the important factors which can influence autonomy development.

Pedagogically, curriculum and teaching methods are amongst the important factors which can greatly influence the development of an autonomous learning culture in any context. Teachers usually have a dominant role over learning, particularly in choice of content, modes of delivery and evaluation. However, one way to understand such (over)dominance may be through teacher's lack of confidence or trust in their students' capacity to take control over certain aspects of their learning, as maintained by Boud (1981). In the same vein, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) surveyed teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy at the Language Centre where the present study took place. Their findings showed that although teachers might appear to be positive about the desirability of students' involvement in their learning, they were not so about the 'feasibility' of such involvement, especially in relation to taking part in setting learning goals and selecting methods of assessment. Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) findings are also supported by a recent study by Shahsavari (2014) in the Iranian context. In this respect, Voller (1997) explains that teachers exercise their role in and control over language learning based on both the assumptions they make about language and language learning at the approach level. He suggests that roles in learning settings should be negotiated with the learners.

Vieira (2003) reports on other examples of challenges which the implementation and development of autonomy can face. Her findings show that dominant educational practices and institutional resistance are amongst the major impediments to autonomy. She notes:

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

Reporting on his experience with autonomy development in the Japanese context, Smith (2003) maintains that teachers' freedom to innovate may itself be constrained by lack of autonomy on the part of institution's and other stakeholders' requirements and/or expectations.

In short, autonomy development in learners can be constrained by contextual factors such as the environment in which learning and teaching takes place or by personal or learner-related constraints such as learners' past learning experiences.

3.4.7. Autonomy in non-Western contexts

In some writings, autonomy is claimed to be a Western concept and largely grounded in Western discourses on philosophy, psychology and education (Benson, 2011). Writers such as Crookall (1995) and Pennycook (1997) (both cited in Zhoulin, 2007) contend that autonomy is rooted in Western culture and it may conflict with non-Western educational traditions, which themselves may be an obstacle to the development of learner autonomy. However, due to the global spread of English language learning and teaching, there has been a great deal of discussion and debate in the literature on the relevance and appropriateness of autonomy to non-Western contexts and cultures. Much of the debate has centred on how learners and teachers in such contexts will react to the new approach in which teachers and learners are assigned different roles. But is the idea of learner autonomy ‘ethnocentric’ (Palfreyman, 2003) and an alien concept to non-Western contexts and learners such as Arabs and East Asians?

Recent literature suggests that learner autonomy can well be claimed as a universal notion (Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1999, 2000; Zhoulin, 2007). According to Adamson & Sert (2012), “learner autonomy appears to have been labelled as a western concept deeply influenced by native speakers’ ideology. This concept rejects styles of all non-western learners” (p.23). This ideology is argued as being “potentially insensitive and racist” (Adamson & Sert, 2012, p.23) towards Asian learners who are usually stereotyped as passive, and therefore ineffective learners (Adamson & Sert, 2012; Littlewood, 2000). In the same vein, Holliday (2003, cited in Benson, 2011) and Littlewood (2000) challenge this stereotype and argue that Asian learners (and so do Arab learners), although influenced by teacher-led and exam-oriented learning experiences, do have at their disposal critical and autonomous learning strategies. In support of this view, Littlewood (1999) asserts that “at the individual level, there are no intrinsic differences that make students in one group either less, or more, capable of developing whatever forms of autonomy are seen as appropriate to language learning” (p.88).

In the Islamic and Arabic culture, the notions of rights, choice and autonomy are deeply rooted in the Qur’anic teachings as well as educational philosophies and practices (Rayan, 2012). In chapter one (see section 1.2), I have contended that autonomy, whatever shape or version it takes, be it personal, intellectual, political, social, or educational, remains a basic human right which has been guaranteed and maintained by Islamic law (Shari’a) to all individuals in the society. In addition, Islamic educational system recognises the significance

of and encourages creative and critical thinking. Therefore, the question of whether autonomy is appropriate or applicable to the Arabic culture renders invalid, for there is a growing number of empirical studies on Arab (as well as East Asian learners) which show that learners in such contexts *do* in fact value the opportunity to take control of and direct their own learning. I cite some of these studies below as well as in the following section (3.4.6).

The collection of papers by Palfreyman & Smith (2003), for example, has been an important contribution to the debate on the relevance of learner autonomy to non-western contexts. The contributors to this volume have examined some of the assumptions and definitions of autonomy in different contexts which are often taken for granted and showed that autonomy could be fostered in learners using locally appropriate practices which are informed both by local knowledge and understandings (Palfreyman, 2003). Also, Chan (2001b), surveyed perceptions of a group of 30 first year undergraduate students at Hong Kong Polytechnic University about autonomous learning and readiness for such an approach to language learning. She found that learners generally have a positive attitude towards learner autonomy and responsibility in learning. In another study, Chan (2001a) also found that learner autonomy was indeed applicable at tertiary level classrooms in Hong Kong and the students appreciated autonomy as an important goal. In both of her studies, the students have had little or no autonomous learning experiences. Furthermore, Smith (2003) described the development of autonomous learning in his Japanese university students by involving them in a process of classroom culture change, building on a cycle of group activity and reflection. He explains that students need to be enabled in appropriate ways to exercise and develop the autonomy which they *already* possess. I have already touched upon Smith's (2003) 'strong version of autonomy' in my positionality (see chapter two, section 2.5) which is based on the assumption that instead of viewing learners as deficient in autonomy, they may already be autonomous and are capable of exercising this capacity.

3.4.8. Research on learner autonomy in Oman and the region

In this section, I will critically review a number of studies which have explored issues related to language learner autonomy in the Omani context in addition to examples of similar research conducted in other Arab countries, highlighting areas of greater connections to my study, gaps and also methodologies. These studies have been selected based on the relevance of the issues they investigated to learner autonomy.

As it is the case with research on learners' voices, beliefs and perceptions; research exclusively devoted to exploring learner autonomy or any of its components such as metacognitive knowledge is seriously lacking in the Omani context. In a previous review of learner autonomy in Oman (see Al-Saadi, 2011), I have contended that interest in learner autonomy in the Arabian Gulf region in general and Oman in particular is relatively new, and so it has not yet been thoroughly researched. In Oman, apart from individual papers presented at local ELLT conferences (the biggest of these is Oman International ELLT Conference which is organised by and held annually at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University), no empirical studies involving students have yet been completed. This is part of the overall paucity of publishing in ELLT in Oman, a phenomenon that has been discussed by Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011b). This can also be understood in light of the stereotypical image which some language teachers have about their students that they are not autonomous learners (Al-Kalbani, 2011) and, as such, while learner autonomy might be seen by some teachers as desirable in language learning, it remains unfeasible and unrealisable by the larger majority (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Shamsavari, 2014).

To my best knowledge, no other studies apart from the present study have yet been published on learner autonomy in Oman from the students' perspective. The handful studies which have been published on learner autonomy in the Omani context are either non-empirical or conducted from the teachers' perspective. These include Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), Al-Busaidi and Al-Mamaari (2014), Al-Shaqsi (2009), Al-Kalbani (2011), Al-Mahrooqi and Asante (2012).

To begin with, the studies by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Al-Busaidi and Al-Mamaari (2014) are examples of the studies which focused on teachers. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) investigated EFL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy at the Language Centre where the present study took place. They explored teachers' perceptions of the feasibility of their students' involvement in areas such as setting learning goals and selecting methods of assessment. Using the same teacher sample from the study by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), Al-Busaidi and Al-Mamaari (2014) examined EFL teachers' definitions of learner autonomy and the sources of their ideas. Based on the findings, teachers were found to define learner autonomy from different perspectives, reflecting their diverse experiences and perceptions about the concept. Some of the definitions were influenced by the teachers' classroom experience while others were based on their reading on learner autonomy.

Teachers also varied in the sources of their definitions, ranging from pre- or in-service teacher training to classroom practices.

In a small-scale study at the school level, Al-Shaqsi (2009) surveyed EFL teachers' beliefs and perceptions about learner autonomy. The results showed that teachers defined learner autonomy in terms of learning independently, self-evaluation, taking responsibility and cooperating. Furthermore, they were generally optimistic that their learners displayed autonomous behaviours.

Examples of non-empirical studies on learner autonomy in the Omani context include Al-Kalbani (2011) and Al-Mahrooqi and Asante (2012). Drawing on the ongoing debate in the literature about learner autonomy and its appropriateness or inappropriateness to certain cultures and contexts (Littlewood, 1999; Palfreyman, 2003; Smith, 2003), Al-Kalbani (2011) discusses the importance of establishing a definition of what the concept of learner autonomy might mean and entail in a given teaching and learning context. She also argues that learners are usually stereotyped by their teachers that they are not autonomous learners and, as such, no serious effort is made to promote autonomous learning skills in the students. Al-Mahrooqi and Asante (2012) discuss ways of promoting learner autonomy amongst EFL Omani students through cultivating a reading culture. They contend that

“Omani students, for example, are often accustomed to near-total dependence on the class teacher for their learning and are thus prone to shying away from the independent reading of prescribed texts ... This is helped by the absence of a reading habit in the entire families” (p. 481).

The authors therefore argue forcefully in favour of establishing public libraries across the country, setting up a reading-biased independent learning centre at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University and adopting reading-enhancing strategies in EFL courses.

Reading critically through the sample studies cited above, some important observations can be made. First of all, these studies are amongst the few ones in the Omani context which explicitly investigated issues related to learner autonomy. However, as I have stated earlier, almost all of the studies on learner autonomy have been conducted from the viewpoint of the teacher, making learners' voices almost missing in the Omani context.

The other observation is that the concepts of ‘learner autonomy’ and ‘independent learning’ are sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably in these studies. However, although not in all cases, the literature on learner autonomy distinguishes between the two concepts in terms of the manner in which each type of learning is carried out. Lamb (2005), for example, maintains that independent learning involves a learner working on his/her own *independently* of the teacher (for example in a self-access lab or at home), while autonomy looks into the ‘way’ in which such independence in learning can materialise. That is, the focus here is on the ‘aptitude’ and ‘willingness’ which the learner needs to have in order to be *able* to learn autonomously.

These are two areas where these studies and the present study differ conceptually, for my study explores learner autonomy as a capacity which students have for taking control of their own learning.

Methodologically, while the first two studies by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Al-Busaidi and Al-Mamaari (2014) employed mixed-method and qualitative approaches respectively to data collection and analysis, the one by Al-Shaqsi (2009) employed a pure quantitative approach. In such a case, the findings need to be taken with caution, for there were no qualitative data (from interviews, for example) to help understand or clarify the questionnaire findings. Furthermore, one of the limitations of this study which the author herself acknowledged was that since learner autonomy was encouraged in the new school curriculum, albeit in theory, the teachers in this study might have responded in a way that reflected such a policy. Finally, the studies by Al-Kalbani (2011) and Al-Mahrooqi and Asante (2012) employed a non-empirical, theoretical approach.

Beyond the Omani context, a number of publications can be found on students’ beliefs and perceptions about various aspects of learner autonomy in language learning. I will review briefly six empirical studies on learner autonomy conducted in different Arab countries including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Libya.

To begin with, Al Ghazali (2011b) investigated secondary school students’ beliefs about learner autonomy in language learning in the UAE. The author argues that given the different definitions and variations of learner autonomy, it is impossible to have one version of autonomy that can be applicable in all contexts and, as such, it becomes necessary to investigate learner autonomy from the viewpoint of the learners themselves in *their* context.

The findings highlighted the impact which the sociocultural context, economic features and curricular system have on students' understanding of autonomy in their context. The form of autonomy exhibited by students has been found to be influenced by their linguistic needs and learning agendas. Furthermore, students did not interpret autonomy as synonymous with total detachment or solitude; rather they believe teachers have facilitating roles in enhancing their autonomy. However, as it is the case in other contexts, teaching in the UAE is not always autonomy-supportive and, as such, the author argues that enhancing autonomy requires improving the learning context to allow more opportunities for students to express the autonomy which they already have.

Amongst the greater connections this study has to mine are, first, it embraces an insider perspective to understanding learner autonomy, i.e., that of the learner him/herself; second, it emphasises the importance of the contextual and sociocultural factors in understanding autonomy; and, third, an important part of the findings have been obtained and analysed qualitatively, allowing deeper interpretations and understanding of the students' voices.

Moving on to Saudi Arabia, I cite two studies which focused on students' beliefs and some aspects of autonomous learning. Aljehani (2011), for example, explored the beliefs which a group of student language teachers had about the role teachers and learners have in learning as well as the origins of and changes in such beliefs. In addition, the study explored the relationship between metacognitive knowledge, teacher-as-learner autonomy and commitment to promoting learner autonomy. The findings showed that the participating student teachers viewed their role as to support learners' development, facilitate their learning and raise their awareness about their roles in learning. The participants' beliefs also suggested that they were aware of themselves as managers of their own learning while at the same time acknowledging the value of different learning resources including the teachers. As is the case in my study, Aljehani's (2011) study also addressed the issues of roles, awareness and metacognitive knowledge as essential components of learner autonomy. Methodologically, the study employed qualitative methodology to data collection and analysis.

The other study was by Tamer (2013). The focus of this study was on assessing the readiness of a sample of Saudi university English students for autonomous language learning. Employing quantitative measures, the study polled the perceptions of 121 students on issues of responsibility, abilities, motivation and self-directed activities for independent language learning in and outside the classroom. The findings showed that although students exhibited

adequate level of motivation coupled with high confidence in abilities, they did not seem to be ready to initiate their own learning or take up responsibility for their own learning. The author hypothesises that this might be related to students' over-reliance on teachers and the spoon-feeding habit. As such, the study emphasised that the English curriculum should incorporate learner training to support the development of learner autonomy in the students. As an overall observation, it is hard to see through the design and quantitative approach which Tamer's (2013) study had employed how or why the students lacked the initiative for voluntary learning activities and were reluctant to taking up responsibility for their own learning. A follow up discussion with the students might have helped to understand the issues under investigation better. Finally, the concepts of learner autonomy and independent learning have been used in this study interchangeably. I have highlighted earlier in this section the differences between these two concepts.

Another study which looked into students' readiness for autonomous language learning was by Hozayen (2009). She investigated Egyptian freshmen students' readiness for autonomous language learning at the tertiary level. Unlike the findings suggested by Tamer (2013), learners in this study were generally found to have the confidence, ability and willingness to revise their own work and evaluate their own learning. While the learning context did not always support autonomy, the study concludes that the students were generally autonomous. However, such studies can be critiqued for heavily drawing on quantitative methodologies to data collection and analysis which, in most cases, can result in bizarre findings (Sinclair, 2000).

In the Syrian context, Othman (2009) reports on a study which looked into Syrian learners' and teachers' perspectives on and practices of learner autonomy in an EFL institute in Syria. Taking an ethnographic approach to investigation, the study explored how learner autonomy was perceived and practised by students and teachers and what socio-cultural factors affected such perceptions. The findings revealed informed understandings of both teachers and learners of the role they had in autonomous learning contexts. Amongst the factors which influenced the teachers' and students' perceptions were gender, past teaching/learning experiences, motivation and type of course/programme of study. The author finally argues that learner autonomy is best understood as a product of a constant interaction and negotiation between the various participants in the learning environment.

Finally, I review a recent study which has been completed on learner autonomy in the Libyan context by Elmahjoub (2014). In this study, the researcher explored the issue of whether learner autonomy was appropriate / inappropriate to the Libyan context by investigating how autonomy manifested itself in students' and teachers' perceptions and students' readiness to act autonomously. Taking an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis, the study showed that both teachers and learners held a positive attitude towards allowing learners the opportunities to take control of their own learning and working autonomously, respectively. The study also highlighted some constraints on the development of learner autonomy in the Libyan context such as materials, exams and length of lessons. The study concludes that after all, autonomy is realised in a contextually relevant form.

To conclude, I take the position that the quality of our pedagogies and educational practices, including how we perceive and practise learner autonomy, should be judged against the actual impact such pedagogies and practices have on learning and learners rather than simply through how they are preached in policy documents or exercised in the classroom. As such, my study considers students' *own* voices and experiences in the current investigation of learner autonomy in the Omani context.

3.5. Concluding remarks and reflection

The goal of this chapter was to define and try to understand the key concepts of the investigation in light of the available literature. It also aimed at providing a theoretical framework for the justification and exploration of learner autonomy and its constituents. To this end, I have defined the concept of voice and justified the importance of researching learners' voices which encompass (as defined in the context of this research) learners' perceptions, perspectives on improvement in their language learning context and metacognitive knowledge. Being the main area of investigation which can manifest itself through other research elements, learner autonomy has also been defined, justified and discussed as an important goal for education in general, and language education in particular. The social dimensions of autonomy as well as the connections between learner and teacher autonomy have also been discussed as prominent issues of discussion and debate in the literature.

While cannot be claimed an easy and straightforward task, conducting a critical literature review can be useful in a number of ways. Reflecting on my own experience of writing this chapter, the above review of the related literature has indeed helped me to realise the scope and range of studies that have been conducted in the area of my investigation, making it easier for me to locate my own study in the mainstream literature and justify its importance. Furthermore, I have become more critical about the methodologies I used in my study as well as those employed in other similar studies in the field. This has also facilitated reflection on the strengths and potential limitations of the various research designs and methodologies adopted in the reviewed studies. Finally, a well-reviewed literature can in general serve as an important reference point for the discussion of the findings in the forthcoming chapters in a dissertation or thesis.

Chapter Four

Research Methodology and Methods

4.1. Introduction

In the previous chapters I have described the background and context of my study, reviewed the related literature and outlined the specific aims and questions of the research. In this chapter, I describe *how* I intend to research the questions set for the study. I begin by introducing the overall philosophical, theoretical as well as methodological frameworks of my research. In particular, I describe the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of my research, the research design and the specific methods of data collection. I will also try to justify my choice of approaches and methods. This is seen as an essential part of any research from the viewpoint that in order for the readers of my thesis to have trust in the findings, they would need to know who the researcher is, understand what data have been collected, what methods have been used to collect these data, and what justifications are given for the choice of the methods or approaches employed. Crotty (1998) argues that the questions about what methodologies and methods we employ in the research as well as how we justify this choice of methods and methodologies are pivotal issues. He asserts that answers to these questions are essential for the observers of our research reports or readers of our theses to regard our outcomes and take them seriously. However, justifying choice of methods and approaches in research necessarily entails having good knowledge and a critical understanding of the different approaches and paradigms available. This has been stressed by Ormston et al (2014). They postulate that “it is advisable for researchers to have an understanding of different epistemologies, paradigms or traditions as a way of understanding the range of approaches available” (p.19).

I will therefore begin the chapter by describing the key philosophical issues in social research and the theoretical framework which underpins my research. I will then spell out my epistemological and ontological assumptions which, in turn, should justify the research methods I have adopted for my data collection. In a later section, I will attempt to problematize the prevalent methodological approaches in the mainstream research on EFL and learner autonomy and make the case for a qualitative inductive investigation which draws on constructivism as an epistemology. This epistemology together with the recent public

awareness of voice and autonomy in the context under study, which I described earlier in chapter one, will then form the basis for the two data collection methods; namely, First Language Reflective Group Conversations (L1-RGCs) and the Guided Reflective Journals. The chapter will also detail the specific procedures for gaining access to the research context, recruiting the research participants and conducting the RGCs together with other related issues such as how ethical issues such as anonymity of the research participants, confidentiality of the data obtained and being an insider researcher were dealt with. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by making some comments on the overall research design and reflecting on what I have learned through reading on and using research methods.

4.2. Key philosophical issues, paradigms and designs in social research

Making choices and justifying these choices are inevitably an important process in every research. A researcher will need to justify his/her choice of particular research methodologies and methods. Here I am reaching into the ‘assumptions’ which the researcher is making about reality and knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Crotty, 1998). These assumptions are the theoretical perspectives or positions which inform or justify our choice and use of research methodologies and methods. The literature on research methods usually refers to two philosophical assumptions or positions which researchers usually adopt and bring into their research task and upon which their research design, methods and procedures rest. These are **ontology** and **epistemology** and their variants. I will elaborate each assumption in turn and explain how my research positions itself within each.

4.2.1. *Ontology*

Ontology is the study of ‘being’ and is concerned with ‘what is’, i.e., the nature of existence and structure of reality as such (Crotty, 1998), or what it is possible to know about the world (Snape & Spencer, 200). The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods (2006) defines ontology as “a concept concerned with the existence of, and relationship between, different aspects of society such as social actors, cultural norms and social structures... Ontological issues are concerned with questions pertaining to the kinds of things that exist within society” (no page). For Richards (2003), ontology is the assumptions we make about the kind and nature of reality and what exists. Snape and Spencer (2003) also define ontology as the nature of the world and what we can know about it. Furthermore, Bryman (2012) introduces the concept of ‘social ontology’ which he defines as a philosophical consideration in research

which concerns the nature of social entities, i.e., whether these social entities are or can be objective entities which exist independently from social actors or rather they are social constructions in themselves built up from the perceptions, actions and interpretations of the individuals in society. Similarly, Ormston et al (2014) assert that ontology concerns the question “whether or not there is a social reality that exists independently from human conceptions and interpretations and, closely related to this, whether there is a shared social reality or only multiple, context-specific ones” (p.4). In short, ontology concerns our beliefs about the kind and nature of reality and the social world (what exists).

4.2.2. Epistemology

Epistemology in general is the assumptions we make about the kind or the nature of knowledge (Richards, 2003), or how it is possible to find out about the world (Snape & Spencer, 200). For Crotty (1998), epistemology is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It involves knowledge and, necessarily, it embodies a certain understanding of what that knowledge entails. He further explains that epistemology deals with the ‘nature’ of knowledge, its possibility (what knowledge is possible and can be attempted and what is not), its scope and legitimacy. Similarly, but with a particular reference to the contrasting views about how natural and social worlds should be studied, Bryman (2012) defines epistemology as “an issue [concerning] the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline” (p.13). He further explains that epistemology concerns the question of whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences.

To further explain what epistemology is about, I cite Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) as saying that epistemology is about the assumptions which one makes about “the very bases of knowledge – its nature and form, how it can be acquired and how communicated to other human beings” (P.7). Furthermore, the authors stress how the kind of epistemological assumptions which we make or hold about knowledge profoundly affect *how* we go about uncovering knowledge of social behaviour. Here they refer to the decisions which the researcher will need to make about the kind of method(s) he/she will be using in their research as per their epistemological assumptions. That is, if knowledge, on the one hand, is viewed as hard, objective and tangible, this demands of the researcher an observer role together with an allegiance to the methods of natural science such as testing, measuring, etc. If knowledge, on the other hand, is viewed as personal, subjective and unique, then this

imposes on the researcher a rejection of the methods used by natural science and a greater involvement with their participants.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further expand our understanding of the concept of epistemology in research. They maintain that epistemology is about the beliefs which the researcher holds about the kind and nature of knowledge and how it should be studied. These beliefs shape how the researcher sees the world and acts in it. For Denzin and Lincoln, the researcher is bound within a net of epistemological, ontological as well as methodological premises, which they term a 'paradigm'.

Also relevant to our discussion about epistemology are the three main issues highlighted by Snape and Spencer (2003) around which there is debate in social science. These issues are as follows:

1. The first issue of debate concerns the relationship between the researcher and phenomena or behaviour being researched. In other words, the debate centres on whether the researcher should (or can, in the first place) distance him or herself from the phenomena or behaviour being researched. This necessarily affects how objective the research is seen or can be.
2. The second issue concerns what constitutes 'truth' or 'independent reality'. That is to say, is truth static and absolute and always matches our observations and readings of the natural world or is rather socially constructed through consensual ways.
3. The final area of debate which Snape and Spencer highlight concerns the ways in which knowledge is acquired. In other words, is knowledge acquired through *induction* where patterns, associations and meanings are derived through our observations of the world around us or rather through *deduction* where hypotheses and meanings are arrived at theoretically through logic and reason. But how do these two processes differ? In an inductive process, evidence is used to arrive at conclusions whereas in a deductive process evidence is used to support already established conclusions. It is worth noting here that social research in general subscribes to the inductive process while natural science subscribes to the deductive process. Nevertheless, such a distinction, as maintained by Snape and Spencer (2003), is not always clear cut.

In short, ontology concerns our beliefs about the kind and nature of reality and the social world (what exists) while epistemology is about the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired. As described above, there exist various philosophical views and debates about the kind and nature of knowledge and truth (or epistemologies) and, as such, there exist various methodologies and frameworks employed in the study and understanding of this knowledge and truth. I will discuss these variant ontologies and epistemologies below and explain how they relate to my own positionality and research.

4.2.3. Types of ontology and epistemology

There are a range of ontological and epistemological positions, i.e., views of the world and knowledge. I will discuss the main ones herein and say which views and traditions I adopt as a researcher.

4.2.3.1. Positivism and Objectivism

Historically, positivist thinking can be traced back to the ancient western writings which focused on the importance of objectivity and evidence in the research for truth (Ormston et al, 2014). Positivism, which is an epistemological position, has been a recurrent theme of Western thought from the ancient Greek to the present but it is usually associated with the nineteenth century French philosopher Auguste Comte (Cohen et al, 2007; Wellington, 2000). Positivism focuses on the importance of objectivity and evidence in searching for truth. It also holds to the position that the world is unaffected by the researcher. In positivism, facts and values are very distinct, thus making it possible to conduct objective and value-free inquiry (Snape & Spencer, 2003). What this means is that the researcher should distance him/herself from any impact on their research findings. In addition, positivist epistemology holds the position that meaning and meaningful realities already reside in objects awaiting discovery and they exist apart from any kind of people's consciousness (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, according to this view, when we recognise objects around us, we simply discover meanings which have been lying in them all along. Furthermore, according to the positivism/objectivism paradigm, truth is static and is always objective. This truth is 'objectified' in the people being studied and this objective truth can be 'discovered' if we go about it in the right way. These 'right' ways of discovering knowledge about the world include, as proposed by positivist writers such as Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon, methods such as 'careful direct observation' and not deduction from abstract propositions (Ormston et

al, 2014). In other words, the essence of objectivism derives from the acceptance of natural science as a paradigm to study human knowledge and, necessarily, employs means and methods for data collections and data interpretations similar to those used in natural science including hypothesis testing, causal explanations and modelling. Finally, in this tradition, all knowledge about the world originates in our experiences and is derived through our senses and, as such, only phenomena (and hence knowledge) which can be confirmed by the senses can genuinely be regarded as knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Ormston et al, 2014; Wellington, 2000). Positivist knowledge, according to Wellington (2000) deemed to be objective, value-free, generalizable and replicable. This is why positivism is often being perceived as synonymous with ‘scientific method’.

4.2.3.2. Critiques to positivist thinking

Positivist and objectivist traditions and thinking have been subject to criticism since the early twentieth century. The rejection of the positivist thinking and tradition was based on the ground that if rules and laws are only derived from observation, then it is also quite possible that a future observation proves an exception to a current rule or law (Ormston et al, 2014). This view then gave rise to a second version of positivism known as **post-positivism**. The proponents of this view argue that knowledge of the world is produced through testing propositions rather than based on careful observation and hypotheses are to be derived first from theories and then tested empirically against observations (deductive reasoning). Finally, while positivism advocates that reality can be known ‘accurately’, the post-positivist approach maintains that reality can be known ‘approximately’.

4.2.3.3. Interpretivism and constructivism

In a total rejection to the positivist and objectivist traditions, opposing views of the world and knowledge then appeared known as **interpretivism** and **constructivism** (Bryman, 2012; Crotty, 1998). According to these views, there are ways of knowing about the world other than direct observation; namely, our perceptions and interpretations of the world around us. People use their perceptions to interpret what their senses tell them. As such, knowledge of the world is based on our ‘understanding’ which arises from our reflection on events rather than only on lived experiences (Ormston et al, 2014). In a clear opposition to the positivist and objectivist tradition, interpretivism and constructivism approaches argue that knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding (not discovering) the social world of the people

being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations, i.e., meanings are social constructed by the social actors in a particular context. (*This very position will later establish the ground upon which my research design and data collection methods rest*).

In the previous traditions we have seen that reality is unaffected by the research process and that the researcher has to distance him/herself from the findings. In this opposing tradition, however, researchers also construct meanings and interpretations based on those of their participants. In addition, the research process is considered to be largely **inductive** in the sense that the aim is to generate a theory from the data collected obtained than use the data to test an already existing theory. Another important distinction between the two approaches is that facts and values in interpretivism and constructivism approaches are *not* distinct and totally objective and that value-free research is *impossible*. In other words, the researcher cannot detach him/herself from the research; they inevitably become personally engaged in the research and, as such, findings are influenced by their perspectives and values. Finally, in interpretivist and constructivist traditions, the methods used in the study of the natural sciences are not suitable for the study of the social world and that social reality cannot be captured or portrayed accurately because there are different perceptions and understandings of reality (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Ormston et al, 2014; Snape & Spencer, 2003).

4.2.4. Quantitative and qualitative research

In terms of the general orientation to the conduct of social research, the literature usually refers to two types of research strategy or design: quantitative and qualitative. Much of the discussion here will focus on the qualitative research design for it is the research design which I have employed in this research.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative research goes beyond the presence or absence of quantification (Bryman, 2012). Quantitative research can be construed as a research strategy that emphasises quantification in the collection, analysis and presentation of data. The emphasis here is on theory testing (deductive approach) and is associated with positivism or empiricism epistemologies. Qualitative research, in contrast, can be construed as a research strategy which emphasises words and values rather than quantification in the collection, analysis and presentation of data. The emphasis here is on theory generation rather than theory testing (inductive approach). Furthermore, quantitative research presumes a stable

reality and seeks a precise measurement and analysis of the target concepts. Qualitative research, on the other hand, aims to get a complete and detailed description to widen the scope of understanding of phenomena by naturalistic data collection such as observation and in-depth interviews (Crotty, 1998; Roberts 2004). According to Snape and Spencer (2003), “Inductive processes involve using evidence as the genesis of a conclusion; deductive processes use evidence in support of a conclusion” (p.14).

In terms of the data collection methods which each design embraces, Snape and Spencer elaborate that quantitative research embraces the merits of the ‘scientific method’ as used in natural science which emphasises hypothesis testing, causal explanation, generalisation and prediction. Qualitative research design, by contrast, rejects the natural science model and concentrates on understanding, rich description and emergent concepts and theories. Recently, Ormston et al (2014) have also drawn a useful distinction between inductive and deductive logic as different epistemological positions. For them, inductive logic involves building knowledge from the bottom up through observations of the world, which in turns provide the basis for developing theories and laws. Deductive logic, on the other hand, is seen as a top-down approach to knowledge which starts with a hypothesis about the world which will then be confirmed or rejected. Other useful distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research are also made by Hennink et al (2011). They have identified seven areas of comparison between the two types as shown in the table below:

	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Objective	To quantify data and extrapolate results to a broader population	To gain a detailed understanding of underlying reasons, beliefs, motivations
Purpose	To measure, count, quantify a problem. How much? How often, what proportion? Relationships in data	To understand why? How? What is the process? What are the influences or contexts
Data	Data are numbers	Data are words
Study population	Large sample size of representative cases	Small number of participants selected purposefully
Data collection methods	Population surveys, opinion polls	In-depth interviews, observation, group discussions
Analysis	Analysis is statistical	Analysis is interpretive
Outcome	To identify prevalence, averages and patterns in data. To generalise	To develop an initial understanding, to identify and explain behaviour, beliefs or actions

Table 4.1: Key differences between quantitative and qualitative research, adopted from Hennink et al (2011)

Ormston et al, (2014) have also compiled a useful list of common characteristics of qualitative research. Their list includes the following features and qualities:

- Qualitative research aims at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of the research participants by learning about the sense they make of their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories.
- It uses non-standardised and adaptable methods of data generation that are sensitive to the social context of the study and can be adapted for each participant or case.
- It provides rich, detailed and complex data, but the precise and depth of this complexity may vary between studies.
- Data analysis in qualitative research retains complexity and nuance and respects the uniqueness of each participant or case.
- The analysis approach maintains openness making it possible for new categories and theories to emerge during the analysis and interpretation stage.
- The outputs of qualitative research include detailed descriptions of the phenomena being researched, grounded in the perspectives and accounts of the participants.
- And finally, qualitative research maintains a reflexive approach, which acknowledges the role and perspective of the researcher in the research process.

Finally, it is useful to note that quantitative research methods are usually, though not always, associated with positivist, empiricist and objectivist traditions while qualitative research methods are associated with constructionist and interpretivist traditions (Ormston et al, 2014). However, other writers such as Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) argue that qualitative research cannot be described in terms of a set of theories and techniques that always apply. Rather, they postulate, it draws on a variety of perspectives and practical techniques. This is one reason why the present study embraces the qualitative research design in data collection and analysis.

4.2.5. Summary

To help us get a better grasp of all the philosophical research traditions and views discussed above, I summarise the main assumptions of each position in the following diagrams and table drawing on the related literature on qualitative research methods, which includes Bryman (2012), Cohen et al (2007), Crotty (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Hennink et al (2011), Ormston et al (2014), Snape & Spencer (2003), and Wellington (2000).

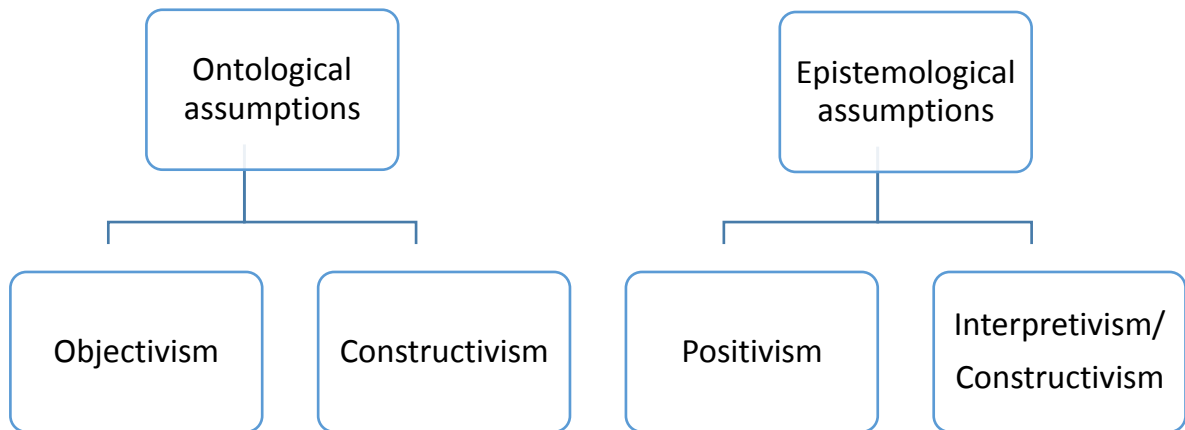


Figure 4.1: Key philosophical paradigms in research methods

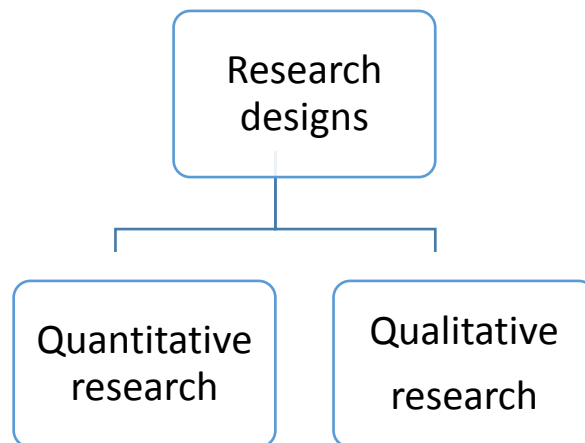


Figure 4.2: Two main types of research design

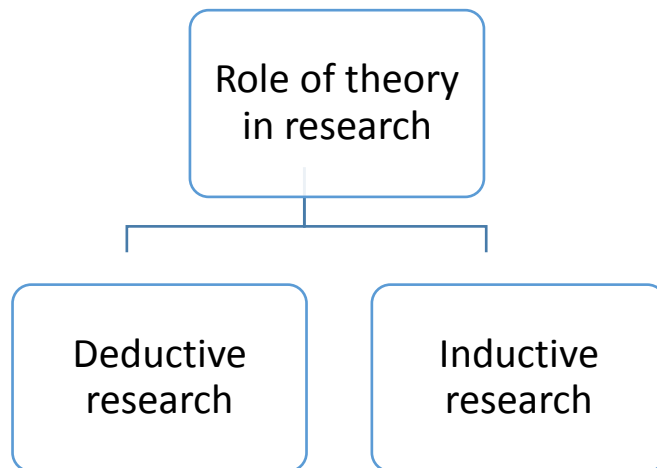


Figure 4.3: Role of theory in research

ONTOLOGICAL POSITIONS (nature of the world and existence)	
Position	Assumptions
Objectivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality exists <i>independently</i> of our beliefs or understanding • Reality can be observed directly and accurately • A clear distinction exists between our beliefs about the world and the way the world is • Only material or physical world is considered ‘real’ • Social phenomena and their meanings cannot change • Events have causes and determined by other circumstances • The casual links between events and their causes can eventually be uncovered by science • Life is defined in ‘measurable’ terms rather than inner experiences • Notions of choice, freedom, individuality and moral responsibility are excluded
Constructivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External reality exists but is only known through human mind and socially constructed meanings • There is no shared social reality, only a series of different individual constructions of it • Reality is subjective • There exist only estimate or approximate observations or views of reality • Social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors • Social phenomena and their meanings are produced through social interaction and are in a constant state of revision • Life is defined in ‘estimate’ terms based on inner experiences of humans where choice, freedom and individual responsibility are appreciated

EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS (nature of knowledge and how it is acquired)	
Position	Assumptions
Positivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The world is independent of and unaffected by the researcher • Facts and values are distinct • Objective and value-free inquiry is possible • Disputes are resolved through observations • Methods of natural science are appropriate for the study of social phenomena • Knowledge is produced through the senses based on careful observation • Only phenomena (and hence knowledge) confirmed by the senses can be genuinely regarded as knowledge • Knowledge is seen as hard, tangible and objective • Knowledge is arrived at through gathering of facts • Social world is approached through the <i>explanation</i> of human behaviour
Interpretivism/ Constructivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The researcher and the social world impact on each other • Facts and values are not distinct • Objective and value-free inquiry is not possible since findings are inevitably influenced by the researchers' perspectives and values • Methods of natural science are <i>not</i> appropriate for the study of social phenomena for the social world is not governed by law-like regularities but mediated through meaning and human agency • Knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied • Knowledge is seen as personal, subjective and unique • The researcher understands the social world using both his/her as well as the participants' understanding • Social world is approached through the <i>understanding</i> of human behaviour

Table 4.2: Key philosophical research positions and their underlying assumptions.

Having described the overall philosophical paradigms in social research and set out the different positions and stances of each tradition, I now turn to describe my own position in relation to these traditions and views. I will also say how my ontological and epistemological assumptions form the bases of selection of my research methodology, methods and overall design.

4.3. My epistemological and ontological assumptions

My epistemological and ontological assumptions which I set out herein form the bases upon which my own thinking about and understanding of the world and its phenomena rest. These assumptions also inform my thinking about and understanding of social research in general and the development of my research methodology and methods which I have adopted for this research. As a matter of fact, and as a Muslim person, my ontological and epistemological positions have arisen mostly from my beliefs which I derive from the holy Qur'an and the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Mohammed (peace and prayers be upon him) as revealed to him by Allah the Almighty. My epistemological and ontological assumptions about social research have arisen from, although I did not have the exact terminology to describe them then, my early reflective thoughts on the language learning and teaching context which I belong to. However, my readings in the area of epistemology and ontology have largely contributed to the development of my understanding of such philosophical arguments and helped me to relate them to and critically think about the actual language learning and teaching situation in my context.

The ontological and epistemological positions which underpin my research are grounded on the belief that *no* ultimate or absolute reality or knowledge exists except that which has been revealed to us through the holy Qur'an. Other knowledge and realities do exist, but these cannot be claimed as purely true realities. The knowledge and reality which have been revealed to us through the holy Qur'an about existence, nations and events of the past, present and future is doubtless and considered as pure truth because of their divine origin. However, not all truth and knowledge has been revealed to mankind and, thus, it is upon us to explore them. Allah says in the holy Qur'an: "*Of knowledge, it is only a little that is communicated to you (O men!)*" (chapter 17, verse 85). In fact, Allah the Almighty encourages us to think about the world around us and contemplate upon existence so that we have our *own* understanding of the universe and become knowledgeable. In this regard, Allah says in the Qur'an: "*Say: Behold all that is in the heavens and on earth*" (chapter 10, verse 101). So this means that other knowledge and realities do exist and we have to explore them but, as a constructivist thinker, I take the position that these can only be understood in the light of human beliefs and perceptions. This necessarily means that our knowledge and experiences remain limited, highly subjective and approximate in nature because they are a result of our endeavours to interpret and understand the world and its phenomena. According

to Cohen et al (2007), “the social world can be understood only from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated” (p.19). In a contrary view to objectivism, this means that there is no shared realities and meanings amongst people; what exists is only a series of different individual constructions of these realities and meanings for “all meanings are a product of time and place...the researcher cannot capture the social world of another, or give an authoritative account of their findings because there are no fixed meanings to be captured” (Ormston et al, 2014, pp.15-16). In addition, because reality is seen through people’s beliefs and perceptions, there exist different ways of viewing and interpreting this reality. This, in turn, makes knowledge subjective for it is influenced by various personal and contextual factors. Such views about reality are **socially ‘constructed’** and do not exist independently of human experiences and interaction. Therefore, I see social phenomena and their meanings as continually being accomplished by social actors through interaction. In addition, people may construct meanings in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomena for each one of them has his/her own personal perspective (Wellington, 2000). Finally, I view truth as in a constant state of revision rather than something fixed awaiting discovery.

Turning to the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired (which is what epistemology means), I take a constructivist view which emphasises a close relationship between the researcher and the social world, i.e., the two are not totally independent but impact one another. In other words, in the research process, the researcher cannot distance him/herself from the research process. On the contrary, they continually construct meanings and interpretations based on their experiences and reflection as well as those of their participants. As such, knowledge of the world and social phenomena such as learning (as it is the case in this research) is based on our understanding which arises from our reflection on and interpretations of events rather than on our senses and careful observation as advocated by the positivist view. Necessarily, I believe that objective and value-free inquiry is *not* possible since findings are inevitably influenced by researcher’s perspectives and values. In addition, I believe that we can learn a great deal about the social world by trying to understand and make sense of people’s behaviour, perceptions and interpretations of the world rather than just observing and explaining these perceptions and interpretations. Therefore, I think that the methods of natural science are inappropriate for the study of social phenomena such as learning– hence my choice of the research methods which I used to *explore* my participants’ perceptions and beliefs about language learning (see section 4.6 below). Moreover, since the purpose of social research is to ‘explore’ rather than discover reality, my research design

embraces the qualities and essence of qualitative research. In section (4.2.4) above, I quoted Hennink et al (2011) and Ormston et al, (2014) as listing important characteristics and qualities of qualitative research. One of the characteristics of qualitative research relevant to our discussion here is that it uses a process of ‘induction’ to develop theory and new knowledge from the data collected rather than uses the data to prove or disprove an already established theory. Therefore, I do *not* see scientific method and deduction, which are common in natural science, as suitable methods in social research, and in his research in particular.

On the subjective nature of research and learning, I have mentioned earlier that social science places a considerable emphasis on individuals’ experiences and their perceptions of different phenomena around them. In this view, findings of social research are inevitably highly subjective. According to Cohen et al (2007)

“Social science is seen as a subjective rather than objective undertaking, as a means of dealing with the direct experience of people in specific contexts, and when social scientists understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants” (p.19).

I therefore do not see learning as a purely objective phenomenon which exists independently of the learner or his/her context but rather as a result of an active process of interaction and deliberate exchange of meanings between individuals. Such a process is informed by the context in which individuals live and at the same time it influences the way individuals construct their perceptions about learning and thus the way they learn. I also recognise the critical importance of my participant’s own interpretations of the issues which my research is set to explore while at the same time believe that their varied viewpoints will yield different types of understanding. These ontological and epistemological positions are of a particular relevance to my work as I commit myself here to exploring language learning experiences of the students in my context through the eyes of the students themselves, as explained further below.

The present investigation involves the exploration of learners’ voices, perceptions and beliefs about language learning in their context and how autonomy manifests itself in such beliefs and perceptions. Such constructs are complex, influenced by various personal, psychological and contextual factors and are never claimed to be static. As such, one way to gain access to such constructs is through direct interactions with the learners in a natural social context

which allows learners to construct their own meanings of knowledge and learning rather than through experimentation. In this respect, Morrow (2005) contends that

“Understanding participant constructions of meaning depends on a number of factors, including context, culture, and rapport. Contextual grounding is essential for understanding the meanings that participants make of their experience” (p. 253).

This indeed is in line with the essence of constructivism and interpretivism which emphasise participants’ interpretations of situations as a way of constructing their social world. Therefore, I take the position that such constructs are best explored (not discovered) through the eyes of the learners themselves rather than the teacher, materials or even the researcher. In this respect, Lamb (2005) stresses that the way we try to understand a phenomenon like learning is through a process of exploration rather than discovery.

4.4. Prevalent research approaches in ELLT and autonomy: A critique

The discussion herein attempts to problematize the dominant research methodologies within the field of language learning and learner autonomy and make the case for a more context-sensitive and learner-friendly form of qualitative enquiry.

Drawing on positivist traditions, learner autonomy, beliefs and perceptions are sometimes researched quantitatively employing quantitative methods such as surveys which raise serious concerns about the **trustworthiness** and **relevance** of the findings from such methods (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Wellington, 2015; Sinclair, 2000). Wellington (2015), for example, defines trustworthiness as an alternative criterion to the traditional ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ in judging qualitative research. Using trustworthiness, quality of qualitative research is usually judged using four sub-criteria. These are: credibility, transferability (which is equivalent to external validity in quantitative research), dependability, and confirmability (which are parallel to reliability in quantitative research).

Examples of these quantitative methods include *ready-made questionnaires* such as the Questionnaire of Learner Beliefs about Language Learning by Cotterall (1995), the Questionnaire on Learner Attitudes to Autonomy by Broady (1996), Beliefs About Language

Learning Inventory (BALLI) by Horwitz (1987) or in a form of *scales* that are designed to measure learners' readiness for autonomy such the Learner Autonomy Profile (LAP), which is licensed to Human Resource Development Enterprises (<http://www.hrjenterprises.com/>) and the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale which was first published in 1978 by Guglielmino. According to Wesely (2012), although survey research has been dominant, it raises serious concerns about the trustworthiness of the data gathered through such means (Assor & Connel, 1992; Barkhuizen, 1998). This is partly because surveys usually involve a large number of subjects and their results may offer a fair but **superficial** representation of the participants' overall opinions, preferences or attitudes. Such methods may also fail to capture the participant's unique perceptions, metacognition and epistemology, i.e., how the subjects view knowledge and what approaches they employ in learning accordingly. As such, when used to research phenomena of a complex and multi-dimensional nature such as learning, such research instruments can be critiqued of being methodologically weak. In this respect, Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) argue that

“People, and the meanings they give to things, cannot be examined using standardised techniques in the way that survey results can be examined through statistics. The reason for this is that statistical methods...ignore the interpretative process. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, place the interpretative process at the centre of their practice. The interpretative process refers to the way people interpret and give meaning to events and things” (p.4).

While these studies have undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of the nature and shape of learners' perceptions about their language learning, in most cases they fail to provide accurate and trustworthy student data due to their overdependence on quantitative data (Sinclair, 2000). Kohonen (2006) observes that learners' beliefs and perceptions about their roles in learning are unconscious and covert. He adds that these beliefs and perceptions may remain unnoticed and people usually take them for granted. This just testifies to the need for a more credible methodology for accessing and evaluating the belief system of the learners so as to bring these to the surface, discuss them with learners and help them to reflect on them. In the same vein Benson and Lor (1999) contest questionnaire research in particular in the sense that it “tends to give a snapshot of a learner's beliefs without telling us much about their functions or the way in which they are open to change” (P.460). This view has also been echoed by Sinclair (2000) who postulates that “adherence to solely quantitative research methods ... has led, in some cases, to inconclusive or even bizarre research results which provide little in the way of useful insights” (p.14). As such, in this study, I employed a qualitative approach to explore learners' voices.

Ready-made instruments have three inherent weaknesses. First of all, the underpinning traditions of these instruments rarely cater for the overall cultural or the immediate and unique social contexts of the research participants. In this respect, Morrow (2005), for instance, regards *social validity* of the research instrument as a principal criterion for conducting quality research and an important standard of trustworthiness, or credibility, in social research. Another factor which may impact the quality and trustworthiness of the data collected through such instruments is the language of these instruments. If the instrument is in the target language which the participants are still learning, there is a great chance for participants to misinterpret the intended meaning of (and consequently react differently to) the instrument items which may compromise the quality or trustworthiness of the data collected. Even when these questionnaires and scales are translated into the participants' native language, and depending on the quality of translation, it is still unclear how participants would interpret and understand key terms and concepts of the questionnaires (Hennink et al, 2011). In the same vein, Schensul (1999), stresses the complex nature of translation in research and maintains that it should not be underestimated for it involves "joint decision making about the terms and concepts to be used in the project...paying attention to how such terms and concepts are translated into local language" (p.81). Finally, surveys usually yield quantified data such as numeric and statistical data which may be difficult to rely on when trying to understand human experiences and behaviour. In a sum, quantified social data can be critiqued for lacking credibility and trustworthiness when used as a means of understanding people's perceptions and experiences.

However, in a more interactive and deeper forms of investigation such as in group interviews, focus groups and reflective group discussions/conversations (I have adopted the latter method for data collection in this research), there are ample chances for participants to expand, elaborate and reflect on their responses and for the researcher to rephrase his/her questions, ask for further clarifications and reconsider the types and sequence of his/her questions according to the situation of the interview/discussion (Bryman, 2012), in a way that contributes to increased quality and trustworthiness of the data collected. Along with Bryman's argument, Tse (2000) also argues in favour of qualitative methods when researching learners' voices for these "allow students to express their views on a wide variety of topics in greater depth than is typically allowed in most surveys...highlighting emerging themes in the data that may be missed by other approaches" (p.70). Such qualitative methods of investigation are in line with my epistemological and ontological assumptions which I have described above in the sense that they emphasise and capitalise on the importance of

participants' own interpretations of their learning context as a way of constructing their own social world and meanings.

4.5. Research design: Looking for a method

Deciding on an appropriate method(s) for data collection and analysis as well as justifying such decisions are essential steps in any research. But what is a method? A research method or methods are the concrete techniques, procedures or activities which the researcher plans to use and engages in to obtain and analyse data (Crotty, 1998). These methods, activities or procedures (should) draw on the researcher's epistemological and ontological positions while at the same time addressing the research questions adequately and convincingly. However, is it always possible to find a method which does this? Some writers believe that it is more important for a researcher to choose an appropriate method or methods which address the *research questions* rather than align with a specific epistemological stance or view, which is a pragmatic choice (see for example, Ormston et al, 2014). In my case though, I needed a method or methods which could possibly align with the two: methods which suit my research questions and context while at the same time are in line with my beliefs.

Given the above-mentioned limitations of the methodologies and methods as well as taking into account the complex and multidimensional nature of learner autonomy in language learning (Little, 1991; Paiva & Braga, 2008), I would like to argue that researching concepts such as learner autonomy, perceptions and metacognitive knowledge, which the current research is set to explore, requires methods beyond the capacity of quantitative instruments. More precisely, the chosen method(s) should align with my epistemological stance as well as the type of investigation which is informed by the main questions guiding the research. In addition, I needed a method which was pragmatic, practical and flexible enough to respond to the type of participants I had as well as the uniqueness of the context under study (described below). In short, my choice of methods was governed by two main parameters:

1. Epistemological appropriateness
2. Contextual appropriateness

The uniqueness of the study context was represented in two areas. First of all, all of my participants were Omanis whose mother tongue was Arabic. They had just completed the foundation programme and joined their respective specialisations. So given the linguistic background and competence of my participants in English, I decided that Arabic would be an

easier and more natural language to use in the investigation. The second area of uniqueness of the research context was reflected in my participants' expectations of the research in terms of how they wanted to engage in the investigation. Many of the participants expressed interest and showed higher motivation in taking part in the research when they had realised that that the investigation would take the form of group discussions rather than a one-to-one interview or filling in a questionnaire, for they anticipated a greater involvement in the research. As a matter of fact, they had many concerns about their learning situation and expected the research to give them the opportunity to voice their concerns and articulate their perspectives. This was all in line with the recent political and social developments in the region and Oman which have begun in 2011 (see chapter one for more details on these changes and their impact on students' level of awareness and demands for improvement of their education system). As such, I contend that one of the strengths of this research lies in its flexibility to respond to the uniqueness of the research context and the expectations of research participants for having a greater involvement in the research as well as its ability to incorporate such expectations and needs into its design. So here we are talking about a research design and methods which enabled participants to take an active role in the research process. Added to this, I also wanted the investigation to benefit my participants in the same way it does to me. That is to say, I opted for a method which would help my participants to develop better awareness about themselves as learners and about their learning and teaching situation in a way that would, hopefully, lead to better language learning. I will say more about this issue in section (4.11.4.5) below.

In terms of the breadth and depth of the investigation, Taboada, Kidd & Tonks (2009) maintain that "an in-depth look at autonomy that approaches it from students' perceptions of actual classroom supports for it will further our understanding of student autonomy" (p.1). By the same token, Reinders (2000) stresses that "most research in this field therefore relies on the learner as the main source of information. It is thus crucial to explore learners' understanding of the concepts and phenomena under review" (p.3). I therefore did not want a method which would treat superficially the issues under investigation and provide an overall account of language learning and teaching in the context under investigation. Instead, I opted for a method which would tackle the **deep-lying perceptions and beliefs** of the participants about language learning and provide an '**insider**' view of the participants on the issues explored (Benson, 2007; Sikes & Potts, 2008).

4.6. Data collection methods

The literature suggests different possible qualitative methods which, to varying degrees, have common features and characteristics to the method opted for in my investigation. Examples of these methods include Group Interviews (Schensul, 1999), Focus Groups (Bryman, 2012), Group Discussions (Hennink et al, 2011), Focused Group Conversations (Lamb, 2005). However, none of these methods ‘alone’ responds directly to the type and nature of the investigation intended for in this research, i.e., they do not necessarily cater to the level and expectations of my participants or the uniqueness of the context. In addition, none of these methods has been designed to help the participants to reflect and develop awareness of their metacognition (knowledge about self and learning) as part of the investigation. Therefore, I synthesised the most relevant features and qualities of each method to my context and developed my own method. I called the new method *First-Language Reflective Group Conversations (LI-RGCs)*. The diagram below shows how the new method was generated from and informed by three commonly used methods in the mainstream qualitative social research; namely, group interviews, focus groups and group discussions in addition to four other components considered as essential in my research. These are *interaction*, *reflection*, *awareness-raising* and *progressive focussing*. I will elaborate these components in the sections below.

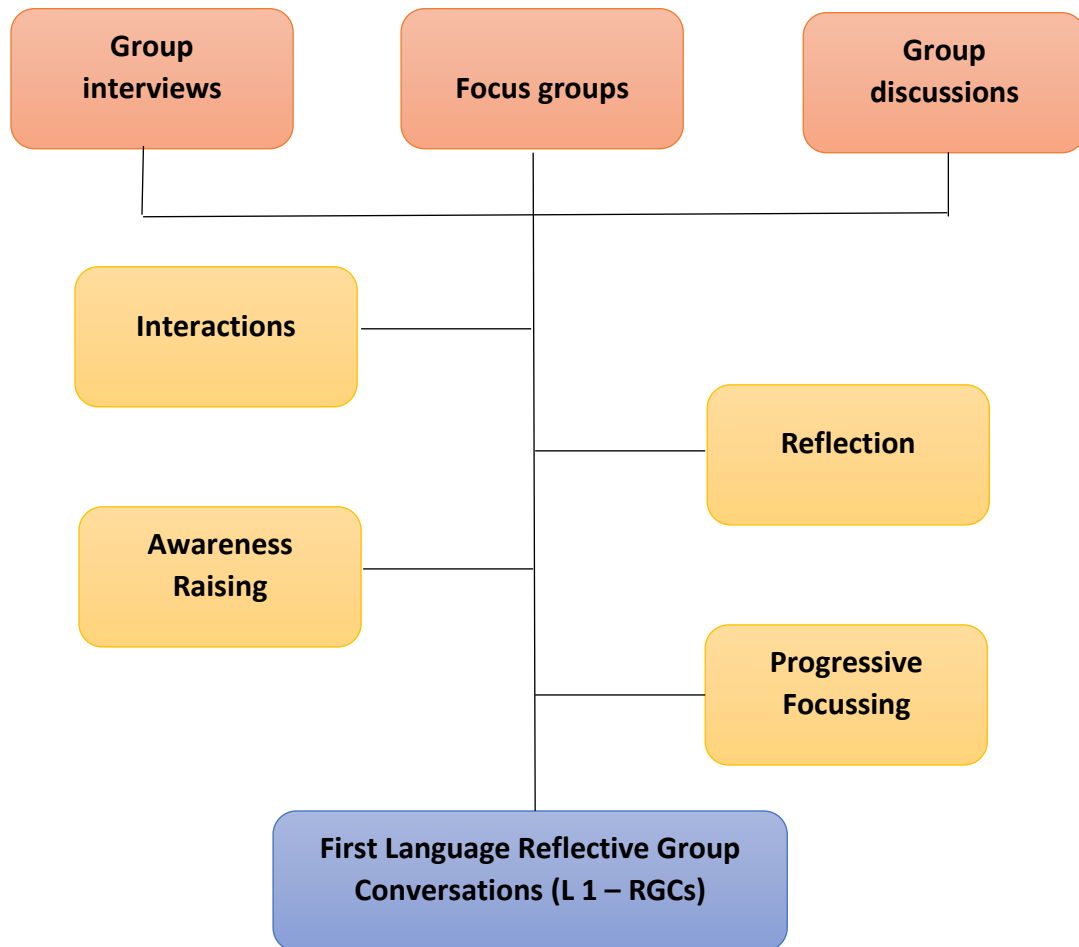


Figure 4.4: Development of the research main data collection method:
First Language Reflective Group Conversations (L1-RGCs)

In addition to the First-Language Reflective Group Conversations, I also employed **Guided Reflective Journals** to back up and supplement the main data collection method. Both methods were deemed suitable data collection methods for the present research. Below I describe each method and justify my choice of each one.

4.6.1. First-Language Reflective Group Conversations (L1-RGCs)

The four phrases and words which make up the name of the method have been carefully chosen to reflect the characteristics of the method. Below I highlight what each of the four phrases stand for and justify my choices.

To begin with, as the name suggests, the investigation was carried out using the participants' (as well as the researcher's) mother-tongue (Arabic) as a medium of communication and interaction between the researcher and the participants as well as amongst the participants

themselves. In addition, the participants wrote about their learning experiences and expressed their opinions and perspectives in the reflective journals using Arabic. Arabic was also the language used for all the communication which took place between the participants and the researcher on the instant messaging messenger used in the research, WhatsApp.

4.6.1.1. Why First-Language?

The language used in group discussions or conversations should be familiar to and accessible by all of the participants. In the context of language learning research where focus groups, group discussions, group conversations, etc. are employed as data collection methods, it is not advisable that the discussion is conducted in the target language which the participants are still learning for it is difficult to predict how they might interpret the questions in the discussion guide (Hennink et al, 2011). Furthermore, Sinclair (1999) argues that it is unrealistic to expect participants to speak revealingly of their knowledge about language learning in the target language and therefore recommends that they are encouraged to use their mother tongue instead. This, she maintains, would provide much richer data for the researcher.

In a research like this one where the goal is to gain access to and explore the participants' perceptions, metacognitive knowledge and perspectives, use of the target language was not seen as a viable option, for it is unrealistic to expect 'post-foundation' language learners to be able to do so using the language which they are still learning. I therefore decided that the participants' first language (Arabic), which is also mine, would be the language of interaction in all aspects of the data collection process.

4.6.1.2. Why Reflective?

The word 'reflective' describes the nature of the investigation where the participants were encouraged to engage in introspective and retrospective thinking (Matsumoto, 1996) about their language learning. Empirical research findings have showed that reflection can lead to more effective language learning (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Jimenez Raya, 2006; Matsumoto, 1996; Opalka, 2003; Porto, 2007). Reflection, according to Jimenez Raya (2006), is

“an active process of exploration and discovery which often leads to very unexpected outcomes...reflection about learning allows a person to observe a certain problem from the perspective of an outsider, thus enabling him to become his own critic, to evaluate his learning process and identify weak spots in it” (p.128).

This may be possible through helping learners to systematically and critically ‘question’ their beliefs about learning as well as their learning habits against their perceived and expected outcomes. Indeed Barnard (2009, as cited in Webster, Lewis & Brown, 2004) postulates that “creating an effective research dynamic and asking skilful probing questions can lead people to reflect on very personal beliefs, feelings and behaviours” (p.94). In this way, learners begin to develop **awareness** about their capacities in learning and the learning process and use such awareness to challenge their perceived learning abilities as well as their hypotheses about how learning occurs. As a result, learners may begin to reconstruct their own definitions of learning using their immediate learning experiences and beliefs about learning as a point of departure.

The link between reflection and awareness-raising is well established in the literature. Several researchers have reported successful results of helping learners to develop awareness about themselves as learners and about the learning process through retrospective thinking (see for example, Matsumoto, 1996; Porto, 2007; Sinclair, 1999). According to Dam and Legenhausen (2010), reflection leads to an awareness of all relevant aspects of learning and teaching and both reflection and awareness constitute some of the prerequisites for the learners’ involvement in learning. This is quite relevant to my research as amongst its goals is helping the participants to develop awareness about themselves as learners, about their immediate learning and teaching context and about the learning process itself.

In research, however, reflective thinking has long been used as a means of accessing constructs such as perceptions, beliefs and metacognitive knowledge (see for example research by Krishnan & Hoon, 2002; Lamb, 2010; Porto, 2007 and Sinclair, 1999) which, otherwise, are difficult to access through conventional, positivist methods such as questionnaires or observation. Sinclair (1999) finds observable behaviour as a poor indicator of and way to access and evaluate complex constructs such as autonomy and metacognitive knowledge. She suggests that one way to gain access to students’ metacognitive awareness is through getting them to **talk** about and **reflect** on their learning. It is through such reflection that their ability to make informed decisions about their learning may be assessed. As such,

by encouraging systematic reflection in their participants, researchers have been able to gain access to genuine and valuable data about how learners perceive learning and, therefore, act in certain learning situations. After all, learners remain an important source of data on their own learning.

Due to the nature of questions which the current research addresses, introspective and retrospective thinking have been employed as a method (through both the conversations and journals) to explore what may be complex (Little, 1991; Paiva & Braga, 2008), multidimensional (Benson, 2010), unconscious (Jimenez Raya, 2006, Sinclair, 1999) and difficult constructs for the participants to articulate (Lamb, 2005). The reflective conversations and journal entries covered specific areas about the participants' past and current learning experiences in a way that made it possible to collect, hopefully, the needed data for the research as well as achieve the research aspiration of helping the participants to develop greater awareness about their learning.

4.6.1.3. Why Group Conversations?

The word 'group' describes the settings in which the investigation was carried out. The investigation was not meant to take the shape of one-to-one interviews but as group conversations where a meaningful and purposeful interaction between the researcher and participants as well as amongst the participants themselves was encouraged and facilitated.

There are a number of reasons why the reflective conversations were conducted in groups. First of all, groups allow for a valuable and **dynamic interaction** to take place between members of the group which may be missing in the normal one-to-one interviews. That is, through interaction, the group conversation design allows the researcher to gain insights into how the participants co-construct meanings and interpretations about the topics discussed as a group while at the same time accommodate and privilege individual differences of opinion. On more than one occasion, I devoted a considerable amount of time to discussing ideas and opinions of individual participants for such ideas and opinions triggered the interest and interaction of other participants in the group. According to Schensul (1999), groups enable more social interactions between the participants of the same group, which help them to articulate their perceptions and together construct meaning. It is also likely to trigger richer responses. In the words of Greenbaum (2000), "the intent of using the group for the discussion is to encourage the participants in the session to interact with each other so that the quality of the output is enhanced" (p.3). As such, participants feel that they and their ideas

are valued. It is this very quality of interaction that made the group conversations a viable option in my research.

Group interaction also enables differences of opinion to be voiced, which allows the researcher to gather rich and multi-faceted understandings and perspectives (King, 2004, as cited in Al Ghazali, 2011a). My participants had the chance to hear the opinions and perceptions of other members of the group, agree and disagree with them and were encouraged to reflect on their own learning experiences and thoughts accordingly. In addition, due to the high level of familiarity among the group members and the fact that they share almost the same language learning experiences and knowledge, it was possible for them to remind one another of additional (and useful) details about the issues under discussion or discrepancies in what their peers have said, leading to more detailed and accurate data. In this way, the participants were not only to answer my questions but also listen to, interact and even agree or disagree with what other participants had to say. According to Bryman (2012), this can be more interesting than the predictable question-followed-by-answer approach. Furthermore, the group conversations allowed me to gather rich and detailed data on a single issue because the participants were able to bring to the fore more issues relevant to the topic that they deemed important and significant. This is because the ‘snowballing’ nature of the conversation encouraged the participants to initiate discussions at different levels based on an initial opinion by an individual participant and develop them.

From a different perspective, Onwuegbuzie, Leech and Collins (2010) cite work by other authors who argue that group interaction creates a safer environment for the participants than can individual interviews. In section (4.11.4.1) below, I will describe how the investigation was carried out in a comfortable and safe environment. I discuss safety and comfort in the literal sense of the words in terms of the place where the conversations were conducted as being secure and comfortable in addition to the figurative sense of the words where the participants felt *safe* in articulating their actual concerns without having to worry about the presence of other members of the group or the researcher. In fact, such an atmosphere gave the participants the opportunity to discuss certain issues about their language learning in a frank and detailed manner because they knew that they do this as “members of a group rather than simply as individuals” (Bryman, 2012, p. 501).

Notwithstanding the above advantages and merits of the group conversation design, a number of writers on qualitative research methods have highlighted some limitations of group discussions and conversations (see for example, Bryman, 2012; Hennink et al, 2011;

Schensul, 1999). According to their opinion, group discussions can sometimes be difficult to arrange for it may be difficult to persuade all the participants to turn up at a particular time. In addition, Bryman (2012) refers to the possible ‘group effects’ where some participants can be either reticent or overly prominent during the conversation. Another drawback of group discussions is that it may be more difficult for the researcher to exercise control over its proceedings than with in individual interviews. Finally, group discussions usually generate rich and a huge volume of data and, as such, the task of data transcription and data analysis can be time consuming and discouraging. However, I was mindful of these challenges and was able to manage my group conversations in such a way that achieved the research goals drawing on my long experience as a teacher in managing group work and discussions in the classroom. I was also able to minimise the effect of the other aforementioned drawbacks through **reflexive thinking** (Ormston, et al, 2014; Snape & Spencer, 2003; Wellington, 2000) about my role as a researcher and the possible influence of my beliefs on the participants and how they respond to my questions. I was also mindful of what the study specifically aimed to achieve and acted accordingly.

I borrowed the term ‘**conversation**’ from Lamb (2005) who employed ‘Focused Group Conversations’ to explore pupils’ motivation for and autonomy in language learning in an urban secondary school in England. The idea of having ‘conversations’ with the participants rather than conducting, for instance, interviews was important in the context of my research in the sense that it provided a relaxing and less threatening atmosphere for the participants to talk freely about their language learning experiences as opposed to words such as ‘interview’, a term which students, at least in my context, usually associate with applying for jobs and perceived as being formal, highly structured and a one which requires a prior preparation. So in this sense, the L1-RGCs are *not* focus groups or group interviews in the precise definition of the method but rather a combination of relevant features and characteristics of these methods in addition to other features derived from the nature and purposes of these conversations such as reflection and awareness-raising.

Generally speaking, I enjoyed talking to my participants and they too were satisfied about the manner in which the conversations were designed and conducted. What they had acknowledged most, however, was the opportunity they were given to voice their concerns about their learning and the ability to reflect and think differently about themselves as well as about their learning. This was evident in the last RGC as well as the last entry of their reflective journal which were devoted to their feedback and reflection on their participation in the study (for more details see chapter six, section 6.6).

4.6.1.4. *Why Single-Sex?*

‘Group homogeneity’ is an important criterion of data quality in qualitative research which involves groups in data collection methods. Homogeneous groups can be organised by gender, age, ethnicity, educational level, degree of shared experience, etc. This procedure is usually linked to the richness of the data collected. Schensul (1999) postulates that “considerable thoughts must be given to the representativeness of group membership and to the combination of individuals that is most likely to produce rich data” (p. 66). In the same vein, Finch, Lewis and Turley (2014) stress that “if the group is too disparate, it is difficult to cover the key topics in depth” (p. 231). Hennink et al (2011) also stress that group homogeneity fosters an open, productive and dynamic discussion among participants. Because heterogeneous groups can hamper discussion and interaction (Schensul, 1999), separating the groups by gender has been a common practice especially when the discussion involves issues such as inter-gender relationships, family affairs and power, which may be sensitive to discuss in mixed-gender groups. Research has also showed that participants tend to feel ‘safer’ with others who share similar characteristics (Finch et al, 2014).

My purpose at the outset was to create a relaxed, comfortable and ‘safe’ environment so that the participants find it easy to bring to the fore any issues or opinions which may otherwise be difficult to discuss in the presence of the opposite sex. Because the level of familiarity and acquaintance among participants can influence their contribution to the group discussion (Hennink et al, 2011), and drawing on my experience of and familiarity with the context where the investigation was conducted (see section 4.9.6 for advantages of being an insider researcher), I was mindful of the effect which mixed-gender groups might have on the dynamism of the group conversations and hence the richness of the data collected. I therefore decided to use single-sex groups in the reflective conversations. Interestingly, one of the issues which was raised in both the male and female groups when discussing the constraints on language learning (especially when making presentations in the classroom) was the presence of the opposite gender. A rich discussion then followed upon my probing questions which showed that such a rich and interesting discussion might not have been feasible had the groups been of mixed-gender.

So far in this section I have described and justified the four phrases which make up the name of the first method I developed to obtain data for my research, i.e., L1-RGCs. In the following sub-sections, I will describe the investigation grid (or conversation protocol) which I developed to carry out the RGCs, as well as the second method of data collection, guided reflective journals.

4.6.1.5. The investigation grid

The topics and issues covered in the conversations were derived from the five research questions which guided the research (see chapter two, section 2.8). These five questions cover the following five areas:

1. Students' perceptions of language learning at tertiary education
2. Students' metacognitive knowledge
3. Students' perspectives on having a greater voice and responsibility in learning
4. Impact of the research on students' awareness about self and learning
5. What could be learned from students' voices and how learner autonomy manifests itself in these voices.

To explore these five areas, I broke down each one into manageable sets of issues to be discussed in separate sessions. To explore these issues with the students, I decided that I would need six RGCs with each of the sample groups. I summarise the six sessions and the topics covered in each in the investigation grid below.

RGC 1: Introduction & free talk about LL experiences	
Topics covered	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introducing myself and my research interests to the students 2. Introducing research topic and aims 3. Signing informed consent forms 4. Ways of working (L1-RGCs & Reflective journals) 5. Times of meetings & collection of journal entries 6. Free general talk about previous language learning experiences – schema activation
RGC 2: Sts' perceptions of & roles in language learning in and outside the classroom	
Areas of investigation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Validation of data collected in previous L1-RGC 2. Nature and goals of tertiary education 3. Nature of language learning at tertiary level 4. Goals of language learning at tertiary level 5. The successful lang. learner? 6. Roles in & responsibilities for language learning (in & outside the classroom) 7. Decision making 8. Availability of choices 9. Have own learning agendas? 10. Influence of their roles and voices 11. Ts.' roles & responsibility 12. Perceptions of control in language learning: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12.1. Control over learning management 12.2. Control over cognitive processing: planning, monitoring & evaluation of learning 12.3. Control over learning content: what & why to be learnt.

	<p>13. Desirability & relevance of autonomy in their context</p> <p>14. Out-of-class language learning</p> <p>14.1. Happens?</p> <p>14.2. What, why, how?</p> <p>14.3. Its nature</p> <p>14.4. Roles, responsibility & control in out-of-class language learning</p> <p>14.5. Ways of linking out-of-class language learning to class learning</p>
RGC 3: Perceptions (cont'd.), metacognitive knowledge & learning approaches	
Areas of investigation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Validation of data collected in previous L1-RGC <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Nature of tertiary education b. Perceived goals, roles, autonomy, deepness, etc. c. Out-of-class learning 2. Self-pursued knowledge Vs. knowledge 'received' from others 3. Learning Vs. learning how to learn 4. Accepting responsibility for learning 5. Autonomy in materials and teaching methods 6. Choices of what & how to learn 7. Self-management of language learning <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What does it mean? b. Possible? c. Easy/difficult/challenging? d. What does it entail (on the student's part?) e. Study/social/personal skills and characteristics considered important here 8. Learning approaches used in and outside the class: deep Vs. surface learning 9. Learning strategies employed in language learning, including dealing with difficulties & thinking of alternatives.
RGC 4: MK (cont'd): Task, strategic & person knowledge	
Areas of investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students choose 2 tasks they did in class/as homework <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students' knowledge about the nature/aims/requirements/ways of doing the task/how useful it was/alternative ways of doing it/ difficulties they had, etc... was elicited using a certain questioning technique. 2. Evaluation of sts' knowledge about their abilities as learners and their use of strategies.
RGC 5: Constraints & perspectives	
Areas of investigation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internal (learners) & external (context) constraints on language learning 2. Perspectives on ways of having more responsibility and a greater voice
RGC 6: Reflection on participation & potential Impact of research on awareness	
Areas of investigation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reasons for taking part in the research? 2. Things learned in the L1-RGCs 3. Things learned by keeping reflective journals 4. Chance for awareness-raising? 5. Awareness of their overall capacities in learning including roles, responsibilities, metacognition & learning approaches

Table 4.3: The investigation grid

Based on the overall areas of investigation planned for each session, I developed a list of specific questions to guide the conversations. It is important to note, however, that these questions served as a ‘conversation schedule’ and were meant to remain flexible and open-ended. I adapted my questions and directed the discussions according to the participants’ responses and interests. I also used sub and probing questions to gain deeper insight into the participant’s perceptions and stimulate their thinking and reflection (see appendix 10 for a copy of these questions). Details of how each RGC was conducted are given in section (4.11.4.2) below.

4.6.2. Guided Reflective Journals

Journals have long been recognised and used as a valuable tool in classroom qualitative research (Dam, 1995; Jimenez Raya, 2006; Krishnan & Hoon, 2002; Matsumoto, 1996; Porto, 2007; Sa, 2002). Journals help gain first-person insights into learners’ learning experiences. Such insights are regarded as an important source of information for improving teaching and learning (Krishnan & Hoon, 2002). Journals have also been recognised as a valuable technique for awareness raising through, for example, **retrospection** (Matsumoto, 1996). In addition, writing is expected to be a useful private tool for self-expression, especially for those who may find it easier to express themselves in writing. The above cited sources are only examples of a growing body of empirical research which supports the use of reflective thinking through journals, learning diaries, learning logs, etc. I have therefore found that the features and characteristics of reflective journals align well with the aims and purposes of the present investigation of learners’ perceptions of language learning in their context and that they may add a deeper insight into my participants’ experiences and enrich my data.

Reflective journals have been employed in this research for theoretical as well as practical reasons. Theoretically, the reflective journals employed in this study aimed at gaining a deeper insight into the students’ experiences and perceptions about as well as perspectives on their language learning in a way that allows for a more personal and in-depth portrait of the learners. However, since keeping learning journals and the very skill of reflection were not a common experience of the participants, they were given some guidelines and instructions on how often they needed to write and what to focus on for each entry- hence the name ‘guided’. Saying so however, a free approach to journal writing was adopted for the purpose of the first entry where participants were asked to reflect freely on their language learning experiences

and express whatever ideas, concerns and perspectives they might have on language learning and teaching in their context.

Practically, for any individual participant, the reflective journals served at least one or more of the following four purposes:

1. The reflective journals were meant as a private means of self-expression for whatever they wrote remained confidential and was not shared with other members of the group. As a matter of fact, such privacy is important in this type of investigation where the aim is to capture the participants' authentic experiences and voices rather than those which the participants think as 'suitable and acceptable' to be said.
2. Reflective journals were also introduced to participants as an alternative, and perhaps easier, means of self-expression. Those who, for whatever reasons, found it difficult to express themselves orally during the RGCs, could well use writing to do so.
3. Because there is limitation to what people could think about in a given period of time, I was not only interested in the learning experiences and ideas which participants were able to recall and reflect on during the RGCs but also those experiences and ideas which they might recall outside the conversation times. Therefore, participants had the opportunity to record such experiences and ideas in their journals outside the RGCs time.
4. Limitation of time was another reason for using reflective journals and so in cases where we ran out of time during the conversations, participants were asked to use their journals to record their ideas and thoughts.

4.7. Sampling methods and criteria for choosing the study sample

Sampling is an important step and procedure of any research design, yet it is one of the problematic procedures. The literature on research methods discusses two main challenges of sampling in research: the first challenge is to do with the **representativeness** of the sample (Wellington, 2000) and the second is about the **adequacy of data** (Morrow, 2005). On the one hand, it is never easy to find a 'representative' sample which can stand for or represent

evenly the entire study population; thus, sampling always involves a ‘compromise’ (Wellington, 2000). On the other hand, there are concerns about how adequate the evidence collected from such a sample is. In this respect, Morrow (2005) regards adequacy of data as an important criterion for trustworthiness in postmodern and critical research. Therefore, researchers will need to make careful and well founded decisions about the size and characteristics of their samples as well as the method of selecting the samples from the entire study population. These are important decisions because they impact directly the quality of the data collected from the study sample and, at a later stage, the data analysis process, as it is the case in ‘theoretical sampling’ (see, for example, Bryman, 2012, p.419).

There are many methods of sampling. The most relevant ones to my research are purposeful (or purposive) sampling, convenience sampling and random purposeful sampling. However, the specific sampling strategies are usually governed by the *purpose* of the study as well as the *depth* and *breadth* of information which the researcher wants to obtain (Morrow, 2005). In purposive sampling, according to Bryman (2012), the researcher does not seek to sample research participants randomly but only those who are *relevant* to the research questions being posed. In this kind of sampling, generalization of the results to the study population is not (and should not be) a goal. A convenience sample, on the other hand, is the one which is simply available and accessible to the researcher. Although convenience sampling is a less difficult and more cost-effective type of sampling, as opposed to purposive sampling, there are risks of using this method alone, for qualitative research is always purposeful, i.e., participants are deliberately selected to provide rich data to the research (Morrow, 2005). I have found that a combination of two sampling methods would best serve the purpose and nature of my research. I therefore used a **purposive-random sampling** to select my participants as described below.

My research aims and questions clearly address a specific group of students: the post-foundation students at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Thus, the research targets a certain group of students at the university: those who have completed the Foundation English Programme at the Language Centre (rationale for the choice of such a category of students was given in chapter two). In this case, all of the students who have completed the university English Foundation Programme constituted the study population. I had to select my study sample from this population. It was therefore a ‘purposive sampling’ in the sense that I deliberately chose that group of students as per the research questions. However, since all of the students who belong to this category of the university students had an equal chance to qualify as participants in the research, any group of students from this

larger study population represented a 'suitable' sample. They also stood as a homogenous group of students demographically, culturally and linguistically. For the sake of increased sample representativeness (discussed above), my sample comprised male and female students from two different colleges and specialisations at the university. Again, these two specialisations were chosen randomly. The student sample was chosen from pre-existing class lists provided by the Language Centre. Recruiting participants from pre-existing groups or lists is a common sampling strategy and has its own advantages (Hennink et al, 2011; Schensul, 1999). According to Hennink et al (2011), recruiting participants from pre-existing groups or lists makes recruitment an easier process. In addition, it provides a high level of familiarity among the participants which may result in higher participation due to the shared obligation to attend the group discussion. Another advantage of recruiting participants from pre-existing groups is that it usually takes participants less time to develop rapport with one another as they are already familiar.

In terms of the characteristics of the student sample, it was almost a homogenous sample in the sense that the students shared the same cultural background and language learning experience. They were all Omanis, around 19-20 years old, in their second year of university, had just completed the university English Foundation Programme and, according to the Language Centre criteria, were almost at the same level of language proficiency. The level of familiarity among the students was also high, for most of them were classmates and friends. There are several advantages for having a homogeneous group of participants in a group discussion. Perhaps the most important and relevant advantages to my research is that the students had shared knowledge and experience about the language they were learning as well as the context of their learning, be it in or outside the classroom. In addition, in a group setting like this one, members usually find it easy to develop rapport with one another, given the high level of familiarity which already exists among them.

To sum up the discussion on sampling methods, I can say that my research population was decided upon 'purposefully' while the actual research sample was chosen by virtue of its convenience of accessibility. Such a 'random-purposive sampling', according to Morrow (2005), may be used to "reduce an unnecessarily large potential sample to one that is more manageable in a way that will promote fairness...Overall, purposeful sampling is used to produce information-rich cases" (p. 255).

4.8. To pilot or not to pilot?

Piloting in research is highly desirable. It is not solely to do with ensuring that the questions which the moderator asks in interviews and group conversations operate well but it also has a role in ensuring that the way the overall data collection methodology functions well (Bryman, 2012). However, I decided that a 'formal' piloting was not essential in a research design like mine when each group of participants (I had four groups as I describe below) serves as a discrete community with its own unique members and dynamism. In such a case, it is difficult to predict how each reflective group conversation would proceed. Indeed I have found that even the group conversations which covered the same topics were not identical across my four research groups. Therefore, issues such as length of each session, the sequence in which the topics were explored, flow of questions, pace of each session as well as how the students understood, and thus responded to, the cues and probing questions varied between the sessions. Therefore, even if I had to pilot a few sessions at the beginning, it would have been difficult to predict how the actual sessions would proceed. Instead, I employed an implicit 'pilot-as-you-go' form of piloting during the first round of the conversations whereby issues such as session length, data recording, sequence and flow of the conversation, etc. were noted and reflected on for the subsequent sessions. The other new issues which emerged during the later sessions were dealt with according to the circumstances of individual groups.

4.9. Ethical considerations

4.9.1. Importance of ethics in social research

There has been a considerable increase in awareness of ethical concerns in social research over the past a few years. This awareness is reflected in the growth of relevant literature and the appearance of codes of research and best practice (Cohen et al, 2007). Ethical issues may stem from the kinds of problems investigated and the methods used to obtain the data. These issues could also arise at any stage of the investigation and cannot be ignored as they relate directly to the integrity of research (Bryman, 2012). In the same vein, Hennink et al (2011) also contend that ethical issues are relevant to and should be considered in all stages of a research.

There are agreed upon ethical considerations which are cited in almost all resources on ethics in social research. Webster et al (2014, p.78), for example, outline five principles of ethical research. These include:

1. The research should be worthwhile and should not make unreasonable demands on participants.
2. Participation in research should be based on informed consent.
3. Participation should be voluntary and free from coercion or pressure
4. Adverse consequences of participation should be avoided, and risks of harm known
5. Confidentiality and anonymity should be respected.

However, every research operates within its own context and circumstances and, as such, a researcher will need to translate such principles into a set of detailed decisions that fit the circumstances of their research. A good ethical research means, as Webster et al (2014) maintain, “being able to anticipate what might arise but also to respond to the unexpected, working in a thoughtful and reflective way. It means developing an ethical conscience that puts participants’ interests at the heart of decision-making” (p.78). In addition, there is the issue of how much information the researcher should disclose to his/her participants so that the research, or research data, are not contaminated (Porto, 2007; Silverman, 2005). I will say more about how the issue of ‘data contamination’ has been handled in my research in section (4.9.4) below.

4.9.2. Measures taken

In order to comply with the regulatory codes of research practice established in the literature and by University of Sheffield School of Education, the following measures were taken:

- a. My research was assessed and received ethical approval by my supervisor and the Research Ethics Committees at the School of Education, University of Sheffield (see a copy of **ethical approval** in appendix 1).
- b. Access to the research setting and sample was officially obtained through an official **covering letter** which was approved by my supervisor (see a copy of the covering letter in appendix 4).

- c. My identity and background as a researcher were disclosed to the administration of the Language Centre where the study was conducted as well as to the participants.
- d. **Informed Consent** was sought from all participants and was honoured. The consent form was translated into the participants' native language, Arabic (see a copy of consent form in appendix 5).
- e. A clear and accessible **Participant Information Sheet** which explains the aims, procedures, ethical issues (including anonymity throughout the research stages), etc. was prepared for the interest of my participants *in their language* (see a copy of participant information sheet in appendix 7).
- f. I ensured that my research procedures were conducted rigorously and accurately.

4.9.3. Participant Information Sheet

The Participant Information Sheet included detailed information about the research and was written in an easy and accessible language (in Arabic) for the participants to read and understand *before* they were asked to make a decision about their participation in the research. The following details and sections were included:

1. A clear statement of the aims and purposes of the research project
2. Reasons why the students sample was chosen
3. Statement of the voluntary nature of student participation
4. Details about what was required from those who volunteer to take part in the research
5. Details of the important ethical issues such as anonymity of the participants' identities, confidentiality of the information given, recording of the conversations, etc.
6. Any possible disadvantages or discomfort the participants might experience as a result of taking part
7. The possible benefits of taking part
8. How the results of the study will be used
9. Who is organising and funding the research
10. Who has ethically reviewed and approved the study
11. Contact for further information and complaint procedures, if any.

4.9.4. Data contamination

One of the debatable issues in the literature on research ethics is the question of how much information about what the research is actually set to investigate should be disclosed to participants. On the one hand, researchers should commit themselves to providing as much information about the research to their participants as possible while, on the other, they do not want to ‘contaminate’ their findings by informing their participants too specifically about the research questions to be investigated (Silverman, 2005). Data contamination arises when participants act or respond in a way that does not necessarily reflect their actual knowledge or feelings about the topic under investigation but rather their prior knowledge of what the research aims to achieve and what the researcher expects of them. An example of this may be the case when a group of student-teachers who are training to become language teachers adjust their journal entries for a research project based on their knowledge of what learning journals aim to achieve (Porto, 2007). This is an ethical dilemma which every researcher needs to deal with, for no doubt that participants have full right to know what the research is about and what it involves. However, all social research is contaminated to various degrees by the values which the researcher holds as well as his/her responsibilities towards the participants (Silverman, 2005). Nevertheless, a researcher should be mindful of such issues at the outset and take the necessary measures to eliminate their effect on the quality of his/her data.

I have taken the following measures to eliminate the effect of data contamination in my research. First of all, I was mindful of what the research primarily aimed to achieve and, as such, the investigation was designed in such a way that served the specific aims and purposes of the research. Secondly, the research followed the specific ethical guidelines stipulated by the University of Sheffield School of Education. Thirdly, the students did not have a prior experience of keeping reflective journals and therefore the risk of data contamination through the interference from such experience was therefore minimised.

4.9.5. Anonymity

Anonymity is an important ethical measure which needs to be established in any research. This means not disclosing who has taken part, and not reporting what they say in ways that could identify them (Webster et al, 2014). As such, a researcher should maintain anonymity of his/her participants throughout the research stages including the processes of data collection, data analysis, report write-up and any future publications of the findings. This needs to be clearly stated in both the participant information sheet which the potential

participants need to read and understand prior to their participation in the research as well as in the informed consent form for those who decide to take part.

In my research, identities of my participants, including their colleges, specialisations and gender, were not disclosed. In fact, in this research it was not important to mention ‘who’ said what but rather ‘what’ was said, for my data coding and analysis were not based on gender or specialisations of the participants. However, as for anonymising the institution where the study was conducted, it was not possible or useful to hide the identity of the institution where the study was conducted. For practical reasons, description of the overall language learning and teaching situation at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University where the present study was conducted was seen as important and useful to contextualise my research and locate the nature of the investigation (including its limitations), the findings and their implications within the boundaries of such a context. There are also specific suggestions and recommendations for the improvement of English language teaching and learning (ELLT) in this very context suggested by the participating students. In this regard and for ethical reasons, a written consent was obtained from the Director of the Language Centre to include the identity of the institution in the research prior to the submission and publication of this research (see appendix 3 for a copy of the consent).

4.9.6. Researching from the inside

Another issue pertaining to ethics in research is to do with the role or status of the researcher in the setting where the research is being conducted. The concept of **practitioner** or **insider researcher** has received wide recognition in the literature of social research methods (Sikes & Potts, 2008; Wellington, 2015). There are a number of advantages of a researcher researching his/her own context. However, it may also pose certain problems.

Wellington (2015) lists the following advantages of a researcher researching his/her own context:

1. Having prior knowledge and experience of the setting or context (insider knowledge).
2. Such knowledge and insight may help with the design, ethics and reporting of the research.
3. Having easy access to the research context and participants.

In the same vein, Morrow (2005) contends that understanding the research **context** and **culture** is essential for understanding the meanings that participants make of their experiences.

However, access to and acceptance in a research location cannot be expected as a matter of right; official permission must be sought from the target community (Cohen et al, 2007).

Being a member of the research community, I had easy access to the research context and participants but an important benefit was the deep knowledge and improved insight which I had about the research context and participants. Such knowledge and insight had indeed helped me to design the research in a way that maintained an appropriate level of safety, comfort and ethics. This was evident in conducting the RGCs in the same building where the students spent most of their time as well as having single-sex RGCs, which was later appreciated by participants.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned advantages of being an insider researcher in my research context, I was mindful of a number of challenges which such familiarity may pose. For example, I was aware of the potential preconceptions, prejudices and subjectivity which I brought to the research. Furthermore, although the research participants were not my students, I was mindful of my role as a lecturer in the research context and the potential effect this might have on the participants' responses. However, all kinds of research is subjective in one way or another (Cohen et al, 2007; Morrow, 2005) and, unlike the case in traditional positivist approaches, subjectivity in qualitative case-study research is even acknowledged (Wellington, 2015). In this respect Morrow (2005) asserts that

“Qualitative researchers acknowledge that the very nature of the data we gather and the analytic processes in which we engage are grounded in subjectivity. Depending on the underlying paradigm, we may work to limit, control, or manage subjectivity— or we may embrace it and use it as data... All research is subject to researcher bias” (p.254).

The awareness I had of the potential implications of being an insider researcher for the research outcomes had in fact helped me not only to manage, as much as possible, the negative impact but also embrace the advantages of being an insider research (some of which have been mentioned above). This included the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation. For example, the research was designed to be exploratory in nature rather than

aiming at testing pre-established hypotheses. In addition, students were encouraged to describe their experiences and express their concerns freely and all of their voices, whatever they were, were included and privileged. Furthermore, my role as a researcher, rather than a lecturer at the institution where the research was conducted, was explained explicitly to participants at the outset. Treating their voices with ultimate transparency and confidentiality was an essential ethical commitment I had towards my participants. Such commitment was also seen as important to encourage as much openness and flow of data as possible. Finally, data analysis had also benefited from my experiences of the research context and knowledge of the participants' culture and mother-tongue and, in this way, I hope I had minimised the chance for any potential misunderstanding or misinterpretations of the meanings that participants made of their experiences. Morrow (2005) refers to this type of knowledge which a researcher has about his/her research context (including participants) as “**contextual grounding**” (p.253).

4.10. Preparations for data collection

Before I went to the field for data collection, I had the following arrangements and tools in place:

1. I finalized the overall design and procedures of my data collection and got my supervisor's approval of the plan.
2. I prepared Arabic versions and copies of the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form.
3. I received the final approval for my research ethical application from the University Research Ethics Committee.
4. I emailed a copy of the covering letter along with a copy of my ethical approval letter to the Director of the Language Centre at my home university where the study took place, requesting access to participants. Hard copies of these documents were also submitted upon my visit to the university.
5. I bought a digital voice recorder for recording and storing the conversations. I checked the quality of the recording as well as the play back facility prior to conducting the group conversations.

4.11. Fieldwork

4.11.1. Gaining access and acceptance

Access to and acceptance in a research location cannot be expected as a matter of right (Cohen et al, 2007). As such, official permission must be sought from the target community. Seeking permission to the research location is an important part of any research project and one which should be planned for and gained early. Permission may be sought at different levels depending on the organisational structure of the institution where the research is to be conducted. For example, a research conducted in a college at a university, access may be required from the university administration as well as the local college itself. Seeking this local endorsement for the study involves providing information about the research objectives, how the data will be collected and used, how participants will be recruited, and how their privacy and anonymity will be ensured (Hennink et al, 2011). Even when the researcher is a member of the institution or organisation where the research is taking place (as in my case), direct cooperation from all the parties involved should *not* be taken for granted. The researcher needs to present his/her credentials as a serious investigator and establish his/her own ethical position with respect to the proposed research (Cohen et al, 2007).

Two main factors have facilitated my access to the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University where the study was conducted. First of all, I am a member of the Language Centre where I was teaching for well over ten years before I embarked on this research. My affiliation to the institution had facilitated communication with the concerned teachers for attending their classes and talking to the students about my research at the end of the class time. Nevertheless, teachers were not informed of the research focus or aims so the chance that participants' decisions to take part in the research (or otherwise) might have been influenced by their teachers was minimised. The other factor was that the Language Centre has always presented itself as a research supportive organisation which encourages research on various aspects of language learning and teaching. However, some 'institutional bureaucracies' were inevitably present which I had to deal with. The group conversations were not conducted at the Language Centre itself but in the participants' respective colleges for which I had to obtain a separate permission from the university administration as well as the colleges. I was therefore referred to the office of the Vice-Chancellor's Advisor for Academic Affairs to obtain an official permission to gain access to the students in their colleges and book rooms for the group conversations. I used the same covering letter and ethical approval which I presented earlier to the Language Centre to obtain the permission

required from the Vice-Chancellor's Office (see appendix 2 for a copy of the permission letter obtained).

The reason why the investigation was not conducted at the Language Centre was that at the time when the investigation took place, the participants had just completed their foundation year and were doing their specialisation courses in their respective colleges where they spent most of their time. As such, and for the sake of convenience and safety (discussed below in sub-section 4.11.4.1), I decided that all of the RGCs were to be conducted in the colleges. Nevertheless, the participants were still regarded as Language Centre students for they were registered on the Credit English Language Programme (ESP courses) offered by the Language Centre. In the following section, I describe my meeting with the Director of the Language Centre as well as the Programme Coordinators and the recruitment of participants.

4.11.2. Recruiting the participants

On my first day at the university, I met the Director of the Language Centre and handed in the covering letter in which I introduced the topic and aims of my study, explained how I intend to recruit my participants and collect my data and, most importantly, explained some of the important ethical issues such as the informed consent, confidentiality of the data and anonymity of the participants as well as their specialisations and opinions. I also explained that the research targets the students who had completed the university Foundation Programme and, as such, all the post-foundation students in that academic year (2012/2013) would have an equal chance to join the research, regardless of their specialisations. I had therefore to select my study sample randomly (I described and justified my choice of the study sample in section 4.7 above). Upon this, the director contacted the coordinators of the two programmes I had chosen and asked them to extend cooperation to me with regard to meeting the students and collecting my data. The Programme Coordinators (PCs) run the day-to-day affairs of their respective programmes.

On the following day, I met the two PCs separately and explained my research to them (class teachers were not present). They welcomed me and showed due support and willing to help. They showed me their class lists and I randomly chose two classes from each programme or college. The plan was to meet the students in the last twenty minutes of their class, explain my research project to them, distribute the Arabic version of the Participant Information Sheet and at the end of the time take the details of those who show interest in the research and decide to take part. Over the following two days, I visited *four* classrooms, two in each

college. The students were given enough time to read the Information Sheet and ask questions about the research and data collection procedures. The volunteer students wrote their details on a separate Research Participation Form (see appendix 9). The form included four main columns. These were for the students to write their names, e-mail addresses and mobile phone numbers. The fourth column was for my personal notes on the students. In fact, things went on smoothly at this stage, thanks to the kind understanding and cooperation of the people at the Language Centre.

4.11.3. Sample size and establishing contact with the students

Before moving to the field and meeting the students, it was difficult to predict how many students would volunteer to take part in the research. However, we know from the literature that qualitative research designs tend to work with a relatively small number of cases and seek details in people's understandings and interactions, for they draw on a non-positivist model of reality (Silverman, 2005). In the same vein, Morrow (2005) postulates that while it is important to have a *sufficient* number of research participants, numbers alone have little to do with the quality or adequacy of the qualitative data obtained. She further explains that what is far more important than sample size are the sampling procedures; quality, length and depth of interview data; and the variety of evidence in the data.

Given the aims and qualitative design of my research, I initially planned to have ten participants- five from each specialisation. However, out of the four classrooms which I visited in both colleges, a total of sixteen students volunteered to take part in the study. One of the students withdrew at an early stage of the research though, so my actual sample was *fifteen*, which was not far from what I initially planned to have. I did not attempt to recruit more participants as I thought that with such a manageable sample, it would be easier for me to maintain the comfortable and relaxed atmosphere which I planned to have in the group conversations. In fact, such a sample size was quite reasonable and workable, given the fact that this is a qualitative research seeking a deep understanding of a specific phenomenon, as opposed to survey types of research. Out of the fifteen students, there were seven male and eight female students from both colleges. Because I previously planned to have single-sex groups and conduct the discussions in the students' respective colleges, I divided the students into *four* groups, each comprising almost the same number of students from the same sex and specialisation, making the four groups almost homogenous. Once this arrangement was over,

I booked two comfortable classrooms, one in each college and began to communicate with my participants with regard to times and venues of the RGCs.

To communicate to the participants information about times and venues of the group conversations, I successfully employed the widely used smartphone instant messaging application “WhatsApp” messenger. This modern social media and way of communication had facilitated communication between me and my participants, on the one hand, and between the participants themselves, on the other. I used the mobile phone numbers of the participants which they wrote along with their names and email addresses on the Research Participation Form to contact the participants and create four separate single-sex ‘chat groups’ on WhatsApp. This innovative method indeed proved effective as instant means of communication between me and my participants. It enabled me to negotiate with my participants possible meeting times, post information about the topics which would be discussed at RGCs, guidelines for the reflective journals as well as receive the participants’ queries and feedback. All members of the groups received instant copies of my postings and were able to interact with me as well as with other members of their groups in real-time.

4.11.4. Conducting the Reflective Group Conversations

4.11.4.1. Ensuring safety and comfort at the investigation site

As for the procedures for and actual conduct of the L1-RGCs, I ensured the provision of a *comfortable* and *safe* environment for the conversations to take place successfully. Comfort was achieved through the following measures:

1. Meetings were conducted in the same building where the participants had most of their classes, met their teachers and friends and spent their breaks between classes, which made the place comfortable, familiar and also safe for them.
2. Participants chose their own times for the sessions based on their class schedules and free times.
3. Single-sex group arrangement was kept based on the students’ preference.
4. Participants knew that they had the freedom to withdraw from the research at any time without having to give reasons and with no obligation towards the research.

5. The WhatsApp group communications added another element of comfort in the sense that it facilitated communication with me and other members of an individual group.
6. Participants were allowed to bring along their own refreshments (such as tea, coffee and juice) to the sessions.

Safety was achieved through the following measures:

1. As I said earlier, the conversations were held in the participants' respective faculty buildings where they spent most of their time and with which they were most familiar.
2. Participants were either classmates or in different sections of the *same* course so they were not totally new to each other. This element provided an extra element of comfort and safety for the participants in the sense that they were not worried about their ideas or opinions being disclosed to externals.
3. Participants were ensured that their participation in the research would be kept confidential and their identities anonymous.
4. Participants knew that any opinion or suggestion they give during the conversations would remain confidential and anonymous.

4.11.4.2. *The six LI-RGCs*

Once I had finalised the room booking in both colleges and agreed with each group about where and when to meet, I conducted the first RGC. Other sessions then followed as per the investigation grid (or the conversation guide) prepared. I met each group twice a week and over a period of three weeks, I was able to conduct a total of *twenty-two* reflective group conversations (on two occasions and due to their commitments, the students in two groups suggested that we combine two sessions in a single prolonged one – hence the total number of sessions). Each session lasted between 50-70 minutes. The sessions were indeed enjoyable and informative and rich data were obtained. I did not impose the conversation schedule on the participants; rather, I maintained a flexible and open approach to the discussion. I tried my best to create an informal and relaxing atmosphere different from the rigid and formal atmosphere of their daily classrooms. The participants were encouraged and prompted to reflect on their learning experiences using their everyday language. The goal was not only to help the participants narrate their learning experiences to me and to other participants in the

group but also re-think how they have been learning and what constraining or enabling factors were present in their learning context. I will now turn to describe the focus of and topics discussed in each of the six RGCs.

As it is clear in the investigation grid (see table 4.3. above), the **first session** aimed at welcoming students, re-introducing participants to me as a researcher, the nature of the research, the topics which would be covered, the two research data collection methods as well as signing the Informed Consent Forms. Although the Participant Information Sheet which the students had prior to the research explained these aspects, the first session was a good opportunity to reinforce certain issues such as anonymity and confidentiality of the participants' identities and responses as well as respond to the participants' queries about various aspects of the research. Having done so, the rest of the session was devoted to listening to the participants' past experiences of learning English, both formal experiences and informal or personal ones.

The focus of the **second session** was on the participants' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom. Examples of the specific issues discussed included:

1. Students' perceptions of the nature and goals of tertiary education in general
2. Students' perceptions of the nature and goals of *language* learning in tertiary education.
3. Students' perceptions of their role in and responsibility for language learning
4. Students' perceptions of the concept of *control* in language learning
5. Students' perceptions of the relevance and desirability of autonomy (though not used in the technical meaning of the term at this early stage) in their context
6. Out-of-class language learning.

As an entry to exploring participants' metacognitive knowledge (which includes person, task and strategic knowledge, as described in the literature review chapter, section 3.4.3), I began the **third** RGC by exploring the knowledge and capacities they thought they had about themselves as language learners (person knowledge). Other issues also included

1. Participants' knowledge and perceptions of self-management of language learning
2. The types of approaches and strategies they used in language learning in and out-side the classroom
3. The differences between 'self-pursued' and 'received' knowledge
4. The differences between learning and learning *how* to learn.

The **fourth** session was devoted to exploring the other two components of metacognitive knowledge: task knowledge and strategic knowledge. This was done through discussing a number of **language learning tasks** which the participants chose from their course materials. Task types included vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing and grammar. To explore the participants' task and strategic knowledge, I drew on Sinclair's (1999) and Dam's (1995) questioning techniques which they employed to explore pupils' perceptions, metacognitive knowledge and capacity for autonomy. Sinclair and Dam explored their students' level of awareness, reflection and capacity for autonomous learning through the following series of purposive questions:

- Why did you do this piece of work?
- Why did you choose this particular text/activity?
- Did you like it? Why? Why not?
- How did you go about doing this activity?
- Why did you do it in this way?
- How well do you think you did?
- What difficulties/challenges did you have?
- Why did you have them?
- What did you do about them? Why?
- What could you have done alternatively?
- What is your plan for next week? Why?
- How will you do it? Why?

Aspects of the investigation included the participants' knowledge of the aims, nature, demands, usefulness, level of difficulty of the tasks as well as their knowledge of alternative ways of carrying out those tasks. Apart from Dam's (1995) and Sinclair's (1999) cognitive model of developing autonomous capacities in their students, I discussed other methods which teachers can use to help their learners to develop critical thinking, reflection and capacities of autonomous learning in an earlier publication (see Al-Saadi, 2011).

Participants' perceptions of the internal (student-related) and external (contextual) constraints on their language learning were discussed in the **fifth** RGC. The discussion in this session also included participants' perspectives on ways of having more responsibilities for and a greater voice in their learning.

The **sixth** and last RGC was devoted to helping participants to reflect on their participation in the research in terms of the motives and impact they felt it had on their ways of thinking and

awareness about themselves as language learners as well as the language learning as a process.

4.11.4.3. Characteristics of the Reflective Group Conversations

The RGCs were designed and conducted in a way that met the criteria for method which I discussed in the ‘looking for a method’ section (see section 4.5 above). However, amongst the important features of the RGCs were being *engaging*, *deep* and *reciprocal* (in terms of the benefits gained by both the researcher and participants).

Every effort was made to ensure that the conversations were attractive, stimulating and cognitively engaging in a way that sustained the participants’ motivation for and interest in the research. This was done in a variety of ways amongst which were encouraging the participants to talk about aspects of their own learning which they liked talking about and the challenges they had in learning and were not usually given the opportunity to discuss in their classrooms. In addition, some challenging and stimulating questions were asked issues were and discussed during the conversations which required the participants to ponder and reflect on for the following sessions. Meta-language and jargon were avoided as much as possible in the parts of the conversations which aimed at eliciting the participants’ perceptions, views and interpretations of the issues discussed. These were seen as important measures to sustain the participants’ interest and engagement in the investigation.

4.11.4.4. Developmental nature of the investigation: Progressive focusing

The six RGCs, as should be clear through the previous sections, were a series of conversations each with a different focus but retaining a spirit of openness, dynamism, spontaneity and interaction. They were designed to help the participants focus on their learning processes and articulate what may be difficult constructions such as perceptions, metacognitive knowledge, approaches to learning and perspectives on ways of having more responsibility for and a greater voice in learning. They clearly drew on the research questions but one of the unique features of their overall design was perhaps their developmental nature, which I call here ‘**progressive focussing**’. In other words, the conversations progressed in topics and depth with the students in order to build their self-confidence and sustain their motivation. Each reflective conversation became increasingly comfortable over time, encouraging a more in-depth exploration of the research issues in an atmosphere of trust and

confidence. My role as a researcher was more of a facilitator, creating and enabling an environment that was enjoyable and non-threatening for the participants. I kept to open-ended questions but was also ready to follow up my initial question with cues or more focused questions when the students found it difficult to respond. Lamb (2005) reported a successful implementation of a similar technique for exploring pupils' motivation for and autonomy in language learning in an urban secondary school in England, which he terms *Focused Group Conversations*. His study undoubtedly showed that employing such an approach was innovative in itself, possible and useful.

4.11.4.5. Seeking awareness-raising through the investigation

I mentioned briefly in section (4.5) above that I opted for a method which should aim at helping the participants to develop better awareness about themselves as learners as well as about their learning and teaching situation so that they may become better reflective learners. My own experience as a language teacher for over ten years (see chapter two, section 2.2 for more on my learning and teaching background) showed that the very activity of helping learners to develop awareness of themselves as learners, the learning process as well as their immediate learning context (including its opportunities and challenges) has the potential for creating better and sustained learning. Therefore, a separate research question was devoted to exploring the potential development of awareness in the participants about themselves and their learning as a result of their participation in the research (see research questions in chapter two, section 2.8). To achieve this, effort was made to provide the participants with information and input on the topics and issues discussed in the conversations which are directly relevant to their learning and context. That is, the participants were encouraged to ask questions, explore issues related to their own learning and reflect on their learning styles and strategies. It was hoped that by the end of the investigation the participants would have developed better awareness about their metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about self and learning) and become better learners.

4.11.5. Recording the conversations

Audio-recording of group interaction and discussion is highly desirable. It enables the researcher to take few if any notes during the discussion. All the twenty-two reflective conversations were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. I ensured that my recording

device was of a good quality and reliable. I did not have technical problems with the recording nor were any of the conversations un/mis-recorded. From an ethical perspective, the participants were told about the audio recording of the sessions through the Participant Information Sheet and their consent for recording was also taken through the written Informed Consent which they read and signed prior to the commencement of the investigation. I checked the quality of the recording right after the first session and found it to be of a good quality.

The audio recording was helpful in many ways. First and foremost, it helped me to manage the course of the conversations and focus on the interaction in the groups rather than having to do so while taking notes. Indeed the following advantages of recording by Arthur et al (2014) are relevant in this respect. They maintain that recording of the data

“allows full attention to be devoted to listening and responsive questioning, to thinking about how the interviewee is approaching the discussion and responding to questions, and to keeping an eye on how the group dynamic is developing and changing. It provides an accurate, verbatim account of what was said, capturing the language used including hesitations and pauses, documenting group participants’ interactions including short and quick-fire comments, in far more detail than would ever be possible with note-taking” (p.172).

In addition, the recording of the entire conversations enabled me to play back the recording, listen to the conversations and note all the interactions which took place in each session. This was particularly helpful for it enabled me to a) immerse myself in the data and become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is an initial step towards data analysis, b) develop my own interpretations of what the participants have said, and c) cross-check or validate my interpretations of what was said during each session with the participants themselves in the subsequent sessions.

4.12. Qualities of the research design

Issues such as trustworthiness (or credibility), attention to subjectivity, reflexivity and adequacy of data have always been viewed as important parameters for evaluating qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). It follows then that any qualitative enquiry will need to apply

certain measures to ensure its findings are credible and acceptable by critical academia. I have, therefore, tried to keep to these standards through adopting a rigorous and reflexive, yet flexible research design. Below, I describe a number of measures which I took to increase the reflexivity and trustworthiness of my research:

1. I created an atmosphere where students comfortably asked questions about me and the conduct of the research (establishing rapport).
2. I explained to the participants at the outset that there were no right or wrong answers so as to eliminate any inhibition of responses which might contribute to decreased richness and quality of the data I intended to elicit.
3. To increase the accuracy and richness of their responses, I made it clear to the participants that they could always seek clarification of any concept, issue or question which they might not fully understand.
4. Instead of checking with participants my interpretation of certain words which they used such as 'effort' or 'useful', I asked them to further explain what they meant by such words. So for example I would ask '*what do you mean that X is useful?*' instead of '*do you mean that X helps you learn English better?*'
5. The fact that I was not their class teacher might have eliminated the participants' hesitation or fear of bringing up issues of concern to them which relate in one way or another to their learning and learning context.
6. Effort was made to help students to see the point of the discussion and relate it to their own world.
7. To maximise 'respondent validation' (Bryman, 2012), I began each meeting with a summary of what the participants had told me in the previous meeting so as to check with the participants any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of their responses which, in turn, paid towards increased trustworthiness of my data.

8. I used to read their journal entries before each meeting which, too, enabled me to validate the journal data with those obtained through the reflective group conversations.

The points below summarise the main characteristics of the research design which I think have contributed to enhancing the quality, credibility and rigour of the research as a whole:

1. First and foremost, the chosen design and methods reflected my epistemological and ontological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and reality.
2. The research design and methods employed for data collection responded to the level and expectations of my participants as well as the uniqueness of their context.
3. It offered first-hand, authentic data on the issues addressed by the research questions.
4. It, hopefully, has helped participants to develop awareness about their learning and the learning context.
5. It was exploratory in nature rather than descriptive.
6. It was flexible and adaptable to the time and resource constraints of the research.
7. It sought to achieve researcher neutrality (through researcher reflexivity).
8. It is doable, replicable and adaptable by other researchers in similar/different contexts.
9. It was ethical, credible, flexible, interactive and secure.

4.13. Limitations of the research design

Any research is subject to limitations. Research is always being carried out within limitations of design, context and procedures. I am aware of a number of limitations of my research which I describe herein. However, these limitations can also apply to any other research applying a similar framework, design and methods. I describe these limitations for two important reasons: a) because my research design and, at a later stage, my findings are to be

understood within the theoretical position I hold, which I described earlier in this chapter, as well as the context in which the study was conducted, and b) it becomes clear to the wider body of readers what I am researching and what I am *not*. Below I highlight the major limitations of my research design and conducts:

1. As maintained by Lamb (2005), any research is to be understood within the specific context in which it was carried out as individuals' beliefs about learning may change over time and this may even be true from one subject students take to another. Similarly, Benson and Lor (1999), maintain that "beliefs are always contextualized in relation to some learning task or situation. The beliefs articulated by students are not necessarily held to under all circumstances" (p.462). As such, similar research carried out in a different context or in the same context but at a later time may yield different results.
2. Given my research questions, the investigation was limited to the students' perceptions, experiences and capacities about their language learning as they 'report' them during the investigation and not what they actually do when they learn. The research was not designed to investigate what the students do in a given learning situation but rather what they *report* they do when they learn.
3. A number of authors have addressed the issue of 'invalidity of learners' self-reports'. There have been concerns about whether self-reports are valid indicators of students' perceptions. They caution that learner's self-reports may be a random product of deficient self-knowledge (see for example Assor & Connell, 1992). In their study, Assor and Connell point to two major potential sources of invalidity of self-reports. The first is that there is a possibility that research participants may not be able to accurately assess their own competence, as might be the case with young children. The second source involves the possibility that some participants distort their perceptions of their academic abilities and competences in order to maintain self-esteem and acquire favourable judgment by others.

However, the same authors present empirical evidence to support the point that students' self-reports *are* generally valid measures of their perceptions. This is also supported by the findings of Sinclair (1999) who investigated metacognitive awareness in her students. She suggests that the ways in which students 'talk' about

their learning may point to different levels of metacognitive awareness. In addition, Dam & Legenhausen (2010) provide a useful discussion about the reliability and validity of learner's own evaluations of their learning. They postulate that learners' self-evaluation can be as reliable and valid as the results of objective tests written by teachers. In my research, I have adopted a design which values participants' own talk and views it as a first-hand and authentic source of data which may be used to understand learners' voices, perceptions and overall capacities for autonomous learning.

4. Another limitation is to do with the choice and conduct of the RGCs and reflective journals as methods of data collection. Since these are conducted in the participants' native language (for ease of self-expression), researchers who chooses to adopt similar methods need to speak and understand the language of his/her participants. In addition, the RGCs require careful planning and particular personal and social skills to manage the interaction and control the pace, direction and focus of the investigation in a way that achieves the aims of the research. To do this, I drew on my long experience as a teacher in managing group work and discussions in the classroom.
5. Keeping reflective journals may not be a habit which the research participants are used to or a skill which they master. In either case, the type and depth of these journal entries may not reach up to the researchers' level of expectations. As such, researchers who decide to use reflective journals in contexts where the students are *not* asked to keep journals may need to assess the benefits of using such a method in the first place and, in case they decided to use them, what guidelines for keeping reflective journals the participants may need to have.
6. Since the investigation requires participants to describe their language learning and reflect on how it occurs and what affects its development, some participants may find it difficult to do so, for metacognition and reflection are not explicitly developed in the students in the classroom, at least not in the context under study.

However, I have found that getting the participants to reach such a deep level of description of what and how they learn is actually possible. To begin with, participants need to be made aware of the scope and depth of the discussion. Then the researcher needs to encourage informal talk starting with the participants' immediate

learning experiences, avoiding meta-language and jargon and then gradually moving to more complex issues as the participants develop confidence in the discussions. Indeed I have found ‘progressive focusing’ (see section 4.11.4.4) of the conversations from basic and closer-to-attention concepts to more complex issues a useful method in maintaining the participants’ confidence and getting them to talk about their language learning in a more abstract manner than they would normally be able to do. This method also requires the researcher to maintain flexibility and be ready to repeat, rephrase and simplify his/her questions until the participants eventually produce the discourses which manifest what the research is set to investigate (in my research the participants’ discourses manifested autonomy and metacognitive awareness).

7. Finally, RGCs generate a huge volume of rich data and, as such, the tasks of data translation (if required), data transcription and data analysis will require time to do, which may render the whole process tedious and discouraging to some researchers.

4.14. Thinking forward to analysis

To me, the tasks of data collection and data analysis are inseparable. Data analysis should not be viewed as a separate stage from data collection but rather part of the research cycle (Wellington, 2000). When I first had my research questions written in their final form, I was mindful that they would need to be both researchable and analysable. Therefore, my overall research framework (which adopts a qualitative and interpretative design) applies to both data collection and data analysis. In addition, I think any adopted framework for data analysis will have to serve the overall purpose of the investigation and keep to the principle of ‘fitness for purpose’ (Cohen et al, 2007) for the type of analysis adopted will also be influenced by the overall aims of the research, number of participants and volume of the data collected.

Given the aims and nature of investigation of my research, I have found **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003) an appropriate approach for it allows sufficient flexibility to enable new themes and categories of data to emerge apart from those which have been previously identified drawing on the main research questions.

4.15. Concluding remarks and reflection

The research methods and methodology chapter is an important chapter in any thesis. Unsurprisingly, it takes a long time to plan, write and revise. In this chapter, the researcher describes and justifies his/her theoretical positions as well as their choice of framework and specific research design. I have taken care to plan the overall structure of the chapter and organise its different sections so that they flow smoothly and link logically to one another. The reader may have noticed that the former sections of the chapter set the scene and lay the foundation for the latter ones.

The chapter begins by describing in some detail some of the key philosophical issues, paradigms and designs relevant to social research then progressing to more specific issues such as my epistemological and ontological assumptions, the specific data collection methods and ethical considerations. I have also described in detailed how access to the research context was gained and the RGCs were conducted. Of course, I had to justify my choices and acknowledge the limitations of my research design and conducts.

The overall research design can be said to draw on my ontological and epistemological positions and embrace qualitative research design. It also draws on constructivist and interpretivist traditions of social research. In fact, such philosophical and methodological positions informed the overall design of the research and selection of the specific data collection methods, i.e., RGCs and reflective journals as well as the approaches to data analysis, as described in the next chapter. The research design also pays special attention to important ethical issues such as anonymity of the research participants and their programmes of study as well as confidentiality of their voices.

The benefits and risks of me being an insider researcher in the research context sharing the same culture, mother-tongue as well as educational background with the research participants was also dealt with. My critical awareness of such benefits and risks as well as their potential impact on the research outcomes had contributed to the development of context-sensitive methods for obtaining participants' voices and experiences. This was done in a natural setting rather than part of a classroom experiment. Such awareness had also helped me to develop a better and improved understanding of the data obtained.

Finally, the reading I have done and the various resources I have consulted for writing this chapter have indeed developed in me a genuine interest in research methods, an area which I did not have much interest in before embarking on PhD studies. I think I have developed the critical knowledge and expertise on various research methodologies and designs which I hope

I will be able to disseminate to the wider academic community through delivering conference papers, publishing articles in academic journals as well as lecturing to postgraduate students.

PART TWO

ANALYSIS AND REPORTING OF THE FINDINGS

- Introduction to Part Two

In part one, I have set the scene, drawn the theoretical and methodological boundaries of the research and described how data were obtained. In this part of the thesis, I provide a detailed description of how data were analysed and what results have been arrived at.

This part of the thesis unfolds in two chapters: chapters five and six. In chapter five, I describe the approaches and procedures I employed to translate and analyse my data. I begin the chapter by describing how I organised my raw data prior to analysis then move on to describe the approach and actual procedures I followed for the simultaneous tasks of translating my data from Arabic into English and transcribing the data into English. The chapter then describes and justifies the use of ‘qualitative thematic analysis’ which I employed to analyse and interpret my data. In chapter six, I present the findings in relation to the five main themes derived from the research questions as well as the themes and categories which emerged during the analysis.

In the introduction to the previous chapter on data collection, I committed myself to maintaining an explicit and transparent approach to data collection. Likewise, I commit myself herein to a clear and explicit description of my choices and decisions about data analysis and data interpretation as well as the procedures and resources I employed in each stage. In this respect, Attride-Stirling (2001) emphasises that if readers do not know how the researcher went about analysing his/her data, or what assumptions informed their analysis, it would be difficult to evaluate their research, and to compare and/or synthesise it with other studies on the same topic. Also, being explicit about analysis can encourage other researchers to carry out related research in the area. I also view maintaining such an explicit and clear approach to data handling and analysis as contributing to increased trustworthiness (or credibility) of my findings and maximising the readers’ trust in what is being reported to them.

Chapter Five

Preparing the Raw Data and Methods of Analysis

5.1. Introduction

In cases where data have been collected in a language different from the language in which the research is to be reported and published, careful translation of the data becomes an important mandatory stage along the research process. As such, while deciding on the analysis framework to be employed for analysis, the researcher also needs to make important choices and decisions regarding *when* and *how* the data are to be translated as well as *who* should carry out the translation. They should also be reflective (and reflexive) about their role in the whole process of data translation and data analysis.

In this chapter, I describe how I have translated, transcribed and analysed my data. I begin the chapter by briefly discussing some of the issues and challenges involved in translating qualitative data in cross-language research and the implications these issues have for validity (or trustworthiness), ethics and quality of the research. This brief introduction is seen as important to some of the readers who may be new to the issue of translation in qualitative research. I then move to describe how I translated, transcribed and analysed my data together with the theoretical as well as methodological frameworks and procedures I employed in each stage. I will conclude the chapter by some final comments on the issues and topics discussed in the chapter and reflect on what I have learned through engaging myself in qualitative data translation and analysis.

5.2. Important issues in translating cross-language research

Cross-language or cross-cultural research has recently become increasingly common. There is a significant growing body of qualitative research where data are collected in a language other than those spoken by the researcher or in which the final report is to be published. This is partly because staff and student mobility has increased over the past few years and more and more organisations and individuals are seeking comparable information across languages and cultures (Birbili, 2000; Crane, Lombard & Tenz, 2009). In addition, there are methodological and epistemological challenges arise from the fact that people using different languages and belonging to different cultures may construct meanings about social life

differently (Temple & Young, 2004). It follows then that the question about the extent to which a translator is actually able to see for the participants and speaks on their behalf through his/her translation becomes a valid one. As such, translation has become a significant factor in cross-language research for it can have crucial impact on the ethics and conducts of the research as well as the credibility of its findings (Shklarov, 2007; Temple & Young, 2004). Amongst the important issues the literature on cross-language, cross-cultural social research discusses are:

1. The challenges of data translation in general, and the translation of direct quotations and academic or cultural concepts, in particular.
2. The various factors that affect the quality of translation.
3. The importance of being explicit about the translation approach employed in the research.

I will briefly elaborate each of these issues in turn and link the discussion to my own approach in translation.

5.2.1. The challenge of data translation

Translation can be a challenging task in social research. First and foremost, translation is not simply finding equivalences for the words used by participants in the target language. Indeed, Esposito (2001) stresses that not all concepts are universal and not everything is translatable. In addition, the words and expressions we use carry within them a set of assumptions, feelings, values and connotations which are unique to our culture and may either not exist in the target language and culture or several meanings can be assigned to them, in which cases a considerable part of what participants meant may be distorted or lost in the translated version of the conversation or interview. In this respect, Birbili (2000) argues that the quality of translation is greatly facilitated by the researcher or translator having not only a proficient understanding of a language but also ‘intimate’ knowledge of the target culture. Translation may even become more challenging when it comes to translating academic terms and direct quotations. According to Crane et al (2009), translating academic terms involves sensitive consideration to the specific social, political and cultural meanings embedded in both the languages used. In this respect, the authors stress that “culture may be as important, if not more so, than language” (p.45). Besides cultural consideration, the issue of whether a term used in one language has a comparable meaning when translated into another language cannot be ignored. As such, a number of authors argue that the crucial task of data translation

in an intercultural or cross-language social research setting is to translate *meaning* rather than words (Crane et al, 2009). This entails obtaining a ‘**conceptual equivalence**’ rather than simply a literal equivalence of the term for the latter does not always express the essential meaning of the source language. In this regard, Nurjannah et al (2014) argue that “the important factor in achieving a valid translation is ensuring equivalence in meaning” (p.1). This approach becomes more evident when some sentences or academic expressions have no direct comparable meanings in the target language, in which a case, as suggested by McGuire (1980, cited in Birbili, 2000), the ‘sense of the sentence’ should be adequately translated into the target language.

When it comes to translating direct quotations, researchers have two options: they either go for a literal, word-by-word translation or a free and more elegant form of translation. The former style may be seen as doing more justice to what the participants have said, and makes the researcher as well as the readers understand the mentality and ways of thinking of the participants in a better way (Birbili, 2000). Such a practice can however hinder readability in the target language. Researchers who, on the other hand, choose to go for a more free and elegant translation that makes their quotations read well in the target language usually find themselves having to edit or interpret the original quotes to fit the ‘tone’ or structure of the target language. Nevertheless, such a practice may involve the risk of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the actual meaning intended by participants. Notwithstanding the argument for a good readability and elegant translation of quotes, Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) argue that the original colloquial style of the words and phrases used by participants should be retained for analysis as they represent specific cultural concepts that are useful when interpreting the data. I will revisit this very argument in section (5.3.1) below where I discuss my approach to data translation.

2.5.2. Factors affecting quality of data translation

A number of factors can contribute to the quality of translation in cross-language, cross-cultural social research. Amongst the most important and relevant factors to my research are a) the overall theoretical approach which informs the research design (in my case, my research draws on constructivist and interpretivist traditions), b) the one who carries out the translation task, and c) the stage at which the translation is carried out. I will discuss the first two factors together, for they are interrelated, and the third factor in a separate paragraph.

To begin with, translation can be carried out by a bilingual member of the research team, the researcher him/herself or by an appointed professional translator. However, the decision about who carries out the translation links very much back to the theoretical or philosophical framework applied in the research (Esposito, 2001; Temple & young, 2004). For research drawing on positivist traditions where knowledge is discovered, not constructed, translation becomes an objective and simple process of language transfer. Within this framework, translation can be (and usually is) carried out by an appointed professional translator. On the other hand, in constructivist, interpretative, no-positivist research, translation is not viewed as being professional, one which is supposed to be 'neutral' and 'objective' and produce a 'correct' version of the text in the target language. In this case, the appointment of a professional translator can raise methodological and epistemological concerns, for a translator will always have his/her marks on the research (Temple & Young, 2004) and objective translation is not always possible (nor is required). This latter view is in line with the approach I have applied in my research, as we are going to see in the following section.

In cases where the translation is carried out by someone else other than the researcher, important issues about the extent to which the translator is familiar with the area of research, the local language and culture of the participants as well as how much influence he/she has on the translation process may arise. Important 'cultural phrases' and 'concepts' may be lost in the text prepared for analysis if the translator, due to lack of knowledge of the participants' local language or culture, fails to capture the participants' intended meaning of such phrases and concepts. Translating one's own data can, however, be seen as one way to avoid problems of misinterpretation and ensure accurate meaning is captured during group discussions (Smith, Chen & Liu, 2008). A bilingual researcher, as Shklarov (2007) argues, can have an active and beneficial position for maintaining the quality of cross-language research and can also contribute to the effective resolutions of relevant ethical concerns.

As for *when* the translation is carried out, there are usually three points where data may be translated: before, during or after analysis. To begin with, translation may be carried out on the raw data as soon as they are transcribed or while they are being transcribed (as it was the case in my research as I will describe later). Although this may be a time-consuming task, the advantage is that the researcher can always include verbatim text from the original transcript (which is already in the target language) for reference during analysis (Hennink et al, 2011). In such a case, however, the translator needs to be familiar with the local language and culture of the participants to ensure that he/she can capture the appropriate meaning intended by the participants in the interview or group interaction (Hennink et al, 2011). Alternatively,

translation may be conducted *during* analysis. This option is common in cases where not all members of the research team speak the same language. The third option is that translation is performed on the analysed data. Again here, the translator needs to be familiar with the local language and culture of the participants to ensure that he/she can capture the appropriate meaning intended by the participants in the interview or group interaction. In this respect, Nurjannah et al (2014) maintain that it is important to consider the composition of the research team when deciding on the timing of translation.

2.5.3. Being explicit about the translation approach

The third issue on translating social research is the crucial task of being explicit about the translation approach used in the research. Data translation can be an area of concern in social research if it is overlooked. We have already seen that decisions made about *how* and *when* the translation is carried out and *by whom* can directly affect the accuracy of the data being analysed and, necessarily, the trustworthiness of the research as a whole (Smith et al, 2008). Temple and Young (2004) make reference to the research on ‘minority ethnic communities’ in Britain as an example of research which is written without any reference to the linguistic background of the participants and where the results are presented as if the participants are fluent English speakers. The writers argue that it is particularly difficult for the readers of such a research to engage with a text when there is no available information on the research process especially in relation to the languages of the researcher(s) and those of the participants. It follows then that translation cannot be overlooked or simply reduced to a logistical or technical issue; rather it is “a significant variable in the research process that can influence its content, outcomes, and ethical adequacy” (Shklarov, 2007, p.530). Researchers are therefore increasingly being encouraged to be ‘explicit’ about their approach in translation. In this respect, Birbili (2000) stresses the need to include a thorough description of the translation-related issues, problems and decisions involved in the various stages of the research process including the *circumstances* within which the translation took place, the *techniques* and *resources* used during the translation and the *people* who carried out the translation. Finally, I would like to sum up this section by quoting Wong and Poon (2010) who observe that “only by making translation visible and through open dialogue can researchers uncover the richness embedded in the data and facilitate multiple ways of knowing” (p.151). With this in mind, I now turn to describe how I carried out data translation and data transcription.

5.3. Preparing the raw data for analysis

5.3.1. Data translation: approach and method

We have seen in the previous section that if data have been collected in a language different from that in which the research is to be published, then it becomes ethically and methodologically imperative that researchers be explicit about the approach they have applied in translating their data. I therefore commit myself to being transparent and explicit about how I translated and prepared my data for analysis. I should keep my data translation visible and maintain an open dialogue with my readers and show how the richness embedded in my original data has been maintained and uncovered in the English translation of the data. In this respect, I will discuss three important issues pertaining to the translation of my data from Arabic into English: the decision to translate the data *on my own*, the decision to translate the data *before* analysis and the specific *method* I applied in translation.

To begin with, I decided that I would translate my data into English *on my own*. There were theoretical, methodological and ethical reasons for this. First of all, given the fact that my research draws on constructivist and interpretivist methodologies, I did not see the need to appoint a professional translator to carry out the translation for me. According to Temple and Young (2004), the appointment of a professional translator applies only in research which draws on positivist and objectivist epistemologies where knowledge is to be discovered, not constructed. Rather, my research draws on a constructivist epistemology in which knowledge is viewed as being constructed by social actors and is always subjective and dynamic. Within this framework, the researcher (or the translator in this case) together with participants play a crucial role in constructing meaning and making sense of the data. This framework asserts that social world influences the perspective of the translator and the way he/she translates and interprets the data. I, as a researcher-translator, do not consider translation as a technical and neutral process which involves changing words from one language to another but one which involves interpreting and conveying the subtle nuances embedded in the original discourse into the target language.

Translation in this sense is also influenced by the social context and cultural traits. As such, as a bilingual researcher belonging to the same culture as that of my participants, I saw myself better-placed to carry out the translation than a professional translator. a professional translator may not be able to capture the specific cultural and social meanings embedded in the participants' phrases and expressions for the participants came from different parts of

Oman and the conversations were conducted in the local Omani dialects, which even vary from one region in Oman to another. As such, “the colloquial style of language and phrases used by the participants” (Hennink et al, 2011, p.215) may be lost in the translation carried out by an outsider translator. In this respect, Smith et al (2008) also postulate that original words, phrases and concepts are securely embedded in the context and, as such, the risk of misinterpretation and loss of participants’ intended meaning is minimised. This is greatly facilitated by the researcher being fluent in the local language (and dialect) of the participants.

From an ethical perspective, appointing an outsider translator may involve revealing certain aspects of the research or the participants’ details which are supposed to be kept confidential. I had an ethical commitment towards my participants to keep their identities and responses anonymous throughout the research stages. Another ethical commitment which I tried to maintain as a bilingual researcher was to act responsibly and ethically with regard to conveying adequately the voices of my participants while at the same time producing honest and sound results which are free from any distortion that might result from language and translation challenges. So keeping to the meaning and concepts intended by the participants during translation was also an ethical commitment which I had to keep to.

Finally, I ended up with a total of twenty-two reflective group conversations (RGCs) each lasted between fifty and seventy minutes in addition to a total of twenty-six journal entries. Assigning this huge job of translation to an outsider translator would inevitably incur unnecessary expenses.

The other decision I took in regard to data translation was to translate my data *before* analysis. In section (5.2.2) above, I have discussed the three stages at which data can be translated. However, it is difficult to maintain a one-fits-all approach here for each method has its own advantages and limitations and each research applies a certain approach or a methodology. As such, for a number of methodological and practical reasons, I decided it was better to translate my data into English first and then carry out the analysis on the English transcript.

I planned and designed my research in English, had my research questions in English and prepared the data collection instruments also in English. Before going to the field, though, I translated into Arabic my conversation guide or protocol and the key concepts and

terminologies of the investigation. The specific research questions were not translated into Arabic for these were not directly asked during the conversations. Being bilingual in the research language as well as the language in which the data were collected, I was very much aware of the complex nature of the concepts I was investigating and alert about the 'language' I had to use to explore such concepts with my participants. This language had to achieve the dual task of maintaining a comfortable yet effective communication with my participants while at the same time doing justice to the actual concepts and issues which the research was set to explore. The major themes for analysis which were derived from the research questions remained in English and as soon as the data collection was over, I translated all of my data from the RGCs and reflective journals back into English ready for analysis. Another practical reason why I translated my data before analysis was that I translated and simultaneously transcribed the data into English and, as such, no Arabic transcript was available for analysis. It would be impractical to first produce a transcript in the original language of the conversations and then translate and transcribe everything back into English, given the huge amount of data collected from both the RGCs and the reflective journals. I therefore found it easier and more practical to have a monolingual, single version of my data ready for analysis.

As for the **method** I used in translation, I was keen to translate the key concepts and terminologies of the research into Arabic as adequately and accurately as possible by gaining '*conceptual equivalence*' of their meanings rather than literal meanings. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, I had to make sure that the investigation focused on the exact concepts and issues intended for the investigation and not anything else. Secondly, I had to ensure that my participants had no difficulty in understanding and relating these concepts and issues to their learning context and experiences. Literal translation was not useful in this research in particular for some of the key concepts of the research such as 'learner autonomy' do not have a direct and single equivalent meaning in Arabic. As it is the case in English, the concept 'autonomy' in Arabic is often used (and understood) as synonymous with 'independence' and 'freedom'. However, when the word 'learner' is attached to it, the term 'learner autonomy', and again as it is the case in English, becomes peculiar to some people, especially those who are outside the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) or TESOL, while others associate it with one being free to learn what he/she likes. In this respect, Birbili (2000) observes that while obtaining grammatical and syntactical equivalence in translation is important, the most important goal of the researcher-translator should be to achieve '*conceptual equivalence*'. I therefore deliberately did not use technical words and research

jargon such as autonomy, metacognitive knowledge and awareness at least in the first four sessions of the total six RGCs I had with my participants.

I also maintained the conceptual equivalence method in translating the RGCs and reflective journal entries from Arabic back into English. However, I exercised some flexibility in this, with a great caution, though. While I ensured that the English text was readable and comprehensible by the English reader, I tried to remain faithful to my participants by keeping the flavour of their original data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), their nuances, style and, on some occasions, even their sentence structure, word choice and prepositions. Such markers and usages carry within them rich cultural connotations and important indicators of the participants' intellect and ways of thinking. These were deemed important for analysis. In the following table, I demonstrate with verbatim examples how my translation catered to the participants' original use, style and structure of utterances:

Areas of language use	Examples
Use of the masculine pronoun only, even by female participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “I think the person plays an important role in <u>his</u> own learning.” ➤ “The successful learner is the one who is self-motivated. <u>He</u> is pushed from inside to learn. <u>He</u> learns on his own.” ➤ “The one who makes effort in order to reach what <u>he</u> wanted.”
Over-use of personal language (second person ‘you’)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “If <u>you</u> want to learn, <u>you</u> will learn.” ➤ “When learning a language, <u>you</u> can do much more things than what <u>you</u> can when learning other subjects. ➤ “If you prepare the lessons at home, it’ll become easy for <u>you</u> in the class.”
Sentence structure/order of phrases (which reflects features of their spoken language)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “You have grown up and have reached the stage where you need to think in a different way about the things that are going around you.” ➤ “Because to me it's still not yet clear the

	<p>difference between ... and ...”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “Some of these words we learned in the foundation program.” ➤ “In our English classes, they are not many students.”
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Table 5.1. Examples of structure and style of students’ language kept in the translated data

5.3.2. Data transcription: method and procedures

I view data transcription as an important stage in the larger process of data analysis rather than a separate stage in its own right. It involves a change of medium from a spoken context of an interview or a group discussion to a typed transcript. Such a change of medium necessarily raises issues of accuracy, fidelity and interpretation (Gibbs, 2007). However, Gibbs argues that “the issue is not whether the transcript is, in a final sense, accurate, but rather whether it represents a good, careful attempt to capture some aspects of the interview” (p.11). While transcription of qualitative data allows more thorough examination of participants’ responses during analysis, it inevitably takes a lot of time and effort. According to Bryman (2012), one hour of speech can take up to five to six hours to transcribe. As such, researchers need to decide whether their research requires a full transcription of their data or only certain parts of it. In fact, such a decision is informed by what is appropriate for the purposes of the research. In a research like mine, where the purpose was to capture the participants’ interpretations and perceptions of their language learning context, there was a need for a detailed copy of what was said in the group discussions. I therefore decided that I needed a full transcription of my RGCs and the reflective journals.

I mentioned in the previous section that for practical reasons I chose to carry out the two tasks of data translation and data transcription simultaneously. While it was an arduous and time-consuming task, having assigned such important tasks to someone else might have deprived me from gaining the benefits of getting closer to my data and encouraging me to start to identify key themes as they emerge during the translation and transcription process. Indeed, I felt such benefits as soon as I began to translate and transcribe my initial group conversations and journal entries. In the same vein, Gibbs (2007) suggests that transcribing one’s own data gives his/her the opportunity to start the data analysis. He elaborates that careful listening to the recording and checking the transcripts means that the researcher becomes very familiar with the content. Another advantage of transcribing my own data was that the possible errors in transcription, which may result from the transcriber being

unfamiliar with the dialects used by the participants, the context in which the group conversations were carried out or the subject matter of the research, were greatly minimised.

As for the procedures I followed to transcribe my data, I tried to be practical, yet accurate in this. The twenty-two RGCs were recorded and stored on a digital voice recorder. The process of data translation-transcription was greatly facilitated by the use of an application on my smart phone called '**Dragon Dictation**'. This is a voice-recognition software which transfers voice into text. I used a headset to listen to the recording (which was in Arabic) and immediately speak the English interpretation into a microphone attached to my smartphone. Dragon Dictation then transformed my English words into text which appeared on my smartphone screen. The accuracy of the voice-recognition feature of the application improved as I proceeded with the transcription. I then copied the chunks of text from Dragon Dictation and saved them onto my laptop for later editing and analysis. I used the same software to also translate and transcribe the written data from the reflective journals. I read the participant's journal entries and spoke the English translation into the application which transformed my voice into a written text. Indeed the use of Dragon Dictation had saved a great deal of time, for otherwise typing the translation of the twenty-two group conversations would have taken much a longer time and effort. Once I had finished transcribing all of my data from both the research instruments, I checked all of my transcripts against the original recording in Arabic for any typing errors, misspellings or mistakes in the translated text.

I believe that everything the participants said or wrote carried valuable information in one way or another. As such, I decided that I would transcribe *all* of the twenty-two RGCs I conducted as well as the twenty-six journal entries the participants wrote creating a 'verbatim' account of all written, verbal and non-verbal (such as laughs) utterances. In addition, I chose to transcribe the RGCs one after another following the same order in which they were conducted with the participants. This method in fact proved useful for it enabled me to see how the conversations progressed in scope and depth over time. It also helped me to account for the themes as they emerged during the transcription. There were themes which linked to the main research questions but there were also some new ones. In addition, I was able to see for myself the areas of similarities and differences in my participants' experiences and opinions as they expressed them, work out relationships and establish connections between such experiences and opinions, both within individual conversations as well as across sessions. As such, I think my transcripts told unique stories about each and every conversation I had with my participants which were worth telling.

Given the length of the transcripts, I am including only samples of each of the six RGCs I conducted with group A in **appendix 11** and samples of the journal entries from group C in **appendix 12** at the end of this thesis (groups were randomly selected). Full anonymised transcripts of all of the RGCs and journal entries are available from the researcher.

5.4. The analytical framework employed

5.4.1. Approaches and methodologies to analysis

Theoretically, data analysis as a process should be informed by the *same* overarching theoretical or philosophical position of the researcher which guided the preceding stages of research design and data collection. For research conducted from a positivist/realist perspective in which knowledge is to be discovered, not constructed, analysis is considered as an objective process of ‘finding’ or ‘uncovering’ truth and meanings which already exist or reside in the data. As for the role of the researcher, he/she is considered to be objective, i.e., has no influence on data analysis and there is no room for him/her interpreting the data. On the other hand, analysis which is carried out from a constructivist, non-positivist and interpretivist epistemology, values the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ statements. The researcher, in this sense, shapes the analysis through his/her identity and experiences (Temple & Young, 2004). In this respect, reality is seen as multiple, for individuals have different ways of seeing and interpreting the world around them and want to make sense of their experiences (Gibbs, 2007). The role of the analysis is then to try to reflect as faithfully as possible the participants’ constructions from their own perspectives but the researcher’s own constructions will always form an important part of the overall outcome of the analysis. Gibbs (2007), therefore, stresses the **researcher’s ethical commitment** to keeping to the differing perspectives held by different participants as well as the potential conflict in perspective between those being studied and those doing the studying.

As for the methodologies available for analysing qualitative data, there are as many ways of analysing and interpreting qualitative data as there are of collecting them. Some of the methods are of a general nature while others are more specific and suit certain types of data. However, there are no well-established and widely accepted methods and set of rules to be followed for analysing and interpreting qualitative data (Bryman, 2012). This is because the kind of analysis performed on the data and how the analysis is to be written up are greatly influenced by the purpose of the investigation and the type of data to be analysed (Cohen et

al, 2007). Methods of analysis may include narrative analysis, conversation analysis, content analysis, grounded theory and thematic analysis. The bottom line however is, as Cohen et al (2007) suggest, keeping to the principle of *fitness for purpose*. That is, any adopted framework for data analysis will have to serve the overall purpose of the investigation and the type of data available for analysis. In addition, the researcher should be clear about what he/she wants the analysis to do as this will determine the type of analysis to be undertaken.

5.4.2. My theoretical framework of analysis

In section (5.4.1) above, I have said that data analysis usually follows the same overarching theoretical or philosophical position of the researcher which originally guided the research design and data collection. My theoretical framework for analysis therefore was informed by my overall ontological and epistemological positions which guided the research as a whole. (I have detailed this in chapter four). Indeed Braun and Clarke (2006) postulate that “researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (p.84).

My data analysis was guided by principles of interpretivism, idealism and constructivism. Since qualitative research is almost inevitably interpretive (Cohen et al, 2007; Gibbs, 2007), and as an analyst of qualitative data operating within these theoretical traditions and frameworks, I see myself as having an active, yet careful, role in trying through my analysis to depicting part of the social world of my participants by giving meaning to and interpreting their experiences and perceptions. In so doing, my interpretation is inevitably influenced by the social world which I live in and interact with other social members of the community (including the participants) and together we construct our ‘varied’ worlds and realities. According to Saussure (1974, cited in Attride-Stirling, 2001), “meaning can only be understood within a social context” (p.403). My interpretation is also influenced (and shaped) by my knowledge about the research topic and the participants being researched. However, I do not subscribe to the naïve realist epistemology where the researcher’s job is viewed as simply ‘giving voice’ to his/her participants, but rather trying to make sense of the data through speaking for the participants using language to construct self and others. This in itself is an ethical issue. It involves a responsibility that the researcher has to maintain towards his/her participants for the way he/she represents them and their language (Temple & Young, 2004). Within such a theoretical climate, I also do not think that there is one ‘ideal’ theoretical framework for conducting qualitative research, nor is there one ideal method for

analysing qualitative data. What is important here, though, as Braun and Clarke (2006) stress, that the chosen framework and method should match what the researcher wants to know and do.

In terms of the role or place of theory in analysis, I mainly, though not entirely, adopted an *inductive* approach to data analysis in the sense that my analysis aimed at generating themes and categories from which new theories could be constructed. However, my analysis can also be said to embrace some essence of the *deductive* approach in the sense that it aimed at problematizing some of the existing theories and assumptions about learner autonomy such as Smith's (2003) assumptions about the strong and weak versions of autonomy and other assumptions about learner autonomy in the context under study.

5.4.3. Method of analysis: Qualitative thematic analysis

The word 'analysis' literally means to break down a whole into its components or divide it into its parts (Wellington, 2000). In research, data analysis involves applying a number of systematic processes on the data such as data reduction, data coding, data categorisation, data comparison, etc. As such, along with a theoretical framework, one also needs to have a robust and practical method or tool for performing these processes. According to Attride-Stirling (2001), "if qualitative research is to yield meaningful and useful results, it is imperative that the material under scrutiny is analysed in a methodological manner" (p.386). Given the aims of the investigation, the adopted method of analysis had to provide a clear account of the participants' learning experiences, perceptions and metacognitive knowledge. One way of doing this was through exploring the data for key, recurring themes and concepts which relate to the questions addressed by the research in addition to any other themes and concepts which could be induced from the empirical data or emerge through the analysis. In this sense, '**qualitative thematic analysis**' was seen as one possible way of going about making sense of my data and responding to the research questions.

Thematic analysis is one of the widely used qualitative analytic methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Bryman, 2012). It offers an accessible and flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. Part of its flexibility lies in its ability to allow the researcher to determine the themes and their level of prevalence in the data in a number of ways. A **theme** in thematic analysis is an abstract construct which links together or labels similar expressions in the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The major function of thematic analysis is to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and to describe patterns across qualitative data

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process also involves categorising and organising the themes in meaningful ways and ‘inducing’ new theories and explanations from them.

However, this is not only unique to thematic analysis. Bryman (2012), for example, argues that searching for themes is an activity being done in many if not most approaches to qualitative data analysis such as critical discourse analysis, content analysis, grounded theory and narrative analysis. In this sense, he argues, thematic analysis has no identifiable heritage or is not an analytical approach in its own right. Other writers such as Braun and Clarke (2006) and Ryan and Bernard (2003) argue that most of the other analysis approaches involve thematic analysis in one way or another but without being named. They postulate that thematic analysis offers robust and sophisticated guidelines for analysing and interpreting qualitative data rendering qualitative thematic analysis a robust and rigorous method for analysing qualitative data.

Moreover, qualitative thematic analysis aligns fairly well with my theoretical framework of analysis, for it can be a non-positivist, idealist or constructivist method, which does not only report experiences, meanings and the reality of the participants as they are (as it would be done within a realist view) but rather tries to explore and interpret such experiences, meanings and realities and understand them as being constructed by the participants themselves in their social context. The bottom line is, however, as maintained by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Ryan and Bernard (2003) that a good thematic analysis will make such assumptions about the participants and how they view the world explicit.

5.4.3.1. Latent thematic analysis

I mentioned earlier that it is important that the researcher makes him/herself explicit about the type of analysis they want to carry out, which is informed by the specific aims of the investigation and the type of data collected.

Three of the prime aims of the present investigation were to explore:

1. What we could learn from students’ voices about their language learning.

2. How autonomy as a capacity (as defined in the introductory and literature review chapters) manifests itself in students' voices, including their perceptions, metacognitive knowledge and perspectives.
3. What potential impact the research might have on the participants' awareness of themselves as learners as well as the learning process.

Necessarily, the type of analysis performed would need to go beyond the 'semantic' or explicit level of what the participants have said to explore the '**latent**' or interpretative level.

Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a good elaboration on the semantic and latent levels of thematic analysis. They maintain that thematic analysis at the semantic level aims at identifying themes and patterns within the explicit or surface meanings of the data. In this sense, this type of thematic analysis is not concerned with anything beyond what participants have said or written. In contrast, analysis at the latent level (which pertains much to the nature of my research and purpose of analysis) "goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations- and ideologies- that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (p.84). So we can see that analysis at the semantic level precedes and paves the way for the latent analysis. Since the latter type of analysis is dependent upon the former, I had to carry out both but latent analysis was more relevant to the thrust of this investigation. It looked at what underpinned or gave shape to the participants' discourses or articulations of their experiences, perceptions and perspectives in relation to the concepts studied. As such, my analysis framework can be said to embrace the essence of '**latent thematic analysis**'.

In the following section, I will describe the practicalities of the analysis which I carried out at both the semantic level, as an initial stage, and then the latent level, for the actual endeavour was to respond to the research questions in general, and the questions about autonomy manifestation and impact of research on the participants' discourses and capacity to reflect, in particular.

5.5. Practicalities and levels of the analysis performed

My initial analysis began far earlier than the actual stage of analysis: it took place during and right after each RGC I had with my participants. I was keen to listen to the recordings and reflect on what my participants had said after each session. According to Wellington (2000), data analysis has to begin early in order to influence the emerging research design and future data collection. Indeed, in qualitative research, there is a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data and the implications of this is that the initial analysis shapes the next stage of data collection (Bryman, 2012, Gibbs, 2007). In fact, such initial reflection on my data proved useful for it allowed me to validate my understanding and interpretation of the data with my participants while I was still in the field (see ‘respondent validation’ in Bryman, 2012) as well as facilitate and direct the course of the subsequent conversations and journal entries. Although it was not possible to carry out actual transcription then, it was possible for me to see how my participants were trying to construct their worlds through describing and reflecting on their language learning experiences. I also began to ‘notice’ the emerging patterns of meanings and issues of interest in my initial data. Indeed, each one of my participants had an interesting story about his/her learning to tell and share with other members of the group. In all of this, the participants were using their own informal language, dialects and styles, giving the data a richer and deeper dimension.

5.5.1. Thematic coding and categorising

By the time I had all of my data transcribed, I began to break down, categorise and code my data. Coding is perhaps the first stage of analysis that most qualitative analysts carry out. It is about defining what parts of the data being analysed are about. Coding involves identifying, labelling or indexing one or more passages of the textual data as, in some sense, belonging to the same theoretical or descriptive idea (Gibbs, 2007). It involves organising the data into meaningful groups. Hennink et al (2011) use the term ‘codes’ to refer to the issues, topics, ideas or opinions that are discussed by the participants, while Braun and Clarke (2006) view codes as identifying a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analysis. It is useful to note at this stage, however, that although used synonymously in some writings, themes and codes are not the same thing. Themes are broader in scope than codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis may begin by coding and categorising the data into meaningful segments but, at a later stage, a number of codes may be combined into one theme. Finally, coding is a creative activity (Wellington, 2000), especially when it comes to deciding on how to

categorise and label the new themes which emerge *during* the analysis, as opposed to those which originally guided the analysis.

For practical reasons, I coded my data using MS-Word rather than the conventional method of printing out the transcripts and then cutting up passages of the text according to the major themes identified for analysis. Although the computerised coding process was laborious due to the substantial amount of data I had to deal with, it did save me a considerable amount of time. It was also practical in the sense that in cases of making mistakes, it was always easy and quick to reverse or ‘undo’ the action. In addition, the basic editing functions in MS-Word such as the command *find*, *find and replace*, *cut*, *copy and paste*, in addition to the *text highlight colours* were sufficient tools to carry out the coding and analysis I wanted.

However, for me, the use of a computer was only possible (and useful) for the initial coding. I did not see the point in using computer-assisted analysis software (CAQDAS) for the actual analysis of my data for a number of reasons. First of all, I think that the kind and levels of qualitative analysis I wanted to perform on my data (which I described above) could not be handled by machines. While these software packages may assist with indexing, preparing summaries and reports, they could *not* actually do the reading, interpreting or thinking on behalf of the researcher (Gibbs, 2007; Krueger, 1998). Secondly, I believe that the touch of human intelligence is missing in CAQDAS, which treat data analysis mechanically and does not recognise important and relevant themes which participants may express using various languages and styles, nor contradictions or contrasts. According to Wellington (2000), the main human input is to discover patterns in the data or to search for contrasts and paradoxes. As such, computers “cannot replace the researcher’s own analysis, intuition and craftsmanship” (p.147). Finally, I thought that the time required in learning and experimenting with these analysis packages would be more usefully and practically spent on familiarising myself with, reflecting on and handling my data.

The initial codes which I used to categorise my raw data were derived from my own prior experience about and understanding of the topic under investigation (language learner autonomy), the research questions as well as from the literature. This type of coding which is based on the researcher’s experience and literature is referred to as ‘**conceptual coding**’, ‘**concept/analyst-driven coding**’ (Gibbs, 2007) or an ‘**a priori coding**’ (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Wellington, 2000). As such, based on my research questions and the relevant literature, I identified the following five conceptual or a priori codes as guiding themes or categories for my thematic coding:

1. Students' perceptions of language learning in and outside the classroom
2. Students' metacognitive knowledge
3. Students' perspectives on having a greater role in and responsibility for their learning
4. Impact of the investigation on students' awareness
5. Autonomy manifestation in the students' discourses

Having refined and checked the above five coding themes or categories against my research questions, I began to read my entire *data corpus* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and categorise them under the appropriate categories which I previously identified for my data coding. As I was reading through my data sets, I noticed that the data which I categorised under the main five themes began to branch out into sub-themes and categories. As such, the need arose to develop a second and third level of categories. Below I list the main five coding themes and their sub-categories:

1. Students' perceptions of language learning in and outside the classroom

- a. Students' perceptions of general vs. higher education*
- b. Students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for learning*
- c. Students' perceptions of teacher's roles in and responsibility for learning*
- d. Students' perceptions of control and choice in learning*
- e. Students' perceptions of class vs. out-of-class/independent learning*
- f. Students' perceptions of exams and evaluation*
- g. Students' perceptions of success in learning*
- h. Students' perceptions of the challenges/obstacles in their learning*
 - i. Internal obstacles (learner-related)*
 - ii. External obstacles (contextual)*

2. Students' metacognitive knowledge

- a. Person knowledge*
- b. Knowledge of the learning environment*
- c. Task knowledge*
 - i. Task type*
 - ii. Task requirements*
 - iii. Task difficulty*
 - iv. Task evaluation*

d. Strategic knowledge

- i. Knowledge of strategy types*
- ii. Knowledge of strategy deployment*
- iii. Knowledge of strategy evaluation*

3. Students' perspectives on having a greater role in and more responsibility for their learning

- a. Role in and responsibility for 'what' they learn*
- b. Role in and responsibility for 'how' they learn*

4. Impact of the investigation on students' awareness

- a. Reasons for taking part in the research*
- b. Awareness of self as a learner*
- c. Awareness of the language learning process*

5. Autonomy manifestation in the students' discourses/articulations

- a. Autonomy manifestation in students' perceptions*
- b. Autonomy manifestation in students' metacognitive knowledge*
- c. Autonomy manifestation in students' perspectives*
- d. Autonomy manifestation in students' reflection*

I now turn to describe the actual systematic analysis which I performed on the coded data.

5.5.2. The formal process of analysis

At this stage, I had all of my data from both the RGCs and reflective journals coded under the five main themes and their sub-categories identified above ready for analysis. The formal analysis was performed through the following *five* steps:

Step 1: I printed off my data sets by themes regardless of source (RGCs or journals) or group and began to scan each set carefully noting the students' specific experiences, perceptions and perspectives of each and every participant using a coding system of symbols, numbers and letters. My coding system became more complex as the analysis proceeded.

Step 2: I read carefully through the data sets and noted in the margins the emerging themes and concepts. For example, under the sub-category *language learning experiences at school*, various themes emerged such as:

- Students' perceptions of the nature of language learning and teaching at school.
- Reasons for students' low level of achievement in English at early stages.
- Factors of improvement in grades 9+
- Students' perceptions of exams and evaluation, etc.

Step 3: I created a separate document on MS-Word and listed all of the new themes and concepts which I identified in step 2 together with the page numbers of the printed data set from which they were taken. This was useful for easy reference and direct quoting during the writing up stage.

Step 4: I then began to move around and put together the relevant and related themes and concepts noting any agreements or disagreements in the participants' talk. I also noted the distinctions between a language learning *experience* a participant went through (such as keeping a learning portfolio), his/her *perceptions* of such an experience (for example whether they saw keeping a portfolio as useful and what impact portfolios had on their learning) and his/her *perspectives* on ways of improving their learning experience (for example, how portfolios should be handled in language learning in their context).

Step 5: Because the analysis also aimed at exploring the students' unspoken capacities for autonomous language learning in an attempt to theorise about and understand the situation of learner autonomy in the context under study, I conducted further analysis on the subcategories using '*latent analysis*'. The same type of analysis was also used to explore (through the language they were using) how the participant's awareness about language learning had changed throughout the investigation period. The outcome of such an analysis will be detailed in chapter six. I will now turn to describe my method of presenting and reporting my analysis.

5.6. Method of reporting

An important step I took towards reporting and writing up my analysis was **anonymising** my data. My participants were of both genders and were studying two different specialisations. However, there was no indication of such information in the transcripts. Participants' names and identities were removed from the transcripts prior to coding and analysis. As I said earlier, I was interested in exploring the participants' specific capacities for autonomous language learning and thinking through their voices and discourses irrespective of their gender or specialisation. As such, neither coding nor analysis was carried out on the basis of gender or specialisation. Therefore, keeping to my ethical commitment in this research, I used a coding system of letters and numbers to anonymise my participants' identities and specialisations.

As I mentioned earlier, I had *four* groups of participants and *five* major coding themes. I therefore assigned each group an alphabet ranging from (A) to (D) and each major coding theme a number ranging from (1) to (5). I also used the lower case letters (a, b, c, etc.) to denote the sub-categories or themes, the letter (J) to denote journal entries, the letter (P) to denote the participants and the letter (R) to denote me as a researcher. The table below shows my 'anonymisation' codes and what they stand for:

Code	Code meaning
P	Participant
R	Researcher
J	Journal entry
A B C D	Participants' groups
1a 1b 1c 1d 1e	Students' perceptions of language learning at school, in & outside the classroom Students' perceptions of language learning in tertiary education in & outside the classroom Students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for learning Students' perceptions of the teacher's roles and responsibility Students' perceptions of the constraints on their language learning
2a 2b	Metacognitive knowledge: Person knowledge Metacognitive knowledge: Knowledge of the learning environment

2c	Metacognitive knowledge: Task knowledge
2d	Metacognitive knowledge: Strategic knowledge
3	Students' perspectives on improvement in their learning context
4	Impact of research on awareness
5	Autonomy manifestation

Table 5.2: Anonymisation codes and their denotations

For example, a code such as (PA1a) preceding a direct verbatim quote from the data would refer to the actual words of a 'participant' belonging to 'group A' talking about his/her 'perceptions of language learning at school'. Also, a code like (PD2d) would refer to the actual words of a 'participant' belonging to 'group D' talking about his/her 'strategic knowledge', while a code like (RB4) refers to the 'researcher' interacting with 'group B' about 'impact of research on their awareness'. Finally, a code such as (JC3) refers to a direct quote from a 'journal entry' written by a participant from group 'C' on his/her 'perspectives on improvement, and so on.

As for methods of reporting, the literature on qualitative research offers different methods of presenting and reporting qualitative data. Cohen et al (2007), for instance, suggest *five* different ways by which analysis can be organised or presented: by participants, by groups, by research questions, by instruments or by issues. Of course the type of method used, and hence how the analysis is presented, will vary according to the research aims. For instance, when arranged by individual participants, the focus of analysis lies on presenting the total responses of an individual participant in relation to the issue(s) being explored, then analysis moves on to the next participant and so on. Analysis of this type may also aim at contrasting the views of individual participants with those of others in the sample or group. If, on the other hand, the focus of analysis was to showcase how 'collective' responses of an individual group vary in relation to those of other groups in the study, then analysis will be carried out and presented by groups. Likewise, analysis, and so is presentation of findings, can be carried out by individual instrument, by research questions or by issues (I have adopted the latter two methods as a means of carrying out the analysis and presentation of the findings). Nevertheless, Cohen et al (2007) warn that in some of these methods, the wholeness, coherence and integrity of responses of individual participants or groups may risk being lost in favour of a collective summary. Therefore, here is where '**researcher reflexivity**' (Wellington, 2000) comes into play. The researcher has to exercise caution and self-awareness about what the research aims to do, his/her own preconceptions and preferences about what is being researched and what methods of analysis and reporting are being employed.

It should be clear by now that data analysis and presentation of the findings, which I present in the next chapter, were informed by the same principles which originally guided the investigation; namely, the specific research questions and overall themes which emerged from the research questions. My thematic coding was therefore guided by the five main themes which were derived from the research questions. This was seen as a useful way of organising and presenting the analysis for it draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to me while at the same time preserving the coherence and integrity of the material. Relevant data from the two sources of data; namely, RGCs and reflective journals, were collated to provide a 'collective' response to each research question drawing on data from both sources. This approach of presenting the analysis will hopefully keep reminding the reader of the driving forces of the research which were raised at the early stages of the research or thesis.

Other methods of reporting data such as presenting the analysis by individual participant or RGC instead of themes were not seen as useful, for each group conversation in itself comprised more than one discrete theme. For example, although 'metacognitive knowledge' was the focus of the third and fourth RGCs (see the investigation grid, chapter four, section 4.6.1.5), it inevitably manifested itself vividly in almost all the other RGCs, and so on.

5.7. Concluding remarks and reflection

There is a consensus among writers on social research methods (some of which I have cited in this chapter) on the importance of researchers maintaining a clear and explicit approach to data analysis and interpretation. This, in fact, is an ethical commitment on the part of the researcher. The thrust of this chapter has therefore been on explaining how I kept to such a commitment. I have detailed and justified my chosen theoretical framework in relation to data translation and data analysis and showed how such a theoretical framework informed both tasks of data translation and data analysis. I have also tried to describe and justify explicitly the procedures I followed to analyse my data and how such an analysis were reported and presented in the analysis chapter.

By being explicit about my data translation, analysis and reporting, I commit myself to maintaining an open door policy to any arguments or dialogue about the methodology and methods I have employed in my work. I believe that an important characteristic of a good research, amongst many other things, is to trigger, encourage and maintain a critical and constructive dialogue about the potential different ways in which the work under question can

be improved and different social phenomena can be explored and understood. There are a number of aspects of my research design and implementation which other research could try to replicate, discuss and even evaluate.

Finally, writing this chapter has been rewarding in a number of ways. I have come across some useful and interesting views and arguments about data translation and data analysis which I was unaware of when I first embarked on this research. For instance, I was unaware of the wealth of the literature available on cross-language, cross-cultural research before reading about the topic. Furthermore, these views and arguments have greatly helped me to reflect on the decisions and choices I had to make about translating and analysing my data. In fact, I was able to locate a number of arguments in support of the important decisions and choices I made in this respect.

Chapter Six

Analysis and Presentation of the Findings

6.1. Introduction

There are numerous approaches to writing and conceptualising qualitative research findings. One approach to conceptualising data is writing and presenting them. This chapter therefore seeks to conceptualise the research data through presenting the outcome of the analysis processes which I described and detailed in the previous chapter. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) postulate that writing and presenting data involve making sense of the data for the research audience where core issues are distilled into a logical and coherent presentation. Two of the most important criteria of good writing, though, include paying attention to detail and giving others a voice beside that of the researcher (Wellington, 2000). In my research, however, the issue is not about giving voice to my participants but rather enabling and privileging the voices which they are *already* having.

Keeping to the criteria of a good writing and presentation of research findings mentioned above, my aim in this chapter is to present the data which respond to the main and sub-questions of the research in a way that shows logical coherence and link between the different issues explored in the research. In addition, the issues of attending to detail and privileging the participants' voices are also of a paramount importance to the presentation of the findings in this chapter. The analysis herein will therefore encompass almost everything the participants had mentioned in the Reflective Group Conversations (RGCs) and the reflective journals. Although I will have to be brief on some occasions for the sake of keeping to the word limit of the thesis, I will be careful not to ignore or underestimate anything said or written by the participants. Direct quotes from the RGCs and the reflective journal entries will be used adequately to support the issues being presented. My assumption for doing this is that any perception expressed by the participants, even if contradictory, represents, using Lamb's (2005) terms, a *voice*, a *form of knowledge* or *knowledge under construction*.

As for the issue of enabling and privileging the voices of the participants, I will devote the entire chapter to presenting the voices of the participants with no attempt to making any interpretations, comparisons or relation to the literature. As such, I will avoid at this stage any distraction of references to the literature. I will leave my comments on, elaboration and interpretations of the findings to the next chapter. This is to emphasise the uniqueness of the students' voices in the context under investigation and allow the data to speak for themselves

without any intervention by or comparison with findings of similar research conducted in other contexts.

This chapter comprises five sections, each presenting one aspect of the analysis. The chapter begins by presenting some basic tabulated data such as the number of the study groups and participants in each group, the number of the RGCs conducted and the journal entries submitted per group as well as how the main research issues dispersed across the investigation sessions. In the subsequent sections, I will present the findings on the first four of the five research questions listed below:

1. How do post-foundation undergraduate Omani students perceive their language learning in higher education in and outside the classroom?
 - a. What are the nature and goals of language learning in higher education as perceived by the students?
 - b. How do they perceive their roles in and responsibility for language learning in higher education, in and outside the classroom?
 - c. How do they perceive the teachers' roles in and responsibility for language learning in higher education?
 - d. What are the internal and external constraints on language learning in the context under study as perceived by the students?
2. What metacognitive knowledge do the students report having in higher education in and outside the classroom?
3. From the students' perspectives, what might enable them to take more responsibility for and have a greater voice in their learning? What are their perspectives on improvement in their language learning context?
4. How does this research impact on students' awareness of themselves as language learners and language learning as a process? How does such awareness manifest itself in students' voices throughout the investigation?
5. What could we learn from students' voices about language learning in the context under investigation? And how does learner autonomy manifest itself in such voices?

Findings on the fifth research question, which looks into what we could learn from students' voices and the type and shape of learner autonomy which might manifest itself through such voices, will be presented in the discussion chapter (chapter seven). This is because such issues were not directly explored in the RGCs, and thus no ready data were gathered on them. Rather, autonomy manifested itself in the students' voices throughout the investigation in different sessions and in various ways as table

(6.3) below shows. Therefore in order to respond to the fifth research question, I used data from every RGC and journal entry that pertained to students' capacity to act and think autonomously.

The underlying purpose of my analysis was to draw on **group norms** rather than on individual identities of participants. That is, the focus was on *what* was said rather than on who said it. As such, my analysis in this chapter draws on responses from all of the students in a given group and does not disentangle individual identities. This was evident in the system I used to anonymise my participants, which I described in chapter five (see section 5.6). Furthermore, I used the same system in this chapter to 'tag' and identify the source of the direct quotations used in the analysis, i.e. whether, for example, a quote refers to a participant or the researcher and whether it comes from a RGC or a journal entry.

Given the substantial amounts of findings presented in the chapter, I have found it useful to provide a brief summary of the key findings at the end of each section in addition to an executive summary of all of the findings at the end of the chapter. With the exception of a few cases, students' perceptions about their language learning and perspectives on improvement in their learning context were almost similar, as we are going to see in this chapter. However, it is hard to claim that these summaries represent a complete consensus of these perceptions and perspectives. Rather, they should be understood as being limited to what I could synthesise of the points that are most agreed on. Finally, as it is the case in other chapters, the last section will be devoted to some concluding remarks and reflections on the entire chapter.

6.2. Analysis: preliminary tabulated data

Visual formats such as tables, diagrams, or conceptual models are often used to enhance the effectiveness and clarity of research findings as well as to display relationships between different components of data (Hennink et al, 2011). As such, this section provides the reader with some preliminary tabulated data about the research results. To begin with, I had a total number of fifteen participants from two different specialisations divided into four groups, gender and specialisation wise, as showed in table 6.1 below:

Group	No. of participants
A	4
B	3
C	4
D	4
Total	15

Table 6.1: Study groups and number of participants per group

Furthermore, I conducted six RGCs with groups A and B and five RGCs with groups C and D. This was because the participants of groups C and D had some other commitments in the last week of the investigation and as such, together with the participants, we decided to combine the fifth and sixth sessions into one prolonged session. However, I managed to cover all of the topics planned for the investigation (as listed in the investigation grid in table 4.3, chapter four) evenly with all groups.

In regard to journal entry submissions, a total of twenty-six journal entries were submitted over the investigation period with the highest number of entries submitted by the participants in group C. Although the submission rate was below expectation, it was reasonable (and in fact contained useful data for analysis) given the fact that the students had no experience in keeping reflective journals neither at school nor in the foundation year they spent at the Language Centre prior to the investigation. The number of RGCs and journal entry submissions are showed in table 6.2 below.

Group	RGCs per group	Journal entry submissions per group
A	6	6
B	6	6
C	5	9
D	5	5
Total	22	26

Table 6.2: RGCs and journal entry submissions per group

I now turn to discuss the relationship between the main research concepts and issues, on one side, and how they manifested themselves through the six RGCs I conducted with the

participants, on the other. I present this relationship through the Venn shape in figure 6.1 and table 6.3 below. The underlying purpose of highlighting such a relationship is twofold:

1. The presentation of the research questions and concepts in this way helps us to understand the interrelated nature of these questions and concepts, i.e., how they overlap with one another, and how they disperse across the six RGCs.
2. Secondly, such an overlapping relationship justifies my choice of approach to analysis and presentation of the results, as I will explain later in this section.

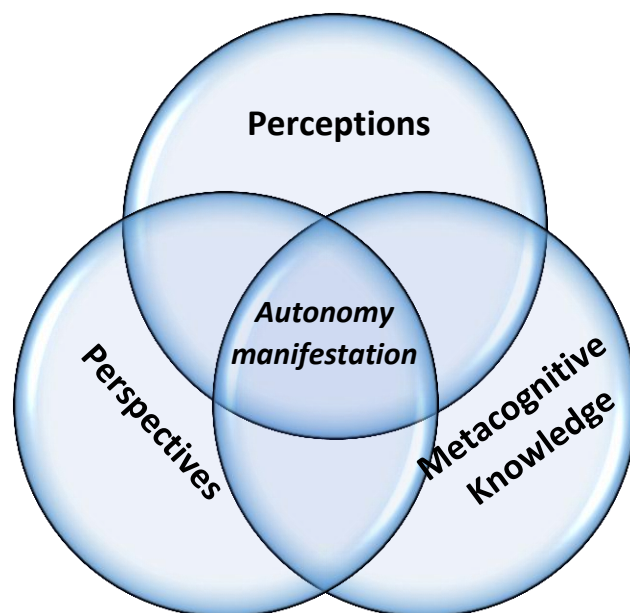


Figure 6.1: Interrelated nature of the research(ed) concepts

Figure 6.1 shows the interrelated and overlapping nature of the four main research concepts; namely, students' perceptions of language learning in their context, their metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about self and learning), their perspectives on having a greater role in and more responsibility for language learning, as well as the manner in which autonomy manifests itself through the three other components of the investigation.

When I first designed the RGCs to explore the main research concepts, I had realised the interrelated and overlapping nature of the issues I was investigating. Such a relationship became more vivid, though, through data analysis. What I have found through data analysis

on the three major concepts was that they were inseparable and could reflect one another. For instance, students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for language learning can be understood through their perceptions of language learning in their context and vice-versa. Also, students' metacognitive knowledge can be explored through their perceptions of language learning and perspectives on improvement in their learning context, and so on. Furthermore, autonomy manifestation can be seen as situating itself in the middle area of the Venn shape above in the area shared by the three concepts, which indicates how autonomy is imbedded in students' perceptions, perspectives and metacognitive knowledge and can manifest itself in different shapes and sizes through their perceptions, voices and choices. I now move on to describe how the research questions and issues intertwined with one another and dispersed across the six RGCs through table (6.3) below:

RGCs Research questions	(RGC 1) Past experiences	(RGC 2) Perceptions	(RGC 3) Perceptions/ MK	(RGC 4) MK	(RGC 5) Constraints/ perspectives	(RGC 6) Impact of research on awareness
1 a Nature/goals of LL in HE	X	X	X			X
Q1 b St.' roles/ Responsibilities	X	X	X	X	X	X
Q1 c T's roles / Responsibilities	X	X	X			X
Q1 d Constraints	X	X	X	X	X	X
Q 2 Metacognitive Knowledge	X	X	X	X	X	X
Q 3 Perspectives on improvement			X	X	X	X
Q 4 Impact of research		X	X	X	X	X
Q 5 What voices mean & autonomy manifestation	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 6.3: Dispersion of the research questions across the six RGCs

As a general observation, if we read the table across-wise. i.e., by research questions, it is interesting to see that *four* out of the eight research questions (main and sub-questions)

clearly dispersed across all the six RGCs (these are highlighted by bold (Xs) in the table above), *one* question manifested itself in five of the six RGCs and the remaining *three* questions dispersed across five RGCs. These four questions which appeared in all of the six RGCs were as follows:

1. **Question 1b:** Student's perceptions of their role in and responsibility for language learning.
2. **Question 1d:** Students' perceptions of the potential constraints on their language learning in their context.
3. **Question 2:** Metacognitive knowledge.
4. **Question 5:** What students' voices might mean and autonomy manifestation in these voices.

The first question which manifested itself in or dispersed across all of the RGCs was the participants' perceptions of their **role** in and **responsibility** for learning. These perceptions were present in the first RGC where the students described their past language learning experiences at the school level, obviously in the second session where they reflected on their roles and responsibility, in the third and fourth sessions where the aim was to explore their metacognitive knowledge, in the fifth session where we discussed the possible constraints on their learning as well as their perspectives on improvement in the context, and finally in the last session which focused on potential impact of the research on students' developing awareness.

The second issue which also dispersed across the six RGCs was the students' perceptions of the **constraints** on their language learning. It was obvious that this very issue was present in their talk about their previous language learning experiences at the school level, their perceptions of language learning at the university, their metacognitive knowledge, of course during the fifth RGC which was dedicated to exploring their perceptions of the constraints on their language learning and finally in the last session. The other two issues; namely, **metacognitive knowledge** and **autonomy manifestation**, were also evident in the students' voices and discourses in all the six RGCs.

The one research question which dispersed across five of the six RGCs was the **impact of the research** on students' awareness about themselves and their learning. Apart from the first RGC, which was a free general talk about their past learning experiences, students' developing awareness began to manifest itself in the language they used and their reflection on language learning as early as the second RGC.

The last three research questions dispersed across four RGCs. These were the students' perceptions of the nature and goals of language learning in higher education (manifested itself in the first three RGCs as well as in the last one), students' perceptions of the teacher's roles in and responsibility for learning (again manifested itself in first three RGCs and the last one), and the students' perspectives on improvement (manifested itself the last four RGCs).

This means that every RGC I had with the participants covered one or more aspects of the research questions, which justifies my decision to present the analysis by research questions or themes rather than by individual RGC (see methods of reporting in chapter five, section 5.6). The latter option was not seen as viable or useful, for each group conversation comprised more than one discrete theme as the table above shows.

Likewise, if we read the table above up-down (by RGCs), it is obvious that the third and sixth RGCs encompassed elements from all the eight research questions (again these are highlighted by bold (Xs) in the table above).

Having presented the tabulated data of the analysis, I now turn to present the specific results of the analysis. I will support my presentation of the analysis with direct verbatim quotes from the RGCs. I had to admit at this stage though, that although my intention was to present everything the students' had said or written, I must say with all honesty, that the actual voices of the students were far richer than any analysis could encompass. The non-verbal language such as hand gestures, facial expressions and voice level did in fact carry a lot of meanings beyond what words could actually convey. The analysis after all does have to be focused, though. Nevertheless, I commit myself through this analysis to convey the students' voices as honestly and accurately as possible.

6.3. Analysis: students' perceptions of language learning

6.3.1. Introduction

First of the five main research questions concerned the students' **perceptions** of their language learning, which encompassed five other sub-categories or themes. These include the students' perceptions of:

1. Language learning at school in and outside the classroom
2. Language learning in higher education in and outside the classroom
3. Students' roles in and responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom
4. Teacher's roles in and responsibilities for language learning
5. Potential constraints on language learning in their context.

The analysis showed that the fifteen students tended to hold more or less similar perceptions of the different aspects of language learning. There are of course some partial differences in perceptions in respect to certain specific issues, but generally speaking, the students seemed to agree on the overall issues of concerns about language learning and teaching in their context either at the school or tertiary level. Such a similarity in perceptions may be related to the similar experiences the students had throughout their education prior to the investigation. What was obvious through students' perceptions, though, was that such experiences and perceptions had an important impact on the decisions and choices students made about what and how they learned English and, thus, on their attainment, as reported by the students themselves.

6.3.2. Analysis: Students' perceptions of language learning and teaching at school

Although the investigation explicitly aimed to investigate the students' perceptions of language learning in higher education, I have realised that this could not be done accurately and wisely without first looking at the students' perceptions of language learning at the school level. I see the two stages as inevitably inseparable. The assumption was that the current perceptions which the students have are greatly influenced by and developed out of the varied experiences they had had in the past and, as such, I found it both sensible and useful to begin the investigation of students' perceptions by first exploring their language learning experiences at school in order to see how such experiences had developed over time and influenced their current perceptions and learning.

The investigation of the students' perceptions and experiences of their language learning at school was the focus of the *first* RGC. However, the initial part of the session was devoted to getting to know the students and also giving them the opportunity to get to know me and familiarise themselves with the research, sorting out some administrative matters such as venues and timings of the sessions as well as signing the consent forms. For the larger part of

the session, the students were encouraged to talk about their language learning experiences prior to university in a free manner and relaxed atmosphere. My purpose was to help the students gain confidence in me as a researcher, in my research and also in themselves as being able to speak about their learning experiences and concerns. In fact, the students' confidence improved as we progressed with the investigation. This approach proved productive as I was able to gather rich data while the students enjoyed talking about and sharing their own stories. Students found it a good opportunity to share their experiences with me and other members of their respective groups and at the same time voice their concerns about various aspects of their learning they deemed important.

By looking at the entire set of data on students' language learning experiences at school, I was able to tease out four themes or categories. These were as follows:

1. The students' perceptions of the nature and goals of language learning and teaching at school.
2. The students' perceptions of examination and assessment methods.
3. The reasons for their low level in English.
4. The measures they took to improve in the last three years of school.

6.3.2.1. Students' perceptions of the nature and goals of language learning and teaching at school

I began the conversation by asking the students when they started learning English and what their overall experiences and impressions about language learning prior to university were. Although all of my students entered the university in the same year, they did not have the same number of years of learning English. This was because some of them came from schools which applied the General Education System where English is taught from grade four onwards while others came from schools which applied the Basic Education System where English is taught right from grade one. The Basic Education System was introduced gradually and, as such, not all regions had schools running the new system. This was true about the students in all the four groups I had. However, students of both systems seemed to have similar concerns about the quality of teaching, materials and their level of proficiency, as we are going to see later in this section.

Almost all the fifteen students acknowledged that they **did not take English seriously** at the early stages of their schooling for various reasons and that they began to realise the importance of English in later years as they got closer to the secondary level, i.e., classes 9 and above, as is clear in the following quotes from the first RGC:

“In my case, I didn't really learn English.. I don't regard myself as learning English at that time, only at class 12 that I started to learn English seriously. But before that we were only copying what the teacher wrote on the board” (PB1a).

This was also a common feeling of other students as it is clear in the following exchange:

(PA1a): “I mean I wasn't really interested in English although I like it but I wasn't serious about it. Also when we had an English class, it was just like another physical education class where we enjoyed playing. We didn't do anything special. I would be very frank with you here.”

(RA1a): “You mean you were not taking it seriously but what about your marks, were they good?”

(PA1a): “The teacher was helping us a great deal with the marks. And so I wasn't really serious about it. I thought when I get to class 10, I would start working hard then.”

This student from group D also emphasised the significance of class 9 as the point when she began to learn English more seriously and, perhaps, more consciously.

“...but my actual learning began in class 9. In class 9, I began to learn how English could be learned, how it could be revised and how we could prepare for exams, and how to use the materials which are available at home to learn English” (PD1a).

There were many reasons why the students began to take language learning seriously in the last two years only, amongst which was the way they perceived the importance of these years for their future higher education:

“... but our thinking was all about getting high marks in class 12 because it was the final class and we wanted to come to the university. I personally decided to work hard in class 12 only, and I did it” (PC1a).

Moving on to students' perceptions of the **nature of their language learning at school**, many of them described it as being general, superficial and characterised by direct transfer of information by the teacher in which students played a passive role:

“I think learning at school is general and the purpose is to teach the students the basics” (PB1a).

“At school we are given information and then we go home to study it and then we are tested on what we have been given” (PD1b).

The same perceptions were also expressed through students' reflective journal writing:

“My English learning at the school was superficial, I didn't benefit a lot” (JD1a).

“I didn't learn English at school as I should do because I didn't take it seriously. In fact, the English lesson was more like an opportunity to play. We didn't care about it. When we were at school we didn't know what to focus on in order to learn English. Teachers were teaching in a random way; they didn't focus on particular skills such as writing or speaking. Learning in schools makes the students feel like the goal of learning English is to pass the exam only” (JA1a).

The same attitude was also expressed in a journal entry by a student from group B:

“Oh! what can I say about learning English!!.. we were just recipients, we had books and there were some activities but we didn't take part in those activities, we didn't really learn English.. we used to begin with the books straightaway, we used to listen to the tape and do the exercises, we just used to listen we didn't understand the teacher, and when I started secondary school, I felt like I was starting from scratch” (PB1a).

As for how students viewed the **school curriculum**, most of them perceived it as limited to the subjects they took at school:

(RA1a): “And how do you understand curriculum at school?”

(PA1a): “I think the curriculum is the subjects which are taught at school”.

Furthermore, **textbooks** were almost the only source of information as expressed by the following two students from groups A and D:

“I think, 90% of the information which we need to learn at school is already available in the [text]books” (PA1b).

“When we were at school, we were given books and we couldn't use different books” (PD1a).

As for their **proficiency in English**, they associated it with teaching and the amount of grammar and vocabulary they had:

“Yes, grammar was the main thing. She [the teacher] used to focus on grammar a lot so we really learned many things” (PD1a).

“I felt there was a big difference between her [sister] English and mine ... I noticed that she had more vocabulary and grammar than me” (PD1a).

They also associated success in learning with independent learning and having a bigger role in learning:

(PD1a): “I think it all depends on the student. Those who study hard will get good marks.”

The significance of their role in learning is also picked up in the following exchange:

(PD1a): “I think the person plays an important role in his own learning. For example in my case, learning English was one of my important goals. So of course I will do my best and spend my time in order to achieve this goal.”

(RD1a): “So what was your role here?”

(PD1a): “I tried to find out what could help me to learn English like books and newspapers and asking other people.”

Also part of the students' perceptions of the nature of language learning at school was evident in their awareness of the difference between language learning in **public and private schools** in terms of the opportunities for practice the students in each school type had:

“I also want to mention the difference between private and public schools. In private schools, maybe they have more opportunities to practise the language, so you see it when you compare between someone who has studied in a private school and another one from a government school. You can see a clear difference between the two” (PA1a).

“And also in the private schools, they take other subjects in English so they know that English is important and so they should make effort to learn it” (PC1a).

Finally, since the students mentioned other subjects, I was also interested in exploring how they perceived learning a language and learning other subjects. Their perceptions on this can be revealed through the following exchange I had with the two students from group B:

(RB1a): “Since we have started talking about other subjects, I’ve got a question for you. Do you think there are any differences between learning English and learning other subjects? I mean do you see any difference between learning a language, any language, and learning other subjects such as physics or geography or history?”

(PB1a): “Yes, I think the teaching methods are different.”

(RB1a): “Do you think they are different or you mean they *should* be different?”

(PB1a): “No, they are different in reality, I mean when you learn English and other subjects.. they are not the same, there are differences.”

(RB1a): “Good. [Turning to another student] What about you?”

(PB1a): “I feel there are differences in the evaluation system and there are also differences in the way you study and revise them so the two are really different. I believe the best way to learn a language, any language, is by practising it and getting in touch with the native speakers.”

(RB1a): “When did you start to have this kind of feeling or belief?”

(PB1a): “In class 12. I think the best way to learn any languages is to use it, to practise it or travel to the country where the language is spoken.”

(RB1a): “You mean learning a language by using it.”

(PB1a): “Yes.”

6.3.2.2. Students’ perceptions of exams and assessment methods

This is the second theme which emerged out of the first RGC I had with the students. It is indeed interesting to see how they perceived **exams** in their context, for such perceptions might, to some extent, explain some of their behaviour in language learning. When asked about how they understood exams and marks, one of the students in group C responded:

“Exams measure what I have learned. They measure our skills and the things we have acquired” (PC1a).

I further asked what else they think exams might measure. A student from group C replied: “I would say effort” (PC1a) and another student from the same group said “I think effort and understanding” (PC1a).

A student from group D viewed exams as based on what they had in the classroom and what they had to memorise from the textbooks:

“When we were at school we just used to memorise what the teacher gave us in the classroom and then go to the exams. And those exams would cover of the same things we had in the classroom” (PD1a).

Another student seemed to have his own perception of exams:

“Exams always link to marks. We were always told that we had to study hard in order to get good marks because the exams would be difficult so you need to study hard. So to be honest we were not learning for the sake of learning but in order to get marks” (PC1a).

Since they associated exams with marks, I was interested in exploring further what marks meant to them:

“[Marks show] my intelligence or how much we can remember. One of the teachers used to put simple questions in the exam but they measure our intelligence” (PC1a).

“This is my effort. How hard I have studied for my exams” (PC1a).

I was also interested in exploring how they perceived getting low marks in exams:

“If they were high, then this means I have made a good effort and I become relaxed but if not, it means I need to make more effort” (PC1a).

“The low mark I think means that the student is lazy” (PC1a)

However, besides making effort, they related low marks to other reasons such as having less interest in the subject and some environmental factors such as noise and the teacher standing near him or her during the exam.

In addition, some of the students perceived exams as a burden but this changed after they had left school. They now think exams are useful:

“At that time, if I were to take the decision, I would cancel exams because they were a burden on us. But now since I have finished school, I will not do that because I think they are useful” (PC1a).

“I would like to keep the exam system because it is useful. I feel the information stays longer when there are exams” (PC1a).

Finally, they believed that exam results did not always reflect their learning:

“Sometimes the level of student is low in the class but he gets high marks in exam, so exams don't always show the real level of the students” (PC1a).

6.3.2.3. Reasons for students' low level of proficiency in English

This is the third theme under the students' perceptions of language learning at school. In fact, this theme and the following one comprised the largest part of the first RGC. Students had a lot to say about the reasons for their low level of proficiency in English, especially at the early stages of their schooling, which may in one way or another reflects their developing awareness of their learning.

Through a careful scan of this data set, I have found in a few cases that students attributed their low level of proficiency in English to some internal reasons (relating to the learners themselves) such as not taking English seriously. In most of the cases, however, they attributed their low level of proficiency to some external factors. These include not learning English until class four (being in the General Education System), poor teaching methods, not given a role to play in their learning, weak curriculum, unclear and unfair exam system, etc.

Students in group C attributed their low level in English to being in a General Education school where she started learning English in class four:

“I first learned English when I was at the nursery. It was quite interesting. And then at the age of 6, I went to school but there was no English. We started learning English in class four. I was in the General Education System. And one reason why I think we did not do well in English is because we didn't learn English from class one. So by the time we reached class four, we had forgotten what we had learned at the nursery” (PC1a).

However, a student from group D was in a Basic Education school where she did start learning English in class one, yet she felt she did not learn much then. Her real learning began after class four.

“I started learning English from class one, as I was also in the Basic Education System but I felt that my actual learning began after class four. I didn't feel I was learning English from classes one to four” (PD1a).

Although she attributed her low level of proficiency in English to herself as not taking enough care of it, the student in the following quote blamed the school for not paying enough attention to English compared to other subjects:

“I was taking much more care of other subjects but not English, maybe because there was not much focus on it in the school and there was not much focus on our learning” (PD1a).

However, poor teaching methods, including use of L1, was the most common reason mentioned by students in all of the four groups, followed by weak curriculum and the marginalised role students had in learning. Here is how one of the students described a typical English lesson in his school:

“We didn't know what we were doing. The teacher just comes into the classroom, he begins to write on the board, he fills up the board [with writing]

and we copy everything into our books.. and the answers too. We didn't really learn this way" (PB1a).

In the following journal quote, a student from group A also reflects on how he felt teaching at school was like:

"Teachers were teaching in a random way; they didn't use to focus on particular skills such as writing or speaking" (JA1a).

This student seemed to recognise how good teaching and curriculum could contribute to students' learning:

"You will need to look at the curriculum and the teaching methods. These were not really good at school. So the materials and the way the teachers use to explain things to the students make a big difference" (PA1a).

As for the use of L1, here is how a student from group B felt about the use of Arabic in the English class:

"The teacher used to speak Arabic.. we didn't like this, we told the teacher to explain things in English...we told the teacher that you are now teaching us English and it would be better if you speak English. He said but you don't understand English. We told him that we would like to understand and to benefit.. he said okay, I will speak some English and some Arabic!" (PB1a).

Another important impediment to learning at school was the teacher's control over choices and also learning:

"I think there is much more freedom here [at university] than there was at school. The teacher at school controls the students all the time in the classroom" (PB1a).

"Students at school have no choice over the timetable and times of the classes. Somebody else's choosing for them and planning their studies. And if this planning does not suit you, nobody cares" (PA1b).

I now turn to the fourth theme under students' perceptions of their language learning at school.

6.3.2.4. Measures the students took to improve in last three years at school

In the previous section, we have seen that the students did not take English seriously and had some difficulties learning it at the early stages of their education due to mostly external reasons but there were also some internal ones. At the later stages, however, they began to realise the importance of English for their future education and career. As such, they began to take **major steps towards improving their language skills** such as changing their views about English, thus ending up considering it more seriously than before and developing new ways of learning, as it is clear in the following journal quote:

“When I reached class twelve, my view towards English started to change. I was carelessness but later I have realised that one will not achieve his goals without having to do well in this subject, and to do this, I need to learn all of the language skills. Many things have changed such as my view of the language and my ways of learning it. I started to realise that learning English is important for achieving my goal and it is never less important than other subjects, if not the most important. My goal was to learn it whatever ways it took” (JB1a).

Having described to me how their perceptions of the importance of English had changed, I was interested in exploring the actual procedures they took to improving their language skills. This is what one of the students from group C wrote in her reflective journal:

“I began by memorising new words, not by learning how to pronounce or write them but by learning the shapes of the words...I also began to read many books, although I didn't understand most of the words, but I continued reading them. I also began to read newspapers in English but I wasn't using the dictionary, so I tried to understand what I could and leave the rest. I also wrote my dairies in English which has helped me to improve my skills. For speaking, I sometimes tried to practise my speaking with my friends and sometimes with my siblings and the shopkeepers. I like to go shopping” (JC1a).

Some of the students were keen to tell me about the successful methods they used to learn language:

(PC1a): “I remember I used a big sheet of paper which I put on the wall with some ideas and drawings and I began describing it as if I was teaching others. I've found that the information stuck in my head because I wrote it with my hand on that paper and then started to explain the subject to myself.”

(RC1a): “Did you learn this method through a book or you read an article or through a program you watched on TV?”

(PC1a): “No I came up with this idea myself. I’ve now found this strategy useful because information becomes easier to remember. I understand things better when I find information myself.”

Two of the students said they took English language courses over the summer holiday just before they began class twelve. One of them wrote about his experience at the language institute:

“And here I recall when my brother suggested that I should take a language course in one of the language institutes over the summer holiday just before I began class 12. I immediately accepted his offer. I really learned a lot in this course, although it was a month and a half long” (JB1a).

I was interested in exploring further why this student learned better at the language institute compared to school. He gave a number of reasons including teaching methods, timing, material and his interest in and responsibility for learning. Again, students still associate curriculum with course books:

“First of all, I think the curriculum played an important role. The curriculum was different. Another thing was the teaching methods, and also the timing of the lessons. Also it was me as a person. I was more interested and also the teacher was keen to help me improve my English. Also I was free, I had no other commitments. I was only learning English at that time. I felt I was more responsible for my own learning because if you really want to do something good and find a job you will need to learn English, so it was my responsibility to learn” (PB1a).

Another measure which some of the students took in the last year of school to make up for the language learning they missed out at school was hiring private tutors. Interestingly, although the teacher was the same in both settings, they reported that they learned better in those private lessons than they did at school:

“In the summer holiday I decided to hire a private teacher. I think I only benefited at the secondary level, which was the last stage before university. Yes the private teacher, he was the same teacher who taught me at school. He offered private lessons too, but we felt that the way he was teaching us in the evening was completely different from the way he used at the school. We didn’t know why the teacher changed his teaching style and methods, I didn’t know why, but I have learned a lot from these private lessons. Many of my

friends also said very good things about him. He was really very well-known in our region” (PB1a).

Nevertheless, I was still interested in finding out more about what went differently in those private lessons which had resulted in better language learning. They reported almost similar reasons and conditions to those they had at the private language institute:

“The private teacher used to take much more care of us and our learning. Yes, it was because of the exercises and activities he gave us, and also we were more interested in these than in those we got at school. He used to make more effort in teaching us and he knew that my father hired him and is paying him. But at school, he didn't really take enough care of us or of our learning. And so if you didn't take care of yourself, he wouldn't” (PB1a).

Finally, students reported that they took a number of personal initiatives to improve their language skills and make up for what they missed out in school by **learning English outside the classroom**. In this direction, students reported reading newspapers and short stories in English, watching films in English, practising their speaking skills with their friends and others around them, etc. This shows that they realised the importance of independent language learning when they were still at school. This could be due to the lack of efficient language instruction at school, on one hand, and their increased conviction of the importance of having a sufficient level of fluency in English before getting to university, on the other.

One of the strengths of this research, I think, lies in the unique opportunity it offers to understand autonomy in young learners as well as the nature and characteristics of language learning and teaching at the school level in the context under investigation from students' perspectives, which are rarely explored. I will now proceed to present the analysis of students' perceptions of higher education in general and, in a later section, students' perceptions of *language* learning in higher education in particular.

6.3.3. Analysis: Students' perceptions of higher education

The previous section on students' experiences and perceptions of language learning at school was an important introduction to facilitate our exploration and understanding of the students' experiences and perceptions of their language learning in higher education, which is the subject of this section. However, before delving into students' perceptions of language

learning in higher education, I will present the analysis on **students' perceptions of higher education** in general. This part encompasses exploring students' perceptions of the nature, purposes and requirements of higher education.

This issue was mostly explored in the second RGC (see the investigation grid in chapter four, table 4.3) but, due to the interrelated nature of the issues investigated, students' perceptions of higher education also manifested themselves in other sessions.

When asked to describe how they perceived higher or higher education, students intuitively associated it with the stage of education which comes after school, but it differed from school as being more advanced in level and more specific in scope. They also seemed to be (or becoming) aware of the differences in which learning takes place in the two stages, as is evident in the exchange below:

(PA1b): "Higher education is the stage which begins after school. It's the college and university level".

(RA1b): "And why do you think this type of education is called 'higher'?"

(PA1b): "I think it is higher because of the nature of learning, as you are making a big jump from school to university or college".

(RA1b): "What about you? What do you understand by higher education?"

(PA1b): "Higher education means more than the other basic levels: elementary, preparatory and secondary. And it's a more advanced study in terms of the level of difficulty and the kinds of topics compared to school. There is also a difference in the way we learn. So you enter a new stage, more difficult than the stage before."

In terms of the scope of learning, a student from group B viewed higher education as being "more specific. Students study specific subjects. At schools, you learn general things but here you choose one specialisation and you study specific things" (PB1b).

Another student from the same group also commented on the difference in teaching methods used by teachers at the university compared to those by teachers at school. For him, university teaching is different because the way the students think and learn were different compared to those used by students at school:

“...because at the lower level, students’ thinking is different and because their thinking is different the way they are taught is also different. And also the way they learn is different. But here at the university, the teachers’ methods of teaching are different because they know they are dealing with students who have different ways of thinking compared to the pupils at school. They learn in a different way” (PB1b).

As the conversation proceeded, another student commented on teacher qualifications as one of the differences between higher education and education at schools. Although not specifically accurate as some of the teachers do hold Master’s degrees, the student viewed university teachers as holding PhDs: “At school, you are taught by a teacher whose qualification is diploma or bachelor, but at the university, he has a doctorate” (PB1b).

Group A students raised the issue of sources of knowledge and the role of textbooks. They viewed textbooks at school as being almost the only source of information whereas the case was different at university where they perceived knowledge as having others sources besides the textbook:

(PA1b): “I think there is an important difference. As we have said before, about, I think, 90% of the information which we need to learn at school is already available in the [text]books but here at the university about 50% of the knowledge you get from the curriculum but the other 50% from different sources”.

(RA1b): “So do you want to say that learning is not only limited to the course books as it is the case at school?”

(PA1b): “Yes. At school we can't go beyond the curriculum, which is the [text]book.”

Again, we notice here that this student associated curriculum with the course books, which is a common perception of curriculum amongst students, as the findings of this study show.

Furthermore, a student from group D wrote in her journal about her perceptions of higher education. She compared it to the school system in terms of curriculum, difficulty and innovation:

“The nature of study in higher education is different from that in general education. In general education, there is one curriculum for all students but in higher education students specialise in their majors and study in a deeper way.

It is true that learning in higher education is more difficult than in general education but if the student likes what he is studying, he can innovate in his field” (JD1b).

The same student also wrote in her reflective journal about the role of textbooks, teacher explanation and students’ own thinking and enquiry in learning:

“Students in higher education learn more than in general education. For example, in general education, the student depends on the book and the teacher’s explanation so he memorises information in the book in order to answer the exam questions and in this way he benefits very little. But in higher education, although there are books, students can search for information beyond the [text]books. Also we pay more attention to the teachers’ explanation because some teachers do not limit themselves to what is in the book only, but they bring information from other sources, which helps students to learn more. In addition, higher education doesn’t depend on memorising information from the books but depends on thinking and enquiry” (JD1b).

Another student from group B viewed learning at university as having more and different sources than was the case at school where learning was limited to textbooks and teachers:

“At school you are limited to the teacher and the textbook. But here at the university you have different resources. You have the teachers and you can read stories so you become more motivated” (PB1b).

In the following exchange, a student elaborates on his issue further. He had his own insight into how learning was different in higher education:

(RB1b): “Now, how do you think higher education affects the way students think? Do you think higher education makes you think in a different way?”

(PB1b): “Sure, and this is related to how information is gained at school. Information is transferred to the students in a passive way. But here at the university, if they apply the method we have just talked about, you will find the student thinking in a different way and you will find him in the library searching for information or on the Internet, because the student isn’t limited to that [in the textbooks] but information can be found anywhere. Also students are more liberal in their thinking and they have more options”.

Nevertheless, we will see later that in this chapter what the students said above about learning in higher education reflected how they perceived higher education or what it *should* be like rather than their how they actually experienced it.

Having explored students' perceptions of the nature of higher education, I then moved on to investigate how they perceived the **goals** of higher education, which links back to the research sub-question (1.b). This included students' perceptions of the goals of higher education as a means of gaining knowledge and beyond, as showed below.

Generally speaking, the analysis showed that students had a good understanding of how higher education differed from general education at the school level, though it was not what they had experienced during their first year at the Foundation English programme. To begin with, a student from group B viewed higher education as helping students to develop a stronger personality. In this context, students associate having a 'stronger' personality with being overt and outgoing, as is evident in the following quote by a student from group B:

“I think higher education develops our personality more than school. For example, there are students who were shy but when they came to university, they have developed a better personality. You see them more outgoing and talk to people” (PB1b).

Another student from group A added 'independent' as an additional characteristic of the type of personality he thought higher education should be developing in the students, while a student from group D viewed higher education as giving her the opportunity to “meet people from different backgrounds and cultures so we [can] learn from their experiences” (PD1b). Other students in the same group also perceived higher education as helping them to develop their skills, abilities, intellect and have ambition. 'Responsibility' and the ability (or perhaps the chance) for 'decision-making' were additional points suggested by students in this group: “here in higher education we also learn how to become responsible and make decisions” (PD1b).

Besides aiming at developing their skills, ways of thinking and personality, this student defined another goal for higher education:

“I think in higher education, the purpose is to make the students concentrate and specialise in a certain area... As I said, the goals of higher education are different because it prepares you for your career” (PB1b).

Another student from group D seemed to agree with this view. In her opinion:

“Higher education prepares me to become a leader, to lead a group. So after secondary school we come to university or college where we learn how to manage things and people” (PD1b).

I was also interested in learning about other goals of higher education beyond gaining knowledge. In this respect, students in group C gave some interesting ideas, which reflected part of their awareness of the goals or functions of higher education:

(RC1b): “Let me now ask you this: other than learning and gaining knowledge, what do you think is the purpose of higher education? What else does it do to the individual other than giving him or her information?”

(PC1b): “I think it is about creating a well-educated generation”.

(PC1b): “Higher education also teaches you how to communicate with others. You need this in your job”.

(PC1b): “Higher education also teaches us how to interact with others in the workplace”.

(RC1b): “I’ll take you back to ‘thinking’ because I’m interested in this. So in terms of thinking, what role do you think higher education plays?”

(PC1b): “I think higher education widens up one’s [scope of] thinking”.

(RC1b): “Can you explain more what you mean by this?”

(PC1b): “I mean I can learn how to deal with people from other cultures”.

On the same issue, a student from group D wrote in her journal that “other than gaining knowledge, higher education helps students to realise themselves as individuals who are responsible and can solve problems” (JD1b).

In addition, amongst the issues which I discussed with the students in the first and second RGCs was the difference between **learning** and **learning *how to learn***, and how students

associated these two concepts or goals with higher education. On this very issue, a student from group D wrote “higher education is about learning ways of learning more than just learning information” (JD1b). I also had the following conversation with group B where the students expressed their perceptions about this issue too:

(PB1b): “I think learning how to get information is more important because when you give me the information, I wouldn’t become a knowledgeable person; I still need to learn, but when I learn *how* to get it, I don’t only learned the information but also how to get it. But this is not done here”.

(RB1b): “What about you, what do you think?”

(PB1b): “learning how to get information of course. There are [many] ways of learning so it's useful to know about these.”

(RB1b): “So you think that learning how to learn is also important.”

(PB1b): “Yes, sure. When I learn one way of finding information I can then think of different ways of learning and also better ways of learning.”

Unsurprisingly, students in all of the four groups agreed that learning how to gain knowledge is more important than getting knowledge itself. This is part of the conversation I had with group C:

(RC1b): “Let me now ask you about something different. Which do you think is more important: learning or learning how to learn? I mean getting information or learning how to search for and get information?”

(PC1b): “Method of learning is more important than the information itself.”

(RC1b): “So do you want me to give you an important piece of information about your specialisation or rather show you how to find information about your specialisation using different sources?”

(PC1b): “No, learning how to get the information is more important for us.”

(RC1b): “Why is that?”

(PC1b): “Because when I knew *how* to get information the first time, I won’t ask you every time I need help”.

(RC1b): “So you all agree that learning about the different ways of getting information is more important than the information itself”.

(PC1b): “Yes, because if you give us a piece of information, we may forget it but if you show us how to find it, then I’ll use that knowledge every time I need to find information.”

However, listening carefully to their responses, I had to make sure if what they were saying reflected what they actually experienced in higher education or rather what they thought higher education ‘should’ be like. I found later that a considerable part of what they said related very much to the latter. As the analysis below will show, students in fact acknowledged that these were their *own* perceptions and did not necessarily materialise in their real life learning in higher education. They were describing what higher education meant to them in terms of its nature, requirements and goals with reference to what they had experienced at school. Thus, what the students said about learning and teaching in higher education might be understood in comparison with teaching and learning at school. Some of them in fact acknowledged their lack of awareness of the real nature and goals of higher education:

“I personally believe that over 90% of us don’t realise the meaning of higher education and its requirements and the challenges. We only ask others when we are already in the colleges or university.” (PA1b).

Another student from the same group also commented “but we don’t think we have a full understanding of higher education and what it requires” (PA1b).

They also acknowledged that the nature and requirements of higher education were either not commonly understood by students or they don’t put into practice what they knew:

“Not all students have enough information and awareness about it [higher education] and are able to apply it [what they know]” (PA1b).

“Not all students have the same understanding. Some of the students take this issue of independence as having unlimited freedom and I think this is because of their ignorance. They understand independence in a wrong way. So I see many students misuse this concept of independence and behave negatively” (PA1b).

A student from group B also agreed that some students lack proper knowledge of higher education:

“There are some careless ones. They study for their university courses in the same way they do when they were at school. They look at the two stages in the same way” (PB1b).

When asked about the causes of such lack of awareness, the students did not seem to put the blame on themselves:

(RA1b): “Do you think then that there is a missing link in the current system?”

(PA1b): “But we cannot blame the students for this?”

Nevertheless, two other students identified the missing link:

“But there isn't anything formal for the students to learn about higher education and its requirements and challenges which one may face” (PA1b).

“I think to avoid such troubles, students need to be made aware of the nature of higher education and its requirements and challenges, so they are better prepared to face the new stage” (PA1b).

They suggested that students at the secondary schools should be offered an orientation course on the nature, goals and requirements of higher education so that they cope with the new learning situation in a better way:

“I think there is a need for another subject in the secondary school which teaches us what higher education is all about: its meaning and how to prepare for it, but we don't know what this all actually means and how it is different from learning at the school level” (PA1b).

“And this needs to be introduced before students come to university so to avoid students falling in troubles in their first year of university. So all topics such as how to prepare for university, how to set up or fix the timetable and the challenges that one might face are important and should be introduced at the school level” (PA1b).

A third student even suggested *who* best could carry out such an important task:

“I think students who are already in the second and third year could go to schools and talk to the students about university” (PA1b).

I now move on to present the analysis of students’ perceptions of *language* learning in higher education.

6.3.4. Students’ perceptions of ‘language’ learning in higher education

This section of the analysis links to the first research question which addresses students’ perceptions of language learning in higher education in and outside the classroom. This first research question is divided into four other sub-questions (see research questions in chapter two, section 2.8). The analysis herein is therefore organised around these four sub-questions as follows:

1. Students’ perceptions of the nature and purposes of language learning in higher education in and outside the classroom.
2. Students’ perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom.
3. Students’ perceptions of the teacher’s roles in and responsibility for language learning
4. Students’ perceptions of the constraints on language learning in their context.

6.3.4.1. Perceptions of the nature and goals of language learning in higher education

This first issue was mostly explored in the second RGC (see the investigation grid in chapter four, table 4.3) but, due to the interrelated nature of the issues investigated, students’ perceptions of the nature and purposes of language learning in higher education also manifested themselves in other sessions.

Students in all of the four groups agreed that language teaching and learning at the university was drastically different compared to what they had experienced at school. They perceived the two stages of language learning as being different in terms of *what* and *how* they were taught and learned. However, this appeared to be their overall perception, which was largely sensible and logical given the different nature and level of teaching and learning at school and university. A further detailed exploration of the students’ experiences, though, did show

that the students in fact had some serious concerns about certain aspects of the language teaching and learning in their context. The analysis also revealed important perceptions of the students in relation to other related concepts such as choice, control and methods of assessment. I will begin this section by presenting the analysis on the students' perceptions of the nature and characteristics of language learning in higher education, which also encompassed their perceptions of the goals or purposes of language learning in higher education as well as their perceptions of exams and methods of assessment.

To begin with, students in group C perceived language learning in higher education as enabling them to speak to and **get to know people** from different cultures and backgrounds:

“Here at the university, I have also learned how to speak with others, especially those from different cultures and backgrounds” (PC1b).

Another issue the students talked about, and again compared to the situation at school, was the **use of L2 in the classroom** “also the teachers here speak only English” (PC1b), “you forget about Arabic when you get to the Language Centre. It is all English, and English only” (PB1b).

Although the exclusive use of English in the classroom was new to them, which they found difficult to cope with at the start but then got used to it and, over time, it had become as a habit:

“Yes, at the beginning we felt a bit uncomfortable about this since it was a new thing, but over time we got used to it, it was okay. So it was all in English and we got used to it. After some time, it had become as a habit and even if I wanted to ask for something I would use English. I felt our thinking has changed” (PB1a).

Further on the characteristics of language learning in higher education, a student in group C regarded the **opportunity for language practice** as one of the important features of higher education:

“In my opinion the most important feature is the availability of language practice. I mean I can use English in the university because I know that everyone understands it, otherwise they wouldn't have been at the university” (JC1b).

Another issue which the RGCs focused on as part of the students' perceptions of language learning in higher education was their perceptions of **exams and evaluation**. The investigation explored the students' perceptions of the exam and assessment methods in higher education as they had experienced them through the Foundation English Programme at the university. Compared to the system at school, students perceived university assessment method as being varied and having a different focus, yet not very different compared to the assessment method at school in terms of function. The following exchange I had with group C reveals part of the picture:

(PC1b): "I still think that they [assessment methods] evaluate the level of the student and the extent to which he has learned the information."

(RC1b): "What about you, do you have the same view?"

(PC1b): "Yes, they still make us study."

(PC1b): "I feel the assessment method is more organised here, because in our portfolios we learn how to organise our writing and how to organise our vocabulary. I feel this has helped me to improve my writing but the quizzes only test the student's understanding of the course."

Not far from the perceptions students in group C had, group D students perceived the function of exams as follows:

"Because they [teachers] want to see the level of the students and whether they have achieved the goals and objectives of the subject, because there are goals set for each subject" (PD1b).

"They show the [proficiency] level of the students" (PD1b).

Besides showing how much effort they had made in a subject, a student in group C had a different view:

(PC1b): "They may also test our intelligence as some of the questions are really tricky."

(RC1b): "Okay, but when you get 70 or a (C-), what does this mark mean to you?"

(PC1b): “This mark means a disaster to me! It means one of two: either I didn't make effort or I didn't understand the subject.”

At this point, I encouraged students to think of other benefits or functions of exams beyond marks and effort but only few of them had a clue. I then shared with them what the students in another group thought of exams as helping them to reflect on the kind of learning strategies and methods of study they were using.

In terms of variety, the students appreciated the different methods of assessment they had in some of their courses. They mentioned portfolios and group presentations. A student from group D also mentioned that exams do not always measure memorised information but understanding. Not different from the system at school, some of the students still perceived marks at university as showing the amount of effort they were making in a given subject, while other students had a different view, though:

“The mark I get in exams and quizzes I relate them to my effort, but some students when get low marks on classroom participation and projects, they may think that the teacher dislikes them” (PC1b).

However, some students were quite honest and acknowledged that they did not really care about marks; rather their main goal was to pass the foundation programme:

“To be honest, when we were on the Foundation Programme, we wanted to pass only. We didn't care about marks” (PA1b).

An important critique to the exam system came from group D. They criticised the teachers and exam system as measuring information retention more than finding out how students actually think or learn, which they considered an ignored, yet important, aspect of their learning:

“The teachers were only concerned about delivering the content but nobody is interested in finding out about how we were thinking or learning at school and even here at the university, even if they see that the students' level was declining” (PD1b).

In addition, students were not satisfied with the current exam system for they believed the marks they got did not reflect their actual proficiency in English:

“As we discussed in our previous meetings, I disagree with the idea of exams. I think grades do not show my real level in the language. You give me a test and I’m tired or I didn’t study well for that test, that’s not my real mark. It doesn’t show my real level in English. I don’t see it as logical assessment of our actual level. Because of the nature of the multiple-choice exam, somebody who doesn’t study well or even doesn’t know English could get a (C) or (B), just by chance. So I feel I have learned English but the low grades I get in the exam do not really show it” (PB1b).

Students also complained that they had no role or choice in the assessment and exam system:

(RC1b): “Good, I would like now to ask you about your role in evaluation. Is your opinion taken into consideration when deciding on assessment methods?”

(PC1b): “Not really. In the first lesson, we are given the course plan where tests and quizzes have already being decided on and we just have to follow that plan.”

(RC1b): “So do you mean you just follow what is in the textbook whether you like it or not, but what about your opinion?”

(PC1b): “The only thing we could do is to ask the teacher to postpone one of the tests if there were two tests in the same week.”

(RC1b): “So here you are asking the teacher to delay some exams but the number of exams and the kind of questions remain the same.”

(PC1b): “Yes.”

(RC1b): “Can you choose what form of assessment you prefer to have, for example, if you like the portfolio method or the oral presentation method, or perhaps some of you are good in writing so you may suggest that you are given an essay to write and so on. Can you choose your preferred method of evaluation?”

(PC1b): “No, not really. We have never experienced this”

So far, I have presented the findings on the students’ perceptions of the nature and goals of higher education in general as well as their perceptions of the nature and goals of language learning, in particular. The gap between the students’ perceptions of higher education and what they actually experience was obvious. I will elaborate further on this issue in the

discussion chapter (chapter seven). I will now turn to describe how students perceived their roles in and responsibility for *language learning*.

6.3.4.2. *Perceptions of students' roles in and responsibility for learning*

The analysis in this section provides responses to sub-question (1.b) which addresses students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom. This issue was mostly explored in the second RGC (see the investigation grid in chapter four, table 4.3) but, due to the interrelated nature of the issues investigated, students' perceptions of their roles in and responsibility for learning also manifested themselves in other sessions. The analysis in this section will include students' roles and responsibility in addition to other aspects of language learning such as *choice and control*, *independent learning*, and *out-of class language learning*.

Interestingly, I have realised through the analysis that there was a gap between students' perceptions of language learning in higher education and what they had actually experienced. I will therefore begin this section by presenting the analysis of how students perceived their roles in and responsibility for language learning in higher education before moving on to how they actually experienced it.

Most of the students described their role in language learning at school as being **passive**. Following on from this, I was interested in exploring how their perceptions of roles might have changed after they had moved to university, given the different learning environment and experiences they had at university compared to those at school:

(RB1c): "What about you as a learner, do you think your roles have changed?"

(PB1c): "Yes, when I was at school, I was only a recipient."

(RB1c): "And what about here at the university?"

(PB1c): "Here at the university my role is different, it's different according to the activities that the teachers give me, so there are many things which I do on my own and the teacher only monitors me."

So this student acknowledged the different role he had at the university compared to what he had experienced at school. Group D students also shared the same perception:

(PD1c): "I think there is some responsibility for the student as they [the teachers] give you something and then you have to continue yourself."

(RD1c): "What about you, what do you think?"

(PD1c): "I think the student has a bigger role than the teacher. Sometimes the teacher just reads the slides. We have to find information on our own."

Besides roles, the discussion also covered the students' perceptions of responsibility in language learning. Here I was asking group D about this:

(RD1c): "Can you tell me about responsibility? And here we're here talking about your responsibility for learning."

(PD1c): "In higher education, yes. I think I'm more responsible."

(RD1c): "And what about roles? Do you think you have different roles in higher education?"

(PD1c): "Yes."

(RD1c): "You mean you have 'bigger' roles or 'different' roles?"

(PD1c): "I think they're bigger roles and also different roles."

This student from group B justified why he had a bigger role and more responsibility at university. And at the end, he linked his role in language learning to success:

"I think my roles are different now because I have become an adult and my thinking has improved. Also I know that there are different ways of learning and so I try to learn these ways. As for responsibility, I came to the university with a goal, and will search for all the ways which will help me to achieve my goal either by asking others or any other way. I personally believe I have a role and I believe in my role, especially in higher education. And this role is very important because I think my role is linked to my success." (PB1c).

For the majority of the students, having a different role at university was, in fact, expected and they associated it with success:

(PB1c): "Yes, the teachers tell us that we have to work hard in order to learn English, so after this I started asking my friends what they usually do to learn English and so I began to learn many things from them."

In the same vein, this student from A also believed that students at the university level should be able to exercise his/her role in learning:

"Ideally, I think the student should know how to handle his learning. I agree that the student should use his experience and knowledge to decide on how to learn and make the huge content and the material easy to learn" (PA1c).

A student in group B also expected to have a different role at university, and so did he for the teacher:

“The moment we came to university, we have realised the different role we will be playing in our learning. And therefore our view of the teacher’s role has also changed. We expect the teacher to do different things and have new roles, unlike the teachers at school because our needs in higher education are different” (PB1c).

In fact, this part of the conversation was indeed one of the most interesting and useful parts as it enabled me to gain deep insights into one of the core enquiries of my research, i.e., perceptions of the students’ roles in and responsibility for language learning. I therefore seized the opportunity of the students’ interest in the subject and asked them how much responsibility they thought each of the teacher and students should have. This is what the students in group A thought:

(RA1c): “But in general what percentage would you give to each 50-50, more, less?”

(PA1c): “I would say 60%, 40%”

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

(PA1c): “The student.”

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

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

(PA1c): “This is what should happen.”

A student in group B suggested a closer percentage to that suggested by the students in group C in the exchange above:

“I believe the teacher’s role is limited or it should be limited at the university to about 30%, whereas at school, the teacher does about 70% of the things. Here at the university students have bigger roles to play” (PB1c).

Another student in group B perceived even a bigger role for the students. And again, this was not what they had actually experienced but what they wished they had, as we are going to see below:

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

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

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

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

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

Laughter!!

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

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

I followed up these responses with another question about whether they felt comfortable about having a bigger role in and more responsibility for their learning:

(RA1c): “But how do you feel about being given a bigger role to play in your learning? Is it something you are comfortable with or is it something that annoyed by?”

(PA1c): “If the student thinks about the benefits then yes it is useful.”

(RA1c): “So do you appreciate this in your own learning?”

(PA1c): “Yes, we realise the importance of it.”

(RA1c): “So you don't feel like the teacher makes your life miserable by giving you a bigger role to play in your learning.”

(RA1c): “No, not really.”

Also, students in group D appreciated having a greater role in their learning and associated it with better information retention:

“It is sometimes a pressure on you [us] but it is better when you think on your own and information sticks in your mind when your search for it on your own rather than getting it from others” (PD1c).

The analysis also revealed an important part of the students' perceptions of **choice and control** in language learning. The students appreciated the value of being able to make choices and exercise some control on certain aspects of their language learning, while at the same time rejecting the teacher's domination on certain areas such as content and methods of learning. On a number of occasions during the conversations, the students voiced their concerns about such issues, some of which have already been presented above. They justified the importance of being able to choose what and how to learn by the fact that each student learns differently according to their abilities. In the following quote, a student in group D maintained that:

“...here at the university we should work on things which we can innovate in and which suit our abilities” (PD1c).

Another student also shared the same view and emphasised that what one student finds useful and interesting, may not be seen the same by another:

“I think here in higher education, teachers are only giving us general ideas and then the students are different in how they learn. So some students may find things on the Internet and others may search in books. They do not find the Internet useful so students differ in what they see useful in learning” (PD1c).

I explained to the students that being able to make choices and exercise control over one’s own learning requires certain skills and abilities. So I followed up this with a question about their perceptions of such skills and abilities. They came up with the following requirements or conditions which showed, firstly, their awareness of the personal and contextual requirements for having a role and control in learning and, secondly, their developing awareness of themselves as learners as a result of taking part in the research. This will be detailed in the next section on ‘person knowledge’. Group B list of the factors and conditions for making choices and exercising a greater control over their own learning included the following:

- Diligence
- Hard work
- Good company
- [Supporting] learning environment
- Thinking
- Intelligence
- Awareness of what one is learning

I was also interested in exploring what aspects of language learning students expect to have a role in and responsibility for. Students in group A said they wanted to be allowed to decide on *what* and *how* they learn, i.e., they wanted to have a greater role in deciding the content and methods of learning:

(RA1c): “Do you have any role in choosing the content of the courses you are studying?”

(PA1c): “No, we don't choose the content.”

(RA1c): “My question was if you have a role to play in choosing what you are learning and how to learn it, or would you rather say that both ‘what’ and ‘how’ come from the teacher?”

(PA1c): “Both, we are told what to study and the teachers teach us the way they think is right.”

(RA1c): “Are you comfortable with this?”

(PA1c): “Not really, I would like to choose the content.”

(RA1c): “But do you think we are being realistic here by saying that the teachers should ask the students what they like to study?”

(PA1c): “Well, this is not happening here. We're not given the opportunity to make a choice about the content of the courses.”

Group B students also wanted to have a say in ‘what’ and ‘how’ they learn:

(RB1c): “So you're telling me that at the early stages of your studies, you want the teacher to decide on what you should be learning but how to learn, for example how to keep a portfolio, should be left to you.”

(PB1c): “Yes. But when designing the curriculum and the materials, students’ needs should be considered.”

(RB1c): “Good. Now I turn to you. When we discuss your role in learning and talk about the decision on how to learn: the methods or ways of learning. Do you think this is your decision or someone’s else?”

(PB1c): “I think it's the student’s decision because he knows how to learn and how to study. The teacher can give some advices but the final decision should be for the students.”

In the same vein, a student in group A asserted that “the student *can* contribute by choosing the content, and I see this as appropriate and useful, to give the student the opportunity to choose” (PA1c).

Nevertheless, a student from group D raised two important issues in her journal: she perceived students’ role in language learning as being unclearly defined, and explained that students should be involved in learning for they could be a useful source of learning methods:

“Learning English at the university needs improvement because the role of the student is not clear. The student needs to be involved in the learning process because he can suggest useful ways of learning” (JD1c).

This was also echoed by the students in group A:

(PA1c): “Our roles as learners are not really clear.”

(RA1c): “How do you understand your roles in the language learning process?”

(PA1c): “I have to study, pass and finish my college.”

(RA1c): “So is this how you experience your roles in reality?”

(PA1c): “Yes. We need more awareness about our roles.”

Notwithstanding the students’ demands for having a greater role in what and how they learn, they did not disregard completely the teacher’s role in language learning. In fact, some of them admitted that having a total freedom in learning was an unrealistic goal.

“I think it's difficult to give the students full freedom when they move to university, which is a completely different environment. So I think it should be [introduced] step by step” (PB1c).

Students in group C also appreciated the key, but untraditional, role of the teacher, as the following exchange reveals:

(PC1d): “We would like the teacher to show us the way, and then to let us continue on our own.”

(PC1d): “It would be good if students could have a greater role in their learning, but without the teacher telling us to do things, we would not do it. So I think the teacher has a role to play- he pushes the students to work.”

(RC1d): “What about you, what do you think?”

(PC1d): “I think the teacher should give the students guidelines and help them.”

Students in group B also acknowledged the important role of the teacher and curriculum:

“Well, the teachers and the curriculum are both important and we ask them [the teachers] if we don’t understand, so they are important” (PB1d).

Another student also appreciated the important role of the teacher in learning but recommended that such a role should be different from the one he had experienced:

“We're not talking about eliminating the teacher’s role altogether, but we're saying that the teachers should take a different role. And I think this will succeed” (PB1d).

Besides acknowledging the essential role of the teacher in the learning process (but not necessarily the traditional dominant role, as we have seen), some of the students also perceived having a greater role and independence in learning as being best introduced gradually, especially at the early stages of learning, as reflected in the following exchange:

(PB1c): “I think it's difficult to give the students full freedom when they move to university, which is a completely different environment. So I think it should be [introduced] step by step.”

(RB1c): “And how much autonomy and freedom of choice were you given in those language courses?”

(PB1c): “About 40 to 50%. I think this is reasonable for students who have just moved from school to university.”

(RB1c): “And do you think having more freedom and autonomy than this amount in your learning would have negative impact?”

(PB1c): “Yes.”

These views will be part of the overall students' perceptions of the teacher's role in language learning which I present in section (6.3.4.3) below.

Moving from perception to **experience**, I will now present the analysis of the students' roles in and responsibility for language learning in higher education as experienced by the students. The investigation encompassed the students' experience of language learning both in and outside the classroom. I began by asking the students about the kind of **choice and control** they had experienced in higher education in general. Interestingly, the students kept focusing on three technical areas in which they were given choice in and control over. The first was the opportunity to choose their specialisation courses from a list of courses offered by their departments, which was not the case in the language courses. The other thing the students also appreciated was the opportunity to choose the timing of their classes, i.e., to fix or make up their own lectures timetable. Again this was not the case in the Foundation English Programme where students receive their timetables from their programme coordinators or teachers. The third technical which students focused on was the ability to use other books besides the course textbooks. Students reported that at school, each subject had *a* textbook which they had to study before the final exam.

These three aspects of their learning seemed to be the most obvious types of choice or control the students had experienced (and perhaps enjoyed) when they first came to the university for it was not the case at school. This might have also contributed to the development of their perceptions of role, choice and control in learning at tertiary level as is clear in the following two statements by students in groups A and D:

“...if we compare independence in higher education and general education, we have more [independence] here in higher education. When we were at school, we were given books and we can't use different books but here at the university we can use other books and we can make our own timetable” (PD1c).

“Yes, we are given the option to choose what course to do and to make up our own lecture timetable. There are some really heavy subjects and so students don't take many of them in the same semester. Also, most of the students like to finish [their classes] early so they fix their timetables in a comfortable way” (PA1e).

Students' perceptions of choice and control constitute an important part of their overall perceptions of language learning in higher education. However, my goal was to walk the extra mile with the students and discuss their perceptions of language learning *beyond* the technical sense of choice and control. I therefore began to explain that I also aimed to explore other aspects of their learning such as the cognitive and metacognitive aspects, without literally using such terms. So I began to focus the discussion on some specific aspects of their language learning by directly asking them if they had any role in deciding part of the learning content or the methods of learning. The students in group C replied in the negative:

(RC1c): “Are you given options about ‘what’ and ‘how’ you learn? What here refers to the content and topics and how refers to the methods and the way you prefer to learn?”

(PC1c): “No, there are no options; the teacher only has the materials.”

(RC1c): “What about homework, can you choose what exercises or activities you would like to do for homework?”

(PC1c): “No, it's in the book.”

A student in group D also emphasised that “in higher education, students should find their own preferred way of learning” but in reality, she said “we don't have freedom for selecting

materials, what to study or making decisions” (PD1c). Then the discussion progressed to making presentations in language classes. I asked them if they could choose the content of what they were presenting or their own method of presenting. They responded that these decisions were all made by the teacher:

(RD1c): “What about choosing the ‘content’ of those presentations?”

(PD1c): “No, we don't choose the content.”

(RD1c): “Can you as learners suggest certain ways of delivering the materials? Ways which you may feel more comfortable with?”

(PD1c): “No, the teacher decides on this.”

(RD1c): “So do you feel like your ‘voice’ is not being listened to? Have you ever suggested something and it has been listened to?”

(PD1c): Student: No, we're not given opportunity to suggest ways of teaching. This is the teacher's job. To be honest we don't really talk about this.”

Group B students also had the same experience:

(PB1c): “So you believe you have a role and that your role is important in learning.”

(PB1c): “Of course, but I have a point. It is true that I have a role in learning, but can I exercise my role in reality? This is the question”.

So we have seen that the students were in fact aware of the importance of having a greater role in and responsibility for their language learning but this was not what they had actually experienced. As such, and as the investigation revealed, students decided to take the initiative and learn things on their own outside the classroom. However, such independent learning initiatives taken by the students were *not* necessarily defined explicitly in the curriculum or being part of the course but rather as a result of either poor teaching methods or uninteresting materials, as the students explained:

(PD1c): “In some courses, the teacher does not explain the materials well, many points are not clear so we have to go to YouTube and search for information on our own.”

(RD1c): “What makes you go and find more information on your own? Are there specific instructions and guidelines in the course book which say go to the Internet and search for more information?”

(PD1c): “No, we decide to do this.”

(RD1c): “Why?”

(PD1c): “Because there is a lot to read in the book and I don't like reading. I understand better by watching videos.”

Other students did not find the course materials easy to understand or interesting enough so they resorted to the internet for easier and more appealing materials on those topics:

(PD1c): “Because sometimes the topics which are available in the book are difficult or not interesting, so if I can find something more interesting on the Internet, I would work on that topic”.

Another student also resorted to independent learning because she did not like her teacher's way of teaching:

(PD1c): “We don't like the teacher's way. She was only reading her slides. And we were first year and still new to the subject. We didn't have background in the subject.”

(RD1c): “So how did you get on with the course?”

(PD1c): “We mostly studied it on our own.”

A student from group C said that she learned on her own because she did not learn much from her teacher:

“In English courses, I feel I have to depend on myself. I don't learn that much from the teacher” (PC1c).

Generally speaking, students found independent learning as both useful and interesting. In group B a student shared with the group his story of getting a low mark in a listening test, which he did not expect. His teacher suggested a website where he could practice and improve his skills but he did not find the website useful. Upon this, he decided to learn it on his own. So he began to search for different resources and, in this way, he was able to learn a great deal:

“So I said to myself: why don't I try something on my own. So I logged in to YouTube and started looking for things I really like. I came across a number of interesting things and useful things. So I started watching those videos. They were really really interesting. So I knew I had a problem in listening and I started looking around for something to help me in my listening and I found

many interesting and useful stuff on YouTube and began to watch them. That has helped me to improve my listening and in the following exam, I got a good score” (PB1c).

I then asked him to describe to the group why he felt that very learning experience as interesting and useful:

“Yes indeed, and this is what makes it interesting and so useful. I find it on my own and I learned it the way I like. The teacher did not suggest this method to me. I just logged on to the website and searched for something which may help me in my listening. So this means that it is better to leave the students find out things they are interested in and not to restrict them to certain topics and ways of learning. I am totally against this. So I think students should choose the time, the place and method of learning” (PB1c).

I also had the same discussion with group D. I asked them about the link between having a bigger role in learning and effective learning:

(RD1c): “Can you think of the relationship between independence in learning and effective learning?”

(PD1c): “I feel that when students are given more independence, they can have more ideas and a wider scope in learning but when they are not given independence they will end up following the teacher and we will all become copies of each other.”

While acknowledging the greater responsibility it involves, students still associate independence in language learning with effective learning: “Yes, there will be more responsibility, but we will learn better” (PC1c).

The discussion then progressed to cover the students’ perceptions of the characteristics and benefits of **out-of-class language learning**. I was amazed to find out that the students indeed had a lot to say about out-of-class language learning. They indeed knew what and why they were learning outside the classroom and showed a good understanding of the characteristics and nature of such a way of learning, i.e., how it is different from the classroom language learning. They also acknowledged its value and benefits as well as the challenges. Generally speaking, they had a positive attitude towards out-of-class language learning and perceived it as an important source of knowledge as well as a domain to practice their language skills.

As a warm up question on this issue, I asked students if in the first place they thought language learning *could* take place outside the classroom. They all had no doubt of this, but acknowledged the varying opportunities they had for this depending on their location:

(RC1c): “Now I would like to ask you about out-of-class learning. Do you think learning takes place outside the classroom? Of course you mentioned watching movies and films in English, would you consider this as a learning experience? There are no teachers, no curriculum. Is this learning?”

(PC1c): “Yes, we do learn English outside the classroom. I often practise English outside the classroom with my roommate and friends.”

(PC1c): “I have friends from the capital area and when I visit them we often go shopping so we use English in the shops.”

(PC1c): “Also sometimes in the cafeteria we hear some students using English in their conversations informally.”

(PC1c): “Those who are in Muscat [the capital city] have a better opportunity to practise English.”

So we can see the students were aware of the various opportunities and also limitations for language learning and practice around them. I was also interested in exploring their perceptions of the main differences between the two types of learning:

“There is more freedom in learning outside the classroom but in the classroom, the teacher is there to correct your mistakes but outside you are on your own as if you are in the forest. So you can decide yourself whether this [a certain language use] is acceptable or not, if it is accurate or not” (PC1c).

“I think that you are limited to certain things in the classroom but outside you have more freedom” (PC1c).

I also tried to link what they were saying to the concepts of independence and choice. They were confident that out-of-class language learning offered greater opportunities for independence and making choices. Their responses were definite on this:

(RC1c): “What about independence? Where do you feel you are more independent in the classroom or outside the classroom?”

(PC1c): “Outside of course. Laughter!”

(RC1c): “What about choosing what you are learning, the content?”

(PC1c): “Outside you have choices and you can also make jokes!”

(RC1c): “What about the options available to you in both settings in and outside the classroom?”

(PC1c): “We have more options outside the class.”

(RC1c): “What kind of options?”

(PC1c): “In the classroom, we have a curriculum and a set of materials to follow but outside you are free.”

The issues of value and effectiveness of this type of learning were also important, so I asked them about how they perceived the effectiveness of their out-of-class language learning:

(PC1c): “The experience of learning English outside the class is different.”

(RC1c): “What do you mean by different?”

(PC1c): “I think what we learn outside the classroom lasts longer because there is no book and you use the language and then think why I used this word here and not another word? So that makes you think. Unlike the classroom where are you receive things from the teacher.”

Other students also considered out-of-class language learning as being more flexible, effective, free from commitments, and offering more choices in terms of what (content), how (ways of learning) and when (time of learning). It was also characterised as being interesting and makes one having a greater self-confidence.

Furthermore, the issue of *interest* was also another important factor in facilitating out-of-class language learning. This links very well to one of the students in group C who shared with the group her unique experience of learning Korean and Japanese on her own through watching cartoons and TV series in these languages. She acknowledged the role of motivation and personal interest as important factors in making her learn these two languages:

“One reason why I don’t like to learn English is that it’s being learned and used by everyone and I like to be different from others. This encouraged me to learn other languages such as Korean and Japanese. I have learned these languages through the cartoons and TV series on the internet” (PC2a).

Students in group A also talked enthusiastically about the benefits of independent and out-of-class learning. It was obvious that they shared the same perceptions of the characteristics and benefits of out-of-class language learning as those in other groups. For the students in group A, out-of-class learning enables them to learn what they want, serves their own learning needs, it is more useful, effective and enjoyable, and has longer information retention compared to classroom learning.

Similarly, students in group C perceived language learning outside the classroom as indeed possible and more effective than classroom learning. They added that books were not needed, for they could learn using their own resources such as the internet. They also came up with interesting characteristics of the learners who learn English on their own. For them, independent learners are curious, become teachers of their own and, as such, have full control over their learning. In addition, the goal of out-of-class learning is to gain knowledge unlike the classroom learning where their major aim was to get high marks. Finally, unlike classroom language learning, a student in group D perceived out-of-class learning as free from stress and worries about making mistakes.

Finally in this section, I would like to feature an important concept of **‘interdependence’** which emerged from the analysis of students’ perceptions and experiences of language learning in higher education. In fact, interdependence, as opposed to independence, located itself at the centre of the students’ perceptions of cooperation and roles in language learning. That is to say, students indeed appreciated the value of cooperation in language learning and that they did not view independent learning as synonymous with *‘learning a lone away from others’*. On the contrary, most of the students acknowledged the role which their peers, either in or outside the classroom, as well as teachers play in helping them to master language skills. For example, a student in group C acknowledged in her reflective journal the value of independent learning but at the same time associated it with others who functioned, in her view, as an important partner for language practice:

“About independent language learning, as we have said in the meeting, it is about learning new words and searching for their meanings. Of course, it plays an effective role, but we always need the others to practise our speaking with” (JC2a).

Furthermore, while acknowledging her own role in learning, a student in group D wrote in her reflective journal that she would still need an ‘expert’ to help her choose the learning content and strategies:

“I think I could decide on and choose the content of what I learn and I could also decide and choose learning strategies, but I cannot do this without those who have expertise. So my thoughts and suggestions + thoughts and suggestions of the experts in this field = useful and interesting curriculum” (JD2a).

Having presented how students perceived and experienced their own roles in and responsibility for language learning, the following section present the analysis of how students perceived and experienced the *teacher's* roles in and responsibility for language learning in higher education.

6.3.4.3. Students' perceptions of the teacher's roles and responsibility

The analysis in this section should respond to the research sub-question (1.c) which addresses the students' perceptions of the **teacher's role in and responsibility for learning** in higher education. This issue was mostly explored in the second RGC (see the investigation grid in chapter four, table 4.3) but, due to the interrelated nature of the issues investigated, students' perceptions of the teachers' roles in and responsibility for learning also manifested themselves in other sessions.

The analysis showed that the teacher's role and responsibility were always embedded in the students' perceptions of their own roles and responsibility. Whenever students talked about their roles and agency in learning, they also, in comparison, referred to those of the teacher, either explicitly or implicitly. As such, in this research I consider the exploration of how the students' perceived and experienced the role of the teacher as an integral part of the overall picture of their own perceptions and experiences of language learning.

The presentation of analysis in this section will begin by describing how students' perceived the teachers' roles in higher education then proceed to describing how they experienced such roles through the Foundation English Programme they had completed just before the investigation had taken place.

I have highlighted part of the students' perceptions of the teacher's role in the previous section as part of the discussion on independent language learning. The analysis of this part of the data showed that students did not ignore the essential role the teacher plays in language learning. However, they perceived the teacher in higher education as having a *different* role compared to the traditional role as they experienced it at school.

In higher education, students perceived the teacher in the formal classroom language learning as a guide, consultant and resource person. For example, unlike the teacher at school, a student in group B perceived the teacher at university as having much less control of learning as well as the students:

“I think there is much more freedom here than there is at school. The teacher at school controls the students all the time in the classroom” (PB1d).

Another student in the same group also perceived the teacher in higher education as to have ‘new’ roles and associated these new roles with the different skills which students in higher education should be able to develop. Amongst these new roles of the teacher was helping students to learn on their own:

“Our view towards the role of the teacher has also changed. We expect the teacher to do different things and have new roles unlike the teachers at school because our needs in higher education are different. I think the teacher should not just give us a book and tell us what is in the book. Here at the university we need the teacher to tell us how to learn. I mean how we should learn when the teacher is away because the teacher is only with us for two hours each class and so we should learn how to learn on our own” (PB1d).

In addition, another student perceived the teacher’s role as to provide the students with general guidelines, advice and help them to associate what they learn in the classroom to real life situations for the learning to be effective. Another student raised the issue of monitoring students’ progress as one of the roles he perceived for the teacher. However, as the last part of the quote below shows, students rejected the teacher imposing on them a certain content to be learned or a certain way of learning:

“But I think we cannot do everything alone. We always need somebody to help us and check on our progress. And this is the role of the teacher. I think he should help me learn and check my progress, but not to ask me to do this and that or to ask me to learn in a certain way” (PB1d).

In general, the students perceived the teacher to have a different role in the learning process. In this sense, the students perceived the teacher’s role as being secondary and of a supervisory nature but not necessarily as not important. When asked to justify their views on the teacher’s role, the students associated the teacher having a secondary and guiding role with achieving better learning outcomes, more self-confidence and more opportunities to develop skills for self-management of learning. They explained that when the teacher dominates what and how they learn, they gradually begin to lose interest, miss the opportunity to innovate in what they learn, become less confident in making decisions concerning their learning in real life settings and, as such, “we will end up following the teacher and we will all become like copies of each other” (PD1c).

As for how the students ‘**experienced**’ the teacher’s roles in their language learning context, the analysis showed that they had serious concerns about a number of issues. First of all, most of the students appeared to be less certain about the way the teacher’s roles were defined in the curriculum. However, inside the classroom, one of the common experiences the students had about teachers was that they:

“were only concerned about delivering the content but nobody was interested in finding out *how* we were thinking or learning at school and even here at the university, even when they saw that the students’ level was declining” (PD1d).

In addition, some of the students thought that teachers enacted their role in a wrong way:

“I feel that teachers exercise their roles in some wrong ways. For example, they don’t do enough to break the barrier between them and their students and give the students the freedom to express their opinions and views about learning” (JB1d).

A student in group D also had a similar experience. She said that her teachers were mostly concerned about delivering the content. Besides this, she thought that the teachers should be investigating the students’ ways of thinking and learning, and advise them accordingly.

On several occasions, I noticed that that the students used the term ‘force’ to describe what the teacher usually did in relation to the curriculum and content. Such a language use may very much reflect what they had experienced in their language learning context. The following exchange highlights this issue further:

(PB1d): “In my opinion, personal interest is important, especially when you want someone to learn something at the age of 18. For example at the secondary school, they [students] want to learn, but if you push them, they won’t really like it.”

(RB1d): “So at this stage you view your personal interest in learning as important and needs to be taken into account.”

(PB1d): “Yes. Students cannot be pushed to learn something which is against their personal interest.”

(PB1d): “You wouldn’t accept any forces from outside. You would say ‘I have my own identity.’”

In addition, the students talked about the importance of teachers sharing their teaching plans and strategies with their students.

“Yes, this is important. If the teachers could just share their future plans with the students, then the students would be able to prepare for those classes and go to class ready” (PB1d).

Finally, students did not like the teacher keeps checking their portfolios and homework in the classroom in a regular basis. They viewed such a practice as showing the teacher’s lack of trust in his/her students and at the same time encouraged the students to do the homework only for the teacher’s eye. As such, students reported that this method encouraged them to copy the answers from each other. They wanted the teacher to have more *trust* in them and help them learn rather than merely pass the course. Students’ concerns and suggestions in relation to this issue are reflected through the following two quotes from the conversations I had with group A:

“I also would like to say that when the teacher checks the students’ work every day, they are not helping the students to develop confidence in themselves and so we come to the university with the same thinking: if the teacher does not check the homework then it means I don’t have to do it. So I think the teacher should *trust* their students and check the homework every week, and not every day, or does a random check to see who is working and who isn't” (PA1d).

“They should have the students learn in order to benefit rather than just to pass the course. What happens now is that we study to pass the exams but not to learn and benefit” (PA1d).

To summarise, the analysis revealed that students acknowledged the essential role the teacher had in language learning but they equally perceived this role to be different. In addition, the role they perceived for the teacher was different from the one they actually experienced in the classroom. I now turn to present the analysis of students’ perceptions of the potential constraints and impediments on their language learning.

6.3.4.4. Students’ perceptions of the constraints on language learning

This is the last area of investigation under perceptions. The analysis of this issue should respond to the sub-question (1.d) which addresses the students’ perceptions of the potential **internal and external constraints** on their language learning. This issue was mostly

explored in the fifth RGC (see the investigation grid in chapter four, table 4.3) but, due to the overlapping and interrelated nature of the issues investigated in this study (see diagram 6.1 above), the issue of constraints on language learning in the context under investigation also manifested itself in the students' perceptions of their roles in learning, their perceptions of the teacher's roles (both have been presented in the previous two sections) as well as in their metacognitive knowledge, which I am presenting in section (6.4) below.

The exploration of the students' perceptions of constraints encompassed both: *internal* constraints, which result from factors relating to the learners' awareness, abilities, (meta) cognition, etc., as well as *external* constraints which relate to factors in environment or the context in which learning takes place.

The conversation on this issue aimed at helping the students to reflect on learning and teaching in their context and consider the potential constraints on their learning (be they internal or external) as they perceived them. The discussion also aimed at helping the students to reflect on the ways which such constraints might have impacted their language learning. The underlying assumption was that by helping the students to reflect on their own learning as well as their learning context in the light of such existing impediments, the students, hopefully, would begin to develop better awareness about themselves as learners and the learning environment around them.

The reflective nature of conversations facilitated the articulation of some important constraints in the language learning and teaching context under investigation. The analysis of data from the initial RGCs showed that the students were in fact aware of some important challenges which they had in the early stages of their language learning both at school and university, though they did not use language such as 'constraints' to describe them. Nevertheless, their discourses did encompass both types of constraints: internal and external, with the external being more obvious than the internal. As the conversations progressed in time and scope, they began to realise the difference between the two types, but these inevitably remained overlapping, as we are going to see below.

Amongst the important **internal constraints** the students reported were lack of awareness which some of them had about the nature, goals and requirements of higher education as well as their failure in utilising their capacities in making language learning a more effective and enjoyable experience. A student in group A acknowledged that

“if I came to higher education with the right understanding and perceptions of learning at this level then this would have helped me in my studies at the university” (PA1e).

Another student wrote in his journal: “there is an important point: many students don’t fully understand higher education, which will limit their creativity in the future” (JA1e). Although the analysis in the previous section showed that students had a reasonable awareness of the nature, goals and requirements of higher education, some of them did, however, acknowledged that this was not the case across the board. Some students reported having no clear goal for learning English, which they perceived as an internal constraint. For example, a student in group B reported that:

“Not all students recognise and appreciate the importance of having a goal for learning English. Learning English is one of the factors of success in our studies, so when students don't recognise the importance of English and they don't set this as a goal, then there will have a problem in their learning” (PB1e).

The kind of learning problems the student was talking about in the above quote was also elaborated on by another student in the group as he was talking about the importance that language learners seize any opportunity to use and practice their English, either in and outside the classroom. So for students, having a clear goal for language learning would make them search for whatever opportunity to practice and improve their language skills.

Besides failing to have a clear goal for what they were learning, students also mentioned some personal factors which they also perceived as impediments to successful language learning. These include lack of motivation for and interest in language learning, the preconceptions which some students had about English as being a difficult language to learn and lack of self-confidence, which results in the students being shy and over-worried about making mistakes in the classroom. Interestingly, many of the students (female students in particular) associated shyness or not talking a lot in the classroom with the presence of students of the opposite gender. This was at least true at the beginning of each semester before the students got used to the atmosphere and other students in the classroom. Students perceived these factors as important impediments to successful and effective language learning. However, they perceived the teacher as playing an important role in helping his/her students overcome such difficulties. (This example shows how internal constraints such as

lack of having a clear goal for learning, lack of self-confidence, shyness, etc., overlap with other issues of the research such as teacher's role and responsibility).

Other student-related factors which the students perceived as impediments to their language learning include procrastination, lack of seriousness and lack of proper time-management. In the following quote, a student in group A elaborates on these internal impediments:

“Yes, I think sometimes we play a role in creating some of the constraints when we leave things for the last minute, for the day just before submission and when we study just before the exam. If we could just manage our time in a better way, we would not feel the pressure” (PA1e).

Another important constraint to successful and enjoyable language learning was the pressure some students felt due to bad selection or combination of the courses in a semester. Some of the students chose their courses based on what other students choose rather than on their interest and abilities:

“One of the main constraints I think is the pressure we feel as students. Sometimes we feel that the courses we are taking do not link well with each other. Some of the subjects are too difficult and leave no time for us to study and think about other subjects. Another thing is that some students don't choose the courses based on their abilities but they look at what their friends have taken and they do the same” (PA1e).

Students also mentioned other examples of personal and psychological constraints. These include depression, anxiety, fear of failure, underestimating their real capacities for learning and hopelessness, as some students keep thinking that no matter what they do they would not succeed. Repeated absence from class was also another internal factor mentioned by the student in group A. In addition, group A students felt that many of the students limit themselves to what was offered by the teacher and the textbook and do not fully appreciate the significance of expanding their learning beyond the classroom confines.

Last but not least, although they may appear as external constraints, a student in group B categorised some of the constraints which some students had under ‘negative preconceptions’:

“The second constraint is the negative preconceptions about the roles of the curriculum and the teacher, the way the teacher deals with students, my responsibility in learning and how students pass and fail. And so when I get low marks, I put the blame on the teacher and the curriculum and the way he

has taught me rather than blaming myself for not working hard. I had this thinking since I started school” (PB1e).

Moving on to the students’ perceptions of the **external constraints** on their language learning in their context, the analysis revealed far more of this type of constraints compared to the internal ones. It is worth noting here, though, that students’ perceptions of the external constraints also constitute an integral part of the students’ knowledge of their learning context, which I present in section (6.4.3) below.

Amongst the important external constraints which the students reported were teaching methods, curriculum and, absence of the opportunity for the students to exercise their agency in learning, which was the most recurrent constraints mentioned in almost all of the RGCs. By exercising agency, the students meant being given *some* freedom to take part in planning their own learning, i.e., making choices about what and how they are learning. ‘Some’ freedom here fits well with the students’ perception of autonomy in their context which does not entirely reject or underestimate the role of the teacher and curriculum but regards them as essential components of the learning process and facilitators of their autonomy. The students’ perceptions of learner autonomy in their context will be discussed further and in more details in chapter seven (see section 7.5).

Some of the internal constraints which I have presented above were also perceived by the students as external factors resulting from limitations of either the teaching methods or curriculum in general. For example, lack of awareness which some of the students had about the nature, goals and requirements of higher education were perceived by some of the students as also being an external constraint caused by the higher education institutions which, according to the students, have long failed to provide sufficient orientation to the students on these important issues:

“To be honest, I’m not fully aware of my roles. Nobody has ever told me about this. Nobody told me that this is your role and you are expected to do this and that, so the picture is not clear to me yet. All that I know is that I have to study and get a degree in order to find a job!” (PA1e).

Other students in the same group also regretted the first impression they had about the nature of studies and life at university. They considered their lack of knowledge and awareness about these areas as part of the challenges they had when they entered university. They also tend to put the blame on higher education institutions for not providing such essential information:

“I also think that there is a problem in preparing students for the university level. In the past, students used to tell us that you have to work hard as this is your final year before you go to university. And this gave us the impression that this was the last year for us to study and work hard and that when we get to university, we will relax. And now because of this, we see first year students are shocked by the reality. So I think students need to be made aware of the nature of study at the university and its requirement while they are still at the secondary school” (PA1e).

Amongst the important impediments to effective learning as perceived by the students was their inability to utilise their capacity for choice due to the already set curriculum and teaching methods in addition to some course and university regulations:

“There will be some problems because the curriculum is ready [already set]...For example, if I have some ideas and I want to apply them in the class, because I have tried them in my own independent learning and I liked them, they worked for me, that may not be possible. So one problem is the curriculum which has already been prepared and also the teacher may not like my ideas, and also the administration, because there are rules which have been set for those courses” (PB1e).

So the students felt that the set curriculum and course objectives allowed no room for them to exercise any kind of control over their learning: “because the curriculum has already been set and the teachers have their own objectives, and we cannot change them” (PB1e). In the same vein, a student in group C wrote in her journal that:

“The English curriculum at the university requires the learner to learn what is included in books and what the teacher says, so I don’t see anything which may suggest taking students’ opinions about what he learns” (JC1e).

Another important constraint the students stressed was that teaching always had presidency over learning. The students felt that too much effort was made by the teachers to complete the ‘set’ syllabus while little attention was paid to finding out how the students learned or what challenges they had in learning.

The development of the students’ capacities for independent learning and research was also amongst the areas where little attention was paid to. Students reported that allowing students to research and explore topics beyond the confines of the course books could help them to widen their horizons and have greater motivation for learning:

“So I think this is higher education; it's about finding your own way of finding information using more resources, not only what is given in the classroom. I think it depends on the university and its way of teaching. For example, compare this university to other universities in the West or in Japan you find that they ask the students to search for information more than they do here. We notice that they have more motivation to do research and more practical work outside [the classroom] but here we only depend on the books” (PD1b).

Some of the students also perceived the teacher as an important constraint to learning. Students in group A described some of their teachers as lacking important knowledge about the students they were teaching such as the students' learning needs and habits:

“One of the constraints is the teacher because we have teachers from different backgrounds. We sometimes have good teachers, but not always. They don't have a complete and clear picture of the students and their needs and some of them find it difficult to deliver information to the students” (PA1e).

Some of the university regulations were also perceived by the students as an important constraint on their learning. Some of these regulations and rules were perceived as being against the students:

“Some of the regulations are not suitable for us as students. When you come from home full of motivation and energy and you are told about these regulations and rules which may be against you, you will not learn in a good way” (PA1e).

When asked about how such regulations and rules impact their learning, they said that they needed a voice and room for making choices:

“Nobody asks us for our opinion regarding the curriculum. Everything is imposed on us. We have no choice or options. They should ask us what we think, in the same way you are doing now” (PA1e).

The last sentence in the quote above is an example of the students' appreciation of the importance of the present study and the voice-giving approach it employed. This was expressed by the students in all of the research groups. I will say more about this in chapter seven (see section 7.4.4)

So generally speaking, there was a common feeling among the students that neither the curriculum nor the teachers explicitly encouraged or developed agency in the students. The

focus was predominantly on completing the set syllabus with little or no attention paid to the students' needs and interests in what or how they were learning.

Moving on to the **exam and assessment methods** as examples of other types of constraints on language learning, the students perceived certain aspects of the assessment method at the university as an obstacle on their learning and intellectual development. Students felt that the current testing and assessment method emphasised getting high marks in tests and passing language courses over the actual linguistic or intellectual benefits the students could have gained from those courses:

“After studying for two or three months, you have a test. And all the effort is made in order to get a good grade in that test. This doesn't give us the opportunity to think or open new horizons because the goal is just to get marks, the goal is just to pass the test- this is the goal” (PB1e).

Students in group B also did not like the teacher's dominance over learning goals and testing methods and considered this as a problem. For instance, the way most of the courses were structured did not allow the students who were not comfortable with making presentations to have a different assessment method such as group discussions and so they had to “follow what the teacher says, and this is a problem” (PB1e). This was a problem, according to the students, because in much of the cases, there was a gap between the teachers' planning and students' expectations. While they acknowledged the need for clear course objectives, they also expected to have a greater involvement in planning their own learning. Students thought that not all of their course objectives could be achieved in reality.

On several occasions, the students talked about the **absence of excitement** in their language learning. Excitement was considered by the students as an important factor of success in language learning. Furthermore, they viewed excitement as being conditioned by the kind of teachers as well as the variety of topics and learning tasks they were having:

(RC1e): “So would you say these elements of excitement are available in your language courses here at the university?”

(PC1e): “No, they are not there.”

(PC1e): “It all depends on the teacher.”

(PC1e): “It can sometimes happen if the students are competing with each other in the classroom.”

(RC1e): “Do teachers usually create an environment of excitement and engagement in the classroom?”

(PC1e): “Not really. We repeat the same skills and do the same exercises and activities which we did before. The same routine.”

Group C students also talked about the absence of space for creativity inside the classroom. The kind and variety of topics which the students had to read and write about in the class were not interesting. Incorporating social media such as Facebook and field trips into the language courses were perceived as useful and more appealing activities.

Away from the classroom environment, the students also mentioned other types of external constraints. These include being away from family, living off-campus (for the boys), and wasting time finding transport to and from university. The male students lived in rented apartments outside university campus and had to commute daily to the university using private transport which was not always available, especially at rush hours. They also talked about the considerable amount of time which was wasted on transport, going out for food and managing their own personal lives away from their families, which had a direct impact on their studies. However, the female students also talked about having their own kinds of constraints. These were mainly to do with their accommodation. Unlike the male students, the female students stayed in student hostels on the university campus in shared rooms which, for most of them, were not comfortable for studying:

“We are two girls in the room and our timetables are not the same so in this situation we don't feel comfortable when we want to study. For example, I like to read aloud when I study but my roommate feels uncomfortable about this so one of us has to leave the room” (PD1e).

Finally, I was keen to find out if the students perceived culture and the way people in their context view education as a potential constraint on their learning. The students maintained that looking at the teacher as the main source of knowledge for students was still a dominant culture in some areas.

6.3.5. Summary

This section of the analysis on students' perceptions of their language learning began with exploring students' perceptions and experiences of language learning at school which was seen as a useful step leading to the exploration of their perceptions and experiences of language learning in higher education. Most of the students reported that they did not learn a

lot then. Students described themselves at the early stages of their schooling as lacking interest and the necessary skills for effective language learning. They related their lack of effective learning to some personal factors (internal constraints) but mostly to other more influential external factors such as fixed and weak curriculum and poor teaching methods and exam system. Generally speaking, boredom and underachievement can be said to describe the students' first stage of schooling.

However, they began to realise the importance and requirements of the stage they were in and the importance of English for their current and future learning and, therefore, began to pay more attention to it. It was also the stage when their awareness about themselves as learners and their learning began to develop as well as their sense of role in and responsibility for learning began to take shape. They reported taking important measures in this direction including the development and employment of their capacity for independent as well as interdependent language learning. This kind of learning emphasises the social aspect of learning which involves learning from and with others, be they their teachers, family members or other members of their social surrounding.

The analysis also offered an important account of the students' perceptions of the nature and requirements of higher education. Students viewed the use of English only in the classroom and the opportunity to fix their own lecture timetable amongst the important differences between learning at school and university. Other students also considered the different teaching methods used by teachers at the university compared to those used by teachers at school as another dimension of the difference between the two levels of education. They also associated curriculum with the course books and perceived the goal of higher education as to help them to develop better and stronger personalities and prepare them for the labour market. Furthermore, students perceived viewed learning in higher education as not only restricted to the classroom and textbooks but it also required them to search for additional resources outside the classroom. Their own role in learning also seemed to come into play as the investigation progressed.

However, the investigation revealed that the above were examples of how students *perceived* higher education. It did not necessarily reflect how they actually experienced it their learning and teaching context; it was rather what they thought higher education 'should' be like.

As for the students' perceptions of their role in and responsibility for language learning in and outside the classroom, they acknowledged that they were having a more active role in and greater responsibility for their learning at university compared to the situation at school.

However, as the reflective conversations progressed in scope and depth and began to focus on their actual learning *experiences*, students began to exhibit a more reflective and considered perception of their roles in and responsibility for learning. They acknowledged that they are not actually enjoying the role they should be having in higher education. They also exhibited awareness about and capacity to exercise control over what (content) and how (method) they should be learning. They believed that in higher education, students should find their own preferred way of learning, but in reality, they did not enjoy the freedom of selecting materials or choosing how they could learn. Finally, they appeared to associate having a greater role in and control over their own learning with effective learning.

As for students' perceptions of the teacher's role in and responsibility for language learning, despite the students' demands for having a greater role in what and how they learn, they did not disregard completely the teacher's role in language learning. They perceived the teacher in higher education as having a *different*, but not a greater, role compared to the type of role they had experienced at school. They perceived him/her as a guide, consultant and resource person. In fact, some of the students admitted that having a total freedom in learning was an unrealistic goal and suggested that students' responsibility for learning was best introduced gradually. Nevertheless, the way students 'experienced' the teacher's role in their language learning context was a different story. Most of the students were not actually certain about how the teacher's roles were defined in the curriculum. Students also complained that teachers were in control of the overall course planning, the selection and presentation of materials, teaching and assessment methods, etc.

The analysis in this section also revealed some important internal and external constraints on language learning from the students' perspectives. Knowledge on these constraints is indeed useful due to the direct impact they might have on students' learning. Examples of the major internal impediments on students' learning include the students' lack of awareness of the nature, goals and requirements of learning in higher education, their carelessness and lack of self-confidence, their over-dependence on the teacher and curriculum, while examples of the external constraints include the teacher's over-dominance and control of learning, rigid curriculum, absence of opportunities for student choices and difficult living conditions, especially for the off-campus students. However, the categorisation or separation of the constraints as being internal and external (or contextual) was intended only for the purpose of exploring them as well as helping the students to develop better awareness of such constraints

and their potential influence on their learning; otherwise they were more complex than can simply be categorised into two groups.

In the following section, I will present the analysis on the second research question which addresses students' metacognitive knowledge and its subcategories.

End of volume I