

# **Greek young learners' perceptions about foreign language learning and teaching**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a study which probed the foreign language learning perceptions of 516 Greek young learners who attended English lessons as part of their compulsory schooling in the school classroom context. Primary and lower secondary learners replied to a closed questionnaire on their introspections and as a result exhibited different beliefs about language learning and strategy use. The study yielded some important findings regarding the views that are connected with the teaching situation. The findings highlighted that young learners hold definite views about the roles adopted by the teacher who is regarded as a central figure in the learning situation. Based on learner responses, errors are regarded as signs of learning, and feedback is considered essential in the process of learning. However, young learners believe that successful learning outcomes are inextricably linked with autonomous learning procedures. This paper concludes with the implications for the teacher who ought to be willing to welcome learner insights about language learning and pedagogical practices and make appropriate changes to his/her teaching.

**Keywords:** learner beliefs, language learning strategies, perceptions, young learners

## **1. Introduction**

The present study investigates the perceptions that Greek young learners of English hold about foreign language learning. We begin with the assumption that learners come to foreign language classes with certain preconceived ideas about how languages are learned, and that these ideas affect the way they approach language learning and their strategy use. As a consequence, learners often develop a concern or dissatisfaction when their expectations are inconsistent with the instructional activities exercised by the teacher. Therefore, if language teachers wish to understand how their learners feel and why they react in a particular fashion during the learning process, they should address, among others, the issue of the perceptions/beliefs learners hold about the nature of language learning, the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, the degree of learner autonomy in the language learning process, and the selection of learning strategies.

## **2. Literature review on learners' beliefs and related issues**

With regard to learners' perceptions about various aspects of foreign language learning, previous studies have investigated the degree of match between teacher and student beliefs (Kern 1995), culture-related differences (McCargar 1993), beliefs and proficiency (Wen and Johnson 1997), gender-related differences in strategy use and beliefs (Bacon and Finnemann 1992), beliefs and learner autonomy (Cotterall 1999), beliefs and strategy use concerning motivation and attitude (Yang 1996), and self-efficacy beliefs and strategy use (Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995).

The studies cited above mainly report on adult learners' beliefs about language learning and related issues, whereas little research can be found on young learners' conceptions of language learning. In a longitudinal study of elementary immersion programmes, Chamot and El-Dinary (1999: 331) found that children were capable of providing detailed descriptions of their thinking and learning processes, thus showing that "metacognitive awareness begins at quite an early stage". Also Horwitz (1999) has hinted that age and stage of life may be among the factors that influence variation in learner beliefs.

In keeping with Chamot and El-Dinary's statement, we assume that young children are capable of effectively understanding and describing what they want and how they prefer to learn a foreign language. This study, therefore, attempts to offer insight into young learners' perceptions about issues related to the language learning procedure, namely, the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, the nature of language learning, independent learning and preferred strategy use patterns.

### **2.1 *The role of the teacher***

Beliefs about the teacher's role and his/her contribution to the language learning process are linked respectively with beliefs held about the learner's role. McCargar (1993) studied learners' and teachers' beliefs with regard to pedagogical practices such as treatment of error, use of group work, and expressing disagreement with the teacher, and found significant differences between the two groups. Kern (1995) compared learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning and found differences in relation to pedagogy, the nature of language learning, and length of time required for the achievement of the expected competence in the target language. Cortazzi and Jin (1996: 169) state that "in many language classrooms... it is possible that there may be largely

unnoticed gaps between the expectations of the teacher and students, or between different groups of students”.

## ***2.2 The role of feedback***

Beliefs about the role of feedback and the source providing it are closely related to the previous and following issues, that is, the teacher's role and learner autonomy. Radecki and Swales (1988) found that the majority of subjects in their study preferred content-based feedback, and wanted their formal errors corrected and suggested that feedback is useful when there is a match between teacher intentions and student expectations, as Yang's (1999) study showed that over 80% of the students believed that errors should be corrected from the early stages of learning. However, one of the characteristics of autonomous learners is that they do not depend solely on the teacher for corrective feedback, but they also self-monitor their language performance and self-correct themselves (Stern 1975).

## ***2.3 Independent learning***

Developing learner autonomy means that learners are prepared to define their own goals, take risks, and experiment with new materials. Learner autonomy depends not only on learner personality traits but also on educational and cultural background. (Cameron 1990, Knowles 1976). Cotterall (1995) investigated 139 adult ESL learners' beliefs about language learning in relation to autonomous language learning behaviour. She identified six factors which indicated that learners held strong beliefs and called for teachers' and learners' mutual understanding of the role each side plays in the language learning process. Wenden (1999b) states that learner beliefs about the nature of learning, the learning process, and humans as learners, constitute a subset of metacognitive knowledge and that this knowledge is important for the promotion of autonomous learning (Wenden 1999a).

## ***2.4 Beliefs about the nature of language learning***

Learners come to the foreign language classroom with certain beliefs about what language learning entails which, in turn, may influence their approach to the actual process of learning as regards the degree of effort required, accepting or rejecting the way teachers teach, developing self-motivation, devoting time to practising or communication, perception of self-efficacy, and so on. Erhman and Oxford (1995)

found a correlation between learners' beliefs and proficiency in speaking and reading. Mori (1999) posits that language proficiency is related to learner flexibility and modification of their beliefs about general and language learning. Riley (1996) claims that beliefs about language learning influence a learner's attitude, motivation or behaviour during the learning process. Cain and Dweck (1995) found a relation between patterns of motivation and beliefs about ability to learn and achievement in their study of primary school children. Finally, in Cotterall's study (1999) on adult learners' beliefs about language learning, it became apparent that learners viewed language learning as a time consuming process, that errors are the road to learning and that communication is achieved once they have learned all the rules of grammar.

### ***2.5 Beliefs and learner strategy use***

Beliefs about the effectiveness of several kinds of learning strategies on language learning have been researched by a number of researchers (Carrell 1989, Horwitz 1987, Wenden 1991, Yule 1988). In a study of 505 Taiwanese university students, Yang (1996) reported that the learners' beliefs about their self-efficacy affected frequency of strategy use. Wen and Johnson (1997), who studied a range of learner variables and language achievement of 242 advanced Chinese learners at tertiary level, concluded that there are direct effects of beliefs about learning on strategy use. Wenden (1999b) also wonders if the relationship is reciprocal, i.e. if strategy use leads to a change of beliefs and if such a change, in turn, leads to reforms in the use of strategies. Bacon and Finnemann (1992) studied gender differences of 938 adult foreign language students in relation to beliefs, attitudes, strategy use, and experience in the target language, and found that female learners made higher strategy use than male learners when dealing with authentic material, or were involved in social interaction, and they also showed higher levels of motivation for language learning. Pintrich (1989), and Pintrich and De Groot (1990), who studied the relationship between students' motivation and strategy use, concluded that those students who believe that the course material is interesting and valuable tend to use all kinds of learning strategies.

With regard to research on young learners, Purdie and Oliver (1999) examined the language learning strategies used by 58 bilingual primary school children in relation to several issues one of which was the students' language efficacy beliefs and found a large correlation between these beliefs and cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Also Lan and Oxford's (2003) study of 379 primary school students in Taiwan showed

significant relationships between frequency of strategy use, on the one hand, and gender, level of proficiency, and degree of liking English, on the other.

### **3. The study**

#### ***3.1 Rationale***

The research was prompted by the dearth of studies undertaken in the Greek educational context regarding young language learners' perceptions about language learning and strategy use. A questionnaire was administered to primary and lower secondary learners, attending English language courses in state schools. Furthermore, this study aspires to shed some light into the beliefs held by learners of different age groups. These learners' beliefs could prove useful when considering effective teaching strategies for the two age groups, because if it is revealed that learners have different expectations, teachers could gear their teaching towards more effective teaching strategies.

#### ***3.2 Design of the questionnaire***

The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire<sup>1</sup> which was divided into two sections. Section A contained 60 closed-ended items; the first 30 items, adapted from the two questionnaires, which were developed by Cotterall (1995, 1999), expected learners to report their preconceived beliefs about the learning process, whereas the last 30 items, aiming at the elicitation of the learners' learning strategies, were adapted from Lan and Oxford's (2003) Taiwanese Children's SILL questionnaire. Section B aimed at building learner profiles.

The questionnaire was piloted on a group of 30 students at the primary level, in order to be assured of its accessibility as the questionnaire had been translated into Greek from English. The feedback received was incorporated into the final version of the questionnaire; some items were rephrased and some were added.

The participants expressed their beliefs about the learning procedure and their strategy use in a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("never or almost never true of me") to 5 ("always or nearly always true of me"). To check for consistency of answering, a few items included in the questionnaire were negative versions of other items.

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the questionnaire can be obtained by communicating with the authors at [apsajoy@enl.auth.gr](mailto:apsajoy@enl.auth.gr) or [asougari@enl.auth.gr](mailto:asougari@enl.auth.gr)

In an attempt to draw the participants' profiles, the respondents provided information about their age (and/or educational level), gender, private language tuition and the number of years undertaken for this endeavour, the attainment of any proficiency certificates, the language mostly used at home, and the reasons for learning English. The questionnaire was administered during a regular English class hour, and the participants were supplied with thorough explanations.

### **3.3 Subjects**

The study investigated the beliefs of 516 learners, attending English as a foreign language as part of their mainstream education at the primary ( $N = 262$ ) and lower secondary level ( $N = 254$ ). The administration of the questionnaire took place in the fall term of the school year, with sixth grade primary level (PL) and third grade lower secondary level (LSL) pupils. The girls totaled 52 percent of the participants. 43 percent of lower secondary learners had attained certification of proficiency in English at various levels through independent exam bodies, whereas only 4 percent of the primary learners had done so.

### **3.4 Method of analysis**

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to obtain the statistical analysis of the data. Descriptive statistics, i.e., frequencies, percentages, means ( $M$ ), standard deviation ( $SD$ ), helped the formation of the participants' profile and the overall picture of the beliefs held. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to indicate the reliability of the findings for each subscale of beliefs and that of strategies. The independent sample t-test was used to determine the statistical significance, by tracking the difference in the means between primary and lower secondary learners. The two-tailed significance level was set at  $p < .05$ .

### **3.5 Results**

This study sheds some light on Greek young learners' inner thoughts about language learning that most probably affect the way they learn a foreign language and, consequently, the strategies they employ, in an attempt to consider methodological adaptations to ameliorate the teaching situation. The findings suggest that young learners hold definite beliefs about language learning and have strong expectations about the teaching process. In the case of the reliability statistics for the beliefs held,

Cronbach's alpha yielded the satisfactory result of .71. The same reliability figure for the strategies was .83.

### 3.5.1 Patterns of beliefs

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire data, while attending classes at primary and lower secondary level, learners hold beliefs which are quite distinct for the two groups of learners. To be more specific, four of the five categories in the belief system yielded significant differences (in the t-tests that were conducted) for the two groups of learners. These findings are presented in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Frequency of beliefs held by primary and lower secondary learners**

Strategies	Primary		Lower Secondary		t-value	<i>p</i>
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
Role of teacher	3.39	.63	3.20	.60	3.496	.001
Feedback	4.12	.49	4.05	.64	1.415	<i>n.s.</i>
Nature of language learning	3.58	.52	3.29	.55	6.155	.001
Learner independence	3.62	.77	3.38	.73	3.508	.001

The results reported in table 1 reflect learners' beliefs. Learners, depending on their age and education background, seem to hold different views about the role of the teacher, the role of independent learning, and the nature of language learning. The younger they are, the stronger the dependency on the teacher. However, in the case of feedback, primary and lower secondary learners share similar views which remain unchanged overtime. Due to the importance allotted to feedback, learners recognise the value of feedback and expect its provision by the teacher.

As regards learners' views about specific language learning and teaching issues, a number of significant results emerge: over time learners reform their beliefs and have different expectations of the whole language learning experience. Table 2 reports the significant findings that surface in relation to learners' expectations regarding the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, the nature of language learning, and learner independence. A statistically significant difference can be traced in the means for 15 belief items.

**Table 2: Belief items scored significantly different by primary (PL) and lower secondary (LSL) learners**

Beliefs		PL	LSL	t-value	p
		M	M		
Role of the teacher					
1	Helping the learner to learn English	4.4	3.9	5.57	.001
12	Creating opportunities to practice in English	4.1	3.9	2.73	.01
15	Explaining what they will learn	3.9	3.5	3.52	.01
18	Deciding how much time will be devoted in an activity	3.9	3.0	2.16	.05
Role of feedback					
17	Reading the correction of errors carefully	4.5	3.9	5.76	.001
19	The teacher knowing better about the progress of learners	4.1	3.7	3.20	.005
30	Trying to speak in English despite errors	3.6	4.0	-3.47	.005
Nature of language learning					
6	Being able to speak in English without knowing all the rules	4.3	4.0	3.25	.005
10	Errors impede language learning	2.7	2.2	3.69	.005
13	Knowing all the rules before speaking in English	4.3	3.5	7.56	.005
20	Being able to learn English within a short time	3.8	3.4	3.66	.005
25	Progress depending on effort in class	4.1	3.6	4.31	.005
27	Speaking with my teacher about progress makes learner uncomfortable	3.1	3.0	-2.20	.05
Learner independence					
16	Attempting to find solutions alone	3.3	2.9	3.37	.005
23	Tracking errors	4.0	3.6	3.89	.001

Learners' educational level, which is closely linked with age, seems to play a significant role in the expectations that learners have in relation to their teacher's involvement in the learning process. Primary learners reported significantly higher expectations about the role they anticipate their teacher to play in class than lower secondary learners. Those primary learners, who believed that the teacher ought to play a dominant role in learning activities, expected the teacher to help them learn English ( $M = 4.4$ ), to create opportunities to practise in English ( $M = 4.1$ ), to explain what they will learn after being involved in certain activities ( $M = 3.9$ ), and to decide how much time will be devoted in a particular activity ( $M = 3.9$ ). Once learners get older, they feel that they can assume responsibility for their learning, without being under constant surveillance.

Regarding the role of feedback in the classroom, errors are taken more seriously by primary learners than by their lower secondary counterparts. Even though overall no significant difference emerged for the two groups of learners (as mentioned above), when the various belief items were considered, some significant differences emerged when individual items were taken into account. Thus it becomes apparent that the correction of errors is considered carefully by primary learners who devote time trying to make sense of the corrections provided by their teacher in an attempt to avoid future



erroneous behaviour ( $M = 4.5$ ). Furthermore, primary learners feel that their teacher knows better whether they have achieved certain learning outcomes. The picture is quite different when it comes to engaging in exchanges in English without having a good command of the language; older learners reported attempting to speak in English despite their incomplete knowledge of the language system. Thus the two groups of learners hold significantly different views regarding their involvement in communicative exchanges with incomplete knowledge of the language system.

As far as the learning process is concerned, the findings yielded a significant difference when learners were asked about the importance of knowing the rules of grammar in order to have successful communication. Primary learners hold the view that knowing the rules is quite important, while lower secondary learners do not share the same viewpoint ( $p < .005$ ). In addition, certain beliefs change over time, as is the case of believing that learning English can be achieved in a relatively short period of time. Older learners have realised that targets cannot be achieved as easily as they may originally have thought.

Learner independence is an issue that is considered of great importance in the learning process as this entails autonomous learners. In terms of learning English independently of the teacher, primary learners believed that they significantly track errors more often than lower secondary learners. A significant interaction effect emerged between educational level and attempt to find solutions without resorting to any sort of help. Primary learners feel significantly more confident in sorting out difficulties encountered without receiving any help. On the other hand, lower secondary learners, being down-to-earth, have probably realised that once a problematic situation emerges, immediate action should be taken. Due to the primary learners' overestimation of their abilities and their unfamiliarity with trouble-shooting, they may have felt that they could deal with the problematic situation on their own.

### *3.5.2 Patterns of strategy use*

Table 3 reports the findings related to the strategies, being classified as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social (Lan and Oxford 2003). We can discern significant differences between primary and lower secondary learners in all the subcategories except for compensation strategies.

**Table 3: Frequency of strategy use in the primary and lower secondary sector**

Strategies	Primary		Lower Secondary		t-score	<i>p</i>
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Memory	3.18	.86	2.54	.86	8.346	.001
Cognitive	3.35	.61	3.20	.59	2.772	.005
Compensation	3.20	.59	3.12	.68	-0.584	<i>n.s.</i>
Metacognitive	4.15	.82	3.53	.86	8.365	.001
Affective	3.68	.87	3.28	.93	5.036	.001
Social	3.14	.83	2.77	.78	5.218	.001

In the findings presented above, we can see that most strategies for both groups of learners fall in the middle frequency range. Of the six categories, the two most commonly used are the metacognitive and affective strategies and both groups of learners seem to make use of these two types of strategies, even though differences can be found in terms of regularity in use. No significant difference was yielded in the use of compensation strategies between primary and lower secondary learners. Social strategies are the least used by primary learners, whereas memory strategies are not frequently implemented by lower secondary learners.

These findings provide evidence that primary learners make conscious effort to use various strategies in their attempt to achieve better learning outcomes and that they are more willing to experiment. Lower secondary learners view learning differently; they have passed the stage of experimentation and have different priorities. They still make use of certain strategies but to a lesser degree.

Based on the responses of the participants, 25 out of the 30 strategy items highlighted a statistical difference among the respondents, reflecting a difference in learners' preferences for certain strategies over others. The strategy items reflecting a significant difference between primary and lower secondary learners are illustrated below in Table 4:

**Table 4: Strategy items scored significantly differently by primary (PL) and lower secondary (LSL) learners**

Strategy Items		PL	LSL	t-value	<i>p</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>		
Memory strategies					
31	Linking new words with old ones	3.3	2.5	6.20	.001
32	Drawing a mental picture or paper picture of new words	3.0	1.5	4.22	.001
33	Making constant revisions of words or expressions	3.9	3.2	6.43	.001
34	Forming rhymes	2.5	2.0	4.14	.001
35	Forming sentences with new words	3.2	2.6	4.91	.001

<b>Cognitive strategies</b>					
36	Imitating native speaker pronunciation	3.7	3.1	5.89	.001
38	Reading computer programmes	3.1	3.7	-4.51	.001
39	Practising English sounds	4.1	3.2	7.57	.001
42	Looking for similarities between English and Greek	3.1	2.8	2.39	.05
43	Deducing meaning from context (without translation)	2.8	3.3	-3.89	.001
44	Translating into English from Greek (when speaking or writing)	3.4	3.1	3.10	.01
45	Translating into English from Greek (when listening or reading)	3.6	3.4	2.69	.01
<b>Compensation strategies</b>					
46	Guessing meaning from context (when listening or reading)	3.4	3.7	-2.77	.01
48	Asking for help	3.7	3.4	3.03	.005
<b>Metacognitive strategies</b>					
51	Organising time to study (not for a test)	3.9	2.8	0.08	.001
52	Looking into the reasons for making mistakes	4.2	3.4	8.12	.001
53	Being anxious about progress	4.3	4.0	4.24	.001
54	Listening carefully to English speakers	4.3	4.0	2.40	.05
<b>Affective strategies</b>					
55	Relaxing when feeling anxious about speaking	4.0	3.5	4.65	.001
57	Self-rewarding for success	3.3	3.0	5.23	.001
<b>Social strategies</b>					
58	Asking speakers to clarify, to repeat, or to slow down	4.0	2.7	2.31	.05
59	Practising with classmates during the break	2.1	1.8	2.12	.05
60	Finding out about English, American and English-speaking cultures	3.4	2.7	4.89	.001

The age or the educational level of the participants have a powerful effect on the use of the various strategies. In terms of memory strategies, the educational level makes a significant difference in their use with primary students using a number of such strategies more frequently than lower secondary students. The t-tests that were conducted provide insight into the use of the various cognitive strategies as well. Cognitive strategies are used by both groups of participants but to a varying degree. Age seems to play a certain role in the kind of compensation strategies that are used by the respondents. For instance, the significant difference for the strategy 'guessing meaning from context' is favoured by lower secondary learners, whereas primary learners are more inclined to 'ask for help'. With regard to metacognitive strategies, despite some differences in individual strategy item use, both groups reported using some of these strategy items nearly always. The proficiency level influences 2 of the 3 affective strategies included in our questionnaire with primary learners significantly using them more often than lower secondary learners. Finally, the social strategies are significantly more often employed by primary learners than by their lower secondary counterparts.

#### 4. Discussion and concluding remarks

This study was undertaken to find out (i) the perceptions about issues related to the language learning procedure and patterns of strategy use held by Greek young learners

of English, and (ii) the differences with regard to age and proficiency level between primary and lower secondary learners in these perceptions. The findings presented above seem to support the view that differences do exist and that these differences call for differential treatment in the language classroom that ought to be considered by teachers should they wish to lead learners to successful learning outcomes.

As learners do not come to the classroom empty-handed, but rather hold certain beliefs about the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, the nature of language learning, and the role of independent learning, their views draw attention to the implementation of certain methodological approaches. The teacher is regarded as a facilitator for learning, even though younger learners still seem to have greater dependence on their teacher, who is expected to guide the learning procedure, by showing them how to learn and to provide feedback. Lower secondary learners, who are more experienced, believe that language learning success depends on their own efforts; their wider experience enhances their perception of achieving successful communication exchanges, even with limited language knowledge. On the other hand, primary learners tend to depend more heavily on being familiar with the rules of grammar before engaging in communication. Thus errors are taken more seriously by primary learners who show interest in the corrections made by their teacher.

Primary and secondary learners' efforts to cope with the enticing experience of learning a foreign language is reflected upon the wide variety of learning strategies employed, and the differences in their priorities. The mother tongue influences primary learners' attempts to express themselves in English (see Table 4, Nos 43, 44, 45, & 46) more than secondary learners. In the use of metacognitive strategies, age does affect the choices learners of different ages make: Primary school learners' attempt to devote time to study English during week days is indicative of the different priorities that the two groups of learners have. In lower secondary education, foreign language learning is greatly marginalised due to the intricacies of the Greek educational system. Older learners, using the maturity that comes with age, feel more relaxed and seem to act more autonomously. Having experienced the stage of experimentation, they have probably deduced that certain strategies are more useful than others in attempting to achieve a communicative purpose (compare, for example, Nos 36, 38, 39, & 46 in Table 4). The implementation of selective means that have proven to be helpful, have rendered lower secondary learners independent and self-reliant.

This study found evidence that learners have certain expectations about the learning procedure; thus, learners' views ought to bring about the adoption of classroom practices. Even though it is not possible to tailor instruction to the beliefs of each individual learner, it is possible to make certain amendments for effective language instruction that would cater for the needs of the majority. Learners welcome the idea of assuming responsibility for their learning but there needs to be a shift in focus to help them learn how to learn. To ensure effective outcomes, they need training in order to monitor, edit, and make an evaluative judgment about their output. The adoption of a learner-centred approach on the part of the teacher could entice learners into more effective learning outcomes, as the teachers' subsequent practice would be influenced by the perceptions of learner preferences.

In general, the approach to be followed by teachers should be differentiated according to age and proficiency differences of their learners: more attempts through communicative activities should be made by teachers tutoring primary learners in order to help them realise that language learning entails more than simply learning the forms and practicing the sounds of the target language out of context; as for secondary learners, teachers should involve them more in tasks which allow learners to use computers, develop reading and listening comprehension through guessing activities, and show approval of their efforts to use the target language for communication without correcting all of their errors. In this way, lessons will become more challenging, and the secondary learners' motivation will be sustained.

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