A study of retrospective and concurrent foreign language learning experiences: A comparative interview study in Hungary

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the influence of learning experiences on foreign language learning motivation has been widely acknowledged and emphasised, there are hardly any studies concentrating on these learning experiences. Hence, the aim of this study is to map the language learning experiences of former and current language learners in order to provide a detailed account of the possible components of the foreign language learning experience. Data were collected with the help of a qualitative interview schedule involving 22 language learners in two subsamples. Ten participants are English language teachers as former foreign language learners, while 12 students, current learners of English, have also been recruited. The most important result of our study is that foreign language learning experience seems to be a complex construct including immediate and present aspects as well as self-related components and attributions. Language learning success, the teacher's personality, contact experiences, as well as attitudes towards the L2 seem to stand out as important components for both groups of learners. Apart from discussing the differences and similarities between retrospective and concurrent experiences, we will provide pedagogical and research-related implications as well.

Keywords: L2 motivation; L2 learning experience; contact experiences; attributions

1. Introduction

While the ideal second language (L2) self and the ought-to L2 self components of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS, Dörnyei, 2005) have been extensively researched recently (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015), the third component of the L2MSS model, the L2 learning experience, has received markedly less attention. This might possibly be attributed to the emergence of the self in L2 motivation research around the 2010s, which Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) describe as "a major reformation of previous motivational thinking by its explicit utilization of psychological theories of the self" (p. 79). As a consequence of the increased attention devoted to the self, the third component of the model, the L2 learning experience, has undeservedly become marginalized. Recent treatment of the L2 learning experience as peripheral is unjustified as ever since the beginnings of L2 motivation research, the influence of the learning experience on motivation has been widely acknowledged and emphasized (Dörnyei, 1994, 2009a; Gardner, 1985, 2010; Lamb, 2012, 2017; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000; Ushioda, 1998, 2009; Williams & Burden, 1997).

In Dörnyei's L2MSS, the L2 learning experience comprises "situated, 'executive' motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g., the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group or the experience of success)" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 86). However, in our conceptualization, the L2 learning experience is a broader concept. On the one hand, it is a concurrent perception of cognitive and emotional processes, as well as external stimuli and circumstances that the learner experiences during the course of learning a foreign language in and outside the classroom. On the other hand, it can also be viewed as a synthesis of retrospective contemplation that may continuously evolve after the actual language learning has taken place. While the influences of both concurrent and retrospective language learning experiences are hypothesized to be salient on motivating learners, little research has been conducted on what similarities and differences there are between them and what kind of underlying components they consist of.

In order to investigate the possible effects that concurrent and retrospective learning experiences might have in second language acquisition (SLA), we need to have a clear picture of the most important aspects of these learning experiences. Therefore, the aim of the study is to investigate the foreign language learning experiences of two groups of research participants: current learners of English and English teachers, as former learners of the language, in order to map the construct of the L2 learning experience (L2LE) with a particular focus on phenomena not previously considered including attributions, contact experiences, and self-efficacy. Hence, the research question we aim to answer

is as follows: What characterizes the construct of the L2LE of former and present foreign language learners? We use the term *foreign language* because our study is situated in the Hungarian context. We present the results of our interview studies and, subsequently, based on the synthesis of the results, we analyze the findings by employing a transdisciplinary framework proposed by The Douglas Fir Group (2016). This framework encompasses the multi-layered complexity of L2 learning and distinguishes "three levels of mutually dependent influence" (p. 24), the micro, the meso, and the macro levels.

2. Background

In order to present the background to this study, it is necessary not only to provide a definition of the foreign language learning experience but also to map results from various fields of SLA research. First, we detail the role of experiences in L2 motivation research in general and in attribution theory in particular. Next, research related to contact experiences is presented. Then, cognitive and affective issues will be touched upon: the role of experiences in self-efficacy beliefs and emotional experiences in foreign language learning. Finally, we summarize research related to the flow and optimal experience.

2.1. The definition of foreign language learning experience

Foreign language learning experience can be defined in various ways in SLA, depending on which part of the concept we emphasize: language or learning. As the central problem of the field is learning a second or foreign language, learning experience can simply mean language input (Dörnyei, 2009b) or, in a broader sense, using the language with other speakers. If learning is in focus, Dörnyei's (2009b) definition seems to be useful, which describes the foreign language learning experience as "situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment" (p. 106). In a somewhat more detailed operationalization, "it focuses on the learners' present – rather than imagined future – experience, covering a range of situated, executive motives related to the immediate learning environment (e.g., the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, experience of success)" (You, Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2016, p. 96). In the current study, as explained in the introduction, we define the foreign language learning experience in the broadest possible sense, including learners' concurrent and teachers' retrospective perception about situated classroom experiences as well as experiences beyond the classroom comprising cognitive and emotional processes.

2.2. The foreign language learning experience in L2 motivation

It is certainly not a novel idea in L2 motivation research that L2 learning experiences play a prominent role in shaping students' effort and, possibly, achievements. Gardner (1985, 2006) included course- and teacher-related components in his motivational model. Moreover, experiencing satisfaction was actually part of his definition of motivation (Gardner, 1985, p. 10). Williams and Burden (1997) wrote about mediated learning experience, indicating the role of significant others in shaping L2 experiences. Ushioda (1998) argued that L2 motivation was partly derived from past learning experiences. Both Crookes and Schmidt's (2001), and Dörnyei's (2001) motivational models contained past experiences at various levels. The model in which L2 learning experience played a really prominent role is called L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005). This rather parsimonious model contained only three constructs: two self-related ones (the ideal and ought-to L2 selves) and the L2 learning experience. The model quickly gained prominence in the field and inspired a great number of studies (see Csizér, in press-a, for details), but the L2 experience remained a somewhat neglected element in many empirical investigations of this model, despite the fact that methodologically diverse studies pointed out that the L2 experience was possibly a decisive predictor of L2 motivation (Lamb, 2012; MacIntyre & Serroul, 2015). One of the possible explanations could be the confusion surrounding the operationalization of the concept in various studies, including immediate, situated classroom experiences or simple attitudinal measures (for a summary see You et al., 2016). Despite this confusion, it is clear, though, that if L2 motivation should be investigated from a situated point of view, L2 learning experience, whatever way it is measured, should be included in the research. Thus, the motivation behind launching the present investigation was to find out to what extent L2 learning experiences involved general positive attitudes to learning English or a more complex measure related to the process of learning.

2.3. Attribution theory and foreign language learning experience

Since both concurrent and retrospective experiences are based on our perceptions, attribution theory (AT) is a theoretical framework that we cannot ignore when studying foreign language learning experiences. Attributions are individuals' perceptions of their own successes and failures, and the reason they provide for those successes and failures (Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2016). Attributions have an effect on future learning as they shape anticipations of future success as well as the learners' affective state, and as a result, their approach towards learning (McLoughlin, 2007; Smith, 2012). The central concept of AT lies in the

fact that individuals invariably try to comprehend the reasons why they succeed or fail and, when they face a similar situation, their attitude will be determined by how they explain the reasons that led to their success and failure. This does not mean that they will interpret these reasons correctly, but their personal interpretation of these reasons will affect their actions (Heider, 1944, 1958). AT was further developed by Weiner (1985, 1986), who classified causes of success and failure into four different categories: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. He described these categories from three angles that he labelled "dimensions of causality": locus (internal or external), stability (stable or unstable) and controllability (controllable or uncontrollable). In the field of SLA, studies on attributions are few and have shown conflicting results (Chang, Windsor, & Helwig, 2017). In a survey conducted with undergraduates examining the relationships between attributions and performance, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) concluded that success was mainly attributed to internal factors, such as ability, while failure was attributed to external factors, such as task difficulty. Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) also found that the attribution to effort (another internal factor) is the best predictor of achievement. By contrast, other studies have confirmed the importance of external factors in attributions. Gobel and Mori (2007) examined relationships between achievement in EFL reading and oral classes and the attributions of first year Japanese university students. Their results suggest that culture may have an impact on the attributions students give for success and failure. Similarly, Kálmán and Gutierrez (2015) found that another external factor, corporate culture, was the best predictor of success in a study measuring adult L2 learners' attributions in a corporate environment.

2.4. Contact experiences

Another line of research taking into account the type of experiences is the investigation of interethnic contact experiences. Informed by social psychological research (for an overview, see Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) as well as by Crookes and Schmidt's (1991) theory of motivation, the main tenet of these types of studies is that both SLA and L2 motivation might be shaped by the quality and quantity of interethnic contact (see also Kormos, Csizér, & Iwaniec, 2014). These contact experiences could be typified as direct (e.g., personal encounters with L2 speakers) or indirect (e.g., the effects of being exposed to L2 cultural products without any personal encounters) (Kormos & Csizér, 2007). Besides actual contact experiences, the perceived importance attached to these experiences also seemed to be important (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kormos & Csizér, 2007).

Apart from the direct impact that contact experience might have on learning and L2 motivation, they could also exert an indirect influence by shaping antecedent

variables that in turn affect motivation and learning. One of the earliest such studies was carried out by Clément and a colleague (Clément, 1980; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985), who investigated how contact experiences influenced students' linguistic self-confidence (a socially constructed image of oneself as a successful learner/user of a foreign language [Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009]) and how this increased self-confidence had a positive impact on motivation. Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh (2006) found that indirect contact impacted students' attitudes towards L2 speakers, affecting motivated learning behavior. Another self-related variable linked to motivation which might be shaped by contact experiences could be self-regulation. Study abroad research, the par excellence contact experience, showed that self-regulatory processes could also be shaped by direct contact (Allen, 2013). Finally, the level of communication apprehension could also play a role in shaping learning and motivation through contact or, rather, lack of contact (Kormos, Csizér, & Iwaniec, 2014).

2.5. The role of experience in self-efficacy beliefs

Another way the L2 learning experience might affect the learning process is through self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy beliefs are "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). These beliefs are formed as a result of students' learning experiences. Based on Zimmerman (2000), it can be postulated that self-efficacy beliefs are shaped by enactive experiences (based on the outcome of personal experiences), vicarious experiences (self-comparisons with a model), verbal persuasion (outcomes described by an outsider), and perceived physiological reactions. Although self-efficacy beliefs are often investigated in SLA contexts (see e.g., Mills, 2014), the usual set-up is to look at what influence self-efficacy beliefs exert on L2 learning. There are relatively few studies mapping experience-related variables that impact self-efficacy beliefs. One such example is provided by Mills (2009), who investigated how experiences related to a project-based curriculum shaped students' self-efficacy beliefs, and indeed she proved the positive impact of this type of curriculum on self-efficacy beliefs. Another example is Piniel and Csizér's (2013) study, which found a direct positive relationship between learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs based on structural equation modelling in a study of Hungarian secondary school students. In addition, they tested and verified a cyclical model describing relations between motivation, experience, self-efficacy and emotions (anxiety) that indicate that the role of self-efficacy beliefs in SLA and L2 motivation is complex and needs to be investigated along with other variables (Piniel & Csizér, 2013).

2.6. Emotional experiences

Emotional experiences that we encounter and later recollect or reconstruct are based on emotions. Growing scholarly interest in the role and function that human emotions play in L2 learning has come about as "a shift toward considering the influence of a plethora of sociocognitive variables and antecedents in the development of target language proficiency" (Ross & Rivers, 2018, p. 104). Interestingly, until the 2010s, the only emotion studied in terms of language learning was anxiety (Pavlenko, 2013). Due to the emergence of positive psychology at the turn of the millennium (Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000), positive emotions experienced during the course of language learning helped to "broaden the scope of affective studies to include positive emotions experienced in the classroom" (Piniel & Albert, 2018, p. 128). Piniel and Albert (2018) pointed out that positive emotions related to SLA had become so focal in research recently that two books were published on the topic in 2016 (i.e., Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016; MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016).

According to Pekrun (2014), in educational contexts we can distinguish between four categories of emotions. Achievement emotions are connected to feelings of success and failure (such as hope and pride related to success, and anxiety related to failure); epistemic emotions are related to cognitive phenomena (such as surprise, curiosity, confusion, and frustration); topic emotions are concerned with the topics that students deal with (when, for instance, students empathize with characters they learn about, or when they are disgusted or anxious or feel enjoyment or interest about certain topics); and, finally, social emotions are related to teachers and peers (such as love, compassion, admiration, contempt, envy, or anger). If we go beyond the classroom, a domain where powerful emotional experiences are likely to occur is that of the study-abroad context (Ross & Rivers, 2018), as well as online contexts where "social relations, knowledge structures, and webs of power are experienced by many people as highly mobile and interconnected as a result of broad socio-political events and global markets" (The Douglas Fir, 2016, p. 19). Swain (2013) argues that it is in narratives that learner stories and experiences reside and in which the central role of emotion becomes evident.

2.7. Flow and optimal experiences

Flow is defined as "a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihályi, Abduhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005, p. 600). Flow has been researched from various perspectives in a variety of contexts including its connection to learning experiences in educational settings; however,

Piniel and Albert (2016) argue that its effect on motivation in SLA is under-researched. They proposed that investigating the language learning experience from a phenomenological perspective might be productive, as it could provide insight into previously neglected aspects of language learning motivation. Studies conducted so far have revealed that the level of challenge and relevance ignited learners' interest and promoted concentration in academic subjects, whereas in art subjects, learners' skills, control of the learning environment, and higher activity levels brought about flow experiences (Shernoff & Csikszentmihályi, 2009). Shernoff et al. (2016) likewise highlighted the role of the teacher in promoting engagement, which Skinner and Pitzer (2012) defined as "constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive and cognitively focused participation with learning activities in school" (p. 22). Engagement is conducive to flow experiences; however, Piniel and Albert (in press) emphasize that optimal flow experiences are more likely to emerge when the learners feel in control of their learning situation. Studies conducted recently on optimal flow experiences have revealed that the higher the level of motivation, the more likely learners are to experience flow (Piniel & Albert, 2016), and the right balance between skills and challenges appears to be the most salient prerequisite of an optimal flow experience (Aubrey, 2017a, 2017b; Czimmermann & Piniel, 2016).

Csikszentmihályi (2014) argued that "flow experiences can result in emergent motivation" (p. 234), owing to the intrinsically rewarding nature of flow and the resulting increase in skill. Since flow experiences are enjoyable, they encourage people to repeat them, which in turn results in an ever-increasing mastery accompanied by feelings of competence and higher self-efficacy beliefs. This positive cycle is based on positive attributions which learners ascribe to their previously experienced successes (see as above).

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The first phase of this study included 10 highly experienced English language teachers in Hungary. The gender ratio represents well the Hungarian situation: eight female and two male interviewees were recruited. In the selection procedure we made sure to have teachers from various types of schools (primary schools, secondary schools and university) and teaching contexts (corporate, private and state). For more information on participants see Csizér (in press-a, in press-b). Detailed information about the teacher participants is included in Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

Table 1 Participants of the first phase of the study

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experience	Present teaching context
András	Male	44	20+	Corporate/university
Balázs	Male	46	20+	Secondary school
Anna	Female	52	20+	Private sector
Barbara	Female	43	15+	University
Cili	Female	46	20	University
Dalma	Female	30	5	Primary school
Emese	Female	54	20+	University
Fanni	Female	48	15+	Primary school
Gréta	Female	46	20+	Secondary school
Hajni	Female	40	15+	Primary/secondary

The second phase of study involved 12 L2 learners of English, French, and Italian from various contexts. Detailed description of the participants can be found in Table 2 (the names are pseudonyms).

Table 2 Participants of the second phase of the study

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Context	Language	Proficiency
Ádám	Male	13	Primary school	English	B2
Béci	Male	12	Primary school	English	B2
Annamari	Female	17	Secondary school	English	C1
Gergő	Male	17	Secondary school	English	C1
Csenge	Female	23	University	English	B2
István	Male	22	University	English	C1
Dia	Female	37	Language school	French	C1
Enikő	Female	52	Language school	Italian	B2
Fanni	Female	48	Private teacher	Italian	B2
János	Male	45	Private teacher	English	C1
Kata	Female	55	Corporate	English	C1
Kálmán	Male	53	Corporate	English	C1

3.2. The instrument

The design of the instrument involved several steps. First, the preliminary interview schedule was put together by the first author in Hungarian. Two experts provided feedback and, subsequently, a pilot interview was carried out in order to finalize the instrument. In addition to the necessary bio questions at the beginning of the interview schedule, the final instrument included 12 main questions with detailed sub-questions to cover a number of main topics. The topics relevant for the present publication include experiences related to foreign language learning, teacher training, and language teaching. Based on this instrument, the student interview protocol was prepared by the second author. The steps involved eliminating the questions related to teaching and adapting the

remaining part of the instrument to address L2 learners instead of teachers by reformulating the questions.

3.3. Data collection and data analysis

The first phase of the study was conducted between November 2016 and April 2017 by the first author. The average length of the interviews was around 60 minutes. The second phase was undertaken between December 2017 and February 2018 by the second author. The average length of the interviews in the second phase was 45 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Hungarian; all English excerpts are the authors' translations. The teacher- interview part of the study is based on a 70,000-word dataset, whereas interviews with the L2 learners yielded a dataset of 50,000 words. We recorded and transcribed all the interviews. We used Atlas.ti for analysis: We followed the steps of coding proposed for grounded theory (Dörnyei, 2007) and included open, axial and selective coding before comparing the two sets of data.

4. Results

4.1. The components of foreign language learning experiences of teachers: The retrospective perspective

Based on Csizér (in press-a, in press-b), the most important components of retrospective experiences for teachers seem to be success, contact, positive attitudes, self-related issues, and various dispositions towards learning, as well as their teachers' personality and teaching methods. Table 3 contains some illustrative quotes for each component.

Table 3 The main components of retrospective FL learning experiences

Success
My language learning experiences are very good because for some reason, I really do not know why, it always went well for me and I won several competitions up to national levels. (András)
It was a real success when I, along with the majority of students, felt that we learnt English in a year. (Barbara)
When one learns and feels this inner growth and feels the well-being, that is very good. (Emese)
English lessons opened a new world . . . and I passed the language exam after the third year. (Cili)
Contact experiences: positive/negative
Then I lived in [name of the country withheld for ensuring anonymity of the participant] and was immersed in an English-speaking school where I had to learn English in a couple of months to be able to learn all the subjects in English. (Balázs)

I was 19 years old when I went to the USA to work for three months. My self-confidence developed there, and I was able to speak English, to communicate in English, to do anything with the English language. (Dalma)

I taught Hungarian through English in Hungary . . ., I learnt English a lot this way. (Gréta)

I: How did contact affect you?
A: It did not affect me. I learnt a couple of words during the three months I was in the USA, but it was minimal.
I: Did the experiences not mean anything?
A: No, absolutely not. Only the things that had happened before [the contact experience] are defining. (András)

[Learning in the US meant that] learning was a real-life experience for me. (Fanni)

Positive attitudes

liked/s FLs, liked/s learning FLs (Anna, Cili, Fanni, Gréta, Hajni)

interesting tasks (Anna)

interesting teachers (Barbara)

I liked pop-music with English lyrics. (Gréta)

Self-related issues: diligence, pride, confidence, curiosity

I was very diligent. (Barbara)

I was very proud of myself. (András)

I had the confidence to communicate. (Dalma)

I constantly had this drive to become better and better and better. (Emese)

I was very curious. (Gréta)

Dispositions towards learning

It is very important that I enjoyed those classes most where I could be an active part of the learning process. When the focus was on me and not on the teachers. When something happened, it was not the teacher who wanted it to happen but me. (Balázs)

I think it [teaching/learning] was catastrophic [in Hungary] but [in the US] the acceptance and inclusion was defining for me. (Dalma)

When it was boring, it had a very bad effect on me and on my learning . . .. Similarly, I hated those stressful situations that blocked me and made me forget even things that I had known earlier. (Emese)

The teacher's personality

I: Any teachers apart from Marc in the USA who had an impact on you?
D: My teacher in the primary school. She had a very positive attitude, always reinforcing us. She had very good attitudes, and I still think of her fondly. (Dalma)

She had a very empathetic personality . . . and I have a lot of memories how much she listened to us and what a good sense of humour she had. And, basically, her personality somehow got attached to the language. You could see that she really liked the language. She was really enthusiastic about the language; you really got carried away. Maybe not for everyone in the group but for me her enthusiasm about the English language created a really lasting experience. (Hajni)

He [the private tutor] was a university student, and it took us a really short time to find a common voice. The course book was not really exciting with its long listening tasks played on a cassette player, but he was a really colourful person, and he could really encourage me to learn English. (Anna)

I really liked him [the English teacher], but not really for her methodology. I do not think that in the 1980s there were so many outstanding English teachers in Hungary in terms of teaching methodology, but she simply had a great personality with a very good sense of humour. (Fanni)
Teaching methods
I think I did not have very good language teachers. (András)
When I look back at my English teachers, I think they did everything that could be done with the methodology of the time. But we never understood the overwhelming emphasis on rote learning. Knowing what I know now, there should have been much less emphasis on memorizing tasks. We have to face the fact that in English all those expressions with 'take' and 'get', and all the others, cannot be learnt from a dictionary. You have to learn them in contexts in small chunks. We hated all the memorizing, but we did not resist as much as today's kids. They could still do it to us. (Gréta)
Interestingly, the first really good language teacher I had was at the university. I have forgotten his/her name, but there were only communicative games at the classes, and I thought how good that was and how good it was that I had already learnt English, therefore, I was not bothered by not being prepared for the language exam. I really liked it and went with it in my career: we have to play a lot. I really had a great time in his/her lessons because it was always about us. This teacher was a really good language teacher, but it was the first time I experienced communicative language teaching. I cannot give such examples from my primary or secondary school experiences: there were no lessons that surprised me, ever. (Balázs)

4.2. The components of foreign language learning experiences of L2 learners: The concurrent dimension

The most salient components of concurrent experiences for L2 learners independent of age, gender, and the learning context seem to be success, contact with the foreign language, positive attitudes, self-related issues, various dispositions towards learning the L2, the teacher's personality, as well as (lack of) interaction. Table 4 contains some illustrative quotes for each component.

Table 4 Illustrative quotes for the most salient components of the L2 learning experience

Success
I win academic competitions one after the other. If I come first, it's a great feeling. If I come second, I could kill the winner. (Gergő)
Whenever there is a test or we have to report to the teacher, everybody comes to me for advice, "How to say this?" How to do that?" etc., or whenever there is an in-house competition or any kind of competition, I see the other teams suffer and think hard, but for me it's easy as pie. (Béci)
I always have a sense of success because English somehow comes to me naturally and I can speak fluently. I don't know things like the Present Perfect or which tense, I just use them. (Ádám)
I listen to podcasts, I understand them, and it gives me a sense of achievement. (Fanni)
Contact experiences: positive/negative
Last year I went to England by train and ferry. I spoke English during the whole journey, but when I arrived in Dover and saw the wonderful scenery, I felt I had arrived and I felt very very safe. The countryside was exactly as I had seen it in movies and imagined in books, and it made me feel very happy.

Many native speakers praised me for my English, and they were shocked to find out that it was my first time in England, and they started to speak very highly of Hungarian language education. (Gergő)

We were flying to New York with my parents and an American flight attendant asked me something twice and I didn't understand. I was in pieces, and I thought if I didn't understand such a presumably simple thing, then I must be a big loser. I felt so ashamed even if I hate American accent. (Gergő)

One of my husband's clients is Italian. The other day he came into our shop, and I told him that I could speak Italian, and he immediately asked whereabouts in Italy I had visited, and we'd just returned from Florence five days before, and we started telling each other where we'd been, what we'd seen, and I had the courage to talk. (Fanni)

Sometimes we have Italian days in the language school. We spend some time with native Italians, we cook together, here in the Italian Institute. After a certain level we only have native teachers, which is very positive as they have to explain everything in Italian, and they do. There are club days in the Institute when we just chat. There are others coming as well so that we don't always meet the same natives. We talk about where they come from, what they do, why they came to Hungary, what they do at home, informal chatty afternoons once a month. It's not obligatory, it's just a great opportunity. (Enikő)

There are a lot of international students at the university, both native and non-native speakers of English, and naturally, we communicate everything in English. (Csenge)

Positive attitudes

I get carried away. I'm happy if I can deal with English. I'm very good at it, and I don't know why because no one ever told me to learn English. It's such a good feeling that I feel it in my stomach that English is good for me, and it puts me in a different state of mind. I feel relaxed and happy at the same time, and I feel that I must deal with it. I'm very musical, and I think the two are connected somehow. I go to music school, and I'm the best at harmonics, and I feel the two are connected. (Gergő)

We were chatting about Xmas dishes, and the word 'buckwheat' came up. After the lesson I wanted to find out the origin of the word, and I started with how it all began with the nuts of the beech tree, because it looks like that, and you can also call it beech wheat, so I got absorbed by the topic, and I was ready to unravel the history of the word for one and a half hours. (János)

I feel that I'm intrigued by the language (English), and it's interesting. More interesting than maths or history. There isn't a subject that's more interesting than English. (Ádám)

Everybody is so kind in England. They work the same number of hours, still, they don't speak like this [like Hungarian waiters]. (Béci)

Self-related issues: pride, confidence, curiosity

Simply, I'm curious about what they're talking about on TV, what's on the Internet. (Béci)

Everybody knows that I'll be among the winners. In this year's competition, my teacher was a member of the jury, and I came first. I don't think I won because she was a member of the jury, and after the competition she told the whole class how surprised she was when I started talking about bitcoins in front of the panel. (Gergő)

This whole thing about self-confidence is such a good thing. (János)

I'm more confident in English, I feel that I can solve anything on my own in English. (Ádám)

I'm curious about the background of the stories that come up in our course book because I know that they're real stories about real people with relevant, everyday topics. (János)

Dispositions towards learning

It is very important for me to choose the time of my lessons and the teacher I want to work with. (János)

I always feel in control. I can choose what topics we talk about in the lesson and what kind of listening tasks we do. (Fanni)
OK, I understand that grammar is important, but it gets boring after a while when you practise the tenses for the nth time. I simply get demotivated. (Annamari)
It's a practical thing to speak English, and it's required as well. (Kálmán)
I want to learn something that's relevant to my work. (Kata)

The teacher's personality
She wants everybody to get the best grade possible. If she sees you need praise or a telling off, she'll do it. She's predictable, and she has good manners. You can negotiate with her. (Annamari)
I'm so happy when she praises me how beautiful my pronunciation is, how beautifully I read; she praises us a lot, she has a sense of humour and she is very tactful. (Ádám)
He was so ready and open to teach us the way we wanted to learn. (Kálmán)

(Lack of) interaction
The lessons are more interactive . . . it's not like he [the teacher] tells you something and you have to do it or write it, but we have conversations. We can practise using the language. (Béci)
Conversation is very important. You can hear how they say a word, and you can say everything. (Csenge)
Having a good conversation with him [the teacher] is the most enjoyable part. Not only because of the common topics we share but also because his French is perfect. (Dia)
I don't get the chance to talk, we are so many. (Annamari)

5. Discussion

If we compare the emerging themes of two participating groups, we can observe several similarities and some differences between the findings of retrospective and concurrent experiences. As our data analysis resulted in four broader themes contributing to the L2 learning experience, we present the analogies and contrasts between the two groups along these four themes: (1) the teachers' personality and teaching practices; (2) various attitudes and dispositions towards learning as part of foreign language learning experiences; (3) contact experiences; and (4) self-related issues including experiencing success and self-confidence. Subsequently, we conceptualize a model of our findings in the Douglas Fir framework.

While both groups of participants expressed the importance of their L2 teacher in shaping their experiences, it is important to note that for the learners it was primarily an attitudinal component: attitudes towards the teacher's personality stood out as having a lasting impact. In Pekrun's (2014) taxonomy, this falls in the category of social emotions. The qualities the participants associated with positive experiences related to their L2 teachers were being generous with praise, kind, predictable, ready to compromise, ready to negotiate, serious, supportive, and tactful. Conversely, for the teacher participants, both their former L2 teachers' personality and teaching method seemed to play a crucial part. In Zimmermann's (2000) taxonomy of experiences, this type of experience is classified

as vicarious experience, through which one compares oneself to a model. Oddly enough, earlier research in the Hungarian context revealed that non-native Hungarian teachers were uncertain as to how to act as role models for their learners (Illés & Csizér, 2015), but our results show that they still are. Teachers do have a lasting impact on their students' experiences, primarily not by what they teach but how they teach and what personality they have.

The second broader theme that became apparent with both groups of participants was the emergence of attitudes and dispositions towards learning the L2. The similarity between the two groups here is manifested in the fact that interest, curiosity, positive emotions towards, and flow experienced during learning the L2 are prevalent in both retrospective and concurrent accounts. The significance of positive attitudes and dispositions in the data is further evidence of the paramount role of learning experiences expressed by Dörnyei's L2MSS model (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). The results indicate that attitudes and dispositions do not only act as prerequisites to positive learning experiences, but they are an integral part of both retrospective and concurrent learning experiences, which create a cycle of positive attributions conducive to L2 motivation. Interestingly, it is only with the teachers that the dimension of motivated learning behavior towards the L2 (effort, diligence, and persistence) emerged as salient in shaping learning experiences. This dimension was completely missing in the learners' accounts. This might be explained by the fact that for the teachers, the L2 has become their profession, which is either the direct or indirect consequence of the effort, diligence, and persistence they extended during learning the L2; however, for the learners, at the time of conducting the interview, learning was an optional fun activity.

The third broader emerging theme that both teachers and learners shared turned out to be contact experiences in and out of the classroom. Our results confirm the findings of earlier studies (Clément, 1980; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kormos & Csizér, 2007) which link contact experiences to linguistic self-confidence. The significance that both groups attribute to contact experiences is striking; however, two major differences emerged here in participants' accounts. On the one hand, the learners reported more negative contact experiences, which interestingly did not discourage them from learning the L2; on the other hand, they emphasized the salience of interaction and conversation, which subtheme was completely missing from the teachers' data. We can hypothesize that both these discrepancies can be explained by the fact that learners, presumably at an earlier stage of the L2 learning process, lack the proficiency that prospective teachers of the L2 used to have as L2 learners, and are very much aware of the need of practicing their L2. It is also possible that the teachers, owing to the presumably longer time they have been exposed to an L2, have had more positive contact experiences that have overwritten

the negative ones, or, due to the retrospective nature of the interviews, the passing of time has embellished their negative experiences.

As for the fourth broader theme, self-related issues, success, pride, and self-confidence emerged as especially vital for both groups of participants. The results confirm Zimmermann's (2000) model, in as much as enactive experience, which is based on the outcome of personal experience, shapes self-efficacy beliefs. It seems that the connection between success experiences and self-efficacy beliefs is salient not only for current learners of foreign languages, as Piniel and Csizér (2013) pointed out, but also retrospectively, for current L2 teachers. Here again, we must emphasize the role of positive attributions, which, by providing a cyclical positive feedback, fuel the motivation of current L2 learners as much as they shape the retrospective experiences of current L2 teachers. The locus of attributions with both groups of participants was internal; however, we must note that while the learners attributed their successes to their abilities, the teacher participants explained them in terms of their abilities as well as efforts, which confirm Hsieh and Schallert's (2008) and Pishgadam and Zabihi's (2011) findings.

Based on the results and discussion described above, we propose to conceptualize the model of the L2 learning experience in the framework of the Douglas Fir Group (2016) as presented in Table 5.

Table 5 The L2 learning experience in The Douglas Fir framework

The Douglas Fir (2016)			Emerging themes in the analyses
Levels	Components	Teachers	Students
MACRO	cultural values, economic values	music, teaching Hungarian through English, real life experience	culture, different dialects, practicality, relevance
MESO	schools, families, places of work, agency	classroom, teaching method, teachers' personality, being an active part of learning, tasks, acceptance, inclusion	teachers' personality, autonomy, group, helping others, not being able to help others, parents, workplace
MICRO	action and interaction, individuals engaging with others, linguistic and interactional resources	success, self-confidence, diligence, effort, persistence, contact, interest, liking learning FL, curiosity	success, pride, self-confidence, failure, contact, curiosity, interest, inability to express oneself, interaction, conversation

6. Conclusion

Based on our results, we can answer our research question concerning the construct of the foreign language learning experience by stating that it constitutes a complex conglomerate including several components related to the learning processes at various levels. The most important results indicate that there are more similarities than differences between retrospective and concurrent experiences despite the fact that two markedly different groups were examined, possibly indicating that salient experiences could have long-lasting effects.

If we take into account the locus of experiences, it has to be noted that experiences are personally situated and have classroom-based, school-related and broader contextual sources as well, cutting across the micro and meso levels of the Douglas Fir (2016) model. Positioning foreign language learning experiences into an increasingly broadening contextual framework encompassing various aspects (from classrooms to a variety of social contexts) is important because the ultimate aim of language learning is to slowly shift language learning experiences into language use experiences. As this study does not allow discussing the relative importance of the various components of the L2 learning experience, we can only hypothesize that experiences which stem from multiple sources could be seen more important. A good example of this is the emerging theme of success: experiencing success in the classroom is a good first step in the learning process, but it is equally important to experience success outside classroom/school contexts as well. Similarly, contact experiences can also come from a variety of sources from teacher-induced classroom experiences to contact experiences that are personally initiated outside the classroom/school environment.

Future research projects should consider the internal structure of the foreign language learning experience, that is, how the various components relate to one another. In addition, this qualitative study admittedly does not offer generalizable results; therefore, larger-scale quantitative studies are needed to map the possible importance of the various components. In addition, further studies should consider investigating the impact of learning experiences on the learning process and how various experiences are internalized and develop into beliefs related to this process. Broadening the research of foreign language learning experiences and investigating language use experiences should also be added to our research agenda.

Finally, we should note that this study is not without limitations. For one, learners' retrospective experiences and teachers' identification with concurrent language learning experiences were not examined. Second, our results mainly come from successful language learners and might be markedly different from those of less successful learners (cf. Nikolov, 2001). In addition, although we have aimed at reaching data saturation in our investigation, it is possible that additional interviews would have yielded more components. Last but not least, our study is rooted in one particular learning context; data collected in different contexts might result in diverging results.

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