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Some components of second language learning experiences: An interview study with English teachers in Hungary

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1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to report on the first results of a qualitative investigation concerning some of the elements of language learning experiences of English teachers. The motivation behind this study is twofold. First, it intends to contribute to the L2 motivation field by exploring the somewhat neglected element of the role of learning experiences. Despite the fact that second and/or foreign (L2) language learners' attitudes and identities have been long researched (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), there is significantly less emphasis on the learning experiences and their role in L2 motivation. Conceptualization of and research on learning experiences seem to be important as they are thought to shape motivation, and through motivation, students' achievement in L2 learning. Second, there is still a relative scarcity of studies involving teachers in L2 motivation research. As teachers are largely responsible for impacting the teaching and learning processes, analyzing what they say about their own learning might eventually contribute to a better understanding of how their work affects students' L2 motivation. In order to accomplish the aim of the study, the following research question has been asked: What are some of the salient elements of English teachers' foreign/second language learning experiences? The study reported here is part of a mixed-methods investigation targeted at issues concerning L2 teachers' motivation in the Hungarian context. In this article, I will focus on some of the findings of the qualitative phase that included an interview study with ten English language teachers from various settings. After a brief theoretical summary of language learning experiences in L2 motivation research as well as an overview of the research methods, I will concentrate on three major emerging themes concerning the learning experiences of teachers: success, contact and the role of their own teachers.

2. Background

When looking at the definition of language learning experiences, it becomes clear that it includes contextually anchored motives that might shape the learning process. Dörnyei (2005) as part of his L2 Motivational Self System defines L2 learning experience as “situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g. the positive impact of success or the enjoyable quality of a language course)” (p. 106). In a similar way, You, Dörnyei and Csizér (2016) defined language learning experience as “covering a range of situated, ‘executive’ motives related to the immediate learning environment” (p. 96). What entails the actual learning environment is not specified in these definitions, but for the purpose of my study, I will take a broad perspective and include all possible contexts from the classroom to immersion education.

The role of experiences in L2 learning were highlighted at the definitional level by Gardner (1985), whose most influential definition of L2 motivation included positive experiences, as he defined L2 motivation as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (p. 10). Despite this, Gardner’s theories never really detailed the role of experiences. One of the reasons for this might be that experiences were not considered as a separate construct, but they were looked at as positive attitudes towards various aspects of language learning. It could be argued that experiences offered a different conceptualization than the attitudinal (cognitive, affective and conative) dispositions.

In connection to L2 motivation research in the mid-1990s, the role of experiences received some emphasis in various theories. Crookes and Schmidt’s (2001) highly influential four-level framework contained past experiences at the classroom level, although one can argue that its relevance could cut across each level (the micro, the classroom, the syllabus/curriculum, and the outside the classroom level) and ongoing, present experiences might also play a role in language learning. Williams and Burden’s (1997) framework of L2 motivation included a great number of internal and external factors, and among the external factors, learners’ mediated language learning experiences could be found that are a result of interaction with significant others. This calls our attention to the fact that experiences are socially constructed and that “learning never occurs in a vacuum” (p. 139).

Apart from theoretical considerations, there are some empirical results highlighting the important role experiences might play in the learning process from various perspectives. Clément linked experience to self-confidence in his research and proved that more pleasant and frequent contact (i.e. positive

experience related to L2 speakers) led to an increased linguistic self-confidence in the learners, which, in turn, affected motivation in a positive way (Clément, 1980; Clément & Kruidinier (1985). In addition, Labrie and Clément (1986) investigated a bicultural milieu and found that negatively seen contact, if frequent enough, had a positive impact on self-confidence, probably due to the fact that “experience in aversive contacts develops the individual’s expectations regarding the capacity to face successfully second language usage in such situations” (p. 279). Ushioda’s (2001) work into attribution theory of motivation (i.e., how we explain our successes and failures in learning) analyzed patterns of attribution based on interviews carried out in two stages (separated by 15-16 months) with 20 undergraduate university students studying French in Dublin. She concludes that “the process of filtering experience and maintaining a positive belief structure seems to hinge in particular on sustaining a positive self-concept of personal ability or potential and on affirming a sense of motivational autonomy in the face of negative affective experiences” (p. 120).

Towards the end of the 1990’s, there was an increased interest in the process of L2 motivation and L2 learning experiences emerging as a more decisive part of theorization. Dörnyei’s (2001) Process Model of Motivation broke down the motivational process into temporal segments by including pre-actional, actional and post-actional phases and attaching motivational influences and action sequences to each stage. In the actional stage, one important motivation influence was the “quality of the learning experience (pleasantness, need significance, coping potential, self and social image)” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 22). In an alternative conceptualization, Ushioda’s (2001, p. 118) model of learner conception of L2 motivation offered a prominent role for experiences, as she argued that the process of motivation was basically shaped by either motivation deriving from past experiences or, by motivation directed towards future goals. Finally, Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System posited that selves and experiences shaped students’ effort invested into L2 learning, as this model outlined the effect of three distinct constructs: the ideal L2 self, that is, to what extent students can imagine themselves as highly proficient users of the given foreign language; the ought-to L2 self, which describes what outside pressures students acknowledge throughout the learning process; and finally, language learning experiences, which influence attitudes towards the classroom processes (Dörnyei, 2005).

In addition to theoretical and empirical consideration, the notion of how learning was experienced seems to be also important in the literature where the practicalities of L2 motivation was detailed. In the discussion of motivational strategies, i.e., techniques and tricks teachers might use to

motivate their students, language learning experience emerged as an important component of the motivating teaching practice (Dörnyei, 2001). In Dörnyei's (2001) 35 motivational strategies for language classroom use, one of the strategies include "provid[ing] learners with regular experiences of success" (p. 142). It is interesting to see that the strategy not only urges teachers to provide students with regular positive experiences, but success was also linked to the process of experience by definition implying that positive experience referred to successful experience (see also above in initial definition).

Current research on L2 motivation includes learning experiences from various multidimensional and interdisciplinary points of views. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed account here, but the following issues seem to be especially important: 1) how vision motivates teachers and students, and how vision is related to experiences (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014); 2) positive experiences from flow in the classroom (Czimmermann & Piniel, 2016; Piniel & Albert, forthcoming); 3) experiencing emotions and their role in L2 motivation (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2016); 4) how self-efficacy beliefs, performing foreign language related tasks successfully (Bandura, 1986, 1988), and learning experiences are interrelated (Piniel & Csizér, 2013); 5) L2 motivation as a complex dynamic system and the role of experiences in this system (Dörnyei, MacIntyre & Henry, 2015).

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The qualitative interview study involved ten English language teachers with their teaching experiences ranging from 5 years to 25 years (with 9 of them having more than 15 years of experience in teaching). There were two male and eight female participants. The selection of the participants was done in a way that maximum variation could be achieved by involving teachers from multiple settings in Hungary. As I used my network to recruit participants for this study, all of them are teaching in or near Budapest. All participants have learnt multiple languages with various success, and all of them seem to be content in their profession. A short summary on the participants (with pseudo names) follows:

- András, born in 1973, has been teaching in a corporate setting for more than 20 years, including for many years without a degree. After obtaining his MA diploma in English language and literature much later in his life, he went on to pursue a PhD degree. While working for his degree, he started teaching classes at a university, which experience

broadened his view of teaching. He maintains a view that he is only interested in teaching people over 18.

- Balázs, born in 1971, is teaching at a secondary school in Budapest. He has worked at different secondary schools both private and state. He carved out a particular niche for himself (which is not mentioned here due to anonymity reasons) in which he is considered one of the leading experts in Hungary. Currently, he is affiliated with one of the best secondary schools in Budapest. He has been teaching intermittently at university level as well.
- Anna was born in 1965, and at the time of the interview lived in a town near Budapest. After she received her English and Russian teaching degrees, she started working in the private sector teaching English. First, she taught at various companies, but nowadays she only works with private students, mostly in a one-to-one context.
- Barbara, born in 1974, was a double major at university and for a long time she planned a career with her non-language major (withheld for anonymity reasons). After graduating, she started working at the same university while obtaining her PhD. Currently, she is an assistant professor and teaches various language- and subject-related courses. She has been teaching for about 15 years.
- Cili, born in 1971, graduated in Budapest as an English and German teacher. She has 19 years of experience teaching English: first, in the private sector, then later in various other contexts. She obtained her PhD a couple of years ago and currently teaches English for specific purposes at a university in Budapest.
- Dalma, the youngest participant in the sample, was born in 1987; therefore, she has the fewest years of experience as she has been teaching at a special needs primary and secondary school for 5 years. Without giving away her person, it has to be mentioned that she is teaching English as a [details are withheld here] special needs educator not a teacher. Once she manages to pay off her students' loan, she intends to obtain an English teaching degree.
- Emese was born in 1963, and she obtained her first degree in teaching Hungarian and Russian. After that, she received a degree in teaching young learners in an alternative setting and finally an English teaching degree. Currently she is working towards her PhD degree, and parallel she is teaching at a university. Earlier she worked with young learners at primary school level.
- Fanni (born in 1969) is teaching at a primary school outside Budapest. She first completed a Hungarian and Russian teaching degree and taught Hungarian. While on maternity leave, she obtained an MA

degree in teaching English. She has been teaching English for 15 years both in the private and state sectors.

- Gréta was born in 1971, and she is teaching in a secondary school outside Budapest. After completing her English teaching degree, she briefly worked outside the teaching profession, but after that she taught at two secondary schools in Budapest. She has 20 years of teaching experience.
- Hajni, born in 1977, currently works at a primary and secondary school in a village near Budapest. She has been teaching English for students between the ages of 10 to 18. She is interested in young learners and teaches at a university as well in this field.

3.2 The instrument

The interview schedule was designed in Hungarian, the mother tongue of the participants. The instrument was piloted in several steps. First, based on the reviewed literature and previous experiences of the researcher, the initial questions were collated. As this phase was mainly brainstorming about possible questions, the first version of the instrument contained an exceptionally large number of questions. This was pared down to a manageable number with the help of two experts, who carefully read the instrument and suggested changes that involved mainly avoiding unnecessary repetitions and questions that did not contribute to the main aim of the study. The following version of the instrument was further fine-tuned with the help of a self-interview. The main topics, apart from biographical background questions, included 1) experiences related to language learning, teacher training and language teaching; 2) motivation to learn foreign languages, to become teachers and to motivate oneself and students; 3) initial expectancy of teaching as well as values associated with teaching; 4) ideal selves: how teachers see themselves in 5 to 10 years; 5) successes and failures: what they are experiencing, and how they explain their own successes and failures; 7) self-confidence, perceived strengths and weaknesses in teaching; 8) teaching styles. In the present article, data collected on the first part of the first topic are analyzed.

3.3 Data collection and data analysis

The interviews took place between November 2016 and April 2017. The interviews were of different length with the shortest being 40 minutes (with a teacher whose speech was exceptionally rapid) and the longest being 1 hour and 15 minutes. All interviews were in Hungarian; all English excerpts are my translations. The interviews yielded an approximately 70,000-word dataset.

All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were checked against the voice recording. The analysis was done thematically with Atlas.ti: first, emerging themes were identified within the topic, and then these themes were fine-tuned after carefully re-reading the interviews.

4. Results

In terms of the characteristics of foreign language learning, teacher training and teaching, I will analyze three emerging themes here. First, many of the participants mentioned that they considered themselves successful language learners and success was an integral part of their experience. Second, contact with L2 speakers also emerged as an important theme mostly in connection with travelling to countries of the L2 communities. Third, teacher-related experiences will be detailed. This emerging theme was the most divisive one: many of the participants were somewhat critical towards their language teachers, while others cited positive experiences.

4.1 Success as experience

It is seen as a truism in motivation research that nothing succeeds more than success, nothing motivates students to learn more than their experiencing success. Success indeed emerged as one of the important themes in the interviews when participants were asked to talk about their foreign language learning experiences. Out of the 10 teachers, 8 talked about being successful or experiencing success. Some of them explicitly stated that they experienced success very early, many times without even knowing or caring about the reasons behind this success. For example, András said: “my language learning experiences were really good because, I do not know why, but I was always good at learning foreign languages and I won many competitions up to national level.” Similar views were expressed by Anna: “at that time [i.e. when starting to learn the L2], I did not know anything, how it would go, but very soon it became apparent that I was very good at it, and I really liked it, that is, I was developing very fast in English.” For Barbara and Cili, success was illustrated by some achievement viewed as exceptional, unique and important: Barbara learnt English in a dual language school, and the first intensive year of learning was seen as highly successful: “it was really great success to see and feel with the other students that we learnt English in one year” (Barbara). Similarly, time is an important issue for Cili: “I was really enthusiastic [unlike the other students in the group], and I learnt those three books by heart. I did pass a language exam after three years in grade 10.” For three interviewees, success was linked to total immersion. Two of them had the opportunity to travel to English speaking countries as young children with their families and

had to learn English at school. After a couple of months, they were able to speak English: “although I had learnt English [i.e., before settling in the USA with her family], I had no positive experience towards it, but there I was, thrown in at the deep end, and I learnt English in grade 6 without opening my mouth for four months and then speaking fluently” (Fanni). Balázs’ story is similar: “I had to learn English in a couple of months in order to be able to learn the other subjects in English, and after a brief period of patience, I had to take exams in biology and other subjects [in English].” Another participant, Dalma, travelled to the US after learning English for 10 years at school without being successful (“There was this huge confusion in my head, it did not make sense to me, and I really did not like learning English. I could not work out the system of the language on my own”) and the experience of learning English in the USA brought about a shift in her self-confidence, and she started to communicate: “at the end of the summer, I was discussing the Kodály-method, and I was really-really surprised (Dalma). Closing her story about her experience in the US, she said that “I count my language learning from that point, despite the fact that I had been taught for 10 years before that.”

Based on these views, it can be concluded that most of the participants ultimately view themselves as successful learners of English, and the views described here illustrate well the fact that without success there might not be much positive experience to report. Success was linked to both developing successfully in a foreign language and being able to pass exams and win competitions as well as the ability to use the foreign language successfully outside the classrooms. In terms of the reasons behind experiencing success, we can find enthusiasm and effort as well as contextual reasons (for example immersion). It is somewhat surprising that success was never really investigated as a component of L2 motivation. I think that the notion of success might be linked to the investigation of the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and L2 motivation (Piniel & Csizér, 2013). In addition, it is not clear to what extent experiencing success could be viewed as a cognitive or affective construct: as self-efficacy beliefs are thought to be cognitive but positive emotions could also be evoked by experiencing success (MacIntery, Gregerson & Mercer, 2016).

4.2 Contact as experience

Another central component of foreign language experiences seems to be contact with the speakers of the language. This emerging theme includes participants’ spending longer periods of time (from months to years) in foreign countries. Apart from one participant, everyone talked about various contact experiences, which ranged from spending years abroad with their family,

studying abroad as university students to participating in shorter study trips. As explained related to success, two participants (Balázs and Fanni) experienced total immersion and learnt the language as young students in school settings. Both of them underlined the memory that it took them a couple of months to learn English and start talking and participating in school activities. Emese was 27 years old when she studied in England for a longer period of time, and she said that having an intermediate level of language exam was certainly not enough; therefore, she explained “I could say that I learnt English by acquiring it.” Hajni spent her gap year in England and had similar experiences with successfully learning English: “it was such a rewarding feeling that in the spring no one was able to tell whether or not I was a foreigner.” Another participant who learnt English and German here in Hungary but later spent years in both Germany and Scotland said that “well, I learnt the languages there” (Cili), although she later added that “I am not saying that you cannot learn the language without [staying abroad], but it is really important if someone can go abroad” (Cili). András had a differing view about studying abroad: he explicitly stated how happy he was to have the opportunity to spend some time abroad only after he had learnt English because he could put himself as an example to students that foreign languages could be learnt without immersion. András said that “if I were able to learn it, I can make them believe that they can do it too.” Study abroad experiences and self-confidence were linked for Dalma, who recounted how after learning English for 10 years at school in Hungary without much success. After she had spent three months in the USA, she felt a considerable change not only in her language knowledge but linguistic self-confidence, as well. In terms of contact, it is interesting to mention that two participants (András and Emese) basically said that foreign language learning was always part of their lives. As both of them come from settlements located very close to the border (Austria and Croatia), this closeness of the border could have influenced them from very early on.

Two participants related contact experiences and study abroad experiences to their own students, as well. Cili mentioned how based on her contact experience she urged university students to be adventurous and apply for various scholarship programs. Gréta explained that organizing exchange trips and inviting English speaking teachers to their schools not only creates various contact experiences for her students but also helps her with keeping her English up-to-date and practice the language. Gréta also recounted a somewhat atypical case in terms of contact experience. She explained how she learnt English in Hungary while teaching Hungarian to native English speakers through English: “this created a big boost in my language learning because it was so different.”

The scope of this study does not allow for the analysis of cause and effect issues, so it is not clear that the usefulness of contact experiences is only seen through the lenses of these successful learners or experiencing contact increases the chances of being successful in the L2s. Still, these results underscore the studies carried out by Clément and his colleagues about the important role of contact experiences in the learning processes (see above) as well as the results found in Hungarian studies (Kormos & Csizér, 2007; Csizér & Kormos, 2009): contact experiences not only create opportunities to learn the language but also increases self-confidences and positive attitudes towards the speakers of the language.

4.3 Teachers as instigators of experience

Learning a foreign language in a classroom setting is a context where teachers play a crucial role in not only shaping the learning process but also shaping students' attitudes towards the language and its learning. This is well reflected by the fact that many participants mentioned teachers, sometimes by name, and explained their likes and dislikes about them as well as how they impacted their learning experiences. The important role teachers play in the learning process was highlighted by Cili, who said “[t]he teacher is the most important [in the learning process]. Definitely.”

In terms of the details of likes and dislikes, examples of both emerged. To start with the negative side, four participants, Dalma, András, Balázs and Emese, said that their teachers were not really exceptional, but this was not a decisive issue in terms of their learning process. As Anna explained: “we had a very difficult Russian teacher, but as I was successful in learning Russian, I had no conflicts with her, other students did but not me.” Somewhat similarly, András juxtaposed his experience with his teachers to his success: “I think that my language teachers were not really good, but my language learning experiences were really good.” Bea was more critical towards her English teachers, and explained that at one point she quit English because the teacher was so boring. Bea later added stress to her negative experiences. She explained at length how stress thwarted her learning process: “I know that someone expects something from me, and I know that it is somewhere in me because I read about it or I know it but I cannot remember it because of the stressful situation, and then I cannot say it.”

In terms of teaching methodology, participants' perceived criticism targeted inappropriate teaching methods. Cili simply said that she did not think that the grammar translation method was a good way to learn a foreign language. In

her explanation, Fanni differentiated between the personality of her teacher and her teaching methods. She really liked her teacher because of her sense of humor and enchanting personality, but when talking somewhat negatively about the teaching methods, Fanni did not leave it at that but added: “I do not think that in the 1980s we could meet with such outstanding methods of foreign language teaching” (Fanni). Some participants, however, were more critical when bringing up the methods of teaching when talking about some of their teachers. Their views are best illustrated by what Balázs said: “we covered uninteresting topics from uninteresting books in uninteresting ways.”

It has to be acknowledged that not all participants were negative in their views. Anna also had positive experiences when a visiting teacher from the USA taught them in secondary school, and the new methods of this teacher provided her with really good experiences. The different backgrounds of teachers and differences in their teaching methods were brought up by Barbara as well, who explained how Hungarian and native English speaker staff members at her dual language secondary school clashed over teaching methods and way of teaching. Relating her experience, she said: “there was a point when we realized that Hungarian and Anglo-saxon ways of education are not the same.” Gréta had something very positive to say about her English teacher at secondary school: “She [the language teacher] took great care in what to teach us: the material had to be up-to-date, adequate and demanding. She did not want us to get stuck at a lower level.” Anna praised the personality of her private teacher; she said that she was very colorful, and they got along really well. Positive experience about teachers’ enthusiasm shaped Hajni’s experience to a great extent: she explained how much her teacher liked English and was part of her identity. Hajni also mentioned that this teacher organized study trips to England as well as reciting Shakespeare in English. Although Hajni did not seem to be impressed by the teaching methods this teacher used, but she claims that “the English language somewhat remained with me as the teacher could pass her love of the language to me and I think to this day that I still would like to learn English.” When asked why this happened, Hajni mentioned that her teacher’s empathetic personality and her ability to pay attention to individual students contributed to her positive language learning experiences. Gréta also claimed that her teachers influenced her to go in the direction of teacher training: “when deciding to become a teacher, my language teachers played a huge role in it because they made me love the language.”

Although the role of teachers in L2 motivation has long been acknowledged in the field (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), it is not easy to design studies to investigate the impact teachers have on students’ motivation. It needs to be

pointed out that the experiences of my participants were more positive than those of unsuccessful learners (Nikolov, 2001). In terms of teacher-related experiences, it is not clear what conceptual differences there might be between retrospective accounts and the ongoing experiences of successful learners.

5. Summary

In this article I set out to investigate some of the components of L2 learning of teachers. Three emerging themes are considered to be of crucial importance when the learning experiences are reported in a retrospective way: success, contact and the role of the teacher. As for the first two themes, participants reported positive experiences, even if difficulties had to be overcome, but their experiences related to teachers were mixed both on the personal level (i.e. how they viewed the personality of their teachers) and the professional level (i.e. what they thought about the teaching methods). These results indicate that L2 learning experiences are not merely positive and/or negative attitudes towards the language and its learning but seem to be broader and more complex conceptualization of the process that includes intrapersonal (success) and interpersonal components (contact) as well as context-related participants (teachers). Acknowledging the shortcomings of this analysis, I do not intend to argue that only these issues make up the concept of experience. Further research is needed to have a comprehensive picture of the conceptualisation of learning experiences (see Csizér & Kálmán, in press). In addition, my participants can certainly be considered successful learners and the experiences of less successful students might be different (Nikolov, 2001) and perhaps worth investigating. Another issue that needs to be pointed out is related to time: my interviewees recounted their past experiences. If a present timeframe had been used, maybe more context-related components would have emerged. In terms of future research, it is not only important to describe the quality of teachers' language learning experiences but also analyze how these experiences impact the teaching process.

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