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Starting age and other influential factors: Insights from learner interviews

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Abstract

The present study uses oral interviews with foreign language learners in search of influential factors in their language learning histories. The sample for the study was drawn from a larger sample of intermediate/advanced learners of English as a foreign language with a minimum of 10 years of exposure/instruction. The sample includes 6 early learners (range of starting age: 3.2-6.5) and 6 late learners (starting age: 11+). Half of them in each group were among those with the highest scores on two English language tests in the larger sample and half among those with the lowest scores on those same tests. A qualitative analysis of the interviews of these learners yields insights into their experience of foreign language learning and the role played in it by starting age and other significant factors, such as motivation and intensive contact with the language.

Keywords: starting age, individual differences, interviews, language learning histories, motivation

1. Introduction

After decades of research focusing on starting age as the sole main determinant of success in second language (L2) learning, age is increasingly seen as a complex variable that holds intricate interactions with a large number of other factors (see Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). This complex nature of age distinguishes it

from other learner characteristics. For example, Ellis (2004, p. 529) excludes age from his grouping of individual differences into abilities (e.g., aptitude), propensities (e.g., motivation), cognitions (e.g., beliefs), and actions (e.g., learning strategies). According to Ellis, age does not belong to any of these categories but rather potentially affects all of them as do other factors such as previous learning experiences and the learning situation.

In addition, due to these multiple associations that age holds with other factors its effects cannot be isolated from the effects of other (often hidden) variables. An illustration is Flege's (2009, p. 184) discussion of starting age in L2 phonology acquisition as a "macrovariable" that is associated with the state of neurological and cognitive development as well as the state of development of L1 phonetic category representations when L2 learning begins, L1 proficiency, language dominance, frequency of L2/L1 use, and kind of L2 input (native speaker vs. foreign accented). In the area of L2 speech acquisition as well, Moyer (2009) highlights the importance of quantity and quality of input and the multiple related influences between starting age, cognitive, social and psychological factors. The present study takes the view that a multi-factor approach can better account for learners' long-term outcomes than an approach solely focusing on starting age.

2. Background

Starting age of learning may be defined as the age at which significant exposure to the target language begins (Birdsong, 2006), and a common proxy has been age of immigration in naturalistic learning studies. This is the most relevant variable for maturational constraints studies for which starting age is the determining factor of ultimate attainment. In foreign language learning studies, starting age of learning is usually considered the age at which instruction begins, although learners may not have access to significant exposure until much later (for example, through an intensive exposure experience in-country or abroad). On the other hand, learners' chronological age may differ widely in studies of long-term or ultimate attainment, and it may become confounded with cognitive factors, education and other background variables (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999; Birdsong, 2006; Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley, 2003; Stevens, 2006).

Research on the impact of age in naturalistic language learning settings has consistently shown an older learners' short-term advantage (or initial faster learning rate) but a younger learners' long-term advantage (or higher ultimate attainment) (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979). In contrast with such findings, research in the last decade in a foreign language context has shown that early

starters do not outperform late starters when the amount of instruction or exposure is controlled for, even after many years of study. Rather, in such situations, older school learners are observed to outperform younger school learners after the same number of hours of instruction (see the collection of studies in García-Mayo & García-Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 2006a). The older starters' rate superiority has been at least partly attributed to the fact that their higher cognitive abilities give them an advantage at explicit learning (Muñoz, 2006b, 2008). On the other hand, it has been argued that younger starters do not benefit from their potential superiority at implicit learning in input-limited foreign language programmes because such a context does not provide young learners with the massive amounts of exposure to the language needed for implicit learning (DeKeyser, 2000; Muñoz, 2006b, 2008).

Because the amount of exposure or hours of instruction in a foreign language context is so low compared to a naturalistic language context, these findings could be interpreted as referring to rate (short term), rather than to ultimate attainment (long term). Only a few recent studies have looked at results in the long term in a foreign language setting and they have shown that starting age is not necessarily associated with superior long-term outcomes either, in contrast to the findings above from naturalistic settings (Al-Thubaiti, 2010; Harada, 2014; Muñoz, 2011, 2014; but see Larson-Hall, 2008). Moreover, two studies by Muñoz (2011, 2014) have shown that several measures of input (e.g., cumulative hours of instruction, hours in stays abroad or frequency of contact with target language) are significantly associated with foreign language learners' proficiency and oral performance. Similar results were obtained by Harada (2014) for L2 speech learning. The significance of intensive input for foreign language learners was also observed in a study by Muñoz (2012) that focused on the identification of a turning point in their process of language learning by learners themselves.

On the basis of those findings, it may be argued that age effects are mediated by learning context and that starting age may play a less influential role in input-limited foreign language settings than in naturalistic settings. In such a case the exploration of the factors that have a prominent role and their interaction with age may shed more light on foreign language learning and on L2 learning, generally. The natural candidate factors to explore are contextual and socio-affective factors that have already been highlighted by research carried out in naturalistic settings with a multi-factor perspective (for a review see Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). The contextual factors found to be significant include amounts and intensity of input (e.g., Jia & Aaronson, 2003), high-quality input (e.g., Flege & Liu, 2001; Winitz, Gillespie, & Starcev, 1995), range of contexts of L2 use (e.g., Moyer, 2004), and co-habitation with native speakers (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Marinova-Todd, 2003; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007). Socio-affective factors found to

be significant include, among others, strong intrinsic motivation (see the review in Moyer, 2014), sense of belonging to the target language community (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014), and engagement with the target language (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Moyer, 2004; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007).

The study of foreign accent by Moyer (2004) is a good illustration of this line of research. On the basis of an examination of 20 late learners of German, Moyer (2004, p. 140) argued that the socio-cultural context inherently brings to bear multiple influences on the learning process that coincide with age. Specifically, early exposure predisposes the learner to a greater variety of contact sources (formal and informal, personal and professional domains) as well as being associated with greater consistency and frequency of personal contact. All of this results in more opportunities to use the L2 and greater confidence and sense of self in the language, which ultimately lead to more practice opportunities and increased fluency in the language.

Another good illustration is the recent study by Kinsella and Singleton (2014), which examined how multiple factors impact on late learners of French. The study showed that there was no significant correlation between age of onset and achievement in French, and that three participants out of the 20 Anglophone late learners scored within the native speaker range on two language tests. The results of a linguistic background questionnaire showed that a number of factors, including length of residence, self-rating of spoken French, frequency of contact with native French speakers and intention to reside in France, correlated positively with the language test results. In the case of the three most successful participants, Kinsella and Singleton highlighted their full immersion in the French language (they all had French spouses) and their engagement with the target language: They felt part of the French-speaking community and intended to reside permanently in France.

The study by Lahmann (2014) also shows the impact of experiential variables on L2 proficiency. Lahmann analysed spontaneous speech from oral history interviews in English of 102 former German-L1 child refugees. Specifically, Lahmann examined the effects of age of onset or emigration and other chronological and socio-psychological variables on grammatical and lexical complexity, phonological accuracy (foreign accent), and fluency. Informants' average age at emigration was 12.15 and the average chronological age was 73.59. Lahmann's findings are that age of emigration had significant effects only on foreign accent, but with several exceptions (mainly in the US); foreign accent was also stronger in these informants if the spouse was German. On the other hand, it was chronological age that significantly affected fluency, which revealed aging effects. Finally, whilst age of emigration did not have an effect on grammatical complexity and lexical complexity, level of education and gender did (participants with high

education and males had higher scores generally), which Lahmann attributed to the important role played by L2 input and L2 use.

The use of interviews in the studies above has allowed researchers to collect biographical information and insights into participants' experience with language learning. In that respect, on the one hand they come close to the individual differences research tradition which uses interviews to identify differences among learners to establish why and how these differences may lead to differential linguistic attainment (Dörnyei, 2005). On the other hand, these interviews also share some traits with the language experience interview, which is designed to elicit the student's reflections on his or her own internalized experience of language learning (e.g., Benson & Lor, 1999). For example, in the study by Polat (2013) the use of language experience interviews with beginner students revealed qualitative differences in how high performing and low performing students approached language learning. The present study uses oral interviews with foreign language learners in search of the factors that may be influential in their language learning histories.¹ On the basis of evidence from recent research that starting age is not a strong determinant of foreign language learners' achievement (Muñoz, 2011, 2014), this study examines oral interviews with learners that vary in starting age and long-term attainment with the aim of identifying distinctive factors that may ultimately explain why some early and late language learners are more successful than others.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 12 undergraduate students majoring in English, 2 males and 10 females, who were drawn from a larger sample of intermediate/advanced learners with a minimum of 10 years of exposure/instruction in English. The majority of them ($n = 10$) were students at a university in Catalonia (eight of them initially bilingual Catalan-Spanish, and two of them born in South America) and the two remaining were students at a different Spanish university in a monolingual region of Spain (one of them was born in Russia). The two universities are publicly funded with socially mixed intake. Their experience as learners of

¹ The term *language learning histories* is used here in a broad sense as a synonym of language learning trajectories, process, or experience. See Mercer (2013) for an insightful account of language learning histories as written autobiographic narratives used to facilitate insight into how learners conceptualise themselves, their experiences and the process of language learning.

English was very diverse, having had many different teachers favouring different teaching methodologies during their long language learning trajectory.

The sample includes six early learners who started English in early childhood (range of starting age: 3.2-6.5) and six learners who started English at puberty or later (range of starting age: 11.1-17.8). The latter is considered the late learner group in this study. Early and late learners were also divided into high-achievement and low-achievement groups on the basis of their very high or very low scores, on two proficiency tests (see Table 1 below).²

3.2. Instruments and procedure

The language tests that were used to select students into the high achievement or low achievement groups, had been previously administered to the larger sample from which the participants had been drawn. They were a general proficiency test (the Oxford Placement Test; henceforth OPT) and a receptive vocabulary test (X-Lex for up to 5,000 words, Meara & Milton 2003; and Y-Lex for up to 10,000 words, Meara & Miralpeix, 2006; henceforth X_Lex/Y_Lex). The criteria for selection into the high achievement groups (early or late start) were to score in the 75th percentile on both tests: a score of 51 or above on the OPT (the highest score attainable on this test is 60), and 6,975 or above on the X_Lex/Y_Lex (the highest score attainable is 10,000). The criteria for selection into the low achievement groups (early or late start) were to score in the 25th percentile on both tests: a score of 39 or below on the OPT and 5,525 or below on the X_Lex/Y_Lex.

An online questionnaire was used to collect personal information (e.g., parents' level of education) and quantifiable information concerning participants' language learning experience (e.g., starting age, number of instructional hours in school, frequency of contact with L2 speakers, time spent abroad). An oral interview was used to elicit: (a) the participant's language learning history (e.g., when s/he began to learn English; what other languages s/he learned, for how long, and a self-rating of proficiency for speaking, listening, reading and writing in each language), (b) the participant's reflections on his or her experience of language learning (e.g., what factors were most influential in their learning of English, was there a turning point in the process), (c) the participant's affect for languages and English in particular (e.g., how much they like languages), and (d) the participant's reflections on what is most effective for learning a foreign language (e.g., what recommendations they might give to a friend who started to learn a foreign language).

² Although they had not all taken the same number of university courses it was found that participants with shorter and longer university experience were similarly distributed into the four groups.

The interviews were conducted by a team of five researchers who used the same interview guide (see the Appendix for the interview questions selected for this study). However, the questions were open-ended and participants were encouraged to talk about other aspects of their language learning experience not directly probed by the interview questions; in those cases the interviewer could introduce new follow-up questions.

The interview was a part of a larger set of instruments used to elicit linguistic and cognitive data and participants were given course credits for their participation. Anonymity was assured to learners in their consent form and, consequently, names have been changed to protect learners' identities. The interview was generally conducted in English, which is a common language of communication with students in their university departments. Although the use of a nonnative language may have reduced the data quality at some points, it ensured the naturalness of the communication in that context. At the beginning of the interview the researcher explained that the purpose of the interview was to learn more about the students' experience of language learning. Participants often expressed their satisfaction with having been able to converse on topics that touch on their lives and experiences beyond the bounds of the classroom (Mercer, 2013: 166); the interview did not include questions concerning their courses at the university so that participants were at ease.

The oral interviews were orthographically transcribed using the CLAN sub-program of CHILDES. The qualitative software N-Vivo 10 was used in the analysis of the interviews and the codes were predetermined by interview questions that were the foci of the study (e.g., influential factors in participants' language learning process). Each participant's response to the same question was compared side by side for similarities within each of the four groups. These responses were later compared across groups to find further similarities or differences.

4. Results

4.1. Participants' characteristics

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the learners: gender (M = male, F = female), starting age or age of onset (AO) and chronological age or age at testing (AT). The next column reflects the participants' self-rating of proficiency in their different languages after averages have been calculated of the scores for listening, speaking, reading and writing (from 0 to 10) in each language; the number of languages appears next to the score. The two right-most columns show participants' scores on the general proficiency test and the receptive vocabulary test.

As seen above, starting age and scores on the two language tests are the participants' grouping variables: early start and high achievement (EH); late start and high achievement (LH); early start and low achievement (EL); and late start and low achievement (LL). The high achievers' scores on the OPT ranged between 53 and 57 and the low achievers' scores between 26 and 39. The high achievers' range of scores on the X_Lex/Y_Lex was between 6975 and 8500, and the low achievers' range was between 3350 and 5500.

Table 1 Participants' characteristics

	Code	Gender	AO	AT	Self-rating / no. of languages	OPT	X_Lex/Y_Lex
Early & high (EH)	Ester	F	5.3	21.8	8.8/5	54	8500
	Enric	M	4.1	20.6	8.6/5	54	8400
	Emma	F	3.2	18.7	*	53	6975
Early & low (EL)	Elena	F	5.2	18.7	6.4/4	31	5000
	Elisenda	F	6.2	24.7	7.5/4	39	4600
	Eleonor	F	6.5	21.5	6.5/3	26	3350
Late & high (LH)	Laia	F	11.8	41.1	8.1/6	57	7350
	Lorena	M	13.1	43.4	8.5/4	53	8100
	Llorenç	M	17.8	47.1	8.7/4	53	8250
Late & low (LL)	Lola	F	11.6	29.1	6.6/4	38	5500
	Luisa	F	15.5	28.1	6.6/5	38	3400
	Lidiya	F	11.1	27.7	6.6/4	39	5000

* not available

4.2. Group and individual profiles

In this section group and individual profiles of the participants are portrayed in the order EH, EL, LH and LL. First of all, the analysis is presented of the participants' reflections on their experience of language learning based on their interview answers concerning the factors that were most influential in their learning of English and the existence or not of a turning point in the process; then the analysis of the participants' answers to the question of how much they like languages; and finally the analysis of the participants' reflections on what is most effective for learning a foreign language, based on their recommendations to a friend who started to learn a foreign language.

4.2.1. The early start and high achievement group (EH)

The three participants in the EH group are in their early twenties or younger. They have an advanced level of English and are all rather balanced bilingual in

Catalan and Spanish (except for Emma, who declares to be Catalan dominant). Their self-ratings of their languages are very high, and the language repertoire of Ester includes Chinese and German. These participants are quite homogeneous in some of their answers. Because they all started at a very early age it was their parents' decision to enrol them in private language schools to learn English (Emma and Enric mention that one of their parents is a teacher); hence parents have been an influential factor:

my parents involved me in a language school when I was seven, because I think for me that was the key moment from all my learning experience, because if I had stayed at school I think I wouldn't have improved as much. (Ester)

Teachers are mentioned by Emma, but their influence comes at a later time: "*I thought next year I'm going to give up English, but eventually when I was twelve I realized English was important and I came to love it, maybe because of the teachers too.*" Emma spent some weeks in England every summer with her mother, an English teacher, since she was 3, but it is not until adolescence that her experience abroad made a difference in terms of listening and speaking skills. Ester spent a month in an English-speaking country when she was 16 and then she gained self-confidence:

I had more confidence in myself in speaking the language because I didn't have that much practice, because at the language school it came to the point in which it was all grammar so we didn't actually communicate, so I needed to go abroad to be able to practice. (Ester)

Enric perceived a turning point in his learning history when English became an "*obsession*" and he exposed himself to English through audio and written materials and studied with the intention to pass a difficult exam.

The three participants in this group *love* (not just *like*) learning languages: "*I have enjoyed it (learning languages) very much. It's my passion. I love everything related to languages*" (Enric).

Their recommendations to a friend who just started learning a foreign language are also similar. They advise the fictitious friend to maximize the contact with the target language, either abroad (after reaching a basic level before departure is Emma's advice), watching films and having a linguistic exchange partner (Ester's advice); only Enric, the male participant, recommends enrolling in an academically demanding language school.

4.2.2. The early start and low achievement group (EL)

The participants in this group started learning English in early childhood as well, but they have reached a comparatively poor achievement level. They are in their early twenties or younger. On the basis of their self-ratings, Elena appears as being slightly dominant in Spanish and Elisenda appears as Catalan dominant. Eleonor belongs to the initially monolingual sample (from outside Catalonia). Their self-ratings of languages are slightly lower than those of the previous group and the language repertoire of these learners, in addition to their L1s and English, includes only Romance languages (French and Italian).

Their reflections concerning influential factors in their English language learning experience indicate that they are a more diverse group than the high achievement group above. Elisenda mentions her older sister who encouraged her to go to Ireland and supported her emotionally while she was there as well as one of her teachers at high school. For Elena the most important factor is her own motivation to travel and visit foreign countries. For Eleonor, travelling abroad and watching undubbed movies were crucial in her English language improvement.

Eleonor had not been abroad to study English and did not identify a turning point in her trajectory, either. Elena and Elisenda had been abroad in Ireland for a summer course and stayed with a family, but only Elisenda identified the summer abroad in Ireland, when she was 14, as a turning point. Before that time she failed English exams at school and hated English. Willingness to communicate with an English-speaking friend was a turning point in her relation to English:

because I spent a lot of time with a girl that was the same age as my age and she tried to explain me things and I tried to communicate with her . . . when I finally could explain what I wanted then I got things you know it was amazing because I then realized that it's real important to communicate to have the ability to communicate with other people.

Feelings towards languages are also more varied than those of the EH group, and sometimes not all languages are equally liked. Elisenda hated English when she was a child, as we saw above. Eleonor does not like learning languages in general: She has tried German, French and Italian and has not liked them. She says she likes English because many people speak it and it is an important language. Elena does not directly answer the question of whether she likes learning languages (affect) and instead she refers to easiness and cultural interest.

Their recommendations to a friend who just started learning a foreign language highlight exposure and motivation together with hard work. The three participants recommend exposure to lots of authentic input (watching movies, listening to songs, speaking with native speakers, travelling abroad); Eleonor

recommends writing a lot of essays, too. Elena speaks of motivation and hard work and she highlights intentional learning: *"motivation the first of all, I mean study hard and work because it's hard to do it, and watch films in the original version, it helps a lot, or listening to songs, pay attention, I think is good."*

4.2.3. The late start and high achievement group (LH)

The participants in this group started to learn English after the age of 11 and reached high levels of attainment in English, comparable to those of the EH group. They are in their forties and thus the oldest participants. Obviously this means that though they did not start in childhood they may have been in contact with English for a long period of time. Laia is a balanced bilingual who has been a teacher of three different languages (English incorporated recently). Llorenç is also a balanced bilingual, and Lorena is slightly dominant in Spanish. Their self-ratings of proficiency in their languages are among the highest as is their range of languages (4-6).

These participants mention a variety of important factors. Laia's motivation was towards English through music. Llorenç refers to his instrumental motivation towards English. Lorena highlights exposure to undubbed films in her home country (Venezuela) and to songs, as well as a motivating teacher:

there is no escape in Venezuela or any country like that, you have to face the language from the beginning . . . there was only one teacher that influenced me I mean I wanted to do everything for her, . . . I just wanted to be the best I wanted her appreciation.

Laia and Lorena lived in England for some months and Llorenç for a summer. For Llorenç that was a turning point in his English language learning history: *"I went to England and stood there for a summer period and when I came back I noticed that my English had improved a lot because there I had to live every day at every moment in English."* An even more important event for Laia was her decision to change her career and make what she loved (English) her profession. For Lorena the turning point was to join an English teaching-learning chat, which provides daily meaningful contact with the English language:

I have been doing that for seven years so I mean I've been involved in that atmosphere of every day going to that chat and . . . I feel more confident and say well maybe I can go for it and I can try to express myself very freely.

Laia highlights her liking of English music and of English. After a change of career she is now a language teacher, with experience of teaching Portuguese, French and English (*"I'm living the dream of my life"*): *"I like to listen to sounds and then looking*

for the lyrics and singing and so it was an aesthetic issue for me. I liked English before I knew what the words meant." Lorena likes learning languages, too ("*I think it came from birth with me*") and she expresses a preference for English over her native language ("*I found in English a better expression of my feelings*").

In consonance with his instrumental motivation, when Llorenç is prompted to say why he likes English, he refers to the global status of English as a lingua franca allowing people to communicate. At the same time, one of his recommendations to a beginner language learner is to love the language:

first of all to love the language to be very persistent in learning this language, never to give up . . . be a kind of explorer in order to find out new words and make this language a part of his or her life as he wanted to succeed in the language but if he or she came across some difficulties never to give up because the language is difficult but then the reward is good.

This extract illustrates the affective component in the recommendations of the successful late learners; other participants' recommendations are associated with enjoyment of learning. Lorena advises starting with songs the learner likes and work on the lyrics and pronunciation, as well as joining an English teaching-learning chat. Laia recommends to a (fictitious) younger sibling to study at school and to enjoy it ("*otherwise you learn languages as if they were mathematics or history*").

4.2.4. The late start and low achievement group (LL)

The group of late learners with low attainment includes Lola, Luisa, and Lidiya. They are all in their late twenties. Although Lola started at the age of 11.6 (compulsory secondary) she reports having "*really*" begun at the age of 14.6 (optional secondary) and not having made real progress with English until university. She is Catalan dominant. Luisa was born in Peru and moved to Spain at the age of 19. Her knowledge of Catalan is basic. Lidiya gives her Spanish the same score as her native Russian. In general, as can be seen in Table 1, these participants give lower scores to their proficiency in their languages than the other groups (besides their L1s and Romance languages, only Lola adds a low level of German).

As for influential factors, Lola mentions a particularly enthusiastic teacher in high school, as well as her motivation to travel abroad. When asked to identify a turning point in her learning history she talks about her Erasmus exchange year in Poland when she lived in a residence where everybody spoke English. For Luisa the most important factor is her motivation to speak other languages because she loves languages. She spent eight months in an English-speaking country, which helped her English language (though she disliked the weather and life style

and went back to Spain). However, studying English at the university was the turning point in her language learning history. For Lidiya watching films in English has been a very important factor, and she also mentions motivating teachers in her current degree in English Studies which she values over her experience at secondary school. When asked about a turning point she reports an event in which she was unable to engage in spontaneous conversation in English, probably the realization of her not yet good enough competence in this language.

The three participants have distinct attitudes towards English and languages. Lola likes languages a lot and in addition to English she has learnt German, French, Italian and Portuguese. She has found learning English "*very funny and entertaining*". Luisa loves learning languages (though she disliked her experience in an English-speaking town, as seen above); she has learned some French and Portuguese (the latter language only informally). Lidiya says that she likes learning languages because she does not like studying other subjects (e.g., biology); she chose English because she was good at it at school and she likes listening to English because it is a very practical and useful language.

With regard to recommendations for a beginner learner, they are also varied. Lola seems to associate learning languages with an extrovert type of personality and finds the use of English as a lingua franca particularly helpful: "*It's very easy if you are not afraid of talking and expressing yourself and when you're in a group of people that they're not native speakers but you are using English as a lingua franca for me it's great.*" Luisa's advice is to go to a foreign bar, for example an Irish pub, to interact with people. She thinks this is easier than going abroad, though she also recommends going abroad and studying hard. Lidiya recommends doing more exercises and listening practice in order to get used to authentic English: "*doing more exercises and listen much more to distinguish words and what the native speaker want to speak because in everyday life nobody will ask you some very simple questions.*"

5. Final discussion and conclusion

This study aimed at gaining insights into the factors that may be more influential in learners' English language learning trajectories and may ultimately explain why some early and late learners are more successful than others. The comparison of the profiles of the four participant groups reveals certain distinctive characteristics that differentiate the high-achievers (EH and LH) from the low-achievers (EL and LL). To begin with, all the participants in the two high-achievement groups, both early and late starters, express an intense love for English and languages in general as shown by the choice of words such as "*passion*" (Enric) or "*dream*" (Laia). This characteristic is shared by the high performers in the study by Polat

(2013, p. 77) who “consistently expressed their love of French or their enjoyment of studying language.” Researchers of language learning motivation identify these feelings of enjoyment as characteristic of intrinsic motivation. This is considered the optimal kind of motivation, that which comes from within: “doing something . . . for its own self-sustaining pleasurable rewards of enjoyment, interest, challenge, or skill and knowledge development.” (Ushioda, 2008, p. 21). In contrast, the comments of the low-achievement participants in the present study are more varied. Two of them, Lola and Luisa, also like learning languages a lot, but their comments (e.g., Lola finds English “*very funny and entertaining*”) do not match the affective strength and consistency of the higher achievers. There is a far greater tendency for them to refer to English as a means to an end (to travel, to access cultural goods, to communicate, etc.), showing an instrumental kind of motivation. While this kind of motivation may be highly effective if it is internalized and self-determined (Ushioda, 2008), many of these participants’ comments do not speak of an unconditional love for languages or of the pleasure derived from the learning process. Indeed, in the above-mentioned study by Polat (2013), the low performers did not mention any feelings of enjoyment.

The affective dimension of language learning is also reflected in the participants’ recommendations to a prospective learner. The high-achievers emphasize the importance of exposure to the target language, particularly through enjoyable activities like watching films, talking to target language speakers, and spending time abroad; two of the participants, one female and one male, also recommend formal learning, but whereas the female participant (in the LH group) highlights the need to study and enjoy it, the male participant (in the EH group) recommends enrolment in an academically demanding language school. It is noteworthy that these successful participants’ views on what factors lead to successful L2 acquisition coincide with those mentioned by the group of “good language learners” that were asked a similar question in the study by Naiman, Froehlich, Stern, and Todesco (1978); the most common answers in that study were immersion and motivation. The low-achievement groups also recommend exposure to the target language but not always in a target-language country, since this may be overwhelming (it is “*easier*” in a pub or with nonnative speakers). They also recommend motivation, but accompanied with hard work or effort. In contrast, none of the participants in the two high-achievement groups associate learning languages with hard work. Thus, it can be concluded that the high-achievement and the low-achievement groups differ in their attitudes to languages and in particular in their liking and enjoyment. Furthermore, the participants’ answers also indicate that the high-achievers find it easier to learn languages than the low-achievers (who often give lower

rates to their foreign languages skills), and thus their perceptions seem to result from the interaction between cognitive and affective factors.

As regards the influence of starting age of learning among other influential factors, it has been seen that two participants in the EH group acknowledge the importance of their early experience in a private language school. However, for a larger number of participants staying abroad and having a real contact with the language at an older age seems to have had a much more prominent role in their language learning history. The fundamental role that these experienced participants ascribe to the language learning environment is in line with Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) view that the language learning environment is responsible for much of the learning that takes place. The variability in these learners' outcomes supports the view that it is not just the amount of time the individual spends inside or outside of class learning that matters, but also how the individual reacts to the learning environment. For experienced learners, the cumulative effect of the learner's actions in the social environment may be greater than for learners at more initial stages in their learning trajectory (Winke, 2013). In other words, the examination of experienced learners reveals the cumulative effect of learners' orientation and engagement with the language, which have determined what they have done with the input (Moyer, 2004).

Although the characteristics of the sample preclude making generalizations about gender differences, it is interesting to note that some of the answers offered by the male participants are slightly different from the answers given by the female participants. For example, alongside his passion for languages the male participant in the LH group highlights the interest of English as a *lingua franca*, and the male participant in the EH group recommends enrolling in a demanding formal course. It would be interesting to examine possible gender-related orientations towards English and foreign languages with a larger sample. Likewise, the homogeneity of the sample in terms of career focus limits the generalizability of the findings to other learner types, though the variation within the sample is not insignificant. Another limitation of the study may be the lack of in-depth information concerning the participants' family context. Although parents' level of education seemed to be similarly distributed in the four groups in this study, not all children from middle-class families with educated parents receive frequent and early parental encouragement to the same degree (Lamb, 2011). In this respect it is interesting to note that at least two of the EH participants came from families where one of the parents was a teacher. The family background may also have determined whether participants attended courses in private language institutes, from what age, and the choice of course (although more than 40% of students attend such courses in the region, some may

be more easily affordable than others). As well, the status of the foreign language, English, has obviously had an impact on the factors that have influenced participants' learning and perceptions, and probably in different ways for the younger participants and the older ones (particularly the LH participants, who started learning English three decades ago when English did not yet operate so often as the lingua franca of the globalized new economy as it does today).

In sum, the exploration of learners' language learning histories and the factors highlighted by them in this study contribute interesting insights into their diverse degrees of success in foreign language attainment. An early starting age may have had a significant impact for some learners but not for others, supporting the view that learner's long-term attainment in a foreign language is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of factors, among which aptitude, motivation, and intensive language contact have been highlighted by the present study.

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APPENDIX

Selected interview questions

- What were some of the most important factors that influenced your learning of English?
- And was there any moment in the past that you thought you had *really* improved your level of English? Why did you think so? What happened? (Any particular experience?)
- Do you like learning languages?
- From 1 to 10, how would you grade your competence in each of the languages you speak (including your first language/s): reading, writing, listening, talking?
- If you had a friend that just started learning a foreign language, what would you recommend him/her to do?