

“WORDS FLY OUT OF MY MOUTH BUT ALSO
OUT OF MY HEAD”:

Adult learners’ challenges and successes in learning
English

Bachelor’s thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Vanhusten ja lasten kieltenoppimisprosessi on ollut tutkimusten kohteena jo kauan, mutta vielä työelämässä olevat aikuiset kielten oppijat ovat jääneet vähemmälle huomiolle. Tutkimukset ovat myös poikkeuksetta keskittyneet varttuneempien kielten oppijoiden kykyyn oppia kieltä sen sijaan, että tarkasteltaisiin heidän omia käsityksiään ja kokemuksiaan itsestään kieltenoppijana.</p> <p>Työni tarkoituksena oli selvittää, millaisia haasteita tai onnistumisia vielä työelämässä olevat ja vapaa-ajallaan englantia opiskelevat aikuiset olivat opiskelutaipaleensa varrella kohdanneet sekä millaisena he kokivat oman kielenoppija-minänsä ja kykynsä oppia kieltä. Tämän lisäksi pyrin saamaan selville, ovatko aikuisopiskelijat huomanneet kykyjensä muuttuneen verrattuna aikaan, jolloin he olivat nuorempia ja opiskelivat englantia koulussa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin kahden ryhmähaastattelun avulla. Haastateltavat olivat kansalaisopiston englannin kursseille osallistuvia, kielitaidoltaan hyvin eritasoisia 45–72-vuotiaita aikuisia Itä- ja Keski-Suomessa. Toisen ryhmän haastateltavien englannin kurssi koostui perinteisemmästä kielten opetuksesta, jossa edettiin kirjojen avulla, kun taas toisessa ryhmässä osallistujien kurssi käsitti paljon puhumista ja pelaamista.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat aikuisopiskelijoiden uskovan kykyihinsä oppia uutta kieltä, mutta he olivat huomanneet kielen oppimisen tuottavan vaikeuksia muun muassa muistin ja kiireisen elämäntyylin osalta – asioita, jotka eivät nuorempana olleet englannin opiskelua haitanneet. Useilla haastateltavista oli hyvinkin negatiivisia kokemuksia kielten opiskelusta koulusta, minkä vuoksi osallistujien myönteinen suhtautuminen kieleen ja omiin kykyihinsä oli erityisen positiivinen huomio. Kaiken kaikkiaan osallistujat löysivät englannin opiskelustaan huomattavasti enemmän positiivisia kuin negatiivisia ilmiöitä ja seurauksia.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The topic first gained my attention through a personal experience as a high school student when attending a language course at the local education centre. One attendant, a middle-aged man, stated, only a few weeks after the course had started, that he could not learn a new language anymore at this age since his brain was like a non-stick frying pan; it did not matter what one put on it or how one prepared it, everything would simply slide off. The comment stuck with me and made me wonder whether these kinds of beliefs are common. Later, I noticed that there is fairly little research done in the field of adult language learning.

The relationship between age and language learning has been approached from several different angles: Griffiths (2008) studied older learners of English but focused her research on immigrants. Multiple studies have been conducted on children's language learning (e.g. Singleton 1989), contrasting it with the way adults learn. Jaatinen (2003), among others, studied the way pensioners and the elderly learn languages. However, the experiences of working adults, which do not fall under the category "pensioner" or "elderly", have not been given the attention they deserve.

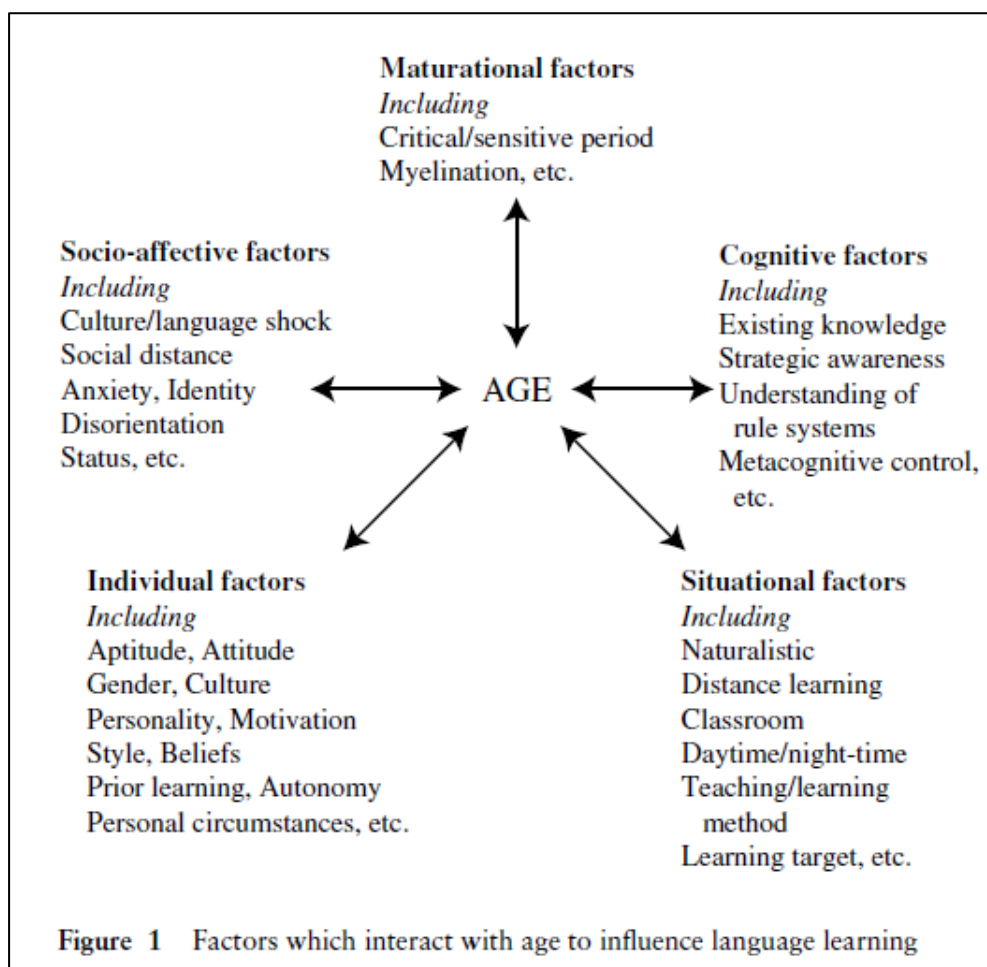
The age group is not the only issue in this field of research that requires more looking into. Previous studies conducted on this particular group of language learners, have heavily concentrated on the biological, cognitive, social and individual capabilities of an older language learner, without paying much attention to the learners' own beliefs and attitudes regarding their abilities. Learning a language is affected by the learners' previous experiences with the language and whether they themselves see learning English achievable or not.

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs adult learners of English had about their own abilities to learn a language, their needs for learning the language and how they saw their skills as having changed since they had studied English at school. I begin by explaining and discussing the most important and agreed upon biological, cognitive, situational and individual factors that mediate between age and language learning. This is followed by the introduction of my data and the used methods, after which the results of the conducted interviews will be presented. The results have been grouped into three main categories depending on the themes that arose in the conversations with the interviewees. The final chapter concludes the main points of the study and discusses some potential research topics in this area for the future.

2 AGE-RELATED FACTORS AFFECTING LEARNING

The characteristics of a good language learner have caused a decent amount of debate, especially when it comes to the question of which one of them has the greatest contribution to success in language learning. The same goes for the age-related factors affecting learning as it is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to reliably determine what the genuine cause behind learners' success or their problems is. The following is by no means an exhaustive list of age-related factors that affect learning, but it introduces the most common and recognized factors divided into respective categories, beginning from the biological level, logically moving on to the cognitive level and finishing in the behavioral level, discussing both internal and external factors. Finally, certain individual factors, that do not necessarily have a direct correlation with age but that are essential for understanding language learning, are discussed.

The following image, composed by Griffiths (2008: 40), effectively summarizes all the points seen to affect language learning, from which only the most significant ones shall be explained in more detail.



2.1 Biological factors

Young learners are often perceived as able to acquire languages in a more effortless manner compared to their older peers and scholars have attempted to explain this discrepancy with the most obvious of differences between these two groups: biology. All of the following possible explanations have encountered controversy and scholars have not been able to reach consensus over any of them, albeit some have gained more popularity than others.

Perhaps the most widely known and recognized theory combining biology and success in language learning is the *Critical Period Hypothesis* (CPH). The CPH was first introduced by brain surgeons Penfield and Roberts (2014: 243–244) who claimed that an individual is more likely to acquire a language if the process is started before the age of 10 as the most opportune period for language learning ends before puberty. Singleton (1989: 38) defines critical period as a limited time frame, within which the individual must learn a certain skill or competency in order for it to be thoroughly incorporated into his/her behaviour. The CPH does not conclusively rule out the possibility of learning a specific skill at an older age, but, according to the hypothesis, learning does become significantly more challenging and the skill will likely not be acquired quite as wholly as it would at a younger age. However, there is much debate among scholars over the so-called age limit of the CPH and no consensus has been reached, although most seem to be accepting of the critical period ending before or right in the beginning of puberty. Griffiths (2008: 39) even mentions the possible existence of a *sensitive* period instead of a *critical* period, which suggests that second language acquisition is still very much possible after this period has passed, whereas the CPH presents this phase as more absolute, determinative. The theory behind sensitive period perceives language acquisition as a long, gradual process and some phases within this process as more suitable for learning than others.

Harley (1986: 4) emphasizes that the CPH is based on the structural changes that take place in the brain as one gets older, which have been explained with the brain plasticity hypothesis. This hypothesis implies that a child's brain is more plastic and adaptable than the brain of an adult, since the brain gets increasingly rigid over time. This is especially visible in the area of learning phonology, since pronunciation is highly dependent on creating automatic motoric pathways in the brain and the loss of plasticity understandably complicates it (Randall 2007: 13). According to Lenneberg (1967: 136) the loss of plasticity happens after lateralization of the brain, i.e. when the two hemispheres start developing specialized functions, which is also the time when the accelerated growth of nerve connections comes to a halt. In fact, Lenneberg (1967: 135-139) argues that

external conditions are fairly insignificant in the case of languages and the aptitude to learning a new language is determined by one's cerebral maturity. According to him, the critical period for language acquisition takes place approximately between the ages of two and thirteen, but, as mentioned, the "age argument" has been challenged by many researchers, as has his lateralization theory. Griffiths (2008: 38) notes that in several studies lateralization has been found to occur long before puberty and, therefore, it does not offer reliable support to the CPH. Instead, she mentions Long's idea of myelination (cited in Griffiths 2008: 38). In the myelination process, as one grows older, nerves in the brain are getting wrapped and covered with myelin, which causes the pathways inside the brain to be more specific, but, simultaneously, to lose their flexibility.

Singleton (1989: 140-144) brings up another interesting issue regarding biology and how it can affect the learning process, namely, the ageing of senses. This factor has not been researched or written about in great detail as scholars have concentrated on larger issues and just mentioned the importance of senses very briefly. The senses involved in language learning are, above all, those of hearing and seeing. As cited by Singleton (1989: 141), Joiner points out that auditory skills peak between the ages of 10 and 14, which happens to be included in the 'critical period' age. Joiner's studies also reveal that the ability to hear high frequencies and soft sounds deteriorates continuously after adolescence is reached, which can have significant effects on one's pronunciation skills, for example, as learners simply do not hear and therefore recognize the slight phonological changes. Brändle (in Singleton 1989: 143) discusses the impaired capacity adults have for auditory imitation and assumes that to be the reason behind the difficulties that older learners often face with pronunciation.

Eyesight might not have as notable an effect on learning as hearing, but it needs to be taken into account, especially by educators. More often than not, teaching relies on written materials, which can cause problems for the elderly whose reading speed is not what it used to be or who can only read in well-lit environments, for example (Singleton 1989: 144). Based on the arguments made here, the role senses play in the learning process should not be overlooked.

The aforementioned factors give reason to assume that younger learners do better with languages than older learners, but the information should be approached with caution. As mentioned, there is no unambiguous biological explanation as to why adult language learners often perform poorly compared to their younger colleagues and it needs to be remembered that one's success always depends on the individual biological characteristics of the learner – it would be ignorant to imply that these factors materialize in a similar manner in all learners. There are exceptions who, despite

having all the deteriorating characteristics mentioned, still perform exceptionally well and prove that biology alone cannot explain one's success in learning a language.

2.2 Cognitive and socio-affective factors

Cognitive factors refer to the processes within one's mind, such as recognition, problem solving and concluding. A number of linguistic functions, for example the ability to produce speech and to understand it, are included in the concept of cognition and thus it is no surprise that language is in close contact with other cognitive functions.

A person without any knowledge regarding the process of language learning might assume that adults have better chances to learn a language, since their cognitive functions are more advanced than those of children, and adults already have some knowledge of languages and how they work. The person assuming this is not entirely wrong, since older students do tend to learn language faster in the initial phase of the process and children catch up with them later (Griffiths 2008: 40).

Griffiths cites a variety of studies (Krashen 1985; Ellis 1985; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle 1978) that all suggest that the fast initial progress is indeed due to their previous experience, their ability to negotiate the meaning in a communicative situation, knowledge of rules and linguistic systems and more advanced cognitive functions that allow them to rationalize and utilize their previous linguistic knowledge. Harley (1986: 16) refers to Ervin-Tripp and the concept established by her: 'positive transfer', which indicates that knowledge and progress in L1, the learner's mother tongue, supports the learning of foreign languages. It has also been suggested that adults' metacognitive skills, such as the ability to monitor and evaluate their own progress, better time management skills and knowledge of learning strategies should give them an advantage in language learning (Griffiths 2008: 40).

There is, however, a downside to having more advanced cognitive functions. Harley (1986: 8) approaches the Critical Period Hypothesis from a cognitive point of view since neurobiological proof does not seem to give an entirely satisfying answer to the questions raised by this hypothesis. Harley mentions the cognitive development theory by Piaget and how an individual at some point is determined to move on to a more formalistic, operational way of thinking, which might be the core issue behind adults' difficulties in learning a language. As quoted by Harley (1986: 9), Krashen (1975) stated that:

The adult's desire to have a conscious understanding of language may be just what prevents him from attaining full competence; it is quite difficult to express all of a natural language in terms of isolated rules. Thus, the adult may be limited by his ability to describe language to himself.

Adults' previous knowledge of languages, rules and linguistic systems can prove pernicious when trying to learn an entirely new language, since in their heads they have an image of how a language should be and behave and this hampers with their ability to face the language as it is, no presumptions attached. Again, Harley (1986: 10) cites Krashen (1977, 1978) who clearly distinguishes between language acquisition, which does not require conscious efforts, and conscious language learning – automatic and controlled development. He emphasizes the importance of acquisition in developing one's L2 competence and claims that only when a language is naturally acquired, can the individual avoid the affective factors that, sooner or later, start hindering and restricting the learning process.

Griffiths (2008: 39) quotes Burling (1981):

... a child does not realize how much he does not know, but an adult is aware of his own limitations and is likely to give up and conclude that he has lost the capacity to learn a language.

This quote perfectly embodies the socio-affective issues that adults experience when learning a language. Adults are aware of the things they are expected to know at a certain stage and if they feel like they have not yet reached that level it is probable that they shy away from using the language in order to protect their ego (Harley 1986: 17). According to Harley, this *ego permeability* might be even more significant in explaining adults' problems in second language learning than the maturational and biological factors. The discrepancy between adults' own level and the target level might cause them shame, anxiety and feelings of being rejected or inadequate. Adults also tend to be more culture-bound than children and they often attempt to hold on to the characteristics that stem from their own culture and are visible in their linguistic abilities, such as accent (Griffiths 2008: 39). Children are not aware of their own limitations, expectations of the environment or cultural issues attached to language and they do not feel the need to protect their ego in social situations, which gives them more freedom to fumble and make errors without being affected by them.

2.3 Situational factors

Adults are no longer required to learn foreign languages, which makes their situation drastically different from that of children and young people who go to school and are taught there. Younger learners have time especially allocated for learning a language and the learning goals are mostly set for them and the overall situation is made as optimal for learning as possible. Adults, on the other hand, must find the time in their already busy lives to attend voluntary language classes and they themselves are responsible for their learning and achieving set goals. This is the core difference between the language learning process for young people and for adults, which can have significant effects on older learners' success but which does not necessarily get paid the attention it deserves.

Language courses that adults attend are mostly offered by local adult education centres or similar institutions. Meetings for one course might take place once or twice a week within a period of approximately four months or the equivalent of one school semester. According to the participants in Tervo's (2000: 91) study, more than two lessons a week takes too much time away from other things, but they doubt whether less than that would be enough to actually improve their language skills or whether they would forget the previously learned before the next lesson. Harley (1986: 21) also takes this factor into account when discussing time as the most important variable in language learning. Her observations are backed up by Singleton (1989: 141) who states that the reason why starting to learn a foreign language at a young age is preferable is because the individual will then get significantly more practise and exposure to the language. These statements suggest that the age when one starts to learn a language might actually be secondary to the time one spends learning the language. As demonstrated, adults have a more limited amount of time to acquire and to learn the language compared to younger learners, which might be one explanation to the vast differences in their end results.

When discussing time, it is also important to note the time of day when the language learning takes place. Adults are forced to study at the time the language course takes place, which is nearly always in the afternoon or evening, after they are finished with their everyday jobs (Griffiths 2008: 40). In her research, Tervo (2000: 92) discovered that adults found themselves tired and not able to concentrate on teaching or, if studying independently, on learning in the afternoons and evenings due to their state of alertness. Also Griffiths (2008: 40) implied that time management in general seemed to cause the learners stress, since the time they chose to spend on studying was time taken away from their work, family and other hobbies. Alternatively, studying was done after the students

had already taken care of all the other factors in their life, which meant late nights alone with the books, when the learning is not as efficient as it might be at a different time of day.

The participants in Tervo's (2000: 91) study mentioned the content of the books and the classes as a significant factor contributing to their motivation and ability to learn. Adults might not be as familiar with educational books as younger students and thus find them confusing and packed with too much or too irrelevant information. Tervo (2000: 91) also discovered that the participants found the themes discussed in the books irrelevant or directed to a younger audience. This suggests that companies producing language learning materials might not entirely understand the needs of an older target group, which can be a decisive factor from the perspective of the student's motivation. Griffiths (2008: 40) discusses the way older learners are taught, contrasting the more traditional *grammar-translation* method with *audiolingual-communicative* method. Griffiths suggests that the method of teaching has more significance for older learners, as their background and experience with the language is more heterogeneous than that of younger students and the methods should, therefore, be selected and adapted to each group and their level of skills.

Atmosphere in the classroom was also pointed out by the participants in Tervo's (2000: 82, 27) research. Adults who study languages at an older age, especially in the beginner's courses, may have encountered difficulties with the language in the past and, as a result of that, their self-esteem and perception of their own abilities is not necessarily very positive. In order to motivate the students, the atmosphere in the class should be encouraging and not concentrated on comparing students with each other and pointing out errors. Both Griffiths (2008: 43) and Tervo (2000: 27) also discovered that the social aspect has significantly more influence in the learning process of older students due to authority and social distance issues. Griffiths (2008: 43) gives an example of an older, 64-year-old Japanese male student and the difficulties he experienced:

... interacting with younger students was fraught with cultural difficulties. They could not display superiority without being, in their terms, impolite, and he could not appear to be inferior without losing face in a way that they would all have found socially very difficult.

The same type of problems can emerge also in a less hierarchic culture if the teacher, for example, is younger than the students and the students find it difficult to see the teacher as an expert, authoritative figure.

2.4 Individual factors

There are some factors that are not directly related to age, but they must be mentioned when discussing success and failure regarding language learning: motivation and goals, attitude and beliefs, learning style and strategies. These factors are briefly covered in the following chapter as they are crucial in creating a comprehensive understanding of language learning.

Ushioda (2008: 21) discusses the dilemma of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation pushes the person to learn the language because of personal aspirations, own desire to improve themselves or out of pure enjoyment. Extrinsically motivated learners study to avoid being punished or embarrassed or to receive a good grade or a certain qualification, for example. Intrinsic motivation is usually considered to be the better option as it often creates continuity and genuine interest but as Ushioda (2008: 22) discusses it is not as straightforward as it is made to sound. Griffiths (2008: 40) also mentions motivation in relation to age and suggests that older learners are more driven by internal factors, which might be an advantage for adults. Tervo's (2000: 86) study shows that motivation correlates strongly with the goals that learners have set for themselves, but not always in a positive way. The learner might have set their own goals too low or too high and, therefore, if they already feel like they have reached this goal or that they cannot reach it at all, they lose their motivation.

White (2008: 121) points out that the importance of beliefs is often belittled and forgotten as its connection to success in language learning might not be as clear as that of motivation, for example. Language learners do, however, believe that the image they have of themselves is the truth and they behave accordingly. Tervo (2008: 27) also mentions beliefs and attitude in her study and recognizes the fact that adults might carry traumatizing experiences that have lowered their self-esteem as a language learner and made them lose confidence in themselves. These experiences often have far-reaching consequences that affect their learning process even at an older age.

Griffiths (2008: 84) refers to multiple studies when attempting to define learning strategies and concludes them as follows: strategies are the actions taken by a learner, which facilitate learning, make it faster, more enjoyable and more effective. As discussed above, older learners might be at an advantage as they are more aware of language structures as well as their own learning and, therefore, have more tools to try different learning strategies. This was also mentioned by the participants in Tervo's (2000: 94) study as they revealed having tried a number of different approaches and alternating between auditive, visual and kinaesthetic learning styles, for example.

3 PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of my study is to explore how adult language learners who voluntarily study languages in their own time perceive themselves, their skills and their abilities as English language learners at a somewhat older age. In this paper, I will discuss the most significant successes and difficulties the learners have encountered during their language learning process as well as the reasons they believe to cause or affect these experiences. Another important factor to be addressed is the change that the learners see between their current idea of themselves as an English learner and the English learner they used to be. To be able to better explore this issue, I have formulated the following research questions:

1. What sort of difficulties and successes have the learners experienced in learning English?
2. What reasons do they themselves believe to be behind these difficulties and successes?
3. How do the learners perceive their abilities as English learners now compared to learning it at a younger age?

3.2 Data

The data was collected via focus group interviews. Vaughn et al. (1996: 4-5) suggest that focus group interviews are most suitable for situations where the researcher aims to explain how and why people behave the way they do. The role of the interviewer, according to Vaughn et al. (1996: 82) in this setting is to help create an atmosphere that encourages the participants to discuss the topic and their opinions freely, to provide the focus group with topics, instead of questions, for the discussion and possibly pose additional questions regarding interesting observations or unclear comments. However, it is of the uttermost importance that the interviewer does not try to lead the participants to a certain answer or direction with his/her questions.

Two separate semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted in the spring of 2016. Both interviews were conducted face-to-face and in Finnish, which was the mother tongue of all participants. Consent to be interviewed and to be recorded was requested from all participants prior to the interviews as they were recorded with an audio device. Interviewees were seated around a big table and one tape recorder was placed in each end of the table. I, the interviewer, was sitting

among the interviewees, thus trying to create a normal, conversational situation where all participants are equal.

The first interview was conducted in Eastern Finland and the other one in Central Finland, where all interviewees were enrolled in an English course at a local adult education centre. Group 1 consisted of six (6) participants of which five were female and one male. Group 1 attended a course that is more concerned with keeping up the learners' English skills through games and playing and is not as heavily built around traditional teaching methods as the classes of Group 2. The language skills of the respondents in Group 1 had a similar level of English. Group 2 consisted of eight (8) participants, six females and two males, who attended a more traditional type of language class. There was significantly more variation in the level of English within this group: from complete beginners (level 1) to independent users (level 6). The participants were from all fields of work, ranging from carpenter to surgeons and the ages varied between 45 and 72 years, as the aim of my research was to concentrate on those still in working life.

In the beginning of the first interview I asked everyone to tell his/her name, age and occupation among other small talk. In the second interview, however, I handed each interviewee a piece of paper and asked everybody to write down their name, age and occupation and then return the papers to me. Interviewees in the first group were already familiar with each other, whereas in the second group, the interviewees did not know each other beforehand, which is why I saw this 'secret' method to reveal their age to me as more appropriate. The interview began with questions regarding the participants' motivation and reasons for studying English, which were followed by more detailed questions regarding their experiences, successes and difficulties with learning English. These questions were accompanied by questions about the reasons they believe to be behind their success or failure and whether they find these reasons to stem from themselves or from their environment. Finally, questions dealing with their perception of themselves as a language learner now and at a younger age were addressed. The interview questions can be found in the appendices. However, the interview questions served merely as a base and were used only if necessary to guide the discussion along.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The parts used as examples in the thesis were later transcribed using the audio recordings of the interviews, after which content analysis was applied. Content analysis was a convenient choice as it,

unlike discourse analysis, focuses on what is being said instead of how it is said (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 103-104). Content analysis can be carried out inductively, gathering answers from the data itself, or deductively, comparing the data with already existing theories and approaches on the topic. In this paper, inductive analysis was used. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009: 109) point out the different stages of inductive content analysis. First, the researcher listens to and transcribes the interviews. In the second stage, relevant information is gathered and noted while unnecessary information is dismissed. Next, similarities and dissimilarities are drawn from the material and arranged into categories. Finally, the data is set against the previously discussed theory and literature review to demonstrate the connections between theory and practise.

4 ANALYSIS

The analysis consists of three subchapters which were identified as the three main themes of the interviews. As the interview questions only provided a basis for the interviews, all the questions will not be repeated in the analysis. Examples of the data are provided and can be found in the appendices together with their respective English translations.

4.1 The language learner profile

I began the interview by enquiring after the reasons and motivations the interviewees had to start studying English and join an English course. Perhaps not very surprisingly, majority of the participants mentioned their desire to keep up their English skills and this seemed to be the most common reason for joining the English course. Many of the participants also brought up the amount of vocabulary they had once mastered but had now completely forgotten. According to their statements, they had decided it was now time to put an end to this deterioration and do something about it by joining a course.

Another common theme that stood out from the answers was that of oral communication skills. Some participants had very negative experiences and memories from school regarding English teaching as it had been heavily concentrated around grammar and the idea of right and wrong. Oral communication skills and speaking were practices that simply were not included in the lessons, which has led to insecurities and shyness when faced with situations where talking is required.

Many of the participants said that their main reason for studying English was to become a stronger user/speaker of English. One of the participants was a classroom teacher who had taught English to primary school children and even she said that she did not feel comfortable talking before gaining confidence in the course she was attending:

Example 1:

Mäkin oon opettanu englantia monta monta vuotta ja sillon eka vuosina, niin tuota, olin itekki vähän ujo käyttää kieltä. Ja sit täällä X:n opetuksessa niinku pikkuhiljaa vapautu. Mä muistan ensimmäisiä kertoja ku olin täällä nii ku X sano aiheen ja et ”Keskustelkaa” nii mä istuin hiljaa ja mietin hirveesti että mä sanon näin ja sitten mä sanoin ja nyt on menny yli 20 vuotta ja nyt täällä on nii rento olla, että se puhe vaan sieltä soljuu ja sitä tulee käytettyä monipuolisesti.

(I have also been teaching English for many years now and during the first years I was a bit shy to use the language as well. And then here, when X is teaching, I slowly opened up. I remember the first times I was here and when X would give us a topic and say “Talk”, I would just sit there quietly and think really hard about what and how I would say and then I said it. Now it has been more than 20 years and now I feel so relaxed here that the words just fly out of my mouth and I use the language in a more versatile way.)

Another group of reasons given by the participants is closely related to freedom. Some pointed out freedom in regards to the already mentioned oral communication, as not having to think so much about what and how to say, whereas others believe that English will bring freedom in other aspects of life, for example travelling. One participant even said that not being able to speak English started to affect her everyday life in the way that if she saw a foreign-looking person walking towards her on the street, she would cross over to the other side, just in case that person wanted to ask directions or anything else that would have required her to speak English.

There were other reasons (good reputation of the teacher, desire for a new hobby) as well, but these were mentioned only by individuals and therefore did not count as a common theme. Based on the answers given by the participants, it has become clear that the majority does not feel comfortable using English and had joined the course in hopes of gaining confidence and courage especially regarding oral communication. This might well be the result of the school system and teaching methods that dominated the field of foreign languages back when the participants attended school and this issue will be briefly discussed later in this paper.

From the various reasons for joining the course, it was a logical shift to move on to discuss their aims and goals for the course and the kinds of situations they could imagine themselves using English in. One goal was mentioned nearly by all the participants: travelling. Practically everybody wanted to learn English in order to get by abroad or to be able to communicate with their foreign friends and acquaintances, some even mentioned having a foreign son- or daughter-in-law. Again,

the theme of freedom stood out as many of the interviewees noted that speaking English meant that they would not have to worry about getting things done when abroad. One participant stated that having been the only one of her family who did not speak English, she had considered herself a burden to the others during their family vacations, which had caused her to feel shame:

Example 2

Sitten ku ollaan aikoinaan matkusteltu yhdessä, mä oon ollu niinku kaikkein heikoin lenkki. Tuppisuuna ku muut sitte puhuvat siellä ... nii kyllähän se harmitti.

(Then, back in the days, when we used to travel together, I have always been the weakest link. Tongue-tied while the others talk ... yes, I felt bad about it.)

Approximately half of the respondents identified with goals of self-improvement or enjoyment. For most of them English classes were relaxing and enjoyable: a place where they could let go of their stress and everyday life and simply concentrate on themselves. Others had goals of improving and challenging themselves on an academic or intellectual level, although this did not necessarily mean they wanted to learn *new* things, as one interviewee put it:

Example 3

Mie en ainakaan murehdi sitä, että opinko mie kuinka paljon lisää uutta – mulle riittää se, että mulla säilyy tavallaan se kielitaito, mikä mulla jo on ja sit et mulla on se rohkeus käyttää sitä, mikä mulla on sitten ihan siinä tilanteessa ... jos se (uusi asia) tarttuu nii hyvä, mut jos ei nii antaa olla sitte että.

(I do not really worry about how much new I am learning – for me it is enough that I can sort of maintain the level of English that I have and that I have the courage to use the language in real situations ... if I learn something new, it is very nice, but if I do not, I am fine with that too.)

Many respondents mentioned factors that could be placed in the category “participation”. Being able to participate in conversations and discussions, following news and happenings around the world, watching TV and movies, finding information online, being able to use computers and the Internet in general came up as something they linked to the English language. There were even a few who needed English for professional purposes, either reading materials or participating in meetings together with foreign colleagues.

The theme combining nearly all the goals is that of globalisation and the change the world has experienced during the past few decades. Had this interview been conducted 50 years ago, the purposes of learning English would most likely have differed quite significantly from the answers given here. Again, we visit the idea of insufficiency of the language education the respondents have had in the past. It is understandable that the types of language skills the teachers back then equipped

their students with are simply not enough to answer the requirements of the current world. These adult learners of English have realized that in order to be able to be an active member in the world that surrounds us and to get as much out of the countless possibilities around them, they need to improve their language skills.

Next, I asked the participants to describe themselves as language learners and language students, giving them the opportunity to reflect their own attitudes towards learning English. The answers were, keeping in mind my initial hypothesis of “adults consider language learning difficult”, surprising in a very positive sense as nearly everyone described themselves with adjectives such as: *excited*, *active* and *enthusiastic*, or with phrases like: *trusting in my own capabilities* and *not embarrassed to speak*. It became obvious that even despite poor English skills or lack of experience with the language almost everybody believed that they would be able to handle and function in a situation that required English. I found the following comment especially encouraging and consider it to be a fit example of the prevailing attitude within the respondents:

Example 4

En mä ainakaan mitään sanakirjoja kaiva esiin. Siis jos mä luen jotain dekkaria vaikka englanniks nii emmä niitä ... joka sanaahan ei tarvi tietysti ymmärtää eikä nii myöskää ruveta ettimää.

(I definitely do not get my dictionary. I mean, if I am reading for example a detective novel in English then I do not ... of course there is no need to understand every single word or start looking for their meaning.)

This respondent trusted her own abilities to follow the plot without having understood every single word of an utterance and her experiences were validated by other members in the group. Similar thoughts emerged in the other group as well when one participant pointed out that he has been watching TV shows and movies without subtitles, which led to the rest of the group echoing his words. It seemed that the groups had internalized that to be able to understand or be understood, one does need to be fluent.

Other adjectives the interviewees mentioned were: *lazy* and *self-indulgent*, meaning that they enjoy this type of laid-back studying in the courses. They do what is expected from them, but not much more – revising notes after a class, for example, was something they mentioned as something they knew they should do, but often failed to do so.

All in all, the reasons for learning or brushing up on their English skills were mostly in relation to factor that would allow them to better explore the world around them and available to them. The

respondents feel enthusiastic and capable to either learn a new language or at least to learn something about a language.

4.2 Successes and difficulties in learning English

After having covered the basics in relation to their reasons and motivations to learn English, we moved on to discuss the possible difficulties they have faced during their language studies as adults and the reasons they consider to have a negative effect on the learning process. As anticipated, memory was the first factor to be brought up and was agreed on by all the respondents. The interviewees were worried about not being able to hold on to vocabulary the way they used to when they were younger. One participant described that it feels like the words have a mind of their own and they simply decide to leave the brain:

Example 5

ne sanat vaan tahtoo lähtee päästä johonkin, et ei ne pysy päässä enää niinku entiseen malliin.

(The words just simply decide to leave my head, like they do not stick anymore the way they used to.)

Some respondents also pointed out having significantly more trouble with memorizing the new as well as with retrieving the old from their memory, if they were stressing about their personal, everyday life. This suggests that the stress they experienced at a younger age might not have been as significant or had such a heavy influence on other parts of their life as it did now. The stress factor together with the weakened memory have created a situation, in which the participants feel like they need to revise the already learned repeatedly to truly learn and internalize it.

Although majority in both groups enjoyed the way teaching was organized in their respective English courses, there were some who would have preferred a slightly stricter and more traditional way with homework and pop quizzes. These respondents said that without the external pressure and someone “forcing” them to study at home, they sometimes felt slightly unmotivated and undetermined. This enforces the ideas Ushioda (2008: 21) brought up in regards to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and how some people are more likely to be motivated by an external force, such as grades or teacher’s acceptance, whereas others are driven by their own desire to learn and desire to improve themselves.

One of the main reasons for having difficulties or being less successful with learning was time, in several different aspects. Firstly, the hour at which the lessons took place was mentioned as a possible negative factor. It was slightly surprising that a clear majority of the participants found it positive that the classes were in the afternoon or evening and said that it was refreshing and cheered them up after a whole day of working. However, there were some who found it troublesome. One respondent mentioned that this did not apply specifically to the course she was attending at the moment, but she had experienced it earlier with another course:

Example 6

Meil oli joskus ne ... illalla, ne loppu muistaakseni, loppuko peräti yheksältä tai vaille yheksän illalla se ja ne oli niin intensiivisiä ne kurssit et sit oli kyllä aika puhki et sit alko vaikuttaa (oppimiseen) jo ihan vaikka mikä ympärillä

(We used to have them (classes) in the evening and they finished around, could it have been even at nine or a bit before and those courses were so intensive that by then I was already exhausted so at that point pretty much everything around started to affect me (the learning).)

A few participants also declared that it can take some time to calm down and concentrate on the lesson after arriving from work as the events and thoughts of what happened earlier might still be fresh in the mind, distracting them. According to them, this happened more often if the day had been especially hectic.

Secondly, the interviewees brought up the lack of time. Some mentioned being in such a place with their careers right now that dedicating more time for independent studying and revision was simply not a possibility. Others did not specify exactly why they felt this way, but stated that time was considerably more limited now than what it was back when they were still in school. It can be assumed that they were referring to their daytime jobs and family life, as these are factors that one does not need to worry about as a child/youngster. One respondent believed that if she had the same amount of time to use for studying as she did when studying in high school, for example, she would not have any trouble in reaching great learning results, but admits that since there is so much more going on in her life, dedicating that amount of time is impossible.

This element complies with the thoughts and research of Griffiths (2008: 40) and Tervo (2000: 92), both of whom considered time to be a major factor in the language learning process of adults as most of their learning happens at a time not the most opportune for acquiring new information. The results of this study also agree with those of Singleton (1989: 141): better learning results at a young age are not due to age, but instead to the amount of time spent studying.

Third factor mentioned in the interviewees in regards to time had also come up in Tervo's (2000: 92) research and relates to the motivation issue researched by Ushioda (2008: 21). The lack of motivation and the lack of time materialize themselves in the adults' concerns about whether one lesson a week is enough. This fact was discussed in greater detail in the second group, where a great deal of the participants was still beginners in English. They felt that having a lesson once a week did not require constant effort from them in their free time, but instead they could just throw the books in the corner after the class and not pick them up until the night before the next one. Based on their comments it seems like they would prefer the already discussed "must" to do things and to activate themselves in their language learning processes.

The interviewees also considered the fact that it has been a long time since they were studying to influence their learning negatively. This contradicted the previous assumptions of Griffiths (2008: 40) of it being easier for adults to learn languages since they are better equipped to monitor and evaluate their own progress and because they are already aware of the different types of learning strategies and methods. Instead, it turned out that the interviewees saw this particular factor as a disadvantage: they had already forgotten everything they once knew about the so-called "learning to learn" -skills and realized the need to practise and brush up on them.

All in all, the number of difficulties they brought up was fairly low compared to the experiences of success, which we shall look at next. This suggests that the overall attitude towards and perception of language learning is positive and the main reason for slow progress lies in situational factors and not in the learners.

The two main categories that emerged in regards to successes in learning English were related to courage and vocabulary. A major reason, as previously discussed, for studying English was gaining confidence and courage in using the language and based on their answers here, it seems like this has been achieved. Both groups agreed that they are much more confident in speaking English, they have the courage to open their mouths and do not feel the sense of panic whenever faced with a situation where English is required. One of the main insights for the participants has been the fact that they can get themselves understood even if they make mistakes and they do not feel embarrassed by it anymore:

Example 7

... eihän sitä suomen kieltäkään kuunnellessa kuuntele koko ajan, että sanoko se nyt oikein kaikki possessiivisuffiksit ja kaikki, vaan tärkeätä on että se asia vaan löytyy sieltä

(... even when listening to someone speaking Finnish, no one ever listens to their speech with the intention of spotting whether they got all the possessive suffixes correctly, but instead the important thing is that they understand what you are trying to say)

Vocabulary was the second area in which the interviewees had experienced feelings of success. Most of them agreed that retrieving words from memory happens a lot faster now than it initially did and that speaking has thus become easier. They said that watching TV or listening to music with English lyrics is more enjoyable now that they can, not only understand it better, but also spot phrases or words they have learned in the lessons and tie these to real contexts. The respondents in the first group pointed out that their listening and reading comprehension had improved significantly and listening to native speakers or trying to understand jokes in English was no longer an issue, which had brought them great joy and a sense of pride in themselves. One participant even mentioned that she would often accidentally speak English in the local supermarket after the lessons, a very good sign from the perspective of learning.

The interviewees found several reasons for these experiences of success. First of them, as mentioned by Tervo (2000: 82, 27), was atmosphere. The teaching and the way the courses are organized differed a lot between the two focus groups and therefore it might have been even expected that their opinions concerning the atmosphere had differed as well, but this was proven false. Both groups praised the atmosphere and their fellow students by saying that they might not be studying English at all if it were not for the general feeling within the group. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the social nature of the classes and they believed this type of warm environment was the reason for why everybody felt comfortable talking and expressing their opinions there. The independent style of studying and the fact that it did not feel like going to school were also appreciated by the respondents. The classroom of the first group had even been furnished with armchairs and sofas and set up in circles in order to get rid of the traditional classroom demeanour. One participant in the first group, a classroom teacher, said that she would not come to another “school” after already having spent the entire day in one:

Example 8

ainakaan meikäläinen ei tulis toisesta koulusta toiseen kouluun

at least I would not go to another school after spending an entire day in another one

Second factor the interviewees mentioned was the teacher and the teacher’s choices. This was perhaps a slightly more prominent group of reasons among the first focus group since the class has

been taught by the same person for over 20 years already and people link the course very strongly to the teacher. The group gave credit to the teacher for having created such a positive atmosphere in the classes and for basing the teaching on discussions, games and different activities instead of strictly following a book. Teachers received positive feedback from the participants in Group 2 as well. The interviewees said that the pace of learning had been adjusted for their needs, which also worked very well in situations when a student had to be absent for personal reasons; no one would be left behind. Although, unlike Group 1, all participants in Group 2 used a book in their classes, they felt like the teachers were also creating their own materials specifically targeted for them, which made the course more interesting and motivating for them. This issue emerged also in the research by Tervo (2000: 91) when the participants in her study considered the themes in the books, and thus in the lessons, not relevant for them and their learning. It is a positive shift in adult education that teachers are modifying their courses to fit the needs of the students.

Another important element that had allowed the respondents to succeed was the emphasis on oral communication skills instead of written. Many participants in both groups criticized the way they had been taught at school since teaching there had been heavily influenced by the needs of an exam or the matriculation examination. One interviewee stated that he still cannot express himself very well in written form, but has never encountered a situation abroad, for example, which he could not handle using oral communication. Respondents also said that the course prepared them for real life situations, using language and expressions they might actually need in the future, which was far away from what they had gotten used to at school.

Final group of reasons were related to the abilities and characteristics within themselves. A few interviewees mentioned being hardworking, revising and learning independently whenever they had the time for it. Some said that the reason behind their success was the internal motivation, which made them want to learn and improve. However, there was one reason that was mentioned in both groups and agreed on by practically everyone: age. The participants claimed to be old enough not to care about making mistakes in their use of language anymore. Age was mentioned as a factor in relation to many of the interview questions.

This was an especially interesting remark since many language learning theories, for example that of Harley (1986: 17) claim that adults shy away from using the language and possibly making mistakes to protect their ego and it is, in fact, the children that are not concerned about committing errors. The results of this study, however, claim the opposite and suggest that perhaps after having

passed a certain age, one regresses and starts to resemble a child in this sense. Naturally, these assumptions cannot be generalized, but it is an interesting phenomenon that requires more research.

4.3 Age and language learning

The interviews continued with the age issue and whether it has affected their learning or whether their attitude towards learning languages has changed over the years. First question was about the respondents' relationship to learning languages at a younger age. This question was actually asked by one of the participants in Group 1 and I decided to use it for Group 2 as well since their answers and experiences were quite interesting and revealed the change that had taken place in their attitudes. Majority of the respondents said that they did alright with English in school, but were never truly interested in it. There were also extremes from both ends of the spectrum as a few respondents said that they very much enjoyed studying foreign languages, but somehow fell out of touch with them throughout the years. A handful of interviewees admitted to detesting English in school and they either worked extremely hard to pass the classes or they practically gave up on it altogether, as the following comments depict:

Example 9

Mul on ollu aina se, että mie koulusa päätin, et mie en tuu koskaan tarviimaan englantia, kun se oli ihan kamala ja siis sehän oli sitä syyllistämistä aina ja virheiden luettelemista ja kääntämistä ... niin miepä ajattelin et mie en tätä kieltä tarvii et ei miun tätä tarvii puhuu. No sit ku mie pikkusen kasvoin isommaks tytöks nii mie huomasin et kyl sitä ehkä tarviiki joskus ja se alko olla hiukan noloa

(I had decided early on in school that I will never in my life need English because it was really awful and the teaching was designed to blame the students and listing all the mistakes they made and translating ... so I decided that I will not need this language, I do not need to speak it. Well, when I grew up a little bit I notice that English might be needed after all and it started to be a bit embarrassing)

Example 10

Voi kyllä oli vaikeeta se englantihomma, se oli just semmosta alistamista vähän. Ja sit jos ei osannu nii opettaja pilkkas muitten eessä nii sitte mä en jaksanu siellä olla nii mää kotona äitille sanoin ja se otti siihen opettajaan yhteyttä nii ne laitto mut puukäsitöihin nii et mun ei tarvinnu siellä englannissa olla. Siitä on nyt 50 vuotta aikaa ja nyt vasta tulin tänne ensimmäiselle kurssille.

(Oh, it was really difficult, the thing with English, it was kind of repressive even. And if you did not know something, the teacher would make fun of you in front of the entire class so then I did not want to be there and I told that at home to my mother who called the teacher and they decided to transfer me to a woodwork class so I did not need to stay there learning English. This happened 50 years ago and now I finally came here and started my first English course.)

These examples well describe the pedagogy and teaching methods which dominated foreign language teaching some 30-50 years ago. Learning about these experiences is appalling and difficult to understand for anyone in touch with foreign language teaching today, but at the same time it is crucial knowledge for someone working with adults. These are the experiences that have shaped their perceptions of themselves as language learners and serve as a reminder of the far-reaching consequences a teacher or a teaching method can have. One respondent mentioned never having the chance to talk or orally use the language during English lessons in her past as talking in class was strictly prohibited. Based on these revelations it is no wonder that the interviewees' main reason to join an English course was to gain confidence and courage to use and to speak the language.

The next topic discussed in the groups was whether the interviewees see their age as a factor that has affected their success in learning English, how they see their abilities to learn English now compared to when they were younger and whether they see any significant changes in learning within a certain linguistic area, such as grammar or vocabulary. Both groups agreed on the fact that age has affected their success positively in the way that they are not as concerned about their ego as they were before, as discussed above. One respondent said that the confidence and courage has come with age and experience and the realization that everybody makes mistakes has facilitated his own language learning. Another interviewee brought up an interesting idea in regards of learning and motivation at an older age. She said that nowadays the best lesson is the first hour or two after the English class when she ponders and goes over the things learned in class. She believed that this is something she would never have done in school while, like many young people, she was happy that the class was over and did not want to revise the lesson in her head afterwards. Now, as an older learner studying English voluntarily, she saw this as an essential part of the learning process.

Everyone believed in their own abilities to master a language, even a completely new one, if they wanted it enough. According to their beliefs they might not be able to learn it as fast as they once might have, but everyone still trusts that they would be able to do it. One participant admitted that she is working a lot harder now than what she thinks would have been required had she started at a younger age, but she still seems confident in herself. Some interviewees also mentioned that it is now easier to find connections between words and it is also easier to place the words in context. This supports Harley's (1986: 16) ideas regarding previous language knowledge and its assistive role in learning a new one. The first group also brought up the fact that the opportunities to learn a language outside of school are now significantly better than before since we are now surrounded with English and can effortlessly get in touch with it through audio-visual devices and the Internet,

for example. Therefore, they believe that their abilities to learn English are better now than what they used to be, because the environment is more supportive of it.

Learning oral language skills was recognized as being easier now than before, mostly due to the newly gained courage. Most of the respondents saw their pronunciation improving together with oral skills and the more they spoke the language. Listening comprehension had caused difficulties in the beginning, most probably due to the lack of spoken language in the schools, but had become much easier through practise. Grammar was seen as something permanent, in which there was not a lot to be learned anymore. Vocabulary seemed to pose the greatest number of challenges, mainly because of the biological deterioration of memory.

For the most part, age was considered as a positive factor in regards of language learning as it had brought about confidence, insights about the use of language as well as internal motivation. Besides memory, no other biological factors were mentioned or blamed for possible difficulties in learning and all participants believed in their abilities to learn a language, which contradicts the general assumption that adults cannot learn languages and that adults themselves also believe it.

5 CONCLUSION

The results of the study might be considered somewhat surprising as previous research (Griffiths 2008; Tervo 2000; Harley 1986) was slightly leaning towards the hypothesis that language learning is more difficult for adults. However, it needs to be kept in mind that all the studies referred to in this paper had focused on the older language learners' abilities to learn a language instead of the learners' own perceptions of their abilities. This discrepancy demonstrates the importance of considering, not just the biological or cognitive facts, but also the individual and their personal needs.

The interviewees mentioned a variety of difficulties in relation to their language learning: issues with memory and memorizing, lack of external pressure leading to laziness, the hour at which the course takes place, insufficient number of lessons per week, lack of studying experience in the recent years and lack of time. Although the respondents did find numerous reasons that complicate their learning, practically all reasons were not dependent on themselves, but instead from the environment. The list of successes was far more versatile and longer than that of difficulties: teacher and the method of teaching, general atmosphere in the classroom, emphasizing oral skills over

written communication, having intrinsic motivation and the courage to make mistakes without feeling embarrassed by them. Age came up as a factor in both groups when discussing the reasons why they felt that they now had more positive experiences in learning English than before – the respondents claimed that life experience has taught them not to take things too seriously, which in turn has set them free in relation to language learning as well.

The results can be of interest to adult education centres and other institutions dealing with or planning adult education. Based on the results, adult learners are motivated and feel capable of learning if the learning environment has been planned for them. The respondents' answers hint that it might be a good idea to involve the learners themselves in the planning to ensure they receive the type of teaching that best suits their personal needs. Naturally, these results cannot be generalized due to the small number of participants, but they do give an opposing idea to the suggestions made in previous research regarding adults' abilities to learn.

This research paper concentrated on adults currently studying English. Many of the adult learners interviewed for this paper had very negative experiences with English in the past, but had now found their enthusiasm and motivation to study it again. In this light, it might be interesting to study a group of adults that also struggled with English in the past, but who have not picked it up again or who did try learning English, but for some reason decided to give it up. The perceptions these adults have of themselves as language learners might significantly differ from those we encountered here.

All in all, the results were more positive than anticipated and painted a brighter picture of the field of adult language education. Successes were seen to be dependable from the learners themselves whereas difficulties were seen to be caused by external factors – something to be considered for the future.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Miksi päätit osallistua kurssille? / Why did you join this course?
2. Mikä on tavoitteesi englannin kielen oppimisen suhteen? / What is your aim or goal in learning English?
3. Millaisissa tilanteissa näet itsesi käyttämässä englantia? / Where do you see yourself using English?
4. Kuinka kuvailisit itseäsi kielten oppijana? / How would you characterize yourself as a language learner?
5. Millaisia onnistumisen tunteita olet kokenut englannin opiskelun aikana? / What sort of successes have you experienced in relation to learning English?
6. Minkä luulet olevan näiden onnistumisten takana? / What do you think is the reason that has allowed you to succeed?
7. Millaisia vaikeuksia olet kokenut englannin opiskelun aikana? / What sort of difficulties have you experienced in relation to learning English?
8. Minkä luulet olevan näiden vaikeuksien takana? / What do you think is the reason behind these difficulties?
9. Luuletko, että onnistumisesi riippuu enemmän itsestäsi vai ympäristöstäsi? / Do you think your ability to succeed is dependant more on factors that stem from yourself or on factors that stem from your environment?
10. Olitko innostunut tai hyvä kielissä kouluaikoinasi? / Were you enthusiastic or good in languages growing up?
11. Millaisena näet itsesi ja taitosi kielten oppijana nyt verrattuna kielten oppimiseen nuoremmalla iällä? / How do you perceive yourself and your skills as a language learner now compared to learning languages at a younger age?
12. Kuinka koet sanaston/suullisen kielitaidon/kieliopin/muiden kielen osa-alueiden oppimisen – helpompaa vai vaikeampaa kuin ennen? / How do you experience the learning of vocabulary/oral skills/grammar/other areas of language – easier or more difficult than before?