

ACHIEVEMENTS AND ATTRIBUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF ACQUIRING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: LEARNER BELIEFS

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Abstract: Learner beliefs form an important part of individual differences within the field of language acquisition. The aim of this qualitative research is to map what beliefs adult language learners hold about achievements when learning English and what or who they attribute their success or failure to. A study applying semi-structured interviews for data collection was carried out to provide the answers. The interviews were conducted with ten experienced Hungarian adult language learners. The analysis of their answers yielded valuable insights into what learners regard as achievements in their learning process relating to the attributions necessary for successful language learning and the affective aspects of learning. The interviews also provided an overview of the respondents' beliefs about what can compensate for the lack of aptitude, their strategy use and the effect of their age.

Keywords: learner beliefs, qualitative research, attribution, achievement

1 Introduction

Entering the language classroom, each learner brings with them more or less well-defined concepts about the right methods, materials, and even about teachers. Furthermore, they have perceptions about themselves as learners, too: about their own intellectual capacity, aptitude and persistence. In other words, learners hold beliefs about all the participants and “ingredients” of their learning.

No matter whether these beliefs are valid or not, learners carry them to each class. Learner beliefs, like all beliefs, are not objective truths or premises, but what the individual gives credence to, what she perceives as true. The Longman online dictionary defines belief as “the feeling that something is definitely true or definitely exists”. Even what we call “knowledge” is subjective and partial (Nilsson, 2013). Thus beliefs can be defined with the oxymoron: subjective truth.

As learner beliefs affect the learning process, they need to be studied. They show idiosyncratic features and are listed among individual differences within the field of language acquisition (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005; Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Although the importance of learner beliefs is overshadowed by that of motivation (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Gardner, 2001), there is a growing interest in exploring the nature and types of beliefs, because they seem to influence language learning powerfully.

The aim of this study is to explore what beliefs the interviewed ten adult language learners hold about their achievements (and failures), and what they attribute their success or failure to. In order to achieve this aim, first the theoretical background of learner beliefs is

provided, listing terms used as synonyms or near-synonyms for the concept of learner beliefs, discussing the so-far proven relationships between achievements and learner beliefs, and the research methods used in the field.

2 Background

2.1 What are learner beliefs?

Schommer-Aikins (2004) states that learner beliefs are part of the epistemological belief system, that is, of our understanding of what knowledge is, and how it can be acquired. The epistemological belief system includes beliefs about the stability of knowledge, the structure of knowledge and the source of knowledge, as well as beliefs concerning the speed of learning and the ability to learn.

Learner beliefs are also referred to as metacognitive knowledge, and although the two terms are often used interchangeably, Wenden (1999) makes it clear that apart from their similarities, learner beliefs are formed along the lines of values and are usually held longer; also, beliefs are considered as a subset of metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1999), similarly to Schommer-Aikins's system (2004). On the basis of a questionnaire study, Yang suggested a two-dimensional theoretical framework of learner beliefs (1999), dividing them into two groups: metacognitive (learners, the task of learning, strategy use) and motivational (self-efficacy, goals, emotional reactions to learning) dimensions.

Another concept used for exploring learner beliefs is the culture of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997), which focuses on the conflicting beliefs held by teachers and learners respectively. Moreover, Dörnyei challenges the term “belief” itself (2005) on the grounds that beliefs do not constitute permanent traits of a learner, but are situation-bound and temporary, and therefore he suggests using the less psychological-sounding concept of “view”. Furthermore, along similar lines, he even questions the legitimacy of listing learner beliefs among individual differences.

2.2 What are learner beliefs responsible for?

What we already know is that beliefs definitely affect strategy use (Yang, 1999, Chan, 2002), and may affect other areas of language learning as well. Furthermore, learner beliefs play an indirect role in achievements by affecting achievement motivation and strategy use (Kizilgunes et al., 2009); that is, the higher the learners rated knowledge, the better results and the more clearly outlined goals they had. Gardner (2001) also came to the conclusion that learner beliefs have an indirect effect on learners' achievements.

Despite the seemingly secondary role that learner beliefs play in language learning concerning achievements behind the flagship of motivation, their effects are obvious in the way they influence and maintain motivation and also effective strategy use (Graham, 2006). In *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* learner beliefs are defined as mediational means affecting learning in a complex way which cannot be restricted to one single causal relationship between learner beliefs and strategy use (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013). The theoretician Schommer-Aikins (2004) also argues for the importance of epistemological

beliefs, admitting that they may have subtle but real effects on how learners learn, and thus on what goals they set and what they actually achieve.

2.3 Methods of researching beliefs

Research into language learner beliefs started with Horwitz, who used her BALLI – Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory – test (1988) to study five areas of language learning: difficulty of language learning, aptitude, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, motivations and expectations. BALLI, as its creator admitted, can give only a "static and cross-sectional view of learner beliefs" (p. 291). She, therefore, concluded her study by emphasising the need for further research regarding the idiosyncratic, temporary and situation-dependent nature of beliefs. This measurement tool has been used for decades, although individual researchers (e.g. Rieger, 2009) amend and adapt the questions to fit their specific contexts, they cannot go beyond the finding that beliefs affect learners' strategy use, and thus indirectly influence the learning process (Boakye, 2007).

Cotterall (1999) conducted a questionnaire study to identify learner beliefs concerning the factors contributing to successful learning: role of the teacher, nature of language learning, strategy use, autonomy, monitoring strategies, and self-efficacy. In some cases a combination of quantitative tools is used: Chan & Elliott, for example (2004) used the Epistemological Beliefs Scale (EBS), the Conceptions of Learning Inventory (COLI), and the Revised 2-factor Study Process Questionnaire (R-SPQ-2F) for identifying the beliefs in the 3P model of learning: presage, process and product. Their results proved that the strongest belief held by Chinese students concerned the importance of effort in the process period, which was explained by the prevailing traditional Confucian values, being the most influential philosophy in that particular context.

Recent research projects into learner beliefs are based on the sociocultural perspective, which is also reflected in the methodology: case studies, self-report, diaries and longitudinal studies have become more frequent than quantitative questionnaire studies; mixed methods studies are also seen in the field. An example for this approach is a metaphor study carried out by Ellis (2002). Six learners were invited to write a diary during a language course about their feelings, and subsequently the texts were analysed in search of metaphors. Five metaphors were found to be applied for learning: that of a JOURNEY, a STRUGGLE, WORK, SUFFERING and PUZZLE. Ellis claims that his findings prove the superiority of the metaphor analysis over Horwitz's BALLI (1988), being able to reveal learners' affective beliefs beside the cognitive ones.

In his study, Ellis (2008) compares the findings of three studies, one applying mixed-methods (Tanaka, 2004 cited in Ellis, 2008), his own above-mentioned metaphor study (Ellis, 2002), and a case study (Zhong, 2008 cited in Ellis, 2008). According to Ellis, the results of the three different studies clearly indicate that only the belief questionnaire used by Tanaka (2004) yielded unsatisfactory results, being unable to indicate the dynamic nature of beliefs. In contrast, both studies applying qualitative methods, Ellis's metaphor study (2002) and Zhong's case study, provided ample evidence for the dynamic and situational nature of beliefs.

The most recent studies have dual aims: beside the obvious one of mapping the beliefs of a certain group of students, they are intended to devise a new research tool as well, because the ones employed so far do not yield sufficient information. The researchers conclude their

papers by stating that there must be some other relationship between achievements and beliefs, but they cannot identify it. A new research instrument is now being developed at the Ruse University in Bulgaria, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (Stefanova & Shenkova, 2010). Unless researchers devise the right instrument, they cannot discern the real roles of beliefs in language learning. Researchers with instructors' mindsets feel, and qualitative studies confirm, that there has to be more to learner beliefs than their effect on strategy use.

Based on the findings of the studies described above, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do adult language learners define achievements?
2. What or who do adult language learners attribute their achievements to?

The research has dual aims: to explore new dimensions in learner beliefs and to design a facilitative tool to be used by instructors and researchers. It focuses on two sets of beliefs: one, which I will call “primary beliefs”, is concerned with achievements; and the other, which I will refer to as “secondary beliefs”, deals with the attributions learners hold. These beliefs help learners explain why certain things happen: to what or to whom events can be attributed (Nilsson, 2013; Weiner, 2010).

3 Methods

As can be concluded from some studies (Ellis, 2008; Rieger, 2009) Horwitz's (1987) questionnaire, even after some modifications (Horwitz, 1999) was not able to yield the kind of data that had been expected. Therefore I decided to opt for an exploratory approach, and devised an interview schedule yielding qualitative data. My interview schedule was a broad one, and after analysing the answers of the participants, I felt that my decision was justified, as the main focus of my original research was to explore the attitudinal patterns of adult language learners toward English as a lingua franca, which area did not prove to be so fruitful. On the other hand, the questions related to achievement and attribution, which were originally considered less important foci of the interviews, proved in the end to be the most significant topics. As Patton quotes Halcolm, “Analysis finally makes clear what would have been most important to study, if only we had known beforehand” (Patton, 2002, p. 431).

The interview schedule was built on Gardner's revised socio-educational model (2001) and following a piloting phase, after some fine-tuning of the questions to improve coherence and comprehension, altogether 48 questions remained. The English translation of the interview schedule is presented in the Appendix. The interviews lasted 35-45 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed.

3.1 Participants

The criteria for selecting participants were carefully devised. The participants had to be over thirty, because I think they have a perspective of their own learning experience, and at the time of the interviews they were learning out of their own choice. Further criteria included Hungarian as mother tongue, and the requirement that both genders were to be represented.

Though I am aware that learning experience has an important role in belief formation (Fishbein-Ajzen, 1975) I could not select people with the same educational background, as the research was based mainly on convenience sampling. Therefore the schooling of the participants is somewhat varied, ranging from vocational school to university degree. The participants' biographical data are summarised in *Table 1*.

	Name	Gender	Age	L2	L3	L4	L5
1	Andrea	F	36	Russian	German	Italian	English
2	Bálint	M	44	Russian	English		
3	Csilla	F	68	Russian	Romanian	German	English
4	Dávid	M	45	Russian	German	English	
5	Eszter	F	46	Russian	Finnish	English	
6	Ferenc	M	31	Russian	German	English	
7	Gabriella	F	42	Russian	French	English	
8	Helga	F	44	Russian	French	English	
9	Ilona	F	39	Russian	English		
10	Judit	F	43	Russian	Italian	English	

Table 1. Overview of the Participants' Biographical Data
F = female, M = male

3.2 The instrument

The theoretical background of the interview protocol was Gardner's revised socio-educational model (2001), which was comprehensive enough to cover several aspects connected to achievements and attributions within language learning. The topics of the interview questions corresponded to Gardner's categories (see *Table 2*). In the actual interview schedule the questions were arranged in six clusters relevant to the language learners: (a) *language learning*: their past experience and current learning activities, their goals, perceived difficulty of the language (possibly compared to other foreign languages), the prestige of English, and English speaking cultures; (b) *everyday learning activities*: the use of learning strategies; (c) *language classes*: the elements of a good language class, individual learning, efforts to improve their knowledge; (d) *the perspectives of the adult learner*: expectations of teachers; (e) *difficulties and beauties of language learning*: the role of age and aptitude, plateau, self-assessment of achievements, missing or existing ingredients of successful language learning; (f) *non-linguistic outcomes*: experience of serendipity in any field due to their language learning activity.

The interview schedule was first piloted with an educated language learner with a very critical and sincere attitude toward the current research. His feedback on the overall logic and wording of the questions enhanced the structure and comprehensibility of the schedule. In the next phase of the piloting process three adult language learners were interviewed. Their responses informed the fine-tuning of the instrument, and, finally, a preliminary analysis to find patterns ensured validity.

The finalised interview protocol consisted of 48 questions. These were not all related to different topics, but there were main questions and backup questions – worded differently – in case the main questions were misunderstood. As the intention was to conduct semi-structured interviews, the questions were listed and used as a guide.

Gardner's categories in his revised socio-educational model (2001)		Interview topics of the current research	
External influences	History	Language learning experience	Attributions
	Motivators	Roles of the teacher (if any) Role models	
Individual differences	Integrativeness	Attitude to English as a world language & the English speaking cultures	
	Attitudes to the learning situation	Goal-setting, plateau, effort perceived difficulty of language	
	Motivation - other motivational factors - other non-motivational factors	Motivation - Instrumental motivation - Learning strategies - Perceived effect of age	
	Aptitude	Role of aptitude	
Language acquisition contexts	Formal	Language schools	Learning experience
	Informal	Individual learning	Learning strategies
Outcomes	Linguistic	Self-assessment	Achievements
	Non-linguistic	Serendipity	

Table 2. Gardner's categories (2001) and the interview topics

3.3 The process of data collection and analysis

The interviews were conducted separately with each participant over a period of two weeks. They lasted 35-45 minutes each, which may seem short in view of the 48 questions in the interview schedule; however, not all the questions were asked in all of the cases, because if an issue was not relevant, then the related questions were not even mentioned. For instance, if someone said she never had a plateau experience in her learning, I did not ask her what motivated her to continue. Furthermore, in some cases asking a question seemed redundant, as the interviewee had already given the answer embedded in another response. Also, as the original aim was to design questions for semi-structured interviews, these questions served as guidelines to elicit the interviewees' views on certain aspects of language learning. In most cases, the original number of questions was reduced to about twenty, which did not affect the amount of information collected, because the interviewees were quite willing to talk about their experience.

The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission, and later transcribed word for word. No editing was done, and thus the full written transcript was used in the

process of analysis. The interviews yielded approximately 20,000 words of data, which were analysed for the emerging themes.

The first phase of the analysis was the initial coding, which involved attaching descriptive labels to each emerging theme mentioned by the interviewees. This process was carried out simultaneously with a fellow researcher working independently.

After cross-checking the codes and clarifying misunderstandings, in the second phase of the analysis axial coding was carried out. This meant that the labels were checked across interviews to ensure that one label denoted one theme consistently throughout the transcript. For instance, when one respondent said that his motivation for learning English was that he could communicate while travelling abroad, it was labelled *travel*. However, if another interviewee mentioned travelling to English speaking countries as a means for improving her language skills, it could not be labelled *travel*, but rather *strategy: travelling*. This stage involved abundant reiteration, i.e. applying the constant comparison method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The third phase involved using the impressions I formed during the interviews, memos I made during the analysis and the attached labels to find patterns in each interviewee's responses. In this phase I strived to create a comprehensive profile of each respondent. Then I collected all the achievement- and attribution-related labels in a table, and added my overall impression of the interviewees, giving them a name describing their overall attitude. This process ensured that I would not mix my impressions with the codes, but that the impressions are still present as additional information.

4 Findings

In order to answer the research questions, the findings are divided into two main categories: beliefs about achievements and beliefs about attributions. Under these headings three subcategories are listed corresponding to the most common patterns of the interviews.

4.1 Beliefs about achievements

4.1.1 Attributions considered as achievements

When listing the attributions of successful learning, some respondents singled out those that have overarching values and promoted to them the status of achievements. Two attributions were mentioned in this way: persistence and confidence.

Persistence as an achievement in its own right was mentioned by Helga who said "I consider myself successful because I do not give it up"; that is, she did not only think that her achievements so far were attributable to her persistence, but regarded her persistence itself as an achievement as well. "It is the subject I have learnt for the longest time", she said proudly, for doing something faithfully and persistently meant living according to a value important to her. Studying a language for ten years might be seen as a failure by many learners, but in the case of Helga it is a virtue, because she is an extraordinarily slow learner and her persistence can truly be labelled as an achievement.

Another interviewee, Dávid, also named persistence as an achievement in its own right. He thought of it as an integral part of his personality, in contrast to others who start and then quit learning: "I decided to learn, I learnt, and I am still learning". His view of persistence as an achievement cannot be fully appreciated without knowing that Dávid had lost his wife three months before he made this statement. In spite of the bereavement and the difficulties of raising three children alone he continued learning English.

Confidence was labelled both as an attribution necessary to succeed in language learning and as an achievement by Judit. She admitted lacking self-confidence (in learning English) because she still did not speak English well enough to communicate. She said "you need to have confidence in order to dare to speak". However, later on during the interview she mentioned that "a good command of English may give you confidence". This expectant attitude is quite common among language learners.

The most significant finding about achievement-related learner beliefs to emerge from the present research is that of attributions ranked as achievements. These people do not only expect career development and better communication skills from learning English; they are able to see themselves and the learning process from a distance. Being aware of one's own value as a learner is a virtue which presupposes being conscious of one's self-worth (Crick & Wilson, 2005).

4.1.2 Learning as an enjoyable activity

The second most important theme that emerges from the interviews is closely related to the previous findings, namely that language learning is seen as a pleasurable, worthwhile activity, which is a source of personal enrichment. It is also a sign of motivated learner behaviour (Gardner, 2001), an aspect of motivation that makes the process of learning enjoyable, which can be likened to travelling, when one enjoys the journey and not just the arrival. This was mentioned not only by those interviewees who were really successful in their endeavours, but also by those who considered themselves less talented learners, needing to struggle a great deal before saying that they gained knowledge.

There are differences in the aspects of language learning that the interviewees found enjoyable. Some mentioned the friendly and dynamic atmosphere of the group, some enjoyed doing the grammar exercises, or copying the grammar rules into a neatly organised exercise book, some simply formed a close bond with their teacher. Those who were allegedly talented in languages enjoyed the whole activity of learning.

4.1.3 Achievements of the past, present and future

All respondents were able to sort their achievements according to time. Achievements of the past were successfully passed language exams in English or other languages. When the interviewees were talking about their current achievements they referred to those of the learning process. For instance, Andrea mentioned that she regularly excelled in doing grammar tasks. Dávid, a composer, admitted that this was the first time in his life that he had focused on texts and not on music, which changed his attitude to his profession as well. Other, affective achievements were mentioned by interviewees over forty: Eszter, Dávid and Csilla said how much they enjoyed the achievement that their peers or family and younger friends respected them for their endeavour.

Future achievements were formulated as goals, and seen as the expected corollary of their past and present achievements. The respondents usually made a difference between idealistic knowledge "to speak like natives" and a realistic goal "to be able to communicate with foreigners" (Helga). The learners who could visualise themselves as future competent speakers of English, for whom this competence was part of their ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), stood a very good chance of achieving their goals.

4.2 Beliefs about attributions

4.2.1 Compensating for the lack of aptitude

Aptitude, the natural ability to learn languages with ease, was uniformly named as an important ingredient of success by the participants. However, only three respondents were confident that they had aptitude for languages, which was proven by the fact that they had previously passed one or two C1 level language exams. The other seven respondents, albeit accepting the importance and facilitative functions of aptitude, emphasised other things as playing more decisive roles in language learning.

Aptitude falls into the uncontrollable, stable, and inner category of attributions (Weiner, 2010) the lack of which can easily intimidate people. What the respondents ranked above aptitude were factors of the controllable and unstable, but still inner category: persistence, effort, practice, time, goal-orientation and self-confidence. Attributing success to controllable and unstable factors, or holding uncontrollable and stable factors responsible for failure, are typical attributional patterns according to Weiner (2010). However, among the interviewees nobody blamed their unsatisfactory achievements on their lack of aptitude.

The respondents mentioned three elements of successful language learning that can compensate for the lack of aptitude, or even surpass it in importance. The three factors: persistence, effort, and goal-orientation, constitute motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). The finding that motivation is considered the most important and powerful drive corresponds to Gardner's (2001) and Dörnyei's (2005) theories. In order to provide a more detailed insight into learner beliefs about motivation as a form of compensation I opted for keeping these labels to denote different aspects of motivation.

Persistence: When asked about the most important ingredient of language learning the unequivocal answer of the respondents was "persistence". Every interviewee gave it the highest priority, above all other attributions. They expressed their awareness of the hard work and the length of time that learning English involves.

Effort: By and large this is the attribution that is bound to emerge in any research into learner beliefs. Some researchers explain its importance by a nation's traditional cultural heritage (Chan & Elliott, 2004). Statements like "allegedly, you can go further with effort than with talent" (Helga) were uttered by all respondents without exception. The significance of this belief is explained by Bandura (1994), who thought that self-efficacy, i.e., one's belief in one's own competence and intellectual power, is capable of influencing motivation to a large extent both in positive and negative directions.

Goal-orientation: two interviewees mentioned the importance of setting goals in order to achieve success. They also attributed their failure to the lack of set goals. Naturally the existing goals were different: the ability to communicate abroad and travelling and receiving one's degree.

Self-confidence was mainly mentioned in relation with speaking as a personal quality that can compensate for lack of aptitude. Even the three highly successful and confident learners attributed their achievements to their being brave enough to try and use English in every possible situation, favouring fluency at the expense of accuracy. The teacher's role in encouraging learners to speak and thereby building their confidence was also emphasised.

The above listed attributions as different shades of motivation correlate with those of theoretical works (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005). The novelty here is how the respondents' beliefs are reflected in ranking them higher than language aptitude, which can be traced in their wording: "[...] yes, aptitude or talent is fantastic, just like in music, but it is worth nothing without practice" (Bálint); "if you feel that you are less talented you need to have more persistence" (Dávid).

4.2.2 Strategy use

The finding common in all research into learner beliefs is that choosing the right strategy strongly contributes to one's success in learning. Three factors are presented here which influence strategy use.

First, strategy use depends on a learner's past learning experience. One respondent, Gabriella, had a good command of French and Russian, and she strongly believed that communication and conversation helped her a lot. Her father started to teach her in this way when she was a little girl, and later, at secondary school she found this method the most efficient. Likewise, Andrea, who is an Italian language teacher by profession, had established strategies to master a new language. Further, she expressed her scepticism toward new strategies, stating that "no better method has been found than sitting down and learning the new words".

The second factor was personality, and the way in which opting for a certain strategy reflects one's personality. Gabriella's main motivation was to communicate with foreign friends in their native language. Her whole attitude was that of someone who sought to understand and was keen to adapt herself to others' needs. For her, even languages have a character: she sees French and English as amiable languages, which makes them easy to master. In contrast, Helga with her timid personality, preferred rote learning, memorising parts of a dialogue to facilitate her speaking.

The third factor is how some learners adapt their professional activities to their learning activity. This shows the learners' true creativity: Dávid, for instance, teaches foreign students to play the piano, using English as the language of instruction, which is admittedly a good opportunity for him to practice speaking. Ferenc uses the technical texts and documents at his office for learning by collecting the new words in an Excel table, which he used as a vocabulary list. Dávid claimed that his command of English improved remarkably when he read the two-hundred-page instruction manual for his new music notation software.

The interviewees' beliefs about their own preferred strategy use and all the influencing factors determined their beliefs about the teacher's perceived roles. In whatever field they felt uncertain or incompetent, they expressed their need for the teacher's assistance. For instance, Bálint, who attributed his failure to not finding the right strategy, expected his future teacher to aid him with finding a suitable one after diagnosing the reason of his failure. Another

example is Judit, who was exceptionally cautious and therefore expected her teacher not to teach anything outside the scope of her textbook. However, ranking the teacher's role below their own persistence – as Ferenc said: "success depends more on my attitude and effort than those of the teacher" – and attributing their success to their own efforts correspond to the findings of a questionnaire study (Cotterall, 1999) in which these were labelled 'autonomy-fostering strategies'.

4.2.3 Age: complex effects on learning

The extent to which age influences language learning depended on the areas that the interviewees related it to. Age was believed to have a positive effect on learners' motivation and attitude, but a negative effect on mental capacity (memory deterioration, less flexible mindset), affective features (lower level of tolerance of failure) and for some respondents more mature age meant more family obligations.

Csilla and Andrea concluded that as the years passed they became more conscious (financially as well), more motivated, more persistent and more efficient. They held the belief that these qualities made them overall better students than they might have been as teenagers. These positive traits fall into the domain of controllable attributions which correspond to responsible, autonomous and successful learners' qualities (Weiner, 2010).

However, age took its toll on mental skills according to some respondents. Bálint and Ferenc complained about their weakening memory and less flexible minds, and they attributed to these the fact that they could comprehend only those phenomena within the English language that follow a chain of logic already familiar to them.

Age had a negative influence on affective factors. As Dávid and Judit put it, they found it more difficult to tolerate failure, they easily felt ashamed or were unwilling to speak in front of others. However, personality may play a greater role in this feeling than age, as the respondents added.

Finally, Ilona and the other female respondents mentioned another aspect of their age. Having families they cannot spend as much time on learning as they would like to, because their responsibilities take up most of the free time that could otherwise have been devoted to learning. This situation explains why Dávid, who became a widower with three children, was so proud of his own persistence because he did not quit learning.

5 Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study suggest that the strongest belief held by learners concerns the contribution of effort to successful learning. The very attribution of success or failure to an unstable and controllable cause – effort – can in itself prompt a pedagogical goal, because it ensures sustained motivation, while attributing achievements to stable and uncontrollable causes like aptitude has a stifling effect on the learning process (Weiner, 2010). Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective self-efficacy is learned through social models (Bandura, 1994). Thus if learners can see their peers coping with a difficult task, they are encouraged to do the same.

Therefore, teachers should be aware of their learners' beliefs and should discuss them openly (Horwitz, 1988) in order to counter the possible negative beliefs and strengthen the positive ones. Longitudinal and case studies show that instruction does influence and alter learner beliefs (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013; Tse, 2000), which is where teachers have an immense responsibility. Some researchers go even further, and suggest that learner beliefs should be an integral part of course planning, of the methodology applied and of classroom activities (Stefanova & Shenkova, 2010), which course of action should in my opinion be carefully planned considering the diversity of beliefs.

Gaining insight into language learners' beliefs has several pedagogical benefits. First, as the findings suggest they reveal how learners see themselves as learners (for instance, whether they believe they have or do not have aptitude), and how they are going to compensate for the perceived lack of talent. Second, finding out about learner beliefs is the most effective way for teachers to understand why their learners choose certain learning strategies. Finally, formulating their expectations of their teachers, learners speak about their difficulties and ambitions. As an overall benefit, gaining insight into learner beliefs helps teachers to tailor learning strategy training to their students' needs.

6 Conclusion

As the study demonstrates, there is a wide spectrum of learner beliefs about achievements: from academic achievements through enjoying language learning as an activity to regarding a value, a possessed attribution, as an achievement. Furthermore, the findings also offer an insight into learner beliefs on factors affecting their strategies, into how learners compensate for the lack of aptitude, and how complex their views are on the effects of their age.

The true question of research into learner beliefs is not whether they exist or not, but what their nature is. Individual beliefs regarding both attributions and achievements have to be analysed and interpreted in order to see the intricate design of their texture. To understand their learners and their actions teachers need a holistic view of their learners' perspectives, fears, hopes and ambitions.

However, learner beliefs remain subjective and elusive. There is agreement among psychologists and theoreticians that beliefs are able to change over the time (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, Weiner, 2010), and language pedagogy theoreticians also emphasise the temporary nature of beliefs (Ellis, 2008, Gardner, 2001, Tse, 2000). Gabillon provides an overview (2005) of the evolution, classification, and possible changes of learner beliefs. Bernat and Gvozdenko take an interdisciplinary approach in their article (2005) trying to find an answer to the question of what factors induce changes in beliefs. They found that social, cultural, contextual, affective and personal factors play roles, and they indicated that further research should be done into effective classroom methods to promote further changes.

This study has explored how a group of Hungarian adult language learners define achievement and what they attribute their achievements to. The finding that attributions themselves are considered achievements by the interviewed adult language learners gives a promising perspective to adult language teaching. For instance, naming effort and persistence as the most important factors contributing to their success, or attributing failure to their absence, the respondents valued themselves as individuals who can make efforts or who are

persistent. This attitude should be encouraged in adult learners who already have it, and should be “planted” in those who believe that their achievements can be attributed solely to any uncontrollable and stable cause, such as aptitude, because the latter attitude, as Weiner (2010) claims, can lead to quitting learning by generating hopelessness. By supporting the learners’ belief that their efforts and persistence will yield achievements, teachers can teach more than English: they can enrich their learners: "After people become convinced they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks. By sticking it out through tough times, they emerge stronger from adversity." (Bandura, 1994, p. 72)

Not every interviewee of this study regard themselves successful language learners. Still, they all believe in the value of language learning, and the constituents of successful learning: persistence, effort and goal-orientation. I think teachers can learn a lot from their motivated learners by understanding their beliefs. This knowledge may facilitate teachers to give their less-motivated learners more informed advice on any areas of learning (e.g. lack of motivation, strategy use) that happen to be problematic due to a certain belief a learner holds.

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Appendix

The English translation of the interview schedule

A) You started learning English as an adult, but you have had experience in learning languages, which I would like to ask you about.

1. Which languages did you learn before, or simultaneously with English?
2. Why did you choose those languages?

B) Let's talk about you learning English.

3. When did you start learning English?
4. Where and how do you learn? (language school, private teacher etc.)
5. How many lessons do you have a week?
6. Why do you think it is important to learn English?
7. What short- or long-term goals did you set when you started learning?
8. Have you achieved them?
9. If yes: How did you feel? Have you set new goals?
10. If no: Have you modified them? Why do you think you have not achieved them?
11. Have you allocated a deadline to your goals? (E.g.: "In .. years I will have passed the .. language exam.")
12. What do you think about the English language?
13. How difficult is it to learn English?
14. Is it more or less difficult to learn than the previous languages?
15. Which aspect of the language do you find difficult to learn?
16. English has become an international language. What is your attitude to this phenomenon (positive, negative, neutral)? Why?
17. Does it affect your learning in any way?
18. How interested are you in English speaking cultures? If you are interested in any, which one(s)?
19. Which aspects (films, books, arts etc.)?

C) Let's talk about your everyday learning experiences.

20. Which form of learning have you found the most effective?
21. Which strategies have you tried in order to make your learning faster, more successful and effective?
22. What experience have you had applying these strategies?
23. Did or do you have your own learning strategy?
24. Did or do you have a role model in language learning? If so, who is it and why?

D) Let's talk about the lessons.

25. What makes a good language lesson?
26. How do you improve your knowledge outside classes?
27. What else would you do to improve your command of English?

E) You attend language classes as an adult.

28. Would you be able to learn English completely on your own?
29. What do you expect from your language teacher?
30. Have you ever had a language teacher who influenced you in any way?
31. If you have or used to have a native teacher, you can compare her to a non-native language teacher. What experience have you had with native language teachers?
32. What experience have you had with non-native language teachers?

F) Let's talk about the difficulties and beauties of language learning.

33. In what area have you felt that your age is an advantage?
34. Is there anything you learn slower or with more difficulty than in your childhood?
35. Do you have an aptitude for learning languages? How do you know?
36. Does aptitude play a role in language learning?
37. Has your learning ever reached a plateau?
38. If so, what motivated you to continue learning?
39. What does this statement mean for you: "I have a good command of English"?
40. When would you say it about yourself?
41. What do you attribute your achievements or knowledge to?
42. What did or did you not have to achieve success?
43. What level is your knowledge now?
44. What level will it be in five years?

G) We have nearly finished the interview. I would like to ask you a few questions.

45. You devote some part of your free-time to learning English. How does it influence other areas of your life and the way you think (either in a positive or in a negative way)?
46. Is it worthwhile? Why?

H) This is the end of the interview.

47. Have you got any thoughts or remarks you would like to add?
48. Have you got any questions concerning our topic or the interview itself?