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Tracing trajectories of young learners. Ten years of school English learning.

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Abstract

An early start of FL teaching has been encouraged on the basis that the main gains in this period lie in the development of positive attitudes and motivation. But the view that those positive effects will remain unchanged over learners' language learning trajectories is at odds with the currently prevailing notion that motivation is a complex and evolutionary process that fluctuates over time. In fact, research has shown that the positive attitudes attested in the first years of primary school wane after a while. But we still know very little about young learners' motivational development and longitudinal studies are very scarce. This 10-year longitudinal study looks at the trajectories of a group of young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from age 6 to age 16 using a mixed-methods design. It examines their outcomes in relation to their language learning aptitude and motivation, and it observes the ways in which their levels of motivation rise and fall over time. The triangulation of data from different sources, and principally from yearly individual interviews, provides us with insights to better understand the role played by internal and external factors in those trajectories and some of the challenges for FL teaching to young learners.

Introduction

In spite of the current increase in the number of young learners of foreign languages (FLs) in many parts of the world, research on the linguistic and non-linguistic

outcomes of this population is scarce. Comparative studies have consistently shown that the learning rate of younger learners (i.e., in primary school) is slower than that of older learners (i.e., in secondary school) (Muñoz, 2008), but an early start has been encouraged on the basis that the main gains in this period lie in the development of positive attitudes and motivation (e.g., Edelenbos & Kubanek, 2009). This view seems to rest on the assumption that an early start will have long lasting positive effects on learners' attitudes and motivation that will remain unchanged over their language learning trajectories, which is at odds with the currently prevailing notion that motivation is a complex and evolutionary process that fluctuates over time (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013). However, we still know very little about young learners' motivational development. A recent review of studies on L2 motivation that were published between 2005 and 2014 (Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015) found that, while secondary school students are underrepresented, primary school pupils are virtually absent from systematic research. However, motivation is a crucial factor for young school learners because they may be expected to study the FL over many years. Because research has shown the strong impact of motives associated with the L2 course, the teacher, and the learner group (e.g. Oxford & Shearin, 1994), one may predict fluctuations of these motives for each L2 course, teacher, and group over the FL learning period. In fact, one may predict even more fluctuations in this group than in other age groups given the many and rapid changes happening in this life stage, and the dynamic and contextualized nature of motivation (Kim, 2005; Ushioda, 2009).

In this study we look at the trajectories of a group of young learners of English (EFL) from age 6 (Grade 1 of primary school) to age 16 (Grade 10 of secondary school) using a mixed-model design. We examine their outcomes in relation to their language learning aptitude and motivation, and we observe the fluctuations in their motivation

and attitudes towards English learning over a 10-year period. The triangulation of data from different sources, and principally from yearly individual interviews, provides us with valuable insights to better understand the role played by internal and external factors in those trajectories.

Background

This literature review focuses on studies that have addressed changes in motivation, attitudes, and perceptions in young learners in primary and compulsory secondary school. A frequent finding of these studies is that, as it happened when FLs were introduced at the start of secondary school, the positive attitudes attested in the first years of primary school wane after a while. The decline has been observed in the transition to secondary school and also before, during primary schooling (Bolster, Ballandier-Brown & Rea-Dickens, 2004; Cable et al., 2010; Mihaljević Djigunovic & Lopriore, 2011). In the transition from primary to secondary school, two demotivating factors have been noted. One is lack of continuity in teaching methodology (e.g. Edelenbos & Kubanek, 2009), specifically a stronger focus on literacy. A second problem is the lack of reliance on what children already know, which may also have a negative effect on their sense of competence (e.g. Courtney, 2014; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000). A general decline in motivation has also been observed with respect to different subjects at around the age of 10, which has been related to learners' becoming more accurate or realistic, and hence potentially more negative, in their self-assessments (Wigfield et al., 1997). However, there is also evidence that perceptions of progress as they grow older may enhance motivation (Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008).

In FL studies, several classroom-related factors have been identified as responsible for school learners' decline in motivation. For example, Nikolov (1999)

investigated EFL motivation of three cohorts of Hungarian students (aged 6 to 14). Out of a total of 84 students, 45 were followed longitudinally for 8 years. The same questionnaire, with an open-ended question format was used over the 8-year period to assess attitudes to the language learning situation and motivation. The study found that the most important motivating factors were classroom-related: intrinsically motivating (i.e., enjoyable and satisfying) activities, tasks and materials, and the teacher.

Instrumental motives (those that are related to long-term benefits concerning work, education and economic advantage) emerged around the age of 11 or 12, and the 11- to 14-year olds stated more utilitarian reasons (e.g., “it will be useful”) than the younger children. However, integrative motives (those that are related to a positive relationship with speakers of the target language) were not identified in the answers to open questions. More generally, Nikolov (2009) concludes, from the analysis of data collected in large-scale studies in Hungary, that teachers’ eclectic methods may “be responsible for very slow development over the years and learners’ loss of motivation over time.” (p. 106).

In typical foreign language classrooms, contact with the target language may be very limited. In Japan, Carreira (2006) compared intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (motivation to get sufficient rewards from the activity itself and motivation to obtain an external reward, respectively) in a group of 174 third graders and a group of 171 sixth graders learning English. A factor analysis of the results of a motivation questionnaire clustered the items into five factors: intrinsic motivation to learn English, interest in foreign countries, caregivers’ encouragement, instrumental motivation, and anxiety. The results showed that, as expected, third graders scored significantly higher in intrinsic motivation than the sixth graders. But contrary to the researcher’s initial hypothesis, third graders also scored significantly higher in extrinsic motivation (interest in foreign

countries and instrumental motivation). Carreira suggests that when learners are in lower grades they can be satisfied with exciting and fun tasks, but as they grow, their motivation can decrease due to lack of contact with the target language in real terms.

Other reasons that have been suggested to explain the drop-off in motivation are related to learners' perceptions of themselves as learners and their learning process. The notion of "linguistic self-confidence" (related to the psychological notion of "self-efficacy"; Bandura, 1997) refers to a person's belief that they are able to perform in the L2 and achieve their goals. This notion has been seen to correlate with L2 proficiency in adolescents and adults (Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1994; Graham, 2004), and also to have a determinant role in young learners' attainment. For example, Courtney, Graham, Tonkyn, and Marinis (2015) followed a group of English learners of French from year 5 ($n = 254$, aged 9-10) to year 7, the first year of secondary school ($n = 165$, aged 11-12). Longitudinal data on learner attitudes and motivation were collected via questionnaires and language outcomes through oral tasks. L1 literacy scores at the end of primary school were also collected from teacher assessments. A general finding of the study was that the widely held view that all young learners enjoy learning languages is unsupported. More specifically, results showed that self-efficacy was more strongly related to outcomes than general attitudes to language learning and that a number of young learners were already displaying low levels of self-efficacy and lack of progress at the end of primary school. Erler and Macaro (2011) investigated self-efficacy in relation to decoding ability (the ability to relate graphemes to phonemes) in French of a large cross-sectional sample of young English adolescents (aged 11-14) over three years. This age group in England characteristically shows low motivation for L2 learning. They found that disaffection with continuing French was linked with poor decoding skills, low self-efficacy, and the students' perception of having no control over their

learning. Lack of a sense of progress has also been found to have a negative impact on learners' motivation in a number of studies (e.g. Lamb, 2007; Macaro, 2008; Nikolov, 2009). For example, in a study of primary languages in England, Cable et al. (2010) found that Grade 3 learners had a more positive attitude towards learning French than Grade 6 learners. Among the former group, 98.5% stated that they enjoyed the lessons whereas only 74.6% enjoyed French lessons among the latter. Some Grade 6 learners found lessons boring and became frustrated with repeating the same content and making very little progress. In a longitudinal study, Graham et al. (2016) followed the development of learners' motivation for learning French in England, during the transition from primary to secondary schooling. A questionnaire to measure their motivation was administered three times: in Grade 6 ($n = 233$), in the middle of the first term of Grade 7 ($n = 161$) and at the end of Grade 7 ($n = 99$). Learners showed higher levels of motivation in Grade 7 than in Grade 6, although by the end of Grade 7 they expressed less positive attitudes towards learning French than at the beginning of the year, low levels of self-efficacy for communication with native speakers, and less optimism about future progress. The researchers concluded that learners' motivation seemed to be negatively affected by their classroom experiences, in particular by activities that they felt did not help them to learn effectively and to make continuing progress. According to these researchers, to halt this decline in motivation, greater alignment was needed between what learners valued about learning French (to use it for travel and communication) and what French lessons equipped them to do (see also Courtney, 2014).

As the review of previous research shows, there is evidence of significant changes in young learners' motivational trajectories. The present study is motivated by the lack of longitudinal studies involving young learners and the need to explain the

variability in their outcomes. A quantitative analysis will look at the association of learners' linguistic outcomes at two time points (after 6 years and 10 years of English learning, respectively) with internal factors such as aptitude and motivation. A qualitative analysis will look at their language learning experiences in depth. The general aim of the study is to examine young learners' trajectories in English language learning to shed light on the internal and external factors that determine linguistic and affective outcomes and drive changes in those trajectories. The specific research questions of the study are:

1. To what extent is learners' language achievement at the end of compulsory secondary school related to their achievement at the end of primary school and to their aptitude and motivation?

2. In what ways have learners' individual motivational trajectories changed throughout their ten-years of English learning?

3. In what ways were their trajectories affected by internal (motivation) and external (classroom, family, out of class exposure) factors?

2. THE STUDY

Participants

Participants in this study are 14 EFL learners from three state schools in the city of Barcelona. They are all Catalan-Spanish bilinguals, most of them balanced bilinguals. They were followed from the first grade of primary education (age 6) to the last grade of compulsory secondary education (age 16). They are a subsample of the participants in a larger research project that was initiated as part of the ELLiE (Early Language Learning in Europe) project (Enever, 2011). When the ELLiE project finished after four years, at

the end of fourth grade, the Spanish sample was followed for six more years until the end of compulsory secondary education. The participants in the current study were drawn from the focal learners in the Spanish sample of ELLiE. They had been selected by their teachers as representative of different types of school performance. Parental permission was obtained for each participant through the school.

The three participating schools (A, B, C) were similar to each other in that students in each school came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds; school B had the highest proportion of parents with tertiary education and school C the lowest. From a methodological point of view, school C was distinctive because it followed a project-based methodology, school A implemented Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in the Science class in Grades 5 and 6, and school B was the most form-focused in the last two years of primary school. English teachers in each school varied in teaching and classroom management skills. Learners in each primary school moved together to the same high school and, although classes could not be observed then, teachers' interviews also showed a wide variety of teaching styles but a common focus on grammar.

Method

Data collection instruments and procedures

This longitudinal study follows a mixed-method approach to examine the language learning histories of 14 learners of EFL over a period of ten years. It uses two indicators of English language achievement: the scores obtained in an official external examination in Grade 6 (including listening and reading comprehension and written production), considered a reliable indicator of students' English language achievement

at the end of primary school; and the final course grades at the end of secondary school (Grade 10), with the exception of one student who was repeating Grade 9.

Learners' language learning aptitude was measured by means of the MLAT-E (elementary version of the Modern Language Aptitude Test) in its Catalan adaptation (Suárez, 2010). The test was administered to intact classes in Grade 6. It consists of four parts: Hidden Words, Matching Words, Finding Rhymes, and Number Learning. To examine learners' motivation and attitudes towards English, this study uses their answers to a questionnaire with smiley face questions that was administered every year (ex.: Do you like English this year?) and adapted to children's increasing age. After performing item internal consistency tests, after Grade 3, the number of items increased from 3 to 7 and the answer choice (the smileys representing a range of sentiments from positive to neutral to negative) was expanded from the initial 3-point Likert scale to a 5-point one.

The learners in the current study were interviewed individually once a year from the first to the fourth grade and twice a year in Grades 5, 6 and 7, and a final time in Grade 10 (or 9 in one case). The interviews were conducted in Catalan (the school language) and in almost all occasions, the author was the interviewer, who over the years had built a strong rapport with them. They were semi-structured interviews where the learners could freely express their perceptions of their own learning process and their attitudes towards the classroom and the teacher. The interviews were coded inductively using NVivo and deductively for the topics that had emerged as relevant over the whole period (e.g., parents' influence). These learners had also been observed by the author in their English lessons twice a year during primary education to triangulate their reports about their attitudes in class and those of their teachers, who were also interviewed twice a year.

Two take-home questionnaires for parents were also used, from Grade 1 and Grade 4, respectively. The questionnaires asked parents about their child's attitude towards English and their extracurricular exposure to the language, about parents' own attitudes towards English language learning, their educational level and knowledge of English, and about English exposure and languages spoken in the home. For this and the above instruments, see www.ubgral.com/ellie-research-instruments.html.

RESULTS

To answer the first research question, English language achievement, aptitude, and motivation (as measured by the smiley questionnaire) are examined. Table 1 provides information about these learners' English language outcomes: scores on the English test at the end of primary school (maximum score = 100); the final course grades in Grade 10 at the end of obligatory secondary school (maximum score = 10); the scores on the aptitude test (maximum score = 123) that they took in Grade 6; and the average scores from the motivation questionnaire in Grade 6 and in Grade 10. The first letter in the learners' pseudonyms represents their respective school (A, B, C).

Table 1 here

The data in Table 1 shows several trends. Students with high scores in English in Grade 10 have high scores in Grade 6. Students with high scores in Grade 10 tend to be more motivated and have higher aptitude scores than those with lower English scores. However, English scores, aptitude, and motivation in Grade 6 do not seem to be

strongly related. Neither is motivation in Grade 6 strongly related to motivation or scores in Grade 10.

To address the second research question, the participants' answers to the attitude questionnaire that was administered nine times over ten years are presented in Figures 1-3 below, one for each school: A, B, and C. (Two students were absent from class at one of the points in school A). The scale used in Grades 1 through 3 had only 3 points, and an equivalence has been worked out so that 3 was converted into 5, 2 into 3, and 1 into 1.

Figure 1 here

Figure 2 here

Figure 3 here

The graphs show attitudinal trajectories that begin with a very positive start in Grade 1 but are not horizontal. Changes occur at the different time points and in many cases, a decline appears as early as Grade 2 or 3. Differences between the three schools are also visible, but the type of instruction in each does not seem to have a distinctive effect on learners' motivation. School A shows a greater uniformity from Grades 1 to 3, with the five learners choosing the happiest face at all three data points. Variability starts in Grade 4 and continues until the end. In school B, we see one student (Borja) unhappy with English after Grade 2, but recovering in the last grade of primary school and in Grade 10. Also interesting is the case of Berta, who seems to be perfectly happy with English all along, with only a slight decrease in Grade 6. In school C, variability starts in Grade 1. Only one student (Carles) shows a linear decline with no upward changes, while the others experience upward and downward changes.

The third research question looks into the factors that appear to have significantly contributed to these learners' trajectories over their 10 years of learning English at school. Data triangulation identified five issues, among those elicited by the interviews, that appear to play a significant role in the students' learning experiences. They are illustrated with the cases of the most successful and the least successful learners, in order to better show how the different factors interact and push trajectories in different directions. The former group includes Alicia, Anna, Albert, and Cinta, those with the highest final mark and a positive or very positive attitude towards English in Grade 10. In the latter group, there are two learners whose final course grade is very low: Biel and Carles. Biel expresses a positive attitude towards English at the end, though it was more negative at the beginning of secondary school, and Carles was repeating Grade 9 at the last data collection point and his attitude suffered a linear decline beginning in Grade 5.

Motivation

These learners' motivation towards English is largely influenced by its role as a world language. An international orientation is already seen in Grade 1 by Cinta, when she alludes to the fact that most people know English, so it will allow her to communicate with other people even if they don't know Spanish. It is also visible in Albert's constant concern in primary school over the need to go abroad to find a job when he grows up, and in his choice of speaking as the most helpful classroom activity for his future travels. Although Carles had not internalized the international value of English in all these years, just before the last interview, he participates in a sport competition abroad and discovers he can communicate with other boys from around the

world who practice his street sport (his WhatsApp chats contain expressions not learned in class: “bro” or “hey man”).

All these learners are aware of the potential importance of English for their lives, although some can better imagine themselves as actual users of the language, while for others, this is still something pushed on them by their parents and society. For Alicia, English is the key to getting a good job, like her mother did. Albert says: “English has opened new doors to me like international marketing”. Some have always loved the language, like Cinta and Anna. For example, in Grade 5 Anna says “knowing English makes me feel good”, while at the same time she has internalized her parents’ interest in her knowing the language (she has attended private lessons ever since Grade 1). She says that learning English is “essential” and that “everybody should have the right to know English”. Some have come to love it more when they have been able to use it in a meaningful way. This is the case of Albert in Grade 10 after spending a whole week with a Dutch exchange student at home: “If I could I would talk in English all the time”. The four successful learners have also studied other FLs as optional subjects in secondary school (Albert, Cinta, Alicia) or in a private language school (Anna). Alicia and Albert took French in secondary school for three years. Albert does not intend to continue it in the next, more demanding, educational phase. Cinta took French in Grade 10 (which she finds easy because of its similarity with Spanish) and Anna took German (which she finds easier to learn thanks to knowing English).

Parents’ encouragement and model

All 14 participants started off saying that their parents were happy with the English they learned, and this was confirmed by the positive answers in the parents’ questionnaires. Only one of the participants (Carles) said he does not talk with his

parents about English and they do not encourage him to learn languages. On the questionnaires, his parents reported that they both had a low educational level and did not know English, while they expressed positive attitudes towards the language.

For all the most successful participants, parents seem to play a fundamental role, encouraging their motivation towards English and other languages. For example, Anna in Grade 7 echoes what she reports her parents saying in Grade 2, that with many languages, one can go to more places. Cinta's parents rated English as one of the most important school subjects in the questionnaire. Anna's parents took her to a private language school in Grade 1, which she attended for the duration of this study. She reports that her mother, who knows English, tried to get her and her sibling to watch their television shows in English, but they found this difficult. In the interviews, Albert reports his parents as very encouraging and interested in his school performance. His father is a teacher and knows some English. His parents tried to convince him to attend extracurricular English lessons in primary school. He finally did so in Grade 7. For Alicia, her mother is her role model. She firmly believes that if she speaks good English, she will have more opportunities to get a job, like her mother did when the family moved to Barcelona when she was 5. In the final years of primary school, when her attitude towards English is more negative, she also reports that her parents are critical of her pronunciation and of the English lessons. In the final years of secondary school, her mother allows her to watch English-speaking television shows every day for one and a half hour after she has completed her homework.

Classroom-related factors

Both individual teaching styles and the teaching approaches used in the different educational phases appear as strong determinants of these learners' attitudes.

Participants often comment on their teachers' classroom management styles: both what is considered too strict and too lenient is criticized, and influences individual participants' attitudes towards English. The effect of shifting teaching approaches can be seen in the attitudinal changes that occur with each new phase in primary education (Grades 1-2, 3-4, 5-6), which implies an increase in literacy orientation and a change of teacher. Figures 1-3 show a decline in positive attitudes across phases in primary school, with most learners complaining that they play less and are now asked to write. For example, in Grade 4, Biel complains that the exercises are difficult and "you need to think hard". He starts finding English difficult in Grade 4 and ever since then, the only activity he likes to do in English is reading his textbook. Cinta, a hard-working student, resents the change of teacher and focus in Grade 3 ("Before, we talked more and learned more things").

The transition to secondary school is perceived differently and it depends a great deal on each individual's experience in primary school. Some resent the change from fun tasks to literacy-related tasks, while some welcome the change to more explicit teaching/learning. In the interview in Grade 10, Albert compares learning English in primary and in secondary school as follows: "In primary school it was through repetition. You may not have understood it but you retained it through repetition. Now in secondary school you are required some understanding...you cannot memorize a whole language, you need to see how it works, and this they have to some extent taught to us these years (...)". However, many resent the exclusive focus on grammar in their classes. For example, Cinta again is very critical and finds it hard to get used to a grammar-oriented methodology after thoroughly enjoying a project-based communicative methodology in primary school. But even then, she is attentive and participates in class; in Grade 7 she confesses that she volunteers a lot in class "to fight

boredom”. Biel and Carles find grammar difficult. The latter says that he would drop English if he could. He admits that he is not very attentive in class and finds it difficult to make sentences, to put words together. Now that English is a more formal school subject, he does not have a solid base on which to build the grammar that is taught, and he seemingly gives up on making any effort to catch up.

After their first few years in secondary school, some participants complain that classes are repetitive and not challenging enough. This is especially the case with those participants who enjoy opportunities to learn the language outside the school, like Alicia, Anna and Albert. For Cinta, a high-achieving student, learning opportunities in the classroom seem to have reached a ceiling.

Extracurricular English lessons

For those participants who attend extracurricular lessons, their learning experience outside the school has a great influence on how they interpret their school experience. The case of Albert is illustrative. Throughout primary school, he does not have a very favorable attitude towards the English subject (although his teachers always find him attentive and eager to learn). He yearns for real contact with the language and is frustrated by the slow pace in school and his lack of progress. For example, in year 5 he complains that his English is not improving because nobody in his family speaks English (comparing himself implicitly with a bilingual classmate whose father is a native speaker of English). After years of parental insistence, he joins a language school at the beginning of secondary school. This enhances his feeling of learning, self-efficacy and motivation: “English is a positive thing for me.” However, this high motivation does not extend to the English subject “I like the language school English, not the English here.” He complains that the pace is slow and repetitive: “We are studying now

here what I studied at the language school two years ago.” This time lag between content taught in private schools (with more focused lessons and small groups) and in regular schools (with very diverse and larger groups) is already felt by Anna in Grade 4, when she complains that school English is sometimes boring because she has learned it before in the language school. She also notes that her pronunciation is better than that of her classmates. This perception seems to be reflected in her attitude in the classroom: in Grade 6 her teacher portrays her as a bit conceited and sometimes inattentive in class.

Learning from out-of-school exposure

Out-of-school learning appears to be a determining factor in the learning histories of some participants. The case of Alicia is the most striking. She is a hard-working but shy student, and classroom observations and teacher reports confirm that, as she admits, she does not participate in class. Her attitude towards English starts declining in Grade 4, but by the end of Grade 10, she has a very positive attitude towards the English language that she acquires through watching shows on the Internet. She started watching them in Grade 8, first with subtitles in Spanish or English and now without subtitles because, she says, after three years, she is familiar with the vocabulary of the cop series genre. Because of her shyness, individual learning through shows seems to be an ideal anxious-free situation, where she can learn much better and enjoy the experience. Another example of effective out-of-school learning and practice is provided by exchange experiences with students from abroad with whom participants speak English. For Albert, finally being able to speak non-stop for a week with a Dutch exchange pal was a source of indescribable pleasure and rekindled his motivation.

Real contact with the language outside school had a strong effect on the two least successful learners as well. Biel met the American exchange pal of a classmate,

and in an interview a year later, he said the best way to learn a language would be through communicating with somebody like that. Carles used the little English he knew for the first time just before the last interview. Previously, he had never had any contact with English or any reason to learn it, and had not met any English speakers. However, two weeks before the interview, he participated in a street sport competition abroad which radically changed his views about English. Since then, he started communicating intensively with other international participants, sharing videos and writing in English (with very simple and often ungrammatical phrases) in Whatsapp chats. Now he wants to learn English to the level where “he can speak it everywhere,” but he is not interested in any certificate or in learning school English. When he finishes secondary school he intends to study within a vocational module related to sports and in the future, he sees himself traveling, working, and speaking English abroad. For the first time, learning English means something to him: to be able to communicate with people who share his sports interests. English has become a necessary tool for his imagined successful international sports career.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question of this study inquired about the relationship between learners’ language achievement and their aptitude and motivation. Strong associations were observed between the English scores in Grade 6 and Grade 10 (Grade 9 in the case of Carles) and between English scores in Grade 10 and motivation in Grade 10 but not in Grade 6, which points to the changing nature of this factor over these four years. Scores in Grade 10 were also highly associated with aptitude (measured in Grade 6). This is in line with previous longitudinal studies that show aptitude to be a strong predictor of L2 achievement in secondary school students (e.g., Sparks, Patton,

Ganschow & Humbach, 2009) and in primary school learners (Muñoz, 2014). This result also contradicts the position that traditional aptitude tests are not relevant for young learners because they target the product of explicit learning and young learners largely use implicit learning mechanisms. As has been discussed in previous studies (e.g., DeKeyser, 2000; Muñoz, 2008), input-limited classrooms do not provide the massive exposure needed for implicit learning mechanisms to be activated. The strong association found between MLAT-E and language achievement scores provide supportive evidence against the belief that young learners in such school settings are primarily learning implicitly.

The analysis addressing the second research question showed trajectories with very positive attitudes at the beginning of primary school, with some early declines, and increases in later grades. Two observations emerge from those profiles. One is the confirmation of previous findings that not all young learners enjoy FL learning (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014; Courtney et al., 2015), or not always. The other is that different patterns seem to emerge from the experiences in the different schools, which highlights the importance of the school environment and the contextualized nature of those trajectories (Ushioda, 2009). These changing trajectories open interesting questions as to the source of change, while the more horizontal trajectories over such a long time are also intriguing and may point to a strong motivation that is resilient in the face of change.

Such issues are illuminated by the analysis related to the third research question, which explores some of these trajectories in more depth by triangulating the data from multiple sources, and principally from the learner interviews. In relation to some of the changes seen above, in many cases, it becomes clear that they are related to teacher and teaching method changes across the different educational phases. Crucially, motivation

appears complex and multifaceted. These learners liked the English lessons at the beginning of school because of the fun activities in class, and they enjoyed them less when lessons became more literacy-oriented. It is arguable that their early “liking” can be always interpreted as evidence of intrinsic motivation (enjoyment of learning the language). Later on, for those who express their love of languages and English, an instrumental motive can also be identified in their acknowledgement of the value of English, which is not present in their attitudes towards other FLs. English learning is seen as an obligation for employment reasons and as a necessity for these learners’ aspirations to integrate in the international community (to acquire a “World English Identity”; see Dörnyei, 2005), even if virtually through the internet. The international motive or “international posture” (Yashima, 2002) is present in all learners at the end. The importance of English as a global language in their present and future lives makes it easier to see a growing disjuncture between their attitude towards the English language, which tends to be very positive and their attitude towards English as a school subject-matter, which is not so positive, and distanced from their initial enjoyment of games and songs.

Parents play a fundamental role in these learners’ attitudes towards English, in line with previous studies conducted in different settings (Butler, 2015; Carreira, 2006; Csizér and Kormos, 2009; Lamb, 2013; Masgoret, Bernaus & Gardner, 2001; Noels, 2001). In the questionnaire all parents express a positive attitude towards English, independently of their educational level or their knowledge of English. However, the parents of the only student who resented their lack of involvement (Carles) had the lowest educational level, which echoes the relation found between parental education and students’ outcomes (achievement and motivation) (Butler, 2014, 2015). The interviews reveal that, in general, parents encourage their children verbally (through

praise and constructive criticism) and may also do so financially (paying for after-school tuition). Parents promote opportunities for language learning (encouraging or letting their children watch English-speaking programs or shows). Parents positively impact the students' L2 motivation, by showing how English has helped family members in their lives and providing models of English speakers that make it easier for learners to imagine themselves as future users of the language (Dörnyei, 2005; Tragant & Muñoz, 2014).

The analysis of learners' perceptions about their school lessons indicates that, for many of them, lessons are not adequately challenging and offer tiresome repetition, as found in studies in different countries (Cable et al., 2010; Nikolov, 2009). Learners associate this with their perception of lack of progress, which also seems to be a common characteristic of school FL learners (Courtney et al., 2015; Lamb, 2007; Macaro, 2008; Nikolov, 2009). In contrast, lessons in private language schools, with smaller class sizes, appear to be better able to cater for individual proficiency levels. A consequence, however, is that this results in a negative attitude towards the school lessons, increases the disparity in levels among students in the regular school classrooms, and makes teaching for all even more difficult. Furthermore, for some less successful learners, like the two in this study (with low aptitude scores and self-competence), lessons and learning activities become harder with the increasing focus on literacy.

Another related finding from the exploration of these learners' stories is the importance of contact with the target language. Input limitations in "drip-feed" classrooms (Stern, 1985) are seen as a demotivating factor here, as in studies in other settings (Carreira, 2006; Macaro, 2008), while the extra input offered by private language schools appears to be a source of motivation or re-motivation in these

learners' accounts. On the other hand, experiences that provide real contact with the language (i.e., exchanges, internet series) push learning and increase motivation and they appear to be better aligned with learners' goals than the classroom lessons, as in previous studies (Graham et al., 2016).

In sum, this study has offered valuable insights from a longitudinal exploration of the first ten years of compulsory English language instruction. An asset of this study is its longitudinal nature that allows us to see the attitudes displayed by learners at the beginning of learning and the ways in which language experience has led to significant changes in motivation and self-perception. The study has observed macro- and micro-contextual influences on individual learners' motivation to learn English and the important role of aptitude, all of this resulting in different trajectories of English learning.

Several implications for teachers, schools, and educational authorities can be drawn from this study. One is the need to ensure continuity, in particular across transition from primary to secondary school, through appropriate liaison between teachers and schools. Continuity should ensure that teachers build on the learners' previous knowledge, avoid unnecessary repetition in the classroom and learners' frustration from lack of progress. Looking forward, another implication is the need to recognize the increasing importance of out-of-school learning, to foster such learning opportunities, and to integrate this learning and learners' real interests towards the language in the classroom.

This study is not without limitations. One is its small sample size, common to research with a qualitative perspective. In future studies the sample can be enlarged with more focal learners and their data enriched with quantitative data on language attainment and attitudes from all the learners in those classes. Other variables that have

not been examined here, such as individual teaching practices, will also shed more light on these learners' processes and outcomes. To finish, this study has highlighted important challenges for FL teaching, some specific to English and some more general. Understanding those challenges through learners' voices can contribute towards improving FL teaching and learning in schools.

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