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BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: Comparisons of two groups of Finnish university students

A Pro Gradu Thesis

by

Minna Rantala

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

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Minna Rantala
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Kiinnostus opiskelijoiden käsityksiin kielenoppimisesta on lisääntynyt viime vuosina, kun käsitysten vaikutus itse oppimisen tuloksiin on tiedostettu. Vaikka Suomessakin tätä aihetta on tutkittu jonkin verran, yliopisto-opiskelijoiden käsitykset englannin oppimisesta vieraana kielenä eivät vielä aikaisemmin ole olleet tutkimuksen kohteena.

Tämä pro gradu –tutkielma edustaa kognitiivista traditiota käsitysten tutkimisessa. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on pääasiassa määrällisten menetelmien avulla kuvailla ja kartoittaa suomalaisten yliopisto-opiskelijoiden käsityksiä englannin oppimisesta vieraana kielenä. Tutkimukseen osallistui yhteensä 148 opiskelijaa, jotka opiskelivat englantia (Ryhmä A, 10 miestä ja 53 naista) ja tietojenkäsittelyä (Ryhmä B, 59 miestä, 26 naista). Tutkimus pyrkii vertailemaan näiden kahden ryhmän käsityksiä englannin oppimisesta vieraana kielenä. Tämän lisäksi tutkimus raportoi mahdolliset ryhmien sisällä esiintyvät erot miesten ja naisten käsitysten välillä.

Tuloksia analysoitaessa käytettiin hyväksi tilastollisia testejä. Näiden testien avulla voitiin päätellä, että tilastollisesti merkitseviä eroja esiintyi ainoastaan ryhmien välillä. Erot liittyivät käsityksiin iän, sukupuolen ja motivaation merkityksestä englannin oppimisessa sekä yliopistossa käytettyjen englannin kielen opetusmenetelmien tasosta. Toisin sanoen, verrattaessa ryhmiä keskenään, Ryhmän A opiskelijat uskoivat toista ryhmää enemmän, että ikä ja motivaatio olivat tärkeässä asemassa oppimisprosessissa. Ryhmän B mielestä taas sukupuolella ei ollut niinkään merkitystä oppimissaavutuksissa. Muutoinkaan Ryhmän B mielestä miesten ja naisten välillä ei ollut eroja siinä, miten hyvin he oppivat englantia.

Tämän lisäksi ryhmien välillä oli myös eroja siinä, miksi he halusivat opiskella englantia, mitkä olivat heidän mielestään vaikeimmat ja tärkeimmät englannin osa-alueet, sekä siinä, mitkä tekijät erottivat englannin kielen oppimisen muiden aineiden oppimisesta kouluympäristössä. Ryhmien välinen vertailu paljasti, että Ryhmä A oli enemmän kiinnostunut oppimaan englantia pystyäkseen kommunikoimaan englantia puhuvien ihmisten kanssa. Heidän mielestään vaikeimmat englannin oppimisen osa-alueet olivat syntaksi ja kielioppi, kun taas toisen ryhmän mielestä ne olivat kielioppi ja ääntäminen. Ryhmän A mielestä oli myös tärkeämpää käyttää kieltä mahdollisimman paljon sekä opetella sanoja. Ryhmä B taas uskoi, että englannin opiskelu vaatii enemmän muistiinpainamista kuin muiden kouluaineiden opiskelu. Opettajat voivat hyödyntää näitä tutkimustuloksia käytännön työssään suunnitellessaan oppitunteja ja valitessaan opetusmenetelmiä.
Asiasanat: beliefs, metacognitive knowledge, language learning, learning English as a foreign language

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

In the field of applied linguistics, the interest in student beliefs (or metacognitive knowledge) about language learning is fairly recent, and that is why beliefs have been a topic of research only for some 20 years (Barcelos in press).[1] The interest has originated from research on learner autonomy and learner strategies (see e.g. Wenden and Rubin 1987). At first, beliefs about language learning were acknowledged as a part of individual learner differences (see e.g. Ellis 1994), but now they are seen as a separate entity directly affecting the language learning process and its outcomes (see e.g. Wenden 2001).

There are several approaches to studying beliefs about language learning. Kalaja (1995, in press) recognises two approaches, i.e. the mainstream approach (which she earlier called the current approach), based on cognitive representations and the discursive approach (which she earlier called the alternative approach), based on discursive construction.[2] As the present study represents the mainstream approach, let us take a closer look at the characteristics of this approach.

The mainstream approach sees language as a mirror, reflecting the beliefs that learners have in their minds (Kalaja 1995, in press). In addition, beliefs could be characterised as cognitive, stable, statable and fallible. The mainstream approach employs questionnaires (or interviews) as research methods, thus the data consist of retrospective self-reports and responses to questionnaire items. The data are subjected to quantitative analysis.

The aim of this descriptive study is to find out what kind of beliefs university students have about learning English as a foreign language. More precisely, the aim is to compare two groups of students, i.e. those participating in an English course (later referred to as Group A) and those taking a course in the computer science (later referred to as Group B). In addition, the present study will report on possible differences between men and women within these groups. The statistical significance of the results will be measured by using various statistical tests.

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[1] In the present study, the terms beliefs and metacognitive knowledge are used interchangeably to refer to what students know and believe about language learning in general, and learning English as a foreign language in particular. In addition, the concept of language learning is considered here to be the broad term for all the research that has been conducted on student beliefs. In other words, it comprises both language learning in a classroom setting and acquisition, which is seen to refer to naturalistic learning without any formal instruction.

[2] For another view on how to classify various approaches see Barcelos (in press).

The data for the present study will be gathered by using an adapted version of *the Assumptions about Language Learning* questionnaire (see Appendix 1), created by Victori (1992, as cited in Victori and Lockhart 1995). The original questionnaire employed a taxonomy based on Flavell's (1979, 1981a, 1981b) classification of metacognitive knowledge into person, task and strategic knowledge. However, for the purposes of the present study, only the first two categories were included in the questionnaire. In addition, some modifications were carried out systematically throughout the questionnaire. First of all, the focus was changed from language learning, in general to learning English as a foreign language, in particular. This modification can be seen in changes in wordings of different factors and questionnaire items. Furthermore, an additional option: *others* was included in each question to provide the students with an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs. And finally, some minor alterations took place in the translation phase.

The study is organised as follows. First, the concepts of metacognitive knowledge and beliefs will be defined as the pioneers Wenden and Horwitz see them. Next, the role that the beliefs have in language learning is discussed. After that, the studies on student beliefs by using a questionnaire will be reviewed. Before moving on to reporting the results, the aims and methods of the present study will be explained. The present study closes with a discussion of the statistically significant findings, evaluation of the study, and suggestions for future research.

2 DEFINITION OF TERMS WITHIN MAINSTREAM RESEARCH

In literature, various concepts have been used to refer to what students know and believe about language learning. Especially in the late 1980s, when research started focusing on this issue, there was a great variation in the terminology. The concepts used included, for example, metacognitive knowledge (Wenden 1987c), learner beliefs (Horwitz 1985, Wenden 1986a, Wenden 1986b, Wenden 1987a), learner representations (Holec 1987), learners' naive psychology of learning (Wenden 1987c), learners' philosophy of language learning (Abraham and Vann 1987), and theories-in-action (Wenden 1987b).

Of these concepts, metacognitive knowledge and learner beliefs are the ones that are presently most frequently used in research. However, scholars tend to define these concepts differently. For practical reasons, the present study will focus only on the definitions provided by the pioneers in this field, i.e. Wenden and Horwitz.

As metacognitive knowledge is seen as a broader concept including beliefs as a subset (Flavell 1979, 1987), it will be discussed first.

2.1 Metacognitive knowledge

Flavell (1979) was the first to introduce the concept of metacognitive knowledge into cognitive psychology. He defined the concept as knowledge about interacting factors that affect the course and outcome of cognitive processes. Flavell (1979, 1981a, 1981b) also claimed that there were three major categories of metacognitive knowledge, i.e. person, task and strategic knowledge. In addition, Flavell (1979) described the characteristics of metacognitive knowledge. Later on, Wenden (see e.g. 1987c) adopted the definition, categories and characteristics that Flavell had introduced and started using them in her studies on language learning.

In the following sections, I will first relate the concept of metacognitive knowledge into a broader concept introduced in cognitive psychology, i.e. metacognition. Then, I will focus on the various definitions and classifications of metacognitive knowledge. And finally, I will discuss the characteristics of metacognitive knowledge.

According to Flavell (1976:232), metacognition "refers to one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them". Later on, Wenden (1987c:573) is in the same line with Flavell, when claiming that metacognition is "related to knowledge about and the regulation of the domain of cognition". Furthermore, Wenden (1987c) states based on Pitts (1983) that metacognition has been shown to emerge in pre-school-children and increase with age. In Wenden's (1998, 1999) more recent studies, she also acknowledges that there are two complementary components under the broader notion of metacognition, which should be considered as separate and distinct (see also Brown et al. 1983). These components are metacognitive knowledge, referring to the information learners acquire about their learning, and metacognitive strategies, referring to general skills that learners use in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning (see also Brown et al. 1983). From these two, the concept of metacognitive knowledge is the one more interesting to us.

2.1.1 Definitions of metacognitive knowledge

As already mentioned, the concept of metacognitive knowledge is based on Flavell's (1979, 1981a, 1981b, 1987) studies in cognitive psychology. However, Wenden (1987c) was the first to use the concept in relation to what students know and believe about language learning. Yet, her definitions of the concept have changed to some extent during the time she has been conducting research on the issue.

In Wenden's (1986a, 1987b) earlier work, she equates metacognitive knowledge with beliefs. That is, she uses terms such as assumptions and explicit beliefs about language learning, and states that these are based on personal experience or the opinions of respected others. Later on, Wenden (1987c) mentions the concept metacognitive knowledge for the first time and offers an alternative name for it, i.e. learners' naïve psychology of learning. Accordingly, metacognitive knowledge "refers to the set of facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations" (Wenden 1987c:574). This definition is very much like the one Wenden uses presently, i.e. "metacognitive knowledge is the specialised portion of a learner's acquired knowledge base … which consist of what learners know about learning, and to the extent a learner has made distinctions, language learning" (Wenden 1999:435).

To put it more simply, metacognitive knowledge refers to learners' acquired "knowledge about learning" (Wenden 1998:516, 1999:435).

2.1.2 Categories of metacognitive knowledge

Based on Flavell's (1979, 1981a, 1981b) studies in cognitive psychology, Wenden (1987c, 1998) argues that there are three categories of metacognitive knowledge, i.e. person, task and strategic knowledge. These categories focus either on the learner, the learning task or the process of learning. Let us now take a closer look at these categories as Flavell and Wenden see them.

Person knowledge refers to everything that you could come to know or believe about yourself and other people as cognitive processors (Flavell 1979, 1981b). In other words, person knowledge is general knowledge about human factors that either facilitate or inhibit learning, according to Wenden (1998). More precisely, she claims that person knowledge includes beliefs about the influence of certain cognitive and affective variables (e.g. age, language aptitude, motivation), estimations about efficiency as learners, and on the ability to achieve specific learning goals.

Task knowledge refers to the managing of cognitive enterprises and the possible outcomes of this process (Flavell 1979). According to Wenden (1998), task knowledge has three facets. First, it refers to learners' knowledge about the purpose of a task and how it will serve their language learning needs (e.g. to expand their vocabulary, develop oral fluency). Secondly, it includes knowledge about the nature of a particular task (e.g. learning to read is different from learning to write), and finally, task knowledge refers to information about the demands of a task (e.g. how to learn in general, skills needed in completing a task).

Strategic knowledge refers to the information about what strategies are likely to be effective in achieving the learning goal (Flavell 1979). In other words, strategic knowledge is general knowledge about the nature and utility of strategies (Wenden 1987c). More precisely, strategic knowledge includes information about the strategies as such, why they are useful, and specific knowledge about when and how to use them (Wenden 1998).

2.1.3 Characteristics of metacognitive knowledge

From the late 1980s until now, the characteristics of metacognitive knowledge have changed only to some extent. Based on the studies of Flavell (1979) and Brown et al. (1983) in cognitive psychology, Wenden (1987c, 1991:35) claims that metacognitive knowledge is stable, statable, fallible and interactive. Stable means that the facts that we know are a permanent part of our store of knowledge, statable means that this information is available to awareness, and fallible that this information may not always be perfectly accurate. Finally, metacognitive knowledge is seen as interactive, functioning together with three other components (i.e. metacognitive experience, a learning task or goal, and cognitive actions or strategies) to influence the outcome of a cognitive enterprise.

Later on, Wenden (1998, 1999) explains these characteristics more specifically. In other words, she acknowledges that metacognitive knowledge is a relatively stable body of knowledge, which may change over time, though. This knowledge may be acquired formally or informally, and consciously (e.g. learners listen to teachers, parents, or peers providing them with advice about how to learn) or unconsciously (e.g. through observation and imitation). As learners gain in cognitive maturity, they may reflect on their learning processes and revise earlier assumptions or develop new ones. The statements about their language learning processes may, however, sometimes be arbitrary.

And now it is time to look at beliefs, another frequently used concept within mainstream research. By defining the concept, I will refer to the publications of Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988, 1999), as she is the pioneer on the issue of student beliefs about language learning. However, there is still some variation both in the terms and the definitions used.

2.2 Beliefs

In the late 1980s, Horwitz (1985:333, 1987:119, 1988:283) used several concepts to refer to what students know and believe about language learning, i.e. “preconceived ideas”, “notions”, and “beliefs”. However, even Horwitz (1987:119) herself seems to be bewildered by the “varying degrees of validity and numerous origins” of these beliefs how languages are learned and how they should be taught. That is why she

claims that the term "myth" might be a more accurate characterisation to beliefs (Horwitz 1987:119, 1988:293).

According to Horwitz (1985:333), it is important to study student beliefs, because they could "directly interfere with their understanding of and receptivity to the information" presented in the class. To put it more strongly, some of those ideas might even inhibit the learning. Later on, she further emphasises the role of beliefs by stating that they "would seem to have obvious relevance to the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz 1988:283). That is why, she calls for a systematic assessment of these beliefs (Horwitz 1985). In addition, Horwitz (1999) acknowledges that it is essential to understand learner beliefs because of the practical implications they have in learner strategies and planning appropriate language instruction. She also claims that beliefs potentially influence both learners' experience and their actions as language learners.

2.3 The terms used in the present study

As the previous sections show, there has been a great variety in the terms used. At present, metacognitive knowledge and beliefs are used most frequently to refer to what learners know and believe about language learning. Let us now briefly consider the relevance of these terms to the present study.

As Wenden (1998) claims, there is no clear consensus on the distinctions between knowledge and beliefs, although the choice of one term instead of the other could be considered as a tacit recognition that there is a difference. According to Alexander and Dochy (1995), the basic distinction between knowledge and beliefs is that knowledge has an objective origin, while beliefs are more based on subjective experiences. In other words, knowledge is considered as factual, objective information, acquired through formal learning, while beliefs are viewed as representing individual understandings, their idiosyncratic truths. Beliefs are also distinct from metacognitive knowledge in that they are value rated and tend to be held more tenaciously.[3]

[3] For more information on the distinctions between beliefs and knowledge, see e.g. Abelson (1979, as quoted in Nespor 1987).

Although there seems to be some differences between the concepts of metacognitive knowledge and beliefs, this view is not shared by all of the researchers. For example, Pajares (1992) has admitted that the task of distinguishing beliefs from knowledge is a daunting experience. Furthermore, in research literature on the various aspects of language learning the terms beliefs and metacognitive knowledge are nevertheless sometimes used interchangeably (see e.g. Kalaja 1995, Wenden 1998, Wenden 1999). This is perhaps because learner beliefs are viewed as a subset of metacognitive knowledge (Flavell 1979, 1987).

Because of this, the present study will not make a distinction between the concepts used, either. In other words, metacognitive knowledge and beliefs are used interchangeably to refer to what students know and believe about language learning. The present study will, however, employ the classification of metacognitive knowledge (or beliefs) into person, task and strategic knowledge as suggested by Flavell (1979, 1981a, 1981b).

3 THE ROLE OF BELIEFS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

In this chapter I will try to explain the role that beliefs have in language learning. This will be done by discussing beliefs as a part of individual learner differences, and explaining the way in which beliefs are seen to influence language learning processes and outcomes.

3.1 Individual learner differences

The interest in investigating the factors affecting language learning processes began, as it was recognised that some learners approach the language learning task in more successful ways than others (Rubin 1987, Ellis 1994: 469). When the cause of this variation between learners was investigated, three interrelating factors were identified: external factors, internal factors and individual learner differences (Ellis 1994:193). The first of these factors refers to the social factors, i.e. to the setting in which the learning takes place. The second one could be interpreted as a learner's existing knowledge and the internal mechanisms that guide the process of language learning. The third factor is most significant considering the present study, as it includes beliefs about language learning as one of the factors causing individual variation in learning processes and outcomes. Other variables that are included in individual learner differences are e.g. age, sex, attitude, motivation, personality, aptitude and learning strategies (Ellis 1994: 193,471-472).

Researchers have, however, various opinions about the factors that should be included in individual learner differences (see e.g. Abraham and Vann 1987, Wen and Johnson 1997). In addition, the relationship between individual learner differences and language learning outcomes has also been under discussion. While some think that the relationship is an indirect one (see e.g. Abraham and Vann 1987), some believe that there is a direct link between beliefs and success (see Ellis 1994).

3.2 Models for investigating the role of beliefs in language learning

All the models that will be discussed here have a somewhat different view about the factors that could be grouped under the concept of individual learner differences. In addition, the models view the relationship between beliefs and language learning

beliefs differently (i.e. beliefs are seen to affect the outcomes of language learning either indirectly or directly). Let us now take a look at these models by starting with the ones that advocate an indirect relationship and by closing with one that emphasises a direct, yet interrelated relationship.

In the first model (see Figure 1), Abraham and Vann (1987:96-97) define beliefs as "a *philosophy* (emphasis original) of how language is learned". This philosophy is affected by variables in a learner's background (i.e. intelligence, personality, education, and cognitive style) and by environmental factors (i.e. formal/informal instruction and practice). Thus, Abraham and Vann propose that individual learner differences could be grouped into several subcategories (i.e. background factors, and actual beliefs) that have different effects on learning outcomes. In addition, they claim that the philosophy (i.e. beliefs) that learners possess at some level of their consciousness will affect the ultimate success (or failure) in language learning through strategies. More precisely, the beliefs that learners hold guide the approach they adopt in language learning. This approach is then, in turn, expressed in (different) learning and communication strategies that affect the degree of success learners achieve. The model is illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Abraham and Vann's (1987:96-97) model of language learning.

Ellis (1994: 530) is mostly in line with Abraham and Vann (1987) when presenting his model of language learning (see Figure 2). In other words, although Ellis' list of individual learner differences is to some extent different from that of Abraham and Vann, both models claim that the relationship between beliefs and learning outcomes is an indirect one, and that beliefs affect outcomes through learning strategies. More precisely, Ellis sees that individual learner differences (i.e. beliefs, affective states, learner factors, and previous learning experience), and situational and social factors (i.e. target language, setting, task performed, and sex) are equally important in determining learners' choice of learning strategies (i.e. the quantity and type of strategies). Learning strategies, in turn, influence two aspects of learning outcomes: the rate of learning and the ultimate level of achievement. This framework in provided in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Ellis' (1994:530) conception of the relationship between individual learner differences, situational and social factors, learning strategy, and learning outcomes.

The third model (see Figure 3) represents Wen and Johnson's (1997:28-30) view of how the various factors affect language learning. Compared to the previous models, this model distinguishes between two types of learner factors: unmodifiable (i.e. intelligence, aptitude, sex, age, and prior learning) and modifiable variables (i.e. learning purposes, beliefs, effort, management strategies, and language learning strategies). The variables are quite similar to those mentioned before, but their role is different. In other words, modifiable variables differ from unmodifiable variables in the sense that they are more open to intervention and therefore of particular interest to teachers and learners seeking to optimise language learning outcomes. In addition, beliefs may influence language learning either directly or indirectly, through the variables that follow (i.e. effort, management strategies, and language learning strategies).

Let us now briefly look at the model as a whole. According Wen and Johnson (1997:28-30), the model consists of three parts: non-learner factors, learner factors and outcomes (or presage, process and product as based on Biggs 1987). Non-learner factors could be further divided into environmental and institutional factors, and learner factors into unmodifiable and modifiable factors. Non-learner factors and unmodifiable learner factors (i.e. presage) establish the environmental, institutional, and individual constraints upon learning. Process factors (i.e. modifiable learner factors) contribute most immediately to the product, which in this case is achievement in learning English.

What is interesting about this model is the role that these various factors have in affecting learning outcomes. The model assumes that non-learner factors and unmodifiable learner variables (e.g. intelligence and aptitude) influence learning outcomes either directly or less directly through modifiable learner variables (e.g. beliefs). In addition, modifiable variables (e.g. learning purposes, beliefs and effort) are assumed to influence English achievement either directly, or indirectly through

the variables that follow (i.e. effort, management strategies, and language learning strategies). Thus, according to this model, beliefs influence language learning outcomes either directly, or indirectly through e.g. strategies. The model is illustrated in Figure 3:

Figure 3. Wen and Johnson's (1997:28-30) conceptual model of factors affecting language learning.

The last model (see Figure 4) to be discussed here, differs in many respects from the ones, mentioned above. First of all, Ellis (1994:472-474) sees individual learner differences as consisting of three main factors that are interrelated. In other words, beliefs about language learning, affective states (e.g. attitudes and affective states) and general factors (e.g. language aptitude, motivation, age, learning style) influence each other. Secondly, Ellis claims that the relationship between beliefs and language learning outcomes is not only one-directional, but reciprocal (i.e. beliefs are seen to influence language learning outcomes and vice versa). And thirdly, Ellis argues for the interrelated nature of all the factors in his model. That is, individual learner differences, learner strategies and language learning outcomes (i.e. proficiency, achievement, and rate of learning) are seen to influence each other in the learning process, as shown in Figure 4:

Figure 4. Ellis' (1994:472-474) framework for investigating the interrelated nature of factors influencing learning processes and mechanisms.

As these models show, researchers have seen the role of individual learner differences (i.e. beliefs) in language learning somewhat differently. Yet, all the models show that beliefs are one of the important determinants in success in language learning.[4]

And now, it is time to look at the studies on student beliefs that have been

[4] For a recent discussion on the influence of beliefs on the learning process and its outcomes see e.g. Cotterall (1999a), Victori (1999a), and Yang (1999). For more specific information on the relationship between beliefs and autonomous language learning see e.g. Victori and Lockhart (1995), Cotterall (1995, 1999a), and White (1999); between beliefs and proficiency see e.g. Mantle-Bromley (1995) and Peacock (1999); between beliefs and anxiety see e.g. Young (1991); between beliefs and sex see e.g. Bacon and Finnemann (1992), and between beliefs and strategies in interpreting unfamiliar words

conducted within mainstream research by using a questionnaire.

in a target language see e.g. Mori (1999a).

4 STUDIES ON STUDENT BELIEFS BY USING A QUESTIONNAIRE

Student beliefs about language learning have been studied by using various methods in the last 20 years.[5] Yet, as the present study represents mainstream research (or the current approach) described by Kalaja (1995, in press), it will focus on discussing studies that have been conducted by using a questionnaire. This chapter aims to give a picture of the broad field of studying student beliefs about language learning, by viewing some of the most recent studies and their results.[6] I will start, however, by discussing the results of the first study that was conducted on student beliefs, i.e. the study by Horwitz (1987).

As one of the pioneers in this field of research, Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988, 1999) developed *the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) in order to assess students' and teachers' opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning. The inventory resulted from language teachers' free-recall protocols, from foreign language teacher educators, and from group discussions of ESL (English as second language) and foreign language students. According to Horwitz, the instrument can be used for purposes of research and training: it can be used in describing students' and teachers' views of language learning, and it may act as a discussion stimuli. Three versions of the questionnaire were written: one teacher version and two student versions, one of them in standard English and the other in simplified language for use with ESL students. The items used in the instruments were quite similar, only words such as "learning" were replaced with "teaching" in developing the teacher version of the BALLI. The inventory covered five areas of language learning:

1. foreign language aptitude,
2. the difficulty of language learning,
3. the nature of language learning,
4. learning and communication strategies, and
5. motivations.

[5] For reviews of studies using different methods, see e.g. Kalaja (1995, in press) and Barcelos (in press).

[6] For practical reasons, the present study will focus on reporting student beliefs about language learning. However, for a discussion on teacher beliefs, I suggest the following studies. For a discussion on the nature of teacher beliefs, see e.g. Pajares (1992) and Borg (2001), for a review of research on teacher beliefs and practices, see e.g. Zhihui (1996), and for a comparison between

Finally, the questionnaire was pilot tested for clarity and comprehensiveness with 150 foreign language students.

Horwitz (1987) investigated beliefs about language learning on 32 ESL students, at the intensive university English program in the USA. The students responded to the 34 Likert-scale items by choosing one of the five alternatives from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Next, the results of the study will be reviewed by selecting one highly scored item from each factor. Almost 85% of the ESL students agreed that "everyone can learn to speak a foreign language", while 75% of them believed that "some languages are easier to learn than others". The language they were trying to learn (i.e. English), was in their opinion at least of "average difficulty". Consistently with the ESL students' decision to study in the USA, they felt very strongly (94%) that "it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country." In reference to the traditional learning strategies, the students strongly agreed (over 95%) that was is important to "repeat and practice a lot." They were also motivated to learn English: the majority of students (78%) associated the ability to speak English with "better job opportunities" and almost 90% stated that they "would like to have American friends".

The BALLI inventory has been an influential instrument until recently and many studies have been conducted either directly applying the items or slightly modifying them to better adapt to different cultural contexts. According to Horwitz (1999), the BALLI has been used in at least 13 published studies (see e.g. Kern 1995) and doctoral dissertations with a variety of student and teacher populations since its publication. Using the BALLI questionnaire, beliefs have been studied in relation to learner strategies (Yang 1999), and cultural and situational differences (Horwitz 1999). Let us now take a closer look at these studies.

Yang (1999) studied the relationship between college EFL (English as a foreign language) students' beliefs about language learning and the use of their learning strategies. A total of 505 university students in Taiwan participated in the study. The study was conducted by using *the English Learning Questionnaire*, which was composed of Horwitz's (1987) BALLI inventory, Oxford's (1990) *the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) and a few questions that were designed by the author. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese, pilot tested and modified for the study.

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teacher and student beliefs, see e.g. Kern (1995) and Peacock (1999).

According to Yang (1999), factor analysis on BALLI items identified four factors that constituted the learners' beliefs about language learning:

1. self-efficacy and expectation about learning English,
2. perceived value and nature of learning spoken English,
3. beliefs about foreign language aptitude, and
4. beliefs about formal structural studies (items included in this factor emphasise e.g. translation, memorisation, and learning of grammar).

The factors identified in Yang's (1999) study differ to some extent from the classification that Horwitz (1987) used (e.g. the factors and their number was different). However, Yang emphasised that the factor analysis was an exploratory one and it did not explain why certain items fell into one factor instead of another.

The study by Yang (1999) shows that the subjects had a strong sense of self-efficacy about learning English, as approximately 80% of the students thought that they would learn to speak English very well. The subjects also believed in the importance and usefulness of speaking English and expressed a strong interest in learning spoken English. The concept of special abilities for foreign language learning was generally endorsed, as 85% agreed with the statement: "Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages." Beliefs about formal structural studies (i.e. the importance of e.g. translation, memorisation, and learning of grammar) divided the subjects' opinions more than the previous factors: some of the students supported traditional teaching methods that emphasise grammar and translation, while some rejected those methods. All in all, the findings were generally in line with the results that Horwitz (1987) had gained in her study.

In addition to the BALLI questionnaire, Yang (1999) used also *the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) questionnaire. Factor analysis on SILL items identified six factors for the learner's language learning strategies:

1. functional practice strategies,
2. cognitive-memory strategies,
3. metacognitive strategies,
4. formal oral-practice strategies,
5. social strategies, and
6. compensation strategies.

The study showed that formal oral-practice strategies for speaking English was considered important, as the majority of the EFL students endorsed the significance of excellent pronunciation (97%) and the need to repeat and practice a lot (98%). In addition, the students used compensation strategies, such as making guesses to understand unfamiliar English words (93%). Social strategies were described as actions that involve other people, and 90% of the students tried to ask other people to slow down or repeat when they did not understand something when participating in English conversation. The most frequently used metacognitive strategies (i.e. planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's language learning) included finding out a better way to learn English (90%) and monitoring their learning process for errors (83%). Some of the popular functional practice strategies (i.e. seeking opportunities to practice English) used by the students included: watching English TV shows or movies spoken in English or listening to English radio programs (84%). The EFL students used also various cognitive-memory strategies that will consequently facilitate the memory process (i.e. direct analysis of the target language, transformation, association or synthesis of the target language). The students, for example, created associations between new material and what they already knew (80%) or divided words for meaning (78%).

When investigating correlations between the two sets of variables (i.e. resulting from BALLI and SILL), Yang (1999) found that the students' self-efficacy beliefs were strongly related to their use of all types of learning strategies, especially functional practice strategies. In other words, these students would actively create opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Another correlation was found between the value and nature of learning spoken English and the use of formal oral-practice strategies. The students wanted to learn to speak English very well, and thus focused on the practise of pronunciation. That is, they were interested in learning formal aspects of English, rather than functional or communicative use of the language. Yang also suggested cyclical relationships between learners' beliefs, motivation and strategy use.

In her review of BALLI studies, Horwitz (1999) tried to identify cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning. The results suggest that although there are some differences in beliefs between and among different cultural groups, the responses to individual BALLI items do not yield clear-cut cultural differences. In her opinion, within-group differences (related

to e.g. individual characteristics, differences in language learning circumstances) could be seen causing as much variation as cultural differences.

And now it is time to look at three other studies that have been conducted by using a questionnaire. First, I will discuss a study of Mori (1999b) and then a study of Cotterall (1999a). Finally, I will review a study conducted by Sakui and Gaies (1999).

Mori (1999b) investigated college students' beliefs about learning in general (i.e. epistemological beliefs) and beliefs specifically about language learning. The sample consisted of 187 American college students learning Japanese as a foreign language. The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between the two belief domains and to investigate, whether these learner beliefs and achievement are connected. The instrument used in the study originated from Schommer's (1990, 1995 as quoted in Mori 1999b) earlier work in this field of research. The belief questionnaire consisted of a 40-item epistemological belief questionnaire, a 92-item language learning belief questionnaire, and a student information questionnaire.

When a factor analysis was employed on the questionnaire items, five dimensions of general epistemological beliefs and six dimensions of language learning beliefs were identified. Factor analysis identified the following five factors for epistemological beliefs:

1. quick learning,
2. simple knowledge,
3. dependence on authority,
4. attainability of the truth, and
5. innate ability.

When the same procedure was applied to the language learning belief questionnaire, the following six factors were identified:

1. kanji is difficult,
2. analytic approach,
3. risk taking,
4. avoid ambiguity,
5. Japanese is easy, and
6. reliance on L1 (i.e. mother tongue).

The findings show that although there were some correlations between these belief factors (e.g. a positive correlation between dependence on authority and reliance on L1, and a negative correlation between quick learning and risk taking), students' beliefs about learning in general and language learning, in particular, could be mostly characterised as independent constructs.

Cotterall (1999a) reports on a study that was based on a questionnaire and investigated language learning beliefs of a total of 131 multicultural English university students in New Zealand.[7] The aim of the study was to identify factors, which literature had suggested were important in successful second language acquisition (SLA). Based on earlier studies (e.g. Cotterall 1995), Cotterall designed a questionnaire, which investigated learner beliefs about six key variables:

1. the role of the teacher,
2. the role of feedback,
3. the learner's sense of self-efficacy,
4. important strategies,
5. dimensions of strategies-related behaviour (e.g. knowledge of a given strategy, confidence to adopt a given strategy), and
6. the nature of language learning.

Let's now take a closer look at the results that have scored the highest and their relation to the six variables. The majority of the subjects felt that the teacher's role was to help students learn effectively (97,6%) and to discuss their progress with them (83,6%). The subjects had also more confidence in the teacher as a source of feedback (53,1%) than in themselves (46,6%). When the students were asked about their sense of self-efficacy, the majority believed that they had the ability to learn a language successfully (87,6%). Responses to items related to learning strategies revealed that the subjects had knowledge of these strategies, in other word, they e.g. knew how to ask for help in learning (86,2%). More precisely, when the dimensions of strategies-related behaviour (e.g. knowledge of a given strategy, confidence to adopt a given strategy) were investigated, the majority of the subjects were confident

[7] Although Cotterall's (1999a) study was based on a questionnaire, she used also some qualitative data in her study (e.g. the subjects were asked to write a letter to a friend providing advice on language learning). However, the article reports only on the data gained from the questionnaire.

(77%) and willing to ask for help in their learning (88,4%), and also accepted the responsibility for it (89,2%). The last variable of the study was concerned with beliefs about the nature of language learning. Within that variable, the majority of the subjects believed that making mistakes was normal (96,1%) and that different people learned languages in different ways (93%).

The last study that will be reviewed here was conducted by Sakui and Gaies (1999) and focused mostly on methodological issues (i.e. the value of interview data to complement and explain questionnaire data), unlike the other studies. Sakui and Gaies investigated almost 1300 Japanese university learners' beliefs about language learning by using a 45-item questionnaire. The instrument was developed by examining existing questionnaires and by creating additional items based on the feedback received from English teachers. The aim of the study was to validate the questionnaire used and to investigate the value of interview data in complementing questionnaire data. In addition, the researchers' goal was to describe the beliefs of Japanese EFL learners and to determine, through factor analysis, how those beliefs were organised. To estimate the reliability of the questionnaire the researchers employed the test-retest method (i.e. students in a sub-sample group responded twice to the questionnaire in order to investigate the consistency of their responses) and the alternate-forms method (i.e. to measure the effect of different item wordings). In addition, with the help of interview data the researchers tried better to explain questionnaire data.

The study shows that the questionnaire used had instrument reliability, as the students were consistent in their responses to the questionnaire items. This conclusion was based on a test-retest comparison and on evidence from interview data. Some inconsistencies that were found in the students' responses were seen as an indication of change in the learners' beliefs over time or due to different situations. On some occasions the students did not interpret the items as the researchers had intended. In order to investigate how beliefs about language learning were organised, a factor analysis was performed. As a result, the following four belief factors were identified:

1. beliefs about a contemporary (communicative) orientation to learning English,
2. beliefs about a traditional orientation to learning English,

3. beliefs about the quality and sufficiency of classroom instruction for learning English, and
4. beliefs about foreign-language aptitude and difficulty.

As these studies suggest, there is variation even among the studies on student beliefs that have been conducted by using a questionnaire. First of all, the context in which the studies have been conducted varies to some extent. In other words, while some studies investigate beliefs about learning (see e.g. Mori 1999b), some focus more specifically on beliefs that are related to language learning (see e.g. Yang 1999). In addition, there are differences between the studies in their special focus. That is, some studies made a distinction between learning (i.e. learning in a classroom setting) and acquisition (i.e. naturalistic learning, without any formal instruction). More specifically, distinctions were made between learning English as a second language (see e.g. Horwitz 1987) and learning English as foreign language (see e.g. Yang 1999). From these two, ESL students learn English in a target language environment, while EFL students do not.

Secondly, the topics of these studies vary. For example, Horwitz (1987) aimed at describing the various beliefs that the students have, while the purpose of Yang's (1999) study was to establish a connection between beliefs and the use of different strategies. Thirdly, the countries and thus cultures in which these studies have been made vary. For example, Mori (1999b) conducted her study in the USA, while Cotterall (1999a) investigated multicultural English university students in New Zealand. Fourthly, the characteristics of the subjects vary. In other words, their educational background, age, and stage in learning varies to some extent. For example, Mori (1999b) studied American college students who were learning Japanese as a foreign language, while the subjects of Yang's (1999) study were Taiwanese university students who had studied English formally for seven years. And finally, most of the studies use different kinds of questionnaires that consist of various factors and items. For instance, Yang (1999) uses the BALLI questionnaire that was developed by Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988), but employs different factors. The instrument that Mori (1999b) used, was based on Schommer's (1990, 1995 as quoted in Mori 1999b) earlier work, but employed somewhat different categories that were based on a factor analysis. As we see from these examples, sometimes the items in questionnaires are grouped a priori into logically-derived categories (see e.g.

Horwitz 1987), while sometimes these categories are empirically-derived (i.e. categories are identified on the basis of statistical procedure, such as factor analysis; see e.g. Yang 1999, Sakui and Gaies 1999).

As this discussion shows, there is great variety even among studies that have been conducted by using a questionnaire. However, all of these studies aim at providing further information about student beliefs. More importantly, all the researchers emphasise the importance of studying student beliefs because of their effects on the learning process, i.e. the success of the task. Similarities are also found between these studies on the surface structure. In other words, some of the factors and individual items are mentioned in several studies. That is, many studies have included in factors that represent e.g. various language learning strategies, and the nature of language learning (see e.g. Horwitz 1987 and Cotterall 1999a).

To conclude, the differences in research on student beliefs begin with focus of the studies and end up with the instruments used. However, all the studies aim at finding out more about the nature of beliefs and the meaning they have in language learning.

And now it is time to look at the present study, its aims and methodological considerations.

5 THE PRESENT STUDY

This chapter discusses the aims and methods of the present study. First, the motivation will be considered by briefly reviewing studies that have been conducted in Finland within the mainstream research. Then, the research questions and issues of methodology, i.e. the subjects and the instrument of the present study, will be discussed. And finally, the procedures in data collection and processing will be reviewed.

5.1 Aim of the present study

5.1.1 Motivation for the present study

The purpose of the present study is to survey Finnish university students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language. In the following, the studies that have been conducted on student beliefs in Finland within mainstream research will be briefly discussed.[8] The studies are presented in a chronological order.

Annola and Saarelainen (1994) were the first to study Finnish EFL learners' beliefs about language learning. The study was descriptive and based mainly on the BALLI questionnaire, developed by Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988). The aim was to report on the learners' beliefs and compare them with the results of earlier studies. In addition, the study also investigated whether background variables, such as age, gender and success in English had an influence on the learners' beliefs. The questionnaire consisted of 49 Likert-scale items, which were written in Finnish and reorganised for the presentation of the results. That is, instead of keeping to Horwitz's five classes of beliefs, the items were reorganised according to Flavell's (1979) classification of person, task and strategic knowledge. The sample of the study consisted of 122 pupils, one half of 8th graders of the comprehensive school ('peruskoulu') and another half of 2nd graders of the upper secondary school ('lukio').

The results of the study by Annola and Saarelainen (1994) show that pupils possessed certain beliefs that were more or less similar to each other. For instance,

[8] Only those studies that focus specifically on student beliefs will be reviewed here. However, for a discussion on English teachers' views on language and language use see Myllymäki (1992) and for children's views of foreign languages see Sorvari (1995).

the great majority (86%) of them believed that it was easier for a child than an adult to learn a language. In addition, the majority (83%) considered language learning important for Finns. In relation of task knowledge, the pupils valued highly all aspects of language. That is, they thought that learning vocabulary (86%) was the most important and learning grammar (53%) the least important aspect of language. The students answers to strategic knowledge –section show that they believed (56% strongly) the best way to learn English would be to live in an English-speaking country. In addition, watching TV (86%) and reading (82%) were also effective ways of learning the language. Annola and Saarelainen concluded that the results were mostly in line with the results of Horwitz's (1985, 1987, 1988) previous studies in the USA with foreign language and ESL students. The belief differences that were found could, in their opinion, be explained by the different learning contexts. Furthermore, the results suggested that certain background factors (i.e. age, grade in English, stay in an English-speaking country, reading English magazines and books, and writing in English) had an influence on the students' beliefs. Gender, on the other hand, had no effect on beliefs.

Hokkanen (1996) investigated the metacognitive knowledge of four 9th graders of the comprehensive school, boys and girls, unsuccessful in English. Data for this case study was gathered by conducting three semi-structured interviews with each learner. The procedures for the interviews were adapted from Wenden (1986b, 1987b), and the classification of metacognitive knowledge into person, task and strategic knowledge was based on Flavell (1979) and Wenden (1991). Besides the interview, the learners also filled in a diary for a week to facilitate retrospection. In addition, background information about the learners was gained from some school documents and an interview with the learners' teacher. The results suggest that the learners' common metacognitive knowledge of second language learning was sensible. For instance, the subjects thought that it was important for the learner to be motivated, and to have a positive attitude. In addition, an active and responsible role in the learning process was considered significant. Although there were some differences in the subjects' metacognitive knowledge, their beliefs did not suggest any great obstacles for their learning. Consequently, Hokkanen suggests that success in English studies might not be such an important factor in shaping learner's metacognitive knowledge.

More recently, Elsinen (2000) studied some 370 first year university students'

views about learning foreign languages. The study was qualitative in nature, and conducted by using a semi-structured questionnaire, which also included an imaginative writing task as an application of role-playing. The results show that although there was variation in the interpretation of the concept "language skills", the skills were generally considered very important. The students' previous language learning experiences were mostly (48%) positive and related to school context. However, some (26%) students had a negative view about themselves as language learners and stated that teachers had been the biggest obstacles to success in language studies. The students' genuine language learning contacts appeared to have been of brief duration and random. When rating their own language skills, the majority of the students stated that they had studied three languages, but claimed to have a command of only two. Regarding the perceived need to learn languages, study and work featured centrally in the students' responses. English was the language they thought they needed most, followed by Swedish and German. For the most part, the students' attitudes to studying languages at university were very positive, and they did not think there were any differences between studying languages and other subjects.

As these studies show, student beliefs about language have been investigated in Finland to some extent, but only Elsinen (2000) studied beliefs of university students. Yet, the focus and research methodology of the study were somewhat different from the present study. That is, Elsinen investigated beliefs on a more general level, in relation to foreign languages. In addition, the study was qualitative in nature, and did not generally report results numerically. To conclude, these studies leave the question of university students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language pretty much unanswered.

5.1.2 Research questions

The aim of the present study is to describe the beliefs that Finnish university students' have about learning English as a foreign language. More specifically, the aim of the present study is to compare the beliefs of two groups of students: those taking a course in English (i.e. Group A) and those taking a course in computer science (i.e. Group B). In addition, the present study will report on possible differences between men's and women's answers within these two groups. The first

research question will be dealt with in more detail, by looking at one question at a time and by comparing the most frequently mentioned answers in both groups. The aim of the second research question is to give some additional information concerning the role of sex as a possible factor influencing the students' beliefs. Thus, the belief differences between men and women will be briefly discussed in footnotes.

5.2 Research methodology

5.2.1 Subjects

The main reason for choosing university students to be investigated was the fact that in Finland research had not yet focused on their beliefs about learning English as a foreign language. To receive a general view on students' beliefs a decision was made to obtain as large a sample as possible. This was done by conducting the study on courses that were lecture-based, as it would be easy to reach a number of students at the same time that way.

The original idea was to study beliefs of students that were learning English at the university. However, as foreign language learners had already been the focus group of many studies world-wide (see e.g. Horwitz 1987, Yang 1999, Mori 1999b), a decision was made to select an additional focus group that had other field of study than foreign languages. This was done to ensure that the results might be more generalised to all Finnish university students. Because of these decisions, the focus of the research changed somewhat and thus the research questions were reformulated. In other words, the aim was now to compare the beliefs that these two student groups had about learning English as a foreign language. In addition, comparisons were also made between men and women within these two student groups.

The subjects were recruited from two basic studies courses offered at the University of Jyväskylä in the spring of 2000. The sample consisted thus of two groups of students: those taking a course in English (i.e. Group A), and those studying the computer science (i.e. Group B). On the English course, there were present 63 (10 male and 53 female) students who filled in the questionnaire. On the

computer science course, the corresponding number was 85 (59 male and 26 female students).

5.2.2 Questionnaire

The aim of the present study is to describe the beliefs that Finnish university students have about learning English as a foreign language. More specifically, the aim is to compare the beliefs of two student groups, and also the answers of men and women within these groups. The fact that there has been no prior studies conducted on the particular issue influenced very much the decision-making procedure.

A descriptive, quantitative study was thought to give the preliminary kind of information about the university students' beliefs. Furthermore, one of the major advantages of using a questionnaire is that it allows a relatively large sample (Seliger and Shohamy 2000:126), and due to that the results could be generalised to some extent. With the use of a questionnaire, data could be gathered rather easily and quickly.

More specifically, survey was chosen as a method of study as it offers a relatively simple and straightforward approach to the study of phenomena which are not easily observed such as beliefs, attitudes, and opinions (Robson, 1997:128, Hirsjärvi et al. 2000:184, Seliger and Shohamy 2000:172). Furthermore, the questionnaire allows the subjects total anonymity, which would make them easier to give sensitive information about their beliefs. And since the same questionnaire is given to all subjects, the data will be more uniform and standard (Seliger and Shohamy 2000:172). In addition, a questionnaire also forces the subjects to consider various aspects of beliefs that may not come up in the course of an interview or a discussion (Benson and Lor 1999).

As the data were gathered by using a questionnaire, the data could be rather quickly entered on a computer and analysed with the already existing methods (Hirsjärvi et al. 2000:182). That is, comparisons could be made between the two sample groups, as well as the answers of men and women within these two groups. In addition, statistical procedures could be applied to evaluate whether the differences in frequencies are statistically significant.

After a survey was chosen as a research method, the decision had to be made

about what kind of a questionnaire would be used in the present study. As earlier research shows (see Chapter 4), beliefs about language learning offer many interesting areas of study. More precisely, each study employs a focus of its own, slightly different from what has been done before. Thus, the problem of the present study was in choosing what areas of beliefs about language learning should be included in the questionnaire and how to investigate these factors. After reviewing the questionnaires used in the earlier studies, a decision was made to conduct the study by slightly modifying *the Assumptions about Language Learning* (ALL) questionnaire, designed by Victori (1992, as quoted in Victori and Lockhart 1995).

There were several reasons for the choice of the ALL questionnaire. The main reason was the fact that the Victori's (1992, as quoted in Victori and Lockhart 1995) questionnaire had the broadest focus. The taxonomy that the study employed was based on Flavell's (1979, 1981a, 1981b) classification of metacognitive knowledge, which was adapted for language learning by Wenden (1987c), and further expanded by Victori (1992, as quoted in Victori and Lockhart 1995). According to Flavell (1979, 1981a, 1981b), the metacognitive knowledge consists of person, task and strategic knowledge. The first category encompasses the beliefs one has about the nature of oneself and other people as cognitive processors, while the second category concerns the information on how the cognitive enterprise should best be managed and the possibility of achieving the goal. The third category focuses particularly on the strategies (i.e. cognitive and metacognitive strategies) that are effective in the various cognitive undertakings (i.e. in reading, writing, listening and speaking). For practical reasons, the present study concentrated on the first two categories.

For the purposes of the present study, some modifications were carried out in the taxonomy. The aim of these modifications was to change the focus from language learning, in general to learning English as a foreign language, in particular. This meant changing the names of some factors, e.g. Inherent difficulty of languages was renamed as Inherent difficulty of English. The aim of these modifications was also to remove the detected mismatch between the taxonomy and *the Assumptions about Language Learning* questionnaire. For instance, the factor: Language of instruction was left out, as the corresponding question could not be found for it. In addition, the factor: Time needed to learn was moved to appear later on in the taxonomy, in accordance with the actual question for this factor. The categories for

the present study are provided in Table 1:

Table 1. A taxonomy of metacognitive knowledge in learning English as a foreign language, as used in the present study.

PERSON KNOWLEDGE

Universal attributes of learners
- Talent
- Age
- Sex
- Intelligence
- Motivation
- Personality
- Learning style

Sociocultural factors
Family factors
Educational background
Intraindividual factors
Self-assessment

TASK KNOWLEDGE

Purpose and goal of learning English
Inherent difficulty of English
Nature of learning English
- Kind of learning
- Nature of different skills
  - Writing
  - Reading
  - Speaking
  - Listening

Learning in different settings
- In the native country / In the classroom
- Time needed to learn

Learning in the classroom setting
- Task responsibilities
- Roles (teacher / student / classmates)
- Working in groups, pairs, alone
- Error treatment
- Activities
- Materials and media

The ALL questionnaire was also interesting, because it offered multiple-choice responses. It may be argued that these multiple-choice responses allow students to choose from meaningful answer options and thus specify the reasons

underlying their beliefs, an important aspect which Likert-scale questions do not usually offer.

As mentioned, the focus of the ALL questionnaire was slightly modified from language learning, in general to learning English as a foreign language, in particular. This alteration was carried out systematically, only a few questions remained unchanged. Furthermore, each question received an additional option: *others*, under which the students could write down their own replies if they were not able to choose one from the options provided. This was done to ensure that the students' own voice would be heard.

The translation of the questionnaire created some changes, too. These changes can mostly be seen in wordings, as it was sometimes difficult to find an exact translation for an English term. On some occasions it was necessary, for example, to include an example after a question to make sure that the students would understand the question in the same way.

5.2.3 Data collection and processing

The data were collected during the basic studies level courses of English (i.e. Group A) and the computer science (i.e. Group B) at the university of Jyväskylä after receiving the lecturers' oral permission to carry out the study. The aim was to collect the data before the Easter break, on 18th and 19th of April of 2000, but the test had to be repeated on the English course shortly after the Easter break to gain more responses. From the total of 148 questionnaires (63 from the English course and 85 from the computer science course) almost all were properly filled in, as only one student did not respond to some questions and one student did not return the questionnaire at all.

On the English course, the collection of the data took place at the beginning of the lecture. The researcher introduced herself and explained the purpose of the study. She also explained how to answer the questions, although the same instructions were to be found in the questionnaires as well in writing. The researcher also encouraged the students to ask if they had any questions, as she was going to be present for the whole time that it would take to fill in the questionnaire. After this, the questionnaires were distributed in the class. The researcher advised the students

that she would collect the questionnaires after they had finished filling in them. As some of the students arrived late, the researcher gave them the instructions separately. Most of the students who arrived late were nevertheless able to fill in the questionnaire in approximately 25 minutes. Only two students did not finish the questionnaire in time and were advised to return the questionnaire to the office of the Department of English. Unfortunately, only one questionnaire was returned to the office.

When the study was repeated on the English course after the Easter break, there were only two students present who had not filled in the questionnaire before. These students answered the questions after the lecture after receiving the same instructions as those who had filled in the questionnaire before the Easter break.

On the computer science course the lecturer informed the students beforehand of the survey, which was going to be conducted at the end of the lecture. As the lecture was over, the researcher introduced herself and presented the study briefly. The instructions were also given both orally and in writing. The students were advised to return the questionnaire to the researcher after they had completed it. It seemed that some students were in a hurry and filled in the questionnaire quite quickly, although they were instructed to read each question carefully through and choose the best alternative to match their own opinions. The first student had filled in the questionnaire in 10 minutes and the last left after 25 minutes.

The data of the present study were mostly analysed statistically, only the students' answers under the option *others*, were analysed qualitatively in each question. Before the quantitative data were entered on the computer, the questionnaires were numbered consecutively from 1 to 148. The questionnaires numbered from 1 to 63 were gathered from the English course (i.e. Group A), while the rest (i.e. questionnaires 64-148) were collected from the computer science course (i.e. Group B).

The data provided by the background section as well as by the belief section were analysed statistically. The statistical analysis was carried out at the computing Centre of the University of Jyväskylä by request. The data provided by the background section were analysed by using descriptive statistics, i.e. frequencies, percentages and cross tabulations. In addition, the results from the belief section were analysed by using statistical tests to find out whether there were any statistically significant differences in beliefs between the two groups, and also between men and

women within these groups.

The statistical tests were: a X^2 (Chi Square) –test, a Levene's test for equality of variances, a t –test, and a univariate analysis of variance –test. The X^2 –test was the most frequently used to assess statistically significant differences between the groups. However, the test could be used only, if its criteria were valid. In other words, no more than 20% of the cells were allowed to count less than 5, and the minimum expected count should be more than 1 (Heikkilä 1998:203). In addition to these limitations, the X^2 test could not be used to test the reliability of the results gained from the ranking questions. The other three tests (i.e. the Levene's test for equality of variances, the t –test, and the univariate analysis of variance) were used only on Likert scale –items. The Levene's test was used to test equality of variances, before using the t –test. The t –test was, in turn, used for measuring equality of means between Groups A and B. The fourth and last test used in the present study, i.e. the univariate analysis of variance, was used to evaluate statistical significance of differences of men and women within the groups. The statistical significance (p or Sig.) of the results describes the probability of obtaining the result of a statistical analysis by chance. The present study uses the following levels of significance, as established by Heikkilä (1998:185-186):

$p \leq 0{,}001$	very significant
$0{,}001 < p \leq 0{,}01$	significant
$0{,}01 < p \leq 0{,}05$	almost significant

A part of the information that was gathered in the present study (i.e. the students' answers under the option *others*) was analysed qualitatively. All the students' answers were written down, but consideration was practised in reporting these answers. That is, the aim in reporting these replies was that they would shed some additional light on the beliefs that the students had. This meant in practice that the students' replies under the option *others* were reported only, if they gave more information about the particular issue. In addition, the replies were reported with respect to group membership and translated from Finnish to English for the purposes of the present study. However, the original replies were included in the discussion in parentheses.

And now it is time to look at the results of the present study.

6 BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: COMPARISONS OF TWO GROUPS OF FINNISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

This chapter reports on the beliefs that the Finnish university students have about learning English as a foreign language. Although the study is descriptive, comparisons are made between Groups A and B, and between men and women within these groups. The emphasis will be on describing the beliefs that the two groups have. In discussing the comparisons between men and women within these groups, only the differences shown in cross tabulation frequencies will be reported in footnotes. As the results of the present study are presented, statistically significant differences will be commented on with the help of statistical tests (see Section 5.2.3).

In addition to the quantitative data, the present study also reports on the qualitative data that were gathered from the students' answers under the option *others*. However, this data will be discussed only, if it sheds some additional light to the particular issue of belief. The replies will be reported with respect to group membership, the original replies (i.e. in Finnish) are provided in parentheses.

This chapter is divided into two major sections. Section 6.1 gives background information on the subjects, while the following section (i.e. Section 6.2) focuses on the results obtained from the ALL questionnaire, that is, the students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language. Section 6.2 is further divided into two subsections, the first (i.e. Section 6.2.1) describing the students' beliefs that are related to person knowledge, and the second (i.e. Section 6.2.2) reporting on beliefs about task knowledge. This classification of beliefs into person and task category is based on Flavell's (1979, 1981a, 1981b) taxonomy of metacognitive knowledge (see Section 2.1.2).

But first, let us take a look at the background information on the subjects.

6.1 Background information concerning the subjects

A total of 148 Finnish university students filled in an adapted version of *the Assumptions about Language Learning* (ALL) questionnaire. These subjects were recruited from two basic studies –level courses offered at the University of Jyväskylä in the spring of 2000. The sample consisted thus of two groups of students: those taking a course in English (i.e. Group A), and those studying the computer science

(i.e. Group B). On the English course, there were present 63 (10 *male* and 53 *female*) students who filled in the questionnaire. On the computer science course, the corresponding number was 85 (59 *male* and 26 *female students*). The subjects were mostly (Group A: 81,0%; Group B: 68,2%) in their early twenties (i.e. *20-25 years*), taking their *first-year courses* (Group A: 65,1%; Group B: 52,9%) at the university. The most common *majors* among the students were *English* (Group A: 74,2%) and *computer science* (Group B: 74,1%). *The minors* of Group A included *English* (27,9%), *psychology* (16,3%) and *pedagogics* (11,6%), while Group B was more interested in *mathematics* (19,7%), *marketing* (13,2%) and *accounting* (11,8%).

The subjects had generally succeeded very well in their English studies. Most of them had received very good grades in *the upper secondary school* (i.e. ranging *from 9 to 10* in the Finnish gradation, Group A: 92,1%; Group B: 58,3%) and in *the Matriculation examination* (i.e. ranging *from eximia to laudatur*, Group A: 84,1%; Group B: 46,4%). However, the percentages of very good grades were even higher among Group A students.

Almost all the students (Group A: 93,7%; Group B: 89,3%) had *started their English studies on the third grade in the comprehensive school* and had thus studied the language for quite a long time. In Group A, *the duration of the studies* was generally (74,6%) *between 11 and 15 years*, in the other group it was a bit shorter than that (i.e. *6 - 10 years*, 49,4%).

Residence in an English-speaking country was a dividing factor between the two groups. While the majority (63,5%) of students of Group A had stayed in an English-speaking country, the majority of Group B students had not (62,4%). In addition, *the time spent abroad* was longer in Group A: the length of the stay was generally several months (i.e. *from 1 to 6 months*), compared to several weeks (i.e. *less than a month*) of Group B. The most popular *locations* visited in both groups were *Great Britain* (Group A: 22 students; Group B: 22 students), and *the USA* (Group A: 19 students; Group B: 10 students).

The last question in this background information section dealt with *additional languages that the subjects had studied*. The most frequently mentioned languages were *Swedish* (Group A: 63 students; Group B: 81 students), *German* (Group A: 49 students; Group B: 65 students) and *French* (Group A: 35 students; Group B: 21 students). From these languages, *Swedish* (Group A: 68,3%; Group B: 76,5%) and *German* (Group A: 69,4%; Group B: 49,2%) were generally studied *from four to six*

years. The time spent in learning *French* varied between the groups from one to six years (cf. Group A: *from one to three years*, 45,7% and Group B: *from four to six years*, 38,1%).[9]

To summarise, the sample of the present study consisted of two groups of university students, mostly majoring in *English* and in *the computer science*. The majority of the students were in their *early twenties* and taking their *first-year courses* at the university. However, there were also distinctive features between the groups, for example, in *success in English*, *length of study time*, and *stay in an English-speaking country*. In other words, students of Group A had in general succeeded better in English at school, studied the language for a longer time, and had more frequently stayed abroad in an English-speaking country, compared to the other group.

As we have now established the background for the subjects, it is time to move on and start analysing the actual questionnaire items, i.e. students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language. The focus of this section is to compare the beliefs of Groups A and B. In addition, the differences between men and women within these groups will be reported in footnotes. The statistically significant results will be commented on with the help of the tests performed. Furthermore, the qualitative data (i.e. the students answers under the option *others*) will be briefly discussed if they provide any further information. These replies are presented with respect to group membership, and are written both in English and Finnish. The original, i.e. Finnish, version is provided in parentheses.

Let us now start discussing the results by looking at the beliefs that are related to person knowledge (i.e. beliefs about people as cognitive processors).

6.2 Comparisons of Groups A and B

6.2.1 Beliefs about person knowledge

The person knowledge –section begins with a question about universal attributes of learners.

[9] It has to be noted, however, that Swedish is a compulsory subject at school, because of the official status of the language in Finland.

Universal attributes of learners (Question 1)

Question 1 of *the Assumptions about Language Learning* (ALL) questionnaire asked the students to state how influential various factors (i.e. *talent, age, sex, intelligence, motivation, personality* and *learning style*) were in learning English as a foreign language. This question was designed to be an introduction to the theme *universal attributes of learners*, thus the factors will be addressed in more detail in the ten questions following. But first, let us take a look at Question 1.

As indicated in Table 2, the students of Groups A and B agreed that *talent* influenced learning English *to some extent* (Group A: 65,1%; Group B: 50,6%), although the issue of *age* divided their opinions. In other words, the students of Group A believed in the influence of *age* somewhat more (i.e. *influences to some extent*, Group A: 44,4%) than the students of Group B (i.e. *influences a little*, Group B: 45,9%). Based on statistical tests, this difference of opinion between the groups was statistically almost significant (p=0,022), as shown in Table 3. The students thought that *sex* was not an issue in learning English, Group B believed this to be the case even more so (i.e. *no influence*, cf. Group A: 63,5% and Group B: 82,4%). The difference was statistically almost significant (p=0,011). The students agreed on the issue of *intelligence*, i.e. that it had *some* influence on the learning process (Group A: 58,1%; 47,1%). For the majority of the students *motivation* was *very influential* factor (Group A: 93,7%; Group B: 83,5%). However, the statistical tests show, that there was a statistically almost significant difference between the groups (p=0,049). On the issue of *personality*, the students of Group A indicated that it had either *some* (39,7%) or *a little* (39,7%) influence on the learning process, while Group B believed it had *a little* (48,2%) influence. The students had a similar view about the influence of last factor mentioned in this question, i.e. *learning style*. According to them, it influenced English learning *to some extent* (Group A: 54,0%; Group B: 55,3%).[10]

Table 2. Role of various factors on learning English as a foreign language, according to Group A and B.

[10] Within the groups, men and women had different beliefs about the roles of *intelligence* and *personality* in learning English. On the issue of *intelligence*, Group B men believed it to have greater effects on learning English (i.e. *some influence*, Group B men: 54,2%) than women (i.e. *a little influence*, Group B women: 46,2%). On the issue of *personality*, Group A men believed it to have less influence than women (i.e. *a little*, Group A men: 60,0%; *some*, Group A women: 39,6%). The same tendency was to be seen in the other group also (i.e. *a little influence*, Group B men: 54,2%; *some influence*, Group B women: 42,3%).

Table 3. Results of the statistical tests in Question 1.

In addition, some students (Group A: 7 students; Group B: 7 students) wrote down additional factors that they thought were involved in the learning process. These factors included, for instance, *the teacher* (‘*opettaja*’; Group A: 3 students; Group B: 2 students), language learning *circumstances* (‘*olosuhteet*’; Group A: 2 students) and *hobbies* (‘*harrastukset*’; Group B: 2 students). Generally, these factors were considered either *very influential* in English learning or they had at least *some influence* in the process.

To summarize, statistical differences between the groups concerned the issues of *age*, *sex* and *motivation*. Despite these differences, the students agreed that *motivation* was the most important and *sex* the least important factor in learning English as a foreign language.

And now, let us find more about the factors mentioned in Question 1 (i.e. *talent*, *age*, *sex*, *intelligence*, *motivation*, *personality* and *learning style*).

Talent (Question 2)

The additional question to the issue of talent (Question 2) revealed that the students did not think that learning English was solely dependent on a special talent that one was born with. That is, the majority of Group A students (58,7%) thought that one needed *a certain amount of talent, but that there were also other factors that influenced learning English.* Group B supported this view too, but not quite as strongly (44,7%). Another popular opinion among the latter group was the belief that *everybody could learn English as a foreign language* (cf. Group A: 28,6% and Group B: 35,3%). This was an interesting result, suggesting that the computer science students (Group B) had, in fact, a more positive view about the nature of language learning than the English students (Group A).

In their replies under the option others (Group A: 3 students, Group B: 2 students), one student (Group A) nicely summarizes the importance of talent in English learning, i.e. *Talent influences the pace and level of learning, but other*

factors are also very important. Almost everyone can learn English *at least to some extent* (‘*Lahjakkuus vaikuttaa oppimisen vauhtiin ja tasoon, mutta muutkin tekijät ovat erittäin tärkeitä. Lähes kaikki voivat oppia ainakin jonkin verran.*’)

Age (Questions 3-4)

On the issue of *age*, there were two additional questions, i.e. Questions 3 and 4. According to the majority of the students (Question 3: Group A: 79,4% and Group B: 67,1%), the best age in learning English would be *between five and twelve years*. Still, some of Group B students (cf. Group A: 11,1% and Group B: 22,4%) thought that it was possible to learn the language during one’s teenage years (i.e. *between 13 and 18 years*). Both groups were unanimous again in explaining the reason why children were better language learners than adults (Question 4). The reason was, in their opinion, the fact that children learned *everything faster and subconsciously*, compared to adults (Group A: 85,7% and Group B: 84,7%).

In the replies under the option *others*, the students’ suggestions for the best age to learn English as a foreign language (Question 3; Group A: 5; Group B: 4 students) ranged from one year to 100 years. Relatedly, in the next question (Question 4; Group A: 5 students; Group B: 4 students) one student (Group A) admitted that *age did not have a crucial effect* on learning English (‘*ikä ei vaikuta ratkaisevasti’*).

Sex (Question 5)

And now, let us consider the role of *sex* in learning English as a foreign language (Question 5). Generally, the students (Group A: 73,0%; Group B: 91,8%) thought that *there were not any differences between men and women*, Group B believed this to be the case even more so. However, Group A students (cf. Group A: 12,7% and Group B: 3,5%) were more willing to believe in *the superiority of women* in the learning process. What was interesting, nobody believed in *men being better than women at learning English*. These results are summarized in Table 4. As the X^2 -test shows (see Table 5), the difference between the groups was statistically significant (p=0,009).

Table 4. Influence of sex on learning English as a foreign language.

Table 5. Results of the X^2 -test indicating statistically significant difference between the groups.

A significant number of students (Group A: 9 students; Group B: 4 students) also wrote down their own replies concerning *sex*. Generally, the students gave an explanation to their belief (Group A: 6 students; Group B: 2 students), e.g. *women were better, because they were more diligent* (‘*naiset ovat parempia oppimaan englantia sen vuoksi, että ahkerampia*’; Group A) or simply created an alternative option (Group A: 3 students; Group B: 2 students), e.g. *women are perhaps a little better than men* (‘*naiset ehkä vähän parempia’*; Group A).

Intelligence (Question 6)

When the students were asked, if they believed that good English learners were also *intelligent* people (Question 6), the majority of them (Group A: 69,8%; Group B: 50,6%) answered that *intelligence was important, but learning English depended also on other factors*. Nevertheless, within Group B almost as high a percentage of students (cf. Group A: 27,0% and Group B: 45,9%) believed that you did *not have to be intelligent to learn English*. These results suggest that Group B students (i.e. the computer science students) did not link intelligence that closely with learning English as the other group did.[11]

Motivation (Question 7)

In Question 1 the students regarded *motivation* as the most influential factor in learning English. The additional question (Question 7) revealed, however, that the students were aware that other factors were also involved in the process of language

[11] Within Group B, men (52,5%) believed that *you did not have to be intelligent to learn English*, while women (65,4%) thought that *intelligence was important, but learning English depended also on other factors*.

learning. In other words, most of them (Group A: 84,1%; Group B: 74,1%) believed that in order to learn English well, *motivation was also important.* The groups were quite unanimous on this issue, only students of Group A were less convinced than Group B that *motivation was the only way to learn English successfully* (cf. Group A: 15,9%; Group B: 22,4%).

Personality (Questions 8-9)

There were two additional questions to *personality*, i.e. Questions 8 and 9. Firstly, the students were asked about the general role of personality in learning English (Question 8). The most frequent answer in both groups (Group A: 46,0%; Group B: 62,4%) was that *personality did not influence learning English*. As the results show, however, Group A students did not support this view as strongly as the other group. In fact, quite many of Group A students (cf. Group A: 25,4% and Group B: 18,8%) had the opposite view, i.e. that *personality had a lot of influence on learning English*.

It is to be noted also that a significant number of the students (Group A: 18 students; Group B: 16 students) chose to write down their own reply. In their answers under the option *others* most of them (Group A: 13 students; Group B: 11 students) said that personality influenced their learning *to some extent* (‘*vaikuttaa jonkin verran’*). This influence was seen, for example, through *personal interest* (‘*vaikuttaa kiinnostuksen määrän kautta’*; Group A: 1 student) and *motivation* (‘*persoonallisuus saattaa olla tukemassa motivaatiota’*; Group B: 1 student).

Question 9 focused on certain *personality traits* and their *advantages* and *disadvantages* in learning English. Being an *extrovert* was seen as an *advantage* (Group A: 88,9%; Group B: 88,1%) and being an *introvert* mainly as a *disadvantage* (Group A: 51,6%; Group B: 56,0%). A considerable number of the students (Group A: 45,2%; Group B: 41,7%) believed, though, that being an *introvert could not either help or hinder* the language learning process. The next personal trait, *perfectionism*, divided the groups’ opinions: while Group A students (51,7%) thought that being a *perfectionist could neither benefit nor hamper* their learning, the other group (Group B: 43,9%) believed that it could be an *advantage*. The students were quite unanimous again, when considering the effects of *impulsiveness*, *thoughtfulness* and *imaginativeness* on language learning. They believed that being an *impulsive* (Group A: 72,6%; Group B: 67,9%) or a *thoughtful* person (Group A: 67,2%; Group B: 63,4%) *could not have either advantages or disadvantages* in learning English. The

last personality trait, *imaginativeness*, was considered to be an *advantage* by the majority of the students in both groups (Group A: 82,3%; Group B: 73,8%).[12]

Besides these *personality traits*, a few students (Group B: 2 students) also suggested additional characteristics that could influence English learning, i.e. *courage* (‘*rohkeus*’) and *humor* (‘*huumori’*).

Learning style (Questions 10-11)

The additional questions concerning *learning style* focused on the students’ perceptive (Question 10) and mental styles (Question 11), and their relation to successful language learning. Most of the students agreed in both questions that in order to be a successful English learner one had to possess *several learning styles* (e.g. *a visual style, an analytic mind*) and use them *equally* (i.e. Question 10, Group A: 61,9%, Group B: 55,3; Question 11, Group A: 81,0%, Group B: 51,8%). Another view (i.e. *learning English did not depend on a certain learning style*) was also popular among the students (Question 10, Group A: 25,4%, Group B: 25,9%; Question 11, Group A: 12,7%, Group B: 16,9%). The groups differed, however, in their belief in a single learning style as opposed to many. That is, Group A students were less ready to trust one learning style (e.g. Question 10, *learning by hearing*) than computer science students (cf. Group A: 6,3% and Group B: 14,1%).

In their replies under the option *others* in both questions (Group A: 4 students; Group B: 8 students) the students highlighted mostly the importance of finding *one’s own personal style* to learn English (‘*henkilön löydettävä itselleen hyvä tyyli*’; Group A: 1 student; Group B: 4 students).

To summarise, these additional questions to the factor *universal attributes of learners* revealed some differences of emphasis between the groups. For example, the students of Group A seemed to believe more strongly that it takes more than one of these factors to succeed in English. On the other hand, Group B students had a more positive view about the nature of language learning, as they believed more strongly that *everybody could learn English as a foreign language* and that *you did not have to be intelligent to learn English*. However, only Question 5 (i.e. the role of *sex* in learning English) brought up a statistical difference between the groups. In

[12] Concerning being *an introvert*, Group B men (62,1%) thought that it was a *disadvantage*, while women (50,0%) believed it would *neither help nor hinder* learning English. On the issue of *perfectionism*, Group B men (46,6%) thought that it could *neither benefit nor hamper* the process, while women believed that it had both *advantages* (41,7%) and *disadvantages* (41,7%).

other words, students of Group B were more willing to believe that *there were not any differences between men and women in learning English*.

In the previous questions we have established the factors that are universal to all language learners. Now, it is time to move on to consider the role that culture and family have in learning English as a foreign language.

Sosiocultural factors (Question 12)

When the students were asked, if they thought *learning English was affected by cultural background* (Question 12) most of them (Group A: 58,7%; Group B: 60,0%) believed this to be the case. However, almost a third of the students in both groups (Group A: 33,3%; Group B: 30,6%) daimed that cultural background was not an important factor, because *English learning depended mostly on the individual*.

In addition, five students (Group A: 3 students; Group B: 2 students) also wrote their replies under the option *others*. These students believed that culture *could influence* learning English (*'kulttuuri voi vaikuttaa'*), for example, through a good *educational system* (*'Suomessa on parempi opetus kuin esim. Etelä-Euroopassa'*) or through the *high respect that the language has* in Finland (*'kielen arvostus ympäristössä vaikuttaa'*).

Family factors (Question 13)

The role of the family in the students' learning English (Question 13) was somewhat ambiguous. While the majority of Group A (57,1%) believed this influence to be mainly *positive*, the other group thought their *family had not influenced them at all* (55,3%). Nevertheless, within each group the opposite opinions gained support, too (i.e. *no influence*, Group A: 39,7%; *a positive influence*, Group B: 42,4%). It was reassuring to find out that the family had not generally had any *negative influence* on the students' learning English.[13]

To sum up, the majority of the students were of the opinion that *learning English was affected by cultural background*. However, different beliefs emerged when the focus shifted to *the family*. While most of the students of Group A thought that *the role of the family in their learning had been a positive one*, the other group

[13] On the issue of *family involvement*, Group A men believed that the family had had both *a positive influence* (50,0%), and *no influence* at all (50,0%). Group A women (58,5%) believed in the *positive effect*.

(i.e. Group B) *did not believe their family had influenced them at all*. However, this difference was not statistically significant.

And now it is time to look more closely at *the educational background*. The four questions included in this factor focus on the students' *previous language learning experiences*. The aim is to find out, whether these previous experiences had influenced their learning English.

Educational background (Questions 14-17)

Concerning the factor of *educational background,* there were both similarities and differences between the two groups. In Question 14 Group A students (47,6%) thought that *previous language learning experiences had had a positive influence on their learning English*, while Group B (51,8%) *did not believe that the prior experiences had influenced them at all*. The opposite opinions (i.e. *no influence*, Group A: 41,3%; *a positive influence*, Group B: 34,1%) were quite common among the groups, too.[14]

Some of the students (Group A: 6 students; Group B: 5 students) also wrote down their own replies under the option *others*. In most of the answers (Group A: 5 students, Group B: 5 students) they reminded that *English was their first foreign language at school* (*'opin englannin ennen muita vieraita kieliä'*; Group A: 1 student) and thus *they did not have previous language learning experiences* (*'ei aikaisempaa kokemusta'*; Group B: 1 student).

Relatedly, when the students were asked, whether *previous language learning experiences (e.g. mother tongue, other foreign languages) had facilitated their learning English* (Question 16), the answers were mostly in line with Question 14. In other words, there were two competing opinions in both groups. In Group A, the majority (57,1%) believed in *the positive effects* of previous language learning experiences (i.e. *prior experience has helped in learning English vocabulary and grammar*, 19,0%, and *prior experience has helped by providing a general approach to English learning*, 38,1%), while more than a third (38,1%) *did not think that these experiences had influenced them at all*. Group B shared the same views, but the order

[14] Concerning *earlier language learning experiences*, Group A men (60,0%) believed that these *had not had any influence*, while women (Group A women: 49,1%) believed in the *positive influence*. The same tendency was to be seen in the other group also (i.e. *no influence*, Group B men: 59,3%; *a positive influence*, Group B women: 46,2%).

of importance was different (i.e. *no influence* 50,6%; *positive effects* 45,9%).[15]

Question 15 focused on different *language teaching methods used in class by the students' previous English teachers* (see Table 6). The methods used in *the comprehensive school* and in *the upper secondary school* were generally assessed as *good* (i.e. *the comprehensive school*, Group A: 57,1% and Group B: 57,1%; *the upper secondary school*, Group A: 30,2% and Group B: 46,4%). However, students of Group A were less convinced about *the methods* used in *the upper secondary school*. In fact, quite many of them (cf. Group A: 27,0% and Group B: 17,9%) believed that *the methods* used there were *neither good nor bad*. The third educational institution mentioned in the question was *vocational school*. Those students (Group A: 4 students and Group B: 16 students) who had studied there, thought that *the teaching methods* were *neither good nor bad* (Group A: 2 students, Group B: 5 students) or *good* (Group A: 1 student, Group B: 6 students). Considering *university*, the students were of the opinion that *the teaching* had generally been *good* there (Group A: 63,9%; Group B: 46,3%). However, some students of Group A claimed that the methods had been *very good* (cf. Group A: 23,0% and Group B: 11,1%), while some of Group B students believed them to have been *neither good nor bad* (cf. Group A: 13,1% and Group B: 35,2%). This difference found between the groups was statistically very significant (p=0,000; see Table 7). The last educational institution included in the question was *language courses.* From the 40 students (Group A: 19 students, Group B: 21 students) that had been on such a course, had generally had positive experiences of the used *teaching methods* (i.e. the teaching methods were considered *good*).[16]

Table 6. Evaluation of different language teaching methods used in class by the students' previous English teachers.

[15] Within Group B, most of the men (55,9%) believed that *previous language learning experiences (e.g. mother tongue, foreign languages) had not had any influence on their learning English*, while women (57,7%) believed in *the positive effects* of previous experiences.

[16] In this question, Group A men (50,0%) believed that *the language teaching methods* had been *neither good nor bad in the upper secondary school*, while women (34,0%) thought that they had been *good*. Considering *the university*, Group B men (50,0%) believed that *the teaching methods* had been *good*, and women (45,0%) thought that they were *neither good nor bad*. Concerning *language courses*, Group B men thought that *the teaching methods* had been *good* (44,4%) or *neither good nor*

Table 7. Statistical significance of the differences between Groups A and B.

Only six students (Group A: 4 students; Group B: 2 students) had studied elsewhere, for instance in *polytechnic institutes* (Group A: 1 students, Group B: 1 student) or in *folk high schools* (Group A: 1 student, Group B: 1 student). The teaching methods had generally been *good*.

The last question (Question 17) in this factor concentrated on transfer.[17] Interestingly, most of Group A students (41,3%) believed in the positive effects of *learning two foreign languages at the same time*, while Group B students (42,4%) thought that the simultaneous learning would *complicate the process* (10,6%) especially when *similar issues (e.g. verb conjugations) were being learned at the same time* (31,8%).[18]

Responding to this particular question, a significant number of students (Group A: 21 students; Group B: 21 students) wrote their own reply under the option *others*. The most frequent answer was that *learning two foreign languages at the same time did not have any influence on the learning process* (‘*ei vaikutusta’*; Group A: 6 students; Group B: 12 students). In the other replies the students pointed out that *simultaneous learning might sometimes be helpful and sometimes not* (‘*joskus hyötyä, joskus haittaa’*; Group A: 4 students; Group B: 2 students) and that the influence *depended mostly on the languages and their systems* (‘*vaikutus riippuu siitä, miten samankaltaisia kielten rakenteet ovat’*; Group A: 1 student; Group B: 2 students).

To summarize, the students seemed to hold different views about *the influence of previous language learning experiences.* While Group A thought that

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bad (44.4%), while women (58,3%) believed that they had been *good.*

[17] Transfer could be defined as “the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired” (Odlin 1989:27). Furthermore, the effect of transfer in language learning could be manifested in errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance or over-use (Ellis 1994:301-306).

[18] According to Group B men (47,5%), *learning two foreign languages at the same time* would *complicate the process* (15,3%) especially when *similar issues were being learned at the same time* (32,2%). However, women (38,5%) believed in *the positive effects* of learning two foreign languages at the same time.

these influences had mainly been *positive*, the other group believed that these experiences *had not influenced them at all*. It has to be noted, however, that the opposite opinions were quite frequent, too. When considering various *methods of language teaching*, the students thought they had generally been *good* in *the comprehensive school*, and *upper secondary school*. Concerning *the teaching methods* used at *the university*, Group A students were more convinced that they were *good*. There were also differences between the groups in beliefs about the effects of *learning two foreign languages at the same time.* Whereas Group A students believed in *the positive effects* of such a situation, Group B emphasized the *complications* that might arise e.g. when *similar issues were learned at the same time.* Despite all these differences, only one had statistical significance, i.e. the issue of *the methods of language teaching* at *the university.*

The next factor focused on students' beliefs about themselves as English learners. First, the students were asked to assess their English skills in general and then, in relation to their classmates. But first, let us study *how good (or bad) they considered themselves at learning English*.

Intraindividual factors (Questions 18-19)

Although the majority of the students (Group A: 74,6%; Group B: 51,8%) thought that they were *good at learning English* (Question 18), there were still some differences between the groups. In other words, a more significant number of students in Group A believed that they were *good at learning English* (cf. Group A: 74,6% and Group B: 51,8%), while the belief of being *average in English* was more frequent among Group B (cf. Group A: 22,2% and Group B: 44,7%).[19]

In relation to their classmates (Question 19), the students' opinions on their English skills were not as positive. That is, the majority of them (Group A: 65,1%; Group B: 54,1%) thought that they were *average English learners, compared with their classmates*. Only 11,1% of Group A and 27,1% of Group B students believed that they were *better language learners than their classmates*. In their answers under the option *others*, the students (Group A: 4 students; Group B: 1 student) mostly said that they were *pretty much at the same level* as their classmates in English skills (*'aika samalla tasolla'*; Group A: 1 student).

[19] Within Group B, men (54,2%) believed that they were *good at learning English*, while women (50,0%) thought they were *average* in it.

Interestingly, the students seemed to hold different beliefs about their English skills depending on with whom they compared themselves. In general, they thought that they were *good at learning English*, but in comparison with their classmates, they did not give themselves that much credit (i.e. they thought they were only *average*).

The last factor (i.e. self-assessment) in this person knowledge –category focuses on different language skills (e.g. *writing, reading, speaking,* and *listening*). More precisely, the focus will be on reporting the students' strengths and weaknesses in learning English as a foreign language. The results will be reported by comparing the three most frequently mentioned skills in each question.

Self-assessment (Questions 20-22)

Question 20 asked the students to mention *three skills in English that they were good at*. According to Group A students, their strengths included *writing* (22,6%), *listening comprehension* (19,9%) and *reading comprehension* (17,7%). Group B mentioned the same areas, but the ranking order was a bit different, i.e. *reading comprehension* (24,6%), *writing* (18,9%) and *listening comprehension* (18,5%).[20]

The skills mentioned above could be grouped into productive (i.e. *writing*) and receptive (i.e. *reading* and *listening*) skills. As the results show, the students were in general *good at written communication*, Group A students even more so. However, neither of the groups included *oral communication* in their most significant productive skills.

Next, the students were asked to list *three skills in English that they were bad at* (Question 21). The groups were quite unanimous when deciding on their most significant weakness, i.e. *grammar* (Group A: 24,1%; Group B: 23,0%) Besides grammar, the students' problems had mainly to do with *speaking*. In other words, Group A mentioned *speaking* (18,2%) and *vocabulary* (16,5%), and Group B named *pronunciation* (19,6%) and *speaking* (18,7%) as areas, which still needed some practice. These results were in line with earlier findings, indicating that the students

[20] Although men and women had brought up similar issues in both groups, the ranking order differed to some extent. In other words, while Group A men believed that they were good at *reading comprehension* (23,8%), *writing* (16,7%), *listening comprehension* (16,7%) and *vocabulary* (16,7%), women named *writing* (23,7%), *listening comprehension* (20,5%) and *reading comprehension* (16,7%). Within Group B, men and women had the same number one skill, i.e. *reading comprehension* (Group B men: 25,4%; women: 22,7%). Additional strengths of Group B men included *writing* (20,2%) *and listening comprehension* (19,7%). The strengths of Group B women

were not particularly good at *oral communication*.[21]

The additional comments that the students (Group A: 2 students; Group B: 3 students) wrote under the option *others* revealed that *different dialects* (‘*eri murteiden ymmärtäminen’*; Group A: 1 student) and *scientific texts* (‘*tieteellinen teksti’*; Group A: 1 student) were causing them also some problems.

The last question (Question 22) concerning the person knowledge –category introduced one problem in language learning that had not been dealt with before, i.e. *lack of time.* This was *the most significant problem* that Group A students (21,7%) had faced in their English studies. Besides this, they were concerned about *being fluent* (21,0%) and *using grammar accurately* (16,1%). The other group was also aware of the problems connected with *being fluent in English* (25,5%) and *the lack of time* (16,3%). In addition, *acquiring good pronunciation* (14,3%) was not easy for them.[22]

The students’ (Group A: 4 students; Group B: 2 students) replies under the option *others* included problems, such as *learning foreign words of e.g. Latin origin* (‘*ns. sivistyssanaston oppiminen*’; Group A: 2 students) and *lack of motivation* (‘*motivaatio tehdä asialle jotakin*’; Group A: 1 student) to improve the detected weaknesses.

As the results from these self-assessment questions show, the students’ strengths were mostly connected with receptive linguistic skills (e.g. *reading* and *listening*), whereas their weaknesses had to do with expressing themselves in English (e.g. *being fluent* and *acquiring a good pronunciation*). Other challenges that they had faced in learning English included *the accurate use of grammar* and *lack of time.*

In this section the focus has been mostly on individual matters that the language learners share (i.e. person knowledge). The results, i.e. cross-tabulations of

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were *writing* (16,0%), *listening comprehension* (16,0%), *speaking* (13,3%), and *grammar* (13,3%).

[21] Concerning the skills the students were bad at, they had mentioned the same skills, but the ranking order was somewhat different. That is, Group A men were bad at *speaking* (26,7%), *grammar* (26,7%), *pronunciation* (16,7%), *writing* (10,0%) and *vocabulary* (10,0%), while women were bad at *grammar* (23,6%), *vocabulary* (17,9%) and *speaking* (16,4%). Within Group B, men were bad at *grammar* (25,3%), *pronunciation* (21,0%) and *speaking* (18,5%), whereas women’s weaknesses included *speaking* (19,2%), *vocabulary* (19,2%), *grammar* (17,8%) and *pronunciation* (16,4%).

[22] Men and women had mentioned the same problems in both groups, only the ranking order differed to some extent. That is, the problems of Group A men included *being fluent* (34,8%), *lack of time* (21,7%), *pronunciation* (13,0%), *grammar* (13,0%) and *writing a composition* (13,0%). For women, the ranking order was *lack of time* (21,7%), *being fluent* (18,3%) and learning *grammar* (16,7%). Within Group B, men and women agreed on the most significant problem (i.e. *being fluent*, men: 25,4%; women: 25,8%) and the second most significant problem (i.e. *lack of time*, men: 16,4%; women: 16,1%). Other problems that men had faced with concerned *pronunciation* (15,7%), among

frequencies, showed that the two student groups agreed on most of the issues, but that there were also some differences between the groups. Of the differences, however, only a few were statistically significant. These differences concerned the issues of *age, sex,* and *motivation* in learning English as a foreign language. In addition, *language teaching methods* used by the students' previous English teachers at *the university* brought also statistically significant difference between the groups.[23]

And now it is time to move on and look at the following section which will deal with issues that are more closely linked with the actual language learning process (i.e. task knowledge).

6.2.2 Beliefs about task knowledge

This task knowledge –category focuses on the different aspects of learning English as a foreign language. First, the purpose of learning English and the inherent difficulty of the language will be discussed. Then, the nature of the actual language learning process will be studied in more detail. The emphasis will be on finding out what kind of skills and qualifications are needed in learning English. And finally, the focus will be on different language learning settings (i.e. the native country, the foreign language classroom). The classroom setting will be discussed more closely, e.g. by studying task responsibilities that a teacher, a student and classmates have in an EFL classroom. But first, let us concentrate on the students' purpose and goal of learning English.

Purpose and goal of learning English (Questions 23-24)

The first question in the task knowledge –section asked the students' opinion about *the importance of learning English as a foreign language* (Question 23). The students were quite unanimous on this issue, as the majority of both groups believed that *learning English was important* (i.e. including options a – d, Group A: 79,3%; Group B: 89,4%), only their reasons varied somewhat (see Table 8). In general, the

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women the issue was learning *vocabulary* (14,5%).

[23] As the cross-tabulations show, there were some belief differences between men and women within the groups. These differences involved, for instance, the issues of *intelligence*, *learning two foreign languages at the same time* and the students' general assessment of their *language skills in English*. However, none of these differences was statistically significant, based on the criteria for the present study.

students wanted to learn the language *to be able to communicate with English speaking people* (Group A: 52,4%; Group B: 44,7%). However, some of Group A students were interested in *the cultures of English speaking countries* (cf. Group A: 11,1% and Group B: 3,5%), while some of Group B students had *occupational reasons* for their language learning (cf. Group A: 7,9% and Group B: 27,1%). Based on a statistical test, it can be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the groups (p=0,007; see Table 9).

Table 8. Motivation for learning English as a foreign language.

Table 9. Statistical significance of the differences between Groups A and B.

In answering this question quite many students (Group A: 13 students; Group B: 9 students) also used the option *others*. Most of them indicated that all the positive reasons listed (i.e. options ranging from a to d) were important in their learning English (Group A: 5 students; Group B: 7 students).

The next question (Question 24) approached the same issue from a bit different perspective, focusing on the reasons *why the students had started learning the language*. The most frequent answer in both groups was the fact that *English was a compulsory foreign language at school* (Group A: 52,4%; Group B: 74,1%). Nevertheless, Group A students did not support this opinion quite as strongly as the other group. In fact, fairly many of them (cf. Group A: 19,0% and Group B: 4,7%) stated that they had started learning English *out of their own interest*.

Under the option *others* some students (Group A: 10 students; Group B: 8 students) also wrote down their own replies, usually indicating that several of these reasons together had affected their decision to start learning English.

As these results show, the students were rather convinced that it was

important to learn English. In fact, in Question 23 none of the 148 students chose the answer: *No, learning English was not that important*. However, the reasons for learning English varied to some extent, bringing up statistically significant difference between the groups. In other words, while Group A was more interested in *communicational aspects* of English, the other group believed that the language would *benefit them in their work*. Yet, most of the students had started learning English because it was *a compulsory subject at school*.

Next, the discussion will focus on *the most difficult linguistic aspect of the English language*.

Inherent difficulty of English (Question 25)

The answers to this question (Question 25) supported the earlier findings concerning the skills the students' were *bad at* (Question 21) and *the problems* (Question 22) they had in learning English. In other words, *the most difficult linguistic aspect* was again related to *grammatical accuracy* (i.e. including options: *grammar* and *syntax*) in both groups (i.e. Group A: 49,2%; Group B: 40,5%). However, Group A was more concerned about *syntax*, while Group B had mostly problems with *grammar* (i.e. *grammar*, Group A: 22,2%, Group B: 31,0%; *syntax*, Group A: 27,0%, Group B: 9,5%). In addition to these difficulties, some of Group A students (17,5%) considered English *vocabulary* to be quite challenging for them, while Group B (22,6%) had difficulties in learning how to *pronounce* words properly. The results concerning this question are summarised in Table 10. The differences found between the groups were statistically almost significant (p=0,038; see Table 11).[24]

Table 10. The most difficult aspects of learning English as a foreign language according to the groups.

Table 11. Statistical difference between the groups.

[24] Within Group B, men (48,3%) believed that *grammatical accuracy* (i.e. *grammar*, 36,2%; *syntax*, 12,1%) would be *the most difficult aspect of English* to learn, while women believed it to be

In the replies under the option *others* the students (Group A: 7 students; Group B: 7 students) named additional problematic aspects, such as *speaking fluently* (‘*puhuminen sujuvasti*’; Group A: 1 student; Group B: 1 student) and *listening comprehension* (‘*kuullun ymmärtäminen’*; Group B: 2 students). One student of Group A also brought up an issue that had not been dealt with before, i.e. *the difficulty of making distinctions between two registers,* i.e. *formal and informal* (‘*kahden eri rekisterin erottaminen, formal vs. informal*).

To summarise, the results gained from this question are in line with earlier findings, showing that the students have problems with *grammatical accuracy, vocabulary* and *pronunciation*. However, this question showed that there were statistically significant differences between the groups.

The following questions concentrate on the nature of learning English. The first two questions ask the students to indicate the importance of certain skills (e.g. *memorisation, imitation*) and to compare learning English with other school subjects. The four last questions focus on the various *qualities* that are needed in *writing, reading, speaking* and *listening*. But first, let us find out what kinds of skills are related to learning English as a foreign language.

Nature of learning English (Question 26-31)

Kind of learning (Questions 26-27)

The first question (Question 26) on this issue asked the students *to determine to which degree they thought certain skills* (i.e. *memorisation, creativity, translation, imitation, using the language, learning grammar* and *learning vocabulary*) *were involved in learning English as a foreign language* (see Table 12). According to the students, *memorisation* (Group A: 63,5%; Group B: 51,8%), *creativity* (Group A: 47,6%; Group B: 65,5%) and *translation* (i.e. Finnish-English, English-Finnish, Group A: 63,5%; Group B: 57,8%) were needed *to some extent*. In addition, Group A students believed that *imitation* was a less necessary skill than Group B students (i.e. *a little*, Group A: 37,1%; *some,* Group B: 48,8%). *The use of language* was *very much involved* in learning English as a foreign language, Group A believed this to be

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vocabulary (26,9%) and *pronunciation* (23,1%).

the case ever more strongly (cf. Group A: 92,1% and Group B: 71,4%). This difference between the groups was statistically very significant (p=0,001; see Table 13). Furthermore, the skill linked with *learning grammar* was needed *to some extent* according to the groups (Group A: 61,9%; Group B: 53,6%). The last skill mentioned in this question, i.e. *learning vocabulary*, was needed *very much* in learning English as a foreign language. Students of Group A believed this to be the case ever more strongly (cf. Group A: 69,8% and 51,8%). This difference was statistically almost significant (p=0,025).[25]

Table 12. Involvement of certain skills in learning English as a foreign language.

Table 13. Results of statistical tests.

Additional variables mentioned by the students (Group A: 1 student; Group B: 2 students) included *activity* ('*aktiivisuutta*'; Group A: 1 student), *the knowledge about social routines* ('*tavat, sosiaaliset rutiinit*'; Group B: 1 student) and *constant exposure* to the language ('*jatkuvaa altistusta*'; Group B: 1 student).

In the next question (Question 27), the students (Group A: 92,1%; Group B: 84,7%) clearly stated that *learning English as a foreign language was different from learning other school subjects, such as history and mathematics*. Examining these differences more closely (see Table 14), both groups agreed that English learning required *more practice and repetition* (Group A: 57,6%; Group B: 65,3%), and *the*

[25] On the issue of *memorisation* Group B men thought that it was needed less in learning English than women did (i.e. *to some extent*, men: 57,6%; *very much*, women: 57,7%). According to Group A men, *imitation* was needed *a little* (40,0%), while women thought that it was either needed *to some extent* (36,5%) or *a little* (36,5%). Furthermore, Group A men believed that *learning vocabulary* was needed *to some extent* (49,2%), while women thought it was *very much* involved in learning English as a

same amount of motivation (Group A: 57,6%; Group B: 52,8%). In addition, the students believed generally that learning English would involve *more memorisation* than learning any other school subjects (Group A: 35,6%; 45,8%). However, other opinions were also quite frequent among the groups (i.e. *memorisation* is needed *the same amount*, cf. Group A: 32,2% and Group B: 40,3%; *less*, cf. Group A: 32,2% and Group B: 13,9%). These difference were statistically almost significant (p=0,036; see Table 15). The students agreed on the two last issues concerning *time* and *learning strategies*. That is, learning English as a foreign language would require *the same amount of time* (Group A: 40,7%; Group B: 42,9%) but *more use of different learning strategies* (Group A: 50,0%; Group B: 53,5%).[26]

Table 14. Differences between learning English as a foreign language and learning other school subjects.

Table 15. Summary of results of statistical tests.

Some students (Group A: 2 students; Group B: 1 student) also listed additional differences between learning English and other school subjects. In their opinion, English required more *active, regular use of the language* (‘*aktiivista, säännöllistä käyttöä*’; Group A: 1 student) and *a different way of thinking* (‘*erilaista ajattelutapaa’*; Group B: 1 student).

As these results indicate, the students had various beliefs about the skills and variables needed in learning English as a foreign language. Statistically significant differences between the groups concerned the roles of *language use*, *learning*

foreign language (65,4%).

[26] There were some differences between men and women on the issues of *practice and repetition* (i.e. *less*, Group A men: 40,0%; *more*, women: 63,3%), *motivation* (i.e. *the same amount*, Group B men: 58,0%; *more*, women: 50,0%), *memorisation* (i.e. *more*, Group B men: 46,0%; *the same amount*, women: 50,0%) and *time* (i.e. *more*, Group A men: 40,0%; *the same amount*, women: 42,9%) needed in learning English as a foreign language.

vocabulary, and *memorisation*.

The last part of this Nature of learning English –theme will focus on the different qualities that are needed in using the English language (i.e. in *writing, reading, speaking* and *listening*).

Nature of different skills (Questions 28-31)

In this section the focus will be on the nature of different skills, i.e. on *the qualities or requisites* that are needed in *writing, reading, speaking* and *listening English*. The results will be reported by comparing the three most frequently mentioned skills in each question.

The students agreed on some of *the qualities needed for being able to write well* (Question 28). That is, in their opinion the most important requisite was *having a large range of vocabulary* (Group A: 24,2%; Group B: 27,0%), and the third most important one *having a lot of practice in writing* (Group A: 15,1%; Group B: 15,5%). In addition to these qualities, the students had different views on what would be the second most important skill needed in writing English. According to Group A (20,4%), this skill was related to the knowledge about the structure of the text (i.e. *knowing how to outline a text*), while Group B (16,3%) thought it was essential to *have a good grammar basis.*[27]

The students were of the same opinion about *the qualities needed in understanding texts written in English* (Question 29), even the ranking order of these skills was similar in both groups. That is, the most important requisite associated with a person reading English texts was that he *understood the text despite unknown words* (Group A: 32,8%; Group B: 26,6%). Besides this, *having extensive reading practice* (Group A: 25,9%; Group B: 24,7%), and *having a large vocabulary and a good grammar basis* (Group A: 21,0%; Group B: 21,0%) were considered essential in being able to understand English texts.[28]

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[27] Men and women were unanimous in both groups on deciding on the most important quality needed in writing English (i.e. *a vast vocabulary*, Group A men: 20,0%, women: 25,0%; Group A men: 25,7%, women: 29,5%). Additional qualities according to Group A men were: *practice in writing* (16,7%), *knowing how to outline a text* (16,7%) and *a creative mind* (13,3%). Among Group A women, the order of importance was as follows: *knowing how to outline a text* (21,2%) and *a good grammar basis* (15,4%). According to Group B men, the skills included: *a good grammar basis* (17,8%) and *practice in writing* (16,1%). The order of importance among women was*: being good at writing in one's mother tongue* (16,7%), *knowing how to outline a text* (16,7%), and *writing experience* (14,1%).

[28] However, within Group B, men and women valued the same qualities, but the ranking order was different. That is, men believed mostly in *extensive reading practice* (25,9%), while women valued

Three of the most important *qualities for being able to understand spoken English* (Question 30) were the same in both groups, only the order of importance varied to some extent. The students agreed on the most important skill, i.e. *being used to listening to spoken English* (Group A: 31,7%; Group B: 29,3%). In Group A the students thought that *having a good vocabulary and grammar basis* (19,9%) was more important than *having a good ear* (referring to language aptitude, 16,1%). However, in Group B these skills were in the opposite order (i.e. *having a good ear*, 19,1%; *having a good vocabulary and grammar basis*, 18,7%).[29]

Some students (Group A: 6 students; Group B: 4 students) also wrote down their own suggestions about the skills involved in understanding spoken English. The most frequently mentioned (Group A: 3 students; Group B: 2 students) was the ability to *understand* the message, *even though not every word of it* (*'että hän ymmärtää, vaikka ei ihan joka sanaa'*).

The last question (Question 31) on this theme was concerned with *the qualities associated with being able to speak English very well*. This time the groups had somewhat different opinions about the requisites. In other words, Group A believed that *having a good pronunciation* (23,9%) was the most important factor in speaking English very well. In addition, *speaking the language without stopping to think what to say next* (19,0%) and *being able to speak about any subject* (17,9%) were quite essential skills in their opinion. However, according to Group B the most important factor was associated with *speaking fluently without stopping to wonder what to say next* (25,1%). Besides this, *a good vocabulary* (23,9%) and *pronunciation* (20,7%) were closely connected to the ability of being able to speak English very well.[30]

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understanding the text despite unknown words (29,5%). Additional skills suggested by men were: *understanding the text despite unknown words* (25,3%) and *a good vocabulary and grammar basis*. Within women the skills included: *extensive reading practice* (21,8%) and *a good vocabulary and grammar basis* (19,2%).

[29] Most of the skills were the same between women and men in both groups, but the ranking order was somewhat different. Men and women had the same number one in both groups, i.e. *being used to listening to spoken English* (Group A men: 33,3%, women: 31,4%; Group B men: 28,7%, women: 30,7%). Within Group A men, other skills were *having a good ear* (16,7%), *a large vocabulary and grammar basis* (16,7%), and *being able to anticipate what is coming next* (13,3%). Within Group A women, these skills were: *a good vocabulary and grammar basis* (20,5%), and *having a good ear* (16,0%). Within Group B men, the additional skills were *having a good ear* (21,6%), and *a good vocabulary and grammar basis* (18,7%). Among Group B women, the other skills included *a good vocabulary and grammar basis* (18,7%), and *a great capacity for concentration* (14,7%).

[30] Within Group A, men and women agreed on the number one, i.e. *having a good pronunciation* (men: 26,7%; women: 23,4%). After that the ranking order was somewhat different. Men valued *speaking fast and fluently* (23,3%), *speaking on any subject* (16,7%) and *speaking without stopping to*

The additional qualities that the students (Group A: 13 students; Group B: 9 students) wrote down under the option *others* had mostly to do with *courage in speaking* (‘*rohkeutta avata suunsa ja puhua*’; Group A: 3 students; Group B: 1 student), and *paraphrasing* to get the message across (‘*osaa käyttää kiertoilmauksia*’; Group A: 2 students; Group B: 1 student).

To sum up, the students seemed to have quite a realistic picture of what it takes to use the language well both in written and spoken communication. In other words, they believed that *practice* was one important part of this learning process. Beside practice, the students recognised the significance of learning various linguistic aspects of English (e.g. *vocabulary* and *grammar*). All in all, the students seemed to have set fairly high qualities for communication skills.

The last part of *the Assumptions about Language Learning* –questionnaire will focus on learning English in different settings (i.e. *in an English-speaking country* and *in a foreign language classroom*). First, the two settings are compared based on the time it would take to learn the language in both of them. After that, the emphasis will be on the classroom setting. The aim is to study, for example, various roles that a teacher, student and classmates have in EFL classroom. But first, let us compare the different settings and find out what would be the minimum time needed to learn English in each setting.

Learning in different settings (Questions 35, 32-34)

In the native country / In the classroom (Question 35)

When the students were asked about *the best context for English learning* (Question 35), the result was clear-cut in both groups: they (Group A: 71,4%; Group B: 74,1%) believed that the best option was to *learn the language in an English speaking country*. Only less than a third of the students believed that *one could learn English successfully in both contexts* (i.e. either in an English-speaking country or in Finland, Group A: 28,6%; Group B: 24,7%). None of the students named *Finland* as the best

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think what to say next (16,7%). Women believed in *speaking without stopping to think what to say next* (19,5%), *a large vocabulary* (18,2%), and *speaking on any topic* (18,2%). Within Group B, men believed *speaking without thinking what to say next* (26,0%) to be the most important variable, while women believed in *a large vocabulary* (26,9%). Additional qualities according to Group B men were *having a good pronunciation* (24,3%), and *a large vocabulary* (22,5%). Among women, these qualities were *speaking without stopping to think what to say next* (23,1%), *ability to speak on any subject* (17,9%).

context.

Time needed to learn (Questions 32-34)

The next three questions addressed the issue of *the minimum time needed in learning English*. Considering learning English abroad (Question 32), Group A students (44,4%) believed that the pace of the learning process would depend mostly on *the person's ability and environment*. Yet, Group B students were more willing to estimate the time the process would take. That is, 42,4% of them thought the duration to be at least *from six to eleven months*. In the additional replies (Group A: 4 students; Group B: 1 student), most of the students (Group A: 3 students) combined two options and stated that learning would take between one and two years, depending on the person's ability and environment.

Relatedly, when *the minimum time needed in learning English in a foreign language classroom* was assessed (Question 33), the students' answers were somewhat in line with earlier findings. In other words, they (Group A: 68,3%; Group B: 43,5%) believed that the learning would *depend on the person's motivation and effort*. Under the option *others*, the students (Group A: 6 students; Group B: 2 students) had most commonly combined two options in their replies, i.e. that the learning would take more than 4 years, depending on the person's motivation and effort (Group A: 3 students).

The students were of the same opinion, when deciding on *how many hours a week a person should spend learning English as a foreign language* (Question 34). According to the majority of both groups (Group A: 66,7%; Group B: 80,0%), the ideal time would be *between 2 to 5 hours a week*. Still, some of Group A students (cf. Group A: 22,2% and Group B: 9,4%) believed that it would take more than that (i.e. *from 6 to 10 hours a week*) to learn the language properly.

In the additional answers (Group A: 5 students; Group B: 1 student) one student (Group A) wrote that English should be learned *as much as possible, but there are also other subjects, e.g. mathematics and biology, that should be learned enough at school* (*'vaikka kuinka paljon, mutta koulussa pitää oppia riittävästi myös muita aineita, esim. matematiikkaa ja biologiaa'*)

To summarise, the students believed that *it would be best to learn English in an English-speaking country*. However, the groups had different opinions on *how long it would take to learn the language*. Whereas Group A emphasised *the person's*

own ability and motivation as the key factors, Group B were more willing to estimate the time the learning process would take. When deciding on the amount of weekly hours dedicated to learning English, the students were unanimous again.

And now it is time to look at the classroom setting more closely and to study the different task responsibilities the teacher and the students have.

Learning in the classroom setting (Questions 36-46)

Task responsibilities (Question 36-37)

The groups had somewhat different views about *the task responsibilities of the language learner and the teacher* in an EFL classroom (Question 36). While Group A (49,2%) believed in *shared responsibility, the emphasis being on the language learner*, Group B (62,4%) thought that *the learner* alone was responsible for the learning process. However, the opposite opinions were also quite frequent among the groups (i.e. *the language learner alone is responsible*, Group A: 46,0%; *they are both responsible, but mainly the language learner*, Group B: 34,1%).[31]

When the students were asked about *the ideal English learning situation*, and *the proportion of time, which would require the presence of a teacher* (Question 37), the unanimous answer was roughly *50%* in both groups (Group A: 50,8%; Group B: 58,3%). The replies that the students (Group A: 5 students; Group B: 2 students) wrote under the option *others* ranged from no teacher involvement at all (Group A) to *depending on the learner's level* of English *and the issues* being taught. In other words, *a beginner needs more* (*'riippuu tasosta ja alueista, aloittelijalla enemmän*; Group B).

To summarise, the students had somewhat different opinions about the task responsibilities in the classroom setting. In other words, Group A students believed more in *shared responsibility*, while Group B thought that *the learner alone* was responsible for his learning. However, both groups agreed that the teacher and the student should *participate as much in an ideal language learning situation*.

In the previous questions the focus was on the different task responsibilities there were in the classroom. Now, it is time to continue the same theme and discuss

[31] In this question, Group A men (60,0%) thought they were responsible for the their language learning, while women (50,9%) believed in *shared responsibility, the emphasis being on the language learner*.

the roles of a teacher, student and classmates in greater detail. The results of Questions 38 and 39 will be discussed by comparing the three most frequently mentioned options.

Roles (teacher / student / classmates, Questions 38-40)

Question 38 asked the students to name *three of the most important roles that the teacher had in teaching English as a foreign language*. The groups (Group A: 30,3%; Group B: 25,1%) agreed on the most important role of the teacher (i.e. *to provide interest and motivation*), but the order of importance varied after that. According to Group A, the teacher should *help the students to become better language learners* (24,3%) and *to provide them a good model in the language use* (16,8%). Among Group B students, these tasks were in the opposite order (i.e. *to provide the students a good model in the language use*, 19,9%; *help the students to become better language learners*, 17,9%).[32]

When *the students' own role as language learners* was considered (Question 39), both groups agreed on two of the most important ones, i.e. *try to use the language as often as possible* (Group A: 28,6%; Group B: 28,5%) and *be responsible for one's own learning* (Group A: 26,5%; Group B: 24,4%). The third most important role split the groups' opinion, however. While Group A considered significant *devising one's own plans to improve some aspects of the language* (14,1%), Group B believed in *working and studying hard* (15,0%).[33]

In the replies under the option *others* (Group B: 2 students), students named *studying vocabulary* (*'päntätä sanoja'*) and *proceeding* in one's studies (*'edetä*') as additional roles of the students.

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[32] Within Group B, men and women had the same number one, i.e. *provide interest and motivation* (men: 23,1%; women: 29,5%). Additional qualities among men were *provide a good model for the language use* (19,1%), and *help to become a better English learner* (16,2%). Among women the qualities included *providing a good model for the language use* (21,8%), *helping to become a better English learner* (21,8%), and *identifying the students' mistakes and correct them* (9,0%).

[33] Within Group A, men and women believed in *trying to use as much English as possible* (men: 34,5%; women: 27,6%). In addition, women believed equally as much in *taking responsibility for one's own learning* (27,6%). Among men, other roles included *devising own plans to improve some aspects of the language* (20,7%), *taking responsibility for one's own learning* (20,7%), and *participating actively in class* (10,3%). Within women, the additional roles were *studying hard* (14,1%) and *devising one's own plans to improve some aspects of the language* (12,8%). Within Group B, the most important role (i.e. *trying to use English as much as possible*, men: 27,2%; women: 31,2%) and the second important role (i.e. *take responsibility for one's own learning*, men: 21,9%; women: 29,9%) were the same. The third role was, however, different among men and women, i.e. *studying hard* (men: 16,6%) and *devise the plans to improve some aspects of the language* (women: 13,0%).

Considering *the role of classmates in learning English as a foreign language* (Question 40), the students (Group A: 46,0%; Group B: 45,9%) believed that classmates *could help them by interacting in discussion*. Furthermore, classmates could also help *by sharing their learning experiences* (cf. Group A: 23,8% and Group B: 8,2%), and *correcting errors and sharing their knowledge of the language* (cf. Group A: 14,3% and Group B: 27,1%).

In the replies under the option *others*, the students (Group A: 8 students; Group B: 4 students) most frequently mentioned that in defining their classmates' role, several of these options were important (Group A: 7 students; Group B: 1 student).

In sum, the students had yet again fairly similar views about the role distribution in the classroom. Accordingly, the teacher's main task was *to provide interest and motivation*, whereas the student's task was *to use the language as often as possible*, and *to be responsible for one's own learning*. The results on the student's role in the classroom are in line with previous findings. In other words, in Question 26 the students believed the most important issue in learning English to be *the use of the language*. In addition, Question 36 showed that the students were ready to take *the responsibility for their learning*. The most important role of classmates was to provide help by *interacting in discussions* in the class.

Next, the aim is to establish what kind of working methods (i.e. *working in small groups, pairs, alone*) the students wished to be used in an EFL classroom. In addition, the students were also asked about their opinions about *error correction* and *the teacher's role* in that.

Working in groups, pairs, alone (Question 41)

When the students were asked, *whether they wanted to work in small groups, pairs or individually* (Question 41), they thought it would be best to *vary these working methods depending on the activity*, Group A students even more so (cf. Group A: 68,3% and Group B: 42,4%). The students of the other group, however, were more interested in *working in small groups* (cf. Group A: 17,5% and Group B: 40,0%).[34]

Only two students wrote down additional comments on this issue. While the other (Group A student) stated that it was *quite the same* (*'ihan sama'*) what kind of

[34] Concerning the issue of working methods, Group B men (44,1%) wanted to work in *small groups*, and women (46,2%) wanted to *alternate, depending on the exercise*.

working methods were used, the other (Group B student) did not want to work individually (i.e. the student had chosen the options: *in small groups*, *in pairs* and *alternate, depending on the activity*).

As these results indicate, the students were, for the most part, quite unanimous in how they wanted to work in an EFL classroom. This was also true of the next questions, focusing on *error treatment*.

Error treatment (Questions 42-44)

The students had a fairly positive view about *making mistakes in language learning* (Question 42), i.e. most of them (Group A: 74,6%; Group B: 63,5%) thought that it was *inevitable to make mistakes when learning English*. Less than a third of the students in each group (Group A: 20,6%; Group B: 28,2%) believed the mistakes to mean that *one needed more practice in using the language*. In the additional replies (Group A: 3 students; Group B: 1 student), one student (Group A) stated that *making mistakes is inevitable, yet it is important that one learns from them (‘virheitä tekee väistämättä, mutta on tärkeää että niistä oppii’*).

The next questions focused on *the teacher’s role in error correction. In oral production* (Question 43) the teacher should correct the errors only *sometimes, depending on the situation* (Group A: 87,3%; Group B: 71,8%). However, quite a significant number of Group B students *wanted the teacher to correct their errors so that they could improve their oral expression* (cf. Group A: 3,2% and Group B: 27,1%). The additional replies (Group A: 4 students; Group B: 1 student) ranged from *no, because it might have a negative effect on speaking English* (‘*ei, saattaa nostaa kynnystä puhua englantia’*; Group A: 1 student) to *yes, but with guidance and in a constructive way* (‘*kyllä, mutta ohjaavasti ja rakentavasti’*; Group B: 1 student).

In written production (Question 44), the students had a different view about the teacher’s role. In other words, the majority of them (Group A: 93,7%; Group B: 90,6%) thought that error correction could help them *to recognise the problems* and thus *avoid those in the future*. In the additional answers the students (Group A: 1 student; Group B: 2 students) stated mostly that they wanted the teacher to correct their mistakes *occasionally, depending on the task* (‘*joskus, riippuen tilanteesta’*; Group B: 2 students).

And now it is time to sum up the main findings of the last two factors. The students wanted *to vary the working methods depending on the activity,* and believed

that *making mistakes was an inevitable part of language learning*. In addition, the students were of the same opinion about *the teacher's role in error correction*. That is, *in oral production* the teacher should correct the mistakes only *sometimes, depending on the situation*, but *in written production* the correction was more desirable.

The last section of *the Assumptions about Language Learning* questionnaire focuses on classroom *activities,* and *materials* that have been useful for the students in their learning English as a foreign language. The results of these ranking questions will be reported by comparing three of the most important aspects in each question.

Activities (Question 45)

Three of the most important *activities that an EFL classroom should provide for the language learner* (Question 45) were the same in both groups, only the order of importance varied to some extent. The groups agreed on the most important activity (i.e. *speaking activities*, e.g. *conversations, discussions or presentations*, Group A: 28,5%; Group B: 29,2%). Among Group A students, *writing activities* (e.g. *letters or compositions*, 21,0%) were more important than *reading activities* (e.g. *texts, articles or novels*, 17,2%). However, the order of importance was the opposite among Group B students (i.e. *reading activities*, 18,8%; *writing activities*, 15,6%).[35]

As these results show, the students wanted to practice more their *oral production* in an ELF classroom. This finding is in line with the earlier results, indicating the importance of *using the language* as much as possible (see e.g. Questions 26 and 39).

And finally, it is time to look at the last theme represented in this questionnaire. It deals with *the material and media* that the students have found useful in the learning process.

Materials and media (Question 46)

When the students were asked to rank *three of the most important resources that had*

[35] In this question, number one (i.e. *speaking exercises*) was the same among men and women in both groups (Group A men: 30,0%, women: 28,2%; Group B men: 28,2%, women: 31,6%). Additional activities of Group A men included *games that help learning* (16,7%), *reading exercises* (13,3%) and *grammar exercises* (13,3%), while women believed in *writing exercises* (23,1%) and *reading exercises* (17,9%). Within Group B, men wanted to use *reading exercises* (20,7%) and *writing exercises* (16,1%), while women believed in *listening exercises* (22,4%), *reading exercises* (14,5%), and *writing exercises* (14,5%).

helped them in learning English, the groups had the same number one, i.e. *listening to tapes, watching videos and TV* (Group A: 26,9%; Group B: 23,3%). Other resources that had aided Group A in the learning process were *reading* (e.g. *magazines, newspapers and novels*, 21,0%), and *interaction with natives* (20,4%). On the other hand, Group B believed that *using computer programmes and the Internet* (18,9%) had proven to be quite effective for them. In addition, they thought that *course books* (15,3%) and *communication with English speaking people* (15,3%) had helped them in the process of learning English as a foreign language.[36]

Additional replies that were written under the option *others* (Group A: 3 students; Group B: 8 students) were mainly concerned with *living abroad* (‘*asuminen ulkomailla’*; Group A: 1 student; Group B: 3 students) and different *hobbies* (‘*harrastukset’*; Group A: 1 student; Group B: 1 student).

To summarise, the students were familiar with various materials and resources and admitted that those had also proven to be effective in learning English. Although the most important resource was the same in both groups, there were yet some differences between the groups. Whereas Group A was more concerned with the traditional *reading activities* (e.g. *magazines, newspapers*, and *novels*), Group B believed in more modern resources (i.e. *computer programmes and the Internet*).

The task knowledge brought up some similarities and differences between the two student groups. Based on statistical tests, the differences had to do with *motivation, the most difficult aspects of English*, and the importance of *certain skills* (i.e. *using the language, learning vocabulary*). In addition, when *learning English was compared with learning other school subjects*, the role of *memorisation* introduced statistically significant difference between the groups.[37]

And now it is time to move on, and summarise the most significant findings

[36] In this question, Group A men and women agreed on the most important resource that had helped them, i.e. *listening to tapes and watching videos and TV programmes* (men: 30,0%; women: 26,3%). After that the ranking order varied, that is men believed in *reading newspapers, magazines and novels* (23,3%), *using computer programmes and the Internet* (13,3%) and *text books* (13,3%), while women believed in *communication e.g. with natives* (22,4%) and *reading newspapers, magazines and novels* (20,5%). In Group B, men believed in *using computer programmes and the Internet* (23,4%), *listening to tapes, watching videos and TV programmes* (22,8%) and *using text books* (15,8%), while women named the following resources: *listening to tapes, watching videos and TV programmes* (24,4%), *communication e.g. with natives* (23,1%) and *the use of text books* (14,1%).

[37] The task knowledge –section introduced some differences also between men and women within the groups. The differences concerned, for instance, *the most difficult aspects of English*, the role of *memorisation* in learning English, and the issue of *working in groups, pairs or alone* in an EFL classroom. However, none of these differences was statistically significant according to the criteria for the present study.

of the present study. Because of the large amount of information that the present study produced, a decision was made to discuss only those results that had statistical significance as suggested by the statistical tests used (see Section 5.2.3). The following chapter will summarise these results and discuss them in relation to earlier research, where possible.

7 DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to compare the beliefs that the two student groups had about learning English as a foreign language. In addition, the goal was to investigate also possible differences between men and women within these groups. The present study was mainly descriptive in nature and focused more on discussing the beliefs of two groups of students. The aim of the other research question was to give some additional information about the possible differences in men's and women's beliefs within the groups.

In the following, the statistically significant differences will be discussed between Group A and B. Men's and women's belief differences will not be brought up here, as the tests did not indicate any statistically significant differences in them. The differences between Group A and B will be discussed in relation to the categories of person and task knowledge, as established by Flavell (1979, 1981a, 1981b). In addition, the results will be discussed in relation to the findings from the earlier studies, if possible.

7.1 Person knowledge

Universal attributes of learners (Question1)

Question 1 of *the Assumptions about Language Learning* (ALL) questionnaire asked the students to indicate to which degree (i.e. *very much, some, a little, not at all*) they thought certain factors (i.e. *talent, age, sex, intelligence, motivation, personality, learning style*) influenced learning English as a foreign language. The tests showed that there were statistically almost significant differences between the groups on the issues of *age*, *sex* and *motivation*. In other words, Group A students believed more strongly in the effects of *age* than the students of the other group did (i.e. *some influence*, Group A: 44,4%; *a little influence*, Group B: 45,9%). This difference was statistically almost significant, the p value being 0,022. On the issue of *sex*, Group B students were more convinced that it did not play any role in the learning process (i.e. *no influence*, Group A: 63,5%; Group B: 82,4%). Based on statistical tests, this difference was statistically almost significant (p=0,011). Concerning *motivation*, students of Group A were even more of the opinion that it was *very much* involved in

learning English (Group A: 93,7%; Group B: 83,5%). The tests showed that also this difference was statistically almost significant (p=0,049).

Sex (Question 5)

The next result that was statistically significant was yet again concerned with the *influence of sex on learning English*. This time the students were asked *whether they believed there were differences between men and women in learning English as a foreign language* (Question 5). This result are mostly in line with Question 1, as the students believed that these *differences did not exist*, Group B even more so (Group A: 73,0%; Group B: 91,8%). However, some of Group A students (cf. Group A: 12,7% and Group B: 3,5%) thought that *women were better learning English than men*. Based on a statistical test, this result was statistically significant (p=0,009).

The result concerning gender differences in learning English as a foreign language is mostly in line with the results gathered from earlier studies. In other words, Horwitz (1987) reports that only 18,5% of the ESL students living in the USA agreed that women are better than men at learning foreign languages. In addition, Yang (1999) found the Taiwanese students' had various views about the role of gender. That is, about a third of them (34%) were neutral (i.e. neither agreed nor disagreed) when asked whether women were better than men. Furthermore, almost equally as many of them either disagreed (26%) or agreed (26%) with the statement. It has to be remembered, however, that these results reflect the students' opinions on learning foreign languages, in general not learning English as a foreign language, in particular.

Educational background (Question 15)

On the issue of educational background (Question 15), Group A students believed more strongly that the *teaching methods used at the university* had been generally *good* (Group A: 63,9%; Group B: 46,3%). In addition, quite many of them were ready to admit that *the methods* had, in fact, been *very good* (Group A: 23,0%; Group B: 11,1%), while some students of Group B thought them to have been *neither good nor bad* (Group A: 13,1%; Group B: 35,2%). Based on statistical tests these differences between the groups could be considered statistically very significant (p=0,000).

To summarise, the issues of *age*, *sex*, *motivation* and *teaching methods used*

at the university brought up statistically significant differences between the two groups. However, only the issue of gender differences was approached in the same way in earlier studies, and thus it was possible to make comparisons between them. To conclude, the findings from the present study support for the most part earlier findings on the issue.

7.2 Task knowledge

Purpose and goal of learning English (Question 23)

All the students indicated *the importance of learning English* (Question 23) but their reasons varied to some extent. In other words, some of the students wanted to learn the language *to be able to communicate with English speaking people* (Group A: 52,4%; Group B: 44,7%). In addition, Group A students were more interested in getting to know *the cultures of English speaking countries* (cf. Group A: 11,1% and Group B: 3,5%), while Group B students were more interested in *learning English for occupational reasons* (cf. Group A: 7,9% and Group B: 27,1%). These differences between the groups were statistically significant (p=0,007).

The findings from earlier research did not support this finding of the reasons underlying students' motivation. In other words, both Horwitz (1987) and Yang (1999) report that the majority of the students (i.e. 78% and 56%, respectively) believed they would have better opportunities for a good job, if they learned English very well. In the present study, the option referring to occupational reasons was not that frequently mentioned by the students, however. It has to be noted still that the formulation of the question and the options given were different in the BALLI and the ALL questionnaire.

Inherent difficulty of English (Question 25)

In Question 25, the students were asked to indicate *which of the aspects of English* (i.e. *vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, syntax, morphology*) *they thought were the most difficult to learn*. As a result, *grammatical accuracy* (i.e. including options *grammar* and *syntax*) was the main issue creating problems for them (Group A: 49,2%; Group B: 40,5%). However, Group A emphasised that their problems were more to do with *syntax*, while Group B was concerned about English *grammar* (i.e.

grammar, Group A: 22,2%, Group B: 31,0%; *syntax*, Group A: 27,0%, Group B: 9,5%). In addition to these difficulties, some students of Group A were also concerned about learning *vocabulary* (17,5%), while some students of Group B had difficulties in *pronunciation* (22,6%). These differences between the groups were statistically almost significant (p=0,038).

Nature of learning English

Kind of learning (Questions 26-27)

Question 26 was concerned with certain skills (i.e. *memorisation, creativity, translation, imitation, using the language, learning grammar, learning vocabulary*) and their relationship with learning English as a foreign language. The students thought that *using the language* was *very important* in learning English, Group A students believed this even strongly (Group A: 92,1%; Group B: 71,4%). This difference between the groups was statistically very significant (p=0,001). Furthermore, *learning vocabulary* was also considered *very important* in the learning process. This opinion was supported by students of Group A even more strongly (Group A: 69,8%; Group B: 51,8%). This difference was statistically almost significant (p=0,025).

The result suggesting the importance of learning English *vocabulary* is in line with earlier research. In other words, Horwitz (1987) states that over half of the students endorsed the opinion that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words. The study by Yang (1999) reports on similar findings, i.e. 42% of the students agreed with the statement. However, it has to be remembered that the students of the present study stated that *learning vocabulary* was *needed very much* in learning English as a foreign language. Thus, they did not indicate that learning vocabulary was the most important part of learning English.

Question 27 asked the students to *compare learning English with learning other school subjects* in relation to certain issues (i.e. *practice and repetition, motivation, memorisation, time, learning strategies*). Concerning the role of *memorisation*, the students believed that it was needed *more* in learning English than in learning other school subjects, Group B thought this to be the case even more strongly (Group A: 35,6%; Group B: 45,8%). In addition, the other options received also some support (i.e. *the same amount of*, Group A: 32,2%, Group B: 40,3%; *less*,

Group A: 32,2%, Group B: 13,9%). Based on tests, these differences were statistically almost significant (p=0,036).

This finding about the role of *memorisation* is mostly in line with earlier research. In other words, Yang (1999) found that the majority (59%) of the students agreed with the statement that language learning involves a lot of memorisation. However, the differences in formulation of the question between BALLI and ALL items have to be taken into consideration when drawing conclusions from these results.

To sum up, statistically significant differences between the groups concerned the students' *reasons* for learning English, *the most difficult aspects* of the language, the importance of *certain skills* (i.e. *using the language, learning vocabulary*), and the role of *memorisation* in learning English as compared to learning other school subjects. Of these issues, *occupational reasons* for the language, the importance of *learning vocabulary*, and the role of *memorisation* were addressed in earlier research in a way that it was possible to make some comparisons. To conclude, the findings from the present study did not support the findings of earlier studies on the importance of *occupational reasons* for learning the language. However, the results on *vocabulary learning* and *memorisation* corresponded for the most part with the findings from earlier research, i.e. emphasising the significance of these factors in language learning.

8 CONCLUSION

The present study represented mainstream research (Kalaja 1995, in press), and aimed at describing the beliefs that the Finnish university students had about learning English as a foreign language. The purpose was to compare the beliefs of two groups of students, those taking a course in English (i.e. Group A) and those taking a course in computer science (i.e. Group B). An attempt was also made to investigate whether there are any differences between men and women within these groups. Statistical procedures (see Section 5.2.3) were applied to find out whether these belief differences were statistically significant. The results show that there were some statistically significant differences between the groups, but none between men and women within these groups. In the following, the statistically significant results of the present study and their practical implications will be considered. After discussing the validity and reliability of the study, the chapter closes with suggestions for future research.

In the person knowledge category, the groups disagreed on how significant they saw the role of *age*, *sex* and *motivation* in language learning (Question 1). In other words, while Group A believed more strongly that *age* and *motivation* were important factors in learning English as a foreign language, Group B was more convinced that *sex* did not play a role in the learning process. An additional question (Question 5) also supported the finding about the role of *sex*. In other words, students of Group B believed more strongly that *there were not any differences between men and women in learning English*. This finding is mostly in line with the results of previous studies. Concerning *the teaching methods used at the university* (Question 15), the students of Group A gave them somewhat more credit than the students of Group B.

In the task knowledge category, the students' reasons for learning English varied to some extent, the students of Group A being more interested in *learning the language to be able to communicate with English speaking people* (Question 23). Compared to earlier studies, the findings of the present study did not support the importance of learning English for *occupational reasons*. The most difficult aspects of English for Group A were *syntax* and *grammar*, while the other group believed them to be *grammar* and *pronunciation* (Question 25). The students of Group A also

saw more important to *use the language* and *learn vocabulary* than the students of Group B (Question 26). The finding of the importance of *learning vocabulary* is in line with earlier studies. And finally, Group B thought that *memorisation* was needed *more* in learning English than in learning other school subjects (Question 27). Also this finding receives some support from earlier research.

The importance of studying learner beliefs lies in their pedagogical implications (Wenden 2001). That is, beliefs or metacognitive knowledge influence the way in which learners approach language learning and their ultimate success in the task. Furthermore, with the help of this additional information teachers could facilitate the learning process and encourage learners' autonomous language learning. All in all, the present study could serve as a valuable source for English teachers working at the university (i.e. at the English Department and at the Language Centre). More specifically, the results of the present study suggested, for instance, that the English students emphasised communicational aspects and the importance of syntax in learning the language, while the computer science students believed that learning involves a lot of memorisation, and that they needed more practice in pronunciation. Among other things, these are the issues that teachers at the English Department and at the Language Centre should take into account when planning their lessons and use of teaching methods. Furthermore, the researcher also wants to encourage all foreign language teachers to start surveying their own students' beliefs e.g. by using the ALL questionnaire. Class discussion on student beliefs could increase the students' awareness and thus their autonomous language learning.

Although the present study was a replication study, some changes were made to the questionnaire to better ensure the validity and reliability of the results. Validity is here seen to refer to the degree to which a questionnaire measures what it claims to be measuring, and reliability to the extent to which the results can be considered consistent or stable (Brown 1988:98, 101). To ensure validity of the present study, the focus of the questionnaire was changed from language learning, in general, to learning English as a foreign language, in particular. This alteration was carried out systematically through the questionnaire. In addition, an option *others* was added to each question to give the students an alternative to write down their own reply, if they had not find a suitable one from the options given. Furthermore, examples or explanations of terms were included in some questions and options, to ensure that the

students would understand them accordingly. Despite these changes, some questions appeared still problematic from the point of view their validity. For instance, Question 24 was somewhat ambiguous when asking the students *why they had started learning English*. As the students' answers under the option *others* indicate, some of the students were thinking about their reasons for starting English at the comprehensive school, and some at the university. Similarly, in Question 15, the students might have referred to different departments within *the university,* when thinking about *the teaching methods* used by their previous English teachers.

Regarding reliability, i.e. the extent to which the results can be considered consistent or stable (Brown 1988:98), there are also some issues that need to be considered. Although the present study employed several statistical tests to ensure the reliability of the results, i.e. to find out whether they are accurate and not due to a chance (Heikkilä 1998:179), the tests could not be applied throughout *the Assumptions about Language Learning* questionnaire. This was because of the structure of individual questions, that is, the results gained from the ranking questions (see Appendix 1, e.g. Question 20) could not be statistically tested for their reliability. In addition, on some occasions, the test result could not be used, because the criteria were not valid for the test. For example, for an X^2 -test no more than 20% of the cells were allowed to count less than 5, and the minimum expected count should be more than 1 (Heikkilä 1998:203). This problem concerned especially testing the differences between men and women within the groups, as these subgroups were relatively small (i.e. Group A: 10 men, 53 women; Group B: 59 men, 26 women).

The field of studying student beliefs offers many interesting future research suggestions. As the present study has established that there are some statistically significant differences between the groups, further research is, for instance, needed to investigate the reason underlying these differences. In other words, it would be interesting to find out what kind of effects certain background variables (e.g. stay in an English speaking country, success in English studies) have on students' beliefs. In addition, further research is still needed to investigate the influence of sex on learner beliefs. Recent discussion on methodological issues offers also interesting suggestions on how to study beliefs about language learning. For instance, Kalaja (in press) argues for an alternative way of studying student beliefs that is based on discursive social psychology. According to her, with the help of naturalistic

discourse data, beliefs become directly observable as actions performed through language. On the other hand, Barcelos (in press) identifies three approaches to the investigation of student beliefs (i.e. the normative approach, the metacognitive approach, and the contextual approach). These approaches differ, for instance, in how they define the concept of beliefs and what kind of research methods they employ. That is, the normative approach defines beliefs as misconceptions and includes studies that employ questionnaires with Likert-scale response alternatives. The metacognitive approach views beliefs as students' metacognitive knowledge and uses interviews and recall protocols as research methods. The third approach, i.e. the contextual approach, represents beliefs as part of the learning culture of the student and uses qualitative data gathering methods, such as interviews and classroom observations. In addition, there is yet another approach, also known as triangulation (Victori 1999b) or an eclectic approach (Cotterall 1999b), which emphasises the importance of combining various research methods (i.e. structured with less structured instruments, retrospective methods with introspective verbalisations or observations). With the help of these various methods further information could be gathered about the nature and role of learner beliefs that these two student groups had. In other words, how beliefs or metacognitive knowledge develop and evolve, and how these beliefs could be revised and expanded to increase autonomous language learning.

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