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**MA DIPLOMAMUNKA**  
**MA THESIS**

Somody Júlia  
Anglisztika MA  
(Alkalmazott  
nyelvészet  
specializáció)

2022

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM  
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

# MA DIPLOMAMUNKA

## MA THESIS

*Középiskolai angol nyelvtanárok nézetei a nyelvtanulási  
autonómiáról Magyarországon*

*Secondary School English Teachers' Views and Practices of  
Learner Autonomy in the Hungarian Context*

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Somody Júlia  
Anglisztika MA  
(Alkalmazott nyelvészet  
specializáció)

2022

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„... A szakdolgozathoz csatolni kell egy nyilatkozatot arról, hogy a munka a hallgató saját szellemi terméke...”

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, learner autonomy (LA) has become an important area in both research and education. Despite this growing interest, only a few studies have been investigating teachers' views on the subject. In Hungary, there were some attempts to raise awareness of the significance of LA, but little progress has been made in practice as language education remains mostly teacher-centred and exam-oriented (Asztalos et al., 2020; Csizér & Öveges, 2020). The aim of the present study is to investigate the situation of LA in the country through secondary school English teachers' beliefs. This thesis presents the analysis of 32 teacher interviews. Qualitative thematic analysis has been used to uncover recurring themes across the data set. The results of the study show that teachers had differing views concerning all three researched aspects of LA (conceptualisation, teachers' role, teachers' practices), but the participants were generally positively disposed towards its desirability and facilitation. The pedagogical implications of the findings are also discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** learner autonomy, teachers' beliefs, secondary school English teachers, Hungary, thematic analysis, interview

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest worldwide in language learner autonomy in both research and education (Asztalos et al., 2020; Benson 2007, 2009). This is indicated by the increasing number of publications and events such as international conferences held related to the topic (Benson, 2007; Benson & Voller, 2014, Everhard, 2016). The justification for autonomy's increased significance in applied linguistics research is substantial. In their study on teachers' perception of learner autonomy, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) argued that the positive influence of promoting autonomy in language education had been already established in previous research. It has been proven that it makes learning more effective as well as of a higher quality, while it also increases learners' capability of making choices concerning their own learning process (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a, 2012b; Szócs, 2017, 2018).

There is also a widely accepted agreement that incorporating learner autonomy into language education is not only advantageous to students and teachers but also a necessity. Its importance has been highlighted several times (Benson & Voller, 2014). As it is not plausible for teachers to transfer all knowledge that students need in order to be proficient language users, learners also need to make an effort outside the language learning classroom. Therefore, teachers should provide students certain strategies that they can use in all learning contexts and help them become autonomous learners (Nunan, 1988). Illés (2012) also took the social context of English language use into consideration and its role as a lingua franca and argued that communicating in English requires flexibility and autonomy on behalf of language users to be able to negotiate meaning in an international context. She suggested that the role of language education is, therefore, to prepare learners to become autonomous and independent language users who can successfully use the language to communicate in today's globalised world.



Even though the research conducted on learner autonomy has been extensive and many aspects of the concept has been thoroughly investigated, the importance of teachers' roles and beliefs have been overlooked for a long period of time (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). Since the first major investigation on the topic in 1999 (see Camilleri, 1999), only a handful of studies have been conducted on the subject resulting in limited understanding of the issue at hand (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). Furthermore, the majority of research have been carried out using questionnaires and classroom observations, which although contributed crucial information to the body of literature, were lacking in terms of providing a deeper insight into teachers' views and their perception of their roles as facilitators of learner autonomy in the classroom (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

The Hungarian context is no exception. Even though researchers have been more and more invested in this field of inquiry, the need for conducting and analysing teacher interviews to shed light on the situation of learner autonomy in the country is prevalent. The present study aims to fill this gap. In my thesis, I investigate Hungarian secondary school English teachers' views on learner autonomy, including their own definition and characterisation of the concept, as well as their perceived roles in fostering learner autonomy in their students. Their reported practices to facilitate learner autonomy in a classroom context are also examined.

In this thesis, first, a review of the literature will be presented to provide an extensive summary of the main issues in the field, such as the controversy surrounding the definition of learner autonomy and the multitude of perspectives from which the concept has been discussed. Research on teachers' beliefs in general and particularly on learner autonomy will be presented in both the global and the Hungarian context. In the following sections, the details of the present study will be specified, starting with the methods used for this

investigation, followed by the results and their discussion, and ending with a section that concludes the current research.

## **2. Literature review**

According to Benson's (2011) investigation, the scientific notion of autonomy originated in the 18th century, and it has been an integral part of historical, philosophical, and political terminology ever since. The expression was only adopted into educational contexts in the 1960s and became a branch of language education research in the 1970s (Benson, 2009; Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016). The first notable investigation on the subject was part of the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project led by Holec, who provided the most commonly cited definition of learner autonomy in his seminal report (Holec, 1981; for the discussion on learner autonomy definitions see section 2. 1.). The project aimed at documenting noticeable changes in language education which was increasingly orienting towards a more learner centred approach (Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016). As Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014) put it, "the emergence of this concept [learner autonomy] has been part of a wide range of ideas in education that have promoted more learner centred instruction, when learners are given more choices and are allowed to make their own decisions" (p. 2051). In the 1990s, the application of learner autonomy in classroom contexts sparked another peak of interest amongst researchers, which resulted in an increasing amount of publications on the topic with diverse ideas and approaches (Benson, 2007).

A review of the literature is needed to understand the intricate web of learner autonomy research and certain issues pertaining to the field of study. First, the problematic nature of the definition will be put under scrutiny as there have been various approaches proposed and considerable debate around the characterisation of the concept. Teachers' roles in the facilitation of learner autonomy will also be discussed alongside with some of the specific

practices that were found to be useful in an autonomy supporting language classroom. Then, the importance of investigating teachers' beliefs will be considered with paying special attention to its practical implications. The review of literature will be continued with examining teachers' beliefs on learner autonomy, and the research conducted in the field. Finally, the Hungarian context and the most prominent studies carried out in the country will be presented and detailed.

## **2.1. Defining learner autonomy**

Defining the concept of learner autonomy has been the subject of heated debates ever since it was first incorporated into language education research (Benson, 2009). There are several volumes dedicated to the theoretical discussion of the notion that try to assign a suitable model, characterisation, or definition to the concept (Benson, 1996, 2009; Benson & Voller, 2014; Everhard, 2016; Holec, 1981; Illés, 2012; Little, 1991). Despite its significant role in language education and the attention that the topic has received, finding one generally accepted and agreed upon definition still presents a challenge to researchers (Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016). The reasons behind this are manifold. Benson (1996) and Benson and Voller (2014) discussed some of the possible explanations in detail considering historical, psychological, and practical aspects of the issue as well. They partially attributed the complex nature of learner autonomy to its adaptation from other scientific fields of inquiry. They argued that this phenomenon presents an issue in the concept's applicability in language education as learner autonomy bears the conceptualisations already existing in other discourses. Another problem from a historical point of view is presented by the numerous changes in learner autonomy research over the years resulting in multiple approaches, all of which exist in the current literature simultaneously (Benson, 1996). Researchers also brought

different perspectives into the discussion, representing various theoretical backgrounds leading to disagreements (Benson & Voller, 2014; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012b).

Other, non-historical explanations have also been provided. Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014), for example, claimed that the understanding of learner autonomy can also depend on the context, in which the notion is applied, as well as on the learners themselves. In addition, Little (1991) argued that age, level of language knowledge, and learning goals and needs can all affect our characterisation of the concept. Benson (2001) went as far as saying it might be beneficial to not assign an exact definition to the concept because of its varied nature. However, it is indisputable that to be able to conduct research on the topic, at least an approximate or general description of learner autonomy is needed, and there have been many attempts to provide one over the years.

The most widely cited description of the concept was created by Holec (1981) who characterised learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). This definition following its publication has been modified several times, both by Holec himself and other researchers, exchanging “ability” with “capacity” and “take charge of” with “take responsibility of” or “take control of” (Benson, 2007, p. 22). Little (1991) produced another influential definition when he described learner autonomy as “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action” (p. 4). It is important to note that these definitions treat learner autonomy as an inherent characteristic of the language learner, while others conceptualise it as an attribute of the learning situation (Benson, 2007; Szócs, 2015). In fact, Benson and Voller (2014) found that learner autonomy has been discussed in terms of at least five perspectives: (1) independent learning situations, (2) self-directed learning skills, (3) innate ability, (4) learners’ responsibility concerning their learning process, and (5) learners’ decision-making concerning their learning process. Cotterall (2000) for instance, attempted to describe students’ responsibilities. She listed goal

setting, choosing from the available options and materials, and self-reflection to mention a few. The connection between learner autonomy and other factors has been considered as well. Among others, the issue of “willingness” has been emphasised highlighting the fact that students’ ability to be autonomous learners is not sufficient, they also have to be willing to take charge of their own learning process (Dam, 1995).

Other alternative definitions have also emerged with the shift in focus towards the social context of autonomy (Benson, 2011). For example, Illés (2012) focused on language use and emphasised the importance of learners becoming independent and autonomous language users who are able to communicate in the changed context of the globalised world. She redefined learner autonomy with factors such as diversity and fluidity in mind and characterised it “as the capacity to become competent speakers of the target language who are able to exploit the linguistic and other resources at their disposal effectively and creatively” (p. 509). This way, learner autonomy is closely linked with success regarding meaning negotiation in real-life contexts. This idea is based on the assumption that learners are able to utilize their capacity of control outside the language classroom as well. Illés (2012) also made the important note that any characterisation of the concept should disregard those aspects of language learning that demand pedagogical competence, foreshadowing the importance of teachers’ roles in the development of learner autonomy.

While these opposing perspectives have caused controversy regarding the definition of learner autonomy, there are some features of the concept that obtained general acceptance among researchers (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). Sinclair (2000) presented an attempt to summarise these aspects and found thirteen such characteristics. For example, researchers generally agreed that the achievement of total learner autonomy is an idealistic and unattainable goal. The categorisation also involved a few already mentioned characteristics, such as the importance of learners’ capacity and willingness but it also added that these are

not necessarily innate characteristics. These points highlight the fact that learner autonomy can be developed. Other statements focused on the specifics of this development process. For instance, it was claimed that the facilitation of learner autonomy demands conscious attention, that it is possible to promote this ability both inside and outside the classroom, and that it requires more than simply teaching learning strategies to students or creating situations that involves learner independence. These points considered together also emphasise that fostering learner autonomy is the shared responsibility of learners and teachers as it requires willingness and work on behalf of the students and commitment to use various approaches on behalf of the teacher. Besides the concept's individual dimensions, this classification also made note of the social implications of learner autonomy and mentioned the differences in its perception by various cultures. This indicates that the concept is not stable, it can vary from context to context.

Adding to the list above, previous research regardless of definition, has also been consistent in claiming that autonomy is an essential part of language learning; therefore, it should be facilitated (Benson, 2011). This applies in a classroom context as well, in which teachers' have the biggest role in fostering this ability.

## **2.2. Teachers' role in learner autonomy**

The implementation of learner autonomy in a classroom context requires the contribution of teachers as well. Autonomous language learning, therefore, does not imply the exclusion of teachers from the learning process, it simply becomes a joint responsibility (Little, 1991).

It is important to discuss the role of language teachers in classrooms that facilitate learner autonomy as it typically differs in nature compared to those using a more teacher-centred approach (Benson, 2016). Teachers play a crucial part in the development and

promotion of learner autonomy both inside and outside the classroom. Their contribution, however, is most commonly described as a form of guidance and support instead of leading students' way towards autonomy (Camilleri, 1999). Teachers can assist and encourage learners by giving more freedom to students in terms of managing their own learning processes and providing them different options and opportunities from which they can choose (Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016). Illés (2012) argued that the key significance of teachers is in the establishment of learning conditions that are suitable for making learners step out of their comfort zones and get fully involved in classroom activities.

Teachers can also develop learner autonomy by applying certain educational practices that learners can utilize outside the classroom as well. Benson (2016) summarised the most important practices that are available for teachers to foster learner autonomy following his five guidelines: (1) active engagement in the learning process, (2) showing available options and resources, (3) providing freedom to make choices and decisions, (4) teacher support, (5) reflection. Some of the specific practices mentioned were “drawing on out-of-class experience”, “using authentic materials and real language”, “involving students in task design”, and “independent inquiry” (Benson, 2016, p. xxxix). The latter referred to encouraging students to search for certain pieces of information independently. While Everhard (2016) noted that these methods should be treated as mere guidelines as no form of practice can assure the achievement of autonomy as it depends on more factors, these practices can certainly be useful for teachers who wish to promote learner autonomy in practice.

### **2.3. Teachers' beliefs**

Teacher cognition can be defined concisely as “the study of what teachers think, know and believe” (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). It became a widely researched area in

applied linguistics that has provided a significant amount of valuable information to help us understand the importance and impact of teachers' beliefs (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). In his influential work, Pajares (1992) attempted to provide an overview on the issues present in research on teachers' beliefs, including problems of definition and the conceptualisation of the term. According to one of the generally accepted definitions he mentioned, a belief can be regarded as "any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase, 'I believe that...'" (Rokeach, 1968 as cited in Pajares, 1992). Pajares (1992) also synthesized the most important findings on teachers' beliefs and their implications for language education. Beliefs have been found to serve as the basis of perception concerning both the importance of certain educational practices and teachers' own attitudes. Therefore, they play a significant role in teachers' behaviour, judgements, and the decisions and choices they make. Beliefs were also shown to have an effect on teachers' instructional and educational methods as well as on the extent to which these are incorporated in the language classroom (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a).

These findings show that understanding teachers' beliefs can be invaluable to improve the quality of education and to serve as the foundation of teacher training (Pajares, 1992). It is important to mention, however, that difficulties in research can arise. As beliefs are not available for direct examination, they have to be accessed through interviews and other non-observational methods, which can be complicated in case the participants are hesitant to talk about them (Szócs, 2017). Another issue is that teachers' beliefs do not always translate into practice because of typically institutional or learner constraints. Therefore, a gap between theory and practice is expected (Szócs, 2015).



## **2.4. Teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy**

Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari (2014) evaluated a number of studies conducted on teachers' beliefs regarding learner autonomy, and they found previous research lacking in terms of both quantity and quality. The majority of analyses were quantitative in nature, predominantly using questionnaires as their instruments. These were sometimes augmented with open ended questions, classroom observations, or follow-up interviews to conduct mixed methods research (Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014). The first notable study on teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy is connected to the name of Camilleri (1999). He collected questionnaire data to discover the attitudes of 328 teachers. The results of the study showed that while teachers were generally positive about the idea of learner autonomy, they were reluctant to include students in choices that shape the framing of lessons, such as decisions about textbooks or the scheduling of classes. This can be partially attributed to certain institutional constraints. On the other hand, they were more positive towards the application of other practices, for example, students' self-assessment or the free arrangement of desks. There are limitations of the study, however, in terms of its rather simple instrument, which unfortunately has been used by several researchers following Camilleri (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019).

For this reason, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) developed a new instrument for their investigation. They studied the importance, desirability, and feasibility of learner autonomy as reported by teachers. The researchers also tried to reveal teachers' thoughts about their students' autonomous learning and their own in-class practices. The results revealed that teachers recognized the advantages that learner autonomy can offer, but they were not as convinced about its applicability in a classroom context. This coincides with the findings of previous research. As for autonomy definitions, teachers maintained ideas that correspond with the notions used in literature, such as "freedom", "control", "responsibility", "choice", or

“independence” (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a, p. 14). Furthermore, they had mixed opinion about their students’ autonomous language learning behaviours, even though all teachers were convinced that they promoted autonomy through certain strategies. A few of them mentioned were “advocacy”, “awareness raising”, and “independent out of class learning activities” (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a, p. 20).

Qualitative investigations made significant contributions to our understanding of teachers’ views on learner autonomy as well. Martinez (2008), for instance, conducted semi-structured teacher interviews to investigate teachers’ subjective theories and beliefs concerning learner autonomy. The study’s primary aim was to inform existing theories of autonomy research to ensure that theory is grounded in empirical findings. Another aspect of the study focused on the incorporation of teachers’ views into practice to help the development of pre-service teacher training and make language learning more autonomous. The study found that teachers generally associated learner autonomy with more effective and improved learning and connected it to concepts such as differentiation and individualisation. As for the theoretical portion of the investigation, teachers’ views supported the assumptions of the field. Based on her experiences, Martinez (2008) encouraged researchers to conduct more qualitative studies to be able to perceive learner autonomy not just from an external but from an inner perspective as well. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) commended the study on its approach but criticized it because of its failure to reveal its instrument to the public.

Almusharraf (2020) decided to launch a purely qualitative investigation involving semi-structured interviews and a longitudinal case study. The main focus was on teachers’ classroom practices and their roles in the facilitation of learner autonomy. Observational notes and recordings of classes provided the foundation of the research. The interview portion showed that teachers held diverse beliefs concerning their own practices, some of them were more supportive of autonomous learning than others. The teachers also mentioned several

constraints that prevented them from actively fostering learner autonomy in classes. The most common reasons were the lack of appropriate teacher training, obstacles presented by the learners, and the lack of freedom that teachers can experience due to strict curricular requirements. It is important to note that this study has been carried out in a Saudi Arabian context; therefore, these findings might have primarily local relevance. The observations also had some implications for educational practice. They highlighted the importance of the gradual introduction of autonomous practices and the importance of pre-service and in-service teacher training.

The majority of teacher interviews have been conducted in a mixed methods design as a form of further investigation with smaller numbers of participants. In the following a few of these will be presented. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) incorporated follow-up interviews in their study augmenting the used questionnaire to be able to gain a deeper understanding into teachers' beliefs in a higher education context. Besides the points that have been already uncovered by previous studies, teachers also mentioned learner autonomy's contribution to the efficiency and success in language learning.

Al-Busadi and Al-Maamari (2014) contributed to the field with another substantial mixed methods study that investigated 61 university ELT teachers' beliefs about the definition of learner autonomy and the sources for their conceptualisations. They classified the definitions that teachers have provided into three types: the first category has been created for definitions in which teachers related the concept to their everyday practices, the second for similar definitions that can be found in the literature as well, for example comparable to Holec's (1981) or Little's (1991) description, and the third for definitions that contained antagonistic ideas.

Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) created an updated and comprehensive overview on the subject and summarised the main findings of previous research. They found some general

themes that recur in most of the studies. Teachers have diverse conceptualisations of the concept of autonomy, but it frequently contains the idea of responsibility or authority. A gap between teachers' views on learner autonomy's desirability and its feasibility has been identified, which is usually attributed either to the constraints of the educational context or to the learners themselves as teachers were generally pessimistic concerning their students' capabilities of autonomy. The results of their own large-scale questionnaire study that investigated learner autonomy in a university context generally correspond with these findings. However, they also pointed out that teachers regularly equated autonomy simply with independent or group work where teachers' have less control over the situation.

Despite the peak of interest surrounding learner autonomy research, teachers' cognition regarding the concept still remains an underdeveloped area (Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari, 2014). Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) argued that the information researchers have on teachers' understanding of the concept is insufficient, especially considering different educational and cultural contexts. As teachers' perceptions have considerable influence on teachers' attitudes towards supporting learner autonomy and their actual practices, this field should receive more attention (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a). Further research is needed, especially in the form of interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers characterise learner autonomy, which in return can inform both educational practice and further research.

## **2.5. The Hungarian context**

There have been a number of research studies in Hungary that tried to raise awareness of the significance of learner autonomy using quantitative as well as qualitative methods (see Albert et al., in press; Asztalos et al., 2020; Csizér & Öveges, 2020; Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016). However, little progress has been made in practice as language education remains

mostly teacher-centred and exam-oriented (Asztalos et al., 2020; Csizér & Öveges, 2020). Previous overviews of the Hungarian situation reported that learner autonomy was generally not facilitated by language teachers (Szócs, 2015). Problems were found on the part of the learners as well who connected language learning strictly to passing language proficiency exams and were not inclined to do additional work for any other purpose (Édes, 2008). These reasons can partially be blamed for the fact that Hungarian learners' language knowledge is insufficient compared to other nations according to several international surveys (Asztalos et al., 2020; Szócs, 2017).

Asztalos et al. (2020) reviewed the situation of learner autonomy in the country and detailed some of the previous studies conducted in the field. They made note of several issues present in Hungarian public education as well, including the absence of strategies that have lasting results, the norm-oriented assessment practices of teachers, and the fact that both teachers and learners focus primarily on pragmatic incentives such as accessing better job opportunities or passing an exam. This also shows that other measures of success are disregarded. In the Hungarian context, some attempts have been made to incorporate learner autonomy into language education, but they have proven to be insufficient. The authors concluded that despite the increasing need for students to become autonomous language learners, teachers typically do not facilitate its development in the foreign language classroom. They argued that a paradigm change is needed in Hungarian classroom contexts of English education along with the introduction of some teaching methods, such as gamification, that have proven to be effective tools in supporting and developing the autonomous learning behaviour of students. The importance of further research is also emphasised in the paper, highlighting the possible valuable contribution of teacher interviews (Asztalos et al., 2020).

The 1990s brought reforms in public education with the shift in politics. The changes in the area of language education were especially substantial (Asztalos et al., 2020; Szócs, 2017). The National Core Curriculum (NCC) was introduced to provide a general framework of the standards that institutions were to follow. Schools gained control over creating their own curricula and educational plans with reference to the NCC (Szócs, 2017). The document underwent several changes since its initiation; therefore, it can serve as an important record of the developments and trends of language education. Several studies have examined its contents. For example, Csizér and Öveges (2020) conducted a language planning- and policy-related mixed methods study to investigate the interrelationship between students' dispositions towards learner autonomy and the attitudes of the National Core Curriculum and frame curricula towards autonomous language learning. They also tried to establish the role of learner autonomy and its importance in the mentioned foreign language policy documents between 2003 and 2020. The results of the study showed that even though the concept gained increasingly greater significance in the National Core Curriculum, it might not be suitable to support teachers in facilitating learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom as autonomy is only mentioned in a descriptive form. The findings of the quantitative part of the study corresponded with these results.

Szócs (2017) conducted one of the few studies in the country that investigated the views of secondary school teachers on learner autonomy using a mixed methods approach. Questionnaires provided quantitative data for the study, while the qualitative data was comprised of a mixture of observational notes, semi-structured teacher interviews, and open-ended questions. She tried to establish the link between teachers' beliefs and practices and identify any mismatches between learners' and teachers' beliefs. The study has found that both teachers and the school curriculum mentioned learner autonomy as a desirable goal, but this idea, similarly to what can be found in international literature, did not result in active

educational practice. Teachers minimized their own roles in the promotion of learner autonomy and emphasised the effects of learning experience, family background, and motivation. Although the observations revealed teacher practices that facilitate learner autonomy, instructors were not willing to allow learners to make decisions concerning their language learning process. The investigation also shed light on the autonomous behaviours of learners, which was reported to be poor by both teachers and students.

Another important and relevant paper from the perspective of my research is the dissertation of Spiczéné Bukovszki (2016), who conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews to investigate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers' knowledge and opinions concerning learner autonomy in a higher educational context and its importance in the English language classroom. The results showed that even though teachers had varied ideas and definitions regarding the concept, and they often misunderstood its meaning, they all agreed that learner autonomy is a necessary and important part of language education that can make students more successful language learners. Furthermore, educators considered themselves important figures in the development and facilitation of learner autonomy, but they also mentioned the substantial role of parents and peers in the process. Age and language proficiency were also highlighted as important factors that can influence learner autonomy. It is important to note that some teachers mentioned their previous efforts to encourage autonomous language learning behaviour. However, many of them have abandoned this cause due to certain difficulties and resistance on behalf of the students. These findings can serve as a basis of comparison for the present study, which also focuses on the analysis of teacher interviews to inspect their views on the subject.

The mentioned papers highlight some of the issues concerning learner autonomy in Hungary. The studies of Asztalos et al. (2020) and Csizér and Öveges (2020) both aim at presenting the Hungarian educational context with attention on the facilitation of learner

autonomy. They also provide valuable overviews of the research already conducted in the country. The doctoral dissertation of Spiczéné Bukovszki (2016) and the studies of Szócs (2015, 2017, 2018) provide insight into the views of teachers concerning the characterisation and importance of learner autonomy which can be later compared to the results of the present study. They all emphasise the significance of the investigated concept and of further research in the field. Even though there has been a growing tendency towards the implementation of learner autonomy in the classroom, it still needs to gain more significance in Hungarian secondary school language education.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the field of learner autonomy research is a very productive and growing area in applied linguistics. It has received much attention over the years, especially concerning its problematic definition. However, the views of language teachers on the concept have been neglected and marginalized even though they have substantial influence on the practices and behaviours of teachers and the language education opportunities that learners receive. Researchers realised this potential and started to investigate teachers' beliefs with predominantly questionnaire studies using quantitative methods. In recent years, mixed methods and qualitative studies also gained significance, and it became possible to attain a more profound understanding of teachers' views and attitudes regarding learner autonomy. These studies collected qualitative data from open-ended questions attached to questionnaires, observations, and interviews conducted with language teachers. In the present study, the latter method has been chosen to contribute to the existing investigations in the field and further our understanding of learner autonomy.



My research aims to investigate teachers' views and practices concerning learner autonomy in the Hungarian context. Through the analysis of teacher interviews, I intend to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do Hungarian secondary school English teachers characterise language learner autonomy?
2. What are the views of Hungarian secondary school English teachers on their roles in the development of learner autonomy?
3. What do secondary school English teachers report doing to facilitate the development of learner autonomy in Hungary?

The methodology used to obtain this information will be discussed in detail in the following section.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. The design of the study**

The current empirical study presents the thematic analysis of 32 semi-structured secondary school English teacher interviews collected in the framework of the NKF-6-K-129149 research grant. Qualitative methodology provides a suitable approach for my research as it allows for the profound investigation of teachers' views. It presents an opportunity for teachers to articulate their thoughts and emotions and supplies the researcher with rich and elaborate data for analysis (Dörnyei, 2007). In his book on applied linguistics research, Dörnyei (2007) meticulously discussed the several advantages that a qualitative approach can offer, including its openness and flexibility during the process of investigation. One of the most commonly used qualitative methods are interviews, which have the potential to expose slight differences in meaning as well as to thoroughly investigate individual cases. The emphasis, therefore, is not on the general understanding of a phenomenon but rather on the

recognition of specific experiences, which is ideal for uncovering beliefs. Insider meaning becomes accessible with participants sharing their points of view, thoughts, experiences, and emotions in connection with learner autonomy and their own classroom practices. As there are not many studies conducted on the topic, interviews can also offer a good way to explore or just simply to expand our insight and potential conceptualisations of learner autonomy. In the following sections, the specific methods used in the present study will be discussed in detail.

### **3.2. Participants**

From the population of secondary school English teachers in Hungary, 32 educators have been chosen through convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007). Therefore, practical aspects such as willingness to participate and availability were given more gravity during the selection of the participants. Even though qualitative research is not focused on representativeness but rather on selecting individuals who can provide valuable data for the sake of the investigation (Dörnyei, 2007), some characteristics of distribution have been taken into consideration. The location of the schools where teachers worked were one of these. Three schools have been chosen from the capital city, Budapest and 8 from the countryside (Kaposvár, Miskolc, Nagykanizsa, Nyíregyháza, Tatabánya, Veszprém), which were equally divided between the western and the eastern regions to ensure the examination of the whole country, not just of certain areas. Altogether, 11 schools from 7 cities were involved in the research.

The participants' age ranged between 27-64 years ( $M=47.47$ ,  $SD=7.74$ ) and they had 5-35 years teaching experience ( $M=22.31$ ,  $SD=8.2$ ). For most of them, this coincided with their English teaching years, only 6 of the participants reported spending fewer years as English teachers. The majority of the participants were female ( $n=29$ ), with only 3 male

exceptions. Due to the requirements of their profession, all participants had at least a university level degree and two of them possessed PhD degrees as well. Teachers had varied backgrounds concerning the institutions they have worked at including language schools, grammar schools, and vocational schools to name a few, and had experience teaching students of various ages including younger children and adults as well. Based on the demographic data, this group can be considered relatively diverse and heterogenous, which increases the transferability of the findings (Dörnyei, 2007).

### **3.3. Instrument**

The data were obtained with the help of semi-structured qualitative interviews. The interview guide was composed with a wider scope in mind than that of the present study as it was originally created for a nationwide Individual Differences (IDs) research (Csizér et al., 2021). The instrument can be divided into four bigger parts: background information, language classroom experiences, beliefs about language learners and the role of the teacher, and beliefs about language learning outside the classroom. The questions were focusing on concepts such as success, emotions, and motivation besides learner autonomy. Although not all questions were directed at learner autonomy, the participants made comments in connection with the concept throughout the interview. The instrument was piloted and fine-tuned. Certain items were modified, and further questions were included. The final Hungarian version of the interview guide can be found on the research project's website (<http://nyelvtanulas.elte.hu/>).

### **3.4. Data collection and processing procedures**

Some of the interviews were conducted in person, while others were held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection was managed by the project's research group

including both the lead researchers and the research assistants who recorded the interviews either with the help of Dictaphones and smartphones in case of the face-to-face interviews, or through the used computer program during online conversations. The interviews were administered in the mother tongue of the participants to limit the possibility of misunderstandings and ensure comprehensibility. This means that the excerpts presented in the results and discussion section were translated from Hungarian into English. The length of the recordings ranged between 28 and 90 minutes with a mean length of approximately 50 minutes ( $M=49.69$ ,  $SD=14.57$ ). This audio data was transcribed verbatim manually by the members of the research group and finalised in a document that I have received for analysis. The transcribed data then were processed with the help of a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, the 7.5.7 version of the ATLAS.ti program. The software was useful in managing bigger quantities of data and provided helpful features for both the initial and second-level coding.

### **3.5. Data analysis**

As it has been highlighted above, the current thesis presents the findings of a qualitative investigation. The results were obtained through thematic analysis based on the guide written by Braun and Clarke (2006). The reasons for choosing this method were mostly embedded in its accessibility and flexibility as it is not closely associated with any theoretical viewpoint and can be approached from multiple perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step of the coding process was familiarising myself with the data. I paid special attention to this step and read through the transcripts carefully before beginning my analysis as I was not part of the data collection procedure and did not have initial knowledge about the specifics of the research. Following this step, I started the initial coding process, during which all relevant segments in the text have been highlighted using the ATLAS.ti

program and each of the selected sections has been assigned an initial label in a systematic way. Altogether 52 such codes have been produced. The third phase of the data analysis procedure was matching and grouping the initial codes into potential themes and trying to assign all relevant codes to each theme. The goal of this step was to surpass the assignment of descriptive codes and see emerging themes across the data set. This way, broader categories have been created. The final step was the interpretation of the data, selecting overarching themes, and finalising the definitions and the names of the created themes. Thematic maps were also drawn up to better illustrate the results of the study.

It is important to note that due to the nature of qualitative data analysis, this process was not as linear in practice as presented in the above defined steps. It was a circular and iterative process with referring back to the transcripts and the coded and recoded data segments several times. The process ended when sufficient saturation was achieved in the analysis and no new themes and categories emerged (Brain & Clarke, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007).

### **3.6. Quality control considerations**

Quality control issues were taken into consideration during both the data collection and processing phases as well as during the steps of data analysis. As for the quality of the instrument, it has been double-checked by the members of the research group to exclude any potentially ambiguous or misleading questions. The interview guide was also piloted to identify parts in need of further improvement. This step was followed by the fine-tuning of the instrument. As qualitative analysis largely depends on the personal interpretations of the researcher, special attention was paid to peer-checking and the reviews of my supervisor to avoid potential bias. Finally, in the reporting stage, my goal was to present my findings in a detailed way with providing rich descriptions of the data and also of their context.

### **3.7. Ethical issues**

Ethical issues were also taken into consideration throughout the research process. As all participants were adults, it was not necessary to obtain any approval or permission before conducting the interviews. During the data collection phase, an introductory paragraph was read out aloud informing the participants about the general topic of the research, the purpose of data collection, their anonymity, the fact that there are no right or wrong answers, and the approximate length of the interview. All teachers agreed to the interview and gave verbal consent for the recording and the use of the resulting data. The participants were able to drop out of the research any time and the research group ensured that no mental or physical harm was caused to the participants, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic. The data was treated in confidentiality and according to the GDPR regulations valid in the country. The anonymity of the participants was ensured by assigning pseudonyms and the excerpts for the results and discussion section were chosen with the teachers' untraceability in mind.

## **4. Results and discussion**

In the following paragraphs, the results yielding from the teacher interviews are presented and discussed. The aim of this section is not just to familiarise the readers with the findings of the data analysis procedure but also to put these findings into context. For this reason, the results are introduced in a detailed and descriptive way. Furthermore, they are also related and compared to the findings of previous research studies, either produced outside or within the Hungarian context. As it has been explained in the methods section, I used thematic analysis to uncover the participants' beliefs about learner autonomy and their perceived classroom practices to promote it. Therefore, the results have been obtained through a lengthy and iterative process of coding, recoding, and searching for emerging themes across the data set. During this analysis, three thematic maps have also been constructed to help the visual

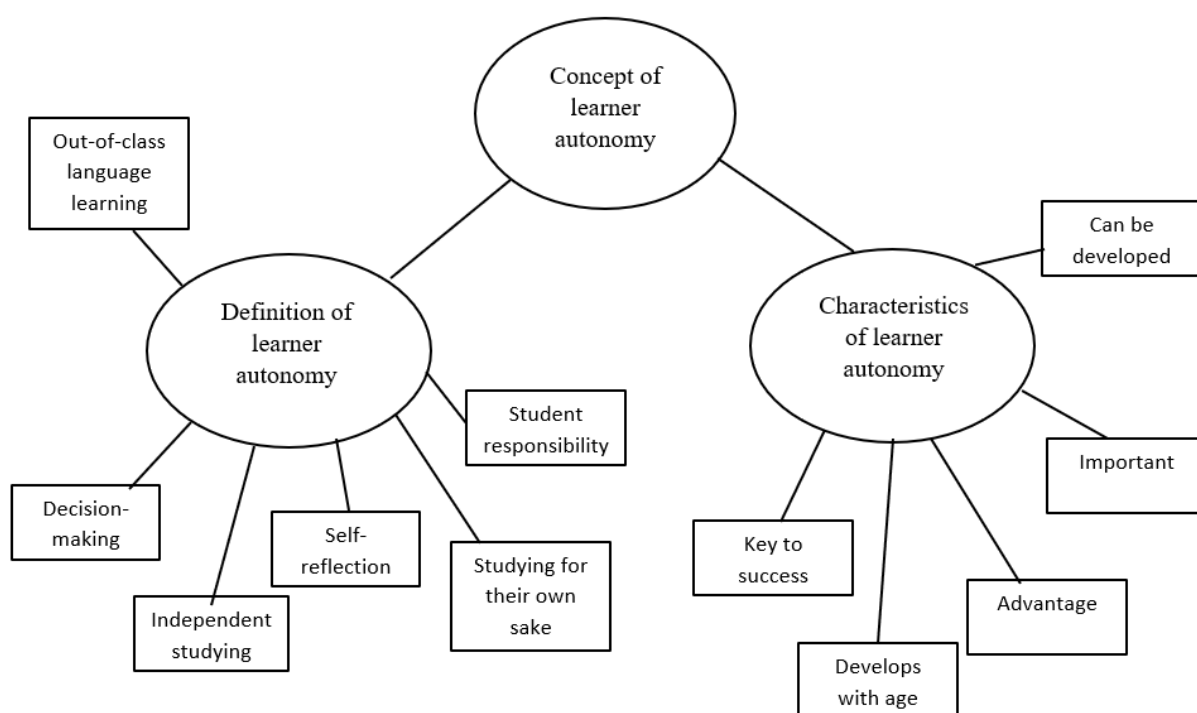
representation of the findings, and as a result, facilitate understanding. As qualitative data can be messy and difficult to manage, I found the maps particularly helpful. They can be seen in Figures 1, 2, and 3 below. Each thematic map has been created in a way that they answer and relate to a specific research question. Based on the recommendation of Dörnyei (2007), in the following subsections the results are presented in thematic chapters that I separated on the basis of the research questions. This way, the results and their discussion are presented in three units. The intention behind this is again to facilitate the understanding of the findings and to make the report more coherent. In each subsection, first, the relevant research question and thematic map are presented, followed by the introduction of the results. To support the findings of my research, examples from the teacher interviews are also provided. Finally, I interpret the results by comparing them to the findings of earlier research, evaluating them in the context of my study, and trying to uncover the underlying explanation behind them. I also highlight unexpected or surprising teacher contributions that sometimes display opposing point of views on the subject than that of the literature. The entire section will be concluded with the evaluation and summarisation of the most important findings and main results.

#### 4.1. The concept of learner autonomy

Q1: How do Hungarian secondary school English teachers characterise language learner autonomy?

**Figure 1**

*The Concept of Learner Autonomy*



The concept of learner autonomy was characterised by the participating teachers in various ways and from various perspectives. After selecting the relevant codes, I established two main categories based on their approach towards the concept, *Definition of learner autonomy* and *Characteristics of learner autonomy*. While these categories might seem very similar at first, there are some obvious differences between the two. The first category contains elements which answer the question “What does learner autonomy mean?”, trying to capture the essence of its definition. On the other hand, the second category is comprised of subthemes that rather focus on some specific features of the notion and answer the question



“What can be said about learner autonomy?”. First, I would like to introduce the first group in more detail.

#### **4.1.1. Definition of learner autonomy**

The definitions given by the participants were varied in terms of their perspectives. Many teachers emphasised the role of learners in the learning process, specifically the importance of student responsibility. In their opinions, learner autonomy means that students take responsibility for their language learning and do not rely on the teacher exclusively. Some of them also mentioned that the language learning process demands that the teacher and the students work together for the common goal. At the same time, they emphasised that the role and responsibility of the learners is the more important of the two.

[Learner autonomy means] that it doesn't matter if I am there, it doesn't matter if there is a teacher, if there is a leader, it is their responsibility, that is, they have to work as well to achieve the goals they want to achieve. (Brigitta)

The ability of decision-making and self-reflection were also commonly associated with learner autonomy. According to the first, learner autonomy means that students are able to consider available opportunities and, based on this deliberation, decide which work for them. On the other hand, from the perspective of the second approach, the concept means that students reflect upon their language learning process, assess their progress, and evaluate their achievements. Decision-making and self-reflection were mentioned both separately and as notions that are closely connected to each other. In the following example, the latter is prevalent, decision-making and self-reflection are described as intertwined concepts and depicted as connected steps of the same autonomous language learning process: “they can recognise the various opportunities and can make decisions, weigh their options, whether it works or doesn't work, and try these opportunities and based on this make a choice, and

evaluate and then reflect upon their progress” (Anna). Based on this quotation, the decision made is supposed to be an informed one, which is both preceded and followed by reflection and evaluation.

A few teachers mentioned that learner autonomy equals the ability of independent studying, and one teacher even used the word “self-study” in connection with the concept. “[learner autonomy] means what I already mentioned that they should be able to study independently” (Alexandra). This approach is related to student responsibility in the sense that it emphasises the role of the learner in their language learning process, but it can also be distinguished as the focus is on the learners’ capabilities rather than what they are supposed to do. These capabilities, according to the participants, can be developed and facilitated by teachers as it is discussed in the following subsection.

For a number of teachers, learner autonomy meant that students study for their own sake and development rather than because of other factors such as parents’ or teachers’ requirements, grades or any form of tests or exams. One of the participants phrased it this way: “To me, it [learner autonomy] means that they should feel it too that they don’t do homework or write assignments for me, it should be important for them” (Anett). This was a regularly recurring theme across the data set and was mentioned several times. Some even related it to the notion of responsibility and implied that as the language learning process in the end benefits the learners, not the teacher, it should be students’ responsibility to manage it and realise that they do so for their own sake. I found the contribution of one of the teachers’ belonging to this category quite unexpected. She associated the previously mentioned notions with cheating, specifically during online education, and emphasised learners’ understanding of studying for their own advantage as the basis of responsibility that prevents them from copying their answers. “so basically the system can be defied, and therefore, individual sense

of responsibility plays a huge role in feeling that it is for their benefit” (Réka). This was a unique understanding among the participants.

The last definition given by teachers is related to language learning outside the classroom. “[an autonomous language learner] doesn’t only learn the language in the classroom but is also motivated to engage with it independently” (Alexandra). The participants determined learner autonomy as a notion that involves investing extra effort on behalf of the learners into their language learning process outside the classroom context. This additional work was mentioned in the form of solving tasks, engaging in discussions with native speakers, or reading the news. However, technology was the most commonly mentioned of them all. Teachers emphasised the opportunities the Internet can offer for language learning and associated autonomous language learning behaviour with seizing every opportunity to learn or use English outside the classroom. “They should look for opportunities, watch movies in English (...) Music, books, online platforms in the foreign language” (Anasztázia).

While teachers generally understood the meaning of learner autonomy, one participant’s view differed from the conceptualisations found in the literature. She mentioned concerning learner autonomy that “the most basic thing is that you ask them to do something, and whether they do it.” (Anna) which shows a misunderstanding on her behalf as it goes against the already well-established essence of the concept.

#### **4.1.2. Characteristics of learner autonomy**

During the data analysis process, several learner autonomy characteristics have emerged. In the end, I established five such categories. Learner autonomy has been described in the following ways: key to success, advantage, important, develops with age, and can be developed.

Learner autonomy was regularly associated with success in language learning, some teachers even argued that autonomy is essential for being a successful learner. During their contributions, not all participants mentioned the term “autonomy” or “autonomous”, some of them used their descriptions of the concept. These contained elements of autonomy definition presented in the previous subsection, such as independent language learning or out-of-class language learning. “those can become very successful who dare or like practicing the language independently outside the classroom as well” (Márta).

Learner autonomy has also been described as an advantage for those who possess it compared to those who do not, especially in terms of development and progress. “I put great emphasis on this because the presence of autonomous language ability in the child is similar to confidence. Those who can take responsibility for it can progress much better” (Bettina).

Many teachers considered learner autonomy as a trait of older students rather than that of younger ones and mentioned the role of age in its development. They detailed their experiences teaching students from different age groups and reported that both the presence and role of learner autonomy becomes prominent towards the end of the secondary school years.

“I think it [learner autonomy] comes with age. That is, at a younger age they only feel that there are requirements towards them...However, well, when they become conscious language learners, then through the years they increasingly realise that it is for their own benefit. (...) Hopefully, it comes out in a few students when they are 17-18 years old young adults.” (Enikő)

In case of some teachers, the emphasis was on understanding what learner autonomy means, and they considered this possible only at an older age. An interesting point was made by one of the teachers who observed that students’ ability to be autonomous has shifted in the

past 10 years. She reported that today's learners compared to previous classes are only capable of making responsible decisions at a later point in their lives.

The last two characteristics have important implications for the role that teachers play or can play in the facilitation of learner autonomy. The first is importance. Learner autonomy was generally reported as a crucial feature of the language learning process; therefore, teachers considered it desirable to foster this ability. They found learner autonomy especially important because of certain constraints in the educational context, such as the number of classes or the availability of teachers. "It is very important, especially because in 3 classes per week it cannot be done that (...) they will not learn it then" (Edit). The second is the plausibility of the development of learner autonomy. As some of the teachers noted, it can be developed, which indicates that teachers have the ability to elicit change in this area.

The presented results show how Hungarian secondary school English teachers in our sample characterised language learner autonomy. The information in the previous paragraphs answer my first research question. Teachers focused on two main aspects of the concept, its definition, and its characteristics. They found it important to mention that learner autonomy can be defined in terms of student responsibility, learners studying for their own sake, self-reflection, decision-making, independent studying, and out-of-class language learning. These mostly coincide with definitions mentioned in the literature. The participants used similar terms to the ones applied in the papers of Holec (1981), Little (1991), and Benson (1996, 2007, 2009), including "ability", "responsibility", and "independence" as well as "self-reflection" and "decision-making". This also emphasises that autonomous students do not expect teachers to do all the work but put in effort on their own. Similarly, teachers' approach to the conceptualisation of autonomy matches the definitions provided by Benson and Voller (2014) and Sinclair (2000). These results show that teachers generally understood the essence of learner autonomy, unlike in the study of Spiczéné Bukovszki (2016) who reported that

participants regularly misunderstood its meaning. This might signal an improvement in teachers' understanding of the concept in the Hungarian context, but as neither study has representative findings, this cannot be claimed for certain.

Naturally, there were teachers in the present study as well who misunderstood the notion of learner autonomy. One teacher described its exact opposite, while others equated it with independent learning, which is while connected, is not the equivalent of learner autonomy (Sinclair, 2000). Even though teachers emphasised that learner autonomy plays a role outside the classroom as well, the definitions found in the interviews rather focused on the individual aspects of the concept, mostly disregarding its social implications presented in Illés (2012). They only mentioned the idea of seizing every opportunity to use English in out-of-school contexts.

Teachers associated diverse characteristics and ideas with learner autonomy, as expected based on the conclusions of previous studies (e.g.: Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019; Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016). Despite this diversity, some common themes have been recognised such as learner autonomy as a success and as an advantage. These characteristics have been mentioned by the participants of Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a, b) study and are also accepted features in the literature (Sinclair, 2000). The relationship between age and autonomy has been discussed by the participants of Spiczéné Bukovszki's (2016) investigation. They found age an important factor in the development of learner autonomy, which view was reinforced by the current research.

Many of the subthemes presented above, out-of-class language learning especially, were connected to the goal of passing a language exam. This indicates the exam-oriented nature of Hungarian language education that is well-documented in the literature.

Nevertheless, some teachers mentioned in connection with the theme "studying for their own

sake” that learning should occur for improvements’ sake and not because of the requirements of tests or exams or other forms of external motives.

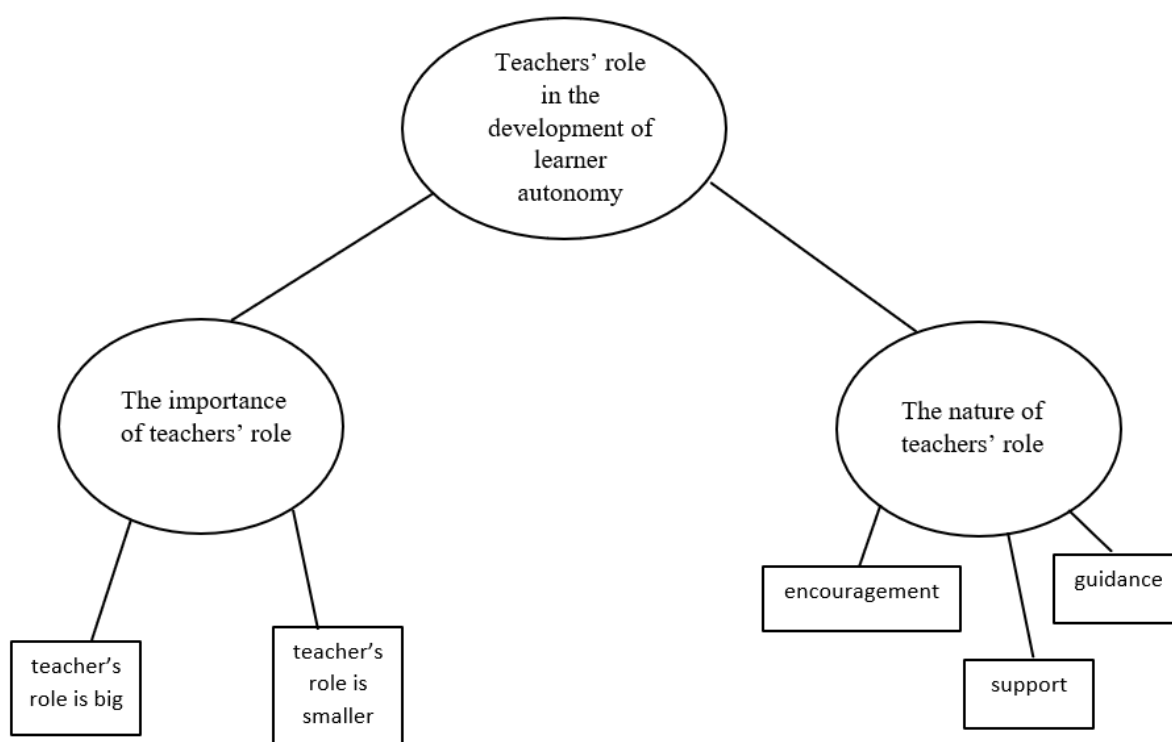
The findings of the present study also show that teachers acknowledged the importance of learner autonomy and saw it as a desirable and improvable aspect of language learning. This has potential positive implications for the situation of English education in Hungary where only minimal emphasis has been placed on the facilitation of autonomous and independent language learning in the past. However, as described in Szócs (2017), theory or desirability does not necessarily translate into practice as there are practical constraints that can influence teachers’ decisions and actions. For example, the number of classes which was also mentioned by the participants.

## 4.2. Teachers' role in learner autonomy

Q2: What are the views of Hungarian secondary school English teachers on their roles in the development of learner autonomy?

**Figure 2**

*Teachers' Role in the Development of Learner Autonomy*



The participants described the role that teachers play in the development of learner autonomy from two perspectives: considering its importance and its nature. There was no agreement among the interviewees concerning this topic, and some opposing views have emerged. These will be highlighted in the following subsections.



#### **4.2.1. The importance of teachers' role**

Teachers had differing views on the importance of their roles in the facilitation of learner autonomy. Some of them considered the educators' contribution very important, while others found it smaller compared to other factors.

Most participants realised the significance of their role in fostering learner autonomy. They highlighted teachers' responsibility in the development of learner autonomy and one participant even characterised this aspect as "the most important role of a teacher" (Jolán). This shows desirability on behalf of teachers to raise autonomous learners and language users. Many of those who considered teachers' role smaller did not disregard it completely but in comparison, they viewed some other aspects of learners' circumstances more determinant. The mentioned factors include students' willingness and their family background stating that "most things, this...well it is determined at home" (Margit). One teacher talked about her role not having a certain or direct effect: "I surely have some role, but... this is like, I can achieve this in case of some, to motivate them, but I can't in case of others" (Marianna). Others were even more pessimistic in this regard and considered their roles "insignificant" (Réka) but this was not the prevailing point of view.

#### **4.2.2. The nature of teachers' role**

Teachers' role in developing learner autonomy has been described with the terms "support", "guidance", and "encouragement". The participants reported having the role of a mentor who establishes the circumstances of learners' autonomous language learning. This opinion reinforces the statements made in connection with students' responsibility concerning their own language learning process. In this sense, teachers' responsibility is to encourage and support learners' ideas and independence, reassure them in their language learning endeavours, and show the most advantageous routes for their learning process. "My job is to

mentor this whole thing, to help, to be there if I'm needed, to explain, to listen, to evaluate, but I cannot learn it instead of them" (Jolán). The participants agreed that autonomous learning does not exclude teachers as students need guidance to navigate independently and providing this is the educator's duty.

Among the studies conducted on teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in Hungary there are only a few that investigate how teachers evaluate their own roles in its facilitation. Those I have found reported differing views on the subject. While Spiczéné Bukovszki (2016) found that teachers admitted their significance in the development of autonomy and mentioned the role of parents and peers as additional factors, Szócs (2017) detected that educators downplayed their importance. The results of the present study reflect both of these findings. Most teachers considered their roles important; therefore, found it crucial to facilitate autonomy in the language classroom. However, others rather emphasised the role of the language learners' willingness and responsibility as well as the family background as the most determinant factors. Despite their perceived efforts, many teachers reported problems concerning their learners' autonomous behaviours which can partially explain why they reported that their role is smaller and do not notice having a certain or direct effect on its development. The fact that these teachers were less positive about their plausible impact can entail that they do not put as much effort in the facilitation of autonomy as beliefs have powerful effects on practices (Pajares, 1992; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a).

The terms the participants used to characterise the nature of their roles were similar to the ones established in the literature. In Camilleri's (1999) study, for example, "guidance" and "support" were also mentioned indicating teachers' facilitatory position. Illés (2012) noted that one of the most important responsibility of teachers was to create appropriate circumstances for autonomous language learning, which has also been declared during the

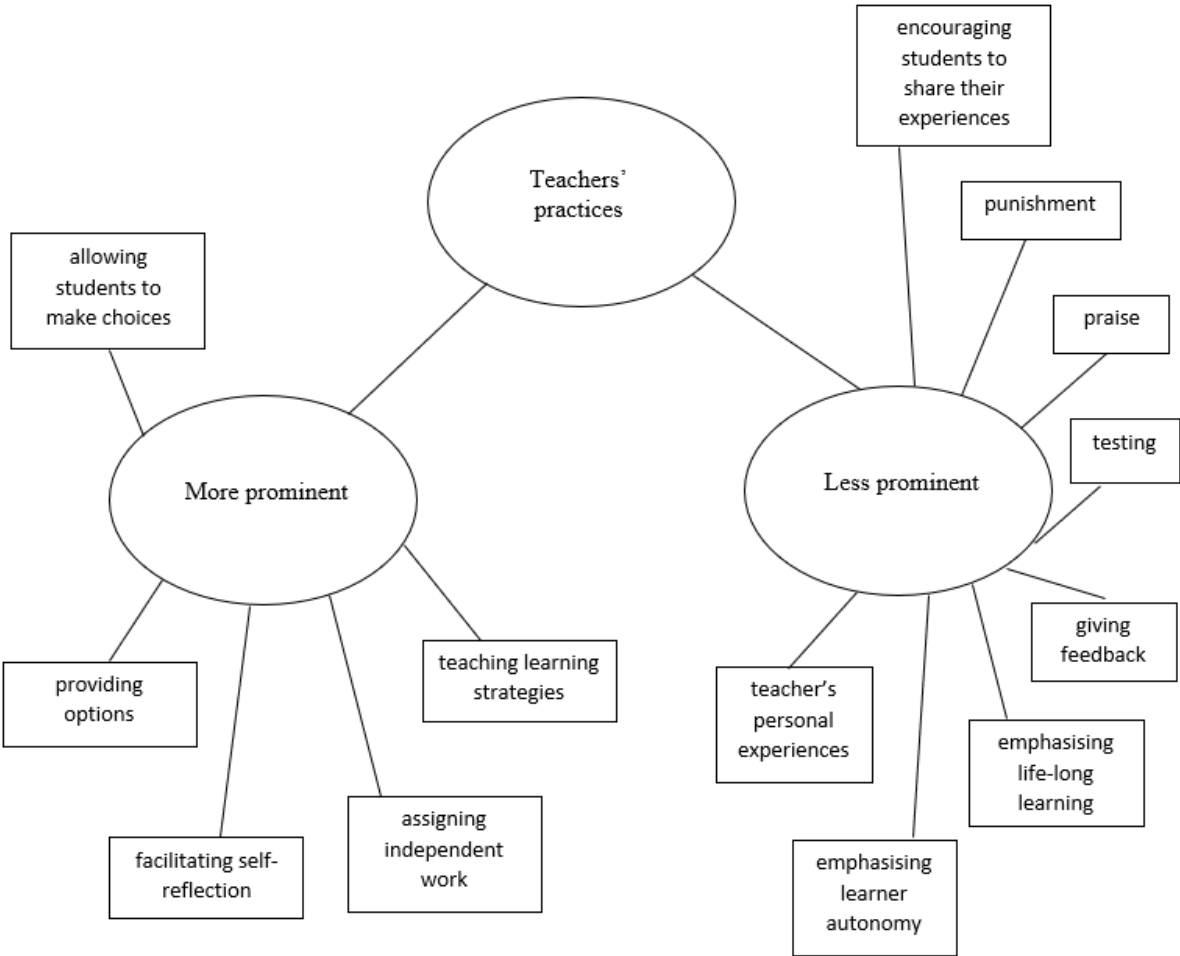
present interviews. It is also important that teachers realised that they are needed even if learning takes place in a more independent and autonomous fashion.

### 4.3. Teachers' practices

Q3: What do secondary school English teachers report doing to facilitate the development of learner autonomy in Hungary?

Figure 3

Teachers' Perceived Practices to Facilitate Learner Autonomy



Teachers mentioned numerous practices that they reported using to facilitate learner autonomy in the English language classroom. I divided these into two groups depending on the number of times they were mentioned, and the emphasis put on them during the interviews. First, I discuss the more prominent practices one-by-one in more details and then move on to listing the less prominent ones.

#### **4.3.1. More prominent practices**

The most regularly recurring practice was teaching learning strategies to help students understand how to study independently and more autonomously. The interviewees generally considered this their task and responsibility. “At every skill, there are strategies. At every task type, there are strategies. Telling about or explaining these is strictly the teacher’s job” (Imre). Teachers were convinced that learners need to be aware of their options regarding learning strategies so that they can decide which works for them the best. It was also repeatedly mentioned that learners are unique; therefore, they have to experiment and try the provided strategies to figure out their preferences. Learning strategies were linked to oral exams, writing, and reading tasks as well, but nothing was as accentuated as their role in learning vocabulary. In case of some teachers, this was the only aspect of teaching where they introduced learning strategies. “What we might talk about is, for example, how to learn words in the most practical way” (Zsóka).

According to the participants, another way of improving learners’ autonomous behaviour was assigning them independent work. The form of the assignments varied from looking up words in a dictionary to learning certain units from the course book as self-study. One teacher explained the reason behind this strategy with the following words: “I try to force them in quotation marks to take it out at home as well, to deal with it at home as well...” (Janka). Some of them also associated independent work with a degree of freedom, for

example, learners could adjust these tasks according to their levels. This leads us to the next facilitating strategy, allowing students to make decisions and choices concerning their own language learning. This included choosing tasks, topics for their presentations, and other study materials, which made it possible for them to somewhat personalise their learning process. One of the interviewees connected this decision-making to learners' self-reflection in practice as well, not just in theory as it has been described in section 4.1.

At the end of each unit, self-reflection questionnaires help them, so that they can evaluate their weaknesses. What it is that they want to do. And at the beginning of each unit there is a 15-minute session when they look through the task list, which they can choose from, and then I tell them to think about what areas they wrote in the self-reflection questionnaire that needs improvement. (Levente)

Teachers also related the ability to make such decisions to showing students options that are available for them. "My role in this in my opinion is to provide opportunities to choose from, that is I offer as many options as possible, so they can pick the one that works best for them" (Levente).

Facilitating self-reflection and providing options for learners were significant themes on their own rights as well, not just in relation with decision-making. Teachers reported that they encourage and help students in reflecting on their language learning process. Several approaches were presented by the participants, and many of them articulated quite specific methods. These were, for instance, giving learners self-reflection guides with certain aspects to consider, setting goals in the beginning of each unit or semester and relating their evaluation to these aims at the end, distributing self-reflection questionnaires to assess their strengths and weaknesses, or even asking questions about their used learning strategies. Providing options for students was also regularly mentioned. This category includes both physically tangible and more theoretical aspects of autonomous language learning as well.

Some referred to specific materials, books, websites, or other digital platforms, while others mentioned showing learners some of the steps and routes they can take during their language learning journey.

I have to show them opportunities from which they can choose from. What are those trustworthy Internet sites for example, that they can use for independent language learning? What are those steps they can take to gradually move forward? (Anasztázia)

#### **4.3.2. Less prominent practices**

I identified eight other themes that were mentioned during the interviews but were given less emphasis by the participants and were only discussed a couple of times. These were the following: giving feedback, praise, emphasising learner autonomy, emphasising life-long learning, encouraging students to share their experiences, teacher's sharing their personal experiences, testing, and punishment. I discuss these one-by-one in the next paragraphs.

Giving feedback and praise are closely connected to each other. However, while those teachers who mentioned giving feedback focused on the evaluation of the work that students did autonomously and showing their strengths and weaknesses, praise was rather directed at learners' autonomous behaviour. "And then with a lot of praise, I reinforce that they are on the right path" (Edina).

Some teachers used practices that tried to explain learners the need for learner autonomy, either by emphasising its importance or by illustrating its necessity through life-long learning. They found it important to talk about the reasons behind fostering learner autonomy. Those in the second category also raised awareness of the fact that language learning is a life-long process that can be facilitated through independent and autonomous language learning.

Two other practices were related to sharing experiences concerning language learning. One teacher mentioned building on their personal experiences and revealing these to the class. “And also telling about my experiences what has worked for me. Maybe the personal example can affect them” (Anasztázia). Others encouraged students to share their experiences and ideas with each other concerning independent language learning to facilitate their journey towards being more autonomous learners.

Finally, two different but similarly surprising approaches were mentioned. I categorised these as testing and punishment. These approaches instead of providing learners with strategies or other support, try to compel them to work independently through external incentives. As one teacher put it “I try to strengthen the inner motivation by giving them tests” (Edit), while another said that “I always check, to be honest, there is a little punishment as well (...) there should be consequences if they didn’t put effort into it independently” (Janka). These were certainly not the prevalent approaches to fostering learner autonomy, but I found it important to include such different views as well.

Teachers reported several practices which conform to Benson’s (2016) guidelines that were found useful to develop learner autonomy. Some of the specific strategies mentioned in the paper also have counterparts in the present study. For example, “independent inquiry” corresponds with the practice of “assigning independent work”, while “involving students in task design” can be associated with “allowing students to make decisions” concerning their language learning, including the selection of tasks. During the interviews, both of these were connected to personalisation or individualisation like in Martinez’s (2008) study. Teachers also emphasised learners’ uniqueness in connection with learning strategies, which were the most frequently mentioned practices. Interestingly, the use of learning strategies was commonly related to vocabulary learning which implies that it is an important aspect of Hungarian’s English education.

Teachers were generally in favour of facilitating learner autonomy, and they all reported to do so in one way or another. This contradicts the findings of Asztalos et al. (2020) who reported that teachers typically did not facilitate learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom as well as the statements of Szőcs (2017) who claimed that not all teachers used autonomy facilitating educational practices. The difference between these findings might signal progress in the Hungarian context concerning the role that teachers assume in the development of learner autonomy. However, as opposed to Szőcs's (2017) study, the results of the present research were not confirmed by classroom observations, which limits our understanding of what actually happens in the language classroom. Teachers also had varied opinions in the current research about the extent to which they support autonomous learning. Some of them only mentioned teaching learning strategies, which according to Sinclair (2000) is not enough to facilitate autonomy. Overall, teachers seemed to be more open to involve learners in decisions about their learning process compared to the findings of other studies (Spiczéné Bukovszki, 2016; Szőcs, 2017).

Some other practices listed above can also be found in the literature. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a), for example, recognised the theme of “awareness raising” that can be connected to both “emphasising learner autonomy” and “emphasising life-long learning” in my results. The participants put the most emphasis on self-reflection and providing options for students to choose from. They mentioned the most specific practices regarding these themes, such as the use of self-reflection questionnaires, cards, or specific materials.

#### **4.4. Evaluation and summary of the results**

The results of my study mostly coincided with the findings of previous research reinforcing the information presented in the literature. However, in the Hungarian context, the



findings of studies conducted in recent years have been challenged by the present thesis as teachers were generally positively disposed towards language learner autonomy. They also understood their significance in learner autonomy's development with only a few exceptions. Furthermore, all teachers reported that they facilitate it in some way during their language classes, while earlier data indicated it otherwise. Nonetheless, our understanding of teachers' educational practices is limited as these findings solely rely on teachers' beliefs without the support of observations and the gap between beliefs and actual practices are well established in the literature.

Despite some of its limitations, the study presents the current situation of learner autonomy in the country through secondary school language teachers' beliefs. It provides a glimpse into their characterisation of the concept, their roles as facilitators, some of their specific reported practices as well as the extent to which they claim to foster learner autonomy.

## **5. Conclusion**

The aim of the present study was to investigate the views of Hungarian secondary school English teachers on learner autonomy. The paper shed light on their characterisation of the concept, their beliefs concerning their own roles in its facilitation as well as their educational practices to promote learner autonomy. To find answers to my research questions and investigate the situation of learner autonomy in the country, I analysed 32 teacher interviews conducted in the framework of the NKF-6-K-129149 research grant. The interview transcripts were analysed with the help of thematic analysis, which provided an accessible and flexible approach to uncover the emerging themes and recurrent patterns in the data set. The results have been obtained through an iterative, labour-intensive process of coding, recoding,

and identifying overarching themes. Three thematic maps have also been constructed to visualise and therefore, facilitate the understanding of the results (see Figure 1, 2, 3).

The findings show that teachers had diverse ideas concerning the conceptualisation of learner autonomy. They discussed its definition from the perspectives of decision-making, independent studying, self-reflection, learners studying for their own sake, student responsibility, and out-of-class language learning. Educators also reported several characteristics of learner autonomy including views about its development, necessity for success in language learning, importance, and advantageous nature. Teachers generally considered themselves positive towards both the concept of learner autonomy and their roles in fostering it. However, some participants were less optimistic and regarded their impact smaller in its development compared to other factors. Guidance, support, and encouragement were the main ways in which teachers' role was described in an autonomy supporting classroom. There were several practices reported by teachers as well to promote learner autonomy, which were on par with practices recorded in the literature, such as facilitating self-reflection, teaching learning strategies, or allowing students to make choices about their own language learning.

The significance of the study is that it investigated teachers' views on learner autonomy which has been an overlooked area of inquiry for a long time. As teachers' beliefs have a considerable impact on their classroom practices and as a result, on the educational opportunities that learners receive, its inspection was important. The findings show that learner autonomy is assuming an increasingly prominent role in Hungarian language education as the majority of the teachers reported its importance and the desirability of its facilitation. All teachers claimed that they promote learner autonomy through certain practices, however, as the data of this study solely rely on teacher interviews without the support of observational data, this cannot be declared for certain. Another limitation of the

study comes from the labour-intensive nature of qualitative research which only allows for conducting a smaller scale study. However, it is important to note that the number of interviews conducted and analysed during this study exceeds the numbers found in the majority of similar investigations. As convenience sampling was used for the data collection procedure, the willingness and availability of the participants were given greater emphasis. This could cause distortion in the results because most likely enthusiastic and autonomy supporting teachers were willing to partake in the study. Nonetheless, as teachers had varied educational and demographic backgrounds, the study has increased transferability. Teacher interviews were a good way to investigate the participants' beliefs and provide a deeper understanding related to certain aspects of learner autonomy. I also found the use of thematic analysis practical to identify and define emerging themes in the transcripts.

Based on the results of the present study, several directions for further research can be detected. First, it would be useful to combine the method of teacher interviews with classroom observations to obtain a reliable account of teachers' educational practices to facilitate learner autonomy. Second, some teachers mentioned certain constraints such as the number of classes per week during the interviews. The nature of such constraints and understanding how they hinder or even prevent teachers to promote learner autonomy specifically in the Hungarian context would have important pedagogical implications. Such research could inform future language planning and policy measures as well as pre- and in-service teacher training.

The current study also has some implications concerning the situation of learner autonomy in the Hungarian language education context. Most teachers had positive attitudes towards the concept and its introduction and facilitation in the classroom. This might signal that teachers require training about specific practices they can use to promote learner autonomy rather than awareness raising about its importance. This can be the basis of both workshops with specialised content as well as teacher training. The study also has

implications for recording and developing specific practices that can later inform teachers' education on the subject.

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