

Making steps on their own : Teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy

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Background



- ▶ Initial research conducted in Oman by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) at Sultan Qaboos University
- ▶ In October 2013, Dr Roger Barnard presented an outline of research he intended to conduct on the same theme with teachers in Asian universities
- ▶ He suggested a similar project be carried out in the Centre for Languages, Waikato Institute of Technology

Definitions of learner autonomy

Holec, H. (1981)

- ▶ In the context of learning languages autonomy means “ the ability to take charge of one’s own learning p.3.”
- ▶ This ability is not inborn but must be acquired by natural means or by formal learning
- ▶ It is an ability and not a type of conduct or behaviour. To say of a learner that he is autonomous is to say that he/ she is **capable of taking charge of his/ her own learning.**

Holec suggested that this means:

- ▶ Determining the objectives
- ▶ Defining the context and progressions
- ▶ Selecting methods and techniques to be used
- ▶ Monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly
- ▶ Evaluating what has been acquired



Benson (2001)

"... the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's own learning p.47."

It is a multidimensional construct. Although we may be able to identify and list behaviours that demonstrate control over learning and hypothesise certain relationships among them, we have little evidence to suggest that autonomy consists of any particular combination of these behaviours.



Little (1991)

- ▶ It appears that autonomy can be recognised in a variety of forms.

“It is true of course that we recognise autonomous learners by their behaviours, but that can take numerous different forms depending on their age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be, and so on. Autonomy in other words can manifest itself in many different ways p.4.”

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- ▶ Learner autonomy is characterised by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. **This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person.**

(Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander and Trebbi1990)



The pedagogy of autonomy (Smith 2003)

- ▶ **weak version**
 - ▶ autonomy is **a capacity which students currently lack** (and so need training towards). The underlying assumptions tend to be that students are deficient in autonomy,... but that autonomy is nevertheless a goal worth pursuing with them...
 - ▶ **strong version**
 - ▶ students are already autonomous, and **already capable of exercising this capacity**
 - ▶ pp. (Smith 2003)pp 130-1."
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Benson (2012)

When asked –“ but how do we do it here?”

“ the theory of autonomy may best serve as a **conceptual tool - kit** to be used at various levels of educational decision-making.

- ▶ Encouraging student preparation
- ▶ Drawing on out-of-class experience
- ▶ Using ‘authentic’ materials and ‘real’ language
- ▶ Independent inquiry. Asking students to find out things for themselves

...we may ask whether our choices and decision as teachers help students develop the **ability, desire and freedom** to control areas of their learning that are important to them p.24. ”



Research questions

- ▶ 1. What does 'learner autonomy' mean to English language teachers at the CfL?
- ▶ 2. To what extent, according to the teachers, does learner autonomy contribute to L2 learning?
- ▶ 3. Do teachers feel that it is desirable and feasible to promote learner autonomy?
- ▶ 4. To what extent do teachers feel their learners are autonomous?
- ▶ 5. To what extent do teachers state that they actually promote learner autonomy?
- ▶ 6. Are the findings in relation to students from Limited Literacy Backgrounds similar to the findings in relation to the rest of the cohort at the CfL? What is the significance of these similarities or differences in relation to promoting Learner Autonomy with this group of learners?

The survey

- ▶ 37 rater-based items
- ▶ 10 questions on the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy
- ▶ Some open ended questions which asked for teachers written comments
- ▶ 10x 20 minute interviews with teachers who indicated their interest in being interviewed.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>				



Analysis

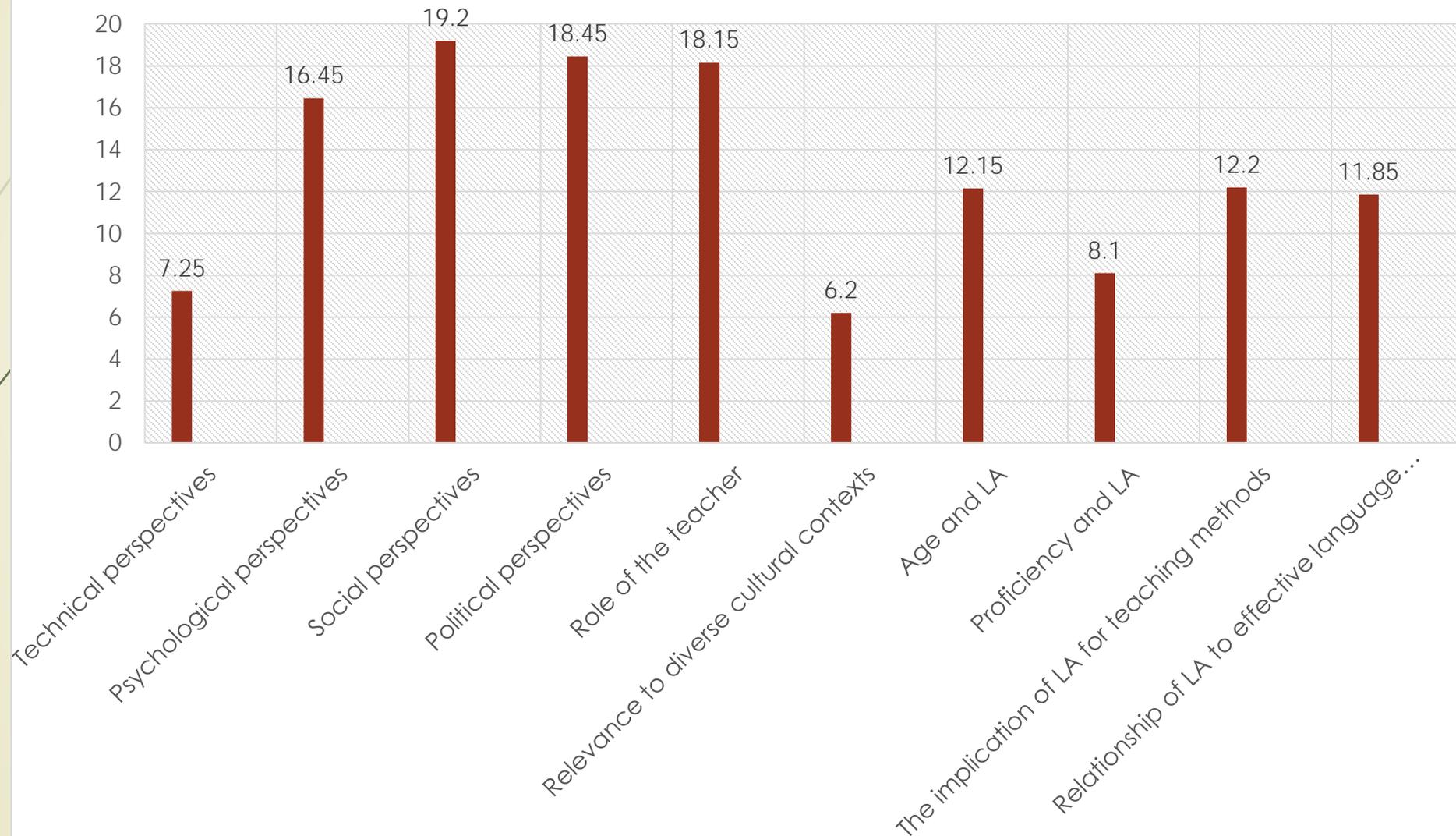
Statistical analysis

- ▶ Data from 37 question survey and desirability and feasibility were entered into SPSS 22 tool
- ▶ Questions about learners and teachers were manually analysed

Qualitative data

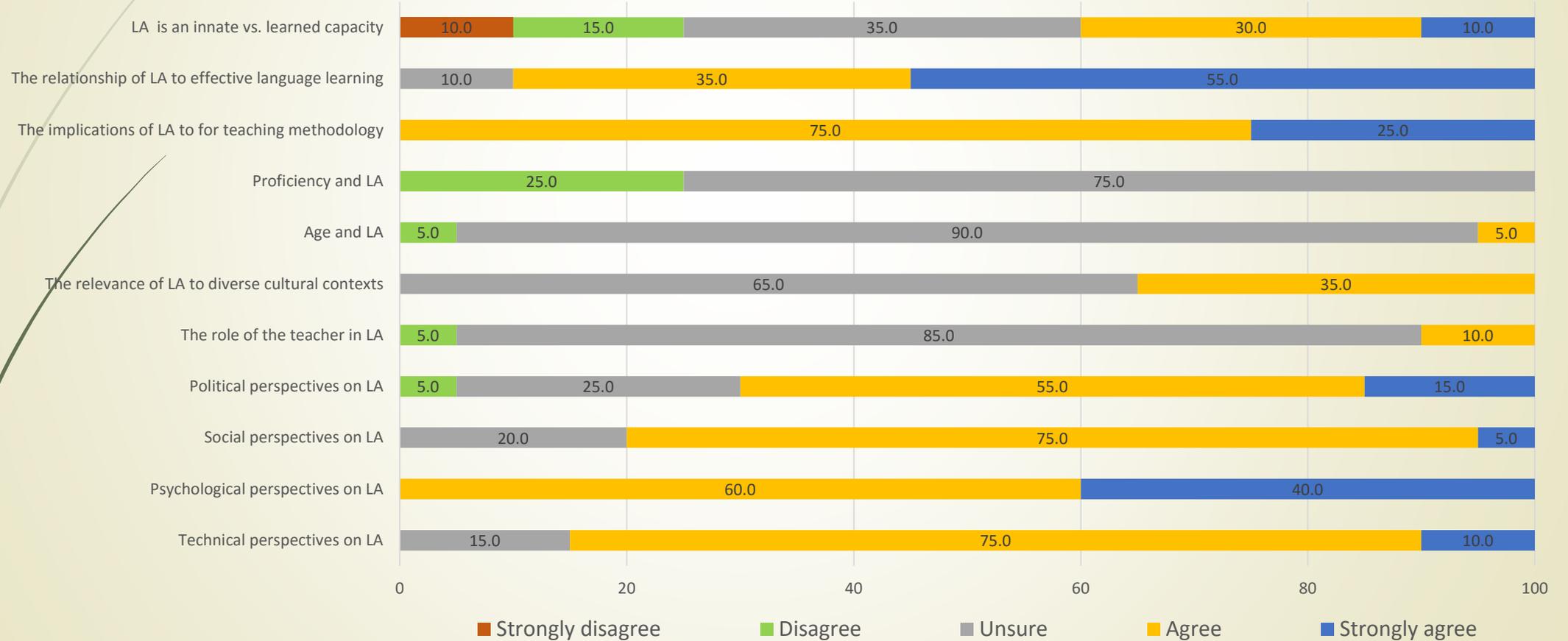
- ▶ Interviews were transcribed using Dragon
- ▶ Categories and themes emerged from the data

English language teachers' beliefs at Wintec about learner autonomy Mean score



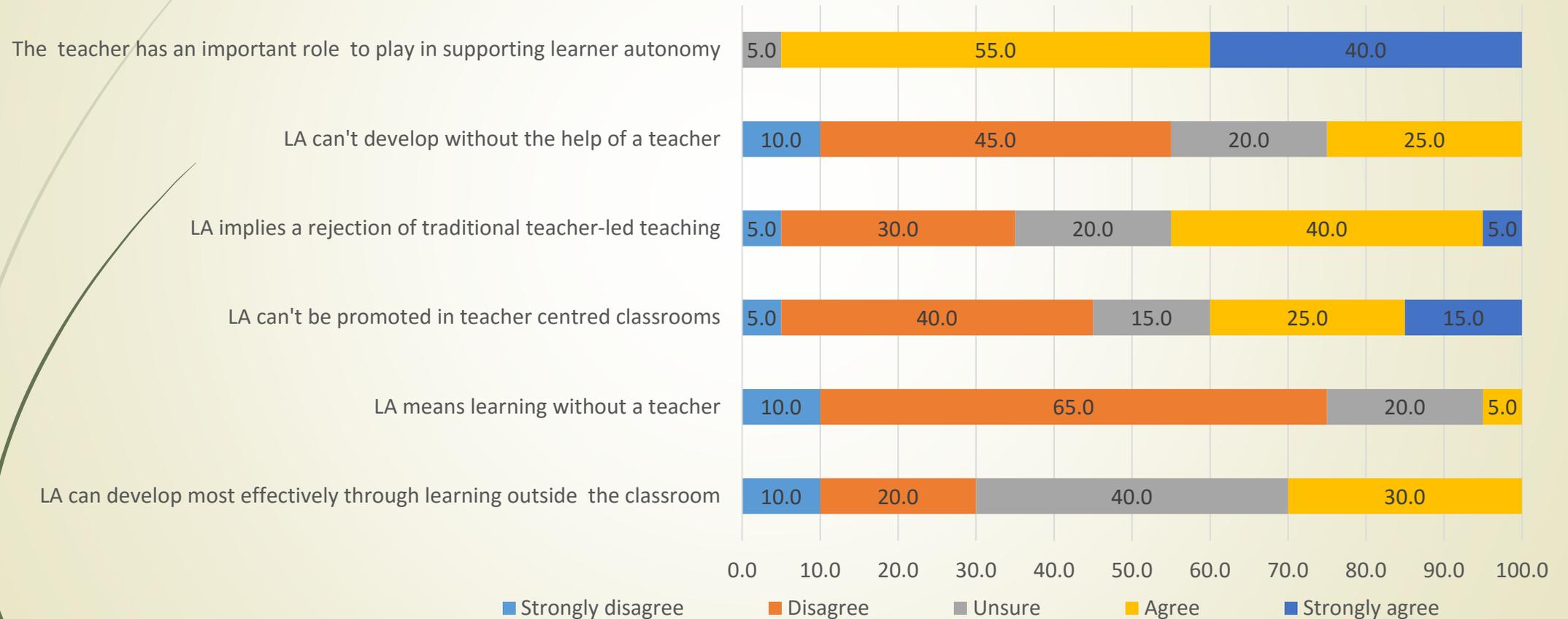
Ratings from teachers

Teachers' Perspectives on Learner Autonomy



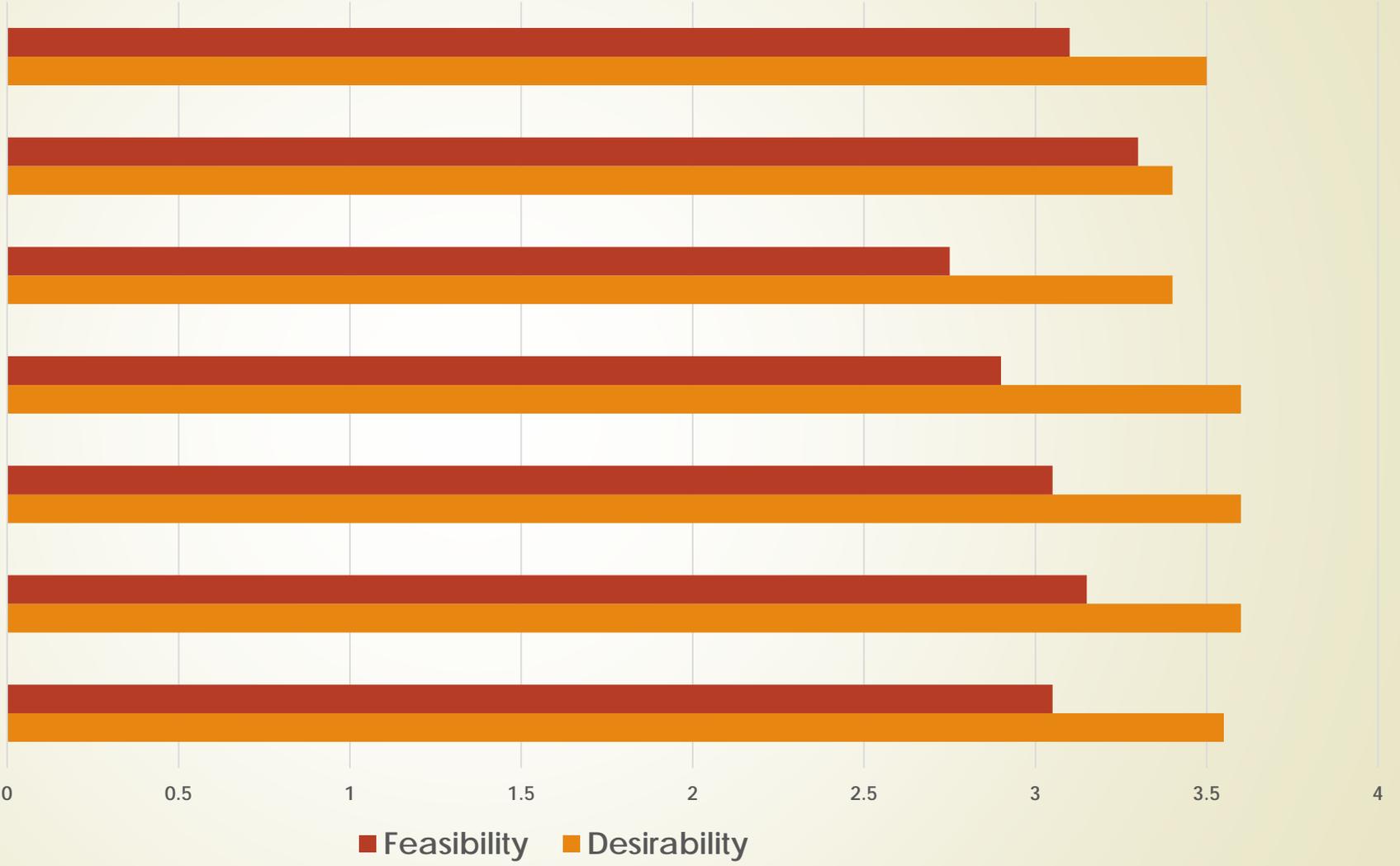
More investigation into the role of the teacher

The role of the teacher in learner autonomy



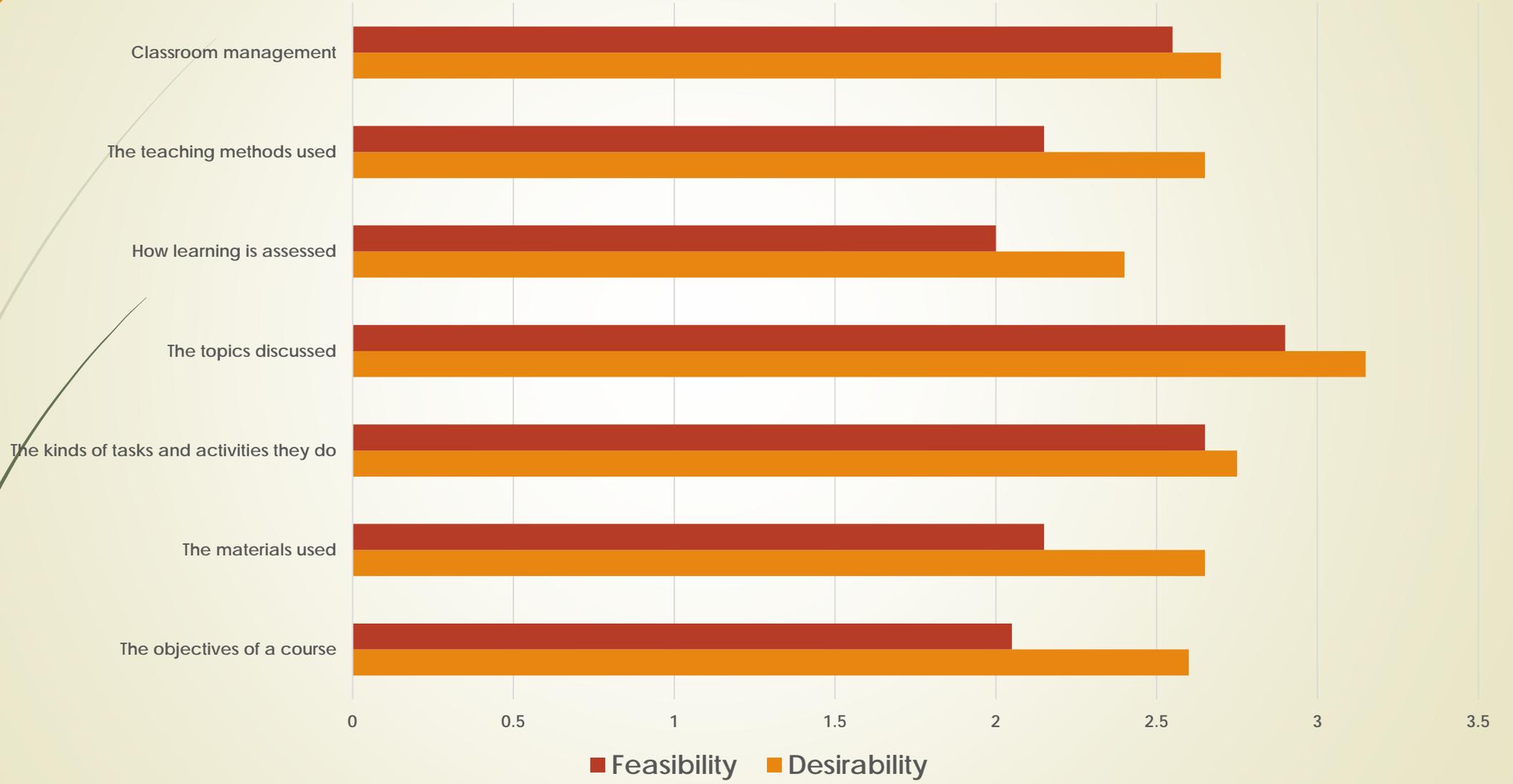
Learners have the ability to

- Learn independently
- Learn cooperatively
- Evaluate their own learning
- Monitor their progress
- Identify their own weaknesses
- Identify their own strengths
- Identify their own needs



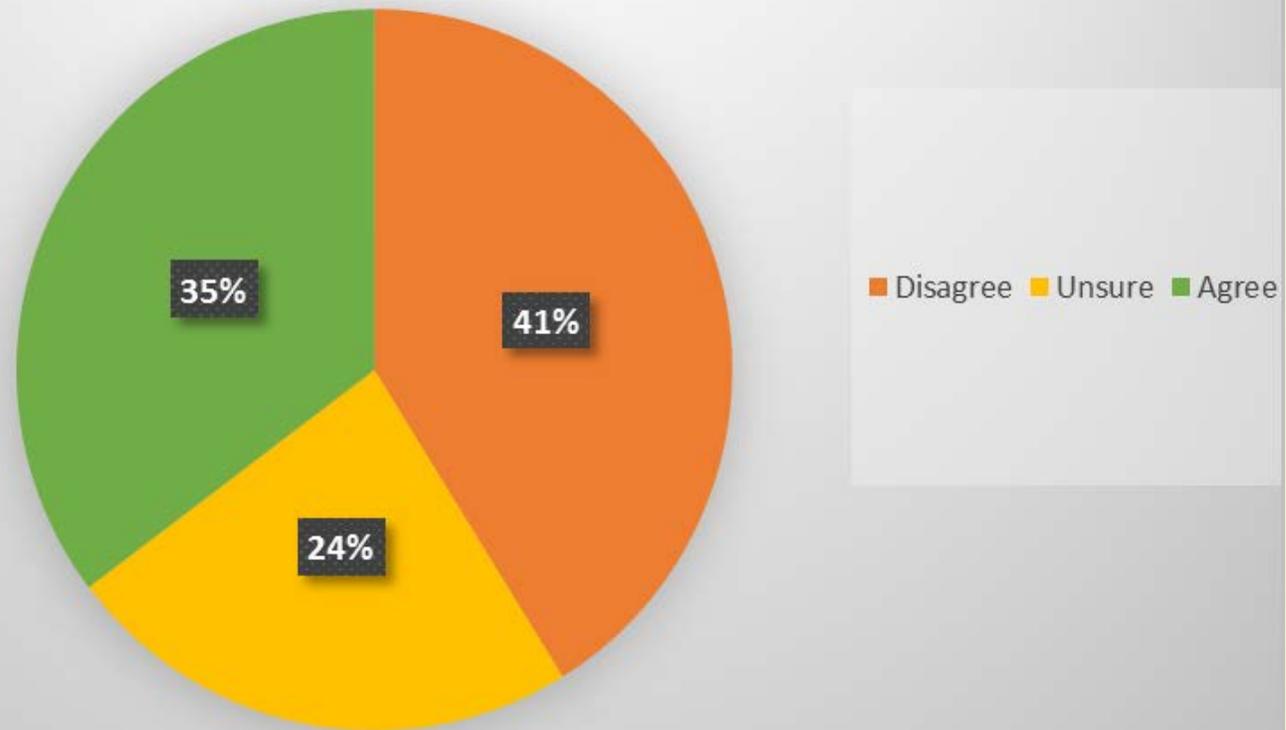


Learners are involved in decisions about

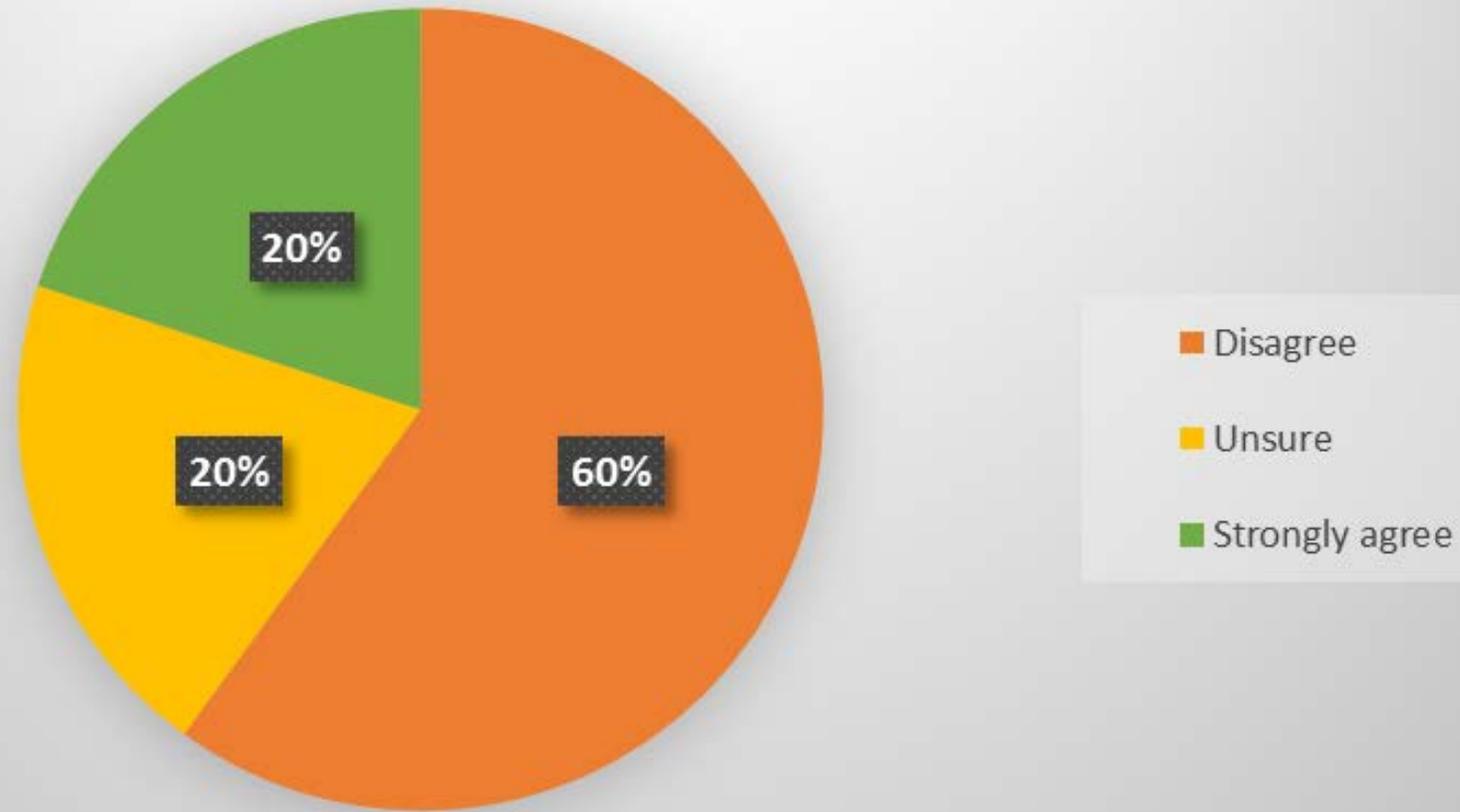


Results from survey of CfL teachers

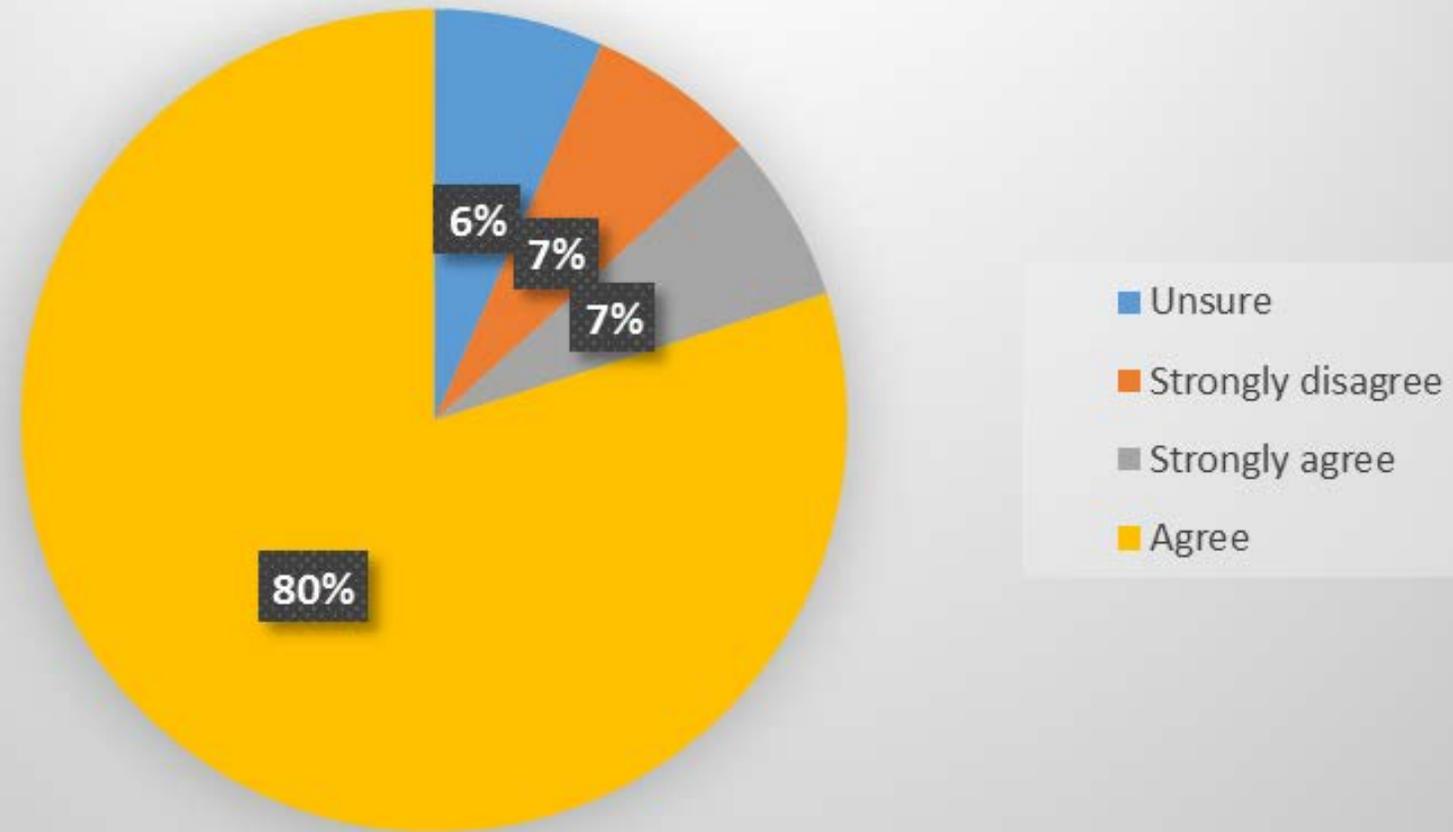
The students I teach most often have a fair degree of learner autonomy.



The learners that I teach with limited literacy have a strong degree of autonomy



In teaching English, I give my students opportunities to develop learner autonomy.

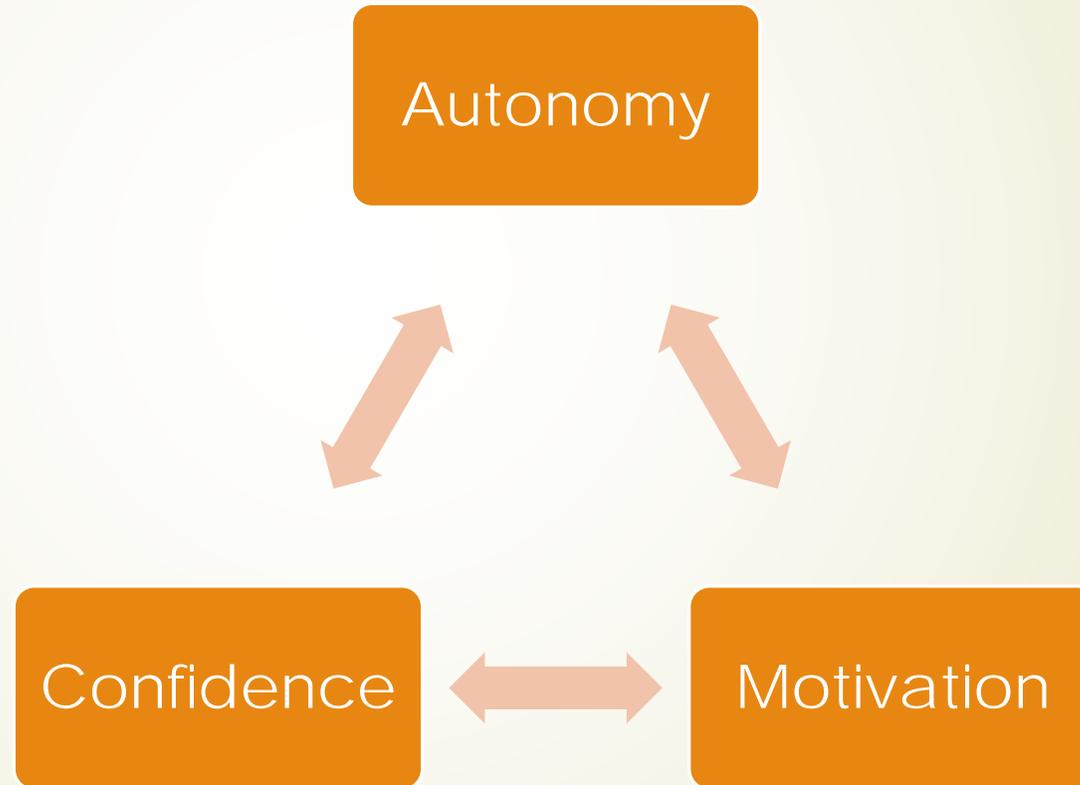




Themes: Motivation and confidence

- ▶ Teachers feel that some students seem to naturally **have motivation and confidence** but it also seems that teachers think that they have a role in promoting learner motivation in their classroom practices – planning, classroom management, choice of materials and interaction techniques.

Interrelationship between confidence, motivation and learner autonomy





*“Learners that have higher levels of autonomy tend to have a higher level of **motivation**. When they are motivated they are more likely to take things in a faster way. When they are motivated this affects them emotionally. They are **ready to take in whatever is available to them**, and when the motivation is there, they kind of **speed up their learning process**”*



*"I think those learners that are **motivated**, that are showing initiative, that are a bit more **confident** are going to succeed better in language learning. They are making steps on their own."*

*"A **motivated** student or someone **has a focus or a reason** for why they're learning. Having an interest in what they are learning I think plays a big part."*

*"To me Learner Autonomy is a student being **confident** enough and capable of seeking information that is necessary to their success in whatever they are studying."*



Evidence of self-motivation

*"I think an autonomous learner has **a clear sense of direction**, they've got **an end goal**, and they've got a clear direction about **what they are doing and why they are doing it**, and how it relates to their studies."*



The role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy

- ▶ Most teachers thought that the teacher had a role in promoting learner autonomy

They thought that:

- ▶ At the lower levels **scaffolding** plays an important role.
- ▶ As students gained greater competency they encouraged autonomy by asking students to **work collaboratively** on tasks, but **being available** if needed.
- ▶ At the higher levels teachers were considering **how to best allow students to be more in charge of their learning** or become **more autonomous**.



*"I think it's a valid point that as teachers **we are able to facilitate and set ground work**....the really successful learners to me are the ones who take that information and **run with it independently** outside of the classroom and it may be that they form groups themselves"*





Progression to greater autonomy

*“within those parameters set once again by their teacher, then they are on their own in that group work task, and they need to negotiate their own way through the task in the group with the other students, and if it’s a new task there’s a **lot more security and safety** in the group, they can pool their resources. They can work out what’s required together and **there is a natural progression in language teaching from group work to pair work to individual work**”*



The process of becoming autonomous is a gradual one

"...it's automatically **taught by teachers as they move up through the levels**, it's very hard for a teacher to articulate how this happens. It's definitely taught to them as they go."

" with the low-literacy students its **working in pairs** means where they have to move out of their comfort zone a little bit, **and then developing from pairs into group work.**



Promoting learner autonomy and engagement involves a lot of thought and preparation

“I found that teacher-centred teaching is much easier actually, and **promoting learning autonomy and engagement takes quite a lot of preparation.** Because good teaching to me is the construction and preparation of activities that learners find engaging, that take off and have a momentum of their own.



Learner autonomy seems to develop as learners adapt to the New Zealand style of education

“ As they get more and more used to the New Zealand style of education and the classroom style of education style of education, they become more comfortable with that and with their classmates.

That makes them more willing to take chances and put themselves out there to become more autonomous.



Learners with limited literacy are more or less autonomous?

- ▶ Divergent opinions
- ▶ Learners may be unable to be autonomous especially at beginner level as they need so much teacher input.

“Especially teaching in a lower level literacy class, **everything is coming from me and I am directing every single activity that they do**, they haven’t any opportunity to develop their own autonomy within that class, and they don’t have to think for themselves, so I think in the classroom where the teaching is teacher-centred then you are not going to have autonomous learners.”

A very few teachers thought that there was not necessarily a link between learner autonomy and competency

“It would be **patronising to assume that beginners are somehow less autonomous.** I don't think it's a continuum that produces an autonomous learner at the end of the diploma course. I think learner autonomy begins at the beginning.”

“Many limited-literacy learners are former refugees. To me this history suggests **survival and struggle, and a high degree of autonomy.**”



The education / societal structure which values literacy highly places demands on limited literacy students which often come from oral traditions

- ▶ “Although they have highly developed aural skills, **their ability to study autonomously is severely curtailed in an education system like ours.** Most of our assessments are predicated on the ability to read and write. They are right back to being a beginner language learner. **That tool box which a student starts to develop - theirs is empty and they need to start from the beginning.** So they can't be autonomous until they have the tools to do it.”
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Real world communication and learner autonomy

“I think one of the great **motivating things** for students is to be able to **use the language in a way that genuinely communicates with other people**, and they feel that **what they say has a real effect on the world around them**. So we need to take the **use of language** beyond the classroom activities **to the more authentic situations** where students can sense that even if their vocabulary is yes or no, **it has an effect on the world around them**.



Some thought that learner autonomy was tied to learners' personalities rather than anything to do with teacher input

"...it's **just people and their personalities** and sometimes you get it group of students that just love to be adventurous and then you'll get a group that just sit there and want to be lead, so you can't give them autonomy, because they don't want to do it, so it's a case-by-case situation but I think that **everyone has the opportunity to be autonomous.**"



Findings

Teachers thought that there was a strong correlation between **confident, active** and **motivated learners** and their level of autonomy

These behaviours may be noticed as they:

- ▶ search out information independently
- ▶ ask questions
- ▶ demonstrate initiative
- ▶ have clear goals and direction
- ▶ make the most of opportunities



► Teachers thought that **learner autonomy can be promoted** and that it seems to **develop over time** while students are at the Centre for Languages.

► **Strategies use to foster autonomy:**

Creating a **supportive environment**

Use of **scaffolding** to enable task fulfilment, careful staging

Use of a variety of **interactional strategies** to promote confidence and competence

Use of **authentic** and **relevant** materials



There were divergent opinions about limited literacy learners' degrees of autonomy

- ▶ Most teachers thought they had a very active role to play in scaffolding their learning
- ▶ They thought that these students may not be able to be autonomous as others due to their limited literacy
- ▶ A small group felt that they were quite autonomous or that there were too many variables to make an informed judgement



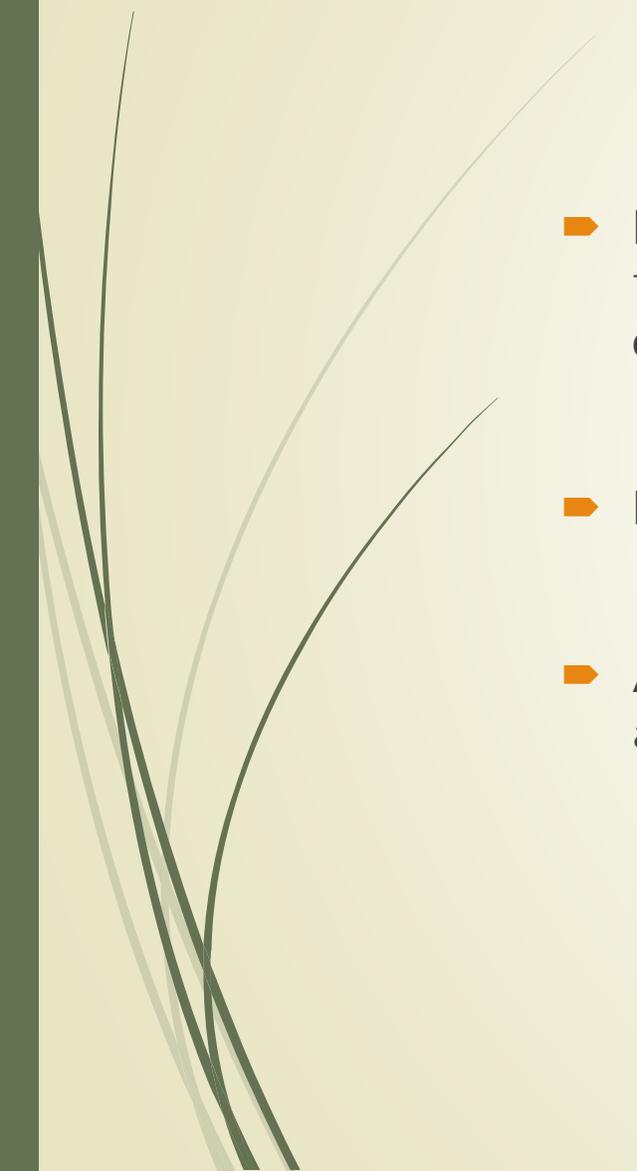
Conclusion

- ▶ Teachers thought that generally motivated and confident learners in their classes were fairly autonomous learners
- ▶ They thought that teachers had a role to play in developing their learners autonomy
- ▶ They thought that in general learner autonomy developed over time
- ▶ They thought that in general limited literacy learners in the cohort were not very autonomous learners

- ▶ Teachers views of their learners at the CfL fall somewhere on the continuum between weak and strong versions of the pedagogy of their learners in that many think that learners may need some assistance to become more autonomous, and others feel that particularly their more advanced learners are demonstrating autonomous learning habits



Further questions arising from this study

- ▶ How can we integrate more effective motivational strategies into our teaching practice keeping in mind the relationship between **motivation**, **confidence** and **autonomy**?
 - ▶ How do teachers continue to **promote autonomy** across the cohort?
 - ▶ Are there some fresh strategies we can further develop to **build confidence** and **foster autonomy** among **learners with limited literacy**?
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References



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- ▶ Thanks very much for your interest.
 - ▶ Questions?