

Fragile Identities: Exploring Learner Identity, Learner Autonomy and Motivation through Young Learners' Voices

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Abstract

Recent research in the fields of motivation and learner autonomy in language learning has begun to explore their relationships to the construct of identity. This article builds on this through the voices of a group of six learners of French or German in a secondary school in England, over a two-year period. These young learners initially reveal a clear identity as learners responsible for and able to take control of their own learning. However, this identity is seen as fragile when teacher control is increased in response to the external pressure of examinations, and there are indications of loss of motivation. Secondary school teachers, therefore, need to ensure that the learning environment they create engages, nurtures, and protects their learners' identity as learners through sustained opportunities for autonomy. Further research is proposed into aspects of learner identity, as well as ways in which changing pedagogy involves changes in teacher identity.

Résumé

Des études récentes dans les domaines de la motivation et de l'autonomie de l'apprenant des langues explorent les relations entre ces deux domaines et l'identité de l'apprenant. Cet article contribue à ces recherches, en examinant pendant une période de deux ans la voix d'un groupe de six jeunes qui apprennent le français ou l'allemand dans une école secondaire en Angleterre. Ces jeunes apprenants révèlent au début une identité claire en tant qu'apprenants responsables pour et capables de contrôler leur propre apprentissage. Cependant on voit que cette identité est fragile quand le contrôle de l'enseignant est augmenté face à la pression externe des examens, menant potentiellement à une perte de motivation. Les professeurs du secondaire devraient donc créer un milieu d'apprentissage capable d'engager, de développer et de protéger l'identité des apprenants en tant qu'apprenants, en assurant qu'ils peuvent continuer à jouir des opportunités pour l'autonomie. Des recherches futures sont proposées sur des aspects de l'identité des apprenants, et aussi sur les implications des changements de pédagogie pour l'identité des professeurs.

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Introduction

Education policy in many European countries has recently been characterised by a shift towards the inclusion of principles related to the development of the autonomous learner, both in general policy and, more specifically, language teaching (Lamb, 2008; Little, 2011; Lamb & Reinders, 2005; Miliander & Trebbi, 2008). A study carried out as part of the European Pedagogy for Autonomous Learning (EuroPAL) project (Lamb, 2008), a European Commission funded project exploring a pedagogy for autonomy in language learning, noted that such changes in the participating countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden), appear to be propelled by three interrelated imperatives: education for democratic citizenship, education for life, and education for life-long learning.

The Council of Europe's (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has the aim of developing language teaching methods which "strengthen independence of thought, judgment and action, combined with social skills and responsibility" (§ 1.2). It includes the notion of self-directed learning, which entails "raising the learner's awareness of his or her present state of knowledge; self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives; selection of materials; self-assessment" (§ 1.5). This is reinforced by the inclusion of "ability to learn" as an explicit competence to be developed by language learners.

Such principles can also be found in the languages curricula of EuroPAL countries. In the new Norwegian French curriculum at lower secondary level (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2007), for example, one of three general aims is "to promote the pupils' insight into what it is to learn French and their capacity to take charge of their own learning" (p. 14), and this is expanded in the following objectives:

Pupils shall

- help to create good learning situations and working methods, make their own choices, discuss their efforts to learn the language and discuss how to provide the whole group with the best possible conditions for French language learning (Grade 8),
- define their own learning needs, set up learning targets, and assess their own efforts and progress (Grade 9),
- learn to use a broad range of aids to solve the problems they encounter in their study of the language,
- talk about and evaluate learning material and approaches in relation to the aims of the language course, and make choices that will benefit their own learning of French (Grade 10).

These examples suggest that the doors are open to the development of learning contexts that are conducive to learner autonomy, enabling learners to take control increasingly of their learning. In this article, such control is conceptualised in two fundamental ways which correspond to control over the learning environment and control over internal cognition, though it is recognised that they are interrelated. The first is self-management, where learners have opportunities to plan what they wish to or need to achieve, making choices from a range of learning activities in order to achieve their goals, and monitoring and evaluating their progress. The second is self-regulation, which involves the development of learning strategies and metacognition in order to enhance the processes and outcomes of learning (Lamb, 2006).

In this article, located in a UK context, the development of learner autonomy is of interest primarily because of its potential links to the development of motivation (Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011). The article explores the insights of a group of six learners of French or German in a secondary school in England into the nature and process of language learning, focusing in particular on those aspects that reveal a “capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 2), as well as what might constrain this. The data emerged from a larger qualitative study carried out in the school, designed to explore the role of learner autonomy in the development of motivation in language learning through a qualitative learner-focused study. Covering a two-year period (the learners were fourteen years old at the start), the article highlights the way in which their identity as learners emerged as significant to the development of both autonomy and motivation, as well as how this identity was challenged by external constraints on their opportunities for autonomy. This article focuses on a relatively motivated and successful group of learners, though other groups of learners also formed part of the broader study, and the diversity of their perspectives has been described elsewhere (Lamb, 2009, 2010). Its purpose is to enable teachers to learn from these learners and to provide an opportunity for them to reflect on ways of enhancing and sustaining learners’ autonomy and, potentially, motivation.

Following a brief contextualisation of the study, the article highlights ways in which theory and research have explored the relationships among motivation, learner autonomy, and, more recently, identity. This is followed by a description of the research and an analysis of the data. The article concludes by considering a number of implications for teachers as well as recommendations for future research.

Research Context

It has been suggested that speaking a global language such as English, as many do in countries such as Canada and England, can have a negative impact on learning other languages (Crystal, 2003). The lack of motivation to learn languages in English schools has been reflected in the rapid and continuing fall in the number of 14-16 year olds learning languages since schools were allowed to drop them from the compulsory curriculum in 2004. By 2010, only 36% of schools in England had more than 50% of 14-16 year olds learning a language (down from 41% in 2009), and in the Yorkshire region, where this study took place, this figure was even lower at 23%, much less than in 2009 when it was 36% (CILT, ALL, & ISMLA, 2010).

This study was conducted in a non-selective inner-city school of 11- to 16-year olds, in which all learners were still learning a language (French or German) up to the age of 16. The school was selected because of two main factors. Firstly, I was particularly interested in motivation for language learning in challenging schools, and this school could be defined as such in a number of ways: it was located in an area which was not economically privileged, with over a quarter of the learners in the school being entitled to free school meals (an official indicator of economic disadvantage well above the national average); 28% of learners were on the special needs register, again higher than the national average; rates of absenteeism were over 16% compared with the national average of just over 6%; and attainment levels were below the national average, as measured by tests at the age of 14 and national examinations at 16.

Secondly, teachers in the school had developed a pedagogical approach designed to develop learners’ motivation through enabling them to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning, making choices about activities from a bank of varied resources. This resonated with my own previous attempts as a language teacher in similar schools to enhance motivation through providing opportunities for more autonomous learning.

Though I had had limited opportunities to research this as a teacher, a small scale study had identified a positive impact on motivation (Lamb, 1998), and I wished to explore this further in a more comprehensive way.

The Emergence of Identity in the Fields of Motivation and Learner Autonomy

A study of research and theory in the field of language learner motivation reveals close relationships with opportunities for learners to take some control over learning. As Saville-Troike (2006) has highlighted, Crookes and Schmidt (1991) proposed a new research agenda in response to the previous focus of the social psychological, instrumental-integrative model (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972) on naturalistic rather than instructed settings. Through self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985), researchers have explored how the learning context may enable learners to determine their own activity (e.g. Jones, Llacer-Arrastia, & Newbill, 2009), feeding intrinsic motivation through meeting people's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). In other words, for intrinsic motivation to develop, people need to have control over what they do, be sufficiently able to do it, and have the opportunity to relate it to other aspects of their lives.

An important element of motivation research is the focus on ways in which the teacher and the learning context can be "autonomy supportive" or "controlling" (Deci & Ryan, 1987). This informed a number of studies which explore self-determination theory as one aspect of broader frameworks incorporating the classroom context (e.g., Dörnyei, 1994; Noels, 2003; Williams & Burden, 1997). These authors have frequently and explicitly referred to the concept of learner autonomy, for example, Dörnyei's (1998) "Ten commandments for motivating language learners" includes the promotion of learner autonomy as its seventh commandment.

More recently, research into language learner motivation has taken a new turn with the development of Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) "L2 Motivational Self System". The concepts of *ideal L2 self* (what we would like to become as a speaker of the target language) and *ought-to L2 self* (the attributes we believe we should possess in order to meet expectations), have introduced the concept of identity into motivation frameworks. According to van Lier (2007), "identities are ways of relating the self to the world" (p. 58), and "[t]he core of identity is voice, and voice implies agency" (p. 47) with agency defined by Ahearn (2001, p. 112) as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act". Building on his earlier suggestion that motivation and autonomy are two sides of the same coin of agency (van Lier, 1996), his 2007 article concerns action-based teaching, an approach that "puts *agency* at the centre of the learning process" (p. 46) and in which "learners will be working together to construct projects and increasingly shape the path of their own learning" (p. 58). With this, van Lier paves the way for research which incorporates all three concepts (motivation, autonomy, and identity), focusing on the learners' identity not only as a future speaker of another language but also as an autonomous learner as well as on the ways in which such identity is nurtured (or not) by the learning environment.

In parallel with these developments in the field of motivation, the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (AILA) Research Network in Learner Autonomy in Language Learning was encouraging the development of new research methodologies as a way of accessing learners' voices and exploring their identities. Papers from the 2005 symposium on Learners' Voices were published in two issues of *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* (Lamb & Reinders, 2007, 2008), and the following symposium in Essen (2008) focused further on the relationships between autonomy, identity, and motivation. In the book which resulted from this symposium

(Murray et al., 2011), Ushioda (2011) suggests that it is in contexts which foster autonomy in the form of choice, social participation and negotiation that “people’s motivations and identities develop and emerge as dynamically co-constructed processes” (pp. 21-22). The volume also contains contributions which build on the largely quantitative explorations of Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) through qualitative insights into the ways in which a strong L2 self is interrelated with autonomy and motivation (e.g., Lamb, 2011; Malcolm, 2011).

The organic, non-linear nature of motivation, and how it emerges from the interrelationships between the individual with a unique identity and the complexities of the context in which he/she learns, was originally discussed by Ushioda (2009) and corroborated in Murray et al. (2011). Contributions to this volume suggest that all three constructs (identity and autonomy as well as motivation) are organic and “share three noteworthy traits: they change over time, they depend on context and they are socially mediated” (Murray, 2011, p. 248). However, most of this research has been conducted with adults learning English. The contribution of this article is to explore these constructs with younger English-speaking learners learning a foreign language. We shall now turn to the study in order to explore this further.

The Study

This article draws on an exploration of learners’ voices and what they revealed about the learners’ capacity to take control of their learning. Following Rudduck and McIntyre (2007), I took the position that learners “have expertise as insightful commentators on teaching and learning” (p. 12). The research was structured around the framework of metacognitive knowledge, based on the premise that, for learners to be able to manage their own learning, there is a need for them to have control not only over aspects of their learning environment, but also over their cognitive processes. Research suggests that such control requires the development of metacognitive knowledge (Lamb, 2009; Wenden, 2001), defined by Flavell (1985) as knowledge about the self as learner (person knowledge), the tasks involved in learning (task knowledge) and the strategies which can be called into play in order for learning to take place (strategy knowledge). This provided a useful framework for exploring the nature and processes of language learning with the learners, and offering insights into the learners’ sense of identity as learners as well as what they found motivating or not.

Recognising that the learners may not be used to discussing learning in depth, I developed a series of focused group conversations (FGCs) (see the example in Appendix 1). These were a form of “mediated consultation” (MacBeath, Demitriou, Rudduck, & Myers, 2003), designed as a hybrid of focus groups and group interviews (Lamb, 2010), with the intention of offering young learners a flexible, inclusive, and supportive framework for formulating and articulating their thoughts, and suspending as far as possible the usual power relationships between adult and children. The FGC protocols were structured in such a way as to help all participants feel able and confident enough to contribute to the discussions. Adapting Krueger’s (1998) work on focus groups to suit young participants, the FGCs moved from inclusive introductory questions through a number of phases which gradually built up to the main focus question. A range of questioning techniques were employed (e.g., Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) “active interviewing”), as well as activities such as “concept mapping” (Powney & Watts, 1987), projective techniques (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), self-rating scales, and drawing (e.g., learners were asked to spend ten minutes in pairs sketching a classroom of the future, which was then used as the basis for a

discussion). Furthermore, I carefully considered my persona and role in the group, for example, asking them to call me by my first name, sharing information about my daughter, pointing out that I came from the same area as the school, stressing that there were no correct answers to my questions, and emphasizing that anonymity would be guaranteed. I also paid attention to environment and atmosphere, for example, using a room which was not usually used as a classroom and arranging chairs in a circle (Lamb, 2010).

The following data are extracted from the series of six FGCs carried out over two years (four in the first year and two in the second) with a group of three boys and three girls, some learning French and some German. In order to offer an environment in which learners could feel comfortable about expressing their thoughts, uninhibited by the presence of other learners with different levels of achievement and motivation, I tried to make the group as homogeneous as possible in terms of attainment and motivation levels, and this was achieved with the support of the group's teachers. Although this particular group was identified as being more motivated and higher attaining than other groups who participated, the intention was not to measure and compare, but to encourage them to speak.

The FGCs were both audio- and video-recorded in order to enable me to identify who was speaking as well as note any relevant body language. They were then fully transcribed by me as I was committed to substantial and faithful use of the learners' own voices in the analysis. Coding began with a general scan of the data with my analytical foci in mind (metacognitive knowledge, control, identity, and motivation), noting emerging questions (which LeCompte and Preissle (1993) call the beginnings of a "dialogue" with the data). I then moved on to a more detailed categorisation process which drew on the constant comparison method of qualitative analysis first used by Glaser and Strauss (1967), involving a constant "to-ing and fro-ing" between the emerging categories and the data. I also noted any changes over the two-year period. Finally I summarised the data, selecting the most appropriate quotes from the transcriptions.

The Learners' Voices

In the first four FGCs, the six learners revealed that they identified strongly with education, both then and for the future. They showed a range of motivations for learning languages, including intrinsic interest in languages themselves and had a strong sense of "ideal L self" (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) in their desire to meet and work with foreigners, both at home and overseas, and, to a lesser extent, awareness of the instrumental value of languages. However, as one of the learners, Jodie, suggested, they also had high expectations of the task of language learning, which they found difficult to live up to:

Jodie: No, it's just going to confuse you if you read German and French news.

You can do it quite well but you can't do it excellently.

This led them to believe that language learning is difficult. Nevertheless, undeterred, they suggested changes in the way languages are taught, especially in terms of skills and content. For example, they believed that the main purpose of language learning is to be able to speak:

Jodie: If you go to France ...

Annie: ... you need to be able to speak.

Jodie: ... and you go into a shop you can't write something down and hold it up. You've just got to ask them. If you get a job when you're older and you're speaking on the phone and ordering something from somebody abroad, you've got to speak to them, you can't write it down.

They also argued for more general conversation rather than transactional language; for example, Mark made the point that “as a child you wouldn’t really go into a tourist place and ask for information”. However, they then said that they could only converse if they had something to talk about, which led them into a discussion of the content of their language lessons:

Mark: In France, people are going to talk about what’s happened before in their country and you don’t understand. You’re never even told things that happened. [...]

Jimmy: I think if we had two lessons a week and we had one on like the actual language and one on the background of the country or something. Like, you could take French geography, or German geography.

The learners’ comments revealed insights into the language learning cycle, including recognition that they needed to revisit language constantly in order to revise it. They believed that it is important to take time to become familiar with language and emphasised the need for lessons to be driven by learners’ learning rather than by the syllabus. They were aware that teachers themselves are constrained by external requirements, but suggested that focusing too much on these could be counterproductive:

Jimmy: They pile more and more work on you before you’ve learned the last things. We’ve not finished one topic and they just push you onto the next one. So they can get the “National Curriculum” (he makes quotation gesture) done!

Possibly for this reason, they preferred to be able to work at their own pace, either in groups or individually, and have choice in what they did. Such opportunities for self-management afforded them opportunities to take control of their learning. Their chances of working effectively in this way were moreover enhanced by their clear and detailed understanding of the purpose of specific tasks, and their ability to evaluate them on the basis of authenticity and personal relevance. Describing pair work, for example, they understood that written support is intended to be removed eventually, when pupils are able to speak without it. There was also a description of information gap activities.

Though there was little evidence that these learners loved languages, they construed the learner as someone for whom motivation should come from within. They did not like this to be compromised by others’ efforts to motivate them, though sometimes they wanted to prove themselves to others.

Jimmy: You have to want to learn. If you don’t want to learn you just don’t bother. I know what my Mum is, the minute you walk through the door, “how much homework?” and “you’ve got to get straight to it”.

Jodie: My Mum isn’t like that, [...] she says, “oh you’re responsible enough now, if you’ve got it, you go and do it, I’m not going to tell you to do it”.

Researcher: So what makes you do it then?

Jodie: Because I want to succeed, and my brother did really well, so I don’t want to look stupid at the side of him.

The data suggest that the learners had a strong sense of identity as learners. They considered themselves to be fully responsible for their progress and capable of taking control of their learning. They commented on the efforts needed to learn as well as how to regulate their learning, even though they claimed never to have discussed this in depth in class. They referred to many varied strategies, which enabled them to understand, practise, memorise, and produce language. They discussed and debated comprehension strategies maturely: for example, skimming through the text, looking at

the questions, then going back in detail; working it out from the context; using non-verbal clues when listening, for example, laughter. They suggested many strategies for practising the language, including re-doing tasks from earlier years, reading simple books or newspapers, watching German cartoons, using the computer to listen to and repeat French, and recording and listening to themselves. Their practising and memorising strategies included those which enabled them to monitor and evaluate their learning (peer and parental testing, self-testing, repetition and monitoring of pronunciation, making an effort to remember rather than immediately asking or looking up a word, identifying and noting down language which is difficult to remember).

The self-management aspects of planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation were thus supported by knowledge of the cognitive processes involved, enabling them to analyse their strengths and weaknesses in detail. For example, they spoke about their preoccupation with detail, suggesting that this could be a weakness in some circumstances. Jodie wanted her work to be perfect and this involves understanding subtle grammatical differences. Jimmy recognised that he is better with “specific” learning content, identifying topics such as food and shopping, than with more abstract concepts such as “putting sentences together”.

These learners understood that it was their responsibility to learn from mistakes, though their high expectations of themselves meant that they did not like making them in front of others. Nevertheless, they felt it was important that the teacher corrects them, unless it was “a really big mistake and you’d be really embarrassed by it”, in which case “they should just pretend they’ve not heard you or something” (Jodie).

Their self-monitoring and self-evaluation led into target-setting which most of the group found important:

Jodie: Yes, because once you’ve put it down and you understand what you need to do, you can focus on that more.

Lucy: Set yourself targets.

Their understanding of evaluation extended to reflection over longer periods of learning, for example, when asked what they did if their grades were poor:

Jimmy: It’s all right on occasions. You’d think it might just be a one-off. But if you do it often ...

Jodie: ... if you’re usually good and you have a one-off bad, you’d think, come on you’ve got to do it properly now. But if you do a few bad in a row, you have to stop and think about it, what you’re doing wrong.

Their high expectations included the need for the learner to be organised, and they offered many examples of their own organisation, both in the broader sense of managing resources and deadlines, and in the sense of having an organised approach to tasks, such as note-taking.

The learners’ responses to questions concerning constraints on learning provided further insights into their identity as learners who believed in their capacity for control over learning. Although they identified some internal constraints, such as lack of confidence (for example, Lucy found it difficult to develop her speaking skills), they were generally able to suggest how they might address these. More constraining, however, were external factors such as disruptive learners in the class or insufficient resources, which appeared to present a greater challenge to their sense of control. Over the last two FGCs, in the year leading up to their national examinations, there was evidence that the learners were becoming increasingly preoccupied by such external constraints, and were particularly frustrated by the reduced opportunities to manage their own learning, and this started to threaten their identity as learners as described

above. Robert and Jimmy, for example, complained about the pressure put on them to prepare for their examinations, which they perceived as unhelpful to their learning:

Robert: Like in languages, we start doing our tests that count towards our mark at the end of the year. And they put too much pressure on you and you feel worried when you're doing them that you need to get full marks, or you're not going to do well. You just don't concentrate as well.

The data suggest that the teacher was now imposing a much more teacher-centred approach. Not only were the learners subjected to constant tests, but they were also provided with "correct" answers to help them to succeed. Mark complained that he was not listened to in class:

Mark: Like sometimes some teachers just want one particular answer; you might say something that's right and they just chuck it, like they don't pay much attention to you, they just tell you it's wrong.

This increasing teacher control was experienced as an external constraint on learning, which challenged their identity as learners able to take control of their learning. They still tried to find ways of improving the situation through negotiation with the teacher:

Mark: You could tell [the teacher] that you're not finding it very interesting and you're not the only one, and perhaps the teacher could change the way they do the lesson.

Jimmy: Some of the teachers would say stop complaining and sit down.

Researcher: Do you do that?

Jimmy: Yes, but you have to not do it in the middle of the class, not just shout it out because the teachers will just tell you to be quiet, even if you just wanted to do better. But I suppose they'd understand more if you went after the lesson and said it's not just you.

Nevertheless they became increasingly frustrated, even despondent, as exemplified by Jimmy, who was actively involved in the School Council but was beginning to realise that this forum for learners was tokenistic and did not provide an opportunity for learners to have a voice in important matters:

Jimmy: [The School Council] might be able to do a bit more if it involved changing the teachers, because all we ever do in the School Council is talk about discos. We've asked for loads of things, like lockers, bike racks, Mars bars, vending machines, but we never get any of it because it's all too expensive. But if you asked if anyone could get together to talk to the teachers to try and get their act a bit better, it might actually do something.

In summary, this change in the learning context happened to learners whose identity as learners was characterised by a recognition of the active role they should play in learning. These learners appreciated opportunities to learn independently, either as individuals or groups, as this afforded them opportunities to take control of their learning through making choices. Their chances of learning in this way were enhanced by their understanding of the purpose and value of specific tasks. They also revealed relatively sophisticated levels of strategic knowledge in the areas of self-regulation and self-management (including self-monitoring and self-evaluation), and were thus able to address their own perceived weaknesses when they arose.

Perhaps because of this aspect of the learners' identity, they attributed most constraints on learning to external factors such as the teacher or the lack of resources. They still tried to take some control over these constraints, but they became more and

more frustrated by external attempts to push them through examinations, such as through excessive testing and a now inflexible curriculum, which increasingly appeared to erode their identity as learners able to control learning. In the final two FGCs there were signs that their influence was now even limited by the perceived reluctance of teachers to listen to them in any meaningful way. In our final meeting, learners commented positively on their attendance at the FGCs, but expressed scepticism about how acceptable such conversations would be to their teachers:

Mark: It wouldn't work with a teacher, because you wouldn't want to say anything against your own teacher.

Jodie: It wouldn't work because you wouldn't dare say anything against them. If it was an outsider that came in, like you, we could say anything to you.

Discussion

The above data reveal that these learners have much to say about their language learning experiences and that their desire to take control over their learning, backed up by their capacity to manage and regulate their learning, form their sense of identity as learners. The learners' voices also suggest that this identity is closely related to their motivation to learn, which is potentially compromised when their identity is challenged by an increase in teacher control.

It could be argued then that the learners' identity as learners and their motivation are closely linked to their voice, both in the sense of them being able to have control and influence over their learning and in the sense of them being listened to by the teacher, and as such, there is a clear link with van Lier's (2007) understanding of voice and how it relates to identity and agency. In terms of Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) theories of motivational self and identity, it may be argued that these students have their own strong sense of ought-to L2 self, which involves the operationalisation of their knowledge and beliefs about their role as learners as well as an ideal L2 self which sees a future in which they are able to live and work in other language contexts. Benson (2007, p. 30) has suggested that agency may be "a point of origin for the development of autonomy", with identity as one of its outcomes, but the data presented here would suggest that the learners' identity as learners, if it includes a capacity to self-manage and self-regulate, may also lead to autonomy, where they are able to act as agents of their own learning. I am not arguing, however, that there is linearity between these three (or, with agency, four) constructs, as the impact of changes in the learning environment (including Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) component of L2 learning experience), where these reduce learners' sense of control over learning, appear to undermine the learners' identity as learners and agents and, possibly, their motivation. This supports Murray et al.'s (2011) claims that identity, motivation, and autonomy can all change over time, and that they depend on the context and are socially mediated.

The article's contribution is to highlight the precarious nature of even relatively strong learner identities in secondary learners, where pressures on teachers for their classes to achieve good examination grades can lead to an increase in teacher control and a concomitant loss of learner autonomy. In Czisér and Kormos' (2009) study of identity and motivation, they similarly found a difference between secondary school and university language learners: in the former group, language learning experiences have a greater influence than an ideal L2 self on motivation, whereas in university contexts, the L2 self and the learning environment play equally important roles in motivation. By introducing the concept of autonomy into the equation, this article offers a deeper understanding of what may be a key factor in the learning experiences and environment, namely learner control.

Of course, the research has its limitations. It is focused on learners who clearly have the capacity to self-manage and self-regulate their learning as well as an identity which supports their sense of responsibility for learning. Other learners would be different, and indeed the broader research from which this article is taken showed this (Lamb, 2009, 2010). However, in the spirit of Rubin (1975), the intention was to explore within a secondary context what the “good language learner” can teach us, and the study has suggested that even such “good language learners” need a learning environment in which their identities as learners can flourish. This has several implications for teachers. Firstly, they need to engage their learners’ identity as learners in the learning process, which “requires that the teacher draws her learners into their own learning process, making them share responsibility for setting the learning agenda, selecting learning activities and materials, managing classroom interaction and evaluating learning outcomes” (Little, 2007). The requirements of the Norwegian curriculum, described in the introduction to this article, exemplify a policy description of the goals which might be attained in such a learning environment. Depending on their particular contexts, teachers may draw on experiences reported elsewhere, such as flexible learning (Lamb, 2006), action-based learning (van Lier, 2007) and experiential learning (Kohonen, 2001).

Secondly, teachers cannot assume that all learners will have a learner identity which is conducive to learning in these ways. For most learners, “self-management in learning will be something they have to learn” (Little, 2007, p. 23). Teachers, therefore, should offer opportunities to develop the metacognitive knowledge and strategies which will enable learners to be more involved in their learning, nurturing learners’ identity as learners capable of taking control of their learning. Such “learner training” (Sinclair, 1996) needs to be integrated into tasks and made explicit, supported by Little’s (2007) principle of learner reflection, according to which “explicitly detached reflection on the process and content of learning” (pp. 24-25) is developed through dialogue between teacher and learners. The focus is not only on learning strategies, however, which this research has identified as only one part of the capacity to take some control over language learning and which need to be developed in tandem with other aspects of metacognitive knowledge if learners are to develop their identity as actively engaged learners. Indeed research into language learner strategies now acknowledges that a shift is needed from a focus on the quantity of strategy use to the quality of strategy use, including metacognition “as the orchestrating mechanism for combining strategies effectively in any given situation” (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007, p. 23).

Thirdly, even when the learning environment is conducive to learner autonomy and learners have developed their capacity to learn, external threats can arise from policy changes, financial constraints, and so on. Whenever this arises, instead of tightening their control over learners, teachers need to find ways of protecting as well as engaging and nurturing learners’ identities as learners in order to avoid a “dramatic loss of ‘sense of self-as-learner’” (Johnston & Johnston, 1997, p. 1). Learners’ identities can in fact be drawn on to address external challenges to the autonomous, motivational learner environment. The learners in this article shared a willingness to negotiate, and opportunities for this need to be structured into the learning environment, possibly employing strategies similar to those used in the FGCs in this research, to engage learners in sharing their insights into learning and to find collaborative ways of addressing the challenges. Even where new rules need to be developed, these can be negotiated or at least imposed in ways which are informational and non-controlling rather than coercive and controlling (Reeve as cited in Jones et al., 2009). Ushioda (2011) draws on McCaslin (2009) to make the point that “[w]hen students are enabled

to voice opinions, preferences and values, align themselves with those of others, engage in discussion, struggle, resist, negotiate, compromise or adapt, their motivational dispositions and identities evolve and are given expression" (pp. 21-22). In other words, according to Ushioda, motivations and identities "develop and emerge as dynamically co-constructed processes" through social participation (p. 22). As Giroux (1983) suggests, structures should be developed which enable learners to see their group potential as agents able to take part in "social and political reconstruction" (p. 228), rather than as powerless individuals who can only resist by disrupting or withdrawing.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, education for democratic citizenship is a driving force in many of the shifts in European education policy. The concept of democracy brings with it the idea that power is shared, with "citizens" being involved in decision-making, and in the educational context it has been said that this changes "the capacities each person needs to flourish and the relationships that will be needed to sustain autonomy and collective well-being" (Nixon, Martin, McKeown, & Ranson, 1996, p. vii). The key to such personal and social demands is, according to these authors, "the *agency* of the learner", which is seen to have an intimate connection to motivation:

We learn best when we have a sense of purpose and such motivation is best likely to grow out of our active participation in creating the projects which are to shape our selves as well as the communities in which we live. (pp. vii-viii)

This article has explored the voices of a group of relatively motivated and successful young learners, using the framework of metacognitive knowledge to explore their understanding of language learning and what this reveals about their identity as learners and how this might be related to their capacity for autonomy and their motivation for language learning. In the first year of the research, the learners revealed that they had an apparently clear identity as learners responsible for their learning, a strong desire to have a voice in what and how they were learning, and relatively high levels of task and strategic knowledge to support them in taking control. The data suggest that they were motivated to learn and that this was connected to a strong sense of L2 self, both ideal and ought-to. In the second year, however, there was an indication that the learners were experiencing changes in their learning environment in the form of increasing teacher control and that these were compromising their sense of control over learning and, with this, their identity as learners and potentially their motivation. This suggests that these learners' identity as learners was still fragile and sensitive to perceived external constraints when these involve enhanced teacher control. Although the research broadly supports recent proposals that identity is intertwined with both autonomy and motivation, and that all three are sensitive to context, a contribution of this article is to suggest that the identity of younger learners is particularly sensitive to increases in teacher control, and that even strong learner identities can be compromised.

The article then provided three recommendations for teachers based on the data:

- to engage learners' identities as learners by creating learning environments in which learners can have some control over their learning;
- to recognise that not all learners' identities will be conducive to learner autonomy, and therefore to nurture such identities through appropriate forms of learner training; and
- to protect learners' identities as learners responsible for their learning, by dealing with external constraints (such as examinations) not through increasing teacher

control but by engaging their learners' voices to find collaborative, negotiated solutions.

This study suggests a number of areas for further research. Firstly, it is unclear where the learners' sense of identity as learners in this study originated. Holec (1981, p. 3) has claimed that the ability to take charge of one's own learning is not "inborn but must be acquired either by "natural" means or (as most often happens) by formal learning". If these learners had not had any explicit discussions about learning in their language lessons, however, as emerged from the research, it would be useful to understand when, where, and how this identity had been acquired, and how their sense of responsibility for learning related to their ability to take charge of it. Similarly, longitudinal studies would enable us to understand better the temporal dimension of identity in relation to autonomy and motivation, particularly in school contexts where identity appears to be fragile. The potential role of age and power differences in learner-teacher relationships would provide useful insights into this.

Secondly, further research needs to be carried out into practical ways in which teaching approaches in secondary schools can explicitly nurture and protect their learners' identity as learners through pedagogies for autonomy, and how this may enhance motivation. Of particular need is research in contexts in which teachers themselves are under extreme pressure from external constraints. As autonomy is not only context-specific but also resistant to a common definition (Jiménez Raya, Lamb, & Vieira, 2007), pedagogies for autonomy necessarily have to be sensitively developed, with learner-control being understood "not as a single, unitary concept, but rather a continuum along which various learning situations may be placed" (p. 5). according to what might be possible Literature in the field has provided many case studies and evaluations of practice in different contexts. However, only recently has the impact on learners' identities been considered, with very little attention paid to this in secondary school contexts. Such research may help us to support the development of identities which activate a commitment to lifelong language learning and an ability to engage more fully in a globalised world (Lamb & Reinders, 2005). Furthermore, we also need to understand how pedagogies for autonomy relate to identity development in different cultural contexts, while recognising that identity, along with motivation, is not only culturally/contextually grounded, but also has to be understood in relation to complex individual differences (Ushioda, 2009, 2011).

Finally, if learners' identity is closely related to their autonomy and motivation, this demands a reconsideration of teacher identity. Jiménez Raya (2009, p. 191) states that teaching "involves the creation of an identity shaped by the individual's evolving perspectives and philosophies of teaching", and adds that pedagogy for autonomy "demands a new identity". Pedagogies for autonomy require teachers to question critically many of their assumptions, both in initial and in-service teacher education, and this has been defined as a "struggle" where constraints and dilemmas have to be faced (Jiménez Raya et al., 2007; Vieira, 2009). Much of the literature which engages with teacher education from this perspective identifies strategies to encourage critical reflection through, for example, new approaches to observation, supervision and action research (e.g., Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva, & Fernandes, 2008), the use of journal writing (e.g., Hacker & Barkhuizen, 2008), and use of the European Language Portfolio (Little, 2009). There has, however, been little study of the ways in which learners' voices may contribute to such teacher development, particularly in contexts such as England where there are strong external pressures on teachers from, for example, national curricula, policies, or examinations.

This study has revealed that learners *are* interested in talking about their learning, but we know little about how teachers might best learn from listening to them. Further research into how learners' voices might challenge teachers' assumptions and provoke the development of new identities, possibly through teacher and learner engagement in collaborative inquiry, could offer fresh insights into and ongoing development of identity research and its contribution to the fields of autonomy and motivation in relation not only to learners but to teachers too.

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Appendix 1

Focused group conversation protocol: Meeting 3 (Task knowledge - Part 1)

A: Introduction (2 minutes)

Collect any lesson evaluations completed since we last met.

Today's meeting is a bit different. I'm interested in finding out what you want to learn in languages, and how you like to be taught.

B: Opening question (3 minutes)

Where do you usually go on holiday? (Ask each in turn.)

C: Introductory questions (5 minutes)

Have you been on a school trip? What do you think of them?

D: Transition question (5 minutes)

Brainstorm about languages:

Imagine you were making a poster to encourage others to learn a foreign language, what would you say is enjoyable about it? And useful? Any other reasons why some people enjoy learning them? (Prompts: Think about the language itself, then tasks/activities.)

Now why do some people hate languages? (Prompts: language itself, its usefulness?)

(Why are they sometimes the most unpopular subject? Are they really less useful than others?) (If problematic, ask about tasks too).

E: Key questions (30 minutes)

Think back to the last unit you completed before Christmas. Let's try to describe step-by-step what happened in the lessons to help you to get to know the new topic. (Use whiteboard to support this mind-mapping exercise.)

What was the topic?

What happened in the first lesson for you to meet the new language?

What happened after you had met the new words?

Who worked hardest at each stage? (Add T or ST for Teacher or Student.)

At which parts did you find yourself working hardest?

Which part did you find most enjoyable? (Add smiley faces)

In which parts do you learn the most? (Add ! or !!)

How does this compare with other subjects? (If it is different, which suits you best? Do you understand why it is different?)

In pairs, imagine you are in some future time when the world is so small that you have to learn a language to survive. You'd really want to learn one then. Now draw the ideal languages classroom of the future.

Present it to the others, explaining your choices.

F: Final questions (10 minutes)

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of working as a whole class, in small groups, and independently. (I record onto three pieces of flipchart paper.)

Which do you prefer? What do you like about it?

Which do you like least? What do you not like about it?

In every week (2hrs 30 minutes of language lessons), how much time do you think should be spent on each type of activity?

For next time:

Bring example of task done recently - also exercise books.