Investigating Student Beliefs about Language Learning

Karin Macdonald

An empirical study of first year students studying English at Eszterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary, in 2004 is presented in this paper. The study aimed to investigate student beliefs about language learning. Student attitudes were examined at the start of their college studies and again at the end of their first semester after following a new language practice programme designed specifically to promote learner autonomy. The 2004 study presented here shows that students at the start of their studies seem more aware of learner autonomy principles than previously assumed. In addition, at the end of the first semester a small increase in some learner autonomy beliefs seem to be observable among the students. However, this paper only presents a preliminary inquiry into student beliefs at the college and more extensive research is necessary before more conclusive statements can be made.

1 Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a localised empirical study of first year students studying English at Eszterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary, in 2004. The study aimed to investigate student beliefs about language learning, in particular those attitudes conducive to autonomous language learning behaviour. Student attitudes were examined at the start of their college studies in order to gauge students' readiness for the promotion of learner autonomy, and again at the end of their first semester at the college to gauge student beliefs after following a new language practice programme designed specifically to promote learner autonomy. The intention to promote learner autonomy at the college results from the findings of a previous study of the former language practice syllabus (Macdonald 2003, summarised in Macdonald 2004). In order to contextualise the findings of the study presented here, this paper will begin by reviewing the findings of the 2003 study and describing the new language practice programme. The 2004 study will then be presented and the findings will be analysed. The conclusion of

the study presented here shows that students at the start of their studies seem more aware of learner autonomy principles than previously assumed in the 2003 study. In addition, at the end of the first semester a small increase in some learner autonomy beliefs seem to be observable among the students. However, this paper only presents a preliminary inquiry into student beliefs at the college and more extensive research is necessary before conclusive statements can be made regarding learner autonomy, including the possible connection between increased learner autonomy and the introduction of the new programme.

2 The New Language Practice Programme: Summary

An in-depth study undertaken in 2003 to examine the English language practice programme at the college identified a number of problem areas which needed to be addressed, namely:

- the lack of opportunities for student-centred decision-making or discussion;
- the problems of student passivity and the large number of failing students in the first year at the college;
- the lack of opportunities for collaboration among staff as well as learners;
- aims and content specifications for Language Practice units which did not provide a clear enough picture for teachers or learners;
- the lack of cohesion between LP units 1 to 4 (Macdonald 2003).

As a result, the 2003 study recommended a new programme for language practice which would actively promote learner autonomy for language learning. By implementing a programme specifically designed to address student attitudes to language learning, it was hoped that students would begin to actively seek to improve their language learning skills and work more independently to achieve that goal. As Little states, "in formal educational contexts, genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous" (1995: 175) and adds, "our enterprise is not to promote new kinds of learning, but by pursuing learner autonomy as an explicit goal, to help more learners to succeed" (1995:175).

The main principle upon which the new programme of English language study is based is therefore as follows: the promotion of the learner as an active participant in the language learning process within an instructed environment, where his/her active participation is to be encouraged through the development of the learner's ability to make decisions, think critically, work collaboratively and on an individual basis in a way which will help his/her studies in the educational setting in question (Macdonald 2003). This

principle is supported by a communicative paradigm for teaching and learning English which emphasises the development of students' communicative as well as study competence. The syllabus is designed to incorporate problem solving tasks, project work, language and study skills analysis, and negotiation and collaboration between staff and students in order to promote the underlying principle of learner autonomy as defined by the 2003 study. Finally, the aims of the new programme are concerned with meeting the study skills needs of full time students in their first year at the college and are summarised on the syllabus as follows:

- to involve students actively in the learning process by providing opportunities to make choices regarding activities in and out of class;
- to prepare students for their non-LP English medium subjects at the college;
- to raise students' awareness of pedagogical goals, the content of materials being learned, preferred learning styles and strategies;
- to give students opportunities to work collaboratively and individually, and be supported in their differing roles.

The next section will now present the 2004 study of learner attitudes.

3 The Study

3.1 Aims of the Study: Learner Beliefs

The study presented in this section aims to gauge learner attitudes to learner autonomy at the start of their studies and at the end of one semester of a new language practice programme. Research has shown the importance of learner beliefs with regards to their impact on language learning (Horwitz 1988, Victori and Lockhart 1995, and Cotterall 1995 and 1999). As Cotterall argues:

> Language learners hold beliefs about teachers and their role, about feedback, about themselves as learners and their role, about language learning and about learning in general. These beliefs will affect (and sometimes inhibit) learners' receptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language class, particularly when the approach is not consonant to the learners' experience (1995: 203).

It is therefore necessary to examine student attitudes to language learning in order to evaluate the promotability of learner autonomy in the context in question and to assess the effectiveness of the new programme,

which is designed specifically to develop qualities associated with learner autonomy.

3.2 Methodology

78 full-time first year students out of a total of 113 were given a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of their first semester of the English programme at the college. The students were all members of one teacher's Language Practice unit, divided into 5 seminar groups (there were 7 groups for each Language Practice unit in total at that time) and were thus able to receive exactly the same instructions for completing the questionnaire at the start and at the end of the semester by the same teacher. Students must complete four Language Practice units in the first semester of the first year of English study (resulting in 6 hours of language practice study per week, one language practice unit being 1 hour and 30 minutes per week) and this is reduced to one Language Practice unit in the second semester of the first year (1 hour and 30 minutes per week). This is therefore the reason for gauging student attitudes to learner autonomy already after the first semester, as the programme of Language Practice units are weighted to the first semester and the active promotion of learner autonomy according to the syllabus is most involved in that period of the first year. Furthermore, there is a level of expectation on the part of teaching staff at the college that the students are ready to take effective responsibility for their studies by the time most of their academic English courses start in the second semester.

Questionnaire items were based on a questionnaire format used by Cotterall which sought to target those variables "which are considered important by researchers interested in learner autonomy" (1999: 498). The variables identified on Cotterall's questionnaire resulted from a series of interviews with ESL students about their experience of language learning. The items used for the questionnaire at Eszterházy Károly College were taken from Cotterall's variables of 'learning strategies', 'the role of the teacher', 'opportunities for language use' and 'effort' (1999). The decision for focussing the questionnaire on these variables was a direct result of staff feedback on student language abilities and attitudes in an earlier study at the college (Macdonald 2003), which suggested that students had a teacher-centred view of teaching and learning and needed to increase their understanding of learner strategies.

The questionnaire was thus organised according to 18 Likert-type statements on which respondents indicated their agreement with the statements on a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In addition, there were 2 sections of ranked items with a total of 7 statements which respondents had to arrange in order of importance. The questionnaire

was given on two separate occasions to the same set of students. The first occasion was in September 2004 and the second occasion was in December 2004. In order to compare the results of the two occasions more accurately, students were asked to put their names on the questionnaires. They were, however, assured that the results would in no way affect their grades on the course, the results for individuals would not be made public and students were reassured that there was no single correct answer to the questions, but that the questionnaire was genuinely trying to find out their views.

3.3 Data Analysis

Student responses to the two questionnaires were calculated as percentages and analysed comparatively in order to examine any trends of student beliefs regarding autonomous language learning. The results are presented in section 3.4.

3.4 Results

This section presents the student responses to the student questionnaire for September and December. The questionnaire variables pertaining to the learning strategies, the role of the teacher, opportunities for language use and effort as part of language learning success will be presented in separate sections. The two occasions of September and December are reported separately under each variable.

3.4.1 Learning Strategies

A. September

According to the results of the learner strategies section of the questionnaire for September, the students polled were confident at the start of their studies that they could find their own ways to practise language (71.79% of students in the agree and strongly agree categories contrasted with only 5.13% in the disagree categories). In addition, they felt they were able to explain why they needed English (78.21% agreeing and strongly agreeing with the statement as opposed to 2.56% disagreeing) and felt able to ask for help when they needed it (74.36% agreeing and strongly agreeing but 7.69% disagreeing). They also felt they could identify their strengths and weaknesses regarding learning English (75.64% agreeing and strongly agreeing, but 10.26% disagreeing). Less acute difference between ageement and disagreement lay in their perceptions regarding their ability to check their own work for mistakes (44.87% agreeing and strongly agreeing with 28.21% disagreeing). Areas where students were more neutral were the strategies for setting learning goals (46.15% agreeing and strongly agreeing and 14.1%

disagreeing, but 39.75% having ticked the neutral box) and measuring their own progress (46.15% agreeing and strongly agreeing and 12.82% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing, but 41.03% being neutral).

The table of results is given in table 1 below in percentages:

Table 1 September responses to Likert items on learning strategies

	September: learning strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	I know how to:					
1	find my own ways to practise language	12.82	58.97	23.08	5.13	0.00
2	check my own work for mistakes	7.69	37.18	26.92	28.21	0.00
3	explain why I need English	29.49	48.72	19.23	2.56	0.00
4	identify my strengths and weaknesses	17.95	57.69	14.10	10.26	0.00
5	ask for help when I need it	30.77	43.59	17.95	7.69	0.00
6	set my own learning goals	6.41	39.74	39.74	14.10	0.00
7	plan my learning	15.38	42.31	20.51	19.23	2.56
8	measure my progress	7.69	38.46	41.03	11.54	1.28

B. December

The same set of students were polled with the same questionnaire in December and, according to the results of the learner strategies section, the students remained confident at the end of the semester with regards to their belief that they could find their own ways to practise language (75.64% of students in the agree and strongly agree catergories contrasted with only 7.69% in the disagree categories). Furthermore, most students still felt they were able to explain why they needed English (78.21% agreeing and strongly agreeing as opposed to 6.41% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing) and still felt able to ask for help when they needed it (79.49% agreeing and strongly agreeing with the statement but 11.54% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing). However, 6.41% more students than in September felt they could identify their strengths and weaknesses regarding learning English (82.05% agreeing and strongly agreeing with only 3.85% disagreeing). The difference between ageement and disagreement became greater in December regarding student perceptions of their ability to check their own work for mistakes (58.97% agreeing and strongly agreeing with 20.51% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing) and their feelings of being able to plan their learning (60.26% agreeing and strongly agreeing and 12.82% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing). 20.52% more students felt they could set their learning goals by December (66.67% agreeing and strongly agreeing and

5.13% disagreeing), though a number of students showed they were still neutral in this regard (28.21%, nevertheless 11.53% less than in September). The ability to measure progress remained an area of uncertainty for students with 12.82% less students agreeing and strongly agreeing with the statement than in September (with 33.33% in December) and 15.38% more students ticking the neutral box (with 56.41% in December).

The table of results for December is presented in percentages in table 2 below:

Table 2 December responses to Likert items on learning strategies

	December: learning strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	I know how to:					
1	find my own ways to practise language	12.82	62.82	16.67	7.69	0.00
2	check my own work for mistakes	8.97	50.00	20.51	17.95	2.56
3	explain why I need English	34.62	43.59	15.38	5.13	1.28
4	identify my strengths and weaknesses	25.64	56.41	14.10	3.85	0.00
5	ask for help when I need it	28.21	51.28	8.97	10.26	1.28
6	set my own learning goals	10.26	56.41	28.21	5.13	0.00
7	plan my learning	16.67	43.59	26.92	11.54	1.28
8	measure my progress	2.56	30.77	56.41	10.26	0.00

3.4.2 The Role of the Teacher

A. September

The greatest majority of students believed that the teacher's role is to help the students learn effectively (47.44% agreeing and 43.59% strongly agreeing, 91.03% in total; and only 1.28% disagreeing); to say what the students' difficulties are (39.74% agreeing and 39.74% strongly agreeing, 79.48% in total; and 5.13% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing); to create opportunities for the students to practise language (41.03% agreeing and 25.64% strongly agreeing, 66.67% in total; and 7.69% disagreeing); and to offer to help the students (42.31% agreeing and 38.46% strongly agreeing, 80.77% in total; with no-one disagreeing but 1.28% strongly disagreeing). 69.23% agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that the teacher should tell the student what to do, with only 15.38% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing. In addition, students believed that the teacher should tell the student what progress he/she is making (66.66% agreeing and strongly agreeing, and 6.41% disagreeing); and students also believed the role of the teacher was to give regular tests to students (64.1% agreeing and

strongly agreeing, but only 8.97% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing).
51.28% were neutral towards the idea that the teacher should explain why an
activity is being done, which contrasts with 37.18% agreeing and strongly
agreeing that the teacher should explain, and 11.54% disagreeing. In
comparison, 42.31% were neutral about the teacher's role in deciding how
long a student should spend on an activity (with 26.93% agreeing and
strongly agreeing, and 30.77% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing).
Similarly, 33.33% were neutral with regards to the teacher setting a student's
learning goal (with 34.61% agreeing and strongly agreeing, and 32.05%
disagreeing and strongly disagreeing).

The results for September regarding the role of the teacher are presented
in percentages in table 3 below:

Table 3 September responses to Likert items on teacher's role

	September: teacher's role	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
	I believe the role of the teacher is to:					
1	tell me what to do	21.79	47.44	15.38	12.82	2.56
2	help me learn effectively	43.59	47.44	7.69	1.28	0.00
3	tell me what progress I am making	21.79	44.87	26.92	6.41	0.00
4	say what my difficulties are	39.74	39.74	15.38	3.85	1.28
5	create opportunities for me to practise	25.64	41.03	25.64	7.69	0.00
6	decide how long I spend on activities	3.85	23.08	42.31	23.08	7.69
7	explain why we are doing an activity	5.13	32.05	51.28	11.54	0.00
8	set my learning goals	1.28	33.33	33.33	25.64	6.41
9	give me regular tests	8.97	55.13	26.92	7.69	1.28
10	offer to help me	38.46	42.31	17.95	0.00	1.28

B. December

7.7% less students in December agreed and strongly agreed that the teachers'
role is to help the students learn effectively (52.56% agreeing and 30.77%
strongly agreeing, 83.33% in total; and 3.85% disagreeing). However, 6.41%
more students believed by December that the teacher should say what the
students' difficulties are (52.56% agreeing and 33.33% strongly agreeing,
85.89% in total; and 2.56% disagreeing with no-one strongly disagreeing).
Students still believed in December that the teacher should create
opportunities for the student to practise language (48.72% agreeing and

20.51% strongly agreeing, 69.23% in total; and 11.54% disagreeing); students also still believed that the teacher should tell the student what progress he/she is making (65.39% agreeing and strongly agreeing, and 3.85% disagreeing); and students maintained their belief that the role of the teacher was to give regular tests to students (64.11% agreeing and strongly agreeing, but only 11.54% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing). However, 15.38% less students believed that it is the teacher's role to offer to help the students (42.31% agreeing and 23.08% strongly agreeing, 65.39% in total; with 6.41% disagreeing and 1.28% strongly disagreeing). Furthermore, 56.41% agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that the teacher should tell the student what to do, 12.82% less than in September. 23.07% less students were neutral with regards to the teacher explaining why an activity is being done, with 28.21% ticking the neutral box. Instead, 53.84% now agreed and strongly agreed with the statement and 17.95% disagreed. In comparison, 14.1% less students were neutral about the teacher deciding how long a student should spend on an activity (with 19.23% agreeing and strongly agreeing, and 52.56% now disagreeing and strongly disagreeing). 29.49% remained neutral with regards to the teacher setting a student's learning goal, though 8.98% more students disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement (29.48% agreed and strongly agreed, and 41.03% disagreed and strongly disagreed).

The results for December regarding the role of the teacher are presented in percentages in table 4 below:

Table 4 December responses to Likert items on teacher's role

	December: teacher's role	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
B	I believe the role of the teacher is to:					
1	tell me what to do	19.23	37.18	25.64	15.38	2.56
2	help me learn effectively	30.77	52.56	12.82	3.85	0.00
3	tell me what progress I am making	11.54	53.85	30.77	3.85	0.00
4	say what my difficulties are	33.33	52.56	11.54	2.56	0.00
5	create opportunities for me to practise	20.51	48.72	19.23	11.54	0.00
6	decide how long I spend on activities	3.85	15.38	28.21	43.59	8.97
7	explain why we are doing an activity	2.56	51.28	28.21	17.95	0.00
8	set my learning goals	2.56	26.92	29.49	30.77	10.26
9	give me regular tests	3.85	60.26	24.36	10.26	1.28
10	offer to help me	23.08	42.31	26.92	6.41	1.28

3.4.3 Ranked Items

3.4.3.1 Opportunities for Language Use

A. September

The items pertaining to opportunities for language use are organised into 3 levels of ranking, and the students were instructed to decide 1, 2 or 3 ranking positions for the 3 statements with no number repeated. Results show that most students (70.51%) believed they themselves must find opportunities to practise language, followed by a majority second ranking of it being the teacher's job (65.38%) and the least important ranking being that it is their classmates' role to provide language practice opportunities (84.62%).

Table 5 below shows all the ranked results in percentages for September with regards to opportunities to practise language:

Table 5 September responses to ranked items on opportunities for language use

	September: opportunities for language use	ranking		
C	I believe that:	1	2	3
i	opportunities to use the language should be provided by my classmates	2.56	12.82	84.62
ii	I should find my own opportunities to use the language	70.51	21.79	7.69
iii	opportunities to use the language should be provided by the teacher	26.92	65.38	7.69

B. December

Students were given the same instructions regarding the completion of the ranked section as in September. The trend of first, second and third ranking positions of items remained the same in December as in September but with a 10.26% increase of students recognising their own role in creating opportunities for language use and with no students ranking that role into the third position. 8.97% less students ranked the teacher's importance in creating opportunities for language use in the first position compared to September. 5.13% more students ranked the teacher's importance in second place in December.

Table 6 below shows all the ranked results in percentages for December with regards to opportunities to practise language:

Table 6 December responses to ranked items on opportunities for language use

	December: opportunities for language use	ranking		
C	I believe that:	1	2	3
i	opportunities to use the language should be provided by my classmates	1.28	10.26	88.46
ii	I should find my own opportunities to use the language	80.77	19.23	0.00
iii	opportunities to use the language should be provided by the teacher	17.95	70.51	11.54

3.4.3.2 Effort

A. September

The items pertaining to effort are organised into 4 levels of ranking, and the students were instructed to decide 1, 2, 3 or 4 ranking positions for the 4 statements with no number repeated. The highest ranking for what students believed to be most important for language learning success was given to the students' role outside the classroom (47.44%), and the same number of students gave their own role in the classroom a second place ranking. The teacher's role in language learning success is ranked third (46.15% of students). Least important was deemed the role of classmates in the classroom with a majority of students (83.33%) giving this a fourth place ranking.

Table 7 below shows all the ranked results in percentages for September with regards to effort:

Table 7 September responses to ranked items on effort

	September: effort	ranking			
D	I believe my language learning success depends on:	1	2	3	4
i	what I do outside the classroom	47.44	19.23	21.79	11.54
ii	what I do in the classroom	33.33	47.44	17.95	1.28
iii	what my classmates do in the classroom	1.28	1.28	14.10	83.33
iv	what the teacher does in the classroom	16.67	33.33	46.15	3.85

B. December

Once again the students were given the same instructions for the ranked items as in September. The trend in December concerning rankings pertaining to effort are the same as those in September. However, 7.69% more students have given the first place ranking to their own efforts outside the classroom than in September and 7.69% less students have given their importance outside the classroom a fourth rank placing. More students have given their role inside the classroom a third rank placing (23.08%; 5.13%

more than in September) but the teacher's importance is also placed in the third ranked position by more students in December (55.13%; 8.98% more than in September). The majority of students still believed in December that their classmates play the least important part in their language learning success (91.03%).

Table 8 below shows all the ranked results in percentages for December with regards to effort:

Table 8 December responses to ranked items on effort

	December: effort	ranking			
D	I believe my language learning success depends on:	1	2	3	4
i	what I do outside the classroom	55.13	24.36	16.67	3.85
ii	what I do in the classroom	32.05	43.59	23.08	1.28
iii	what my classmates do in the classroom	0.00	2.56	6.41	91.03
iv	what the teacher does in the classroom	12.82	28.21	55.13	3.85

4 Discussion

The study presented in section 3 of this paper is limited to the collection of quantitative data via a questionnaire. Reliance on quantitative data generated by questionnaires can certainly have disadvantages, such as the inability to follow-up on student statements or check student interpretation of questions. Indeed the number of items on the questionnaire were carefully limited to take student language abilities into account, further reducing the possibility for drawing definite conclusions regarding the research here. However, a questionnaire format was deemed most suitable for investigating student attitudes to language learning in the context in question due to time constraints. Students at the college have a heavy programme of study which involves two majors and have very little space on their timetables to be able to be interviewed in such numbers as were able to complete a questionnaire. In addition, the introduction of the new programme at the same time as the research into student beliefs at the start of the semester of a new academic year meant that teaching staff were also constrained by time and would not have been able to interview students easily. Furthermore, it is important to note that this particular study was of a localised empirical nature with mainly pedagogical aims of assessing the efficacy of a new programme of study. Moreover, the questionnaire focused upon in this paper comprises the first stage of a longitudinal study of Hungarian college students following the new programme and will be extended to include other methodological approaches over time. The intention of the questionnaire is therefore only to gauge possible trends of students' beliefs at the start of higher education, and any changes in these attitudes that might have taken place among these

particular students in the first semester of the new syllabus. The results of the data analysis will now be discussed in relation to each variable on the questionnaire.

4.1 Learner Strategies

Trends in learner beliefs with regards to the learner strategies section of the questionnaire are similar in September to December. Students believed on both occasions that they could find their own ways to practise language, explain why they needed English and ask for help when necessary. A trend towards increased confidence in being able to identify strengths and weaknesses, check their work for mistakes and plan their learning seems to be suggested by the comparison of the two occasions, but the trend is only suggestive as the increase is small and further investigation over a longer period of time would be necessary in order to show that the trend would remain thus. A clearer trend is visible by December towards students believing they are able to set their own learning goals and might be explained by such requirements as project work on the new language programme, though there is no conclusive evidence to prove this.

Interestingly, students seemed to feel less sure about their abilities to measure their own progress in English in December compared to September. Conversations with students over the semester provide anecdotal evidence of students losing confidence in their English language abilities when facing the differences between school and college, achieving top grades at school but struggling at college level. These students commented on the fact that they no longer felt that they were among a small number of able students, but were now pitted against a larger number of similarly talented language students in a college setting where their English level might even be deemed inadequate at times. This in turn may have led students to lose confidence in their ability to evaluate their own language learning levels. In addition, as Blue states, "self-assessment is an area that many non-native speaker students have difficulty with, even when they have had feedback on language level" (1994: 30). Blue argues that as a result of a number of cultural and psychological factors, the process of sensitising students to assessing their own levels accurately can take time and students need to be constantly monitored and guided through the process (1994). Three months of a new programme at college may not be enough for such awareness to develop sufficiently and although the new programme mentions self-assessment in its assessment aims, the occasions for self-assessment have not been systematised on the new syllabus and may therefore need to be introduced more thoroughly.

4.2 The Role of the Teacher

Once again the trend in beliefs about the teacher's role were similar in September to December. Most items in the teacher's role section remained relatively unchanged by December and students see the teacher's role as important in helping them to learn effectively, telling them the progress they are making, creating opportunities for language practice and giving regular tests. Signs of a trend towards a less pronounced teacher role seem to be the reduction in the numbers of students believing that the teacher should offer to help students, tell students what to do and how long to spend on an activity. Once again further research is necessary in order to confirm whether this trend continues to increase but these reductions may be due to aspects of the new language programme which allow students to dictate their own tasks, though may also be a natural trend resulting from higher education attendance and increasing maturity on the part of the students.

4.3 Opportunities for Language Use

Ranking positions remained similar in December to those in September. Already in September, students believed their role to be most important in finding opportunities to use language, with the teacher in second place. This may seem surprising to those teachers who believed students to be reliant on the teacher to provide such opportunities as suggested by the feedback in the earlier study at the college (Macdonald 2003). The trend towards the students believing their own role to be paramount seems to increase by December and further research is necessary to investigate whether this trend continues. Classmates feature at the bottom of most students' rankings and third place rankings increase slightly by December. This trend does not reflect the emphasis of the new programme on collaboration between students and suggests that the new syllabus has had no impact on perceptions of importance regarding student to student cooperation despite the introduction of project work. This might be due to the short time period within which such attitudes were guaged using the questionnaire and the unaccustomed nature of students relying on other members of the class to complete a task that would require grading, which contrasts with assessment methods at school level in Hungary. It remains to be seen whether such attitudes might eventually change with continued student collaboration on English programmes.

4.4 Effort

Students recognised the importance of their own role outside the classroom to achieve language learning success already at the start of the academic year. This trend increased slightly by December. This perception again

contrasts with teacher feedback, which commented on student passivity and the apparent reliance of students on staff to improve their language abilities (Macdonald 2003). The trends regarding other rankings remained similar in December when compared to September, placing the students' role in the classroom in second place and ranking the teacher's and classmates' role third and fourth respectively. The seeming difference between teacher expectations about student attitudes and actual student beliefs shown here might suggest a mismatch of attitudes, though may equally suggest that although the students believe they know what leads to language learning success, they may not actually be acting on that belief in an observable way. Once again, further investigation is necessary to explore the extent of both the teachers' and the students' beliefs.

5 Conclusion

This paper reported on student attitudes to aspects of learner autonomy at the start and end of their first semester at a college of higher education in Hungary. The new programme had been specifically designed to promote learner autonomy as a result of a previous study of the former syllabus. Data collection and analysis were limited to a questionnaire format and could only be used to explore general trends of student beliefs at the start of higher education and after one semester. Trends suggesting an awareness of learner strategies and students' awareness of their own role in achieving language learning success even at the start of their studies are encouraging. For example, the small-scale study by Gan, Humphreys and Hamp-Lyons (2004) showed that successful students (i.e. those showing success in examinations) could manage their own learning, determine their own learning goals and work towards their own learning goal at their own pace. In addition, the seeming readiness for learner autonomy, according to the questionnaire results in September, suggests that the promotion of learner autonomy is realistic in the context in question.

In terms of evaluating the new programme for its suitability to promote learner autonomy, the new syllabus includes a number of aspects argued to be necessary for the promotion of learner autonomy, such as raising awareness about language learning strategies (Oxford and Nyikos 1989), developing students' critical thinking skills through study skills training to develop students' study competence (Waters and Waters 1992) and opportunities for students to interact through negotiation and collaboration, evident from the project work aspect of the course. Dam (1995), for example, carried out project work in a formal educational institution in Denmark and devised a planning model to prioritise such work. She claims

that her procedures have led her school-aged learners to develop both an overall awareness of language learning processes and an awareness of personal possibilities and responsibilities within these processes (1995: 80). However, opportunities for self-assessment on the syllabus may currently be too limited to have helped students to develop this skill and the programme may benefit from systematising occasions for student self-assessment.

Nevertheless, the new programme at the college can be considered potentially beneficial in developing learner autonomy especially as the study reported in this paper suggests a readiness for learner autonomy on the students' part previously underestimated. However, it is worth noting that in order to be able to make more concrete conclusions regarding student beliefs and the effectiveness of the new programme, further research over a longer period of time is necessary in the form of interviews, surveys and the introduction of learner diaries. A mixed methodology of data collection will allow a more complete picture of student beliefs in relation to language learning success and the role the new English language programme might play towards achieving the goal of greater learner autonomy and English language competence. As Glesne and Peshkin state, "the openness of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction and to do justice to that complexity, to respect it in its own right" (1992:7). The next stage of research must therefore be to add a qualitative dimension to the study of these particular students at the college in Hungary, gauging both their level of learner autonomy and language learning success.

References

Blue, G. 1994. Self-assessment of foreign language skills: Does it work? *Centre for Language in Education 3, University of Southampton.* 18–32.

Cotterall, S. 1995. Readiness for learner autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. *System,* 23, 2: 195–205.

Cotterall, S. 1999. Key variables in language learning: What do learners believe about them? *System,* 27: 493–513.

Dam, L. 1995. *Learner Autonomy: From Theory to Practice.* Dublin: Authentik.

Gan, Z., Humphreys, G. and Hamp-Lyons, L. 2004. Understanding successful and unsuccessful EFL students in Chinese universities. *Modern Language Journal,* 88, ii: 228–243.

Glesne, C. and Peshkin, A. 1992. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction.* New York: Longman.

Horwitz, EK. 1988. The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal,* 72: 283–294.

Little, D. 1995. Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System,* 23, 2: 175–181.

Macdonald, K. 2004. Promoting a particular view of learner autonomy through an English language syllabus. *Eger Journal of English Studies*, IV: 129–148.

Macdonald, K. 2003. Promoting a Particular View of Learner Autonomy Through a Proposed Syllabus for First Year Students of English in a Specific Higher Education Institution in Hungary. Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of Southampton.

Oxford, R. and Nyikos, M. 1989. Variables affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students, *Modern Language Journal,* 73: 291–300.

Victori, M. and Lockhart, W. 1995. Enhancing metacognition in self-directed language learning, *System,* 23, 2: 223–234.

Waters, M. and Waters, A. 1992. Study skills and study competence: getting the priorities right. *ELT Journal*, 46, 3: 264–273.