

# EMOTIONS, LEARNING-AUTONOMY AND GENDER-SPECIFIC ATTITUDES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** In the ESL classroom, students' attitudes and learning success are largely influenced by a variety of emotions experienced. The present research aims to investigate how emotions and perceptions on learning-autonomy shape Hungarian high school students' and educators' attitudes in the ESL classrooms. Results indicate that female students, as opposed to their male peers, have considerably lower confidence in their own capability of learning and using English, yet they are less dependent on the teachers' perceived likeability and more autonomous in their learning processes. Teachers reveal that they are aware of the differences in emotions between male and female students; however, they do not encourage students sufficiently to develop learner-autonomy. Implications from this study indicate that teachers should explore and implement more psychological content-based strategies to meet students' gender specific emotional needs and to avoid learning-dependence on the educator's person.

**Key words:** Learning-autonomy, emotions, ESL, gender-differences in perception, English teaching

## 1 Introduction

The present article attempts to investigate Hungarian high-school students' emotions and perspectives on learning-autonomy, or the ability to take charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981), while considering possible differences in attitudes among gender groups. Although most Hungarian students are learning English (along with other foreign languages), the experience of foreign language learning is still considered a unique challenge for learners in general. Even individuals with already well-established learning styles and strategies in other subjects may display difficulties upon realising that learning a foreign language can be a profoundly unsettling psychological phenomenon. This experience may forcibly widen and alter students' already established learning practices, world-view and cultural identity (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Boekaerts, 2007; Elliot & Pekrun, 2007; Weiner, 2007; Linnenbrink, 2007; Guiora, 1983). Learning in general, and academic achievement may heavily condition the view of success in our society today, as they provide access to highly valued professional careers and social relations (Ratner, 2007; Turner & Waugh, 2007). Several studies (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry, 2002; Shutz & Pekrun, 2007; Komlosi-Ferdinand, 2020; Ainley, 2007; Zeidner, 2007) point out that emotions experienced in the foreign language classroom are of crucial importance, as they may have a significant impact on cognition, which in turn affects academic motivation, academic self-concept and ultimately success. Tran (2010) states that there are observable emotional, social, communication-style and problem-solving differences among genders in the foreign language classroom. According to her, while the structure of the lessons and required communicative and role-playing approach favours female students more, teachers usually give more positive attention to male students. However, Howe (1997) states that such gender differentiation/bias towards students has no measurable relevance to students' academic

success. While gender and emotions shape students' attitudes and motivation in the classroom, a strongly emerging positive educational trend may empower students to enhance their potential regardless of the teachers' attitudes, namely developing learning-autonomy. Students, becoming autonomous and responsible for their own learning, will further foster their ability to make positive choices in educational settings, they will act on those choices and contribute and construct their own knowledge and life circumstances (Martin, 2004).

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 English-teaching in Hungary

Hungary is a landlocked country situated in central Europe forming part of the European Union since 2004. Hungarian language is currently accepted as part of the Finno-Ugric language family. However, it is not mutually understandable with any other language in the world. Hungarian is a language mostly spoken in Hungary and in the territories populated by Hungarians that were detached from the Budapest government after the Treaty of Trianon (1920). These territories are currently found in Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Romania, Austria and Croatia. Foreign language teaching and learning, more or less forcibly, has always played a key role in Hungary's history. Latin was used as a lingua franca among all nationalities living in Hungarian territories until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Almási&Šubarić, 2015). Afterwards, a strong German language education was imposed. During the post-war communist era, all Hungarian citizens were compelled to learn Russian. Nowadays, most Hungarian primary and secondary schools offer English, German and to a lesser extent French, Italian, Spanish and other languages as a compulsory part of the national curriculum. Moreover, according to the Law 100/1997. VI 13. 6/5, students who sit *érettségi* (high-school leaving exam) cannot receive their diplomas unless they have successfully attained a minimum B2 level in a foreign language exam, although this law is under revision at the moment. The need for learning foreign languages is growing in Hungary, both among younger and older generations, especially due to the multinational companies established in the country which usually require foreign language skills from current and prospective employees.

### 2.2 Emotion and cognition

Pekrun et al.(2002) state that emotions have deep impact on motivational and cognitive mechanisms, and different emotions impact these mechanisms in a variety of ways. In contrast with the traditional approach in research towards emotions and performance, which consider mostly positive versus negative emotions, their cognitive-motivational model adds 'activation' as a conditional dimension. With the combination of the two main dimensions, positive versus negative emotions and activation, they divide academic-related emotion-performance factors into four main groups:

- positive activating emotions: enjoyment of learning, expectation of success and prediction in personal achievement
- positive deactivating emotions: de-stressing after successful assessment, acknowledgement of the effort and grit displayed and relief
- negative activating emotions: anxiety, embarrassment and annoyance
- negative deactivating emotions: (academic) boredom, hopelessness and learned helplessness

Based on the re-arranged mediating systems above, Pekrun et al. (2002) consider that

academic achievement is impacted by the following contexts:

- motivation
- strategies for learning
- cognitive resources
- self-regulation versus external regulation of learning

As students encounter and confront a wide range of emotions in the classroom, their emotions in academic settings are conditioned by many factors relating to achievement motivation (Op'tEynde, De Corte & Verschaffel, 2007). Besides this, depending on the educational activity, a variety of discreet emotions, differing in recurrence and distribution, may be observed. In Pekrun et al.'s (2002) study, the most reported emotion was anxiety relating to situations such as sitting exams, home study or the simple fact of attending the class. Less regularly, envy, hopelessness and, on very few occasions, even suicidal thoughts were expressed in relation to failing certain exams. However, they reported that positive emotions were at least equally present in students' feedback, alongside less frequently reported social emotions such as admiration and gratitude. Moreover, besides the usual experienced emotions, Pekrun et al. (2002) found a rather unexpected phenomenon. Learners unconsciously reported meta-emotions, that is, reflections and feelings about their own emotions. Many students experienced anger in relation to being anxious before assessment. Also, several students reported this anger as a motivational tool to cope with anxiety. This allowed Pekrun et al. (2002) to see academic boredom from a new perspective. So far, academic boredom was believed to pertain to high-ability students who met too low academic demands, or to students' unrealistic self-evaluation's rendezvous with the mainstream classroom's reality. Nevertheless, many students reported boredom because of the inability to keep up with requirements. This indicates that academic boredom may be related to learned helplessness and serves as a behavioural or mental escape from situations that offer insufficient stimulus, are too stressful, or are beyond learners' competence (Schutz, Cross, Hong & Osbon, 2007). In their study on Japanese students, Saito, Dewaele, Abe & In'nami (2018) pointed out that the frequency of the use of the target language resulted in more positive emotions. Also, they confirmed that positive emotions were less stable and constant, while negative emotions developed and accumulated in a more moderate fashion but remained more permanent throughout time.

### **2.3 Gender-specific attitudes and differences in the classroom**

There has always been much controversy about cognitive differences between genders. Scientific studies and observations such as the ones conducted by Upadhyay & Guragain (2014) and Gibbs (2009) concluded that male and female brains displayed anatomical, biochemical and functional dissimilarities throughout different stages in life. Moreover, cultural and sociological norms as well as physiological factors may influence the individual's cognitive development according to his/her gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Also, some theories suggest that males, in general, perform better in mathematical tests, reasoning and visual-spatial ability, while females excel in reading tests, memory, verbal skill and language use during adolescence (Richardson, 1997). In their study on gender differences in school achievement conducted with 53 German fifth graders, Weis et al. (2013) compared female and male students' motivation, behaviour regulation and achievement in language (German), and mathematics. The findings revealed that, while in mathematics there was little difference perceived in favour of male students, in the language class, girls significantly outperformed their male peers. Kiziltepe's (2003) study on the influence of gender on Turkish learners' attitudes and motivation towards foreign language learning reported that female students had higher motivation, more

motivational intensity, and better attitudes towards learning English. Female students also exhibited superior attitudes regarding the English teacher's persona and teaching skills. Similarly, in a study conducted by Dewaele, Macintyre and Dewaele (2016), female students displayed considerably more pride, positive attitudes, enjoyment and satisfaction towards learning a foreign language than male students did. Moreover, female students reported that they perceived to have learned interesting things, which in turn motivated them to be more creative during the lesson. Thus, such increased positive emotions produced an overall impression of participating in something worthy and fashionable. However, female students' predominantly positive emotions were coupled with some classroom-related anxiety which, instead of hindering the learning process, served as a motor and grit to develop better language learning strategies.

In Główka's (2014) study, female learners not only achieved better foreign language proficiency, but they did it considerably faster and with more accuracy than their male peers. This was due to the fact that female students internalised new linguistic forms and input more readily, and that the design of the education system, at least in some countries, favours females' cognitive and behavioural approach more than males'. Moreover, in foreign language classrooms, activities often involve imitations of real-life scenarios, brainstorming sessions and tasks developing communication skills which, in some culture-specific ideologies, may seem less attractive for male students. This is particularly true in societies where men attach very little value to self-expression and find 'acting' in the classroom embarrassing, often hindering their own language learning success by not allowing their linguistic and conversational skills to be fully developed. On the other hand, the general approach displayed by female students seems to be more co-operative, self-expressing, communication-oriented and accepting of guidance from the educator.

According to Terrier (2016), teacher bias against a specific gender group impacts greatly on students' attitudes, motivation and even their cognitive development. In her study, she found that teachers were usually biased against male students, which reflected on their grades, progress and schooling trajectories. Also, it was found that the teachers assigned to underprivileged areas were usually younger and were considerably more biased, as opposed to older teachers with more experience working in less deprived areas. This was a very relevant result in her study and a key factor which played an important role in understanding teacher-bias and its effect on students' behaviour, attitudes and learning outcome. A completely different approach was offered by McCaughan (2009), suggesting that students' age, teacher-bias against a gender-group, and discriminatory gender roles assigned by the socio-cultural background of the student are factors significantly more important than gender differences *per se*.

## **2.4 Reinders' model for developing learning-autonomy**

Reinders (2010) argues that *constructivism* is a central success factor, providing learners with a broader scale of language learning strategies. This approach, instead of emphasising the traditional knowledge-transmission based learning, places a greater priority on constructing, (re)organising and knowledge-sharing methodologies. However, he acknowledges that some difficulties may arise if learners are not fully aware of their own learning styles, strengths, and/or the concepts of proactivity and self-motivation have not the same (if any) meaning for the educators and their students. According to him, research on students' individual differences and learning styles may help to identify specific cognitive and behavioural features of every student which, in turn, act as crucial factors in developing learner-autonomy (Reinders, 2010).

Reinders' Framework of Independent Learning Skills: Stages in the development of learner autonomy (2010, p.46) summarises well the main concepts to be considered:

<b>Learning stages</b>	<b>Teacher-directed</b>	<b>Learner-directed</b>
Identifying needs	Placement tests, teacher feedback	Learner experiences difficulties in using the language
Setting goals	Determined by the course, relatively fixed	Contextually determined, relatively flexible
Planning learning	Determined by the teacher. Somewhat flexible	Contextually determined. Very flexible
Selecting resources	Provided by teacher	Self-selection by learners
Selecting learning-strategies	Teacher models and instructions	Self-selection by learners
Practice	Exercises and activities provided by teacher	Implementation (language use) and experimentation
Monitoring progress	Regular classroom feedback and comments on assignments and tasks	Self-monitoring, peer feedback
Assessment and revision	Tests, curriculum changes	Self-assessment, reflection

Table 1. Reinders' Framework of Independent Learning Skills

### 3 Hypotheses

According to the author's experience as a teacher and researcher in various European and Asian countries, learners often rely too much on their emotions in the EFL classroom. Although in most cases the initial wish and impetus to learn English is present, the teacher's persona and attitudes, and/or bias towards the individual (or a specific gender-group) impact considerably on the learners' success. Nevertheless, very few students realise (and act upon) the urgent need to take responsibility for their own learning. Additionally, some students are not even conscious about the possibility and their own capability to develop their own learning structures and methodologies, but they solely rely on the educators' talent and good disposition. Therefore, a common scenario can be observed: *If I like the teacher, (or he/she likes me), I will do well in the subject.* Under such circumstances, emotions may not be the best motivational agents. The researcher's perception was that learners are not always capable to correctly identify and manage their academic emotions, and they develop an imaginary learning-autonomy that may lead to too much dependence on the educator's personality and teaching style. Therefore, three hypotheses were investigated:

- 1 Most students' learning success heavily depends on the educator's personality and encouragement
- 2 Learners have no clear understanding of the concept of learning-autonomy

- 3 Depending on the students' gender, academic emotions and attitudes towards English language learning vary significantly

## **4 Methodology**

This study surveyed the key factors in ESL classrooms on emotions in the classroom, motivation and perceptions and attitudes towards existing or imagined learning-autonomy. Quantitative research methodology was used to unveil the students' attitudes. In order to collect data, students participated in a survey by completing a questionnaire (see Appendix). The data were analysed by taking percentages on the students' answers marked on a Likert-scale. As for the analysis, two major categories were differentiated. The differences in attitudes and perceptions among male and female students were the crucial factor in determining the contrasts in viewpoints between the two groups.

In the case of the participating teachers, qualitative research methodology was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and all answers were received in written form, to which narrative analysis was applied.

### **4.1 Participating school**

The research was conducted at Bethlen Gábor Grammar School in Hódmezővásárhely, Hungary. This institution, founded in 1723 as a school teaching through the medium of Latin, offers a higher number of foreign-language lessons in its curriculum and it is regarded as one of the most successful schools in the area, with numerous writers and academics amongst its alumni.

### **4.2 Participating teachers**

The school employs 17 English teachers in total, all of them being female. Although all teachers were asked to participate in the study, only four of them (including the head of the English department) were available at the time when the research was conducted. The participating educators' teaching experience varied from 8-21 years.

### **4.3 Participating students**

In total 48 students answered the questionnaires and all were considered valid. Among the subjects there were 17 male and 31 female students aged between 18 and 20 years old. A convenience sampling method was used to gather the appropriate subjects. By the time the present study was carried out, the majority of the participating students were about to sit the final examinations before receiving their Certificate of Secondary Education. Within the Hungarian education system, the scores achieved in this exam will enable learners to apply for university programs and degrees. Also, as previously mentioned, learners will not receive their diplomas without having passed a foreign-language exam. Therefore, hypothetically, at this period in time most participants were very focused on foreign-language acquisition/perfection. At this point, students must have already developed some clear attitudes and observations about teaching methodologies, academic emotions regarding the English language and the (lack of)

learning-autonomy they acquired during their schooling. The age of the students was considered appropriate, since some scholars suggest that attitudes start to appear at the age of 10 and are clarified and consolidated during adolescence (Huguet & Llurda, 2001).

#### **4.4 The instruments**

In the case of the students, the data were collected by a self-completed questionnaire created by the researcher principally for this investigation. The adopted quantitative research method intended to acquire self-report data from the participants with the aim of reporting existing conditions, determine points of reference to be used for comparisons, and/or demonstrate the connection between specific events (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012). The structure of the questionnaire included a few closed-ended questions and, in some other questions, the answers had to be marked on a five-point Likert-scale (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). The questionnaires were translated into Hungarian. This was seen necessary in order to make sure students fully understand of all items.

The teachers preferred to receive the interview questions online. Because a semi-structured interview was used, all the questions asked could be answered succinctly or with much detail.

#### **4.5 Procedure**

A pilot study was conducted to guarantee the scientific reliability, intelligibility and coherence of the questionnaire. Several Hungarian teachers and a foreign researcher on education and linguistics collaborated in the assessment of the final edition of the questionnaire. They provided counsel on the clarity, precision, terminology and content of all items. Some of the suggestions were incorporated in the final version.

The distribution of the questionnaire occurred in April 2018 at the school's library, where all students participated at the same time. Before the distribution of the questionnaire, all participants were instructed about the purpose of this research. Moreover, they were informed of the anonymous nature of the questionnaire. It was also specified that no monetary compensation or better grades were offered as an honorarium for participating. Likewise, a short paragraph at the beginning of the questionnaire informed students about their rights to withdraw at any moment. The students received the paper-based questionnaires from the researcher and had the chance to clarify any doubts.

In the case of the teachers, the interview questions were sent in English and full information about the study's nature and the participants' rights was made clear. The answers were sent back almost immediately by them.

### **5 Results**

The present investigation was conducted with the intention of revealing students' perceptions towards English language teachers, their teaching methodology and the degree of learning autonomy perceived. The research strongly emphasised possible viewpoint discordances according to the gender of the participants and the teachers' influence on the

students' motivation to learn English.

### 5.1 Attitudes towards learning English

The process itself of learning English was enjoyable for around 60 percent of both gender groups. However, considerably more female than male students declared to like this activity (*Q.1*). Rather big differences were observed on self-perceptions about being talented in learning English. While half of the male students believed to have a natural talent for learning English, only 30 percent of the female students had the same perception about themselves. In addition, nearly the half of the female students proclaimed not having talent at all (*Q.2*). Nevertheless, both genders agreed on the importance of studying English as a second/foreign language (*Q.3*), and about 70 percent of both male and female students confessed to needing English for further studies (*Q.4*). See Table 2.

Age: 18-20 Total: 48 (17 Male + 31 Female)		Male students			Female students		
		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	<b>Do you like learning English?</b>	65	29	6	58	19	23
2	<b>Do you think you have a natural talent to learn English?</b>	52	24	24	29	23	48
3	<b>Nowadays it is important learning English.</b>	100	0	0	97	3	0
4	<b>Will you need English for your future studies?</b>	70	6	24	72	8	20

Table 2. Attitudes towards learning English in percentages

### 5.2 Attitudes towards language acquisition

There was a considerable difference in opinions about homework as a useful tool for developing independent learning habits. Half of the male students disagreed, while half of the female students agreed on this topic (*Q.5*). The preparation of presentations was perceived by only 30 percent of both groups as practical in the process of learning English (*Q.6*). However, 58 percent of both groups found the detailed and lengthy explanations of grammar points offered by the teachers beneficial (*Q.7*). The collective discussion of grammar points was also highly favoured by both groups, female students being moderately more convinced about its efficacy (*Q.8*). By contrast, only 55 percent of female students found working/brainstorming in small groups advantageous, while 70 percent of the male students agreed on the usefulness of this practice (*Q.9*). However, female students showed more positive attitudes with 70 percent in favour of learning from the classmates, while male students were more sceptical, 58 percent agreeing and 24 percent discarding this possibility (*Q.10*). Finally, 58 percent of the female students would usually offer to help their peers, while only 23 percent of male students expressed willingness to display such proactive behaviour (*Q.11*). See Table 3.

Age: 18-20 Total: 48 (17 Male + 31 Female)		Male students			Female students		
		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
5	<b>Homework helps me to develop independent learning habits</b>	24	29	47	54	26	20

6	Preparing presentations help me to learn English better	24	34	42	29	29	42
7	Do you find helpful the teacher explaining grammar/words for long time?	58	18	24	58	16	26
8	Do you find helpful the collective discussion of certain grammar points/themes in the class?	76	12	12	91	6	3
9	Is it beneficial working in small groups where everybody's opinion matters?	70	6	24	55	19	26
10	I believe I can learn from my classmates	58	18	24	70	20	10
11	I usually offer my help with English to my peers	23	47	30	58	10	32

Table3. Attitudes towards language acquisition in percentages

### 5.3 Perceived encouragement to develop learning-autonomy

Viewpoints varied on perceptions about having opportunities to talk about subject-related themes in the classroom. A quarter of the male students declared to have such occasions, while only 12 percent of the female students agreed to this statement (*Q.12*). However, half of the female students proclaimed that they were encouraged to be creative during the lessons by the teacher, while males had slightly more modest opinions on this regard (*Q.13*). Finally, between 60 and 70 percent of both gender groups declared that continuous encouragement to prepare independent project work at home was not a regular tool to encourage students in developing learning-autonomy (*Q.14*). See Table 4.

Age: 18-20 Total: 48 (17 Male + 31 Female)		Male students			Female students		
		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
12	I usually have the opportunity to talk about an interesting (subject-related theme) in the classroom	24	52	24	12	39	49
13	I am encouraged to be creative during the lessons	40	18	42	52	13	35
14	I am continually encouraged to prepare independent projects at home	12	18	70	13	26	61

Table 4. Perceived encouragement to develop learning-autonomy in percentages

### 5.4 Teachers' influence on learning skills and self-determination

Some dissimilarities were found between the two gender groups about dependence on the teachers' skills and personality. A very high percentage of both groups declared that success

in learning English is possible only if the teacher is a skilful educator (*Q.15*). Moreover, 59 percent of the male students declared that the outcome of their language-acquisition depends on whether they like the teacher, while 48 percent of the female students agreed on the importance such factor (*Q.16*). However, when reflecting on learning-autonomy, only 35 percent of the male students stated that in the case they would not understand something during the lesson, they would take action and look for solutions by themselves. In contrast, more than half of the female students proved to be more autonomous learners (*Q.17*). Surprisingly, around 80 percent of both groups stated they were responsible for their own learning processes (*Q.18*). See Table 5.

Age: 18-20 Total: 48 (17 Male + 31 Female)		Male students			Female students		
		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
15	I will only learn English well if the teacher is skilful	64	6	30	70	13	1
16	My English language knowledge depends on whether I like the teacher or not	59	0	41	48	10	42
17	If I don't understand something during the lesson, I like to find the answers at home by myself	35	41	24	52	23	25
18	I am responsible for my own learning	82	12	6	78	6	16

Table 5. Teachers' influence on learning skills and self-determination in percentage

## 5.5 The interviews

The three female English teachers agreed that they enjoyed teaching English in general. Yet all of them declared to have received very little (if any) training at university on how to motivate their students. Two teachers admitted that students' achievement depended mostly on their teaching skills and hard work, while one teacher remained neutral in this regard. There was no consensus about the usefulness of homework as a tool to learn English better. Opinions varied from *very strongly agree* to *very vague neutral*. In any case, all of them acknowledged that students' presentations would be an excellent tool to develop independent learning and research skills. Also, all three educators confessed that they usually needed to explain grammar points and vocabulary on repeated occasions for their students, as they were unable/unwilling to catch up by themselves whenever they missed or did not understand a lesson.

Working in small groups, brainstorming and polishing problem-solving skills were regularly implemented and regarded as beneficial by all teachers. However, as they revealed, students were not much encouraged to create independent research projects for their English lessons. Yet, they had the opportunity to display their work in case they prepared a topic-related project. Also, students were regularly encouraged to be creative during the class, to respect their peers' viewpoints, and to share their own opinions. According to all three teachers, students' constructive opinions and good ideas were implemented in the lessons and, by observing students' difficulties and comments, the lessons were regularly tailored to meet the learners' needs. However, allowing students to display leadership skills was not perceived as something that made them more responsible. Finally, there was a very strong agreement on the theory that students' motivation could be enhanced if the educator had encouraging attitudes in the class.

## 6 Discussion

Learners' variances in attitudes, emotions and perceptions on learning-autonomy in the classroom were investigated according to their gender. The results obtained from this study reveal that perceptions and attitudes between the participating gender groups differ in several aspects. Although it would be extremely laborious and demanding for each English teacher to meet the psychological and emotional needs of each student, there are indications that it was (at least) attempted in the case of this research. The often-coinciding opinions of the students and the teachers give insight that both students and educators work towards the goal of learning English better.

According to the first hypothesis, most students' learning success heavily depended on the educator's personality and encouragement. This theory was partly confirmed, since most participants in both gender groups stated that much depended on the teacher's *skill* and *ability* in the process of their learning. Moreover, they recognised that successful language learning often depended on whether they *liked* the teacher or not. Nevertheless, it may be unsafe to declare that students [wanted to] recognize and accept the difference between *likable* and *skilful*. It may happen that a teacher who is not liked from the beginning because of his/her physical appearance, strict teaching methods or bias against specific students suddenly transforms from being not *liked* to not *skilled*. Furthermore, all three teachers proclaimed that much of the learners' success depended on their hard work, positive attitude and encouragement during the lessons. This phenomenon was already confirmed in Komlosi-Ferdinand's (2020) study, where EFL learners stated that they expected unconditional emotional validation from the teachers, and in most cases their emotions and learning outcomes heavily relied on the educators' skills and enthusiasm. The findings also confirm Pekrun et al.'s (2002) ideas, namely that emotions deeply impact on motivation and cognition.

The second hypothesis put forward was that learners have no clear understanding on the concept of learning-autonomy. The often-contradictory statements of the students suggest that most of them were aware of their own responsibility and duties required to learn English, yet they relied excessively on their emotions towards the teacher. Also, they acknowledged that learning English is important, since they would need it in the future, including in their future studies, yet most of them made little (if any) steps to prepare projects at home or to look for information, in case the lesson was too difficult or missed. Therefore, much pressure was placed on the educators, since learners expected them to be encouraging, skilful and to have 'magical' powers in order to pour knowledge into their heads. In sight of this, some students' viewpoints about learning-autonomy could be described as being passive actors in the classroom, who, in the best case, do not offer resistance against the teachers' effort (if they are skilful and likeable). In line with Reinders' (2010) theory of constructivism, the basic understanding and definitions about the concepts of learning-autonomy and motivation should be established *before* the actual teaching. It is now impossible to verify whether this action was continuously performed, or at least intended to be explained in the beginning of the year. In any case, the outcome shows a rather wide gap between learners and educators.

The third hypothesis suggested that academic emotions and attitudes towards English language learning vary significantly according to the students' gender. Both the students' answers and the teachers' declarations indicate that differences between male and female students were obvious in some specific domains. In the case of the male students, the majority of them believed to have a natural talent, or at least not lacking talent for learning English. Their

attitudes show that homework was not perceived as a very useful tool in developing independent learning habits. Male students were rather sceptical about being able to learn from their peers and/or helping them with understanding difficult topics. Nevertheless, they found brainstorming in small groups highly beneficial, where they felt their opinions were accepted. Also, male students perceived to have more opportunities than females to talk about interesting topics during the lesson (Saito et al. 2018), yet, most of them did not find to be encouraged by the teachers to be creative. Most male students were very conscious about their own role and responsibility in the learning process. However, more than a half agreed that a skilled teacher could condition their success. Also, they were less dependent on the teachers' likeability than female students did.

Female students displayed some contrary behaviours in a variety of contexts. Unfortunately, half of them perceived not to have any natural talent for learning English, while only the 30 percent believed the opposite. In part, this phenomenon may have provoked female students to be more conscious in their language learning process. For example, they attributed much more importance to do homework, were more willing to help and be helped by their peers and were more proactive in finding information related to their studies at home than male students did. Interestingly, most female students were conscious that they were responsible for their own learning, yet half of them agreed that their learning success depended on the teachers' likeability and even more of them considered the teachers' perceived skill to be a key factor in language learning. These findings can only partly corroborate previously existing studies where female students exhibited faster learning, more motivation or much better attitudes towards the teachers (Weis et al. 2013; Kiziltepe, 2003; Dewaele, Macintyre & Dewaele, 2016; Głowska, 2014). In this case female students' attitudes towards the teachers, their self-confidence and faster learning abilities were not necessarily superior to their male peers'.

The head of the English department, after discussing the topic with the rest of English teachers, offered some valuable insight. Her account portrayed the students' attitudes in a very similar fashion as expressed by them. According to her, female students generally displayed a combination of lower self-confidence and more maximalist attitudes, as opposed to male students who, at this age, had significant self-confidence and '*in general take things very easy*' attitude. Additionally, male students used more video games and surfed more on the Internet. This behaviour may have brought them in contact with practical English more often, a fact not to be confused with doing educational research for the specific goal of learning English better. Interestingly, the marks received did not necessarily reflect students' perceptions. Although there were many male students with outstanding talent for spoken English, apparently many of them were '*too lazy*' to acquire correct grammar and to learn new vocabulary which fell outside their areas of interest. Therefore, in general, female students wrote better tests, while male students used spoken English better and with more self-confidence, which generated more positive feelings in the EFL classroom and more intrinsic motivation. According to the teachers, these results cannot be taken as a rigid rule. Depending on the class' composition, the chemistry among the students, and specific (charismatic) personality traits of certain teachers, the outcome may vary moderately. The teachers also hypothesised that all English teachers, being female, may be less appealing for female students, and having young male teachers would probably enhance their interest in English as a subject.

## 7 Conclusion

Conclusions based on the findings are mostly comprehensible and explicit. The results indicated that gender-related variations in emotions and perceptions about learning-autonomy are relevant in the Hungarian ESL classrooms. These findings' impact and relatedness may be transferable to other students' experiences in other countries and cultures as well, since gender-based behavioural differences exist worldwide. As results unveil, male students are more dependent on the educator's preparedness and likeability, are less willing to engage in autonomous research, they perceive to have more opportunity to talk in the class and have increased self-confidence in their abilities to learn English well. On the other hand, female students display lower confidence in their natural talent to learn English yet place more emphasis on doing education-related research and place less importance on the teacher's skill or personal charm. Furthermore, both gender-groups are highly conscious of their learning-related responsibilities, although some show reluctance to accept learning activities set by the teacher as a useful tool in the learning process.

In the educators' view, female students often work harder, which usually bears superior test results, while male students start speaking earlier, with more confidence, yet far from perfect grammar. According to the teachers, most male students' initially superior verbal performance is due to the fact that they are more exposed to English on the Internet and playing video games. Nevertheless, this practice does not necessarily help them to internalise the correct grammatical forms as well. Finally, contrary to previous theories, in this case female students' attitudes towards the teachers, their self-confidence and faster learning abilities were not necessarily superior to their male peers'.

As for the educators, the two main implications are that 1) they declare to be not properly trained at the university on how to motivate students, therefore, they execute all the cognitive work in the classroom, as if the learning process were their sole responsibility. 2) Although encouraging students to be creative during the lessons is a usual practice, it seems that teachers' attitude does not suggest (or explicitly request) the creation of autonomous projects and/or placed importance on allowing leadership skills to emerge. These findings raise awareness on the need of teaching more psychological content as part of the teacher-training programmes. Future educators should learn more about how students' emotions, gender-related differences in attitudes and perceptions shape their learning processes and specific needs in the classroom. Learning about motivation itself would help to maintain a healthy balance between the teachers' and the students' exact responsibilities. Moreover, teachers should be able to educate and motivate students to learn about and to develop learning-autonomy, a skill that is transferable to several other areas of life as well.

Although this research offers some practical data, the limitations are not to be overlooked. Further research is needed to investigate whether female students have a tendency to develop learned helplessness in the classroom due to their general lack of confidence, and whether this phenomenon will accompany them in their future careers as well. Also, the relationship among individuals' perception about the 'future self', cumulative intrinsic motivation and grit in the classroom needs to be investigated in more depth.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

- 1 Do you like learning English?
- 2 Do you think you have a natural talent to learn English?
- 3 Nowadays it is important to learn English
- 4 Will you need English for your future studies?
- 5 Homework helps me to develop independent learning habits
- 6 Preparing presentations help me to learn English better
- 7 Do you find helpful the teacher explaining grammar/words for long time?
- 8 Do you find helpful the collective discussion of certain grammar points/themes in the class?
- 9 Is it beneficial working in small groups where everybody's opinion matters?
- 10 I believe I can learn from my classmates
- 11 I usually offer my help with English to my peers
- 12 I usually have the opportunity to talk about interesting (subject-related) topics in the classroom
- 13 I am encouraged to be creative during the lessons
- 14 I am continually encouraged to prepare independent projects at home
- 15 I will only learn English well if the teacher is good
- 16 My English language knowledge depends on whether I like the teacher or not
- 17 If I don't understand something during the lesson, I like to find the answers at home by myself
- 18 I am responsible for my own learning