

**The Role of Learner Autonomy in Reformational Christian, Preparatory Vocational
Secondary Education English as a Second Language Classes**

D.M.W. van der Tang BA

MA Multilingualism and Language Acquisition (English track)

Humanities, Utrecht University

Supervisor: J. H. Wall MA

Second reader: prof. dr. J. M. van Koppen

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Abstract

It has been shown that Reformational Christian (RC) English as a second language (L2) learners perform below average compared to non-RC students, and that this is particularly the case at preparatory vocational secondary education level (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). With regard to this level, it has also been found that students' motivation for learning English is lowest compared to other RC Dutch secondary education levels that have been investigated (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). As learner autonomy can play an important role in motivation (Verbeeck et al., 2013), and may have been affected by the pressure on English education at RC secondary schools (Lectoraat Engels, 2021), this study examined the extent to which learner autonomy is supported in RC vmbo English classes. By conducting interviews with teachers and students, the implementation of autonomy was evaluated with respect to five subcomponents of autonomy in Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy: planning, choosing materials and methods, monitoring, completing tasks, and evaluating. Both teachers' and students' responses revealed that the autonomy students have over their learning process is limited concerning all of the subcomponents that have been examined. It is argued that this could account for the low motivation that has been observed for RC vmbo-students. In response to a number of challenges teachers highlighted, as well as preferences students expressed concerning the implementation of various subcomponents, recommendations are offered to foster learner autonomy further in English classes. Furthermore, based on the interview responses, the possible influence of students' competence feelings and general knowledge that might have affected students' motivation are discussed.

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The Role of Learner Autonomy in Reformational Christian, Preparatory Vocational Secondary Education English as a Second Language Classes

1. Introduction

After World War II, English developed into the most important foreign language in the Netherlands (Edwards, 2016). Nowadays, many Dutch people use English as a second language (L2) (Edwards, 2016). In fact, it has been shown that Dutch people have the highest English proficiency level on average compared to most other countries in which English is not used as a first language (Education First, 2020). It is not surprising then that “sound knowledge of English is seen as essential to students’ work and lives within Dutch society” (Edwards, 2016, p. 66).

However, underperformance has been observed for L2 English students at Reformational¹ Christian (RC) secondary schools (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). Attempts to improve students’ performance were successful for higher secondary education levels, but did not prove effective for *voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* ‘preparatory vocational secondary education’ (vmbo) (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). Since motivation can influence performance significantly (Verbeeck et al., 2013), Lectoraat Engels (2021) compared vmbo-students’ motivation for learning English to motivation of students attending higher RC secondary education levels. This revealed that vmbo-students’ motivation is relatively low compared to those other secondary education levels (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). Yet, the next question to be addressed then is which factors could have affected vmbo-students’ motivation. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), human beings have three prerequisite needs for motivation, which also applies to education settings

¹ The term “reformational” is used here to denote protestant Christians who subscribe to reformed teachings.

(Harmin & Toth, 2006). One of these needs concerns autonomy. Because of the pressure that could be experienced by RC teachers due to students' continuous underperformance, teachers' preferences might have been increasingly prioritised over students' preferences, affecting the satisfaction of students' autonomy (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). Utilising Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy, this study investigates whether the autonomy RC vmbo-students have over their learning process in English classes is indeed limited, by conducting interviews with teachers and students.

This thesis first of all offers a theoretical framework in chapter two, which includes an overview of academic literature, as well as the research questions and the hypothesis addressed in this study. In the third chapter, a description of the methodology is provided. Subsequently, the findings and analyses based on the interviews that were conducted can be found in chapter four. Chapter five discusses the findings in relation to academic literature. Also, the possible influence of other factors that may play a role in students' motivation and performance are discussed in this chapter, and recommendations are provided for further implementation of autonomy. Lastly, the conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for future research are described in chapter six.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter discusses the topic of this study in relation to academic literature. Firstly, the role of English in the Dutch education system as well as Dutch learners' out-of-school exposure to the English language are described. Secondly, it is discussed how RC learners' amount of exposure to the English language and their performance in English final exams differs from non-RC learners of English. Thirdly, possible factors responsible for the difference between RC and non-RC learners are dealt with, by specifically focussing on the influence of autonomy. Fourthly, it is discussed how autonomy can be assessed in education

settings, exploring the dynamic model of learner autonomy (Tassinari, 2010). Finally, a short summary is offered which is followed by the research questions and hypothesis.

2.1 English in the Dutch Education System and Out-of-School Exposure to English

As described in the introduction, English plays an important role in Dutch society. This is also reflected in the Dutch education system and people's out-of-school exposure to the English language. First of all, much attention is paid to the acquisition of English in schools. Since 1968, English has been a compulsory subject for all secondary school learners (Edwards, 2016). Moreover, the starting age for English education was lowered from age 12 to age 10 in 1986, because of which English became a mandatory subject in the final two years of primary education as well (Drew et al., 2007). After primary education, learners can attend one of the three different types of secondary education: *voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* 'university preparatory education' (vwo), duration six years; *hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs* 'senior general secondary education' (havo), duration five years; or vmbo education, duration four years (Nuffic, n.d.). Particularly at vwo-level, a significant increase of Dutch-English bilingual education has occurred in the past few decades, although a small number of schools have introduced bilingual education at havo- and vmbo-level as well (Edwards, 2016; Verspoor et al., 2010). However, Dutch learners are not only exposed to the English language through education, but also through media use (Verspoor et al., 2010). The amount of out-of-school exposure to the language in particular is assumed to contribute to the relatively high level of English observed for a large majority of Dutch learners (Verspoor et al., 2010).

2.2 English in RC Secondary Education

As Verspoor et al. (2010) discuss, the role English plays in the Netherlands and the high English proficiency skills of Dutch people does not apply to all learners equally. Approximately a decade ago, RC learners used to have significantly less out-of-school exposure to the English language than non-RC learners on average, since their media use was limited for religious reasons. Verspoor et al. (2010) judge this to be the reason for the lower performance in English final exams for this group of learners at the time.

Several attempts were made by RC secondary schools to deal with students' lower performance (Lectoraat Engels, 2021; Verspoor et al., 2010). Yet, the effort to improve RC learners' English level was successful for vwo and havo education, but did not prove effective for vmbo education (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). In fact, vmbo's performance in English final exams has mainly decreased in the past few years (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). Lectoraat Engels (2021) has therefore conducted a follow-up study to examine which other underlying factors could have caused the low performance of RC vmbo-students. Specifically, as motivation can play an important role in learning (Verbeeck et al., 2013), Lectoraat Engels (2021) has compared the L2 learning motivation of the three different secondary education levels for all Dutch RC schools using surveys. This has revealed that vmbo-students have the lowest motivation for L2 learning compared to other secondary school levels' motivation to learn English. The question is then which factors may be responsible for the low motivation that has been observed.

2.3 Possible Role of Autonomy in Vmbo-Students' Motivation

A theory describing which factors could affect motivation is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination theory is a research-based "macrotheory of human motivation" that describes how motivation can be influenced by the fulfilment of human

beings' basic psychological needs in various life domains (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). It first of all distinguishes between different types of motivation: *autonomous motivation*, which occurs when people “experience volition, or a self-endorsement of their actions” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182) and *controlled motivation*, which appears when people “experience pressure to think, feel, or behave in particular ways” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). While autonomous motivation is determined by intrinsic motivation—i.e., “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence” (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—and a few extrinsic motivation types that people have internalised to their self, controlled motivation mostly emerges through external factors (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As Deci and Ryan (2008) indicate, both types of motivation contribute to people's behaviours and actions. However, autonomous motivation generally leads to “more effective performance on heuristic types of activities” and “greater long-term persistence” (p. 183). Therefore, to motivate people for certain actions or behaviours, it seems particularly important to stimulate autonomous motivation, or intrinsic motivation, an essential element of autonomous motivation.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) furthermore postulates that human beings have three prerequisite psychological needs for intrinsic motivation. Firstly, as has been shown by experiments demonstrating that positive feedback contributes to intrinsic motivation (Boggiano & Ruble, 1979; Deci, 1971), human beings have a need to feel competent, or to experience satisfaction from their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Secondly, feelings of relatedness play an important role in the enhancement of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, it has been found that learners are more intrinsically motivated when they consider their teachers to be supportive (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Ryan & La Guardia, 2000; Ryan et al., 1994). Thirdly, autonomy is a prerequisite need for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While the concept *autonomous motivation* concerns the

reasons people have for certain actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000), autonomy refers to “the experience of behavior as volitional and reflectively self-endorsed” (Niemic & Ryan, 2009, p. 135). Supporting autonomy can contribute to autonomous motivation (Liu et al., 2016).

The need for autonomy can also be applied to educational settings. As Harmin and Toth (2006) state:

All humans also have the ability to self-manage, and we would do well to develop this in our students ... we want them to think for themselves, managing themselves as intelligently as they can. This is what they, too, want. They do not want to be bossed. Nor do they want to fly about out of control. (p. 7)

Several studies have confirmed these statements, showing that supporting learners’ autonomy in classrooms can positively influence learners’ motivation, and that not supporting learners’ autonomy could affect learning experiences, and eventually learners’ motivation as well (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Jang et al., 2009; Kage & Namiki, 1990; McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Noels et al., 2019; Ushioda, 2011). Teachers should thus ideally attempt to support learner autonomy, especially since teachers can play a vital role in the development of learner autonomy (Han, 2014; McGrath, 2000; Najeeb, 2013).

Lectoraat Engels (2021) indicates that autonomy—as opposed to the other prerequisite needs for motivation, i.e., relatedness and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000)—in particular may have been affected in the past few years in vmbo L2 English education in RC secondary schools. Their explanation for this is that RC vmbo L2 English learners’ continuous lower performance has increased the pressure teachers experience in teaching. Because of this, teachers’ attention for learners’ preferences concerning their learning process might have decreased. For instance, teachers may have determined the choice of teaching materials increasingly, rather than offering a range of possible materials that learners could choose from to achieve learning objectives. This may have affected learners’ autonomy.

Given that autonomy is a prerequisite need for motivation (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Noels et al., 2019), the lower motivation observed for RC vmbo-students may thus be influenced by the fact that learners do not have sufficient autonomy in their learning process.

2.4 Assessing Autonomy in Language Education

To assess whether the autonomy RC vmbo-students have over their learning process is indeed limited, it is first of all important to consider which aspects of autonomy are to be focussed on. Benson (2010) discusses the construct autonomy in relation to language education settings. Describing the relationship between an autonomous learner and his learning process utilising the term “control”, he defines autonomous language learners as “learners who are in some sense ‘in control’ of important dimensions of their learning, which might otherwise be controlled by others or by nobody at all” (Benson, 2010, p. 79). However, when assessing learners’ autonomy in educational settings based on this definition, a few challenges may be faced, as Benson (2010) points out as well. Firstly, learners may be autonomous in some learning aspects, but less so in others (Benson, 2010). The question is then over which aspects of a learning process learners need to be in control in order to be considered an autonomous learner (Benson, 2010). Secondly, a learner may have been acting autonomously, without this being observable from the outcome, which affects the external assessment of autonomy (Confessore & Park, 2004). Thirdly, developing autonomy may not be straightforward in all settings, especially in those settings in which learner dependency rather than autonomy is normative (Breen & Mann, 1997; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018). Finally, learners may adopt autonomous behaviour to please teachers, rather than acting autonomously intrinsically (Breen & Mann, 1997).

Acknowledging the complexity involved in assessing autonomy externally (Sinclair, 1999), as well as building on previously formulated definitions of autonomy (i.e., Benson,

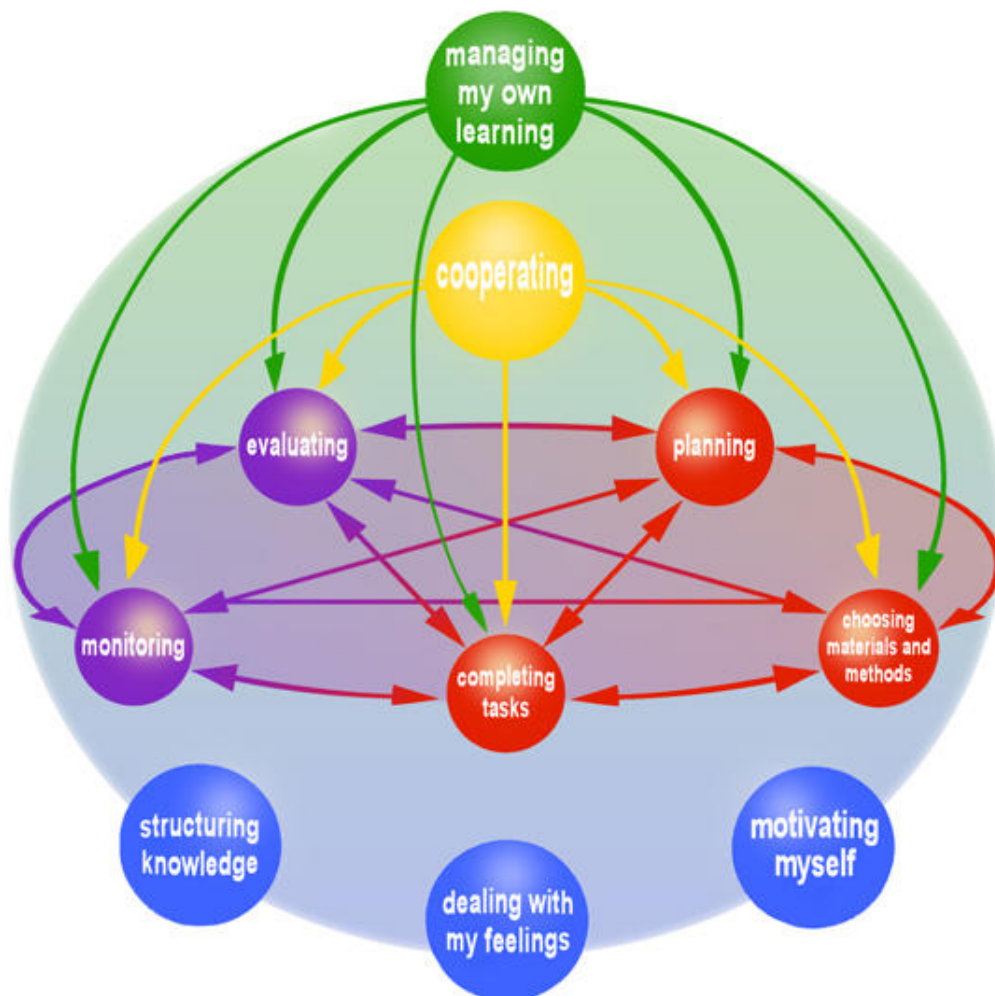
2001; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1996, 1999), Tassinari (2012) defines learner autonomy as “the metacapacity, i.e. the second order capacity, of the learner to take control of their learning process to different extents and in different ways according to the learning situation” (p. 28). Tassinari (2012) argues that learners’ capacity to regulate their learning process can be (self-)assessed based on the four components of learner autonomy, namely:

1. A cognitive and metacognitive component (cognitive and metacognitive knowledge, awareness, learners’ beliefs);
2. an affective and a motivational component (feelings, emotions, willingness, motivation);
3. an action-oriented component (skills, learning behaviors, decisions);
4. a social component (learning and negotiating learning with partners, advisors, teachers...). (p. 28)

These components form the basis of Tassinari’s (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Dynamic Model of Learner Autonomy (Tassinari, 2010)



As expounded by Tassinari (2012), the four components are processed into the dynamic autonomy model through a number of other components which will henceforth be referred to as subcomponents. First of all, the cognitive and metacognitive component is represented by the subcomponent “structuring knowledge”, and the affective and motivational component by “dealing with my feelings” and “motivating myself”. Furthermore, the action-oriented component includes the subcomponents “cooperating”, “evaluating”, “planning”, “monitoring”, “completing tasks”, and “choosing materials and methods”. The final component, i.e., the social component, is processed into the model

through “cooperating”, a subcomponent that is also linked to other subcomponents. Moreover, the model demonstrates that learners have the possibility to begin developing one subcomponent and can continue developing another subcomponent, corresponding to their preferences. This is shown by the fact that all subcomponents are interrelated, and that all subcomponents are equal, except from “managing my own learning” which is superordinate in relation to other subcomponents (Tassinari, 2012). Despite the possible limitations of measuring autonomy as previously described, and discussed by Benson (2010), focussing on the subcomponents displayed in the dynamic autonomy model could serve as a starting point for assessing learners’ autonomy (Lamb, 2017; Tassinari, 2012).

To assess the implementation of autonomy into RC vmbo L2 English classes, this study focusses on five action-oriented subcomponents of the dynamic autonomy model (Tassinari, 2010): planning, choosing materials and methods, monitoring, completing tasks, and evaluating. These five subcomponents are selected as they are five distinct skills of autonomy, relating to different stages of students’ learning process, while the other subcomponents are integrated into, or relate to, these five subcomponents (Centre for Independent Language Learning, n.d.; Tassinari, 2012). Hence, there is considerable overlap between subcomponents such as “managing my own learning” and “structuring knowledge”, and the five subcomponents mentioned above (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-g, Structuring knowledge; Tassinari, 2012). Also, the social dimension “cooperating” forms part of all other subcomponents (Tassinari, 2012). Additionally, learners’ autonomy with respect to the five action-oriented subcomponents investigated in this study could be directly influenced by teachers, which applies less to the affective and motivational component, i.e., “dealing with my feelings” and “motivating myself”. The potential direct role of teachers is important as this study investigates the extent to which teachers support learners’ autonomy.

Furthermore, to evaluate whether teachers support learners' autonomy, this study investigates this from learners' perspectives as well as teachers' perspectives. Teachers can attempt to support learners' autonomy, but this should also be experienced as such by the learners (Verbeeck et al., 2013). Also, research into learners' perspectives could highlight learners' needs and preferences, which could then allow teachers to anticipate these (Basri, 2020). Therefore, perceptions of both teachers and learners should be taken into consideration when assessing autonomy.

2.5 Conclusion, Research Questions and Hypothesis

In short, L2 English proficiency is important for members of Dutch society (Edwards, 2016). However, a systemic relatively low performance is observed for RC vmbo-students with respect to L2 English learning (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). Since their L2 learning motivation and experience appears to be affected (Lectoraat Engels, 2021), it should be investigated to what extent this may be related to learners' autonomy in their learning process, as autonomy is one of the preconditions for motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Noels et al., 2019; Ushioda, 2011; Verbeeck et al., 2013). Also, as suggested by Lectoraat Engels (2021), autonomy—as opposed to competence and relatedness, i.e., the other prerequisite needs for motivation according to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)—may have been particularly affected as a result from the pressure on RC vmbo L2 English education in the past few years. Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy can be used as a starting point in assessing the degree to which learners currently have autonomy over their learning process (Lamb, 2017; Tassinari, 2012). As explained above, this study will investigate both teachers' and students' perceptions of the autonomy learners have with respect to five subcomponents of Tassinari's (2010) dynamic autonomy model: planning, choosing materials and methods, monitoring, completing tasks,

and evaluating (Basri, 2020; Tassinari, 2010; Verbeeck et al., 2013). This way, it will attempt to shed more light on the role of autonomy in RC vmbo L2 English education, by addressing the following research questions and sub questions:

To what extent do RC vmbo L2 English learners have autonomy over their learning process in English classes?

1. Which role do teachers currently attribute to learners' autonomy?
2. How do learners perceive the extent to which they have autonomy over their learning process?

Based on the low performance and motivation observed for RC vmbo L2 English students (Lectoraat Engels, 2021), as well as the potential influence of autonomy on language learners' motivation and L2 learning experiences in L2 English classes (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019), it is expected that the autonomy learners have over their learning process in English classes is limited, and that this is also perceived as such by teachers and students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The Netherlands has a total number of seven conservative RC school collectives². To ensure a representative sample of the school collectives, three different schools were included to participate in this study, namely a stronger, an average, and a weaker performing school. The performance of these schools was determined based on average grades obtained for English final exams in the past few years. In the Netherlands, final exams are compulsory for all learners and are the most important part of learners' assessment at the end of secondary

² The term "school collectives" is used as a translation here to denote the Dutch "scholengemeenschap" which is similar to English multi academy trusts.

education (Van Rijn et al., 2012). Moreover, as final exams per secondary education level are similar for all Dutch learners (Van Rijn et al., 2012), performance at these exams can provide insight into the relative performance of certain schools in comparison to other schools.

To address the first sub research question of this study, focussing on which role teachers currently attribute to learners' autonomy, interviews were conducted with vmbo-teachers who teach third-year vmbo-students. Per school, a group of two teachers were interviewed ($N = 6$). Additionally, to address the second research question, i.e., the extent to which learners perceive that they have autonomy over their learning process, one group of third-year vmbo-students (consisting of 3 people, $N = 9$) were interviewed at each school. As the purpose was to elicit learners' reflections, the third year of vmbo education was focused on. In this age category (14-15 years of age), learners' ability to reflect on L2 learning experience is better developed compared to younger learners with less language learning experience (Lamb, 2010). Additionally, this group was focussed on since fourth-year students (ages 15-16) were taking final exams at the time of testing. The groups of learners were selected by the teachers, who asked in class which students were willing to participate. No further criteria were imposed to select the students.

3.2 Materials

To assess the extent to which autonomy is implemented into English classes, interview questions were devised to interview both teachers and learners (see appendix A). The interviews focussed on five subcomponents of the dynamic model of learner autonomy: planning, choosing materials and methods, monitoring, completing tasks, and evaluating (Tassinari, 2010). The main questions were based on the definitions of the five subcomponents investigated and the descriptors provided for each of these subcomponents (see appendix B). For instance, the subcomponent choosing materials and methods is defined

as “choosing and working with suitable learning materials, methods and strategies” (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-a, Choosing materials and methods). Additionally, this subcomponent has a few descriptors which allow learners to assess their autonomous learning skills, e.g., “I can try out new materials and resources” (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-a, Choosing materials and methods). Since the definitions and descriptors all include different elements of autonomous learning (Centre for Independent Language Learning, n.d.), the definitions as well as the descriptors could be used as points of focus to evaluate the extent to which autonomy was implemented into English classes.

However, a few adjustments were made to the descriptors that were used as a basis for the interview questions. Firstly, as the descriptors were originally devised for self-assessment of autonomous learning skills, they were slightly adjusted to evaluate the extent to which teachers support learners’ autonomy. For instance, a statement such as “I can choose different methods and strategies” (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-a, Choosing materials and methods), was turned into a question asking whether learners have the opportunity to choose different methods and strategies to achieve learning objectives in class. Secondly, a few descriptors were excluded for the interview questions, as not all descriptors suited the purpose of this study equally. For instance, the subcomponent completing tasks included the descriptor: “I can organise a time and place for my learning” (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-b, Completing tasks). This descriptor mostly seems to refer to independent learning processes, e.g., homework assignments, which normally do not imply teacher involvement, while the purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which teachers support learners’ autonomy. These descriptors were therefore excluded and are not included in appendix B. Thirdly, since the self-assessment descriptors were originally used for university students (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-d), the register of the students’ questions was adjusted to ensure that the questions would be comprehensible to the younger age category as well. This

for instance concerned replacing higher register words such as *reflecteren op* ‘reflecting on’, by lower register ones such as *nadenken over* ‘thinking about’.

Furthermore, a few follow-up questions were added to the main questions. If teachers appeared to support learners’ autonomy, or if learners perceived to have autonomy with respect to a certain subcomponent, follow-up questions aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the degree to which autonomy was supported. If teachers indicated that they did not support learner autonomy concerning a certain subcomponent, follow-up questions addressed which reasons there were for not supporting autonomy, and whether teachers would be open towards the implementation of learner autonomy. If learners perceived autonomy to be implemented with respect to one of the subcomponents, further questions invited students to provide examples. If learners did not perceive to have autonomy with regard to one of the subcomponents, questions explored the extent to which learners would prefer the subcomponent of autonomy to be supported more. This way, follow-up questions could increase understanding concerning the extent to which vmbo-students have autonomy over their learning process. Also, they could provide insight into possible barriers teachers face in supporting learner autonomy, as well as learner preferences for the implementation of autonomy. Eventually, this could enable the researcher to provide teachers with specific recommendations to further support autonomy in English classes when necessary.

To ensure that the interview would suit the educational practice, the questions were complemented by a few possible topics to discuss during the interviews in relation to the questions (listed below the questions, see appendix A). These could offer both teachers and learners examples of curricular activities which allow for the integration of learner autonomy, and could then also support teachers and learners in reflecting on English classes. The topics were gathered through a conversation with a few Lectoraat Engels teachers who did not participate in the interviews. They were asked to indicate which activities are performed in

regular English classes. Also, in relation to Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy, possible areas in educational practices that allow for learners' autonomy were discussed with these teachers. This way, a number of practice-based topics were listed which enabled the interviewer to apply the questions to practice.

3.3 Procedure

Before the interviews, participants completed consent forms (appendix C). Consent forms of students younger than 16 years of age were signed by parents as well the students. Subsequently, the participants were interviewed in pairs or groups. This supported the participants in answering the questions, for instance as it allowed participants to complement each other and to stimulate each other's reflection process with respect to their experiences with education. With respect to one school, teachers were interviewed separately because of time limitations. The participants were interviewed online via Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded using an iPhone 7 dictaphone. The recordings were first stored in OneDrive, and then deleted from the iPhone for data security reasons. Finally, the data were transcribed in Word.

4. Results and Analyses

The main research question addressed in this study was to what extent RC vmbo L2 English learners have autonomy over their learning process in English classes. This was examined through interviews that were conducted with teachers and students. Through these interviews, teachers' perspectives were investigated in relation to the question which role they currently attribute to learners' autonomy, while students' perspectives were examined addressing the question how learners perceive the extent to which they have autonomy over their learning process. The transcriptions of these interviews can be found as a standalone

appendix. The references to line numbers in this chapter refer to the transcriptions in this appendix.

To answer the research questions based on teachers' and students' perspectives, the section below summarises teachers' and students' responses for each of the five subcomponents in Tassinari's (2010) dynamic autonomy model that were investigated, namely planning, choosing materials and methods, monitoring, completing tasks, and evaluating. For each of these subcomponents, an introduction will be provided first, describing the subcomponent that was involved and the questions that were used to examine this subcomponent. Then, an overview will be offered, describing and analysing teachers' and students' responses that provide insight into the extent to which the subcomponent is implemented into English classes. With respect to this, responses of both groups were combined to the extent a significant amount of overlap occurred between both groups' responses. However, these descriptions and analyses are followed by additional overviews describing teachers' and students' preferences and ideas with respect to the implementation of the subcomponent concerned—these data were elicited through follow-up questions. With regard to these topics, teachers' and students' perspectives are dealt with separately. Finally, the results per subcomponent will be analysed to answer the research questions. Also, the findings will be related to the hypothesis, which predicts that learner autonomy is affected and that this is perceived and experienced as such by both teachers and students.

4.1 Planning

To evaluate the extent to which the skill planning—i.e., the use of learning plans including learning objectives and strategies to develop language skills in relation to learning objectives for a certain time frame (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-f)—is implemented by teachers and perceived as such by learners, two main questions were asked during the

interviews. The first question addressed whether learners' language skills were evaluated to identify learners' language learning needs, while the second question built on this question, asking whether learning plans were created based on these evaluations.

4.1.1 Evaluation of Language Skills. With respect to the evaluation of different language skills, most teachers indicated that learners' skills are mainly assessed through summative tests (l. 5-8; 1295), i.e., tests to draw conclusions concerning students' language skills rather than using the results as a basis for further development (Scriven, 1991). Furthermore, one teacher mentioned that she also evaluated learners' proficiency by observing them during lessons, which she was able to do through her teaching experience (l. 8-9). Formative tests, i.e., tests that are used as a basis for further development (Scriven, 1991), are sometimes used as well, for instance with regard to English listening and reading skills (l. 626-648). These findings were confirmed by students' responses (l. 384-386; 395-397; 1852). However, students additionally mentioned that they informally discuss with peers which skill is challenging to them and which skill they consider less difficult (l. 948-963). Yet, given the emphasis on summative tests, the responses do not seem to suggest that evaluation often occurs to identify students' language learning needs, which would have offered a basis for the development of learning plans.

4.1.2 Use of Learning Plans and Other Interventions to Improve Performance. As appeared from both teachers' and students' responses, learning plans are hardly used in English classes (l. 19-20; 406-408; 677-678; 969-971; 992-993; 1308-1321; 1566; 1865-1869). Interventions in students' learning processes are mostly conducted when students perform lower on tests than the rest of the group did, or when a student's performance is lower than usual (l. 1567-1568). Teachers pointed out that in these cases they often have

informal conversations with learners, in which the teacher asks questions to evaluate which factors are responsible for a student's underperformance. These conversations then enable teachers to intervene in learning processes by offering suggestions for how to prepare for future tests, for instance (l. 1297-1299). Students can furthermore improve language skills by attending additional English classes, which are in some cases tutored by teaching assistants who develop a learning plan for the students involved (l. 656-659; 690-694; 1566-1570; 1973-1874). One teacher indicated that he recently submitted a proposal at the school he teaches at, for mentors³ to observe their students' performance; to instruct students to evaluate their performance; and to create learning plans for improvement when necessary (l. 1328-1344). This proposal was not adopted at the time the interview was conducted. To summarise, interventions in students' learning process mainly occur when students perform below average. In most cases, learning plans are not employed to improve students' performance.

4.1.3 Practical Limitations of Using Learning Plans. As the participating teachers did not use learning plans directly in their lessons for all of their students at the time the interview was conducted, teachers were asked whether they would prefer to use learning plans. In response to this, most teachers—except for the teacher who proposed to use learning plans at the school he was teaching at—explained that there would be a few practical limitations for the use of these. First of all, teachers often teach several hundred students per week, which would not enable teachers to create learning plans with all learners (l. 24-28).

³ At the schools participating in this study, students have different teachers for each of their subjects. Additionally, groups of students are guided by their own mentor, who normally also teaches one of the students' subjects, and who can support them with learning in general or when students have personal issues.

Therefore, this seemed impossible to teachers as far as time was concerned (l. 1583-1584): “If we have to create learning plans as teachers all the time, I think this would be an obstacle, because we just do not have time for that. We’re just busy. I work fulltime ... and teach continuously” (l. 706-708).⁴ Also, teachers pointed out that students should be willing to participate in using learning plans as well (l. 1312-1315). In relation to this, it was mentioned that a number of students had gained negative language learning experiences in primary education. According to one teacher, primary schools often attempt to prepare all students for English education at secondary schools properly by offering a relatively high level of English education. However, since students’ language learning abilities vary considerably in primary education, as most primary schools, as opposed to secondary schools, generally do not differentiate between different levels, the level of English education was often too high for current vmbo-students. Consequently, a large number of vmbo-students have negative experiences with English learning. The teacher therefore expected that these students in particular would not be sufficiently motivated to create learning plans in addition to other activities that are part of English classes (l. 1312-1315; 1440-1447).

4.1.4 Students’ Preferences for Using Learning Plans. Compared to teachers, students responded somewhat more ambiguously to the idea of using learning plans. On the one hand, some students responded positively mentioning possible advantages of using learning plans. For instance, one student pointed out that learning plans would offer learners a basis for their language learning development and would allow them to work towards concrete learning objectives (l. 1883). After expressing their positive view, a few participants

⁴ Original quotation in Dutch: “Als wij als docent elke keer die leerplannen op moeten stellen denk ik wel dat dat een bezwaar is, want daar heb je gewoon geen tijd voor. Dat is heel simpel, je bent gewoon druk. Ik werk voltijd ... dus je hebt continu klassen.” (l. 706-708)

added to this that it is important to include engaging methods and materials when describing in learning plans how language skills will be developed (l. 413-416; 419-431). On the other hand, a few students were more critical regarding the use of learning plans that would allow students to develop their language skills in accordance with individual learning needs. They indicated that they would prefer to improve skills as a group, rather than individually, which would allow them to support each other when necessary (l. 435-437).

4.1.5 Analysis of Learner Autonomy in Planning. As is shown by both teachers' and students' responses, RC vmbo English classes often lack evaluation to identify students' language learning needs as well as the use of learning plans to anticipate these needs. Rather than students identifying their own language learning needs and developing a learning plan based on their evaluation to proceed their learning, teachers conduct summative tests and hold conversations when performance is below average as appearing from tests. In line with the hypothesis then, the autonomy learners have in this respect appears to be limited, which is perceived by both teachers and students.

4.2 Choosing Materials and Methods

The second subcomponent of autonomy that was evaluated concerned choosing materials and methods, or, the possibility and ability to choose different learning materials and methods to achieve learning objectives (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-a). To investigate this, teachers were asked to indicate whether they offer students the possibility to choose from different types of teaching materials, methods, and strategies to achieve learning objectives. Additionally, students were asked whether they were familiar with various materials, resources, methods, and strategies they could use to develop different aspects of their language skills, and whether they made use of these.

4.2.1 Possibilities in Choosing Materials. In responding to the question as to whether teachers offered students the possibility to choose from various learning materials, it appeared that standardised teaching materials are used in most cases (l. 54; 1599-1601). This mostly limits students' possibilities to choose from different materials (l. 98-99). Yet, teachers also mentioned that they provide recommendations for extracurricular materials that students can use as well to develop their language skills (l. 1908). For instance, students are pointed towards final exams used in previous years which can be found online, or YouTube videos in which aspects of learning materials are explained (l. 734-739). Additionally, most teachers mentioned that they provide students with a number of options when they are instructed to read English books to develop reading skills (l. 1467-1474; 1636-1640). Moreover, students are sometimes given the possibility to choose a documentary in accordance with their interests to practice listening skills for homework assignments (l. 66-68). Thus, possibilities to choose from different materials are mainly limited by the use of standardised teaching materials, but are increased by recommendations for learning materials that students could use as well, or by options to choose from a wider range of materials with respect to homework assignments.

4.2.2 Possibilities in Choosing Strategies. With regard to different strategies students can use to achieve learning objectives, it became clear from teachers' as well as students' responses that most freedom is offered in strategies that learners use to prepare for tests and exams (l. 463-469; 745-751). According to teachers, and as also mentioned by students, students are allowed to use any preferred method as long as they perform well on tests (l. 745-751). Most tests that have to be prepared for in advance concern vocabulary tests (l. 1034-1038). With respect to these tests, students were aware of various strategies that they

can use to study vocabulary (l. 1010-1013; 1018-1023). A few students also mentioned that teachers sometimes provide tips for how to study vocabulary (l. 473-475; 478-479). On the other hand, students indicated that they would not know how they could improve other language skills such as reading and listening independently, in case they would prefer to (l. 453-459; 1034-1038). In other words, students have the possibility to use their own strategies to prepare for tests as long as they perform on average, but students are not aware of strategies they could employ to improve language skills other than vocabulary.

4.2.3 Possibilities in Conducting Larger Assignments. Several teachers felt that they offer students a considerable amount of freedom in the way they conduct larger assignments. For instance, most teachers allow students to choose their own topic for their presentations (l. 70-73). Another example one teacher mentioned was that students could conduct any type of assignment in relation to books they had to read, for instance they could make a video, a song, or write a poem about the books they read (1475-1480). Yet, no other examples were mentioned with respect to larger assignments.

4.2.4 Possibilities in Activities During Lessons. In contrast to larger assignments, students appeared to have fewer possibilities to use their own strategies for regular in class activities. As both teachers and students suggested, the teacher mostly decides which activities are conducted at which moment, although one teacher noted that he offers high-performing students the possibility to work on in class assignments individually at their own pace (l. 1599; 1614-1616). Teachers were furthermore the ones deciding whether assignments are completed in pairs or individually (l. 118-119; 1645-1648). Moreover, as became clear from students' responses in particular, most activities and assignments are conducted at school (l. 1034). Since in class teachers mostly determine which activities are performed at

which time and in which manner, teachers are responsible for most of the choices in students' materials and methods. However, as one teacher commented as well, the situation was slightly different during a few months of online education because of Covid-19 restrictions. During this period, the teacher allowed students to choose which assignments were completed when, and whether assignments were conducted online or not (l. 73-78). However, the teacher did not report whether she or the students appreciated the increased number of possibilities students had in this situation. In short, possibilities to choose any preferred materials and methods are mostly restricted in in class settings, which form the largest part of students' learning process.

4.2.5 Barriers in Offering Possibilities to Choose Materials and Methods.

Teachers mentioned a number of barriers in offering learners different materials to choose from. First of all, it seems practically impossible to offer additional materials for a large group of learners, especially when considering that all learners are different and therefore have different needs and preferences (l. 1604-1611; 1622-1632). In addition, limited by the curriculum, test levels are similar to all students of a class (1459-1461). Since students using extracurricular materials cannot be challenged more by increasing the level of assessment, their motivation to use additional materials and methods may be low: "Tests have to be similar for everyone, so the motivation for a student to do something extra has to come from the student ... because in the end you will get the same test" (l. 1459-1461).⁵ Finally, a few teachers did not think that learners would necessarily benefit from having a number of different options to choose from (l. 91; 741-744; 1651-1655). They expected this to cause

⁵ Original quotation in Dutch: "Toetsen moet ik gewoon gelijktrekken, dus de motivatie voor een leerling om echt iets extra's doen, dat moet echt vanuit hem komen van ik wil meer weten, ik wil meer snappen, want uiteindelijk krijg je dezelfde toets." (l. 1459-1461)

confusion among students, especially for vmbo-students (l. 741-744). Also, they indicated that students generally feel unconfident and therefore prefer teachers to choose which learning materials students need (l. 756-758).

4.2.6 Students' Preferences in Choosing Materials and Methods. Students were also asked about their preferences with respect to the choice of learning materials and methods. While they acknowledged that the effectiveness of strategies may not be similar for all students, their responses revealed that students would prefer to learn more about strategies they could use to improve specific language skills (l. 463-464; 1043; 1914; 1921). A few students noted that it would be helpful if a website were created by teachers, which offers appropriate reading and listening materials that can be used in accordance with one's proficiency level to improve reading and listening skills (l. 1045-1049).

4.2.7 Analysis of Learner Autonomy in Choosing Materials and Methods. On the one hand, the results seem to indicate that teachers offer students freedom, especially when independent learning processes are involved, for instance in preparing for tests or conducting larger assignments, as long as this would not affect students' performance. On the other hand, students' possibilities to choose their own materials and methods are mostly limited with respect to in class learning activities, which form the largest part of their learning process. As a result, the majority of choices that could be part of students' learning process are made by teachers. Also, students expressed a need for materials and awareness of methods to improve language skills independently when they would prefer to, which seems to suggest that teachers' current attempts to increase options are relatively ineffective. Thus, the hypothesis that students' autonomy is limited is mostly confirmed with respect to the subcomponent choosing materials and methods.

4.3 Monitoring

Through the third main question of the interview, the subcomponent monitoring was investigated, which refers to the extent to which students' independent learning processes were monitored and reflected on by students and teachers (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-e). Teachers were asked whether they monitored independent learning processes and whether they supported students in reflecting on their learning process, to learn about their strengths and weaknesses, and to improve future learning based on this. Students were asked whether they reflected with the teacher on their strengths and weaknesses with respect to independent learning; what would prevent them from completing tasks; and whether they reflected on materials, resources, methods, and strategies they use for independent learning or conducting assignments.

4.3.1 In Class Monitoring. According to teachers, most activities are performed in class, as was also mentioned with respect to other subcomponents. This allows teachers to closely monitor the main part of students' learning process (l. 145-146; 779-780; 781-791; 795; 1496-1497). As teachers indicated, this is for instance done by walking through the classroom and observing students while they are working on assignments, and by asking them whether activities are going well and how any issues, for instance with regard to collaborating, could be solved (l. 129-132; 157). At one school, online learning materials were used most of the time. The teachers commented that this enabled them to monitor students' progress closely, as it allowed them to view which assignments students had completed and which results they had obtained (l. 173-170; 183-187). Moreover, to reflect on learning processes, teachers sometimes have short conversations with individual students at the end of lessons (l. 801; 802-820). This mostly occurs with regard to low performing

students (l. 802-804). Teachers' responses mainly suggest that they monitor students' progress closely, which is partly facilitated by the fact that most of students' learning process occurs in class and the fact that online teaching materials are used in some cases. However, reflections on learning processes to identify strengths and weaknesses hardly seem to occur.

4.3.2 Independent Learning Process Monitoring. With respect to larger assignments that are worked on at home as well as in class, teachers appeared to check students' progress on a regular basis (l. 165-167). A few examples teachers mentioned include asking whether students have already chosen topics for presentations in class (l. 162-163), or instructing students to submit a few parts of their assignments before submitting the final version and providing feedback on these (l. 1661-1669; 1676-1679; 1682-1696). However, one teacher responded that he does not consider himself successful in monitoring independent learning processes and that he would prefer to improve this in future, even though he was not yet sure how he could do this effectively (l. 1504-1506). In other words, with respect to independent learning activities, as well as in class learning processes, teachers monitor students' progress regularly. Yet, as also observed regarding in class activities, the responses hardly include instances of reflection on students' learning strengths and weaknesses.

4.3.3 Students' Perceptions of Monitoring. When asking students whether they reflected on independent learning processes in class including considering which aspects are challenging to them, which aspects less so, and which strategies are most effective in preparing for tests or executing assignments, the findings were slightly different. First of all, students indicated that they informally reflect on learning and which strategies should be used with peers (l. 535-536; 1118-1119). Additionally, the effectiveness of various strategies for

studying vocabulary are sometimes discussed in class with teachers (l. 548; 1067-1071; 1938-1940; 1941-1943). Also, a few students pointed out that they could discuss their independent learning processes with a teacher individually if they prefer to (l. 552-555). However, students indicated as well that they do not reflect on learning processes regularly in class (l. 552; 1107-1108). Students' responses seem to deviate from teachers' responses, since fewer instances of monitoring with teachers are mentioned, and as students appear to reflect on learning processes with peers, while they would prefer to do this in class more often.

4.3.4 Teachers' Views on Monitoring. From the teachers' responses it appeared that they consider monitoring to be significant to students' learning processes and that it is especially important to vmbo-students (l. 765-780; 1661-1673). As one of the teachers explained:

They are vmbo-students. You cannot expect these learners to be able to prepare a conversation [for a speaking exam] without any guidance. Until the final year they need this ... I do not tell them to do this at home, but in class, so that I can guide them when necessary. (l. 775-780)⁶

On the other hand, one teacher suggested that third-year vmbo-students are generally more capable of working independently than younger learners. Therefore, she prefers not to check learners, but rather to monitor students' progress concerning independent learning activities by asking them about their progress in class (l. 161-169). Additionally, teachers indicated that they do not always have sufficient time to reflect on students' learning, which was

⁶ Original quotation in Dutch: "Het is een mavoleerling. Je kunt niet van ze verwachten dat zij in staat zijn een heel gesprek [voor een spreektoets] voor te bereiden zonder begeleiding. Tot in de examenklas toe hebben ze dat gewoon nodig ... Ik zeg niet, doe dat thuis maar, maar in de klas zodat ik kan begeleiden wanneer nodig." (l. 775-780).

acknowledged by students as well (l. 209-217; 563-564). While there may be possibilities to reflect on learning processes with individual learners at the end of lessons, there is often hardly any time left to do this: “In particular at the end of your lesson, the next [group] is already standing at the door to enter the classroom, which makes it difficult to have a short talk with someone” (l. 223-224).⁷

4.3.5 Students’ Preferences Regarding Monitoring. Several students pointed out that it seems helpful to them, and to low performing students in particular, to have reflection opportunities more often (l. 564-567; l. 1120-1123; 1127-1130). According to one student, this would enable students to offer tips to students who need these, for instance because of lower performance (l. 1127-1130). However, a few students also mentioned that these reflections may take much time and that this may be a disadvantage of reflecting more often (l. 563-564).

4.3.6 Analysis of Learner Autonomy in Monitoring. Although both teachers’ and students’ responses include examples of monitoring and reflection on learning, the data do not provide clear evidence for the fact that students reflect on learning processes regularly in class. This seems to be perceived by students more than it is perceived by teachers. Based on this, it is concluded that autonomy with regard to this subcomponent is hardly supported, which would be in line with the hypothesis.

⁷ Original quotation in Dutch: “Zeker het eind van je les staat de volgende [klas] alweer te dringen om naar binnen te gaan, dus het is soms ook lastig om iemand even te houden en een praatje te maken.” (l. 223-224)

4.4 Completing Tasks

For the fourth subcomponent, i.e., completing tasks, it was evaluated whether students had the possibility to complete tasks in their own manner and pace, using materials, resources, and strategies that suit their learning objectives or needs (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-b). Teachers were asked to indicate whether they offered learners freedom in ways students complete their tasks using learning materials corresponding to students' learning objectives. Students were asked whether they had the possibility to choose their own strategies to prepare for tests and to complete assignments, and whether they could conduct these activities at their own pace. Because of interrelatedness between the subcomponents choosing materials and methods and completing tasks, some amount of overlap occurred between teachers' and students' responses in relation to both subcomponents. Therefore, responses that were repeated with respect to the subcomponent completing tasks will only be mentioned briefly.

4.4.1 Freedom Offered in Ways Students Complete Tasks. Several teachers expressed that they attempt to offer students freedom when students need this. For instance, with respect to the manner in which students do their presentations—as opposed to topics students can choose, as was mentioned in relation to the subcomponent choosing materials and methods—in class, several teachers mentioned that they provide students with the possibility to choose whether they prefer to present in pairs or individually. As was pointed out with respect to the use of learning plans as well, a number of students have negative language learning experiences from primary education. This affects their confidence in presenting. In these cases, teachers find it important to anticipate students' needs and preferences (l. 888-897). Another example of this is when learners have dyslexia. One of the teachers indicated that he allows these students to take vocabulary tests more frequently,

while reducing the number of words that have to be learnt in preparation for these tests (l. 897-900). Yet, another teacher explicitly mentioned that he does not attempt to offer learners freedom in deciding how and when tasks are completed (l. 1734). To summarise, most of teachers' responses suggest that teachers provide students with freedom to the extent they feel students need this.

4.4.2 Students' Perceptions of Freedom in Completing Tasks. When asking students about the freedom they have with respect to ways in which they proceed with their learning process, students' statements were similar to their responses in relation to the subcomponent choosing materials and methods. On the one hand, students expressed that they have the possibility to choose how they prepare for tests (l. 575-576; 1141-1145; 1978-1981). On the other hand, they emphasised that most assignments are completed in class (l. 586-587; 588; 589). The content of lessons, including the programme, activities, assignments, and how these are completed, is often fully determined by the teacher (l. 580-581; 1151-1154; 1158-1159; 1164-1165; 1985-1986; 1987-1988; 1991). In contrast to teachers' responses, students' responses indicate they have freedom in the ways in which they complete tasks at home, but that freedom is limited with regard to in class tasks which form the majority of their learning activities.

4.4.3 Teachers' Views on Offering Freedom in Completing Tasks. With regard to the possibilities which teachers offer students in completing tasks, several teachers suggested that "a number of students are just not able to deal with freedom" (l. 275).⁸ Related to this, one teacher mentioned the example of an assignment for which students were instructed to

⁸ Original quotation in Dutch: "Sommigen kunnen daar gewoon niet zo goed mee omgaan." (l. 275)

create a video in any preferred manner, based on five out of ten fables they could choose (l. 253-258). According to the teacher, a few students do not manage to complete these assignments adequately, which results from the fact that they need to be offered more structure and guidance (l. 260-261; 268-269). As was also suggested by another teacher, some students consider it to be extremely challenging to work independently, which is an important reason to that teacher for not offering learners as much freedom as possible (l. 1737-1744). Yet, as was commented by one teacher as well, offering more freedom and providing less guidance sometimes saves time which then supports teachers in working more efficiently (l. 273-274; 279).

4.4.4 Students' Preferences in Having Freedom in Completing Tasks. To some extent, students' expressed preferences correspond to the limitations teachers highlighted with respect to offering students freedom in completing tasks. One student indicated that he would prefer to have more freedom, for instance in deciding which activities can be conducted when time is provided to work individually. According to the student, this is an advantage of working at home, where he is able to determine himself which activities are done at which time (l. 1169-1173). However, the majority of the participants commented that they appreciate the fact that most work is completed in class where the teacher decides how and which activities are performed (l. 586-587; 1174-1177; 1182; 1185-1194; 1199-1201; 1995-1997; 1999-2000). Students mentioned several advantages of this. Firstly, this reduces the amount of homework students have to do, which is beneficial as students do not prefer having to do homework (l. 586-587). Secondly, they indicated that it is advantageous that teachers can check whether students are working on their assignments, since students experience that they have a lack of discipline with regard to completing homework exercises (l. 1174-1177; 1182; 1185-1187; 1191-1194; 1199-1201). Thirdly, students expressed that

teachers know which assignments are important to complete to achieve learning objectives (L. 1995-1997; 1998; 2004).

4.4.5 Analysis of Learner Autonomy in Completing Tasks. Teachers' responses demonstrate that freedom is offered to the extent teachers feel students need freedom and to the extent students are able to deal with the freedom they receive. Students' responses were mostly in line with this, although they suggested as well that most choices in students' learning activities, in particular in class, are determined by the teacher, which was also pointed out concerning the subcomponent choosing materials and methods. Also, this was the preferred situation to them. Since both teachers' and students' responses indicated that options in choosing the manner in which tasks are completed are limited in most cases, the findings confirm the hypothesis with respect to the subcomponent completing tasks.

4.5 Evaluating

The fifth subcomponent that was assessed was evaluating, i.e., the reflection on students' learning process in relation to their progress (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-c). While forms of evaluation as described earlier refer to the identification of students' stronger and weaker language skills which can be used as a basis for learning plans, the subcomponent evaluating denotes the evaluation of students' performance in relation to their learning process. To investigate students' autonomy regarding this subcomponent, teachers were asked to indicate whether they evaluated students' language skills in relation to their independent learning process together with the students. Students were asked whether they discussed with teachers, peers, or in class, after completion of tests or assignments, which strategies they had used to complete their tests or assignments and which result this had led to.

4.5.1 Evaluation Strategies Used by Teachers. Teachers indicated that evaluation in relation to learning processes mostly happens when remarkably low grades are obtained by one of the students or a group of students, or when results fluctuate considerably in comparison to other tests that were taken (l. 287-292; 931-933; 1521-1523). These are then considered reasons for teachers to discuss how the students involved prepared for tests, and how this could be improved if certain strategies did not appear to be effective (l. 931-933; 1521-1523).

In addition to evaluation through conversations, a few other strategies were mentioned as well. First of all, one of the teachers pointed out that he sometimes instructs students to assess their working attitude with regard to preparation for the test they are taking at that moment. Also, he asks students to indicate which grade they expect to receive. According to the teacher, this method can be particularly insightful when a student underperforms, and it can offer a basis for conversations in which the teacher and individual student reflect on the learning process preceding the test that was taken (l. 1524-1530). Another teacher mentioned that skills tests are conducted at the end of terms which are then followed by evaluation sessions (l. 911-913). For instance, students had to take a writing test which the teacher then graded and provided feedback on. Afterwards, students were given the possibility to view their grades and feedback, and to discuss and compare their results and feedback with peers (l. 913-930). Also, teachers from one school indicated that they evaluate learning processes in the third year of vmbo education in particular, as this forms a basis for advice provided for the fourth or final year of vmbo education (l. 325-326). Thus, some types of evaluation of performance in relation to students' learning processes occur. However, as the majority of teachers indicated that evaluating mainly happens when students perform

lower than average, and only two teachers mentioned other instances of evaluating, the attention for the subcomponent evaluating seems limited based on teachers' responses.

4.5.2 Students' Perceptions of Evaluating. Students' responses mostly seemed to indicate that evaluation of performance in relation to learning processes hardly occurs (l. 599-602; 603). One of the students provided an example of a speaking test that was conducted after which students informally discussed which strategies were used to perform various tasks that were part of the test (l. 1243-1246). Furthermore, it was indicated that teachers sometimes discuss general challenges students faced with regard to tests that were taken. The teacher then offers suggestions for future improvement (l. 2018-2019). Yet, other comments mainly emphasised the fact that grades are discussed online with peers once the grades are shared by the teacher via online learning management systems (l. 1251-1255). As appeared from students' comments, grades are discussed rather than learning strategies that lead to a certain grade (l. 607; 608; 1251-1255). However, it should be mentioned as well that students also indicated that they do have possibilities to reflect on learning processes with teachers if low grades are obtained (l. 607-608). In short, students' responses include instances of informal evaluation in relation to learning processes with peers, or individual evaluation opportunities with teachers, whilst the focus in evaluating is on the results predominantly, rather than on learning processes preceding these results.

4.5.3 Students Preferences in Evaluating Learning Processes. Several students suggested that they would prefer to evaluate learning processes more often. Specifically, they would like to evaluate in more detail how they performed with respect to tests, for instance by viewing their own answers in relation to the correct answers (l. 1269-1277; l. 2033-2035;

2036; 2037). As one student indicated, this could be instructive for future tests that are to be taken (l. 1280-1282; 1286-1287).

4.5.4 Analysis of Learner Autonomy in Evaluating. The responses of teachers, but even more of students, mainly suggest that evaluation of students' performance in relation to their learning processes does not occur on a regular basis. Only a few examples were highlighted by teachers and students, while students indicated that they would prefer to evaluate performance in relation to learning processes more regularly. Taken together, these findings show that the autonomy students have over their learning process is limited with regard to the subcomponent evaluating, which confirms the hypothesis in this respect as well.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the role vmbo teachers currently attribute to learner autonomy in English classes and how learners perceive the extent to which they have autonomy over their learning process. Given the important role autonomy can play in learners' motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019) and the low motivation that was found for RC vmbo L2 English learners (Lectoraat Engels, 2021), it was hypothesised that learners' autonomy is affected and that this is perceived and experienced as such by both teachers and students. This chapter discusses the results and analyses as described in the previous chapter. Per subcomponent investigated, an introduction will be offered first, to recap the main findings in relation to the research questions and hypothesis. Subsequently, the results and the implications of these are discussed in relation to previous research and academic literature. This is followed by a general discussion dealing with the question whether the factor autonomy is indeed responsible for RC vmbo-students' low motivation for learning English, as suggested by Lectoraat Engels (2021). Finally, based on

the discussion of the findings, recommendations will be offered for further implementation of autonomy into vmbo L2 English education.

5.1 Planning

With respect to the first subcomponent of autonomy, planning, it was first of all investigated in which ways language learning needs were identified, or, how language skills were evaluated. Subsequently, it was examined whether learning plans were used to anticipate students' language learning needs. In line with the hypothesis, the results demonstrated that there was an emphasis on summative tests rather than formative tests to identify students' language learning needs, and that learning plans were hardly employed to build on these evaluations. These two findings will be discussed in the following two paragraphs.

5.1.1 Emphasis on Summative Tests in the Evaluation of Language Skills. The emphasis on tests rather than evaluations that can serve as a basis for future development of language skills could be related to the testing culture that characterises the Dutch education system (Heij, 2014). As explained by Litjens et al. (2018), the subject English at Dutch secondary schools has a long tradition of summative tests, i.e., tests that are not used as a basis for students' further development (Scriven, 1991). This may then account for the observation that assessment often occurs in the form of tests, but that there is a lack of evaluation by students to identify their language learning needs for subsequent learning.

5.1.2 Absence of Learning Plans in English Classes. To account for the limited use of learning plans in English classes, teachers highlighted a number of possible limitations of using learning plans. First of all, teachers indicated that they have to teach many students

each week and that they do not expect to have sufficient time to use learning plans when working as a teacher fulltime. Breen and Mann (1997) and Yasmin and Sohail (2018) already considered potential socio-cultural challenges of supporting autonomy in certain education systems. However, in view of the points mentioned by teachers, a novel observation from this study is that a few practical barriers may be added to these challenges as well. In educational settings in which teachers teach large groups of learners continuously throughout the week, it may be particularly challenging to support learner autonomy by instructing students to develop learning plans whilst having to check these as well. It would add another activity to the curriculum, while the amount of time teachers have is already limited. However, it should be mentioned as well that a few teachers also seemed to assume that they had to create the learning plans themselves. Yet, as described by Freie Universität Berlin (n.d.-f), learning plans are to be created by students. Although they could be guided in this by teachers, using learning plans may require less time than some of the teachers estimated, which may then nuance their expected limitation.

Furthermore, one teacher suggested that he would not expect students to be motivated for using learning plans because of their low motivation for English language learning activities, resulting from negative English learning experiences. However, concerning this point, it should be mentioned that some of the students expressed a willingness to use learning plans given that this would allow them to work towards specific objectives. On the other hand, a few students expressed a somewhat more negative view on using learning plans, as they would rather prefer to work as a group to develop their language skills in class. Even though students' negative view was supported by a different argument than the teacher's argument—i.e., an expected lack of motivation because of negative language learning experiences versus a lack of motivation based on preferences to work as a group rather than developing skills individually—, this would support the teacher's expectation that

students may not necessarily be motivated for using learning plans. This might then show that supporting autonomy is not only a prerequisite need for intrinsic motivation as suggested by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), but that students also have to be motivated for autonomous learning, at least with respect to the use of learning plans in this case. This might contradict self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Not only would satisfying human beings' need for autonomy be prerequisite for motivation, but motivation might also be a precondition for autonomous learning. However, although this could seem contradictory, this observation ties in with Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy. One of the subcomponents in the model is "motivating myself" (Tassinari, 2010). In other words, as teachers noted, part of autonomous learning is that students are able to motivate themselves for autonomous learning behaviours. Yet, this also suggests that students could develop train themselves to become more motivated over time. This limitation could then be nuanced as well as the expected time barrier.

5.2 Choosing Materials and Methods

With regard to the subcomponent choosing materials and methods, it was investigated to what extent students are offered possibilities to choose from various materials and methods to achieve learning objectives. The hypothesis was confirmed concerning this subcomponent. On the one hand, it was found that a number of possibilities were provided with regard to independent learning processes, e.g., preparing for tests. Yet, simultaneously, it was observed that teachers determine most of the choices during lessons, while in class learning activities form the largest part of students' learning process. This conclusion was strengthened by the fact that students indicated that they were unaware of strategies which they could use to develop language skills independently, while expressing a need for additional materials to improve skills such as reading and listening. However, acknowledging that they are

responsible for most of the choices in students' learning processes, teachers also commented that there would be several issues to deal with when offering a wider range of choices in materials and methods student can use to achieve learning objectives. These will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

5.2.1 Influence of Class Size and Standardised Tests. The first barrier teachers pointed out with respect to offering options in materials and methods to choose from was that they teach large groups of students continuously. Since all these learners have different language learning needs, a wide range of different materials and methods would be required to sufficiently differentiate between all learners, which seems inefficient to the teachers. This issue in supporting learner autonomy has also been raised in studies investigating other education settings (Basri, 2020; Reeve et al., 1999; Roth et al., 2007). Another limitation concerns the fact that tests are similar for groups of learners as a result of the curriculum. According to Basri (2020), "teachers, even the ones who are real proponents of autonomy support, may experience challenges that limit the support they provide. ... Standardised tests ... are among these limitations" (p. 2).

As these issues have been highlighted by researchers in relation to other education contexts as well, they do not seem specific to RC vmbo English classes, but rather characteristic of the entire over-arching education system. As Basri (2020) indicates, "in such contexts, teachers are usually inclined to conform the regulations, particularly arising from accountability standards, fixed curriculum and assessment requirements. With the pressure they encounter, they exert pressure on their learners" (p. 3). Considerable changes at higher levels in the education system may be required to help teachers to overcome these challenges.

5.2.2 Influence of Students' Abilities to Choose From Different Options. The third limitation that was mentioned by a few teachers was the expectation that providing a certain number of options would cause confusion among students. It could be argued that this expected limitation results from misconceptions regarding autonomy support. The teachers seemed to assume that offering options to choose from implies that students are supposed to make a choice without any guidance provided by teachers. However, as was described in the theoretical background as well, several scholars have indicated that teachers can play an important role in autonomy (Han, 2014; McGrath, 2000; Najeeb, 2013). In fact, offering teacher guidance is essential in conjunction with autonomy support (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Harmin & Toth, 2006; Kirschner et al., 2006). As is pointed out by Bajrami (2015):

Teacher's role is vital in autonomous learning and for that reason can never be ignored. The learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of their learning, but without teacher guidance and supervision, the whole process will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder. (p. 424)

Teachers could thus support learner autonomy by providing more options to choose from, while simultaneously guiding students' choices to avoid confusion. This would also suit students' needs, as they expressed a need for additional materials.

However, teachers also mentioned that vmbo-students were involved—as opposed to students from higher secondary education levels. For vmbo-students in particular, it was considered important to limit the possibilities provided. This finding could contradict self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as it would indicate that the need for autonomy is to some extent influenced by students' level of secondary education, or the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of students attending a certain secondary education level. Similar points with respect to students' needs and preferences for autonomy were expressed by teachers in relation to the subcomponents monitoring and completing tasks. The extent to

which concepts such as autonomy are prerequisite needs for human beings may then vary depending on the type of human being involved. With respect to self-determination theory then (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this may imply that human beings' widely acknowledged prerequisite need for autonomy can be subject to variation, as a result of differences between human beings' strengths and weaknesses.

5.3 Monitoring

Concerning the subcomponent monitoring, it was evaluated to what extent students' learning processes are monitored and reflected on by teachers and students. The responses included a number of instances of monitoring with respect to in class learning activities as well as out-of-school learning processes. However, hardly any indications of reflections on students' learning strengths and weaknesses were observed. The lack of reflections was perceived by students in particular. Therefore, it was concluded that the support for students' autonomy is limited with regard to monitoring. The following paragraphs will address the relation between teachers' and students' responses and discuss the theoretical implications of students' preferences with respect to monitoring.

5.3.1 Relation Between Teachers' and Students' Responses. Some connections could be found between teachers' responses and students' responses. A few teachers commented that they sometimes experienced that they do not have sufficient time for individual reflections with students, even though teachers would be willing to reflect on learning processes with a few students more often. This was reflected in students' responses. Some of the students explicitly referred to time constraints as well, and a number of students expressed that they would prefer to reflect on learning processes and the effectiveness of learning strategies more often.

At the same time, there seemed to be a disparity between teachers' attempts to monitor and reflect on students' learning processes and the extent to which this is perceived by students. While teachers provided a number of examples to explain how they monitor and reflect on students' learning, and suggested that monitoring is particularly important to vmbo-students, students' responses included fewer examples of monitoring and reflection during lessons. In fact, students commented that they would prefer teachers to reflect on learning more often in class. A similar difference between teachers' and students' responses occurred in relation to the subcomponent evaluating. This provides evidence for the fact that it is important to take students' perspectives into consideration when evaluating the extent to which autonomy is implemented into classes (Basri, 2020; Verbeeck et al., 2013). As appeared from students' responses in contrast to teachers' responses, teachers' attempts may not necessarily satisfy students' needs. An inaccurate impression of the implementation of autonomy could thus appear when teachers' perspectives are considered only.

5.3.2 Students' Preferences With Respect to Monitoring. Students indicated that they would prefer to reflect on the use of various strategies to develop language skills more regularly in class, as suggestions for learning could then be provided for improvement. This finding could provide evidence for Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy. As indicated in the definition of monitoring, monitoring "enables one to identify one's own learning strengths and weaknesses and to structure one's learning accordingly" (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-e, Monitoring). This is in line with students' preference to reflect on independent learning which, as they indicated, allows students to learn how their strategies to prepare for tests could be improved. Also, students' desire for the implementation of this subcomponent of autonomy in class further confirms learners' need for autonomy in general, as pointed out by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

5.4 Completing Tasks

Regarding the subcomponent completing tasks, it was evaluated to what extent students have possibilities to complete various tasks in their own manner and pace. The results confirmed the hypothesis with respect to this subcomponent. While teachers were found to offer freedom to the extent they feel students need this, it was observed as well that teachers limit the number of possibilities students receive, since they do not consider students to be capable of dealing with much freedom. Additionally, students indicated that they preferred teachers to determine most of the choices in their learning process. In the subsequent paragraphs, the implications of these findings for self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) will be discussed.

5.4.1 Teachers' Views and Students' Preferences Concerning Completing Tasks.

According to teachers, students need much guidance in completing tasks since they are not able to cope with the freedom receive. Interestingly, students expressed similar points. The majority of students indicated that they prefer to complete tasks in class, a setting in which teachers are responsible for most of the choices in students' learning process. One of the advantages that students highlighted was that teacher guidance supports them in completing tasks, as students experience that they do not have sufficient discipline themselves to complete their tasks in absence of teachers. Therefore, teachers' as well as students' responses seem to suggest that having freedom in the ways tasks are completed is not one of students' needs. Freedom in completing tasks is rather viewed as a factor that could affect students' learning process, since it could prevent students from completing tasks.

These findings seem to contradict self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While self-determination theory states that autonomy is one of human beings' needs to

become intrinsically motivated, responses of both students and teachers indicate that students' need to act autonomously may vary depending on the subcomponent of autonomy that is involved. At least with regard to completing tasks, students may prefer teachers to determine the majority of choices that are made.

Yet, it should be taken into account as well that students' preferences can also be shaped by the type of education they are used to. As indicated by Basri (2020), students can become used to teacher-centred education with limited space for students' autonomy, which negatively influences the extent to which students are receptive to autonomous learning behaviours. This could then also affect teachers' perceptions of students' needs and preferences, which means that teachers do not attempt to enhance students' autonomy further (Basri, 2020).

Alternatively, misconceptions may play a role in teachers' and students' views, as appeared in relation to choosing materials and methods as well. Both teachers and students commented that providing students with freedom in completing tasks could be particularly problematic with respect to finishing tasks because of students' lack of discipline. Yet, as mentioned before, providing students with autonomy by offering more possibilities to conduct various learning activities does not mean that students are expected to act autonomously without any teacher guidance (Harmin & Toth, 2006; Kirschner et al., 2006). This nuances the idea that the limitation of offering freedom as pointed out by teachers contradicts self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

However, as was discussed with respect choosing materials and methods as well, teachers noted that the need for teacher guidance applies to vmbo-students in particular, as opposed to students attending higher levels of secondary education. As explained, this finding might contradict self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), since it suggests that the need for autonomy does not apply to all human beings equally, as a consequence of

individual differences such as the amount of discipline human beings have with respect to completing tasks in this case.

5.5 Evaluating

In relation to the subcomponent evaluating, it was examined to what extent students' performance is evaluated in relation to their learning processes. In line with the hypothesis, it was found that students' autonomy concerning this subcomponent is limited, as this type of evaluation does not occur on a regular basis. This became clear from students' responses even more than from teachers' responses. Also, students indicated that the emphasis in evaluation was on grades, rather than on learning processes. In the following paragraphs, the emphasis on grades rather than learning processes in evaluating will be discussed, as well as the implications of students' preferences for self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

5.5.1 Emphasis on Grades in Evaluating. Instead of reflecting on students' results in comparison to the strategies students used, which could allow them to improve future learning processes, grades are focussed on predominantly in evaluation. Evaluating is thus mainly summative. As was explained in relation to the subcomponent planning as well, this phenomenon is characteristic of the education system which the English classes investigated are part of (Heij, 2014; Litjens et al., 2018). However, another factor that could play a role in the lack of evaluation relates to the use of online learning management systems. Students pointed out that teachers often share grades with the students online. Subsequently, students view these results at home and compare their grades with peers via social media. Because of this, the focus in the evaluation of performance shifts towards grades, rather than the effectiveness of strategies that were used to obtain the results.

5.5.2 Students' Preferences in Relation to Self-Determination Theory. The fact that students hardly evaluate their learning processes, and instead focus on their results in evaluating, does not imply that this is the preferred situation to students. In fact, students indicated that they would prefer to evaluate learning processes more often, and that they would also like to gain more insight into the mistakes they make in tests. Students' expressed need for this subcomponent of autonomy, which also occurred in relation to the subcomponent monitoring, provides further evidence for self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which states that autonomy is one of human beings' needs..

5.6 General Discussion

In relation to the research question asking to what extent RC vmbo-students have autonomy over their learning process in English classes, the interviews conducted showed students' autonomy is mostly limited with respect to the five subcomponents of the dynamic autonomy model (Tassinari, 2010) evaluated. This became clear from teachers' descriptions of the extent to which they had implemented each of the subcomponents of autonomy into classes, and became even more apparent from students' perceptions and preferences. The question could then be asked whether the limited amount of autonomy as observed through the interviews indeed accounts for students' low motivation, as indicated by Lectoraat Engels (2021), or whether other factors could have played a role as well. It will be argued that the limited amount of autonomy that students have over their learning process could indeed account for students' lower motivation, but that other factors might have affected their motivation and performance as well.

5.6.1 Influence of Autonomy on RC Students' Motivation. To answer the question whether the amount of autonomy is indeed responsible for the low motivation observed

(Lectoraat Engels, 2021), it may firstly be considered whether the interviews conducted provided sufficient insight into education practices to conclude that students' autonomy is limited. There are several reasons to suggest that the interviews were valid with regard to the assessment of autonomy at RC schools. First of all, as described in the methodology, the findings were based on a representative sample. The fact that teachers selected the participating students does not seem to have affected representativeness, as students were selected based on willingness. Furthermore, the extent to which teachers support autonomy was investigated with respect to a broad range of the subcomponents in Tassinari's (2010) dynamic autonomy model. The fact that not all of the subcomponents were examined, does not seem to have affected the validity, as the subcomponents excluded mostly concerned overlapping subcomponents, or subcomponents with respect to which students' autonomy could not be directly influenced by teachers. Including the latter could have led to the mistaken conclusion that teachers did not support autonomy, while this would mainly relate to the fact that they cannot directly influence autonomy regarding these subcomponents. Hence, it is concluded that RC vmbo-students' autonomy in English classes is indeed limited. Since autonomy belongs to human beings' prerequisite needs for motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Oga-Baldwin, 2019), it seems a plausible conclusion that students' low motivation is caused by the limited amount of autonomy students have in their English learning process.

However, it should be taken into consideration that some findings and a few of the issues that were expressed by teachers with respect to the implementation of the subcomponents are not necessarily specific to RC schools. For instance, there appeared to be an emphasis on summative testing rather than formative testing in English classes, meaning that the implementation of the subcomponents planning—or, the evaluation of language skills that provide a basis for learning plans—and evaluating were negatively affected. Yet, as was pointed out above, the lack of formative testing characterises the Dutch education system and

thus applies to non-RC schools as well as RC schools (Heij, 2014; Litjens et al., 2018). Therefore, it seems implausible that absence of autonomy in these respects are responsible for the difference between RC and non-RC students' motivation. Additionally, teachers mentioned that they had to teach large groups of students, which affected the possibility to offer students autonomy in English learning activities. However, similar to the emphasis on summative tests, this issue has been addressed in relation to non-RC educational settings as well (Basri, 2020; Reeve et al., 1999; Roth et al., 2007). In other words, the limited amount of autonomy RC vmbo-students have could account for their lower motivation to some extent, but may not be the only factor that is responsible for the difference observed between RC and non-RC students' motivation. Yet, two other factors that may account for RC students' low motivation could be inferred from teachers' and students' responses as well. These will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

5.6.2 Possible Influence of Competence on RC Students' Motivation. Teachers indicated that a number of students start English education at secondary schools with negative experiences concerning English education. Specifically, it was suggested that some primary schools offer a relatively high level of English education, because of which vmbo-students in particular gain the idea that they are not sufficiently competent to learn English. As self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) states, human beings need to feel competent to become motivated for certain actions. Given that the level of English education in primary education is too high for a number of vmbo-students, this may imply that students' lack of feeling competent for learning English also plays a role in their low motivation.

The lack of competence feelings could also account for the differences between RC and non-RC students. Under the assumption that RC students attend RC primary schools as well as RC secondary schools, it may be speculated that the pressure on English education at

RC secondary schools increased the pressure on RC primary schools as well. For instance, these primary schools might anticipate the challenges of English education at RC secondary schools by increasing the level of English education as an attempt to prepare all learners for English education at secondary schools adequately. This may then cause a difference between English language learning experiences of RC and non-RC learners.

5.6.3 Influence of General Knowledge on RC Students' Lower Performance.

Another possible factor was mentioned by one of the participating teachers during an informal conversation after the interview. This factor does not relate directly to RC vmbo-students' lower motivation, but rather to their observed lower performance compared to non-RC students (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). According to the teacher, many RC vmbo-students have a lack of general knowledge, for instance with respect to current themes such as climate change, due to their religious background. This could affect their vocabulary size, as also pointed out in previous research (Rozendaal, 2017). However, English final exams often include texts that are related to these topics. Since RC students' lack of general knowledge negatively influences their vocabulary size, they could be disadvantaged in final exams. Similar conclusions have been drawn with respect to vocabulary tests taken by RC learners in primary education (Rozendaal, 2017).

This factor may also account for the fact that RC vmbo-students perform below average as opposed to RC vwo- and havo-students in comparison to non-RC students (Lectoraat Engels, 2021). For instance, while vwo- and havo-students might be more motivated for learning in general, and therefore also for exploring the world by reading news regarding current themes, they may gain more general knowledge compared to vmbo-students. This could then compensate for vwo- and havo-students' disadvantaged position in final exams.

To summarise, the findings of this study suggest that the lack of autonomy could have affected RC vmbo-students' motivation for learning English. However, students' limited feelings of competence and lack of general knowledge could have influenced students' motivation and performance as well.

5.7 Recommendations for the Implementation of Autonomy

The findings mostly suggested that the autonomy vmbo-students have over their English language learning process is limited with respect to the five subcomponents of the dynamic autonomy model (Tassinari, 2010) that were investigated in this study. As this could have affected students' motivation, this section provides a few recommendations to foster students' autonomy in English classes, while taking into consideration teachers' and students' perspectives regarding the implementation of the subcomponents.

First of all, with respect to the subcomponent planning, learning plans were hardly used in English classes. One of the limitations that was pointed out concerned the fact that most teachers do not have sufficient time to make or check these. To overcome this challenge, schools may employ teacher assistants, who only seemed present at a few schools in this study. They could then assist students in the development of learning plans. This was already realised to some extent at one of the participating schools. A trial might be performed with respect to low performing students first, which could be followed by extended use for other students in the long term. Since the lack of learning plans may also apply to other subjects that are taught, the use of learning plans might be implemented by the help of teacher assistants with respect to other subjects as well.

Secondly, regarding the subcomponent choosing materials and methods, teachers appeared to experience challenges in providing students with a wide range of engaging learning materials. Also, some of the participants expressed a need for materials they can use

to practice reading and listening skills independently. To anticipate this, schools may create an online website offering a wide range of materials that students can use to develop their language skills in accordance to their English proficiency level. Similar initiatives have been proposed and realised on a larger scale to foster students' autonomy in language learning processes (Reinders & Hubbard, 2012; Tassinari, 2017). The availability of these learning materials may encourage students to practice their language skills independently more often (Reinders & Hubbard, 2012). The development of the website may be a joint project by a number of RC school collectives to avoid possible time limitations and financial barriers.

Thirdly, concerning the subcomponent monitoring as well as the subcomponent evaluating, students expressed that they would prefer to reflect on their results in relation to learning processes more regularly, to improve the strategies they use for learning. Given the time limitation that was mentioned, teachers could introduce reflection moments on a small scale, for instance by instructing students to write short reflections on their learning process after having received grades for tests and larger assignments. By enhancing self-examination using written reflections, students' can become increasingly aware of their learning process, which strengthens their sense of control and stimulates them to improve learning strategies (Porto, 2007). Also, the highlighted emphasis on grades in evaluating may shift towards learning processes rather than the results obtained. Students furthermore indicated that they would prefer to evaluate their performance on tests in more detail. Teachers might therefore create more opportunities for students to view their own answers to test questions in comparison to the correct answers, which could allow students to identify which areas they could develop further.

Fourthly, in relation to the fourth subcomponent, completing tasks, teachers indicated that guidance is essential. Yet, to some extent, this view affected the freedom that was offered in completing tasks. Therefore, teachers' awareness should be increased with regard

to the fact that autonomy support is inextricably linked to teacher guidance (Reeve, 2006). As Reeve (2006) indicates, one of the most important ways to do this is by offering students “clarity of what to do along with a freedom of choice, voice, and initiative” (p. 232).

Teachers could thus attempt to offer more options to support learner autonomy with respect to the freedom students have in completing tasks, while guiding students by providing clear regulations with teachers’ expectations for the assignment.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Main Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate to what extent RC vmbo English students have autonomy over their learning process with respect to five subcomponents of Tassinari’s (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy: planning, choosing materials and methods, monitoring, completing tasks, and evaluating. Two sub research questions were addressed by conducting interviews with teachers and students. Firstly, it was examined which role teachers currently attribute to learners’ autonomy. Secondly, it was investigated how learners perceive the extent to which they have autonomy over their learning process. The findings mainly showed that the autonomy students have concerning the five subcomponents addressed was limited, which was in line with the hypothesis. Therefore, it was argued that autonomy could have affected students’ motivation for learning English, as suggested by Lectoraat Engels (2021). Furthermore, in relation to the sub research questions, the data demonstrated that students’ perceptions were mostly in line with teachers’ responses. However, with regard to the subcomponents monitoring and evaluating, students’ limited autonomous learning behaviour became even more apparent from students’ perceptions. This further underlined the importance of investigating students’ perspectives as well as teachers’ perspectives (Basri, 2020; Verbeeck et al., 2013). In line with self-determination theory (Deci

& Ryan, 2000) and Tassinari's (2010) dynamic model of learner autonomy, which point out human beings' need for autonomy, students' perspectives also highlighted their needs for subcomponents of autonomy such as monitoring.

It was furthermore indicated that a number of challenges could be faced when implementing the subcomponents of autonomy investigated. A few of these challenges seemed to contradict self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as they indicated that students' need for autonomy was subject to variation due to students' learning strengths and weaknesses. The strengths and weaknesses perceived by teachers may be observed at some secondary education levels—vmbo in this study—more compared to other secondary education levels. Other challenges, such as class size and schools' curricula, were related to the education system in general that the participating schools were part of. Hence, it was argued that autonomy might not be the only factor causing a difference between RC and non-RC students' motivation. Based on the data, it was suggested that students' limited feelings of competence could further account for RC students' motivation, and that their observed lower performance may also be related to students' lack of general knowledge.

However, since the findings showed that RC vmbo-students' autonomy over their learning process was limited, which could have affected their motivation, several recommendations were offered to foster learner autonomy in RC vmbo L2 English classes further. These included the use of learning plans with help of teacher assistants; creating a website offering a wide range of materials that students can use to develop listening and reading skills; instructing students to write short reflections on their learning process after having received grades; and providing guidance in conjunction with freedom in completing tasks.

6.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Two limitations might be taken into consideration when interpreting the conclusions of this study. First of all, the conclusions were based on teachers' and students' perceptions of autonomy support. This might have affected insight into the extent to which teachers support autonomy. While teachers may have overestimated their attempts to support autonomy, students might not always have been aware of ways in which some of the subcomponents were implemented into practice. To gain broader insight into the extent to which teachers support learner autonomy, future research might also include lesson observations. In addition, these observational studies could be followed by experimental research measuring the effects of an autonomy enhancement intervention that is based on the recommendations offered in this study.

Another limitation could be the fact that not all subcomponents of the dynamic autonomy model (Tassinari, 2010) were investigated. Although this might not have affected the validity, as was described in the discussion, this does not mean that other subcomponents could not have influenced students' motivation as well. For instance, while the subcomponent dealing with my feelings may not be a subcomponent of autonomy concerning which teachers could directly support students' autonomy, RC vmbo-students might not be able to deal with feelings of demotivation, which may then affect their motivation and performance (Lectoraat Engels, 2021) as well.

Furthermore, as pointed out above, other factors, such as feelings of competence and amount of general knowledge, could also have affected RC vmbo-students' motivation and performance. Future research could investigate to what extent these factors play a role in RC vmbo-students' motivation and underperformance. This may further highlight underlying factors influencing language learners' motivation and performance, and might eventually contribute to an education that suits all learners' different backgrounds.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Planning (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-f)

- *Teachers:*
 - Evalueren jullie weleens taalvaardigheden van leerlingen en analyseren jullie weleens op welk punt sommige leerlingen wat achterblijven?
 - Zo ja, hoe vaak doen jullie dit? Hoe doen jullie dit?
 - Zo nee, waarom doen jullie dit niet?
 - Helpen jullie leerlingen op basis hiervan bij het maken van een leerplan met daarin leerdoelen, wanneer wat wordt uitgevoerd en wat nodig is om een activiteit uit te voeren of een doel te behalen?
 - Zo ja, hoe vaak doen jullie dit? Hoe doen jullie dit?
 - Zo nee, wat is de reden dat jullie leerlingen geen leerplannen laten maken?
- *Students:*
 - Evalueren jullie in de klas weleens in welke taalvaardigheden je goed bent en in welke taalvaardigheden minder?
 - Maken jullie weleens een leerplan voor jezelf met daarin leerdoelen om ergens beter in te worden en een planning wanneer je wat op welke manier gaat doen?
 - Als jullie dit weleens doen, hoe vinden jullie dat?
 - Als jullie dat nooit doen, hoe lijkt het jullie om meer inzicht te krijgen in dingen waar je goed en minder goed in bent en om daarmee aan de slag te gaan aan de hand van een leerplan?
- *Possible topics:*

- Leerlingen geven aan welke vaardigheid ze willen verbeteren en hebben de ruimte om te beslissen hoe ze het door henzelf geformuleerde leerdoel willen bereiken
- Leerlingen kunnen zelfstandig en op hun eigen manier naar deadlines toewerken en maken daarvoor (met eventuele begeleiding van docent) een leerplan om hun doel te behalen

2. Choosing Materials and Methods (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-b)

- *Teachers*: Geven jullie leerlingen de mogelijkheid om te kiezen uit verschillende (soorten) lesmateriaal, methodes en strategieën om (persoonlijke) leerdoelen te bereiken?
 - Zo ja, bij welke opdrachten gebeurt dit dan bijvoorbeeld en hoeveel vrijheid krijgen leerlingen dan?
 - Zo nee, waarom bieden jullie leerlingen die mogelijkheid niet en zouden jullie er wel voor openstaan om meer mogelijkheden te bieden in het lesmateriaal, de methodes en strategieën die leerlingen kunnen benutten om een doel te behalen?
- *Students*: Ben je bekend met verschillende materialen, bronnen, methodes en strategieën die je kunt gebruiken om verschillende onderdelen van je taalvaardigheid te verbeteren en maak je hier ook gebruik van?
 - Zo ja, bij wat voor opdrachten hebben jullie de mogelijkheid om dit te doen? Zijn opdrachten waarbij jullie meer keuzemogelijkheid zouden willen hebben om iets te leren?
 - Zo nee, zijn er wel opdrachten waarbij je meer vrijheid zou willen hebben om jouw materiaal te

- *Possible topics:*
 - Aanbod alternatief lesmateriaal om keuzevrijheid te vergroten in aansluiting op het niveau en de persoonlijke interesses van leerlingen, bijvoorbeeld bij de ontwikkeling van lees- en luistervaardigheid, of grammatica
 - Mogelijkheid om alternatieve strategieën toe te passen om leerdoelen te bereiken, bijvoorbeeld om lees- of luistervaardigheid te verbeteren, of woordenschat te vergroten
 - Het gebruik van laptops met gepersonaliseerde programma's zoals Holmwoods, die leerlingen de mogelijkheid bieden om te werken met materialen afgestemd op hun niveau
 - Mogelijkheid om zelfstandig of samen te werken aan opdrachten, of om te kiezen in welke ruimte gewerkt wordt, of er thuis/op school gewerkt wordt, op welk tempo dit gedaan wordt en in welke volgorde activiteiten uitgevoerd kunnen worden

3. Monitoring (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-e)

- *Teachers:*
 - Monitoren jullie zelfstandige leerprocessen (bijv. bij het werken aan een grote opdracht)?
 - Helpen jullie leerders te reflecteren op het leerproces, te ontdekken wat hun sterke en zwakke punten zijn bij het leren en om hun leerproces daarop aan te passen?
 - Zo ja, kunnen jullie voorbeelden daarvan geven?
 - Zo nee, hoe komt het dat jullie zelfstandige leerprocessen niet monitoren en dat jullie niet met leerders reflecteren op hun leerproces?

- Zouden jullie in de praktijk meer willen monitoren en leerders te begeleiden in hun leerproces? Hoe zouden jullie dat kunnen doen?
- *Students:*
 - Denken jullie in de klas weleens na over je sterke en zwakke kanten bij het leren en over wat jullie bijvoorbeeld tegenhoudt bij als je last hebt van uitstelgedrag?
 - Hebben jullie het met je docent weleens over je manier van leren of opdrachten uitvoeren?
 - Bespreken jullie bij deze gesprekken ook weleens wat voor materialen, bronnen, methodes en strategieën je hebt gebruikt?
 - Zo ja, kun je voorbeelden noemen waarbij jullie dat deden?
 - Zo nee, lijkt het je fijn om dit bij opdrachten of toetsen te doen en wat zou je dan graag willen bespreken?
- *Possible topics:*
 - Bij zelfstandige opdrachten die uitgevoerd moeten worden: voortdurende reflectie op voortgang
 - Bespreking met leerlingen hoe er aan opdrachten gewerkt wordt, of hoe er op toetsen voorbereid wordt

4. Completing Tasks (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-b)

- *Teachers:* Geven jullie leerlingen de vrijheid om geheel op hun eigen manier aan taken werken, daarbij gebruikmakend van leermaterialen die passen bij hun leerplannen?
 - Zo ja, hoe geven jullie dit in de praktijk dan vorm?
 - Zo nee, waarom niet? Zouden jullie dit wel willen doen?

- *Students:*
 - Mogen jullie voor een toets of opdracht weleens zelf kiezen hoe je een toets voorbereidt of een opdracht uitvoert, dus dat je zelf lesmateriaal, bronnen, methodes en strategieën kunt kiezen die passen bij wat je moet leren en bij je taalniveau?
 - En mag je dan ook kiezen op welk moment je werkt aan een opdracht of een toets voorbereidt?
 - Zo ja, op welke momenten hebben jullie die mogelijkheden bijvoorbeeld?
 - Zo nee, wat zou je ervan vinden als jullie op meer verschillende manieren naar een leerdoel toe kunt werken?
- *Possible topics:*
 - Kunnen leerlingen tijdens de les zelfstandig op hun eigen wijze werken aan de vaardigheid die ze willen verbeteren?

5. Evaluating (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-c)

- *Teachers:* Evalueren jullie met (individuele) leerlingen hun taalvaardigheden in combinatie met hun zelfstandige leerproces?
 - Zo ja, wanneer doen jullie dat? Hoe doen jullie dat? En wat doen jullie met die evaluaties?
 - Zo nee, wat is de reden dat jullie dit niet doen? Zouden jullie het wel willen doen? In welke situaties zou het jullie een goed idee lijken om prestaties en leerprocessen te evalueren en om daar wat mee te doen?

- *Students:* Bespreken jullie met docenten, medeleerlingen, of in de klas weleens na afloop van een opdracht van een toets of opdracht hoe je een toets hebt voorbereid of een opdracht uitgevoerd hebt en wat voor resultaat dat opgeleverd heeft?
 - Zo ja, hoe vaak doen jullie dat en wat doe je met deze evaluatiemomenten?
 - Zo nee, wat vind je ervan dat jullie dat niet doen?
 - Zou je het vaker willen doen en zo ja, bij welke toetsen of opdrachten zou je dat willen?

- *Possible topics:*
 - Reflectie op wat geleerd is, hoe dit gedaan is en de mate waarin leerlingen reflecties op hun leerproces communiceren met docenten (en of dit terugkoppelen gestimuleerd wordt)
 - Wat wordt er gedaan met toetsresultaten en tussentijdse rapporten?

Appendix B: Main Descriptions/Definitions and Descriptors

1. Planning (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-f, Planning)

Main Description/Definition:

“Planning is a key part of autonomous learning: to recognise one’s own needs, to formulate these into realistic learning objectives, and to structure these into steps and create a learning plan. To plan, one has to be flexible enough to change the learning plan if one’s situation or needs should change.”

Descriptors:

- I can evaluate my own language competencies.
- I can analyse my own needs.
- I can set myself goals.
- I can plan a time and place for my learning.
- I know what I need to complete a task or to achieve a goal (for example the competencies, steps of a task and language tools”).
- I can put together a learning plan.

2. Choosing Materials and Methods (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-b, Choosing materials and methods)

Main Description/Definition:

“A key element of autonomous language learning is choosing and working with suitable learning materials, methods and strategies. These competencies are acquired and developed bit by bit.”

Descriptors:

- I am familiar with a variety of materials and resources for language learning.
- I can choose materials and resources.

- I can try out new materials and resources.
- I am familiar with a variety of language learning methods and strategies.
- I can choose different methods and strategies.
- I can try out new methods and strategies.

3. Monitoring (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-e, Monitoring)

Main Description/Definition:

“Monitoring means reflecting on topics, tasks, the learning process, and thinking about oneself as a learner. This enables one to identify one’s own learning strengths and weaknesses and to structure one’s learning accordingly.”

Main Description/Descriptors:

- I can recognise my strengths and weaknesses as a learner and/or reflect on these.
- I can recognise what prevents me from completing a task.
- I can reflect on materials and resources which I have used.
- I can reflect on methods and strategies which I have employed.
- I can reflect on my learning.

4. Completing Tasks (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-b, Completing tasks)

Main Description/Definition:

“Part of completing tasks consists of equipping the place of study with the necessary language tools and resources. Other important aspects include organising time to learn, completing individual or multiple tasks, and employing appropriate methods and strategies.”

Descriptors:

- I can set myself a task.
- I can structure my learning independently.
- I can use a variety of materials and resources when learning.
- I can employ a variety of methods and strategies when learning.
- I can carry out my learning plan.

5. Evaluating (Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.-c, Evaluating)***Main Description/Definition:***

“Evaluating is at the core of the autonomous learning process. This term includes the evaluation of learning progress (i.e. what have I learnt?) and of the learning process itself (i.e. how have I learnt?). Evaluating one’s own progress and one’s own language competencies is the hardest part of autonomous language learning. It requires practice and normally exchange with other learners, native speakers, learning advisors and teachers.”

Descriptors:

- I can evaluate my own language competencies.
- I can evaluate materials and resources for language learning.
- I can evaluate language learning methods and strategies.
- I can evaluate my learning.

Appendix C: Consent Forms

Informatie- en Toestemmingsverklaring Docenten voor Deelname aan Masterscriptieonderzoek Meertaligheid en Taalverwerving

Het interview waaraan u deelneemt is onderdeel van een onderzoek. Tijdens het interview zal gevraagd worden naar uw ervaring met de invulling van Engels onderwijs in 3 vmbo. Het interview zal opgenomen worden en duurt maximaal één uur. Na afloop worden de interviews getranscribeerd. Dit kan dan gebruikt worden voor het onderzoek. Deelname aan het onderzoek levert u voordelen op in de vorm van praktische handreikingen om Engels onderwijs te verbeteren.

Uw deelname is geheel vrijwillig. U kunt zich dan ook op elk moment zonder opgave van reden terugtrekken tijdens de uitvoer van het onderzoek. Ook na het interview hebt u nog de mogelijkheid om uw deelname in te trekken. Uw onderzoeksgegevens worden dan niet gebruikt voor verdere analyses. Als u wel deelneemt worden de data anoniem verwerkt in het onderzoek. Uw persoonsgegevens worden enkel door de onderzoeker beheerd en niet gedeeld met derden.

Hebt u vragen? Neem contact op met Mirjam van der Tang (mirjamvdtang@gmail.com)

Ik bevestig:

- dat ik naar tevredenheid over het onderzoek ben ingelicht;
- dat ik in de gelegenheid ben gesteld om vragen over het onderzoek te stellen en dat mijn eventuele vragen naar tevredenheid zijn beantwoord;
- dat ik gelegenheid heb gehad om grondig over deelname aan het onderzoek na te denken;
- dat ik uit vrije wil deelneem.

Ik stem er mee in dat:

- de verzamelde gegevens voor wetenschappelijke doelen worden verkregen en bewaard zoals hierboven vermeld staat;
- er voor wetenschappelijke doeleinden geluidsopnamen worden gemaakt die na transcriptie worden verwijderd.

Ik begrijp dat:

- ik het recht heb om mijn toestemming voor het gebruik van data in te trekken.

Naam deelnemer: _____ Datum, plaats: ___ / ___ / _____,

In te vullen door de uitvoerend onderzoeker:

Naam:

Ik verklaar dat ik bovengenoemde deelnemer heb uitgelegd wat deelname aan het onderzoek inhoudt.

Informatie- en Toestemmingsverklaring Leerlingen (en Ouders) voor Deelname aan Masterscriptieonderzoek Meertaligheid en Taalverwerving

Het interview waaraan je deelneemt is onderdeel van een onderzoek. Tijdens het interview zal gevraagd worden naar jouw ideeën over lessen van het vak Engels. Het interview zal opgenomen worden en duurt maximaal één lesuur. Daarna worden de interviews getranscribeerd. Dit kan dan gebruikt worden voor het onderzoek. Deelname aan het onderzoek heeft voor jou geen directe voordelen. Het interview kan de onderzoeker wel helpen een beeld te vormen van Engels lessen op jouw school en dit kan in de toekomst mogelijk gebruikt worden om Engels onderwijs te verbeteren. Er wordt niet verwacht dat het interview verder nadelige gevolgen voor je zal hebben.

Je deelname is geheel vrijwillig en je kunt je op elk moment, om wat voor redenen dan ook, terugtrekken tijdens de uitvoer van het onderzoek. Ook na het interview kun je nog besluiten niet meer mee te doen. Dan worden jouw onderzoeksgegevens niet gebruikt voor het verdere onderzoek. Als je wel meedoet worden je gegevens anoniem in dit onderzoek verwerkt. Je persoonsgegevens worden alleen door de onderzoeker beheerd en niet gedeeld met derden.

Heb je vragen? Neem contact op met Mirjam van der Tang (mirjamvdtang@gmail.com)

Ik bevestig:

- dat ik naar tevredenheid over het onderzoek ben ingelicht;
- dat ik in de gelegenheid ben gesteld om vragen over het onderzoek te stellen en dat mijn eventuele vragen naar tevredenheid zijn beantwoord;
- dat ik gelegenheid heb gehad om grondig over deelname aan het onderzoek na te denken;
- dat ik uit vrije wil deelneem.

Ik stem er mee in dat:

- de verzamelde gegevens voor wetenschappelijke doelen worden verkregen en bewaard zoals hierboven vermeld staat;
- er voor wetenschappelijke doeleinden geluidsopnamen worden gemaakt die na transcriptie worden verwijderd.

Ik begrijp dat:

- ik het recht heb om mijn toestemming voor het gebruik van data in te trekken.

Naam deelnemer: _____ Datum, plaats: ___ / ___ / ____,

Handtekening: _____

Naam ouder: _____ Datum, plaats: ___ / ___ / ____,

Handtekening: _____

In te vullen door de uitvoerend onderzoeker:

Naam: _____

Ik verklaar dat ik bovengenoemde deelnemer heb uitgelegd wat deelname aan het onderzoek inhoudt.

Datum: ___ / ___ / ____