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Advanced EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and teaching:

A comparison between grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary

Ellen Simon & Miriam Taverniers

Abstract

This paper reports on the results of a study exploring learners' beliefs on the learning and teaching of English grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary at tertiary level. While the importance of learners' beliefs on the acquisition process is generally recognized, few studies have focussed on and compared learners' views on different components of the language system. A questionnaire containing semantic scale and Likert scale items probing learners' views on grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary was designed and completed by 117 native speakers of Dutch in Flanders, who were studying English at university. The analysis of the responses revealed that (i) vocabulary was considered to be different from grammar and pronunciation, both in the extent to which an incorrect use could lead to communication breakdown and with respect to the learners' language learning strategies, (ii) learners believed in the feasibility of achieving a native-like proficiency in all three components, and (iii) in-class grammar, pronunciation and

vocabulary exercises were considered to be useful, even at tertiary level. The results are discussed in light of pedagogical approaches to language teaching.

1. Introduction and Aim

In this paper we report on an exploration of students' beliefs about the second language (L2) they study, and we discuss the outcomes of this exploration in relation to pedagogical approaches to, and specific methodologies in teaching an L2 at tertiary level.

The importance of learners' beliefs is now generally recognized in the field of applied linguistics, since various studies have shown that there is a connection between learners' beliefs and the strategies they use as well as their relative success at acquiring the target language.¹ Moreover, studies have revealed that learners' and teachers' beliefs do not always match. A recent study by Brown, for instance, compared students' and teachers' beliefs about areas in foreign language pedagogy and found that there was a mismatch between learners' and teachers' beliefs, which could negatively affect the learning process.

This study sets out to examine learners' beliefs about learning English at tertiary level in Flanders. The participants in this study are native speakers of Dutch living in Flanders. The majority of people in Flanders are monolingual native speakers of Dutch.² English is not normally spoken at home or in public life but it is pervasive in the media, and even young children come into contact with it on a daily basis. The level of proficiency in English is generally very high, especially among young speakers, who

¹ Horwitz, "The Beliefs about Language Learning"; Wenden, "An Introduction to Metacognitive Knowledge".

² Goethals, 105.

grow up with English-spoken pop songs and pop culture, and who typically have 2-4 hours of English classes a week between the ages of 14 and 18.³ However, English is not usually used as the medium in other courses in secondary school and the majority of university courses are in Dutch, although some universities offer a number of courses in English.⁴

The communicative approach, with its focus on task-based learning, was introduced in Flemish schools in the mid seventies. Whereas communicative activities have been integrated in the Flemish EFL schoolbooks,⁵ it is not clear to what extent these activities are actually being taken up in the classroom. Today it seems that EFL classroom practice in Flanders is based on a combination of grammar-based and communicative methods.⁶

In mapping students' beliefs about learning English, we focus on the components of a language system that traditionally play a role in language instruction, viz. *grammar*, *pronunciation*, and *vocabulary*. While a great deal of previous studies have probed learners' opinions and beliefs about language learning in general (see section 2 for an overview of the existing literature), studies focusing on one specific aspect of language learning, such as grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary are much rarer,⁷ and the present study is—to the best of our knowledge—one of the first to compare learners' beliefs about three different language components.

As far as grammar is concerned, the usefulness and desirability of explicit grammar instruction has been the subject of considerable debate. With the emergence of the

³ Ibid., 108.

⁴ See also [author].

⁵ Goethals, 112.

⁶ See also Heffer.

⁷ See also Pazvar and Wang, 28.

communicative language teaching approach, in which the focus lies on fluency rather than on accuracy (see section 2.2), explicit grammar teaching has sometimes been considered superfluous or even counterproductive. Moreover, recent studies on learners' beliefs vary as to whether they report positive⁸ or negative⁹ beliefs about explicit grammar instruction.

With respect to pronunciation, the emergence of English as a global language has called into question the desirability of setting the native speaker's pronunciation as the model in explicit pronunciation training.¹⁰ While studies have shown that explicit pronunciation teaching can facilitate the acquisition of L2 sounds,¹¹ Cenoz and Lecumberri note that pronunciation is often seen as a "supplementary activity rather than a central part of the syllabus".¹² They argue that this may be related to the observation that the incorrect realization of sounds does not often lead to communication breakdowns (though they note that errors of intonation may, in fact, be more serious).¹³

As far as vocabulary teaching is concerned, the communicative language teaching approach advocated a focus on meaning *in context* and the belief emerged that the meaning of words can better be picked up from reading than from the explicit teaching of new words.¹⁴ Hunt and Beglar, for instance, argued that vocabulary teaching is useful for beginning and intermediate learners, but much less so for advanced learners, who learn new words by extensive reading and listening.

⁸ Brown.

⁹ Loewen et al.

¹⁰ Jenkins; cf. Davies and Escudero & Sharwood Smith on the concept of the 'native speaker'.

¹¹ Elliott; Trofimovich and Gatbonton.

¹² Cenoz and Lecumberri, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ Though see Laufer for counterevidence.

As a result, teachers ask themselves the question whether explicit grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary teaching is desirable at university level, and to what extent the academic study of language in a linguistics programme can assist its learners in their L2 acquisition. We will explore to what extent the beliefs of our participants show an entrenchment of (aspects of) these two well-known complementary approaches to language pedagogy,¹⁵ viz. grammar-based teaching¹⁶ vs. communicative language teaching,¹⁷ and consider to what extent the three linguistic components are dealt with differently in this respect.

In order to examine learners' conceptions in each of these three components, we developed a questionnaire which was filled out by a group of university students of English in Flanders. We identify three dimensions or levels of perception, for which aspects of students' conceptions are probed, being first, *language beliefs* (beliefs about the relative importance of each component and on the level of proficiency that can or should be attained), secondly, *language learning beliefs* (beliefs about perceived proficiency and the level of difficulty), and finally, *beliefs about language learning strategies* (ideas on efficacy and usability of specific language learning methods and tools). The questionnaire contains a number of items probing conceptions on each of these three levels.

Some background information on learners' beliefs, pedagogical approaches to language teaching and previous research on learners' beliefs about grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary is provided in section 2. Details on the method are provided in section 3 and the results of the questionnaire are described and discussed in

¹⁵ Richards.

¹⁶ Doughty and Williams; Azar.

¹⁷ Brumfit and Johnson.

sections 4 and 5, respectively. Finally, concluding remarks can be found in section 6, which also includes some suggestions for further research.

2. Background

2.1. Previous Studies on Learners' Beliefs: Research Paradigms and Methodologies

A great deal of studies have dealt with learners' beliefs about language learning. Barcelos classifies these studies into three groups according to the research paradigm used.

A first research paradigm is called the 'normative approach'. Studies within this approach consider "beliefs about SLA as indicators of students' future behaviours as autonomous or good learners".¹⁸ Typically, normative studies on learners' beliefs make use of Likert-type questionnaires, in which learners are asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with a set of statements on language learning. One of the most widely used questionnaires is the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), developed by Horwitz. Many studies have used BALLI,¹⁹ adapted it²⁰ or developed their own questionnaire.²¹

The second paradigm defined by Barcelos is the 'metacognitive approach', in which beliefs are defined as metacognitive knowledge, and which has been advocated by Wenden.²² The difference between the metacognitive and normative approach is that the former but not the latter makes an explicit distinction between 'knowledge', which is

¹⁸ Barcelos, 11.

¹⁹ E.g. Tumposky; Yang "Second Language Learners' Beliefs"; "EFL Learners' Beliefs and Learning Strategy Use".

²⁰ E.g. Mantle-Bromley.

²¹ E.g. Kuntz; Cotterall; Mori.

²² Wenden "How to Be a Successful Language Learner"; "Introduction to Metacognitive Knowledge".

viewed as “factual, objective information, acquired through formal learning”,²³ and ‘beliefs’, which are defined as “individual, subjective understandings, idiosyncratic truths, which are often value-related and characterized by a commitment not present in knowledge (Alexander and Dochy 1995)”.²⁴ Metacognitive studies typically collect data through interviews and self-reports.²⁵

Finally, the third and most recent research paradigm is the ‘contextual approach’, in which the aim is to get insight into learners’ beliefs in specific contexts, rather than to arrive at a general picture of beliefs about second language learning. Various methods have been used in this type of studies, including ethnographic classroom observations, diaries and narratives.²⁶ Examples of studies using the contextual approach can be found in Kalaja and Barcelos.

It is clear that the different research paradigms have their preferred methodologies, each of which has its merits and limitations.²⁷ The present study aims to arrive at a better understanding of university students’ beliefs about specific components of language learning through the use of a questionnaire. While a disadvantage of the normative approach mentioned by Barcelos is that students may interpret the items in the questionnaires differently from the meaning intended by the researchers, and questionnaires obviously do not provide as much detailed information as, for instance, one-to-one interviews, there are two main advantages to the use of questionnaires.²⁸

²³ Wenden “Metacognitive Knowledge and Language Learning”, 517.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Barcelos, 16.

²⁶ Barcelos, 19–20.

²⁷ Bernat and Gvozdenko.

²⁸ Oxford.

First, learners can fill out the questionnaire at their leisure, and anonymously. While a social desirability bias cannot be eliminated in questionnaires, one-to-one interviews are more likely to tempt learners to give socially favourable answers and present themselves in what they believe is a good light.

Secondly, data from a much larger number of individual participants can be obtained when using questionnaires than when collecting data through interviews or classroom observations.

2.2. Learners' Beliefs about Grammar, Pronunciation and Vocabulary

Whereas most studies on learners' beliefs have aimed at characterizing beliefs about SLA in general, a number of previous studies have dealt with learners' beliefs about specific language components.

In order to review these studies, it is useful to sketch the types of pedagogical approaches which have come to prevail since the 1970s. Studies on learners' beliefs have often been conducted in the context of evaluating two major types of pedagogical approaches that have been distinguished in the literature, viz. 'Communicative Language Teaching', with its focus on fluency, is distinguished from 'Grammar-Based Teaching', in which the focus lies on accuracy.²⁹ The Communicative Language Teaching approach is based on the assumption that "like first language (L1) acquisition, L2 acquisition occurs unconsciously and implicitly' and claims that '[a]ny overt attention to linguistic form is unnecessary, and any corrective feedback is ineffective".³⁰ Its meaning-focused instruction stands in contrast to the form-focused instruction typical of the Grammar-Based Teaching approach, which encourages learners to pay

²⁹ Richards; Azar.

³⁰ Loewen et al., 92.

attention to linguistic form.³¹ Two types of instructions within the Grammar-Based approach are discerned: Focus on Form (FonF) and Focus on Forms (FonFs). While FonF activities typically induce learners to attend to linguistic forms while doing communicative activities, FonFs instruction focuses on the teaching of “discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons in a sequence determined by the syllabus writers”.³² Ellis argues that the distinction between these two types of instruction lies mainly in the way in which learners view themselves: “In a FonFs approach, students view themselves as learners of a language and the language as the object of study; in FonF, on the other hand, learners view themselves as language users and language is viewed as a tool for communication”.³³ Doughty and Williams (1998) point out that FonFs and FonF are not polar opposites; rather, “focus on form *entails* a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on FormS is *limited* to such a focus, and focus of meaning *excludes* it”.³⁴

Studies on learners' beliefs focussing on specific language components, have mostly dealt with grammar. The extent to which grammar instruction should be included in SLA teaching and how it should be taught is a matter of continued debate among SLA researchers and pedagogues, but only recently have studies emerged which aimed to get insight into this topic by examining learners' beliefs about grammar instruction. Loewen et al., for instance, investigated the beliefs about the role of grammar instruction and error correction among American university students on the basis of a questionnaire containing 37 Likert-scale items and 4 open questions.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Laufer, 150.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Doughty and Williams, 4.

Studies on students' beliefs about pronunciation and vocabulary instruction are even rarer. An exception is a study by Cenoz and Lecumberri on learners' awareness of the difficulty and importance of English pronunciation and their beliefs about factors that influence the acquisition of pronunciation. The results of their study on Spanish and Basque L1 speakers learning English revealed that all learners consider pronunciation to be difficult but important and believe that ear training and contact with native speakers are the factors which influence the learning process most. By contrast, their participants did not consider personal ability to be an influential factor in the acquisition of English pronunciation. This last finding contrasts with the results of Thompson's study on the English pronunciation beliefs of L1 Russian speakers.

A number of studies have also investigated the effect of explicit pronunciation and vocabulary instruction on subsequent performance. Elliott, for instance, conducted a training study with American English speakers learning Spanish. Participants were trained on the pronunciation of a number of allophones by raising metalinguistic awareness on the place and manner of articulation of the target sounds. The results revealed that the trained participants performed significantly better on a post-test than an experimental control group, suggesting that a great deal of auditory input alone (typical of the communicative approach) does not suffice to improve learner's pronunciation of the L2. With respect to vocabulary instruction, Laufer compared the effectiveness of FonF and FonFs instruction for the teaching of vocabulary. The results of the empirical study showed that students trained with FonFs tasks performed significantly better than students trained with FonF tasks after a first training phase, though the difference disappeared after a second training phase. Laufer concludes that a FonFs approach, though criticized by some as being "old fashioned, synthetic,

unnecessary, and generally ineffective”³⁵ can be effective in the teaching of new vocabulary.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were native speakers of Dutch and undergraduate students of English at a Belgian university. They were all first year students of English, taking courses in English language proficiency, linguistics and literature. While no independent measure of proficiency was used and there is, of course, interpersonal variation, all participants could be considered proficient speakers of English. They reported having had on average 4.9 years of English classes in secondary school (range: 2-6 years), usually with 2-3 hours of classes a week. The majority of participants (75%) had been in an English-speaking country before, most of them for 1 or 2 weeks (range: 1 day – 2 years), and 9% had also taken English classes abroad.

In total, 145 students filled out the questionnaire. Students who did not have Dutch as their mother tongue, or did not complete the questionnaire till the end were removed from the analysis, which was ultimately based on responses from 117 Dutch-speaking (i.e. Flemish) students of English, aged between 17 and 21 (mean age: 18.9; 34 males and 83 females).

3.2. The Questionnaire

Following Horwitz, and Bacon and Finnemann, who examined university students' beliefs about L2 learning, we developed an extensive questionnaire probing learners'

³⁵ Laufer, 151.

views and beliefs about language learning. The questionnaire, which can be found in the Appendix, was put online and could be completed by participants who logged in into the system. They were not paid and did not receive course credit for their participation, but the aims of the study were explained to them orally and they were encouraged to take part. The questionnaire was self-timed and participants could log out and log back in again at any point. They could also move back and forth between the questions and change their answers until they submitted the questionnaire. On average, participants completed the task in 15-30 minutes.

The questionnaire started with a number of personal questions, including questions about the participants' age and their language background. This section was followed by 88 questions probing the participants' beliefs about learning grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. These questions were divided into three main blocks on the basis of the types of responses which were elicited.

Block I consisted of 51 questions, which were organized in 25 'triplets', since each question was asked three times with respect to each of the three language components. The responses were points on a 6-point semantic differentiation scale.

Example:

How likely do you think it is that vocabulary errors made by native speakers of Dutch in English will lead to a communication breakdown with native speakers of English?

1. Not likely at all, 2. Rather unlikely, 3. Not so likely, 4. Somewhat likely, 5. Quite likely, 6. Very likely

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Participants could click on just one option, but could always change their mind and click on another option, so that the previous choice was unselected. A 6-point, forced-choice scale was opted for so as to avoid a central tendency bias, i.e. there was no option 'not likely nor unlikely'.¹

Block II consisted of 24 statements, organized in 8 triplets. The responses were points on a 6-point Likert scale.

Example:

How successful you are at learning grammar in English depends on how good your memory is.

1. Strongly disagree, 2. Mostly disagree, 3. Somewhat disagree, 4. Somewhat agree, 5. Mostly agree, 6. Strongly agree

Again, a forced-choice method was opted for, i.e. there was no option 'neither agree nor disagree'.

Block III, finally, consisted of 13 questions in which participants were asked to rank different skills or learning strategies according to their importance or usefulness.

Example:

Rank the following learning methods from 1 to 3 according to their efficiency in the learning of pronunciation. Write a number from 1 to 3 next to the skill:

1 = most useful – 3 = least useful

a. practice exercises in class....

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b. self-study...

c. stay abroad...

This type of question was included in order to force participants to directly compare different strategies or skills according to their perceived importance or efficacy.

3.3. Analysis

The results of the questionnaire were converted into an Excel file and fed into SPSS. Non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis and post-hoc Mann-Whitney U-tests were carried out to examine whether participants gave significantly different responses for grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary and where the differences were situated. The median was used as a measure of central tendency.²

4. Results

The questions (see the Appendix for the list of questions and statements as presented to the participants) are grouped according to three dimensions—language beliefs, language learning beliefs and beliefs about language learning strategies (see section 1)—and five factors, viz.:

- [1] Importance and usefulness for future professional life and communication in general
- [2] Perceived proficiency and target
- [3] Perceived confidence
- [4] Beliefs about language learning methods, strategies and tools

[5] Beliefs about factors influencing the learning process

In sections 4.1-4.3, the responses to each question are visually represented in a bar chart in which the shades of grey reflect the 6 different points on the Likert or semantic scales and in which a vertical line represents the median, and in a line chart in which the peaks indicate the modes. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests and, if significance was reached, the post-hoc tests are provided in the captions, and visually represented in the rightmost ring diagram. In this diagram, a significant difference between the responses for two language components is represented by a dashed line between the components. When the difference between two components turned out not to be significant, the components are connected by a full line. Subsequent sections deal with learners' language beliefs (4.1), their language learning beliefs (4.2) and their beliefs about language learning strategies (4.3).

4.1. Language Beliefs

Three triplets of questions probed learners' opinion on the importance of English and its usefulness for their future professional life.

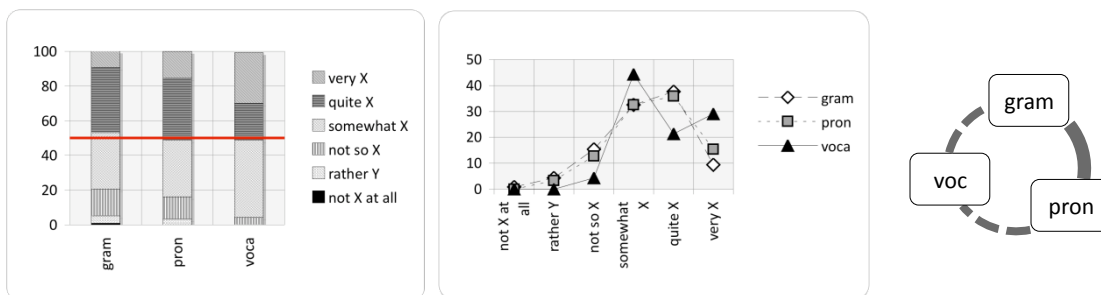


Figure 1: How important do you think it is to have ... in order to communicate efficiently with other people? {correct grammar / correct pronunciation / a good command of vocabulary} [Question set 1.4] Median: Grammar = "somewhat x"; Pronunciation = "quite x"; Vocabulary = "quite x". Kruskal-Wallis $X^2(2, N = 117) = 29.091, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 6281.000, Z = -1.140, p = .254$; pron-voc: $U = 4836.500, Z = -3.988, p = .000$; gram-voc: $U = 4263.000, Z = -5.163, p = .000$

Participants find all three components useful and important for their future professional lives. With respect to the usefulness in general and the importance in future professional lives (Question sets 1.2 and 1.3), there are no statistically significant differences between the three components. However, the participants consider vocabulary to be significantly more important for efficient communication than grammar and pronunciation (Figure 1).

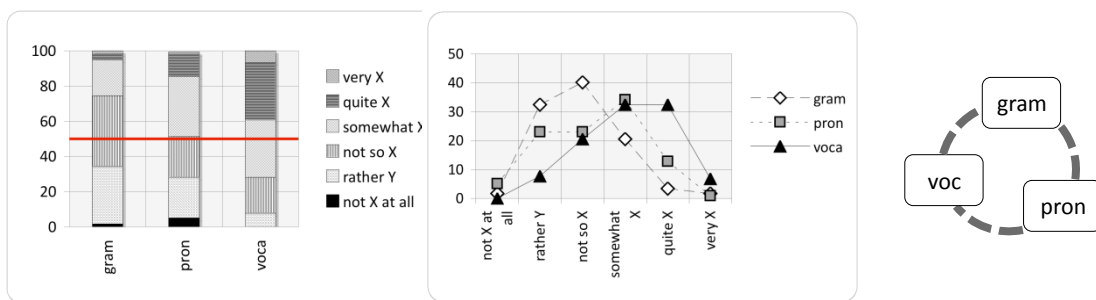


Figure 2: How likely do you think it is that ... errors in English made by native speakers of Dutch in English will lead to a communication breakdown with native speakers of English? {grammatical / pronunciation / vocabulary} [Question set 1.10] Median: Grammar = “not so x”; Pronunciation = “not so x”; Vocabulary = “somewhat x”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = 61.292, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 5513.500, Z = -2.572, p = .010$; pron-voc: $U = 4231.500, Z = -5.131, p = .0000$; gram-voc: $U = 2992.000, Z = -7.676, p = .000$

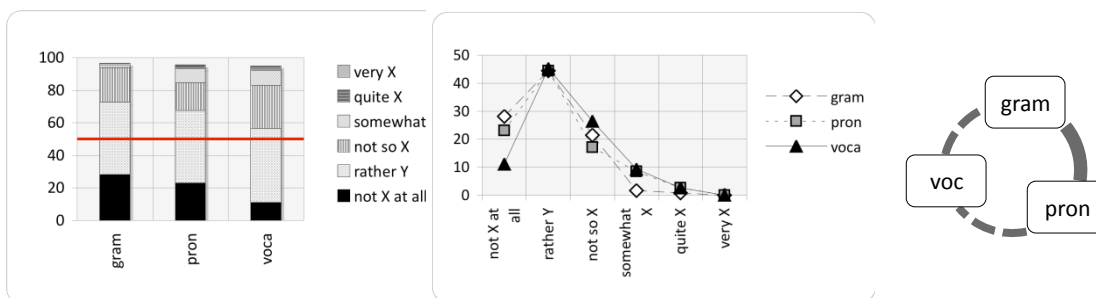


Figure 3: How often have you experienced a communication breakdown with native speakers of English because ... in English? {you used an incorrect grammatical structure / you pronounced a word incorrectly / you used a word incorrectly} [Question set 1.17] Median: Grammar = “rather y”; Pronunciation = “rather y”; Vocabulary = “rather y”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = 14.046, p = .001$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 5745.000, Z = -1.277, p = .202$; pron-voc: $U = 5211.500, Z = -2.333, p = .020$; gram-voc: $U = 4620.000, Z = -3.742, p = .000$

Two triplets of questions inquired after the frequency with which the learners had encountered communication breakdown because of errors in the specific language components. According to the participants, vocabulary errors are more likely to lead to

communication breakdown than pronunciation errors, which in turn are more likely to hinder communication than grammatical errors (Figure 2). When asked how often they themselves had experienced a communication breakdown with native speakers because they used an incorrect grammatical structure, pronounced a word incorrectly, or used a word incorrectly in English, participants in general stated that this rarely happens, though vocabulary still hinders communication significantly more often than grammar and vocabulary (Figure 3).

When asked to rank the four skills—reading, writing, speaking and listening—according to importance (Question set 3.2), the results showed that participants judged speaking skills to be by far the most useful (most '1' responses), followed by writing (most '2' responses), reading, and listening.

4.2. Language Learning Beliefs

4.2.1. Perceived proficiency and target. In this section we discuss learners' responses to questions and statements probing their perceived proficiency in English and the target they are aiming at. We probed perceived proficiency in terms of two dimensions: (1) similarity to native speakers' use of English (Question set 1.5), and (2) difference from the language use of peers not studying English (Question set 1.6). The three components (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) scored similarly with respect to these two dimensions, with the peak values 'somewhat similar' to the language use of native speakers and 'rather similar' to the English language use of Dutch-speaking peers. There were no statistically significant differences between the three components.

Three triplets of questions inquired after learners' beliefs about the feasibility and importance of a 'native-like' competence in English (Question sets 1.8 and 1.9).

Participants believe that it is ‘quite feasible’ to arrive at a native-like proficiency for grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, and also consider it important to have a native like proficiency in all three components (both have ‘quite X’ as peak value). One question set probed learners’ opinion on the statement that “if a non-native speaker studies hard enough, they can arrive at an error-free usage of English” (Figure 4).

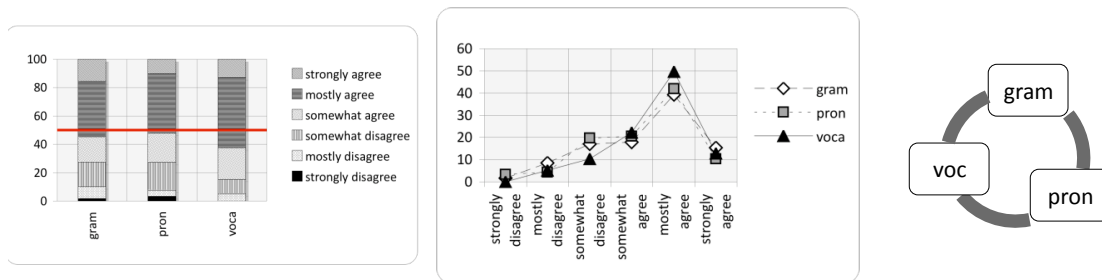


Figure 4: *If a non-native speaker studies hard enough, (s)he can arrive at an error-free ... of English {grammar / pronunciation / vocabulary}* [Question set 2.3] Median: Grammar = “mostly agree”; Pronunciation = “mostly agree”; Vocabulary = “mostly agree”. Kruskal-Wallis $X^2(2, N = 117) = 3.484, p = .175$

Interestingly, learners tend to agree with the statement that, if a non-native speaker studies hard enough, they can arrive at an error-free usage of English (peak value for all three components: ‘mostly agree’).

4.2.2. *Perceived confidence.* Three triplets of questions probed learners’ level of confidence in English grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.

First, as far as confidence about their language use is concerned (Question set 1.7), there was no significant difference between the three components, although the distribution is slightly different, with a median value of 5 (‘quite X’) for vocabulary and 4 (‘somewhat X’) for grammar and pronunciation.

Secondly, our participants reported they ‘mostly disagreed’ with the statement that they pay too much attention to correct usage (Question 2.2), which has a negative

influence on their fluency, but slightly less so for vocabulary, compared to the other two components.

A third triplet of questions probed learners' confidence in terms of error-avoiding strategies (Figure 5). The results revealed that vocabulary differs significantly from the other two components: students tend to look up the meaning of unknown words more than that they use simple grammatical structures or look up the pronunciation of words.

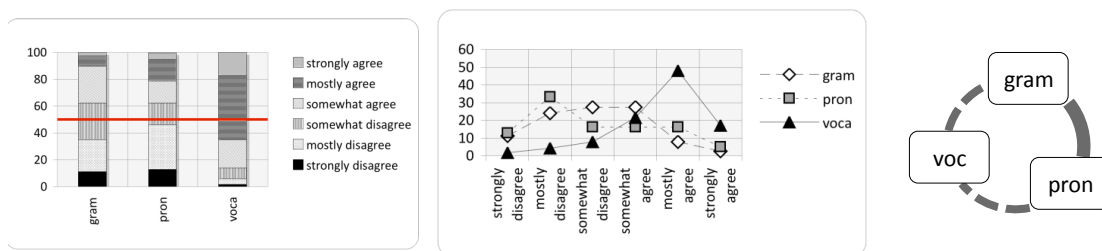


Figure 5: *When doing an assignment, I use simple structures in order to avoid grammatical errors. / When I have to give a presentation, I look up almost all unknown words in a dictionary to know how I have to pronounce them. / When doing an assignment, I look up the meaning of all unknown words in a dictionary to know how to use them correctly.* [Question set 2.1] Median: Grammar = “somewhat disagree”; Pronunciation = “somewhat disagree”; Vocabulary = “mostly agree”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = .919.955$ $p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 6698.000, Z = -.290, p = .772$; pron-voc: $U = 2903.500, Z = -7.808, p = .000$; gram-voc: $U = 2361.000, Z = -8.862, p = .000$

Learners' beliefs about the difficulty of the components and the degree of effort required to make progress were also probed (Figures 6 and 7).

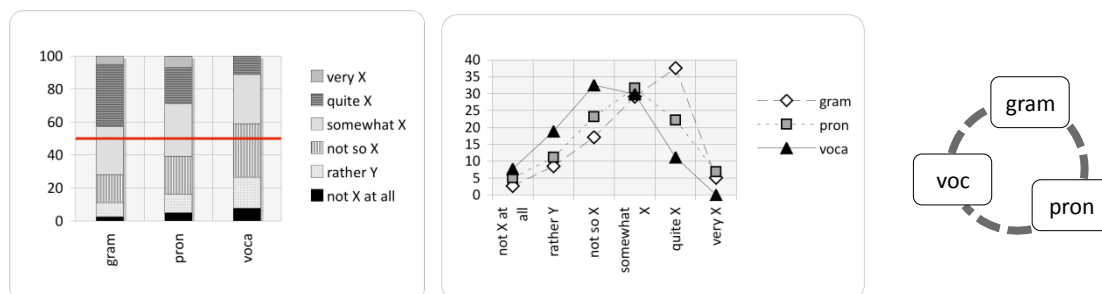


Figure 6: *How difficult do you think it is to learn and use ... ? {correct grammatical usage / correct pronunciation / new vocabulary}* [Question set 1.1] Median: Grammar = “somewhat x”; Pronunciation = “somewhat x”; Vocabulary = “not so x”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = 33.224, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 5810.000, Z = -2.065, p = .039$; pron-voc: $U = 5042.500, Z = -3.587, p = .000$; gram-voc: $U = 3970.500, Z = -5.719, p = .000$

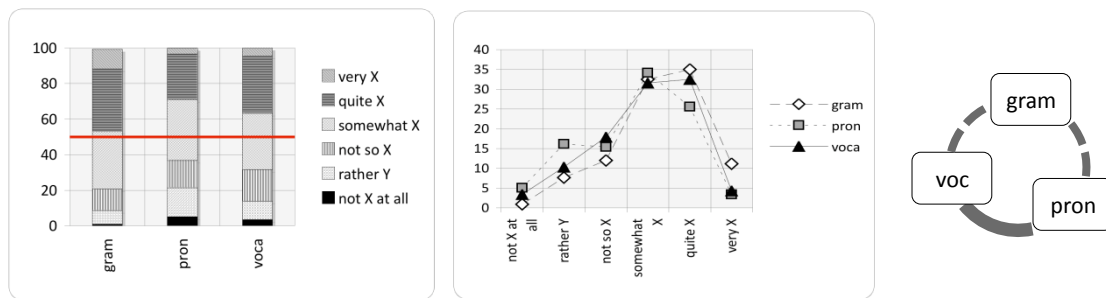


Figure 7: How much effort do you have to do to learn ... ? {correct grammatical usage / correct pronunciation / new vocabulary} [Question set 1.13] Median: Grammar = "somewhat x"; Pronunciation = "somewhat x"; Vocabulary = "somewhat x". Kruskal-Wallis $X^2(2, N = 117) = 12.717, p = .002$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 5046.500, Z = -3.507, p = .000$; pron-voc: $U = 6147.000, Z = -1.395, p = .163$; gram-voc: $U = 5698.500, Z = -2.200, p = .028$

Figure 6 shows that the peak of responses with respect to the difficulty of the components is different for the three components: The majority of participants believe that learning 'new vocabulary' is 'not so difficult', learning 'correct pronunciation' is 'somewhat difficult' and learning 'correct grammatical usage' is 'quite difficult'.

As for the effort required to learn correct usage (Figure 7), grammar proved to require significantly more effort than pronunciation and vocabulary. The charts further reveal that pronunciation is perceived as requiring slightly less effort than vocabulary.

4.3. Beliefs about Language Learning Strategies

4.3.1. *Beliefs about language learning methods, strategies and tools.* In total, six triplets of questions probed learners' beliefs about the importance and usefulness of learning methods and strategies and the efficiency of learning tools.

The majority of participants believe that doing practice exercises is 'quite important' for grammar, pronunciation as well as vocabulary (Question set 1.11). While the academic study of the three components is also believed to be 'quite important' by the majority of participants, the option 'somewhat important' was also selected by a large

group (Question set 1.16). The importance of a one-year stay in an English-speaking country was rated high (Figure 8).

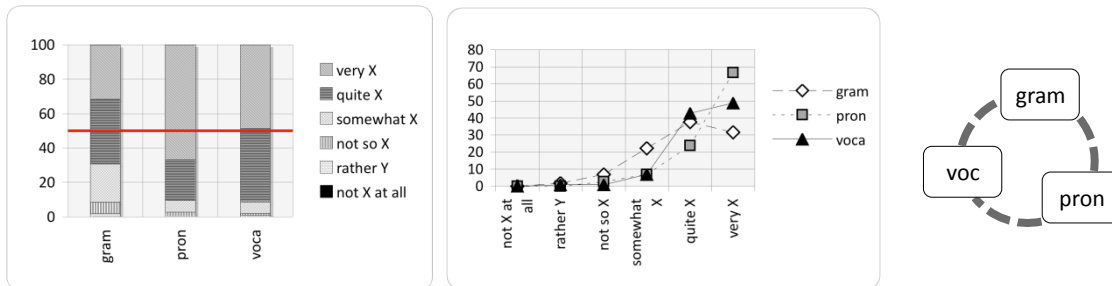


Figure 8: *How much would a one-year stay in an English-speaking country improve your English ... ? {grammar / pronunciation / vocabulary}* [Question 1.12] Median: Grammar = “quite x”; Pronunciation = “very x”; Vocabulary = “quite x”. Kruskal-Wallis $X^2(2, N = 117) = 34.822, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 4180.000, Z = -5.585, p = .000$; pron-voc: $U = 5753.500, Z = -2.400, p = .016$; gram-voc: $U = 4983.500, Z = -3.860, p = .000$

A one-year stay in an English-speaking country is believed to improve the use of English ‘quite a lot’ to ‘very much’. The three components differ significantly in this respect: the benefit is considered to be highest for pronunciation (median: ‘very X’), followed by vocabulary and grammar (median: ‘quite X’).

Participants were also asked to rank three learning methods from 1 ‘most efficient’ to 3 ‘least efficient’ in the learning of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, respectively (Question sets 3.1.a, b and c). The most efficient learning method was considered a stay abroad for all three components, with the strongest preference for a number 1 position for pronunciation, followed by vocabulary and grammar. In-class exercises were judged to be most efficient for learning grammar, followed by pronunciation and vocabulary. The efficiency of self-study, then, was rated highest for vocabulary, followed by grammar and pronunciation.

Within grammar, the ranking of the three skills is (1) stay abroad, (2) in-class exercises, and (3) self-study.

Within pronunciation, the order is the same, but a stay abroad is rated number one by as much as 88% of the participants, which contrasts sharply with self-study, which was ranked number 3 by 79% of the students.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, the pattern of number one for 'stay abroad' is maintained, while self-study comes second and in-class exercises third.

4.3.2. Beliefs about factors influencing the learning process. Five triplets of questions focus on five factors potentially influencing the learning process.

The results revealed that, first of all, the majority of students tend not to believe that one's proficiency in English depends on factors one has little control over (Question 2.4). In addition to this general tendency, a more detailed look at the distribution shows that the disagreement is strongest for vocabulary, followed by grammar and pronunciation: the cumulative percentages of negative answers (i.e. 'somewhat', 'mostly' and 'strongly' disagree) are 91% for vocabulary, 79% for grammar and 55% for pronunciation. The difference between the three components is statistically significant.

The next four triplets probed learners' beliefs about the role of talent (Question set 2.5), studying hard (Question set 2.6), logical thinking (Question set 2.7) and memory (Question set 2.8). The results are presented in Figures 9–12.

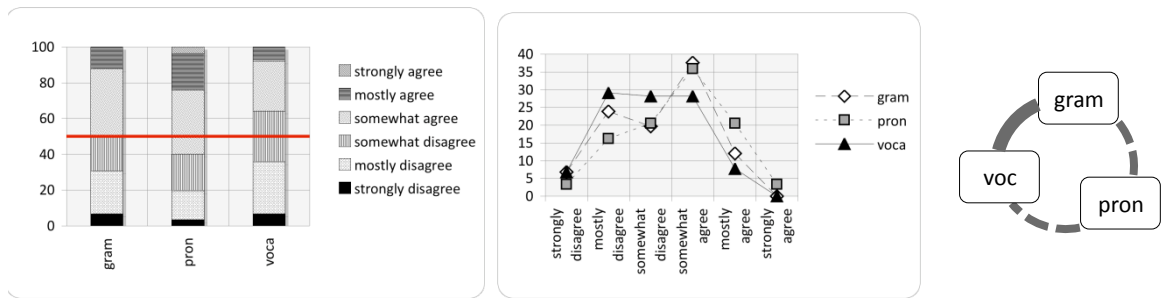


Figure 9: How successful you are at learning ... in English depends on how talented you are {grammar / pronunciation / vocabulary} [Question set 2.5] Median: Grammar = “somewhat agree”; Pronunciation = “somewhat agree”; Vocabulary = “somewhat disagree”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = 17.277, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 5605.000, Z = -2.483, p = .013$; pron-voc: $U = 4783.000, Z = -4.111, p = .000$; gram-voc: $U = 6010.500, Z = -1.670, p = .095$

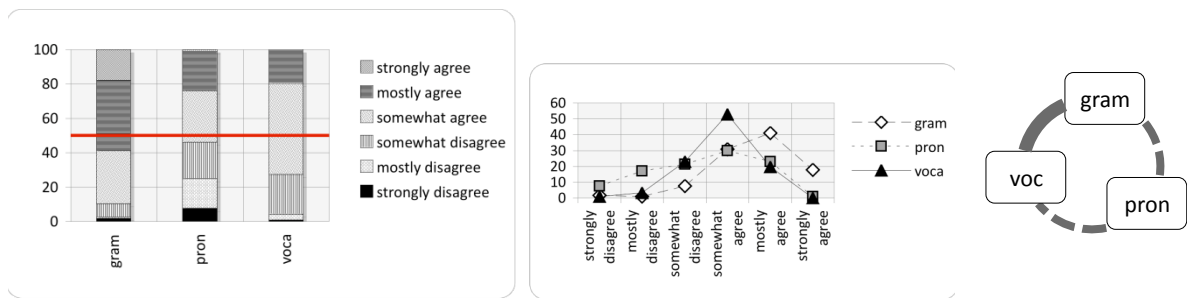


Figure 10: How successful you are at learning ... in English depends on how hard you study {grammar / pronunciation / vocabulary} [Question set 2.6] Median: Grammar = “mostly agree”; Pronunciation = “somewhat agree”; Vocabulary = “mostly agree”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = 85.636, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 3347.000, Z = -6.988, p = .000$; pron-voc: $U = 2553.500, Z = -8.628, p = .000$; gram-voc: $U = 5934.500, Z = -1.885, p = .059$

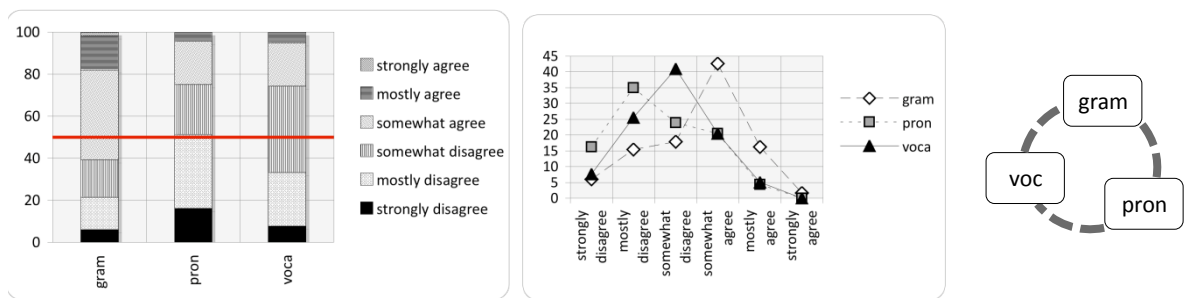


Figure 11: How successful you are at learning ... in English depends on how good you are at logical thinking {grammar / pronunciation / vocabulary} [Question set 2.7] Median: Grammar = “somewhat agree”; Pronunciation = “mostly disagree”; Vocabulary = “somewhat disagree”. Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2(2, N = 117) = 38.995, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 3948.000, Z = -5.768, p = .000$; pron-voc: $U = 5779.500, Z = -2.136, p = .033$; gram-voc: $U = 4552.500, Z = -4.584, p = .000$

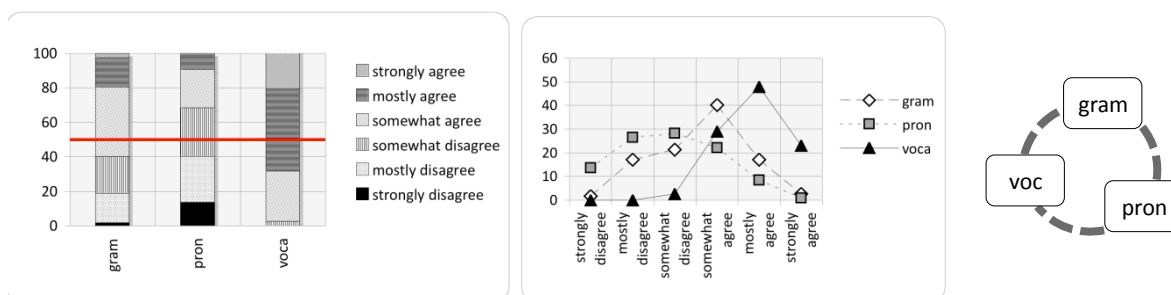


Figure 12: *How successful you are at learning ... in English depends on how good your memory is {grammar / pronunciation / vocabulary}* [Question set 2.8] Median: Grammar = “somewhat agree”; Pronunciation = “somewhat disagree”; Vocabulary = “mostly agree”. Kruskal-Wallis $X^2(2, N = 117) = 145.478, p = .000$ — Mann-Whitney gram-pron: $U = 4515.000, Z = -4.637, p = .000$; pron-voca: $U = 1254.000, Z = -11.048, p = .000$; gram-voca: $U = 2457.500, Z = -8.813, p = .000$

The role of talent (Figure 9) is considered significantly more important for pronunciation than for the other two components.

Studying hard is believed to be an important factor for learning all three components, most strongly so for grammar, followed by vocabulary and pronunciation (Figure 10). The cumulative percentages of positive answers (i.e. ‘somewhat’, ‘mostly’ and ‘strongly’ agree) are 90% for grammar, 73% for vocabulary and 54% for pronunciation.

The role of logical thinking is statistically different for the three components: the majority of participants ‘mostly disagree’ or ‘somewhat disagree’ with the statement that one’s success at learning English pronunciation or vocabulary is linked to one’s ability to think logically (Figure 11). Most participants do, however, ‘somewhat agree’ that success at learning English grammar depends on how good you are at logical thinking.

Having a good memory is judged significantly differently for the three components (Figure 12): it is considered to be most beneficial for learning new English vocabulary, but is also thought to be an advantage for learning English grammar. The cumulative

percentages of positive answers are 98% for vocabulary, 60% for grammar and only 32% for pronunciation.

5. Discussion

The results of the questionnaire revealed three main findings.

First, the results showed that learners perceived vocabulary to be different from grammar and pronunciation. Learners considered vocabulary to be significantly more important for efficient communication than pronunciation or grammar and reported that, in general, vocabulary errors are significantly more likely to lead to communication breakdown than errors in the other two components. The learners themselves had most often experienced communication breakdown because they used a word incorrectly in English, not because they mispronounced a word or used an incorrect grammatical structure. This is in line with the observation that an incorrect pronunciation does not normally lead to communication breakdown, unless a non-target intonation is used (see Section 1).³⁶ Having to search for a particular target lexical item, however, leads to an immediate disruption of the fluency of the conversation. While the participants believed that the incorrect use of a target word leads to communication breakdown more often than the incorrect pronunciation of a word or the use of an incorrect grammatical structure, they at the same time reported to be slightly more confident in their English vocabulary use than in their grammar usage or pronunciation. Since vocabulary is thought to be the most important cause of communication breakdown, the learners' confidence in their use of English vocabulary may at first seem remarkable. However, this confidence may be related to their language learning strategies: students

³⁶ Cenoz and Lecumberri, 4.

reported to look up the meaning of unknown words more often than that they use simple grammatical structures or look up the pronunciation of unknown words. This may be the result of their experience at secondary school, where there tends to be a great emphasis on using translation dictionaries, but not on looking up grammatical structures or the pronunciation of words. Of course, in order to look up the pronunciation of words in dictionaries, learners need to be able to read the phonetic alphabet, though there are now also many free websites in which one can listen to the production of words by a native (usually British or American) English speaker. Hence, even though learners realize that the smaller size of their English lexicon can lead to communication breakdown in conversations with native speakers, they are still confident about their vocabulary use, because they are familiar with the tool (i.e., the use of dictionaries) to enlarge their lexicon and avoid errors.

The second main finding of the study relates to the learners' perceived proficiency and the native speaker ideal. When asked to compare their use of English to that of native speakers and of peers who did not study English at university, the participants judged their own use of English to be somewhat similar to that of native speakers, but at the same time also rather similar to the use of English by their peers. This observation can be explained when taking into account that the knowledge of English of young and middle-aged people in Flanders is generally very high (see Section 3). As a result, the English of beginning university students of English in Flanders is not necessarily very different from that of people of the same age who are not studying English. This implies that, in order for the university students to distinguish themselves from their peers who do not study English at university, they have to set themselves a high target. The questionnaire indeed revealed that the participants believe that it is feasible for a non-

native speaker to arrive at a native-like proficiency and that they themselves strive for a native-like proficiency in English for grammar, pronunciation, as well as vocabulary. This observation is interesting in light of the growing realization that the concept of 'native speaker' is hard to pin down and the emergence of studies which argue to set aside the native speaker ideal in foreign language teaching. Jenkins points out that the spread of English as a global language has led to a situation in which most non-native speakers of English use the language in communication with other non-native speakers.³⁷ She argues that, given this new situation, it is not reasonable to take native English pronunciation as a norm for all speakers, though she points out that "there will always be learners of English who want or need to sound as 'native-like' as possible".³⁸ A survey with 108 university students of English in Flanders revealed that 96% of the participants aimed for a "native-like English pronunciation".³⁹ The present study confirms that university students of English belong to the group of non-native speakers who aim to arrive at native-like use of English.

Finally, the third finding is related to the participants' beliefs about language learning strategies. The participants believe in the usefulness and efficacy of 'studying hard' and believe that, if a non-native speaker studies hard enough, s/he can arrive at an error-free usage of English grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Moreover, the results revealed that even at tertiary education level learners believe practice in-class exercises to be important for grammar, pronunciation as well as vocabulary. This seems to indicate that learners are convinced of the merits of a system-based approach to language teaching: while in a communicative-based approach, the focus is on natural,

³⁷ Jenkins *Phonology of English; English as a Lingua Franca*.

³⁸ Jenkins *Phonology of English*, 161.

³⁹ [Author1].

effortless learning, in a system-based approach it is believed that certain aspects of language can best be acquired by studying them. Whereas we did not probe learners' opinions on the types of in-class exercises they preferred, and hence cannot draw any conclusions on whether they preferred FonF or FonFs activities, it is itself remarkable that young learners of English believe in the possibility of learning an L2 by studying hard. While the participants expressed their preference for naturalistic (i.e. in the form of a stay abroad) over instructed language learning, especially for acquiring L2 pronunciation, they consider in-class exercises to be useful for learning all three skills, and rate in-class exercises higher than self-study for learning both grammar and pronunciation.

6. Concluding Remarks

The results of the study allow for a general characterization of university students of English in Flanders as confident and ambitious learners, who believe that native-like proficiency is attainable in all three components probed in this study, viz. grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, and who find it important to strive for such native-like proficiency. Moreover, they believe in the merits of working hard to achieve this goal, and are positive towards in-class exercises on all three components, even at tertiary level. These results are of interest to language teachers, who need to know what their learners' beliefs and expectations are about vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation instruction at university level. They teach us about the perceived relevance and desirability of a system-oriented approach, which is presented to the students, in any case, in the academic study of lexicogrammar and phonology.

More research is clearly needed in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the complexity of learners' beliefs about the second language learning. One suggestion for further research would be to compare the beliefs of the 1st year university students probed in the present study to those of 3rd or 4th year students of English at university. At the time the 1st year students completed the questionnaire, they had only finished one full semester of courses at university, in which they had received explicit grammar instruction, but had not been formally instructed on pronunciation or vocabulary. A study on the beliefs of 3rd or 4th year students could give us insight into the influence of language and linguistics courses on learners' beliefs. Although more research is needed, this study has hopefully contributed to the existing body of research on learners' beliefs by comparing students' beliefs about English grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary learning and teaching in tertiary education in Flanders.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Intro

How old are you?

Are you male/female?

What's your mother tongue?

Do you speak any other languages on a daily basis? If yes, which ones?

How many years of English classes did you have in secondary school?

How many hours a week?

Have you taken English classes abroad? If yes, where and for how long?

Have you been in an English-speaking country before?

If yes, for how long?

Do you have contact with native speakers of English? If yes, how often?

Block I: Semantic scale

a. Not X at all, b. Rather -X, c. Not so X, d. Somewhat X, e. Quite X, f. Very X

1.1a. How difficult do you think it is to learn and use correct grammatical usage?

1.1b. How difficult do you think it is to learn and use correct pronunciation?

1.1c. How difficult do you think it is to learn and use new vocabulary?

1.2a. How useful do you think it is to learn and use correct grammatical usage?

1.2b. How useful do you think it is to learn and use correct pronunciation?

1.2c. How useful do you think it is to learn and use new vocabulary?

- 1.3a. How important do you think correct grammatical usage in English will be in your future professional life?
- 1.3b. How important do you think correct pronunciation in English will be in your future professional life?
- 1.3c. How important do you think correct vocabulary use in English will be in your future professional life?
- 1.4a. How important do you think it is to have correct grammar in order to communicate efficiently with other people?
- 1.4b. How important do you think it is to have correct pronunciation in order to communicate efficiently with other people?
- 1.4c. How important do you think it is to have a good command of vocabulary in order to communicate efficiently with other people?
- 1.5a. How similar is your English grammar to that of a native speaker of English?
- 1.5b. How similar is your English pronunciation to that of a native speaker of English?
- 1.5c. How similar is your English vocabulary to that of a native speaker of English?
- 1.6a. How different is your English grammar from the English grammar of your Dutch-speaking friends who do not study English at university (or higher education in general)?
- 1.6b. How different is your English pronunciation from the English pronunciation of your Dutch-speaking friends who do not study English at university (or higher education in general)?
- 1.6c. How different is your English vocabulary from the English pronunciation of your Dutch-speaking friends who do not study English at university (or higher education in general)?

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- 1.7a. How confident are you about your English grammar use?
- 1.7b. How confident are you about your English pronunciation?
- 1.7c. How confident are you about your English vocabulary?

- 1.8a. How important is a native-like grammar in English for yourself?
- 1.8b. How important is a native-like pronunciation in English for yourself?
- 1.8c. How important is a native-like vocabulary in English for yourself?

- 1.9a. How feasible do you think it is for yourself to arrive at a native-like grammatical use of English?
- 1.9b. How feasible do you think it is for yourself to arrive at a native-like pronunciation of English?
- 1.9c. How feasible do you think it is for yourself to arrive at a native-like vocabulary of English?

- 1.10a. How likely do you think it is that grammatical errors in English made by native speakers of Dutch in English will lead to a communication breakdown with native speakers of English?
- 1.10b. How likely do you think it is that pronunciation errors made by native speakers of Dutch in English will lead to a communication breakdown with native speakers of English?
- 1.10c. How likely do you think it is that vocabulary errors made by native speakers of Dutch in English will lead to a communication breakdown with native speakers of English?

- 1.11a. How important do you think it is to do grammar practice exercises in order to learn English?
- 1.11b. How important do you think it is to do pronunciation practice exercises in order to learn English?
- 1.11c. How important do you think it is to do vocabulary practice exercises in order to learn English?
- 1.12a. How much would a one-year stay in an English-speaking country improve your English grammar?
- 1.12b. How much would a one-year stay in an English-speaking country improve your English pronunciation?
- 1.12c. How much would a one-year stay in an English-speaking country improve your English vocabulary?
- 1.13a. How much effort do you have to do learn correct grammatical usage?
- 1.13b. How much effort do you have to do to learn correct pronunciation?
- 1.13c. How much effort do you have to do to learn new vocabulary?
- 1.14a. How much attention was paid to English grammar in secondary school?
- 1.14b. How much attention was paid to English pronunciation in secondary school?
- 1.14c. How much attention was paid to English vocabulary in secondary school?
- 1.15a. How much attention was paid to English grammar at university?
- 1.15b. How much attention was paid to English pronunciation at university?
- 1.15c. How much attention was paid to English vocabulary at university?

- 1.16a. How helpful do you think the linguistic study of syntax is for learning and using correct grammar in English?
- 1.16b. How helpful do you think the linguistic study of phonology is for learning and using correct pronunciation in English?
- 1.16c. How helpful do you think the linguistic study of the meaning and structure of words is for learning and using correct vocabulary in English?
- 1.17a. How often have you experienced a communication breakdown with native speakers of English because you used an incorrect grammatical structure in English?
- 1.17b. How often have you experienced a communication breakdown with native speakers of English because you pronounced a word incorrectly in English?
- 1.17c. How often have you experienced a communication breakdown with native speakers of English because you used a word incorrectly in English?

Block II: Likert scale

a. Strongly disagree, b. Mostly disagree, c. Somewhat disagree, d. Somewhat agree, e. Mostly agree, f. Strongly agree

- 2.1a. When doing an assignment, I use simple structures in order to avoid grammatical errors.
- 2.1b. When I have to give a presentation, I look up almost all unknown words in a dictionary to know how I have to pronounce them.
- 2.1c. When doing an assignment, I look up the meanings of all unknown words in a dictionary in order to know how to use them correctly.

- 2.2a. I sometimes pay too much attention to the use of correct grammar when speaking English, which has a negative influence on my fluency.
- 2.2b. I sometimes pay too much attention to the use of correct pronunciation when speaking English, which has a negative influence on my fluency.
- 2.2c. I sometimes pay too much attention to the use of correct vocabulary when speaking English, which has a negative influence on my fluency.
- 2.3a. If a non-native speaker studies hard enough, (s)he can arrive at an error-free grammar of English.
- 2.3b. If a non-native speaker studies hard enough, (s)he can arrive at an error-free pronunciation of English.
- 2.3c. If a non-native speaker studies hard enough, (s)he can arrive at an error-free vocabulary of English.
- 2.4a. Your proficiency in English grammar depends on factors you have little control over.
- 2.4b. Your proficiency in English pronunciation depends on factors you have little control over.
- 2.4c. Your proficiency in English vocabulary depends on factors you have little control over.
- 2.5a. How successful you are at learning grammar in English depends on how talented you are.
- 2.5b. How successful you are at learning pronunciation in English depends on how talented you are.
- 2.5c. How successful you are at learning vocabulary in English depends on how talented you are.

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- 2.6a. How successful you are at learning grammar in English depends on how hard you study.
- 2.6b. How successful you are at learning pronunciation in English depends on how hard you study.
- 2.6c. How successful you are at learning vocabulary in English depends on how hard you study.
- 2.7a. How successful you are at learning grammar in English depends on how good you are at logical thinking.
- 2.7b. How successful you are at learning pronunciation in English depends on how good you are at logical thinking.
- 2.7c. How successful you are at learning vocabulary in English depends on how good you are at logical thinking.

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- 2.8a. How successful you are at learning grammar in English depends on how good your memory is.
- 2.8b. How successful you are at learning pronunciation in English depends on how good your memory is.
- 2.8c. How successful you are at learning vocabulary in English depends on how good your memory is.

Block III: Ranking

- 3.1a Rank the following learning methods from 1 to 3 according to their efficiency in the learning of grammar. Write a number from 1 to 3 next to the skill:
- a. practice exercises in class ...
 - b. self-study ...
 - c. stay abroad ...
- 3.1b Rank the following learning methods from 1 to 3 according to their efficiency in the learning of pronunciation. Write a number from 1 to 3 next to the skill:
- a. practice exercises in class ...
 - b. self-study ...
 - c. stay abroad ...
- 3.1c Rank the following learning methods from 1 to 3 according to their efficiency in the learning of vocabulary. Write a number from 1 to 3 next to the skill:
- a. practice exercises in class ...
 - b. self-study...
 - c. stay abroad...

3.2. Rank the following skills according to importance: Write a number from 1 to 4 next to the skill:

- a. Reading
- b. Writing
- c. Speaking
- d. Listening

Notes

¹ Given the inherent differences between grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, a question sometimes had to be formulated slightly differently for the three components. For example, the question 'How difficult do you think it is to learn and use...?' was completed with 'correct grammatical usage', 'correct pronunciation' and 'new vocabulary'. We used the phrase 'new vocabulary' rather than 'correct vocabulary use', since we aimed at probing learners' view on expanding the size of their L2 lexicon.

² Although parametric statistical tests are often carried out on Likert-scale type data, it has been argued by some (e.g. Jamieson) that, while data of these type have a rank order (i.e. response '5. Mostly agree' is ranked higher than response '2. Mostly disagree'), the points on the scale cannot be considered equidistant. The interval between '3. Somewhat disagree' and '4. Somewhat disagree' is, for instance, greater than the semantic distance between '5. Mostly agree' and '6. Strongly agree'. As a result, the data are ordinal rather than interval, which obviously has repercussions for the type of statistics that can validly be carried out: no means or standard deviations should be calculated and no parametric statistical tests can validly be carried out. While other scholars (e.g. Carifio and Perla) argue that parametric statistics can be carried out on Likert scale data, the criterion that must be fulfilled for these tests to be valid is that different questions probe the same attitude. By contrast, if a questionnaire consists of questions probing attitudes towards a set of different conceptions, and the responses are single Likert response format items, as is the case in the questionnaire built for the present study, no parametric statistics can be carried out. Non-parametric tests, and more specifically Kruskal-Wallis tests and post-hoc Mann-Whitney U-tests will therefore be carried out to examine whether participants responded

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significantly differently for grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary and between which pairs the differences are situated.