Developing primary school students' foreign language learner self-concept

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Abstract

The experimental study presented in this paper explores the emergence and development of foreign language learner self-concepts in young learners. The study was conducted in the linguistically rich yet politically complex context of Catalonia, in a rural primary school. Within an action research framework, the study focused on self-efficacy beliefs and learner attributions and set out to address two principal research questions: i) To what do young language learners attribute their self-efficacy in the domain of foreign language learning? ii) How do these attributions affect their foreign language learner self-concept? Results showed strong causal links between learner attributions, self-efficacy levels, and emerging self-concepts. They also highlighted debilitating attributions which may be impeding the emergence of positive foreign language self-concepts. The pedagogical implications of these findings are discussed, as well as the need to distinguish between subject-based self-concept (e.g. language self-concept or mathematics self-concept) and subject-specific *learner* self-concept. A spectrum of foreign language learner positions is proposed as a pedagogical tool to identify learner positions as a step towards developing positive and situated foreign language learner self-concepts.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Over recent years, an increasing body of work has emphasised the relation between language and identity construction. The journal in which this article appears has dedicated an entire section to the psychological construct of the self in language teaching and learning, introduced with a review by Kostoulas and Mercer (2016). The review concludes by highlighting a tendency within the articles to report on aspects related to language learners rather than teachers. The study presented in this article reports on aspects related to both learners and teachers, aiming to fill a gap in the current literature by focusing on the emergence (or not) of foreign language self-concepts in young learners and the pedagogical questions this raises for teachers. To some extent, the lack of research in this area could be explained by the argument that stable ideal-self representations do not emerge before adolescence and that children cannot consider multiple perspectives on the self (Zentner and Renaud 2007). Taking up this idea, and referring to his L2 motivational self system, Dörnyei concludes that "the self approach may not be appropriate for pre-secondary students" (2009: 38). In our view, the fact that stable ideal-self representations have not emerged does not mean that work should not be carried out prior to adolescence, or delayed until later stages of development, but that different approaches need to be developed from both a research and pedagogical perspective. The experimental study presented in this paper aims to contribute towards developments in this field, exploring how emerging foreign language learner self-concepts (hereinafter referred to as FLLSC) can be approached and

developed with younger learners. The approach focuses on the relation between learners' self-efficacy beliefs, attributions, and emerging FLLSCs. While this focus reports on aspects related to learners, it does so within an action research framework that also foregrounds the critical role of the language teacher in identifying such beliefs and accompanying learners in the language learning and identity formation process.

The study has been developed in the context of the current mainstream primary education system in Catalonia. In addition to the main language of instruction – Catalan - children also learn Spanish as well as a foreign language; now English in practically all schools. This arrangement is the subject of intense ongoing debate, with the time/weight given to each language often being disputed and exploited for political rather than educational motives (Soler-Carbonell, Gallego-Balsà, & Corona, 2016). In this regard, threats to the status of the Catalan language in education and other spheres of public life remain palpable, as reflected in newspaper reports (see Monzó, 2012) sharing concerns with an international readership in the years preceding the study. Within this context, debates on identity, language use and related issues were highly present in society at large. In conjunction with these ongoing debates, it is important to note that the study took place during the lead up to the 1 October referendum on self-determination/independence, news of which reverberated across the world, as explained in the CNN report of the following day (see Dewan & Clarke, 2017). This backdrop presents a complex context which must be taken into account in the interpretation of the data collected in the study. At the same time, the issues analysed are relevant to any educational context in which English, or any other language, is introduced as a compulsory foreign language. The aim of this study is to explore and analyse young learners' emerging foreign language learner self-concepts (or absence thereof), paying particular attention to self-efficacy beliefs and learner attributions.

2. Literature review

The literature review has been divided into three sections. The first focuses on self-concept, reviewing key work developed on the construct in general before highlighting studies focusing specifically on foreign language learning contexts. The second part of the review focuses on self-efficacy, reviewing early definitions of the construct before taking in recent work discussing its relevance in foreign language learning settings. Finally, the third part introduces attribution theories, reviewing the work of authors who advocate the need to link such theories with the notion of self-efficacy.

2.1. Self-concept

In the field of educational research, Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton (1976: 411) provided a useful framework for conceptualising and developing work on self-concept, presenting a working definition which helped pave the way for further studies:

> In very broad terms, self-concept is a person's perception of himself. These perceptions are formed through his experience with his environment, perhaps in the manner suggested by Kelly (1973), and are influenced especially by environmental reinforcements and significant others. We do not claim an entity within a person called "self-concept". Rather, we claim that the construct is potentially important and useful in explaining and predicting how one acts.

According to this definition, general self-concept consists of both academic and non-academic self-concepts; with the latter being broken down further into social, emotional, and physical self-concepts, and the former being conceptualised according to disciplinary subareas such as 'English', 'History', 'Math' and so on (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976: 413). Highlighting the 'multifaceted' and 'hierarchical' structure' of the construct, Marsh & Shavelson (1985) stressed that the attainment of positive self-concept represents a desirable goal not only in education, but in different

socio-cultural settings. Focusing on the educational component, some authors (Jansen et al., 2014; Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015) went on to emphasise that self-concept is domain specific and may therefore differ considerably across different subject areas; with a learners' language self-concept potentially differing considerably from their mathematics self-concept, for example. Recent work has developed this point further, focusing on skill-specific self-concepts within wider language self-concepts, and also exploring potential generalisability across both native and foreign languages (Arens & Jansen, 2016). Within the specific context of foreign language learning (hereinafter FLL), more work is needed to develop understandings of how learners construct a sense of self during the language learning process (Csizér & Magid 2014) and, in turn, how self-concepts impact on language learning itself (Tragant 2016). According to Williams et al (2015), learner self-concepts in the domain of FLL are shaped by a combination of cognitive beliefs and affective responses. Studies on self-concept thus need to pay attention not only to learners' cognitive beliefs about themselves and their own abilities, but also to the way in which these beliefs are played out and dealt with on an affective level. As Gkonou (2017) also pointed out in her review of Masuko Miyahara's *Emerging Self-Identities and Emotion in Foreign Language Learning* (2015), any work on self-concept must go hand-in-hand with a growing awareness and sensitivity to the role of emotions in language learning. Finally, in relation to the study conducted here, it is important to highlight one of the key principles established by Shavelson et al's initial definition: self-concept is not an entity within a person but, rather, something that is inferred (1976: 411). As such, they distinguished between self-concept, conceived as a person's report of self, and inferred self-concept, conceived as "another's attribution of a person's self-concept" (ibid). This is highly relevant in the context of this study, in

which inferred self-concept (inferred by teachers/researchers/others) may be instrumental in developing learners' capacity to report on self.

2.2. Self-efficacy

While self-concept refers to a global construct expressing how individuals think about themselves on different levels, the term self-efficacy relates more precisely to a person's assessment of their ability to do something successfully in a particular situation; or to their perceived ability or inability to complete a specific task (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2007). Since Bandura's seminal work on the construct (1977), its importance in FLL settings has been highlighted in studies showing correlations not only between high self-efficacy levels and learner achievement, but also linking the former to positive attitudes towards the foreign language and culture in general, as seen in the bilingual setting of Canada (Clément, 1980, cited in Williams et al, 2015). Recent studies continue to develop this line of enquiry, advocating the benefits of increasing student self-efficacy (Rubio, 2014; Cave et al 2018) and drawing on current theories (mindfulness in the second case) to increase self-efficacy and reduce levels of foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Fallah 2017). Despite this, scarce literature is available exploring this issue specifically in young learners.

2.3. Attributions

Some authors have highlighted the need to link the self-efficacy construct with attribution theories in the domain of FLL (Hsieh and Schallert 2008). The attributional theory proposed by Weiner (1985) offers a theory of motivation and emotion in which learner perceptions play a key role; particularly in relation to the factors learners attribute their own successes and failures to. According to this theory, learner attributions influence their expectancy of completing a task successfully; which is to say

that the way they perceive their past/present successes and failures influences their expectations concerning future achievement. On this account, attributions contribute towards the construction of self-efficacy beliefs which, in turn, affect learning behaviour. The relevance of this for FLL is highlighted by Dörnyei (2001), who encourages teachers to consider the motivational or demotivational effects of learner attributions on self-efficacy and to develop specific strategies to promote positive attributions.

3. The study

In light of the previous research discussed above, this study aimed to explore and develop learners' foreign language learner self-concepts in a specific pedagogical context. The aim was to evaluate how learners respond to the idea of carrying out a task that most of them usually do effectively and confidently in the main language of instruction (L1 hereinafter) in the foreign language they have been learning since the beginning of their primary schooling (English/also referred to as L2). To do this, the study focused on self-efficacy beliefs prior to, during and after implementation of the task (a new storytelling project to be incorporated into their English classes as described in 3.4 and 3.5 below).

3.1 Research questions

In addition to the general focus on self-efficacy beliefs, the study also set out to address two principal questions:

- To what do young language learners attribute their self-efficacy in the domain of FLL?

- How do these attributions affect their FLLSC?

3.2. Method

The qualitative study presented here was carried out within an interpretative paradigm which aimed to foreground the participants' perspective within an action research context. In the specific case of language teaching research, Mark Pike argues that action research is particularly useful for gauging learner perspectives and for exploring their learning-related attitudes and values (2002). The action research process followed collected data from different instruments, including questionnaires, small group discussions and class observations. Data was collected during different stages of the research process, as described in more detail below (3.6 and 3.7).

3.3. Participants

Children in year 5 and year 6 of a small rural primary school in Catalonia participated in the study. Class sizes were small, as is common with low-population rural schools, with thirteen students aged 11-12 in year 6 and six students aged 10-11 in year 5 (n =19). The gender distribution was different in each group, with slightly more boys (8) than girls (5) in year 6, and an equal number of girls (3) and boys (3) in year 5. In line with national curriculum standards, all the children had been receiving English classes since the beginning of primary school (6 years old) and had also been introduced to the language during the infant/preschool stage (4-5 years old). Their contact with the language in the school had been limited to two one-hour classes per week, with class-time mainly being dedicated to the completion of coursebook activities, as well as ad hoc activities related to special events and festivities, such as Christmas and Easter, or storytelling sessions conducted with the support of volunteer storytellers.

3.4. Author/researcher

The author of this paper collaborated with the school for several years as one of the volunteer storytellers. During these storytelling sessions she drew on her past experience as an English language teacher working with young children, as well as her current role as researcher and teacher on the education degrees offered at the local university. Her close collaboration with the English language teachers and other staff at the school led her to make the following observations: i) The school placed considerable emphasis on storytelling for L1 literacy development: a peer reading programme in which older children regularly read aloud with younger peers had become an established school practice, with teachers agreeing that it generated multiple positive learning outcomes for both the older readers and the younger listeners. ii) Children of all ages responded positively to the volunteer storytelling sessions in English, showing high levels of enthusiasm and interest and making visible efforts to put into practice the language used/learned during the sessions. Taking these observations into account, she presented a proposal to the school which aimed to expand on the existing L1 peer reading programme, while simultaneously contributing towards the development of L2 skills. The proposal consisted of a cyclical, whole-school project whereby children's roles gradually developed from active listeners (years 1-4 of primary) to storytellers (last two years of primary education). The key difference between this proposal and the L1 peer reading programme was that the learners would need more time and support to be able to prepare their storytelling sessions in a foreign language. A programme of competency-based activities was therefore designed to structure the preparation phase, beginning with picturebook selection - with students working in small heterogeneous groups and with each group selecting a different picturebook - and continuing through the successive stages of development (Author, 2017a: 22). The time needed for these sessions meant that one of the two one-hour English classes per week would need to be

allocated to the project during the first two terms of the year, with the last term being reserved for telling the stories to the other classes. In addition, a Storytelling Circle routine was established to help storytellers structure their sessions, and to help listeners follow the story and interact with it. Videos of previous storytelling sessions were used to create an audiovisual model following the routine indicated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 approximately here.

Having observed the positive effect of the volunteer storytelling sessions on their students, and noting the close alignment with the objectives of their L1 literacy programme, the school staff (management, specialists and generalists) approved the proposal and agreed to implement it as a new school project. The author agreed to support the school through the implementation period and to work closely with the English teacher responsible for preparing the older children to become storytellers in L2.

3.5 Procedure

The research activities were planned to coincide with the implementation of the long-term, competency-based storytelling project described above. In view of this, the data collection process was carried out in three different stages:

3.5.1. Prior to project implementation

Several meetings were held prior to implementing the project in which the researcher and school staff discussed and agreed how the research activities could be incorporated into classroom activities in a way which would enable data collection, while also helping to develop the different key stages of the Storytelling project. Families were

informed about the research being conducted in parallel with the project implementation.

3.5.2. During project implementation

The researcher was present during the first classes in which work began on the project. Participants already knew her as she had visited their English classes on previous occasions as a volunteer storyteller. The English teacher explained that this time she was visiting them as a researcher from the university as she was interested in their views on the new project they were starting. After this introduction, students were invited to ask questions and clarify any doubts, helping to create a relaxed atmosphere where different viewpoints could be given. Working in small groups, students then read through a Research Agreement (Appendix a) which prompted discussions on suitable and unsuitable classroom behaviour, conditions for effective group work, and so on. Although this task had a clear pedagogical aim (to promote a positive classroom climate and foster constructive group work), it also had an ethical component insofar as it established an agreement between participants, teacher and researcher and explicitly acknowledged the learners' participation in and contribution to the study. Once all students had discussed and signed the Research Agreement, they were then asked to complete an ad hoc pre-intervention questionnaire (Appendix b). Presented in L1, this questionnaire had been designed with a dual aim: a) to prompt learners to think about storytelling at school and questions related to their own experiences; b) to collect data related to the first research question: *to what do young language learners attribute their self-efficacy in the domain of foreign language learning*? Our intention at this stage was to prompt participants to move gradually from thinking about experiences in L1 to experiences in L2 and to express these thoughts in writing and orally. Thus, in the first instance, the questionnaire asked them about their experiences telling stories in general

(L1); whether they enjoyed doing it, whether they thought they learned anything from it, and so on. The aim was to obtain data on their learner self-concept in relation to storytelling in general (in L1), which could then be contrasted with their responses to the final question, asking "Do you feel capable of telling stories in English?" We anticipated that written responses would only provide data on one part of the research question (self-efficacy), but would reveal little to indicate what they attributed this to and how such attributions may affect their foreign language learner self-concept. Follow-up discussions were therefore conducted after participants had completed the questionnaires (with the help of the teacher and researcher whenever needed), during which the young learners explained their answers more fully and shared their views. Importantly, code-switching was used throughout these discussions to maintain the linguistic pattern usually employed in class; with teacher (and researcher) speaking English but clarifying in L1 if students did not understand, and with students being encouraged to use English whenever possible, but also being free to use L1 to express their ideas more fully, in line with recent calls for the strategic use of L1 in the foreign language classroom (see Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015).

The data collected during this initial stage was subsequently extracted and used to create a problem-solving activity (Appendix c) which encouraged learners to think about reasons why they may not feel confident telling a story in English and ways in which they might overcome perceived difficulties or insecurities. Working in small project groups, learners discussed how they might respond to the problems raised and what advice they might give to a classmate who expressed such a view. All problems were taken directly from participants' own responses, but cited anonymously to create a personalised task which resonated with the learners. With the support of the teacher, they then summarised their ideas, writing them down in the form of guidelines/tips

before sharing their responses together during a whole class discussion. The guidelines that emerged were referred back to during subsequent class sessions by students and teachers alike, whenever difficulties arose while preparing their storytelling sessions.

3.5.3. After project implementation

At the end of the initial project implementation, after all students had visited other classrooms to carry out their storytelling session (in pairs or groups of 3), several class sessions were dedicated to discussing and evaluating their experiences. The researcher was present again during these sessions. Following a similar format to the pre-intervention stage, students were asked to complete an ad hoc questionnaire (Appendix d). The teacher and researcher circulated among students, checking to make sure they understood and helping to clarify any doubts. As in the pre-intervention stage, the written activity was followed by small group discussions and then a whole class discussion to explore the questions and issues further. These sessions were followed by meetings with the English teacher and meetings with other teachers involved in the process (teachers of the groups who had listened to the stories, head of studies, director of the school) to reflect on the experience.

3.6. Data collection

A considerable amount of oral data was collected during the different stages of the research process which helped to shed further light on the written data provided in the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. Two strategies were followed to capture this data to the full: on the one hand, the researcher took extensive field notes during all visits to the class sessions and also during the research meetings held; on the other hand, audio recordings were made of the most important class sessions (initial discussions after pre-intervention questionnaire completion and discussions after post-intervention

questionnaire) to capture participants' responses. These recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated (responses often mixed L1 & L2) to facilitate data analysis. A professional translator reviewed the translations to ensure accuracy.

3.7. Data analysis

The data collected during the different stages of the process underwent a process of analysis, reflection and evaluation within an interpretative paradigm drawing on 'grounded theory' and using the 'constant comparison method' developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The first focus of the analysis was on identifying and evaluating learner self-efficacy, contrasting the pre-intervention and post-intervention data to obtain an overall picture of perceived learner self-efficacy. The second focus of analysis identified and categorised the factors according to which learners attributed their self-efficacy in the domain of FLL. Finally, further analysis and reflection was carried out in light of the categories that emerged in order to evaluate how these attributions were affecting learners' emerging FLLSC.

4. Results

In the first instance, it is important to state that data analysis revealed significant changes in learner self-efficacy throughout the process.

4.1. Pre-intervention self-efficacy

Pre-intervention data showed that only one child responded with total confidence ("A lot") to the question of whether they felt capable of telling a story in English. Other responses were split evenly between "quite", "not much", or "not at all". The more positive responses can be explained, to some degree, by the fact that the fairly confident

students ("quite") attend additional private classes outside school, receiving additional input and being exposed to different methodologies. After considering these exceptions, overall, the pre-intervention results showed that most students presented low levels of self-efficacy in relation to their perceived ability to tell a story in English; results which contrasted significantly with the post-intervention data, as discussed below. When interpreting this data in order to uncover the reasons underpinning low self-efficacy levels, three main categories emerged in relation to learner attributions: 1) weaknesses in communication skills/comprehensibility; 2) pronunciation/accent; 3) identity-related issues. Further detailed analyses focusing on these three categories revealed how such attributions may interfere with or inhibit FLLSC construction, as indicated below.

4.1.1. Weaknesses in communication skills/comprehensibility

The cases in which learners explicitly attributed their perceived inability to carry out the task to limitations in their own communication skills revealed anxieties about their own ability to transmit the desired meanings in a coherent way ("I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to tell it properly"); and about their potential listeners' ability to understand them ("in case they don't understand me"). Further questioning on this point suggested that the real concern lay more with the frustration of not being understood than with whether the listeners received the intended message or not. Not being understood emerged as a cause for considerable concern for some learners; to the extent that some indicated that they preferred not to attempt a challenging communicative task at all than to put themselves at risk of not being understood, thus exhibiting behaviour known as 'avoidance orientation' (Williams et al., 2015). While this self-limiting position was not shared by all participants in the study, concerns about not getting it right were revealed

by many, including those who reported feeling fairly capable of telling a story in the foreign language ("But I might get it wrong").

4.1.2. Pronunciation/accent

Analysing the data obtained in this category, it became clear that learners' self-efficacy levels dropped considerably when referring to their pronunciation skills in English. Comments made by several learners indicated high levels of self-efficacy for language-related work in general, for telling stories, and for foreign language aptitude in general, which dropped significantly when the question of pronunciation was introduced. The majority of students considered their 'accent' to be a hindrance restricting their ability to carry out a task in L2 (telling a story) which they would feel more than comfortable doing in L1. When questioned further, we found that the children used the term 'accent' to refer to the way the person speaks the language in a general sense and not to denote elements that might usually be associated with the term (geographical area, social class, etc.). What is noteworthy is that they seemed to conceptualise 'accent' as an identity trait, as something that is a fixed part of the speakers' self, rather than as a distinctive way of pronouncing a language which a) develops within a specific context and is subject to and dependent on different factors; and b) is in a constant process of change as a result of these factors. Conceptualised as an identity trait, 'accent' (or non-L1 status as it seemed to be understood by the participants) appeared to represent a permanent barrier to effective communication in the foreign language ("I can't do it because of my accent"), while simultaneously promoting the assumption that tasks in L1 are *always necessarily* easier than those set in L2. What seems to emerge out of this is a generalised perception that learning in L1 is 'natural' or 'effortless', while learning in

L2 is associated with difficulties or obstacles that are inherent to the learners themselves (their 'accent'), rather than challenges that can be worked on and overcome.

4.1.3. Identity-related issues (competing languages)

Further analysis of data in this category highlighted the link between language use and identity formation. Tensions were manifested and learners presented different degrees of unease when faced with what they seemed to perceive as 'competing' languages (see Cicres & Llach (2018) for a discussion of this concept in the cross-border region spanning Catalan/Spanish and French territories). A clear example of this was expressed by one participant who, explaining why he did not feel either interested in or capable of completing the task, stated that "I don't understand anything in English; I'm well Catalan, me". The emphatic rendering of the second clause in L1 ("sóc ben Català, jo") made it explicitly clear that this (being 'well Catalan') explained the former (not understanding anything in another language). In other words, for this learner, being Catalan and speaking the Catalan language precluded the speaking of other languages. The participant's utterance – which could initially be interpreted as rather flippant, disrespectful towards the English teacher, or as simply manifesting a closed mindset to other languages – needs to be contextualised within the socio-cultural and political setting in which these learners are growing up, as emphasised in the introductory section. For this particular learner, it seemed that the mere fact of engaging with another competing language (English) could somehow undermine an already threatened sense of identity. Claiming not to understand a thing, and expressly refusing to make an effort to understand things, becomes synonymous here with taking a socio-political stance which aims to defend a threatened language and identity and to refuse the imposition of another. The defensive position manifested by the learner – which could also be

interpreted as a fear of loss of identity - had a patently negative effect on his language learning and language learning goals. In contrast to this position, some learners revealed an openness to other languages which was explicitly linked to their sense of identity and their future possible selves. Questioning the learner who claimed not to understand anything on account of being Catalan, another member of the class asked:

> So what does that mean, then? You mean you have to speak Catalan all the time to be Catalan? What about other languages? Can't we learn them too?

Despite the young age of these participants, their ability to articulate and discuss such questions revealed an awareness of and interest in critical questions related to identity formation: Does the language I speak define who I am? How is my identity affected by speaking other languages? Furthermore, the debate conducted around the question "Can't we learn them [other languages] too?" revealed the extent to which some of these young learners already associated being able to learn other languages with a widening of their own horizons and the opening up of their possible future selves.

4.2. Post-intervention self-efficacy

As indicated above, considerable changes were revealed in student self-efficacy after the intervention, with most learners reporting that they would like to repeat the experience and tell more stories in English in the future because "it's fun"; "it helps you learn English", "to teach English to the younger children"; "to improve my English"; among other reasons. Not all students agreed on this, however. Of the two learners who expressed strong feelings against repeating the experience, one initially refused to offer further explanation – "because I don't" –, while the other expressed his dislike for the subject in general – "because I don't like English". In this case, the learner's experience

appeared to be closely related to experiences of learning other subjects and, more importantly, to their global academic self-concept within the current educational setting. The learner who "does not like English" was new to the class/school and experiencing difficulties adapting to the new environment in general. Aside from these two cases, some students expressed reservations because of what they considered to be an excessive amount of time preparing the activity (approximately one class per week over 2 school terms). On the one hand, data analysis focusing on this question helped to feed back into the pedagogical design by indicating improvements for future project implementation. On the other hand, it also shed light on an interesting point regarding students' perceptions of their own learning. While some showed reluctance to take part in the experience again "because they had to work hard to prepare it", others showed awareness that working hard and making an effort was an essential part of the learning process: "I enjoyed it, but I had to make a real effort". Overall, and in comparison with the pre-intervention stage, data analysis revealed considerable changes regarding the way in which learners reported on their performance and explained their successes, as summarised in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 approximately here

Table 1 *Learners' attributions: reasons reported for successes in storytelling sessions*

Attribution	Reasons for perceived success*
Collaboration of others	Our classmates participated The listeners were quiet when we were telling the story The other children respected us The audience were good The listeners behaved themselves The listeners joined in when we asked
Effort	I worked hard to prepare the story I made a lot of effort I enjoyed it, but I had to make a real effort We put a lot of effort into it
Practice/persistence	We practiced a lot

	It was hard at first but we got there by practising
Positive feelings	I felt confident because we'd prepared it well (Positive feelings-practice/persistence) I felt good doing it
Use of resources	Using the puppets we made ourselves The masks we made helped
Belief in own ability	Having confidence in myself (was my strong point)
Positive behaviour	I behaved well
*Sample of most frequently repeated responses.	

Learners' increased self-efficacy was also observed to be closely related to their affective assessment of the experience. Thus, all students who expressed a keen interest in repeating the experience also reported that they were either 'sure' or 'almost sure' that the listeners had enjoyed their story and that this made them feel 'really good', 'happy', 'content', or 'good'. These findings support the idea advanced by Williams et al. that self-concept "can refer to people's cognitive beliefs about their abilities as well as to their affective evaluation of their competence in a specific domain" (2015: 47). The positive feelings generated by the experience appeared to have a direct effect on the learners' assessment of their own competence in this domain, boosting their self-efficacy and compensating for the 'hard work' involved. In view of this, it is no surprise that one of the most common attributions reported by learners to explain the success of their storytelling sessions was 'effort'. This was followed by other factors (see Table 1) that pointed to an increased awareness of their position as learners within a particular setting, which depended on their own behaviour, the behaviour of others, their own beliefs, their own feelings, and so on. This growing awareness indicated that notions of innate obstacles (for example, 'accent') and exclusive identities (fixed to L1) were giving way to positions which would allow for the emergence of situated and constructive FLLSCs.

5. Discussion

Ushioda suggests that "the ideal motivational scenario is one in which students attribute positive outcomes to personal ability" (cited in Dörnyei, 2001: 119). While agreeing with the underlying intention of this claim (to empower learners and discourage negative attributions related to perceived inherent inabilities), the attributional explanations offered by participants in this study highlighted the essential interaction between different factors that go beyond 'personal ability'. Moreover, while 'effort' was afforded particular prominence in both student and teacher explanations of success, it was situated within a wider context which depended on other factors (the collaboration of others above all, their own feelings, their own behaviour, etc.), as we can observe in Table 1. Students' growing awareness of the role played by different interrelated factors - the environment, their own feelings and behaviour, the behaviour and responses of others, their efforts and the products of their own labour - contributed towards the development of a situated FLLSC, according to which learners were able to set themselves realistic learning goals (Dornyeï, 2001; Author, 2017b) and identify ways to improve their own learning and that of their classmates: "not act like an idiot in class"; "don't laugh so much"; "try to explain things better"; "do a better presentation"; "speak louder"; and "don't speak when others are talking", are just some of the responses given by participants to the question "which points do you think you could improve when telling the story?". In this sense, the participant attributions highlighted in Table 1 can help raise awareness of the different factors that contribute to the development of positive FLLSCs in young learners.

At the same time, the attributions identified in the pre-intervention stage can also help raise awareness of attitudes and beliefs that may be preventing the emergence of such self-concepts, with a view to addressing such debilitating beliefs in classroom practice.

With regard to learners' perceived *weaknesses in communication skills*, the results challenge a popular assumption that 'children pick up languages easily because they are uninhibited'. The results of this study show that children are in no way immune from the anxieties associated with FLL. While the existence and problematic nature of FLA – or xenoglossophobia **-** has been well established (Horwitz et al, 1986) and widely researched in relation to adults (see Liu & Jackson, 2008 and Riasati, 2011 for recent discussions, the first in China with undergraduates and the second in Iran with adult learners*)*, less attention has been given to this phenomenon in children; possibly due, to some extent, to the prevailing assumption that they are 'uninhibited little sponges'. The results of this study thus support recent work highlighting the need to recognise and analyse FLA in young learners (see Aydin et al., 2016 in the context of ELT with children in Turkey) and to move beyond assumptions that do little more than stereotype children and children's learning processes. The results also support recent work calling for more research to help L2 learners align or calibrate their self-assessment of own performance with actual performance (Trofimovich et al, 2016) and to encourage teachers to identify and manage individual and contextual factors that impact on students' willingness to communicate in language classes (Shao & Gao, 2016) and that may be hindering or preventing learning. With regard to *pronunciation/accent*, the results suggest the need to pay more attention to learners' pronunciation/accent-related self-efficacy beliefs in order to identify avoidance strategies that students may be using to 'save face'; to promote realistic language learning goals; and to foster the emergence of FLLSCs which accommodate different 'accents' and acknowledge that pronunciation is context-specific and subject to change. These findings are consistent with other current studies that focus on self-concept and self-regulation at early ages, and that promote the integration of pronunciation work in communicative activities such as

storytelling, role-playing and other activities (Moyer 2018). Finally, with regard to *identity-related issues/competing languages*, the results of this study help to address the questions advanced recently by McCrocklin & Link (2016), and the general gap in the literature highlighted in their study, by showing how learners' fears of loss of identity can indeed affect language learning and language learning goals.

Overall, the findings indicate that self-efficacy levels in the domain of FLL, and learner attributions explaining these levels, have a direct impact on young learners' emerging FLLSCs. The learner attributions identified during the pre-intervention stage reveal the presence of negative factors (FLA, avoidance behaviour, self-limiting positions, debilitating beliefs and assumptions, defensive and antagonistic positions) which, if not addressed, could prevent the emergence of FLLSCs. In this scenario, the foreign language will be conceived as just another form of 'content' taught at school, which the student must 'learn' or 'pass' like any other subject, without this affecting or coming into contact with their self-concept. A contrasting scenario opens up, however, if we focus on the results obtained in the post-intervention stage of the study, which show considerably higher self-efficacy levels after successful task completion. The learner attributions identified reveal a growing awareness of the different factors that contribute to successful language learning and language usage. The important point is that these attributes (effort, their own behaviour, the behaviour of others, their beliefs, feelings, etc.) point to factors that are intrinsically related to learners' self-concept (how they feel, how they behave, what they believe) and that can be addressed, questioned and developed. Within this scenario, learners are encouraged to make the connection between what they do, what they feel, what they think, etc., and their language learning achievements. Making this connection enables them to become active learners with emerging FLLSCs, as opposed to students aiming to pass a school subject. In this sense,

these findings indicate the benefits of distinguishing between subject-specific self-concept as presented by Shavelson et al. (i.e. English self-concept) and subject-specific *learner* self-concept, whereby the learner becomes conscious of their own status as learner. As a pedagogical tool, the spectrum of learner positions presented in Figure 2 can help raise awareness of the different positions adopted by students. By detecting which positions their students are adopting on this spectrum, teachers can i) determine the extent to which their learners perceive themselves as foreign language learners (or not); ii) identity underlying issues that may be hindering their learners' progression and iii) take measures to address these issues.

Insert Figure 2 here

6. Conclusion

This study focused on primary children's self-efficacy beliefs in the domain of FLL. It set out to explore what these learners attribute their foreign language learner self-efficacy to, and how these attributions may be affecting their FLLSC. Most learners who participated in the study had been receiving English classes for around seven to eight years. Despite this, and while taking into account their low exposure to the language (approximately 2 x one hour classes per week in line with curricular standards), the results showed surprisingly low levels of self-efficacy during the pre-intervention stage, particularly when contrasting the high levels shown in relation to the same work in L1, raising questions about the generalisability of skills across languages (Arens & Jansen, 2016). Exploring learner attributions uncovered three main categories according to which low self-efficacy levels were explained: perceived weaknesses in communication skills/comprehensibility; pronunciation/accent; identity-related issues/competing languages. Further analysis of these categories revealed 1) the

presence of FLA among young learners, resulting in avoidance behaviour and self-limiting positions; 2) the belief that accent-related factors are a fixed identity trait representing a permanent barrier to effective communication; the assumption that L1 learning is easy and effortless (natural) while L2 learning is conceived as difficult and as a struggle against 'innate' qualities of the learners themselves (i.e. their L1 'accent'); 3) that young learners already display awareness of the relation between language and identity and are starting to assume different positions, shaped by different contextual factors. Figure 2 illustrates these different positions along a spectrum of foreign language learner positions. At one end of the scale we observe defensive positions in which protecting a threatened sense of (still emerging) L1 identity entails the refusal of L2 learning. In the middle of the scale we find more neutral positions revealing little awareness of or reflection on identity. At the opposite end of the scale we observe affirmatory positions which associate FLL with a widening of horizons and an openness to different possible future selves, which includes multiple language use.

This study makes a contribution to this field of research by emphasising the need to distinguish between subject-based self-concept (English self-concept) and FLLSC: a distinction that stresses the point that receiving English classes does not necessarily mean acquiring or having a concept of oneself as a foreign language learner. In this sense, the study highlights the way in which the emergence (or not) of FLLSCs in children is intrinsically related to self-efficacy beliefs and learner attributions. While it may be unrealistic to expect children of this age to explicitly consider multiple perspectives on the self (Zentner and Renaud 2007), the experimental study has shown how emerging FLLSCs can be approached and developed in the classroom with the support and guidance of teachers.

One of the limitations of the study is the small size of the sample population and therefore it would be interesting to verify the results with a larger sample in a different educational setting, taking care to attend to the specificities of that setting. In this sense, and in line with Mercer (2011), the adoption of an interpretative and grounded theory approach is considered to be a particularly appropriate way of exploring the complexities of emerging self-concepts, while avoiding the imposition of preconceived frameworks. Time should also be taken to ensure that the findings are shared and discussed with all agents concerned (teachers *and* students) in order to incorporate necessary changes into classroom activities and address the issues raised. In this particular case, discussions of the findings with the participants resulted in decisions being taken to dedicate more time to pronunciation work within the storytelling project and to allocate more time to the reflective work developed in the students' learning diaries.

The pedagogical implications of this study point to the need to develop both pre-service and in-service teachers' awareness of learner self-efficacy beliefs and to incorporate work on learner attributions in classroom activities in order to challenge debilitating beliefs, promote constructive attitudes, and encourage the setting of realistic and achievable goals. The classroom activities/research instruments used in this study (see appendices) could be replicated, adapted or used as a reference point for teachers to design other activities aimed at identifying self-efficacy beliefs and developing positive learner attributions. Such activities provide teachers with a means of addressing some of the underlying issues that may be hindering their learners' progression, thus encouraging the emergence of more positive and situated FLLSCs. This is seen as particularly important at the preadolescent stage of identity formation, when the work

carried out (or not carried out) will affect the way in which FLLSCs are rejected, stilted, or accommodated alongside other learner self-concepts.

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