'Me as a Learner of English':

Self-Concept and Learner Beliefs in Finnish Advanced L2

Learners' Autobiographical Narratives

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Self-concept has interested researchers for decades, although within the field of Second Language Acquisition, mostly quantitative methods have been used in self-concept research. Nevertheless, qualitative methods offer a more holistic and detailed view of self-concept and the factors that affect its development. Narratives are a rather novel qualitative method for examining self-concept in language learning, especially in Finland.

The aim of this study was to examine how Finnish learners of English in upper secondary school describe themselves as learners of English, and which factors, according to the learners, have been influential to their self-concept development. In particular, learner beliefs and their relationship with self-concept were studied alongside other factors. Autobiographical narratives were collected from 44 Finnish upper secondary school students. The narratives were analyzed using thematic analysis, and four learner groups were identified according to the self-descriptions. Mercer's (2011c) categorization of internal and external factors was used as a framework in identifying influential factors in the narratives.

The findings suggest that self-concept is best understood as a complex, dynamic, hierarchical construct instead of a two-dimensional continuum. The learners described a variety of factors that had been influential to their self-concept formation, for instance, earlier experiences of learning and using English, affective responses, and feedback from significant others. Furthermore, the learners believed that practice was more important than natural talent in learning English, and that English would be useful for them in the future. In other words, the learners expressed a belief that they would be able to achieve their goals under the right circumstances, regardless of how negatively or positively they described themselves as learners of English.

In conclusion, narratives were found to be an adequate method for examining individual trajectories of self-concept development as well as trends within groups of learners. In the future, following the same learners over longer periods of time and complementing narratives with other research methods will shed more light on L2 self-concept.

Key words: self-concept, beliefs, narrative research, autobiographies, English as a second language, English as a foreign language, second language acquisition, second language learning

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a process that takes years and continuous effort. Over the course of their studies, each language learner forms a perception of themselves as a learner: their strengths, weaknesses, preferred learning strategies, goals, hopes and also fears. Within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), self-concept is understood as "people's beliefs of themselves as language learners and users" (Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 4). The connection between self-concept and learning outcomes has interested researchers for decades, but within SLA, other individual differences such as age, motivation and aptitude have received much more attention. While self-concept has been found to be in some relationship with learning outcomes (Huang 2011, 523), the nature, direction, and strength of the relationship are still largely unknown.

Learner beliefs, in turn, are related to the learning context instead of the self, but they also affect learner behavior and performance (Mercer 2011b, 336). Similarly to self-concept, learner beliefs have also been investigated using a plethora of labels and definitions, which has made it difficult to draw definite conclusions or to make comparisons across studies. Indeed, complexity and dynamic change are characteristic of both self-concept and learner beliefs (Mercer 2011a, 69; Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 132). Despite the terminological challenges that concern both self-concept and learner beliefs, understanding the processes and factors that affect self-concept formation can help to understand the experiences of language learners in the reality that they live in: where they believe their difficulties to arise from, and what they believe could facilitate their learning.

Both self-concept and learner beliefs have been investigated quantitatively with questionnaires and qualitatively with interviews, but rarely using narrative methods (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 282; Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 129). In the Finnish context, narratives are a fairly novel method, and in most of the studies conducted in Finland, the participants have been university level students or future teachers (Kalaja 2011, 127). Therefore, narratives can offer a myriad of novel insights, especially if new learner groups are included: different ages, backgrounds, educational contexts, and so on. Given the complexity that characterizes both self-concept and learner beliefs, narratives are an adequate research method as they do not require truncating the concepts into fixed questionnaire items.

In this thesis, I examine narratives written by advanced learners (N = 44) of English:

second-year students in the Finnish upper secondary school, aged between 17 and 19. I use thematic analysis and the computer program N-Vivo for processing the qualitative data. The aim is to explore how the learners describe themselves in the narratives, and which factors the learners perceive to have been influential in how they view themselves as learners of English. In addition, I aim to explore the role of learner beliefs in self-concept development. The research questions are the following:

1. How do the participants describe themselves as learners of English?

2. Which factors, according to the learners, have influenced their self-concept?

3. What kinds of beliefs do the learners express and how have the beliefs influenced self-concept development?

In some research contexts, outlining the distinction between formal foreign language learning (FLL) and informal second language acquisition (SLA) is necessary. In this thesis, however, English is considered both a foreign language and a second language, given that it is a subject studied formally at school but also increasingly used in a variety of informal contexts (Kalaja, Menezes and Barcelos 2008, 9). Consequently, foreign language learning and second language acquisition are not systematically distinguished from each other in this thesis.

This thesis consists of seven sections. After this section, I move on to explore previous literature, first on self-concept in Section 2 and learner beliefs Section 3. In Section 4, I present the data collection methods, participants, and data analysis in more detail. The findings are presented in Section 5, together with links to previous literature. In Section 6, the implications of the findings are discussed in more detail, evaluating how self-concept and learner beliefs are related to classroom practices and how a positive self-concept could be reinforced. The final section outlines concluding reflections, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

2. Self-concept in Second Language Learning

In psychology, sociology and educational sciences, the academic self-concept has been of interest for more than 30 years (Marsh et al 2019, 333; Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 1). The results have revealed that a positive academic self-concept indeed enhances academic achievement, being a stronger factor in predicting success than grades, standardized tests or socio-economic status (Huang 2011, 524; Marsh et al. 2015, 16). Despite the apparent predicting power of global academic self-concept, researchers now highlight the importance of using domain-specific self-concept measures instead of global self-concept scales (Huang 2011, 524; Bong et al 2012, 348). That is, the relationship between self-concept and achievement in the given subject domain might become blurred or underestimated when the methods are not adjusted to tap the specific subject domain (Huang 2011, 526). This means that to study the effects of self-concept in EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts, methods that are adjusted to measure EFL self-concept should be used. However, within the field of SLA, the self has not been the focus of studies up until recently as it was not considered one of the main factors in the Individual Differences paradigm (Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 129). This lack of research concerning self-concept in language learning is even more striking when considering the unique role of language and language use in shaping identities and self-beliefs: as Mercer (2008, 183) argues, examining the role of self-concept in language learning is even more critical than in other subjects because of the close connection between self-beliefs and language use.

The self-concept is traditionally measured quantitatively by different scales adapted to each subject matter (see Laine and Pihko 1991, 119–130; Marsh et al 2019, supplemental materials). In addition to these quantitative studies, the field of SLA has seen an increasing amount of studies where self is examined from a holistic perspective, as dynamic and situated, and closely interacting with other individual characteristics (Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 129). According to Mercer (2011b, 335), a more holistic perspective is much called for, as only in-depth studies can scrutinize the subtleties of self-concept development and manifestation. Also Henry (2009, 180) points out that traditional quantitative instruments are limited in how well, if at all, they can examine temporal change in self-concept. New methods and perspectives are needed to comprehensively study the increasingly complex interplay of factors and contexts that concern self-concept development (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 182).

Besides the methodological challenges described above, self-concept research faces terminological issues: there remains a variety of definitions and terms that all relate to self-beliefs but conceptualize them differently (Mercer and Williams 2014a, 1). Self-concept is increasingly difficult to differentiate from similar but theoretically distinct constructs such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (Huang 2011, 506; Marsh et al. 2019, 332). While recognizing the importance of terminological precision, Mercer and Williams (2014b, 182) point that different perspectives, definitions and methodological approaches need not be seen as competitors or mutually exclusive approaches: on the contrary, each could offer unique insights and particular viewpoints to the same complex and dynamic phenomenon. In the following section, the various definitions of self-concept are examined, and the characteristics that distinguish self-concept from other similar constructs are presented.

2.1. Self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem

In SLA as well as in psychology and other related fields, three similar terms are used to study the self and self-beliefs: self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. However, defining and particularly distinguishing the three from one another is far from straightforward. In this section, the three concepts are discussed, differentiated, and the particular definitions used in the context of the present study are delineated.

Self-concept in SLA can be defined as "people's beliefs of themselves as language learners and users" (Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 4). Other definitions include "the personal perception of self with different levels of specificity and domains" (Huang 2011, 506) and "a complex, multilayered, multidimensional network of interrelated self-beliefs" (Mercer 2011b, 335). Although different on the surface, all these three definitions capture the same core elements: firstly, the self, secondly, the perceptions or beliefs about the self, and thirdly, a variety of contexts or dimensions. The complexity of self-concept, mentioned in Mercer's definition, is an essential characteristic also highlighted by Rubio (2014, 43) when he explains that self-concept consists of "physical, social, familiar, personal, academic, and many other situational" dimensions. The multitude of contexts and complexities that characterize self-concept reflect the holistic understanding of self, embraced by Kostoulas and Mercer (2016, 132), Badiozaman (2015, 107) and Mercer and Williams (2014b, 180). Indeed, a person's perceptions and notions about themselves, emerged and modified throughout life, cannot be examined through a restricted definition which excludes certain dimensions, such as contexts, social interactions, or temporal change. Also Mercer (2011b,

336) notes that a broad definition is needed to capture the wide set of beliefs and feelings that self-concept can involve.

In the following paragraphs, three more essential characteristics of self-concept are discussed. Drawing from previous literature, I first explain how self-concept includes both cognitive and affective components; second, that it involves both descriptive and evaluative components, and lastly, that self-concept is dynamic and cannot be separated from its contexts. These are also some of the features that differentiate self-concept from other similar constructs, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are discussed at the end of this section.

First, self-concept is comprised of both cognitive and affective components (Mercer 2008, 183): that is, what learners think of themselves, and how they feel about themselves. Both cognition and affect interact to modify someone's self-concept, and when describing themselves as learners or users, people often use statements that refer both to knowing or thinking and to feeling (Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 132). Second, self-concept includes both descriptive and evaluative aspects (Badiozaman 2015, 82–83): people describe themselves according to what kind of learners they think are, and also evaluate how good or successful they perceive themselves to be. Lastly, self-concept is now considered to be a dynamic trait, or at least a mixture of dynamic and stable traits (Mercer 2011b, 336–337; Rubio 2014, 48). Instead of unidirectional cause-and-effect relationships, self-concept researchers now agree that self-concept and its context or the factors influencing it are in a bidirectional relationship, where a change in one will affect the other and the other in turn will change the first one (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 180; Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 4; Badiozaman 2015, 107). Another widely accepted view is that self-concept cannot be separated from its contexts to be examined as a static, detached trait (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 179; Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 12), but that the time, place, social context, and other situational variables must always be considered for detailed and in-depth analyses of self-concept.

As already mentioned, there exist several other constructs that are seemingly very close to self-concept: among the most similar, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Choosing, defining and comparing these three concepts, which often overlap and evade precise characterizations, could be one of the greatest challenges faced when researching self-beliefs (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 177). At the very least, such a variety of definitions leads to confusions, and possibly even to fallacies where similar labels are used to describe different constructs and, at the same time, scales that claim to measure different constructs actually

assess the same phenomenon (Marsh et al. 2019, 332).

The defining feature that has traditionally distinguished self-efficacy from self-concept is that self-efficacy is more context-dependent and task-specific (Mercer 2008, 183; Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 2). However, as mentioned above, self-concept has been found to have more predicting power when measured at an increased level of specificity. Thus, the trend is that self-concept is examined with subject-specific or even task-specific measures, which leads to the problematic situation where task-specificity is no longer enough to distinguish self-concept from self efficacy (Huang 2011, 506; Marsh et al. 2019, 334; Mercer 2008, 183). To resolve this, Marsh et al. (2019) attempt to propose a characterization that would conclusively outline the "murky distinction" between self-concept and self-efficacy. This proposal consists of three criteria. First, self-concept is both prospective and retrospective, while self-efficacy is mainly prospective: self-efficacy beliefs are people's perceptions of what they can do or cannot do in the future (Marsh et al. 2019, 334). The second criterion is that self-efficacy is purely descriptive and does not include an evaluative component, as self-concept and self-efficacy do (Marsh et al. 2019, 335). The third criterion maintains that self-efficacy is free of frame-of-reference effects, for instance, social comparison, which is perceived as an important factor in self-concept formation (Marsh et al. 2019, 335). While such criteria are essential in constructing closed-ended questionnaire items, qualitative research may not significantly benefit from strict delineations, as discussed above. Furthermore, some authors assert that self-efficacy is a building component of self-concept (Mercer 2008, 183; Mercer 2011b, 336), and separating the two constructs, clearly intertwined, is thus not necessary or even possible in qualitative approaches.

When considering self-esteem, in turn, a similar challenge arises as both self-concept and self-esteem include descriptive and evaluative items (Huang 2011, 506). Rubio (2014, 43) asserts that "[s]elf-esteem is the process and resulting evaluation of the self-concept", suggesting that self-concept is the initial starting point, which the person then assesses and values. According to other authors, self-esteem is a general construct, encompassing a wider range of contexts and task domains than self-concept or self-efficacy (Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 2). Self-esteem also appears to correlate more weakly with subsequent academic success than the two other constructs (Bong et al. 2012, 348). According to these understandings, self-esteem seems a somewhat blurred concept, which is in a relationship, possibly multidirectional, with both the two other constructs, and with the context and situational factors. Another possible interpretation is that self-esteem (or self-worth) is one of the three sub-components of self-concept: the actual (or cognized) self, the ideal self, and

self-esteem that emerges from either the harmony or conflict between the two other constructs (Laine and Pihko 1991, 18). In this model, a learner who perceives a large gap between what they think they are and what they would like to be, is likely to suffer from low self-esteem, which in turn further alters their self-concept. To sum, self-esteem is arguably a concept related to both self-efficacy and self-concept, but the nature of the relationship remains obscure.

Besides theoretical characterizations, also empirical studies have attempted to pin down the distinction between the similar but different labels. In a large-scale quantitative study, Bong et al. (2012, 348) found that both self-concept and self-efficacy, regardless of the scale chosen to measure the two, produced close to same results. Bong et al. reckon that the students themselves do not distinguish between the different self-constructs as clearly as researchers have theorized. Consequently, as the definitions already prove problematic in quantitative studies, they are likely to cause even more challenges when studying the constructs qualitatively (Mercer 2011b, 343). Therefore, Mercer and Williams (2014b, 178) highlight that while defining and justifying the use of each term is essential in research, different perceptions need not be seen as competing. A holistic view of the self also allows, and actually requires, a holistic definition that does not generalize or truncate the constructs to fit preformatted, strict labels (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 178).

In conclusion, a myriad of alternative definitions for self-concept exist. The different definitions, however, share some core features: the self, perceptions or beliefs about the self, and a variety of environments where the perceptions are formed and shaped. Thus, in this thesis, I understand self-concept as a set of perceptions or beliefs about the self in a variety of contexts or dimensions, especially the self as a learner of English. As discussed above, understanding self-concept as complex and dynamic allows for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Such a dynamic understanding is also embraced by Mercer and Williams (2014b) Roiha and Mäntylä (2019) and Badiozaman (2015), which is why the definition used in this thesis resembles the definitions used by the mentioned authors.

2.2. Factors of self-concept formation

The early tools developed for studying self-concept were Likert-type questionnaire scales consisting of ready-made statements: for example, the Academic Self-Description Questionnaire by H. W. Marsh (1992) includes items like "I have always done well in

subject". From the 1980s to the present day, Marsh and colleagues have used such questionnaires and developed a model to understand academic self-concept in different subject domains: the internal/external frame of reference model or the I/E model (Marsh et al 2015, 16–17). The I/E model hypothesizes that self-concept is influenced by two frames of reference: the internal frame of reference, where learners compare their achievements in one academic subject to their own achievements in other subjects; and the external frame of reference, in which learners compare their performances to the performances of their peers (Marsh et al 2015, 17). Therefore, self-concept cannot be treated as a global construct, comprising all subject domains and all contexts, as was the case in the earliest studies, but rather understood as a domain-specific and hierarchically structured phenomenon (Huang 2011, 506).

In the recent years, various researchers have adopted a qualitative approach to study the self. These authors agree that the self cannot be understood as an abstract measure separate from the world surrounding it (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 179), as simple Likert-scale questionnaire items might do. Qualitative methods, including narratives, abandon sets of pre-existing questionnaire items and seek new ways of understanding the hierarchical nature and elements that interact in self-concept formation. One of the authors who represent this qualitative turn is Sarah Mercer, who attempts to investigate which factors influence the EFL learner self-concept (2011c, 6). The data include interviews, journals, other written texts and language learning histories (2011c, 7); that is, largely narrative pieces of written text or spoken language. Mercer (2011c, 97) organizes her findings according to Marsh's I/E model, but instead of the relatively narrow definition of internal and external factors used by Marsh, Mercer extends the categories to comprise broader phenomena and additional factors that emerged from her analysis. For Mercer (2011c, 97), internal factors arise from the self: for example, self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and cognitive reactions. External factors, in turn, emerge from outside the self, like experiences of learning or language use, feedback from others, learning environment, and so on (2011c, 97). Of course, the two categories overlap, even to the degree that an ultimate distinction of internal and external factors might be close to impossible, and understanding the two as the two opposite ends of a continuum might be more appropriate (Mercer 2011c, 97).

In this thesis, Mercer's classification of internal and external factors is used as a preliminary framework of analysis. This classification is considered appropriate for examining narrative texts because it was created based on Mercer's observations on a

largely similar set of qualitative data, while acknowledging and incorporating the earlier findings from quantitative research. Similarly to Mercer, the "internal" and "external" factors are understood broadly as opposing ends of a continuum, not as clear-cut labels, to avoid forcing the elaborate details present in qualitative data to fit rigid categories. Next, the variety of potentially influential factors found by Mercer (2011c) are presented in more detail.

2.2.1. Internal factors

Internal factors emerge from the self (Mercer 2011c, 97) and, together with other factors, modify and adjust a L2 learner's self-concept. Mercer (2011c) further divides internal factors to cross-domain comparisons, affect, and beliefs. Next, the different types of internal factors are examined and exemplified with instances from various empirical studies.

Cross-domain comparisons are processes in which learners contrast their own ability in one domain, as they perceive it, to their perceived abilities in other domains. While early research almost exclusively studied comparisons between mathematical and verbal skills, learners also make comparisons across a variety of domains (Mercer 2011c, 98). Mercer identifies five subcategories of cross-domain comparisons: comparison across academic subjects, foreign languages, native and nonnative languages, skill domains, and task domains.

Cross-domain comparisons at the subject level are internal comparisons of perceived ability between different academic subjects, for example, math and languages. The dichotomy between math and verbal skills was first posited by Marsh's I/E model: according to the model, high performance in mathematics leads to weakening self-concept in language subjects, and vice versa, due to processes of internal comparison (Marsh et al 2015, 17). The model has received support from empirical studies: a meta-analysis of 69 studies showed that while good performance in mathematics was strongly correlated with good performance in verbal subjects, the self-concepts in the same subjects were almost uncorrelated (Marsh et al 2015, 17). The same results prevailed across age groups, gender, and a variety of countries (Marsh et al 2015, 17). Mercer (2011c, 98–99) found several instances of subject-level comparisons in her data, often between mathematical and verbal subjects, in concordance with the I/E model. However, learners perceive the similarities and differences between the subject domains differently, which highlights the possibility of individual variation (Mercer 2011c, 99). Moreover, such comparisons may not be relevant to

all learners, especially at advanced levels, and thus their predictive power might not be as strong as hypothesized in Marsh's I/E model (Mercer 2011c, 99–100). In sum, cross-domain comparisons across different subjects is a much researched, but still an ambiguous phenomenon, which potentially influences a learner's all academic self-concepts.

Cross-domain comparisons across foreign languages are the most frequent type of comparison in Mercer's data (2011c, 100), although this would not have been the case if the subjects had not had the opportunity of studying more than one foreign language. Similarly as between different academic subjects, learners also contrast their performance in one foreign language to their achievements in another, and form separate self-concepts for each language. For instance, Carina, a participant in Mercer's study, has clearly separate self-concepts in Spanish and in English, and she constantly compares her abilities in the two when describing her language skills (2011b, 339). Therefore, Carina's self-concepts in different foreign languages are separate but interrelated and in continuous interaction (2011b, 339). Carina's case exemplifies how a learner's self-concept and experiences in one language might differ outstandingly from the same learner's self-concept and experiences in another language, and that the two influence each other. For instance, experiences of success in one language may reinforce a positive self-concept as a language learner, and thus facilitate learning in another foreign language. However, in Carina's case, the influence is rather reversed, as her negative experiences and feelings of dissatisfaction with her own performance in English conversely highlight her successes and positive self-concept in Spanish (Mercer 2011b).

The perceived similarities and differences between the foreign languages may influence these processes: for example, Roiha and Mäntylä (2019, 8) found that advanced learners with a strongly positive English language self-concept repeatedly showed a negative self-concept in Swedish and in German, even though all three belong to the same Germanic language family. Also, the forms of teaching, evaluating and grading may vary from one classroom to another, which could also impact the perceived performance in different foreign languages (Mercer 2011c, 101). Hence, the influence of one foreign language self-concept on another could vary depending on the cultural and educational practices, which calls for research in a variety of countries and educational contexts.

Cross-domain comparisons across L1 and L2 mean comparisons between a native (L1, first language) and a non-native language (L2, foreign/second language). The participants in Mercer's study (2011c, 101) contrasted, for instance, how they feel when they speak their first language with how they feel when speaking a foreign language.

While such comparisons were relatively rare in Mercer's data, the relationship between perceived ability in first language contrasted to foreign languages definitely requires further research, both because of a lack of empirical studies but also the possible influence that L1–L2 comparisons may have on a learner's performance. Mercer (2011c, 102) notices that the two learners who explicitly compared their L1 and L2 performance were the lowest-performing students, and hypothesizes that more advanced learners might regard other frames of reference, such as skill-domain comparisons, more relevant.

Cross-domain comparisons across skill domains refer to comparisons between different components of language competence: writing and speaking, vocabulary and grammar, and so on. In Mercer's data (2011c, 103), the most recurrent comparison was between writing and speaking, which the learners seemed to perceive as distinct skills that are hardly connected to each other. Badiozaman (2015, 92), in turn, examined Malaysian English learners' (N = 170) self-concept in academic writing, and found that the same students who reported that they liked writing English in general and were relatively good at it, also expressed a lack of confidence in their academic writing skills.

Another example of the multilayered nature of self-concept is the way in which generally successful and self-confident learners express their weakness in one specific skill domain. Carina, one of the participants to Mercer's study who was already mentioned above, repeatedly affirmed that she was good at Spanish, but also mentioned that she still has some difficulty with tenses (2011b, 341). Mercer (2011b, 341) suggests that this apparent conflict between two sets of self-beliefs is possible because Carina does not think that one area of difficulty should affect negatively her general Spanish self-concept. Similarly, the subjects in Roiha and Mäntylä's (2019, 8) study with overtly positive self-concepts identified some problematic skill domains, but the problems were regarded as occasional and did not deteriorate the overall self-concept. A possible explanation is the process of compartmentalization, where a negatively perceived skill domain is isolated from the general perceptions of ability (Mercer 2011a, 67–68). In fact, the ability of identifying one's weaknesses as well as strengths is a sign of a realistic self concept (Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, 8). Even the most successful learners face momentary difficulties, but are able to overcome them without losing faith in their overall abilities as language learners. Examining and understanding these processes might also help those learners who struggle with a weaker self-concept and more frequent difficulties in second language learning.

Cross-domain comparisons across task domains are instances of comparison between subtasks: writing an email compared to writing an academic essay, or giving a

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speech compared to maintaining a casual conversation. Mercer (2011c, 106) regards tasks as a subcategory of a skill domain, although drawing a precise line between skill domains and task domains is hardly possible or even necessary. An example of different self-concepts in different task domains is Badiozaman's (2015, 97) study: two participants explained that they struggled with English academic writing tasks because they were not familiar with rules and conventions of academic writing in English, despite having enjoyed writing less formal essays in their previous English studies. This example indicates that it is meaningful to understand self-concept as a hierarchical, layered, and above all a dynamic construct: a new task type can further alter a language learner's already complex self-concept.

Cross-domain comparisons across time are not an independent subfactor in Mercer's classification. However, Mercer (2011c, 119) mentions some instances of temporal comparison between a learner's current self-concept and a prior self-concept. For example, a learner may reflect on their past progress in the language, and this perceived progress could weaken, strengthen or otherwise modify their self-concept as a learner. Furthermore, not only the prior self-concepts have potential influence: also the future possible selves, such as an ideal L2 self or a feared unsuccessful self, can contribute to self-concept formation. Mercer and Williams (2014b, 180) reflect that self-concept is a constantly changing product of a learner's experiences in the past, but also of their goals and ambitions for the future. Future aims and hopes, as well as pressures to perform, influence how a learner expects to succeed in the future, while the learner simultaneously reflects on their past performance. In motivation research, Dörnyei's 'L2 Motivational Self-System' emerges from the idea that learners seek to reduce the gap between their current selves and their L2 ideal selves: thus, a well-established ideal L2 self can be a forceful factor in a learner's behavior (Dörnyei 2009, 29). Notwithstanding the potential significance of comparisons across prior, current and future self-concepts, Henry (2009, 180) notes that such temporal change remains underresearched, despite the fact that self-concept is largely agreed to be a dynamic phenomenon in constant change, especially during childhood.

Affective statements and responses are "internal reactions to external events" (Mercer 2011c, 117): for example, feelings of interest, enjoyment, boredom, anxiety and so on. There is a wide range of possible emotions related to language learning, but also of possible external events which could cause the affective responses: the learning context, other persons like teachers or peers, tasks and performance pressure. Mercer (2011c, 117) acknowledges that sometimes the stimulus that causes the emotion is not explicitly external, as also subjective perceptions such as an experience of progress and success or of failure and

disappointment could elicit an affective response. Moreover, Mercer (2011c, 117) states that affect was extremely difficult to separate from other factors, which highlights the importance of affect in self-concept formation.

Aragão's study (2011, 309) on Brazilian English learners' (N = 3) beliefs and emotions underlines the influence of emotions in language learning: the participants expressed that feelings of embarrassment, anxiety and possible judgment from teachers or other students hampered their learning. One of the participants had embraced a self-concept as a shy student who did not enjoy speaking in class, which prevented her from participating in many of the speaking activities and thus from developing her speaking skills altogether (Aragão 2011, 311). According to Laine and Pihko (1991, 13), negative affective states such as anxiety or awkwardness can generate inhibitions and defense mechanisms, which in turn further complicate learning the language. In consequence, affective states and responses, whether positive or negative, are a powerful factor in self-concept formation and hence in overall language learning.

Beliefs, in Mercer's classification, are the third subclass of internal factors. Mercer distinguishes three types of learner beliefs: beliefs about language learning, beliefs about the specific language, and attribution beliefs. However, some researchers (see Roiha and Mäntylä 2019, for instance) consider that beliefs are an individual factor in language acquisition, and that self-concept, in turn, is a particular type of self-belief. In this thesis, given the special relationship between self-concept and learner beliefs, beliefs are examined in more detail than other internal factors and discussed separately in Section 3.

2.2.2. External factors

External factors, in Mercer's classification, are broadly defined as emerging from outside the learner, as opposed to the internal factors that stem from the individual's cognitive and affective processes (Mercer 2011c, 127). Mercer further divides external factors into five subclasses: social comparisons, feedback from significant others, perceived experiences of success and failure, previous experiences of language learning or use in formal or informal contexts, and critical experiences. Next, the five categories are discussed and exemplified with instances from empirical studies.

Social comparisons were a frequent external factor in Mercer's data: learners compared their grades and performances with those of others (2011c, 128). The most common social comparison was with peers (Mercer 2011c, 128). This is predictable given

the wide support found for the so-called "big-fish-little-pond–effect" (Marsh et al 2019, 334), which posits that learners form their self-concepts primarily by comparing their own academic performance to that of their classmates. However, Mercer (2011c, 128–132) found other instances of social comparisons: for example, comparisons to native speakers, family members, friends, and other people with the same nationality. For example, Roiha and Mäntylä (2019, 10) found that students who had received English-medium instruction often compared themselves to those students who had only attended classes in their native language, as opposed to each other within the same English-medium program. This indicates that social comparisons entail much more complex processes than simple evaluation of own skills against the skills of the classmates.

Badiozaman (2015, 101–102) found that perceiving peers as more competent than the self did not always deteriorate a learner's self-concept. While this was the case for some students, who maintained a feeling of inferiority throughout their English studies, other students succeeded in improving their own performance after observing that their peers were scoring better in their English studies. Belonging to a group of motivated and successful students reinforced the self-concept of those learners, helping them to maintain focus and further improve their performance (Badiozaman 2015, 101–102). In sum, social comparisons are a notable influence in self-concept formation and could have either a boosting or deteriorating effect on the self-concept. However, this influence appears to be far from a simple cause-and effect relationship, but a complex process of simultaneous comparisons and interpretations of the perceived differences.

Feedback from significant others such as family members, teachers, friends, other peers and native speakers was a frequent element in Mercer's data of self-concept formation, the most salient source of feedback being language teachers (2011c, 133). The opinions that others express about a language learner's competence are interpreted and potentially internalized into the learner's self-concept. The participants to Roiha and Mäntylä's study (2019, 10) often reported having received positive feedback from the environment, which had notably improved their self-concept as learners of English.

It is thought that feedback from parents is especially influential in early childhood, but that after middle childhood and early adolescence, feedback from teachers and peers gains more importance (Mercer and Williams 2014b, 180). Nevertheless, according to Pesu (2017, 38), both parents and teachers can have a crucial role in how students shape their self-concepts. Pesu (2017, 33) found that parental perceptions about the abilities of the student predicted self-concept formation after early adolescence, not earlier, as would be predicted.

The beliefs of the teachers, in turn, predicted the students' perceptions of their own abilities throughout school years, but only in the case of students with high levels of performance (Pesu 2017, 33). Low-performing students did not benefit from the positive beliefs teachers maintained about their competence, possibly due to a lack of positive feedback or feedback in general, a lack of constructive interaction with the teacher, or because they possibly misinterpret the feedback received from the teacher as unearned special attention (Pesu 2017, 34).

Moreover, a learner does not accept all feedback from all sources equally: feedback from someone considered credible, impartial and qualified to give the feedback in question is likely to be more influential (Mercer 2011c, 133). No importance might be placed on the feedback if the source is considered biased (Mercer 2011c, 134). However, the impartiality or validity of the feedback appears to be a subjective judgment, as parents and peers are often accepted as a valid source of feedback despite the fact that they seldom have formal experience in evaluating someone's language skills.

Perceived experiences of success and failure include school grades, test scores, and other forms of formal feedback, but also the variety of experiences that learners could interpret as success or failure, whether those experiences take place in formal or informal contexts of language learning and language use (Mercer 2011c, 137). This broader definition encompasses a wide scale of possible experiences of success and failure, for example, being able to place an order in the foreign language on a family vacation, or failing to complete a speaking task in class but outside an actual test situation. Moreover, one same grade, for example, an 8 or a B, could be a success for some students but a failure to others, and in consequence, the perceived experiences of success and failure are a highly subjective factor, always depending on the learner's own interpretation of the situations.

Prior experiences of failure in class can be detrimental to a learner's self-concept development, as is the case of two participants in Aragão's study (2011, 307): one of the participants had been laughed at by her classmates and as a consequence, experienced fear and embarrassment whenever she had to speak English; the other had failed several speaking tests in the past, and so decided not to speak in class to avoid judgment by others. In contrast, experiences of success can boost a learner's self-concept with long-term influence: Roiha and Mäntylä (2019, 11) found that even years after taking the final exam, many learners who had received the highest grade explicitly referred to it, which indicates that the success in the exam has indeed been a decisive factor in their self-concept formation. When considering the long-lasting effects that both positive and negative experiences have in the

examples above, it is crucial that more attention is given to the role of perceived experiences of success and failure in language learning and teaching.

Previous language learning/use experiences in formal/informal contexts are experiences that are not interpreted as failures or successes in themselves, but rather situations that the learners interpret as significant or pivotal to their language learning. Mercer (2011c, 142) explains that this category comprises the effects that the actual environment has on a learner's self-concept development: teaching style, class atmosphere, and especially the situations outside the classroom, that is, experiences of language use in informal contexts. In another study by Mercer (2011a, 61), a learner explains that she had not really enjoyed learning English at school, expressing a rather negative perception of studying English in a formal context. Nevertheless, a year in Britain and succeeding to take the Cambridge proficiency exam was such an influential turning point that ultimately she took English as a minor subject in the university (Mercer 2011a, 61). This is very illustrative of the importance of language use experiences in informal contexts: a language learner becomes a language user, consequently having to adjust both their self-concept as a learner and their self-concept as a language user.

Critical experiences are the final external category in Mercer's classification and defined as "a particular type of past experience that stands out as being distinct from the other factors" (Mercer 2011c, 146). The critical experiences have a narrative form with details, and they bear some special significance to the learner. Mercer (2011c, 147) further notes that the critical experiences present in her data did not always introduce a change, but were rather elements that consolidated a process already ongoing. The contents of the critical experiences could be anything from experiences with significant others to using the language abroad and transitions from one educational setting to another (Mercer 2011c, 158). Badiozaman (2015, 104) points out that especially transitional periods, such as from school to a university context, could be critical points for self-concept formation: the self-concept becomes challenged by the new context, and the learners have to readjust the perceptions of their own abilities to fit the new environment. While such critical experiences could also be classified under the categories above, they appear to possess some special meaning given that the learners themselves, explicitly or implicitly, place so much importance on them while narrating their language learning experiences.

2.3. Effects of self-concept on second language learning

The influence of having positive or negative self-concept on learning outcomes has been an object of interest for years. In a large meta-analysis comprising 39 studies, Huang (2011, 523) found either a medium or a large correlation between self-concept and general academic achievement, revealing a bidirectional relationship where self-concept improves academic achievement and vice versa (Huang 2011, 524). Also Bong et al (2012, 348) found that academic self-concept indeed predicted achievement in the specific domain. In the Finnish educational context, Laine and Pihko (1991, 95) found as early as in 1991 that a positive foreign language self-concept led to better performance, and that performing well, in turn, improved foreign language self-concept and reduced inhibitions related to language learning. Moreover, it was concluded that self-concept affected not only the learning outcomes, but it also had a notable influence on learners' classroom behavior (Laine and Pihko 1991, 8). Self-concept is closely related to motivation (Mercer 2008, 183) a possible factor in gender differences in second language learning (Henry 2009, 189), and embedded in affective dimensions of language learning (Aragão 2011). In order to understand second language learning in general, and to develop more efficient and learner-centered language teaching, it is crucial to understand how a learner forms perceptions about themselves as a learner, and how those perceptions, in turn, affect language learning,

As discussed above, there are a myriad of possible factors that could affect self-concept formation, although the relationship between the factors is yet unknown. Nevertheless, the examples in the preceding subchapters (Mercer 2011b, Aragão 2011, Badiozaman 2015, Roiha and Mäntylä 2019) show that all of the factors have the potential to influence a learner's self-concept, and that the influence can be powerful and remarkably long-lasting. Obtaining more detailed insights to how the factors cooperate to modify an individual's self-concept is critical in order to grasp the role of self-concept in second language learning.

3. Learner beliefs

In this section, I discuss what learner beliefs are and how they have previously been researched. Mercer's (2011c) classification of learner beliefs is presented. At the end of the section, I examine the complex relationship between learner beliefs and self-concept.

The idea of learner beliefs as a cognitive construct was borrowed to SLA from psychology, although philosophy, sociology, and other related fields have also examined beliefs within their particular research paradigms (Bernat 2012, 447). As a result, no all-encompassing definition is available. Beliefs were first introduced into SLA in the 1970s within the Individual Differences paradigm, which sought to examine a multitude of factors such as motivation, age, attitudes, and so on (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 222). The aim was to observe which characteristics were those that made 'a good language learner'; that is, which characteristics facilitated learning. It was hypothesized that maintaining certain beliefs about language learning could potentially promote learning, which led to an interest in examining the relationship or even correlation between learner beliefs and learning outcomes (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 223).

Quantitative methods and questionnaires have dominated the research into learner beliefs (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 282). As the aim was, initially, to observe which beliefs could be either facilitative or harmful to the learning process, quantitative methods were employed to measure the performance of a group of students and then to compare their beliefs to explain the differences in performance (Bernat 2012, 448). One of the earliest tools for measuring learner beliefs was Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory, or BALLI, a questionnaire consisting of statements on a five-point Likert-scale (Kuntz, 1996). As learner beliefs were considered stable, fixed and either true or false, such a closed-ended questionnaire which was to be analyzed quantitatively was deemed appropriate (Kalaja et al 2015, 9).

Later, researchers have acknowledged that no simple correlations or cause-and-effect relationships can be drawn between learner beliefs and performance or learner beliefs and behavior (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 232). The object of interest has also expanded: in addition to understanding why some learners perform better than others, researchers now seek to explore how beliefs are constructed, how they change and evolve in time, and, above all, how they interact with their context and other individuals' beliefs (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 282). Notably, beliefs are no longer seen as floating in a void and disconnected from

their context, but rather in constant interaction with the surroundings, other individuals, and broader values and ideologies (Barcelos 2015, 305; Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 232). Alongside the shift in the topic of interest, research methods have also evolved from quantitative and survey-dominated research to more qualitative approaches, including narrative inquiry and life history research (Barcelos 2008, 38). The focus has expanded from contexts where English is learned as a second language to areas where it has a more of a foreign language status (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 285).

3.1. Defining learner beliefs

Similarly to self-concept research, learner beliefs have also been studied using varying definitions, methods, and perspectives, and the focus of the study has varied with the chosen definition (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 222–223). Some of the labels for learner beliefs include "perceptions, conceptions, everyday knowledge, folk linguistics, and language ideologies" (Kalaja et al 2015, 9). While the terms share some key features, they also differ slightly in meaning and in context of use, which is why the term *beliefs* is used throughout this thesis.

When defining learner beliefs, three core concepts are described: first, who are the *learners* that hold the beliefs; second, what the *beliefs* themselves are; and thirdly, what it is that the beliefs are *about*. For example, according to Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro, learner beliefs are "the conceptions, ideas and opinions learners have about L2 learning and teaching and language itself" (2018, 222). Thus, *learners*, in the context of SLA, are people learning a second language, or a foreign language. *Beliefs* are cognitive notions that the learners have, and those notions are *about* the language in question: what the language like, and what learning or teaching it is like. Many definitions view beliefs as a dynamic system, consisting of various parts, some of which are fairly stable and some changing constantly (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 232). In addition to dynamism, learner beliefs systems are also characterized by complexity: the learners might be more conscious of some beliefs than others, and the same learner can sometimes hold mutually inconsistent beliefs (Kalaja et al 2015, 10). The definition used in this thesis embraces the ideas presented above: learner beliefs are notions or ideas that language learners have about language learning; and those beliefs construct a dynamic and complex system.

As discussed above, the view that certain beliefs could cause certain behavior has been largely abandoned. Now the relationship between beliefs and learner behavior is seen as

complex and influenced by a multitude of factors: the learner's own interpretations, affective reactions other people's actions and behavior, and the wider social and educational circumstances (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 286). Beliefs are constructed in social interaction, that is, internalized little by little through socialization, negotiation and shared experiences (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 285; Barcelos 2015, 305). As a result, beliefs cannot be meaningfully examined without taking into consideration the context in which they have been constructed.

3.2.   Researching learner beliefs

As learner beliefs are now described using the same characteristics as learner-self concept: complexity, dynamism and constant change, a more holistic approach is equally appropriate for examining learner beliefs as self-concept. Given the complexity of learner belief systems, truncating and separating a learner's beliefs into discrete statements is close to impossible (Mercer 2011b, 336) Therefore, I will rely on the data in identifying beliefs instead of using ready-made categories or questionnaire items. However, Mercer's (2011c) classification of learner beliefs is used as a starting point, and as a framework for grouping the individual beliefs under three main ideas. The categories differ in what the beliefs are *about*: whether they are about language learning in general, or about the specific language, or maybe about causes and effects, that is, attributions beliefs.

Beliefs about language learning are ideas about the nature of language learning as a process, its difficulty, speed, the role of natural talent opposed to practice, whether it is necessary to learn words by heart, or to stay abroad, or to actually speak in order to learn the language (Mercer 2011c, 107–113). Mercer (2011c, 107) explains that such beliefs were prominent in her data, and that the beliefs could be stated explicitly, but also implied indirectly in how learners report and explain their learning experiences. Mercer (2011c, 107) found that the learners had solid beliefs about language learning, and that those beliefs were employed as internal frames of reference in self-concept development. For example, many learners believed that learning to speak a language required extensive practice in speaking. If a longer period of time had elapsed and they had not had opportunities of speaking English, they expressed feeling insecure about their oral language competence (Mercer 2011c, 108). Another common belief was that mastering a language required an extensive stay in a foreign country (Mercer 2011c, 110).

Beliefs about the role of natural talent have also been experimented: Austrian and Japanese university level students and learners of English were interviewed by Mercer and Ryan (2010) in order to explore what they believed about the necessity of having natural talent for learning a foreign language. Mercer and Ryan (2010, 437) concluded that some learners indeed believed that natural talent was critical in mastering a language, while others highlighted the importance of hard work and consistence, believing that the ability to learn a language could be improved through practice. An established perception that innate talent is needed for language learning could damage a learner's self-concept, especially if they interpret their previous experiences in a way that implies that they do not possess natural talent. In turn, many advanced language learners stated that they have always been 'good at languages', thus reinforcing their self-concept.

Beliefs about the specific language, in turn, concern the language to be learnt: what learners believe about its characteristics, its sounds, the complicatedness or difficulty; and what they believe can be achieved through learning it (Mercer 2011c, 114). For example, a learner may consider one language more difficult to learn than another because of its tenses, which in turn affects their self-concepts in both languages. In Aro's (2015, 47) study, in turn, fifteen Finnish elementary school students were interviewed to inquire their beliefs about learning English. At the ages of 9 and 11, the participants believed that learning English could primarily help them get better points in exams and thus better grades, without placing any value on learning English for other purposes (Aro 2015, 47). As a result, the learners' self-concepts were shaped essentially according to what kind of English learners they thought they were, not what kind of English users they were (Aro 2015, 45). However, when four of the same participants were interviewed at the age of 21, they had already used English in a variety of formal and informal contexts, their self-concepts had been reshaped accordingly, now also reflecting their perceptions about themselves as users of English, and less dependent of formal school contexts (Aro 2015, 45–46). Therefore, a student who fails to see the benefits of learning English is less likely to perceive themselves as a user of English beyond the classroom; reevaluating the importance of learning English could help those students to find new motivation and to imagine themselves as competent users of English for their own needs.

Attribution beliefs are the final category of learner beliefs. They are the explanations and underlying causes that the learners believe to affect their learning: the reasons for their successes and failures (Mercer 2011c, 114–117). Although the effect of attribution beliefs on self-concept was more indirect than explicit, Mercer (2011c, 114–115)

found some cases where the effect was visible: one of the learners had attributed her progress to hard work and practice, which had further reinforced her self-concept as she now believed that she herself could actually improve her performance (Mercer 2011c, 115). Similarly to beliefs about language learning in general, attribution beliefs arise largely from the learners' interpretations about their experiences, which makes them highly subjective in nature. Two learners might attribute the same test score to completely different causes, and the attributions, in turn, affect how the learners perceive themselves, their competence, and their abilities to improve their own learning.

3.3. Relationship with self-concept

In the previous sections, both self-concept and learner beliefs were discussed. While the key difference between the two terms is that learner beliefs are related more to the learning context instead of the self, both constructs affect learner behavior, performance, and interpretations (Mercer 2011b, 336). Indeed, the two concepts are highly interrelated, which is evident in the literature: Mercer (2011c) classifies learner beliefs as one factor in self-concept development, while in many other sources, for example, Roiha and Mäntylä (2019, 1) treat self-beliefs as one type of learner beliefs. Both self-concept and learner beliefs are characterized by complexity and dynamism, which supports the choice of qualitative research methods, such as narrative inquiry.

However, much of the possible interaction between learner beliefs and self-concept remains unknown. Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro (2018, 232) summarize the latest development in the research of language learner (self-)beliefs: for example, beliefs have been found to have an affective element besides their cognitive nature, and the fixed, true-or-false view of beliefs has been abandoned. Nevertheless, much further research is needed: first, the object of interest should be expanded to include beliefs as language learners but also as language users; second, the participants of the study should include learners of all ages and all backgrounds; third, the research should explore learning languages in a variety of contexts and educational settings. These gaps in the research are taken into account when designing the present study.

In the sections 2 and 3, the literature on both self-concept and learner beliefs has been explored, and the key characteristics, varying definitions, as well as possible methods of research have been discussed. Next, I present the methodology, data collection, and participants of the study.

4. Research methodology

In this section, the methodology of the study is presented in more detail: first, the method of data collection, autobiographical narratives, is introduced and justified. Next, I present the steps of data collection and the study participants. Finally, the methods of data analysis are presented and discussed.

The purpose of this study is to examine the self-concept of advanced English learners, and the factors that contribute to the development of their self-concept. The research data consist of autobiographical narratives, given that narrative texts can offer a more holistic and qualitative perspective to learner self-beliefs than closed-ended items like Likert scales can (Kalaja 2011, 118). Moreover, written narratives, as opposed to interviews, ensure complete anonymity and give the learners time to carefully reflect on their past experiences and future insights. While there are some studies that use narratives to examine self-concept (see Mercer 2011c, 2011a), the narrative inquiry is still a novel method, and rarely used to study language learning in the Finnish educational context (Kalaja 2011, 127). The research questions are the following:

1. How do the participants describe themselves as learners of English?

2. Which factors, according to the learners, have influenced their self-concept?

3. What kinds of beliefs do the learners express and how have the beliefs influenced self-concept development?

The hypothesis is that while each learner follows their own learning trajectory and develops a unique self-concept (see Badiozaman 2015, 106), some general groups or prototypes can be identified. The second question concerns the differences and similarities across the groups: some factors might be more accentuated in one of the groups, while some factors have been influential for all learners (Mercer 2011c, 83). Similarly, the third research question concerns differences and similarities that the groups show in their beliefs: some beliefs are shared across all learner groups, while some beliefs might be more prominent in one of the groups, as a result of a certain type of self-concept development, or as a response to a certain learning experience (Badiozaman 2015, 107). The research questions aim at shedding light on the complex nature of self-concept which was discussed in Section 2. Both language teaching and language research will benefit from understanding how language learners verbalize their self-concepts, and which factors the learners themselves consider to have been the most important for their learning.

4.1. Autobiographical narratives

Narratives are used across a variety of fields, including education, sociology, psychology, and applied linguistics. As the fields differ from each other in focus, philosophy and tradition, each field also defines narrative differently, and consequently the research practices vary from discipline to discipline (Barkhuizen 2013, 2). While acknowledging that formulating a precise definition of narrative or narrative research is close to impossible, Barkhuizen (2013, 3) provides a broad characterization of narrative approaches: "in the process of narration the narrator makes reference to experiences or events (the tale, or story) that are distant in terms of space (another place) and time (past or an imagined future)." In other words, narratives are products of three components: narrator, addressee, and the tale. Kalaja (2011, 119), in turn, defines narratives or autobiographies as stories about language learning as the learners themselves have experienced it, in first-person narration, and over a relatively long time span. Other similar terms include (auto)biography, self-narrative, life story, language learning history, and personal experience (Kalaja 2011, 128). While some distinctions between the terms can be outlined, they all refer to a qualitative research method that focuses on narrating human experiences, and thus are often used interchangeably. In this thesis, I use the term narrative to refer to written stories of personal learning experiences. However, narratives can also be spoken, visual, or even multimodal (Kalaja 2011, 119).

Narrative as a research method favors a holistic perception of a language learner. In the Individual Differences paradigm, the different features or characteristics (age, talent, motivation, et cetera) have traditionally been investigated separately, which leads to an atomic perception where learners are seen as mechanic groups of characteristics and unidirectional cause-and effect chains (Kalaja 2011, 118). This unique opportunity for a holistic perspective is also highlighted by Mercer, who observes that predetermined categories and concepts often employed in quantitative methods are inappropriate for studying self concept because its complexity, variation and unpredictability (Mercer 2011c, 4). Moreover, narratives offer an entrance to the inner world of the learners, which has been difficult with other methods (Kalaja 2011, 119).

According to Barkhuizen (2013, 4), humans only make sense of their experiences when they tell them as stories, that is, coherent wholes that re-shape the past and guide the future. This sense-making is both a cognitive and a social activity: through narratives, we knowledge the meaning of our experiences, and we construct them with others in certain social contexts (Barkhuizen 2013, 4). Also Barcelos (2008, 37) highlights that narratives are

a unique instrument for understanding experiences, especially experiences of learning and change. Human experience connects both the past and the future, and occurs in the interaction of the individual and the environment (Barcelos 2008, 37).

In sum, I choose to use narratives as a research method because of their flexibility compared to quantitative methods that often are limited to a predetermined set of categories. Moreover, narratives enable examining self-concept as a complete experience that combines the present, the past and the future. As Mercer and Williams (2014b, 182) affirm, the self is such a multilayered, complex, and nuanced phenomenon, that one best research method for examining self-concept cannot exist. Instead, the use of a variety of methods is required, each offering unique information and novel insights.

4.2.   Data collection and participants

The participants (N = 44) were second year upper secondary school students. The task was assigned to the students in April 2020 as a part of their English course, but the guardians or the students themselves had the possibility to opt out of the study and to complete an alternative assignment instead. Permissions were obtained from the students themselves, the subject teacher and the head of school development of the municipality. The data were collected through Webropol, an electronic survey platform. Electronic answers, as opposed to handwritten texts, are more familiar to upper secondary school students, and less likely to lead to problems that could rise from interpreting handwriting. Moreover, electronic texts ensure anonymity and are practical because there is no need for transcription, as is the case with interviews. Finally, written assignments allow for the students to use as much time as they want for the assignment, so that they have time to reflect their experiences with detail and also to edit their texts until they become complete narratives.

The electronic survey form consisted of three parts: a permission form, a background form, and the actual assignment. On the permission form, the students agreed that their responses could be used for research purposes. On the background information form the participants reported their age, gender (optional), spoken languages, years studied, and English grades from primary school to lower and upper secondary school. On the last page, together with the instructions, the students were provided with guiding questions and a box where they were to submit their narratives. The narratives were written in Finnish which was the native language for the majority and the medium of instruction for all participants. This was to ensure that limited language skills would not impede a detailed reflection and

narration. The instructions and guiding questions were also in Finnish (see the original and translated instructions: Appendix 1). The instructions were adapted from various sources (Kalaja 2011, 120; Mercer 2011c). A set of guiding questions was created to help the students to comprehend the assignment, to recall their experiences, and to get started with the writing process more easily (Kalaja 2011, 120). However, the students were instructed not to answer all of the questions but to choose those that felt the most meaningful to describe their personal experiences. The goal was to avoid limiting or directing the writing process excessively so as to create as authentic narratives as possible. Both the background information form and the instructions were tested in a pilot study (N = 5). The guiding questions, both in Finnish and in English, are found in the Appendix 1.

This particular group of students was chosen because of two reasons: one, they were advanced enough to have obtained years of experiences, different teachers with different teaching methods and approaches, they had been evaluated on numerous occasions, and had had time to create a self-concept in the given language. They were also mature enough to be able to reflect on their past experiences and to report them meaningfully. The second reason, conversely, was that the students in this group were not professional or even near-native: they came from an average-scoring upper secondary school, all with different backgrounds and not necessarily a special interest in languages. As opposed to many earlier studies, which have studied university students who have already decided to specialize into language studies, this heterogeneous group widens the point of view. For example, in Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva's study the participants were future English teachers (Kalaja 2011, 127), in Badiozaman's (2015, 93) study they were university students attending English-medium science courses, and in Mercer's studies (2008, 2011a, 2011b) university students of English. Widening the scope to younger students and different educational levels is therefore essential (Kalaja 2011, 127).

Of the 44 participants, 41 spoke Finnish as their native language, one was bilingual in Thai and in Finnish, and two spoke Swedish (see table 1). However, one of the Swedish-speaking students considered their Finnish to be stronger than Swedish. Given that Finnish was the native language of the majority and the medium of instruction for all participants, the assignment was written in Finnish. The participants were aged between 17 and 19. 31 were female, 11 male, and two preferred not to report their gender. Although English is not the obligatory first foreign language in Finland, it is the most common and often the only choice available. Thus, English had been the first foreign language for all participants, except for one who had started studying English and Swedish at the same time. Besides

English and Swedish (or Finnish for those two who had attended primary school in Swedish), 27 of the students had studied one or more of the following languages: French, German, Japanese, Spanish and Russian.

The participants had studied English between 7 and 15 years, most between 8 and 10 years, and are thus considered advanced learners of English. Although an assessment of proficiency was not conducted in this study, their level can be estimated based on the fact that the students attend an average-scoring school which represents the whole range of academic success: by the third year of upper secondary school, over 60 per cent of Finnish upper secondary school students reach level B2 or above on the CEFR scale (Juurakko-Paavola and Takala 2013, 24). The final data consisted of 44 texts that ranged from a few sentences to 1.5 A4 pages (font size 12, spacing 1.5).

Table 1 Background information of the participants of the study

Age	17		18		19		
N (= number of participants)	31		12		1		
Gender	Male		Female		Not reported		
N	11		31		2		
Native language	Finnish		Swedish		Thai		
N	41		2		1		
Years studied English (= L2)	7	8	9	10	11	12	15
N	1	8	12	20	1	1	1
Years studied Swedish (= L3, if not native)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Native
N	1	1	3	28	5	3	1	2
Other languages studied	None	French	German	Japanese	Spanish	Russian	
N	17	1	17	1	13	3	

4.3. Data analysis

Polkinghorne (1995, 12) distinguishes two ways of analyzing narrative data: *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis*. This distinction is adopted and referred to by several narrative researchers, including within the field of SLA, due to its usefulness in pinpointing two different methods of analysis but also two ways reporting the findings (Barkhuizen 2013, 11). Polkinghorne's (1995, 12) analysis of narratives means collecting narrative data and then analyzing its themes or elements: stories, characters, settings, and events. The result is a research report in the form of descriptions of these elements. Analysis of narratives is also called thematic analysis, as it consists of coding and categorizing the central themes of the narratives (Barkhuizen 2013, 11). Essentially, analysis of narratives seeks to observe patterns and recurring themes in the narratives (Barkhuizen 2013, 11). Narrative analysis, in turn, begins from observing the individual elements, combining and synthetizing them, and moves on to form a whole story (Polkinghorne 1995, 12). The results of the research are presented in the form of a coherent narrative, that is, instead of an analysis of individual themes (Barkhuizen 2013, 12).

Barkhuizen (2013, 12) observes that narrative studies are often a combination of the two approaches, as the two share similarities. In some cases, however, one approach is preferred over another. In this thesis, I use analysis of narratives (or *thematic analysis;* see, for instance, Barcelos and Kalaja 2011), as the goal is to make sense of the individual narratives by observing the similarities and differences in them, and then to categorize and to group the findings to form patterns of recurrence. Creating one coherent story from the experiences of as many as 44 participants is hardly possible, and not even desirable, and thus narrative analysis is less appropriate for the aims of this study.

Analyzing qualitative data requires different tools compared to analyzing quantitative data. One possible tool is N-Vivo, a program for coding and processing qualitative data. Flowerdew and Miller (2013) exemplify how N-Vivo can be used to analyze non-numerical and unstructured data sets obtained from interviews, journals, essays, and observations. First, the data are coded under 'nodes', that is, themes or categories. Flowerdew and Miller (2013) observe that sometimes coding is straightforward, especially when the data fit into preexisting categories, but that the researcher has to often make choices between several possible ways of coding the data. For example, some phrases can be coded under one or more categories, and in those cases, the data are cross-coded under all appropriate nodes (Flowerdew and Miller 2013, 51). Flowerdew and Miller (2013, 48) observe that the coding

has to be done manually, that is, according to the researcher's understanding and interpretation. In consequence, different researchers might interpret and code the data differently, a possibility also recognized by Mercer (2011c, 97). However, through transparent definition and careful coding, it is possible to achieve consistency and internal validity in qualitative analysis of narrative data (Flowerdew and Miller 2013, 48). Kalaja (2011, 121) observes that all narratives are produced in a given context, that is, time and space, and that the researcher should be aware of the context throughout the analysis and processing of the data. The researcher should observe also what the participants have omitted from the narratives (Kalaja 2011, 121), as such omissions are also choices, whether conscious or unconscious, and therefore potentially significant.

In this study, Mercer's (2011c) factors were used as initial categories. However, as both self-concept and learner beliefs are exceedingly complex phenomena, discrete ready-made items are all but impossible to establish (Mercer 2011b, 336). Thus, I relied rather on the data in identifying learner perceptions and beliefs, rather than limiting the study to observing clear-cut statements that resemble fixed questionnaire items. The data were first entered into NVivo, and Mercer's categories of internal and external factors were created as nodes. Next, all narratives were read three times, and each time the data were coded under the nodes. When appropriate, new categories were created. For example, positive self-description and negative self-description were not included as categories in Mercer's 2011 study, but were added here after data-driven analysis and interpretation. Once the coding was finished, the definitions of different nodes and factors were further adjusted, and participants were grouped under four groups according to how they described themselves as learners. Lastly, the four groups were compared and contrasted to detect similarities and differences. This phase required both processing the data through the tools built in NVivo, but also careful reading of the original texts.

Research ethics were considered throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and permissions were collected from the participants, the teacher, and the head of school development of the municipality. The guardians of the students were informed and offered the possibility to decide that their child would not participate in the study. The anonymity of the participants was ensured in various ways: first, the narratives were submitted electrically. Secondly, the files containing the narratives did not include the names of the participants. Thirdly, any data that could be used to identify an individual or the school in question were deleted from the narratives. Furthermore, the materials used in the study are not used for any other purposes, and are deleted afterwards.

5. Self-concept and learner beliefs in written narratives

In this section, I present the analysis and the findings of the study. In the first section, 5.1., the learners are grouped to answer the first research question: how the learners describe themselves as English language learners. The second research question is considered in section 5.2: the potential influence of each factor on self-concept development is examined and discussed separately. Lastly, section 5.3. analyzes the learner beliefs present in the narratives to answer the third research question. I summarize the findings of each section before moving on to discussion.

5.1.   Learner groups

The learners were divided into four groups according to how the participants described themselves as learners of English. Various features were taken into account, whether they were explicit 'I am' statements or more implicit descriptions. One of the factors considered was the recurrence of positive or negative adjectives while describing either the self (*good, successful, lazy, industrious*) or the learning process (*easy, challenging, enjoyable*). Among the more implicit features were the mentions of positive or negative experiences with the English language, and whether the learners treated them as successes or as failures. Also the expected learning outcomes, that is, how the learners assumed they would perform in the future, were taken into account.

Each group was labeled by two attributes to illustrate both the similarities and differences between the groups. For example, a sense of success was identifiable in both Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* and in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure*. However, the first were confident of their skills and that their success would continue, while the latter did not show such confidence, rather emphasizing the challenges they might face in their future studies. To better outline the characteristics that were common across some groups but clearly distinguish others from them, two words were chosen to represent each group, instead of one adjective only.

Of course, the grouping of the learners is subjective, and another researcher might have created, selected or described the groups differently, and assigned some learners to different groups. Also, more subgroups could have been created. However, a simple division into four groups was here preferred to fit to the scope of the present study and to comprehensibly illustrate the complexity of the narratives. Most notably, the learners went

beyond simple self-descriptions as "a good learner" or "a bad learner", and reflected their own learning in a detailed, qualitative manner with much more subtle descriptions.

Group 1: Successful and Self-Confident (N = 19)

The learners in Group 1 described learning English as easy or effortless. When they made explicit statements about themselves, they said they were quick to learn, talented, or simply "good in English". The narratives by these learners were abundant with mentions of positive encounters with English, positive feedback and good grades. Mentions of difficulties or greater challenges were largely absent from the narratives of this group. The learners did identify some small challenges in certain areas, but only to highlight their strengths in other areas, as does Learner 20 in example (1):

> (1) Englantia opiskellessani muistan uudet sanat melko nopeasti. Kielioppien hahmottaminen onnistuu myös hyvin. Voisin kuitenkin parantaa ääntämisessä.
>
> When studying English, I remember the new words quite quickly. I also manage to grasp the grammar well. I could, however, improve my pronunciation. (Learner 20, Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*)

Most importantly, the learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* appeared to believe that they are able to overcome the difficulties they potentially face in the course of their English studies. They were also the largest group of learners, which is in line with Laine and Pihko's (1991, 83) findings: 47 per cent of the participants, selected from various, heterogeneous schools and geographical areas, had a strong self-concept as learners of English. In sum, the learners in this group displayed a robust self-concept: they were conscious of their own successes and believed their success would continue in the future.

Group 2: Successful but Insecure (N = 6)

The learners in Group 2 also described themselves as successful learners and used positive adjectives when making statements of their learning experiences. The key difference to Group 1 was that the learners in this group frequently expressed insecurity about some aspects of their own competence, certain subskills, or the probability of succeeding in future tasks. Three of the learners mentioned they experienced fear or anxiety when they had to speak English, although they were satisfied with their competence in written English. Others expressed insecurity about scoring well enough in the Finnish matriculation examination, or

doubted their ability to ever reach the level they hoped to achieve. The evaluation of different subskills by Learner 4 illustrates the contrast between positive self-description (the statements "I can") and expressions of insecurity (*mostly, mainly*):

> (2) Osaan ääntää englannin kielen sanat suurimmalta osalta oikein. Ja osaan muodostaa suurin piirtein oikeaoppisia lauseita. Kirjoittamin [*sic*] onnistuu minulta paremmin kuin puhuminen.
>
> I can mostly pronounce English words correctly. And I know how to form mainly correct sentences. My writing is better than speaking. (Learner 4, Group 2: *Successful but Insecure*)

The learners in this group were conscious of the fact that learning English had been relatively easy for them, but maintained some reservations as to their competence. Consequently, they appeared to possess a weaker self-concept in comparison with the first group. However, the fact that the learners in Group 2 simultaneously expressed a sense of success and a prevailing insecurity corroborates the view that self-concept is not best to be measured on a scale from weak to strong. Instead, more holistic and qualitative descriptions are appropriate, an observation in line with Mercer (2011b, 343).

Group 3: Self-Confident but Underachieving (N = 7)
The learners in Group 3 shared another characteristic, confidence, with Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*. These learners also described themselves as good learners and reported having received mostly positive feedback from their teachers. However, they did not invest the time or the effort to fully succeed on the level they believed they could potentially achieve. Some learners explicitly admitted that they were somewhat lazy or had consciously decided to devote more attention to other subjects, while some attributed their underused potential to demotivating teachers or raising standards from lower to upper secondary school. The critical distinction between Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* and Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* is the fact that the learners in the latter did not doubt their own abilities to score better or succeed in the future challenges, but attributed their performance to something external. Learner 12 explained his learning experiences:

(3) Hankaluuksia ovat aina olleet välitestit, koska en ole lukenut niihin ja aloitan lukemisen yleensä tuntua [sic] edeltävä välitunnilla. Suurin syy siihen lienee laiskuus.

The difficulty has always lied in the mid-term tests, because I have not studied for them, and I usually start studying on the recess preceding the test. The biggest reason for this is probably laziness. (Learner 12, Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*)

Given the positive self-descriptions and the lack of expressions of insecurity in the narratives, the learners in Group 3 appeared to have a relatively positive self-concept. However, the consciousness of the fact that they were failing to achieve the best results, for some reason or another, was frequent enough in these narratives to suppose that the sense of underachievement was an important element of their self-concept. Similarly to Group 2, the self-concept of these learners cannot be fully described on a scale from negative to positive as it simultaneously showed elements of confidence and a sense of failure.

Group 4: Struggling and Surviving (N = 12)

The narratives from Group 4 featured recurring mentions of difficulties, negative self-descriptions and experiences, and even failures. The statements included both descriptive statements about the self or the learning process, but also expressions of fear, shame, and inferiority. A noteworthy characteristic is that the difficulties continued throughout the school years, or, in some cases, that the challenges appear in their middle years and continued in upper secondary school. However, the narratives from this group were not altogether missing optimism or positive experiences: the learners had also had positive encounters with their teachers, maybe had used English successfully in an informal context, or had enjoyed studying English when they were allowed do it on their own terms. Thus, the word *surviving* in the description of the group: none of the learners expressed they had failed learning English altogether.

The expectations for the future varied in this group: some believed, with careful optimism, that they could improve their skills, while some doubted they would ever achieve a sufficient competence or a positive relationship with English. Learner 24 (Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*) described her experiences after primary school:

(4) Yläasteelle mentäessä englanti vaikeantui koko ajan tottakai. Tällöin tipahdin kärryiltä, joka näkyy edelleen englannin menestyksessäni.

After entering secondary school, English of course became more and more difficult. Back then I lost the plot, which is still visible in my English performance. (Learner 24, Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*)

Given the saliency of negative self-descriptions, the self-concept of the learners in this group can arguably be described as the weakest among the four groups. Nevertheless, the learners did identify specific skills or tasks in which they had excelled, and some narratives from resembled stories of personal growth in their subtle optimism despite all the struggles. Given that relatively many of the learners, 12 out of 44, fell into this group, it is extremely interesting to examine how these learners have come to form their self-concept, and which factors they believe to have facilitated their learning.

5.2.   Influential factors in self-concept formation

The learners reflected thoroughly and in detail on the factors that had been influential in their English learning over the years. In the next section, I examine the internal factors that had affected the self-concept development of the learners. The most recurring internal factors were affective statements and responses (223 instances) and comparisons across time (131 instances). The other factors, despite the fewer number of occurrences, had also influenced how the participants viewed themselves as English learners. The four learner groups differed from one another, especially in how they compared English to other subjects and languages, and in how they described their affective responses and emotions. Nevertheless, the groups also shared some experiences, for example, enjoyment and interest when studying English, and the hope of being able to speak English when traveling or for career purposes. Next, each factor is explored separately.

5.2.1. Internal factors

Cross-domain comparisons at a subject level

The data included 21 instances of cross-subject comparisons from 14 learners. The differences between the four groups of learners were remarkable: all learners from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* who made cross-subject comparisons (N = 6 out of 19) contrasted English positively with other subjects, stating that English was their favorite

subject or one of their most preferred subjects. Also one learner from Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* (N = 1/6), stated that studying English was more enjoyable than other subjects. In turn, the learners from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* (N = 3/12) contrasted English negatively with other subjects: all three explicitly stated that English was the most difficult subject for them. Therefore, a positive self-concept was related to regarding English as an enjoyable subject, whereas learners with a weaker self-concept expressed the difficulty of English as a subject. The learners from Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* (N = 4/7), made more conflicted statements: for two of them, English was one of the easiest subjects, but as a consequence, they invested less time and effort in it. Notably, only one learner explicitly compared math and English as Marsh's I/E model would predict in example 5.

(5) Kielet ovat aina olleet mulle helppoja, mutta usein sanotaan että he ketkä osaavat kieliä eivät osaa matikkaa ja toisinpäin, tämä sopii minuun sillä kaikki matikan kurssini kiljuvat nelosta.

Languages have always been easy for me, but often it is said that those who are good at languages are bad at math and vice versa, this is illustrative of me as all my math courses are total failures. (Learner 10, Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*)

These results show that while Marsh's math–languages dichotomy was not widely represented in the data, also advanced learners make cross-subject comparisons, in contrast to Mercer's suggestion that such comparisons are no longer relevant to them (2011c, 99–100). However, a sense of being successful and competent in the language was often related to positive affective responses, such as enjoyment and preference, which is also something that Mercer (2011c, 118) found in her data.

Cross-domain comparisons across foreign languages

11 of the total 20 comparisons between foreign languages were made by the students from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* (N = 5 out of 12). Four of these learners expressed that English was difficult compared to Swedish, and explained that they felt less peer pressure in Swedish or that they had had better teachers in Swedish. The fifth student, however, mentioned that she performed in Swedish even worse than in English, with no hopes of ever reaching the same level. Hence, most of the comparisons to other languages in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* appeared to improve the learners' Swedish self-concept while

decreasing their perceived competence in English, similarly to Carina in Mercer's study (2011b, 339).

In contrast, only one participant out of 19 in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* and two out of 6 in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* contrasted learning English to other languages. Moreover, the result of the comparison was rather an analogy than a distinction: learning English was considered similar to learning other languages. Learner 31 from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* noted that studying English helps studying other languages and vice versa, especially if the languages share typological or lexical features. Learner 33 from Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* reflected that she had always been good at languages in general, and thus had avoided any serious problems with English.

The comparisons made by the students in Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* (N = 2/7) reflected the conflicted relationship they had with their English studies. Learner 13 stated that she invested more resources to studying Swedish, because in Swedish she had received better grades and more positive feedback from the teachers than in English. Nevertheless, she appeared to consider English easier to learn compared to other languages:

(6) Mielestäni on tyhmää, että niin moni valitsee englannin A1-kieleksi ala-asteella, koska englantia kuulee arjessa kaikkialla ja kieli on helppo oppia.
I think it is stupid that so many choose to study English first, because you hear English everywhere in your everyday life and the language is easy to learn. (Learner 13, Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*)

Learner 7, in turn, had chosen to study German as an optional language which had later become more and more demanding. Ultimately, the exacting German classes led him to neglect his English studies, given that English was one of the easiest subjects for him.

Cross-domain comparisons across L1-L2
Only four learners made cross-domain comparisons between English and their first language: three from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* and one from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*. However, the few cases of such comparisons show that learners draw interesting parallels between the languages. Learner 2 from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* explained that the fact that he suffers from dyslexia had already caused difficulties in Finnish classes, and that it consequently made learning English more challenging.

Similarly, Learner 20 Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* reflected that the vocabulary she sometimes struggled with in English was the same type of specific or technical vocabulary that she was not familiar with in Finnish. Hence, the English self-concept of the two learners had been influenced by factors that the learners considered to affect also their first language. In turn, Learner 14 from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* paralleled the intuitive and effortless way she thinks of the English grammar to how she uses her native language:

(7) Englannin kielioppi on vähän niin kuin suomen kielen kielioppi minulle.

The English grammar is a bit like the Finnish grammar for me. (Learner 14, Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*)

Thus, learner 14 seemed to highlight the easiness and even "nativeness" of her L2. Learner 43 from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* went even further to state that producing texts was easier in English than in Finnish. The fact that both these learners were from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* is in complete contrast to Mercer's hypothesis (2011c, 102) that comparisons between the native language and the second language would no longer be relevant for advanced learners. To the contrary, the first language was a valid frame of reference equally for low-performing (Learner 2), high-performing (Learners 20 and 43) and average-performing (Learner 14) students.

Cross-domain comparisons across skill and task domains

Comparisons between skill domains were relatively frequent in the data: 74 cases across all groups. When comparing skill and task domains, the learners identified their own strengths and weaknesses among the different skills, but also stated which skills they considered the most important or the most enjoyable to practice. The most comparisons, 29, were made by Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* (N = 10 out of 19), often between vocabulary and grammar (7 comparisons) or productive and receptive skills (5 comparisons). As many as eight learners from this group identified a problematic skill which they hoped to improve. Similarly to Carina in Mercer's study (2011b), these learners were able to realistically pinpoint the areas they occasionally struggled with, but the difficulties did not affect the overall positive perceptions of their own competence. This process of compartmentalization allowed the learners to maintain a balanced, optimistic self-concept, even though they struggled at times with minor skill areas. The learners in Group 3: *Self-Confident but*

Underachieving only made 5 comparisons between different subskills (N = 3/7), and only one mentioned a problematic area or a weakness. This highlights the fact that the learners in this group considered themselves largely competent in the English language, not appearing much concerned about whether there were any areas they needed to work on.

The learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* made 20 cross-skill comparisons (N = 7/12). Six were mentions of a weakness, four mentions of a strength. Two of the learners described that they learned English best when they were able to speak it to others. Also the learners in this group made use of compartmentalization, as Learner 11 in the example (8):

(8) Vaikka se kirjoittaminen ei ehkä ole niin hallussa niin mielestäni kuitenkin kielen puhuminen ja ymmärtäminen vie pidemmälle elämässä.

 Even though I have not really mastered writing I think that speaking and understanding the language takes you further in life. (Learner 11, Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*)

The learners in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure*, in turn, compared their stronger and weaker skill domains very frequently: they made 20 comparisons (N = 6 out of 6). The most common comparison was between speaking and writing, as five of the six participants stated that writing was easier than speaking. This is arguably related to the fact that most of these learners experienced negative feelings, for example, anxiety and nervousness, when they had to speak English. Thus, self-concept is to be understood as a hierarchical phenomenon, as the same learner could experience lack of competence and anxiety in one skill area, but feel totally secure and competent about another.

Distinguishing tasks from skill domains was somewhat challenging. There were not many comparisons between specific tasks in the data, at least not similar to how the participants of Badiozaman's study (2015) compared writing academic texts to writing English at school. Five students, from three different groups, however, did compare the tasks they are given in a formal school context to what is required from them when using the language in informal contexts. Notably, Learner 15 from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* explicitly mentioned that their strengths in English were "definitely speaking and writing" while their weaknesses were "listening and reading comprehensions". This suggests that the learner felt especially insecure when their skills were formally evaluated, not making any

statements about whether they faced difficulties when reading or listening to English in informal contexts.

Cross-domain comparisons across time

References to time or temporal change were frequent in the data: 131 instances from 39 learners across all learner groups. The references revolved around three main themes: future aims and aspirations (63 instances), development of skills and competence across time (48 instances), and raising standards when moving on from one educational level to another (20 instances).

References to future aims and aspirations, that is, imagining one's ideal L2 self, were the most common theme across all learner groups. The learners frequently described what they would like to achieve in the future, the most frequent goal being able to speak fluent English, especially when traveling (24 learners). The fact that more than half of the learners mentioned that their goal was to reach fluent oral production, and that many of them explicitly mentioned traveling or communication with people living abroad, implies that the learners wanted to learn English primarily to use it in communication with other people. Other aims included gaining confidence in one's English skills (11 participants), improving career opportunities via English (8 participants), getting a good grade in the final matriculation examination (2 participants), and being able to read books in English (1 participant). Moreover, it is notable that all learners, across all four groups, expressed high hopes and ambitious aspirations. Thus, a gap between the current L2 self and an ideal self does not appear to lead to a low self-esteem, as suggested by Laine and Pihko (1991). Instead, a perceived discrepancy between a present self and an ideal self could act as a powerful motivator, as demonstrated by Hessel (2015, 111). Furthermore, Henry (2014, 83) hypothesizes that a crucial factor is the perceived likelihood of achieving the L2 ideal self, which apparently is higher in the case of Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* than Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*.

48 instances described a change in the learners' skills and competence across time: that is, learners compared their current L2 selves to their prior L2 selves. In Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, the comparisons described a positive development (N = 4 out of 19) or a sustaining a steady progress over time (N = 4/19). In turn, learners from Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* expressed either a positive development (N = 2/7) or a decline in success, effort or interest (N = 3/7). In Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*, a decline in success was also frequent (N = 5/12), but the same number of learners also

mentioned that they had progressed over time (N = 5/12). None of the learners stated that their English competence itself had declined; the negative development between a prior English self and the current English self was rather related to declining interest or motivation, or to external frames of reference, that is, grading and evaluation. Despite the feeling of falling behind, some learners also explicitly stated that their perceptions of their own English competence had improved:

(9) Olen myös paljon aliarvioinut itseäni ja vasta myöhemmin tajunnut, että en ehkä olekaan niin huono kuin olen aina ajatellut.

I have also underestimated myself a lot and only later realized that I may not be so bad as I have always thought. (Learner 26, group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*)

A possible reason why the learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* simultaneously expressed a feeling of and a decline in grades was the raising standards when moving on from one educational level to another. Even in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, 5 learners out of 19 acknowledged that English had become much more demanding in upper secondary school compared to earlier years, and as a consequence, many of them had had to put some actual effort into learning English, which they had rarely done before. However, the learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* appeared to have become even more conscious of an increasing workload, level of difficulty and higher expectations when they had entered upper secondary school two years earlier. Five learners out of 12 stated that their difficulties had increased significantly at the transition, and two more learners had already experienced an abrupt change in expectations in elementary school, which had only worsened in upper secondary school. Thus, their current self-concept in English was not weaker in comparison with prior L2 self-concepts, but the increasing demands from outside the self had caused the learners to perceive that they were falling behind.

Affective statements and responses

Affective statements and responses were extremely frequent and permeated all data: 223 instances by 41 learners, reflecting Mercer's findings (2014b, 117) where affective responses appeared repeatedly. The large number of affective descriptions is noteworthy given that in the instructions, the learners were not explicitly asked to evaluate their emotions. All groups expressed having experienced both positive and negative feelings over the course of their

English studies. However, the groups differed in which emotions were the most salient in their narratives.

As could be expected, the most positive responses were from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, who expressed enjoyment (N = 12 out of 19), interest (N = 6/19), excitement (N = 5/19), motivation (N = 4/19), and fun (one learner). Negative emotions were fewer, but also present: discomfort (N = 4/19), boredom and insecurity (two mentions of each) and hate, fear and disappointment (one mention of each). Thus, a strong and positive self-concept was clearly related to positive affective reactions, although Mercer (2011c, 118) observes that drawing cause-and-effect conclusions is impossible: a positive self-concept could create positive affective reactions, but also vice versa, and both could actually have their origin elsewhere.

Also somewhat expectedly, the negative emotions experienced by Group 2: *Successful and Insecure* were nervousness (N = 2/6), anxiety (N = 2/6) and fear (one participant). However, the learners also stated that they had experienced enjoyment (N = 4/6), interest and fun (one mention of each). The negative emotions were especially frequent when the participants were writing about speaking English, which highlights the fact that these learners regarded themselves mostly successful learners in many domains, but maintained a feeling of insecurity, inferiority and anxiety when it came to their oral English competence. Aragão (2011, 311) showed that feelings of shyness, embarrassment and low self-esteem can critically affect a learner's self-beliefs as well as behavior, and thus the negative emotions expressed by the learners in Group 2: *Successful and Insecure* are potentially decisive in how their self-concepts develop.

The learners in Group 3, *Self-Confident but Underachieving*, expressed only one negative emotion: boredom (N = 3/7), which suggests that they did not find English language classes challenging or interesting enough. Otherwise, their affective responses were positive: interest (N = 3/7), excitement (N = 2/7), motivation (N = 2/7), and enjoyment (one learner). Apparently, these learners had mostly enjoyed their English studies, without experiencing much anxiety, stress or insecurity, and thus had developed a primarily positive English language self-concept.

The widest range of emotions was expressed by Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*. While the most frequent feeling was enjoyment (N = 6/12), other positive affective statements were rare: mentions of interest (N = 3/12), fun (N = 2/12), motivation, excitement, and happiness (1 case of each) were only occasional. In turn, a variety of negative emotions was expressed by the learners in the fourth group: anxiety (N = 6/12),

insecurity (N = 5/12), dislike (N = 4/12), and even hate (N = 3/12) were the most frequent emotions. Others were nervousness, embarrassment, and lack of interest (two instances of each) and frustration, stress, and irritation (1 instance of each). Similarly to group 2: *Successful but Insecure*, the frequent negative emotions are likely to have affected profoundly how these learners perceive themselves and how they behave in class (see Aragão 2011, 311). Creating opportunities for positive affective reactions and eliminating classroom activities that could cause negative responses might potentially diminish the negative influence of affective responses to the learners' English language self-concepts.

Summary: influential internal factors in self-concept formation

In this section, I examined the internal factors that had been influential in the learners' English language self-concept development. While some factors permeated the data more densely, each factor was illustrative of a certain type of effect on a learner's self-concept. The groups differed in which factors were the most salient in their narratives. The learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* described English as an enjoyable subject, and also had experienced mostly positive emotions when learning it: enjoyment, interest, and excitement. The learners in this group identified their strengths and weaknesses among different subskills, but were optimistic about overcoming the weaknesses. In turn, the learners in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure*, in turn, were more cautious: they often compared their skills in writing to their speaking skills, being clearly less confident about their oral competence. These learners also experienced nervousness and anxiety when having to speak English, in spite of the enjoyment they otherwise felt when learning and using English. Therefore, their self-concepts as learners appear to consist of several sub-skill self-concepts.

The third group, *Self-Confident but Underachieving* described English as an easy subject when contrasted to others, but also invested less time and effort in it. In their narratives, the learners in Group 3 mentioned mostly positive affective states, but also boredom. The learners were mostly confident about their own competence, but their self-concepts as learners had been affected by the mismatch between what they believed they could achieve and what their actual performance was. By contrast, the learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* described English as a difficult subject, especially when compared to Swedish. These learners also mentioned the widest range of emotions when narrating their learning experiences: both positive, such as enjoyment and interest, and negative, for instance, anxiety, insecurity, and dislike.

Despite the distinct features of each group, some factors were shared by all: there were learners in all groups who asserted that the difficulty of English had increased in upper secondary school. Moreover, most learners across all groups reported having expressed some positive feelings when learning English, and a will to learn to speak English fluently, especially for travel purposes.

5.2.2. External factors

In this section, influential external factors are explored. As the learners were asked to report when, where and how they had learned English, experiences of learning and using English were by far the most recurring of the external factors: 190 instances. Remarkably, the learners repeatedly described having learned, practiced or used English outside school contexts. Another frequently mentioned factor were experiences of success and failure (79 instances). Despite the lower number of occurrences, also social comparisons had an important role in some learner's self-concept formation. In addition, three critical experiences were identified in the data. Next, each factor is examined separately.

Social comparisons

There were 20 instances of social comparison in the data, 15 of which were made by learners from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* (N = 6 of 12). The learners often stated that they felt inferior to others in their English competence (N = 5 out of 12) or that they had not encountered English in their everyday life as often as others (N = 2/12). In example (10), Learner 26 from Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* relates how she felt that English instruction had benefitted other students better than herself:

> (10) Englannin kielessä taas [kielitaidon] haitari on huomattavasti laajempi, sillä siihen vaikuttavat erityisesti oma harrastuneisuus. Mielestäni englannin kielen opetuksessa ei ole tarpeeksi huomioitu niitä, joilla harrastuneisuutta on huomattavasti vähemmän.
>
> In English the range [in language competence] is much wider, as it is influenced especially by extracurricular commitment. I think that those who do not use English in their everyday life as much as others are not sufficiently taken into consideration in English instruction. (Learner 26, *Group 4: Struggling and Surviving*)

In contrast, only two learners out of 19 from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, explicitly stated that they had performed better than their peers. Social comparisons do not appear to be an important factor for those who already have a robust self-concept, or they simply prefer to use other frames of reference when writing about their competence, even in an anonymous context. In turn, students who struggle with a weaker self-concept appeared to be more aware of social comparisons, or at least they reported them more frequently.

Feedback from significant others

As was the case in Mercer's study (2011c, 133), language teachers were the most salient source of feedback in the data: 44 cases by 20 learners. The learners repeatedly stated that teachers had been influential to their learning, either positively or negatively. Interestingly, the learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* and in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* mentioned that teachers had contributed positively to their learning the most often: 6 out of 19 participants and 7 out of 12 participants, respectively. The same groups, although somewhat surprisingly, also often reported that teachers had negatively influenced their learning: 4 out of 19 learners in Group 1 and 6 out of 12 students in Group 4. In contrast, only three learners in Groups 2 and 3 made any reference to their teachers. Possibly the teachers had given more feedback to learners in Groups 1 or 4; in any case, the feedback and other influence from English teachers was apparently perceived more important by the learners in Groups 1 and 4.

Although the learners were aged between 17 and 19, 8 learners affirmed that their parents had been influential to their English studies. Thus, parental influence does not disappear altogether over the years, although the importance of teachers might surpass it (Mercer and Williams 2014b). Given that the learners themselves repeatedly stated that teachers had greatly influenced their learning, teachers undoubtedly have an impact in learners' self-concept formation. The participants in this study also described the good teachers they had had or had hoped to have, the most common characteristics being teaching style, language competence of the teacher, and the relationship they establish with the students.

Perceived experiences of success and failure

There were 79 experiences, by 32 participants, that were presented as successes of failures in the narratives. According to Mercer (2011c), the experiences to be included in this category are school grades, test scores and other forms of formal evaluation, but also

informal situations that the learners interpret as successes or as failures. However, test scores and other types of formal evaluation were by far the most common experiences in the data: 50 instances by 23 learners.

Unsurprisingly, the learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* mentioned good grades or other formal feedback the most often: 9 out of 19 participants. Moreover, the only experiences of failure in this group (N = 4/19) were related to receiving a grade they were not satisfied with. Another group with recurring mentions of positive grades was Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*, where 4 out of 7 learners stated that they had scored well in an English course or an individual test, although two of the learners in Group 3 also had received what they regarded as bad grades. Other experiences of success among the two groups were using English successfully abroad or via video calls (4 learners), noticing the effortlessness of learning English (2 learners) and one's own progress (1 learner). As argued by Roiha and Mäntylä (2019, 11), excelling in tests and exams can undoubtedly have an impact on the self-concept of the learners. Furthermore, the occasional bad grades might be regarded as unimportant by the learners, possibly via compartmentalization, or dismissing the test (or the person assigning the test) as invalid to fully test their competence.

The learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* reported having received bad grades the most often: 9 out of 12 participants in 16 instances. However, 4 participants out of 12 also stated having achieved good results in a test. Other experiences of success were using English successfully abroad (1 learner) and listening to an audiobook in English (1 learner). Nevertheless, the experiences of failure were more common: two learners remembered having mispronounced a word in class, two reported feeling often afraid of making a mistake and being embarrassed in class, and one had often felt that their competence was much inferior to others. The failures experienced by this group resemble the experiences of the subjects in Aragão's study (2011, 307): feelings of inferiority, anxiety in class, and repeatedly scoring badly in tests. Therefore, the effect that the failures have had on these learners' self-concepts is likely to be long-term, and to influence these learners' behavior in class.

By contrast, the learners in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* did not narrate experiences of failure, or mention any grades or test scores at all. Instead, they had experienced success when they felt they were making progress (two learners), when they had noticed that learning English was easy for them (one learner), and when they had overcome their nervousness of speaking in class (one learner). Therefore, the source of the

insecurity these learners otherwise expressed in their narratives, especially as to speaking English, was not uncomfortable or embarrassing experiences, but rather something else, possibly the other factors discussed in this and the previous section.

Previous experiences of learning and or use

Alongside other instructions, the learners were also asked to report where they had learned or used English and how. As a consequence, the data were abundant in descriptions of practicing and using English: 190 instances by 41 learners across all learner groups.

The most salient result is that the learners repeatedly reported that they had learned or used English outside school, that is, in informal contexts. 31 learners (70 per cent out of the total 44 participants) stated that they had learned English on their free time, and 28 (64 per cent) reported that they had used English media: for instance, movies, series, games, music, videos, social media, and audiobooks. Those who did not mention English media in their narratives might, of course, also use them frequently, as the learners were not explicitly asked to confirm or deny whether they encountered English in their free time. The fact that the majority of the learners had previous experiences of learning or using English outside school contexts implies that English was no longer a school subject only, but a more important part of their lives. This is in accordance with the notion that English is transforming from a foreign language to a second language in Finland, and is more and more frequently used as a Lingua Franca (Kalaja, Menezes and Barcelos 2008, 9).

There were small differences among the four learner groups. The learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* had most experiences in using English abroad: 7 out of 19 participants reported having used English abroad, compared to Groups 2 and 3 (N = 1/6 and N = 2/7, respectively). In turn, the participants in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* were the least frequent in reporting having learned or used English in their free time at all: only 6 out of 12 participants mentioned having learned English outside school. The learners in Group 4 also mentioned English medias less often (N = 5/12), compared to Group 1 (N = 13/19), Group 2 (N = 6/6) and Group 3 (N = 4/7). It is impossible to conclude whether the learners in Group 4 actually encountered English less frequently, or whether they were not as aware of using English in their everyday lives as the other groups. It is also possible that the learners in Group 4 did use English medias, at least to some extent, but that they did not consider it as 'learning' or 'practicing' English, similarly to the youngest participants in Aro's study (2015).

Critical experiences

Three examples of critical experiences were identifiable from the data: they had a detailed, narrative form, and were assigned some special importance by the learners themselves. One of the critical experiences was narrated by Learner 41 from Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, who had confused two similar words, been laughed at by all her classmates and as a consequence, hated English even more than earlier. Nevertheless, Learner 41 expressed that she English had later become her favorite subject and that she learned to laugh when remembering the confusion. The other two critical experiences were from Learner 40 in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*. In the first experience, the learner narrates how they were asked to read English out loud by a new English teacher. The student mispronounced a word and the class burst out laughing. However, the learner highlights how the teacher's unexpected reaction to the event had a profound impact on their English language self-concept:

(11) Sen tunnin jälkeen (*opettaja*) pyysi kaikkia jäämään hetkeksi luokkaan paitsi minut. Kuulin jälkeenpäin, että (*opettaja*) oli sanonut, että ensi kerralla, kun nauratte kun (*nimi*) lukee, niin voitte nauraa keskenänne jälki-istunnossa. Vihdoinkin aloin pääsemään jyvälle englannista. Nousin vuodessa kuutosen oppilaasta tavoittelemaan kiitettäviä arvosanoja.

After the class [the teacher] asked everyone, except for me, to stay for a while in the classroom. Afterwards I heard that the teacher had said that next time, when you laugh when [*name*] reads, you may laugh in detention. Finally I started to get a grasp of English. In a year I went from getting sixes to aiming at excellent grades. (Learner 40, Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*)

Despite the small number of critical experiences found in the data, they clearly are decisive moments for the individual learners in question, and consequently, for their self-concept development.

Summary: influential external factors in self-concept formation

In this section, I analyzed the influence of external factors in the learners' self-concepts. Likewise internal factors, external factors also revealed important group-level differences: for instance, encounters with language teachers, experiences of using English outside school, and interpretations of successes and failures.

The learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, made the least social comparisons, but reported having received most positive formal feedback. They also mentioned most often that their teachers had been influential to their language learning, although the influence had also been occasionally negative. Thus, instead of social comparisons, these learners preferred to use other frames of reference to explain how they viewed themselves as learners. Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* shared many similarities with the first group: they mentioned often positive grades and other experiences of success. They also reported using English medias often. However, the learners in Group 3 made few mentions to their teachers, suggesting that formal feedback had not been that important for their self-concepts as English language learners.

The learners in the second group, *Successful but Insecure*, did not mention formal feedback, uncomfortable experiences or failures in their narratives. Instead, they often experienced a feeling of progress and all six reported using English-language media platforms for learning English. In consequence, the negative feelings that the learners in this group displayed when having to speak English or the insecurity when imagining their future learning outcomes do not seem to emerge from negative external factors.

Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* again differed from the other groups in various aspects. They did most social comparisons in their narratives, expressing a feeling of inferiority, and mentioned having received bad grades most often. They also affirmed that they used English less in their free time than others, which they considered to be a disadvantage. However, the learners in this group highlighted the importance of teachers: teaching style, language competence, and the nature of the relationship established with students were the characteristics that the learners considered to be critical for a good language teacher.

5.3. Learner beliefs

In this section, I move on to learner beliefs. In the narratives, learner beliefs were embedded in how the learners described, interpreted and explained their learning experiences. Some beliefs were shared by all four groups: for example, most learners believed that practice was more important for language learning than natural talent, and that knowing English would be a valuable and useful skill in the future. The groups differed, on the other hand, in their attribution beliefs, that is, how they explained their learning outcomes. Next, the three categories of learner beliefs are explored one at a time.

Beliefs about language learning

The beliefs that the learners expressed about language learning were mostly implicitly embedded in the narratives, and thus counting the actual number of instances is difficult. Nevertheless, some beliefs were visible and identifiable from the manner in which the learners narrated and interpreted their experiences, as explained by Mercer (2011c, 107). The most salient beliefs were about the role of practice or natural talent, and the importance of speaking and using the language in real-life contexts.

A vast majority of the learners, 40 out of 44, appeared to believe that the role of practice was more important than natural talent. When asked to reflecting on how they could improve their English language competence, they often listed several ways in which they could practice English to become more proficient. The learners also believed that having encountered and used English in a variety of informal contexts had had a critical role in their progress. Few learners made any allusion to natural talent at all, and some explicitly affirmed that practice and effort were the key to improvement, as does Learner 3 in example 12:

(12) Motivaatiosta on nyt kaikki aikalailla kiinni. Englannin kielen opiskeluun on monenmoisia keinoja ja minun pitäisi vain harjoitella enemmän.

It all rather depends on motivation now. There is a variety of methods for studying English and I should just practice more. (Learner 3, Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident)*

The results differ slightly from Mercer and Ryan's study (2010, 438), where many participants displayed the belief that natural talent was the key factor in language learning. In both studies, nonetheless, the distinction between the two mindsets was subtle, and while practice seemed to be the dominating element for most learners, some learners also believed that innate factors had a role: for example, having an "ear for languages", mentioned by 3 learners, or dyslexia, which was mentioned by 2 learners.

The learners also made statements that suggested how they believed that languages would best be learned. The most common belief among all learners (N = 29 out of 44) was that languages should be learned by using it in the real life, mostly in informal contexts. Some learners (N = 13) also highlighted that speaking was particularly important in learning languages. However, the learners did not believe that going abroad to practice English was

necessary, in contrast to the participants in Aro's study (2015, 46). One possible explanation is the fact that the learners were some ten years younger than the students in Aro's study: younger Finns tend to spend more and more time immersed in English media content, and thus are likely to find more opportunities for practice without traveling abroad to an English-speaking country.

Beliefs about the specific language

The most common belief about English in particular was about its usefulness. 19 learners in total explicitly stated that English would be useful for them in the future: most often for traveling and for improving career opportunities. The groups did not differ considerably from each other in how many learners expressed this kind of beliefs: the usefulness of learning English was highlighted by 9 learners out of 19 in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*, 3 learners out of 6 in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure*, 3 out of 7 in Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*, and 4 out of 12 in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*. Of course, the results do not imply that the rest of the learners did not believe English could be useful at all, as they were not explicitly asked to assess the importance of learning English. In fact, none of the learners declared that English would *not* be useful for them in the future. Nonetheless, the small difference across the four groups suggests that perceiving the specific language as important was not related to whether the learners had a strong and established or a weaker and wavering self-concept.

The findings were in line with Leppänen and colleagues' 2011 study, where more than 1 400 Finns by random sampling were surveyed on their attitudes and opinions about the English language. A vast majority of the participants believed that in 20 years, it would be difficult to participate in certain activities without knowing English: international interaction, job opportunities, internet and entertainment, and traveling (Leppänen et al 2011, 152). The belief that knowing English is a prerequisite for certain activities and opportunities in Finland is visible in both Leppänen and colleagues' results and in the narratives examined in this study.

Other beliefs about English in particular regarded its complicatedness (2 instances) and how English in particular would be learned best (4 instances). Two learners mentioned that English had an immense vocabulary and a complicated grammar with "exceptions to exceptions". The best way to learn English, according to all four learners, was by using and speaking English in everyday life, although two learners also highlighted the importance of

studying vocabulary and grammar. There were no noticeable differences between the four groups.

Attribution beliefs

Expressions of causality were frequent in the narratives: 182 cases by nearly all learners, 42 out of 44. The explanations that the learners gave to their successes and failures were linked to their previous experiences and their beliefs about language learning, both of which were discussed above.

In Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* the most common attributions, that is, the assumed reasons for the successes, were the use of English in real life (N = 8 out of 19) and the role of English teachers (N = 7/19). This confirms the observations from the previous subchapters, namely the fact that using English frequently in everyday life and having received positive formal feedback had been important factors in the self-concept development of the learners in Group 1: *Successful and Self-Confident*. Other attributions for successes in this group were sustained effort (3 learners), early start (3 learners), and peers (2 learners). The occasional failures reported by this group were attributed to a lack of interest (2 learners) and disagreements with language teachers (2 learners).

Groups 2 and 3 did not differ considerably from each other: both attributed their successes mainly to having used English in real-life contexts (N = 4 out of 6 and N = 4 out of 7, respectively). The learners in Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*, however, also gave explanations to their failures: lack of time or effort (N = 3/7), lack of interest (N = 2/7), and the increasing pace or level of difficulty in the Finnish upper secondary school (N = 2/7). The learners in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* did not express any attribution beliefs of this kind. In sum, the learners in the Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* believed that their own abilities was not the factor that hindered their learning: in contrast, they attributed the poorer results to external causes and a lack of interest in improving their performance.

The learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* expressed the most attributions for their failures of all groups, the most common being the influence of teachers (N = 6 out of 12), poor attitude towards English (N = 5/12), the lack of English usage outside school contexts (N = 2/12), and the lack of their own effort (N = 2/12). Remarkably, the narratives did not suggest that the failures would be attributed to a lack of ability to learn English at all. Instead, the learners believed that they would, under the right conditions, be able to improve their learning: with the help of better teachers, better attitude, and more effort. Arguably, the

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negative attitude, poorer results and the fact that these learners used English outside school contexts less than the other groups had influenced the self-concept development in this group. Nevertheless, these learners appeared to believe that effort, practice and positive encounters with language teachers were the key factors in success, a belief reflected in the fact that these learners also had optimistic expectations for their future studies and expressed a will to improve. In example (13), Learner 19 concludes her narrative:

(13) Haluaisin pärjätä hyvin englannin kanssa, mutta meillä on vielä vähän huonot välit.

I would like to do well in English, but we are still on a bit bad terms. (Learner 19, Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving*)

Summary: learner beliefs

In this section, I analyzed the beliefs that the learners expressed in their narratives. Most of the learners believed that English would be useful for them in the future, and that practice, especially using English outside school, was the key factor in improving language skills. However, the groups differed in their attribution beliefs. While the learners in groups 1, 2 and 3 all believed that the frequent use of English in their everyday life had been a key factor in their learning, the learners in Group 4: *Struggling and Surviving* did not mention English use as frequently. Instead, two learners in Group 4 believed that they were falling behind namely because they had not encountered English as much as the others. The learners in Group 4 also attributed their weaker results to the negative influence of language teachers, their own poor attitude, or to a lack of effort, similarly to learners in Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving* who believed that a lack of time, effort or interest had hindered their learning. Nevertheless, an observation worth underlining is that none of the learners seemed to believe that they were not able to learn English: on the contrary, they believed that given the right conditions, they would be able to improve.

6. Discussion

In this section, I discuss the results obtained in the study, and evaluate what implications they could have for self-concept research and English language learning and teaching. The discussion is organized around three main themes: the complexity of self-concept evident in the narratives, the learners' interpretations about which factors have been influential to their learning, and the implications of the findings for English language classrooms. Finally, I indicate some limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

The first aspect to be discussed is the complexity of self-concept, already recognized by many researchers (Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 132), but not evident in quantitative research designs which aim to place learners on a continuum between a strong self-concept and a weak self-concept (see, for example, Marsh et al 2019). Instead, the four groups identified in this study were characterized by multidimensional self-descriptions, and placing the learners on a two-ended scale instead of the groups would have left a variety of aspects, such as future expectations, emotions, and previous experiences, neglected. As a consequence, both language teachers and language researchers should update their understanding of self-concept as a complex, dynamic, and hierarchical construct.

The second theme of discussion is the value that the learners' interpretations can offer to self-concept research and language teaching. Indeed, the factors explored in this study were factors that the learners perceived and interpreted as important for their learning: what the learners did not consider important was not present in the narratives. Nevertheless, the value of the findings lies exactly in the learners' interpretations, given that self-concept is, by definition, an individual's interpretation of themselves (Huang 2011, 506). Both language teachers and researchers will benefit from understanding which factors the learners themselves believe to be critical in their learning. For example, negative formal feedback, such as bad grades, did not seem to have importance in self-concept formation of the learners in Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*, as they appeared to firmly believe in their own abilities, but interpreted their lack of time, effort or interest to be the underlying cause if they performed weakly. By contrast, formal feedback, whether negative or positive, was notably more influential for the self-concepts of the learners in groups 1: *Successful and Self-Confident* and 4: *Struggling and Surviving*. Noticing such differences between the learners and sensitizing to what the learners

themselves believe to facilitate or inhibit their learning is crucial for both language teaching and research.

The final theme to be discussed is what implications the findings have for educational practices and English language classrooms: first, how the findings relate to the Finnish national curriculum for upper secondary schools; second, which are the factors that, according to the learners, inhibit their learning and what could be done to eliminate them; and third, how a positive and self-confident self-concept could be reinforced in English language classrooms.

First, the participants in this study wanted to learn English first and foremost for using it in real-life contexts: traveling abroad, speaking fluently to other people, and for improving their career opportunities. In other words, the participants valued oral competence and fluency over written language skills or receiving good grades in their exams. Oral skills are, to some extent, visible also in the Finnish national curriculums: both the latest National core curriculum for general upper secondary schools (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019) and the previous national curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015), still in use until 2021, underline that English language teaching should focus on communication skills, interaction, multilingual competence, and preparing students for further studies and work. However, oral competence is still not tested in the national matriculation examination, and in language classrooms, practicing oral language skills has remained fragmentary and occasional (Hildén 2011, 13). Especially in upper secondary school, because of the fast-paced curriculum and the pressure created by the matriculation examination, language teachers feel obliged to leave out the exercises aimed at improving oral skills, regarded as too time-consuming (Nyman 2011, 108). An essential responsibility of language teachers is to ensure that spoken English skills are thoroughly practiced and evaluated.

Second, the learners in this study reported some factors that prevented them from achieving the best learning outcomes. Especially in Group 3: *Self-Confident but Underachieving*, the learners reported that they did not have enough time to fully concentrate on their English studies, and that they sometimes experienced boredom in the classrooms. Providing the learners with enough time to study and materials that are both relevant to them and challenging enough could help these learners find new interest in their English studies and improve their learning outcomes. The learners in the rest of the groups mentioned that unconstructive interaction with language teachers and negative emotions, such as anxiety or nervousness, were factors that hindered their learning or participation in

class. On the part of the teacher, creating a safe and encouraging environment and ensuring a constructive relationship with the students could eliminate some of the negative influence.

The final question is whether a positive self-concept can be reinforced to help learners achieve better performance and to benefit most from the language instruction they receive. According to the learners in this study, practice, especially outside classroom contexts, was the key element in improving learning outcomes. In addition, encouragement from language teachers and positive formal feedback had supported learning. Essentially, all learners believed that they could improve their English and acknowledged the importance of knowing English in the future. The responsibility of teachers and educational authorities is to provide enough time, resources, adequate material and opportunities to learn English in a safe and encouraging environment.

Before continuing to final conclusions, some limitations of the study are indicated. As the study was not longitudinal in nature, the actual processes of self-concept formation were only examined based on the learner's self-reports at one point in time. Adding a longitudinal perspective by following the same learners over longer periods of time could shed more light on the changes that take place in a learner's self-concept formation. Moreover, to fit the scope of the study, only a limited number of participants could be included. To obtain a more varied picture of learner self-perceptions, more learners should be examined across different age groups and backgrounds. Also complementing narrative inquiry with other methods, such as interviews, journals, and quantitative methods, will produce triangulation and add new perspectives into self-concept research.

Finally, I propose questions for further research. As pointed out in the previous section, adding a longitudinal dimension and following the same learners over longer periods of time will produce more understanding of how self-concept changes over time. Also, shifting the focus from factors that influence self-concept to how self-concept, in turn, influences other elements, learner beliefs and learner behavior, will shed light on the dynamic nature of self-concept and its effects on language learning beyond just learning outcomes measured as grades or test points. Furthermore, each of the factors examined here merits analysis in more detail: scrutinizing, for example, the emotions expressed by the learners in Group 2: *Successful but Insecure* would bring valuable insights into how the learners' self-confidence could be reinforced. As shown by the detailed findings of this study, narratives have an enormous potential yet unused within the field of SLA.

7. Conclusion

In this thesis, the aim was to examine how advanced English learners describe themselves as learners of English, and how learner beliefs and other factors have influenced the self-concept development. The data were collected in the form of narratives from Finnish upper secondary school students and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that a variety of factors influence self-concept formation in a complex and dynamic manner, to the extent that each learner seems to follow an individual learning trajectory with unique perceptions and attributions. However, some perceptions and beliefs were shared by a majority of learners, a fact that merits special attention given its possible implications to educational practices.

The first research question aimed at examining how the participants described themselves as learners of English. The narratives written by the participants were detailed, individual, and abundant in descriptions of the learners themselves, their language learning experiences, hopes, fears, and expectations. While each learner had formed a unique self-concept, four learner groups were identified based on shared experiences, perceptions, and self-descriptions. To answer the first research question, I posit that a simple continuum between "a strong self-concept" and "a weak self-concept" is inadequate for capturing the complexities of language learner self-concepts, based on the detailed, subtle, and multidimensional self-descriptions that go far beyond being "good" or "bad" at a language.

The second research question sought to explore which factors were influential in self-concept development according to the learners themselves. In the narratives, some factors emerged more frequently than others, and thus had an impact on a majority of the learners' self-beliefs, but even the least common factors were illustrative of certain processes that had been decisive in the self-concept formation of the learners in question. As a conclusion, each factor, whether internal or external, has a potential to persistently affect the self-concept development, given that many experiences narrated by the learners had taken place years earlier.

The third research question aimed at answering which learner beliefs the participants expressed, and how the beliefs affected, in turn, the learners' self-perceptions. The attributions for successes and failures differed across the four learner groups, suggesting that beliefs indeed are in a relationship with self-concept development: learners with different types of self-concept attributed their successes and failures to different

explanations. Nevertheless, regardless of how easy, difficult, enjoyable or frustrating learning English had been, most of the learners believed that English would be useful for them in the future, and that they would be able to reach a desired competence, given the right circumstances. A belief that natural talent or lack of it would determine the outcomes of language learning was not found in the narrative data. To conclude, the learners expressed a will to learn English and believed that practice was the key to reach their goals.

The findings have important implications for educational practices. First, the learners wanted to learn English essentially for speaking it, especially in informal contexts. Second, the learners indicated some factors that are harmful to their learning, such as negative encounters with language teachers, and feelings of insecurity or nervousness. Third, all learners believed that they had the ability to learn English with continuous practice and optimal circumstances. Thus, the responsibility of language teachers is to ensure sufficient practice especially aimed at improving spoken English skills, and to create a safe and encouraging environment which seeks to reinforce a positive and confident self-concept. As visible in the narratives, each learner has an individual language learning story with a myriad of valuable insights for language teachers and researchers. Letting those stories be heard is essential in establishing a constructive relationship with the learners, as well as in further understanding the intricate processes of language learning.

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Appendix 1: Background information sheet and writing instructions

English translations in italics.

Äidinkieli _____

First language

Ikä _____

Age

Sukupuoli _____

Gender

Olen opiskellut englantia _____ vuotta

I have studied English for __ years

Olen opiskellut ruotsia _____ vuotta

I have studied Swedish for __ years

Olen opiskellut muita kieliä, mitä ja kuinka kauan? _____

I have studied other languages, which and for how long?

Englannin keskiarvo alakoulussa _____

Average grade in English in primary school

Englannin keskiarvo yläkoulussa _____

Average grade in English in lower secondary school

Englannin keskiarvo lukiossa _____

Average grade in English in upper secondary school

Kyllä, vastauksiani saa käyttää tutkimustarkoitukseen. Aineisto käsitellään nimettömästi ja luottamuksellisesti.

Yes, my answers can be used for research purposes. The data are processed anonymously and confidentially.

Tehtävänanto: Minä englannin kielen oppijana
Writing instructions: Me as a learner of English

Kerro tarinasi englannin kielen oppijana: kirjoita teksti omista kokemuksistasi ja näkemyksistäsi menneisyydessä, nykyhetkessä ja tulevaisuudessa.
Tell your own story as a learner of English: write a text about your own experiences and perceptions in the past, in the present and in the future.

Sinä olet tarinan päähenkilö. Kirjoita tekstisi suomeksi omalla tyylilläsi. Tekstiä ei arvostella, eikä lauseiden tarvitse olla täydellisiä. Tee tekstistä kuitenkin kokonainen tarina. Tekstin pituus on 1-2 sivua (fonttikoko 12, riviväli 1,5).
You are the protagonist of the story. Write your text in Finnish in your own style. The text will not be evaluated, and the sentences do not need to be perfect. However, make sure that your text is a whole story. The length of the text is 1 to 2 pages (font size 12, spacing 1,5).

Saat apukysymyksiä helpottamaan kirjoittamista. Kaikkiin kysymyksiin ei tarvitse vastata: valitse ne, jotka tuntuvat merkityksellisimmiltä oman tarinasi kannalta.
You are given guiding questions to facilitate your writing. You do not need to answer all of the questions: choose those that feel the most meaningful for your own story.

Millainen olet englannin oppijana?
What are you like as a learner of English?
Missä ja miten olet oppinut englantia?
Where and how have you learned English?
Millainen oppija haluaisit olla tulevaisuudessa? Mitä haluaisit saavuttaa? Mitä sinun täytyy oppia?
What kind of a learner would you like to be in the future? What would you like to achieve? What do you have to learn?
Mitkä ovat olleet tärkeimpiä kokemuksiasi englannin oppijana?
Which have been your most important experiences as a learner of English?
Mitkä ovat kielitaitosi tärkeimmät osa-alueet?
Which areas of your English language competence are the most important?
Mitkä asiat tai henkilöt ovat eniten vaikuttaneet oppimiseesi?
What things or persons have influenced your learning most?

Millainen oppiaine englanti on ollut sinulle?

What kind of a subject has English been for you?

Mitä hankaluuksia olet kohdannut? Mitä onnistumisia? Miksi? Miten ne ovat vaikuttaneet sinuun tai oppimiseesi?

Which difficulties have you faced? Which successes? Why? How have they influenced you or your learning?

Mikä olisi helpottanut oppimistasi? Miten olisit oppinut paremmin?

What would have facilitated your learning? How would you have learned better?

Miten voisit oppia englantia paremmin tulevaisuudessa?

How could you learn English better in the future?

Appendix 2: Finnish summary

Vieraan kielen oppiminen on vuosia kestävä prosessi, jonka aikana oppija muodostaa erilaisia käsityksiä sekä opittavasta kielestä että itsestään oppijana: millainen hän on, miten menestyy, mitkä ovat hänen vahvuuksiaan tai heikkouksiaan, mitä mahdollisuuksia hänellä on, ja niin edelleen. Näitä käsityksiä sanotaan minäkäsitykseksi eli oppijan ajatuksiksi ja uskomuksiksi itsestään vieraan kielen oppijana ja käyttäjänä (Roiha ja Mäntylä 2019, 4).

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena oli tutkia englannin kielen oppijoiden minäkäsityksen luonnetta, minäkäsityksen muodostumiseen vaikuttavia tekijöitä sekä uskomusten vaikutusta minäkäsitykseen. Aineistona käytettiin suomenkielisen lukion toisen vuosikurssin opiskelijoiden (N = 44) kirjoittamia narratiiveja omasta kielenoppijuudestaan. Narratiivit analysoitiin sisällönanalyysin menetelmin tietokoneohjelma N-Vivon avulla. Tutkimuskysymykset olivat seuraavat:

1. Miten osallistujat kuvailevat itseään englannin oppijoina?
2. Mitkä tekijät ovat oppijoiden mielestä vaikuttaneet heidän minäkäsityksiinsä?
3. Millaisia uskomuksia oppijoilla on ja miten uskomukset ovat vaikuttaneet minäkäsitykseen?

Minäkäsitys on kiinnostanut eri alojen tutkijoita jo vuosikymmeniä, ja positiivisella minäkäsityksellä on havaittu olevan yhteys hyviin oppimistuloksiin (Huang 2011, 523). Tulokset ovat kuitenkin olleet osin ristiriitaisia, ja minäkäsitystä on tutkittu sekä Suomessa että muualla maailmalla lähinnä kvantitatiivisin menetelmin (esimerkiksi Laine ja Pihko 1991, 119–130; Marsh et al 2019). Lisäksi minäkäsitys on usein teoreettisesti erotettu muista läheisistä käsitteistä, kuten minäpystyvyydestä ja itsearvostuksesta, mutta käytännössä näiden käsitteiden määritelmät ovat häilyviä ja osittain päällekkäisiä (Huang 2011, 506; Mercer ja Williams 2014a, 1). Minäkäsityksen erilaisissa määritelmissä korostuvat kuitenkin kolme ydinelementtiä: oppijan minä, oppijan käsitykset minästään, ja näiden käsitysten useat eri ulottuvuudet eri konteksteissa. Tässä työssä minäkäsityksestä käytetäänkin tällaista laajaa määritelmää, joka mahdollistaa minäkäsityksen kokonaisvaltaisen tarkastelun laadullisesta aineistosta (Mercer ja Williams 2014b, 178).

Oppijoiden uskomukset puolestaan ovat erilaisia käsityksiä minän ulkopuolisista tekijöistä: kielenoppimisen prosesseista ja luonteesta, opittavasta kielestä itsestään sekä oppimisen erilaisista syy- ja seuraussuhteista. Nämä käsitykset voivat muistuttaa myös ideoita tai mielipiteitä (Kalaja, Barcelos ja Aro 2018, 22). Oppijoiden uskomusten ajatellaan olevan moniulotteinen ja jatkuvasti muuttuva järjestelmä, joka vaikuttaa oppimisen tuloksiin

ja oppijan käyttäytymiseen luokkahuonetilanteessa (Kalaja ja muut 2015, 10; Mercer 2011b, 336). Uskomuksia on tutkittu eniten kvantitatiivisin menetelmin, muun muassa kyselyin, mutta erilaisia menetelmiä ja laadullisia näkökulmia tarvitaan, jotta uskomusten kaltaista moniulotteista käsitettä voidaan ymmärtää syvällisesti (Barcelos and Kalaja 2011, 282).

Vahvan minäkäsityksen on havaittu parantavan oppimistuloksia ja toisin päin, joskin aihetta on tutkittu eniten matematiikassa ja äidinkielessä ja harvemmin vieraiden kielten oppimisessa (Bong ja muut 2012, 348; Huang 2011, 524). Suomessa Laine ja Pihko (1991) tekivät jo 1990-luvulla laajan tutkimuksen kieliminästä ja sen mittaamisesta, mutta tulosten voidaan katsoa joiltakin osin vanhentuneen, sillä sekä englannin kielen asema että opetuksen painopisteet ovat muuttuneet Suomessa (Kalaja, Menezes ja Barcelos 2008, 9). Minäkäsityksen on havaittu olevan yhteydessä motivaatioon (Mercer 2008, 183), tunteisiin (Aragão 2011), ja myös oppijoiden uskomuksiin (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro 2018, 232), mutta näiden yhteyksien laadusta, suunnasta ja voimakkuudesta ei ole kattavia tutkimustuloksia. Minäkäsityksestä siis riittää vielä tutkittavaa. Tässä tutkielmassa minäkäsitystä tarkastellaan narratiiveilla: narratiivit eli minä-muodossa kirjoitetut kertomukset ovat uudehko aineistonkeruumenetelmä myös Suomessa, jossa niitä on hyödynnetty lähinnä yliopisto-opiskelijoiden ja tulevien opettajien kokemusten tarkastelemisessa (Kalaja 2011, 127). Uutena näkökulmana tässä tutkielmassa on siis oppijoiden uskomusten yhteys minäkäsitykseen sekä uusi oppijaryhmä: suomalaiset lukioikäiset englanninoppijat, jotka eivät ole valinneet englantia omaksi erikoisalakseen (vrt. esim Kalaja 2011, 127; Mercer 2011b, 2011c).

Tämän tutkielman analyysin lähtökohtana käytettiin Mercerin (2011c) jaottelua minäkäsitykseen vaikuttavista sisäisistä ja ulkoisista tekijöistä. Mercer puolestaan johtaa jaottelunsa Marshin ja kollegoiden (2015, 15–17) mallista, jossa minäkäsitys muodostuu vertailuista kahdessa eri viitekehyksessä: sisäisessä viitekehyksessä oppija vertaa omia saavutuksiaan yhdessä oppiaineessa saavutuksiinsa muissa aineissa, ja ulkoisessa viitekehyksessä hän taas vertaa onnistumistaan muiden onnistumisiin. Mercer (2011c, 97) kuitenkin laajentaa näiden viitekehysten määritelmiä kattavammiksi: sisäiset tekijät ovat oppijan käsityksiä itsestään, tunteita, uskomuksia, ajatuksia ja tulkintoja, ulkoiset tekijät taas kielenoppimiskokemuksia, muiden antamaa palautetta, ympäristön vaikutusta, ja niin edelleen. On muistettava, että nämä määritelmät toki menevät osin päällekkäin, ja usein voidaankin puhua sisäisten ja ulkoisten tekijöiden yhteisvaikutuksesta. Seuraavassa eritellään sisäisten ja ulkoisten tekijöiden pääkategorioita, jotka ovat tämän tutkielman

analyysin lähtökohta.

Ensimmäinen sisäisten tekijöiden kategoria ovat erilaiset vertailut: vertailut englannin ja muiden oppiaineiden välillä, englannin ja muiden vieraiden kielten välillä sekä englannin ja oman äidinkielen välillä. Eniten on tutkittu minäkäsityksen eroavaisuutta kieliaineissa ja matemaattisissa aineissa (esim. Marsh ja muut 2019; Huang 2011), mutta on huomattu, että samalla oppijalla voi olla hyvinkin erilaiset minäkäsitykset myös eri kielissä (Mercer 2011b, 339). Oppijoiden on todettu tekevän vertailuja myös eri osataitojen, esimerkiksi kirjoittamisen ja puhumisen välillä (Mercer 2011c, 103), mikä tukee minäkäsityksen ymmärtämistä hierarkkisena. Oppijat tekevät vertailuja myös ajassa, esimerkiksi kuvitellessaan, mitä haluaisivat kielenoppijoina saavuttaa ja arvioidessaan sitä, miten todennäköistä näiden tavoitteiden saavuttaminen on (Dörnyei 2009, 29). Viimeinen sisäisten tekijöiden kategoria ovat tunnereaktiot, joita on tutkittu erillisenä piirteenä, mutta osana minäkäsitykseen vaikuttavia sisäisiä tekijöitä vain vähän (Aragâo 2011). Erilaisia kuvauksia tunteista ja tunnereaktioista oli kuitenkin Mercerin (2011c) aineistossa runsaasti, mikä tarkoittaa, että tunteet ovat tärkeä tekijä minäkäsityksen muodostumisessa ja kielenoppijuudessa yleensä.

Ulkoisia tekijöitä ovat Mercerin (2011c) mukaan sosiaaliset vertailut, toisten palaute, onnistumisen ja epäonnistumisen kokemukset, kokemukset kielen oppimisesta ja käyttämisestä sekä kriittiset kokemukset. Sosiaalisia vertailuja on tutkittu paljon, erityisesti Marsh ja muut (2019, 334): oppijoiden on havaittu muodostavan minäkäsityksensä vertaamalla omia suorituksiaan muiden, esimerkiksi luokkatovereiden, suorituksiin. Toisten antama palaute tarkoittaa suoraa tai epäsuoraa palautetta opettajilta, perheenjäseniltä, luokkatovereilta ja ystäviltä: esimerkiksi Roihan ja Mäntylän (2019, 10) tutkimuksessa ympäristön runsas positiivinen palaute oli vahvistanut osallistujien minäkäsitystä taitavina englannin kielen osaajina. Onnistumisen ja epäonnistumisen kokemukset tarkoittavat paitsi koe- ja kurssiarvosanoja, myös erilaisissa kielenkäyttötilanteissa selviytymistä vähemmän muodollisissa yhteyksissä. Olennaista on, tulkitseeko oppija tilanteet tai arvosanat onnistumisina vai epäonnistumisina (Mercer 2011c, 137). Seuraava kategoria, aiemmat kokemukset kielen oppimisesta ja käyttämisestä, taas tarkoittaa oppijalle jollain lailla merkityksellisiä tilanteita, joissa hän kokee oppineensa tai käyttäneensä kieltä. Tähän kategoriaan sisältyy eniten ympäristön vaikutusta: opetustyyli, luokkahuoneen ilmapiiri ja kielen kohtaaminen arkielämässä (Mercer 2011c, 142). Viimeinen ulkoinen kategoria, kriittiset kokemukset, ovat oikeastaan erityistapauksia edellisistä. Kriittiset kokemukset kerrotaan yksityiskohtaisesti narratiivimuodossa, ja oppija katsoo niiden olevan jollain lailla

kielenoppimisen käännekohtia (Mercer 2011c, 146).

Oppijan uskomukset ovat Mercerin luokituksessa (2011c) yksi sisäisistä tekijöistä, mutta tässä tutkielmassa ne nostettiin omaksi aihealueekseen. Uskomukset ovat usein implisiittisiä, mutta silti tunnistettavissa haastattelu- tai narratiiviaineistosta (Mercer 2011c, 114–115). Oppijalla on uskomuksia esimerkiksi kielenoppimisesta ja sen luonteesta, nopeudesta, ja siinä tarvittavista tekijöistä. Esimerkiksi Mercer ja Ryan (2010) huomasivat oppijoiden käsitysten eroavan siinä, onko harjoittelu vai synnynnäinen lahjakkuus tärkeämpää kielenoppimisessa. Tällä taas on merkitystä minäkäsityksen muodostumisessa. Uskomukset kielestä itsestään eli tässä tutkielmassa englannista tarkoittavat käsityksiä kielen ominaisuuksista, helppoudesta tai vaikeudesta, ja siitä, mitä kielen osaamisella voi saavuttaa. Esimerkiksi Aron (2015, 47) tutkimuksessa alakouluikäiset oppijat uskoivat englannin osaamisesta olevan hyötyä hyvien arvosanojen saamisessa, ei juuri koulun ulkopuolisessa elämässä. Viimeinen Mercerin tunnistama uskomusten alakategoria on attribuutiot eli syy- ja seuraussuhteiden selitykset (2011c, 114), tosin kielenoppijan uskomukset ovat niin vaikeasti määriteltävissä oleva aihe, etteivät nämä kolme kategoriaa luultavasti kata kaikkia oppijan uskomuksia.

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin siis kolmenlaisia minäkäsitykseen vaikuttavia tekijöitä: sisäisiä oppijasta itsestään kumpuavia tekijöitä, ulkoisia ympäristön vaikutuksesta syntyviä tekijöitä, ja kolmantena kategoriana oppijan uskomuksia. Tavoitteena oli selvittää, miten oppijat kuvaavat itseään eli millainen heidän minäkäsityksensä on, ja miten yllämainitut tekijät ovat vaikuttaneet minäkäsityksen muodostumiseen oppilaiden itsensä kertomana. Näillä tutkimuskysymyksillä pyrittiin vastaamaan tarpeeseen laajentaa minäkäsityksen tutkimusta suljetuista ja tarkoin määritellyistä kysymyksenasetteluista kokonaisvaltaisempaan käsitykseen muuttuvasta ja moniulotteisesta minäkäsityksestä.

Tässä tutkimuksessa minäkäsitystä ja oppijoiden uskomuksia tarkasteltiin narratiivien avulla. Narratiivien katsottiin sopivan menetelmäksi, sillä ne antavat suljettuja kyselylomakkeita kattavamman kokonaiskuvan monimutkaisista ja vaikeasti määriteltävistä ilmiöistä (Kalaja 2011, 118–119). Lisäksi narratiivit ovat ainutlaatuinen menetelmä ihmisten yksilöllisten kokemusten tarkasteluun: narratiivissa oppijat pohtivat sekä ajassa tapahtuvaa muutosta että oppimisen syy- ja seuraussuhteita (Barcelos 2008, 37). Aineisto kerättiin suomenkielisen lukion toisen vuosikurssin opiskelijoilta (N = 44), jotka olivat 17–19-vuotiaita ja puhuivat äidinkielenään suomea (N = 41), ruotsia (N = 2) tai thaita (N = 1). Osallistujat valittiin kahdesta syystä: ensinnäkin he olivat jo pitkälle edistyneitä englannin oppijoita, jotka ovat keränneet vuosien varrella runsaasti kokemuksia eri opettajista,

opetusmenetelmistä ja -materiaaleista, arvioinnista, onnistumisista ja epäonnistumisista. Toisaalta he edustivat ryhmää, joiden minäkäsitystä ei ole juuri tutkittu laadullisesti: he menestyivät englannin kielessä hyvin vaihtelevasti eivätkä olleet valinneet kieliä erikoisalakseen, toisin kuin osallistujat useissa aiemmissa tutkimuksissa (Mercer 2008; Kalaja 2011).

Tutkimus toteutettiin osana englannin kielen kurssia, ja opiskelijat saivat halutessaan tai huoltajien toiveesta valita toisen tehtävän ja jättäytyä näin tutkimuksen ulkopuolelle. Tarvittavat luvat haettiin myös kunnan opetuspäälliköltä sekä aineenopettajalta. Aineisto kerättiin nimettömästi sähköisellä Webropol-alustalla. Narratiivit kirjoitettiin suomeksi, ja opiskelijat saivat taustatietolomakkeen ja kirjoitusohjeiden lisäksi apukysymyksiä helpottamaan kirjoittamista. Aineisto koostui 44 narratiivista, joiden pituus vaihteli muutamasta lauseesta puoleentoista sivuun. Narratiivit analysoitiin N-Vivo-ohjelmalla sisällönanalyysin menetelmin eli etsimällä narratiiviaineistosta toistuvia teemoja ja elementtejä sekä ryhmittelemällä niitä (Barkhuizen 2013, 11). Analyysin lähtökohtana käytettiin Mercerin (2011c) kategorioita minäkäsityksen muodostumiseen vaikuttavista tekijöistä, mutta uusia kategorioita lisättiin aineistolähtöisesti silloin, kun aineistossa huomattiin jokin toistuva elementti, joka ei kuulunut alkuperäisiin tekijöihin.

Aluksi oppijat jaettiin neljään ryhmään sen mukaan, kuinka he kuvailivat itseään englannin kielen oppijoina. Tämän jälkeen tarkasteltiin kutakin minäkäsitykseen vaikuttavaa tekijää yksi kerrallaan ja ryhmiä vertaillen. Osa tekijöistä toistui kaikkien oppijoiden kertomuksissa, kun taas osa oli merkityksellisiä vain muutamalle oppijalle. Seuraavaksi tuloksia esitellään yksi aihealue kerrallaan: aluksi esitellään oppijoiden ryhmittely, sitten sisäisten ja ulkoisten tekijöiden merkitys minäkäsityksen muodostumisessa. Lopuksi tarkastellaan oppijoiden uskomuksia ja niiden yhteyttä minäkäsitykseen.

Oppijat jaettiin neljään ryhmään sen mukaan, miten he kuvailivat itseään englannin oppijoina. Tavoitteena oli vastata ensimmäiseen tutkimuskysymykseen. Tekstit luettiin kokonaisuuksina ja huomioon otettiin erilaisia piirteitä: ne sanat, joilla oppijat kuvailivat joko itseään (*onnistuva, yritteliäs*) tai englantia oppiaineena (*helppo, vaativa, mukava*); se, kuvailivatko oppijat kokemuksiaan onnistumisina vai epäonnistumisina; sekä millaisia olivat oppijoiden omat odotukset siitä, mitä he pystyvät tulevaisuudessa saavuttamaan. Jokainen ryhmä nimettiin kaksiosaisella nimellä niin, että nimet korostavat kunkin ryhmän muista erottavia piirteitä. Ryhmä 1 oli *Menestyvät ja itsevarmat* (N = 19), joille englannin oppiminen oli ollut helppoa ja mukavaa, ja jotka uskoivat, että pystyisivät suoriutumaan myös tulevista haasteista englannin kielessä. Ryhmä 2 taas oli *Menestyvät mutta epävarmat*

(N = 6), jotka kuvailivat itseään taitaviksi ja englannin oppimista helpoksi, mutta olivat epävarmoja joistakin kielitaitonsa osa-alueista tai mahdollisuuksistaan menestyä tulevissa englannin opinnoissa. Ryhmä 3, *Itsevarmat mutta alisuoriutuvat* (N = 7) uskoivat omiin kykyihinsä oppijoina, mutta positiivisista oppimiskokemuksista huolimatta eivät käyttäneet tarvittavaa aikaa tai vaivaa saavuttaakseen parempia oppimistuloksia. Ryhmässä 4, *Kamppailevat ja selviytyvät* (N = 12) oppijat kuvailivat itseään ja oppimiskokemuksiaan selvästi negatiivisemmin kuin muut ryhmät, mutta mainitsivat myös onnistumisen hetkiä tai varovaisen positiivisia odotuksia kertomuksissaan.

On muistettava, että ryhmät olisi voinut jakaa myös eri tavoin, mutta tällainen yksinkertainen jako oli perusteltua, jotta narratiivien moniulotteisuutta voitiin havainnollistaa työn laajuuden puitteissa. Huomattavaa on, että oppijat kuvailivat itseään yksityiskohtaisesti, monipuolisesti ja laadullisesti, eivät vain "hyvinä" tai "huonoina" englannin oppijoina.

Seuraavaksi tarkastellaan sisäisiä tekijöitä minäkäsityksen muodostumisessa. Erilaiset vertailut englannin ja muiden oppiaineiden välillä olivat aineistossa verrattain yleisiä (N = 41), ja niiden laatu vaihteli ryhmien välillä: ryhmän 1 *Menestyvät ja itsevarmat* oppijat (N = 6/19) pitivät englantia helpoimpana ja mukavimpana oppiaineena, kun taas ryhmän 4, *Kamppailevat ja selviytyvät* (N = 3/12) oppijat pitivät englantia vaikeimpana aineenaan. Ryhmä 4 vertasi myös useimmin englantia ruotsin kieleen (N = 4/12), jota he pitivät helpompana oppia. Myös englannin kielen eri osataitoja, esimerkiksi puhumista ja kirjoittamista tai sanastoa ja kielioppia, verrattiin toisiinsa usein (74 tapausta). Monet oppijat nimesivät osataidoista vahvuuksiaan ja heikkouksiaan: erityisen usein puhumista ja kirjoittamista vertasivat ryhmän 2 *Menestyvät mutta epävarmat* (N = 5/6) oppijat, jotka pitivät kirjoittamista helpompana kuin puhumista. Tämä osoittaa, että minäkäsitystä kannattaa tutkia useista eri osa-alueista koostuvana hierarkkisena käsitteenä.

Useimmin mainitut sisäiset tekijät olivat vertailut ajassa (131 tapausta) sekä tunteisiin liittyvät toteamukset (223 tapausta). Oppijat kaikissa ryhmissä kuvailivat usein, mitä haluaisivat englannin kielessä saavuttaa: selvästi yleisin tavoite oli sujuva suullinen kielitaito (N = 24/44). Kaikkien ryhmien kertomuksissa myös mainittiin positiivisia että negatiivisia tunteita kielenopiskeluun liittyen, mutta odotetusti eniten positiivisia tunteita mainitsivat ryhmän 1 *Menestyvät ja itsevarmat* oppijat, kun taas laajimman kirjon negatiivisia tunteita kuvailivat ryhmän 4 *Kamppailevat ja selviytyvät* oppijat. Sisäisiä tekijöitä esiintyi siis teksteissä runsaasti, ja ne olivat olleet oppijoiden mukaan merkityksellisiä heidän kielenoppimiselleen.

Ulkoisia tekijöitä olivat sosiaaliset vertailut (20 tapausta), palaute muilta (44 tapausta), onnistumisen ja epäonnistumisen kokemukset (79 tapausta), kielen oppimisen ja käyttämisen kokemukset (190 tapausta) sekä kriittiset kokemukset (kolme tapausta). Sosiaalisia vertailuja tekivät eniten ryhmän 4 *Kamppailevat ja selviytyvät* oppijat (N = 6/12), jotka pitivät itseään muita huonompana sekä panivat merkille, että he käyttivät englantia vapaa-ajallaan vähemmän kuin muut. Muut ryhmät eivät juuri verranneet itseään muihin kertomuksissaan. Opettajilta saatu palaute oli ollut merkittävää 20 oppijan mielestä, mutta vaikutus saattoi olla sekä positiivista että negatiivista. Oppijoiden mielestä tärkeimpiä tekijöitä olivat opettajan opetustyyli, oma kielitaito sekä suhde oppilaisiin.

Onnistumisen ja epäonnistumisen kokemuksia oli lähes kaikilla oppijoilla, mutta kokemusten laadussa ryhmät erosivat toisistaan jälleen: ryhmissä 1 (*Menestyvät ja itsevarmat*) ja 3 (*Itsevarmat mutta alisuoriutuvat*) oppijat raportoivat eniten onnistumisen kokemuksia, kuten hyviä arvosanoja tai kielen käyttöä onnistuneesti jossakin tilanteessa. Ryhmän 4 *Kamppailevat ja selviytyvät oppijat* taas kertoivat useista epäonnistumisen kokemuksista, jotka olivat vaikuttaneet heidän minäkäsitykseensä englannin oppijoina. Vähemmän eroja taas oli kielen oppimisen ja käyttämisen kokemuksissa. Jopa 31 oppijaa 44:stä ilmoitti oppineensa englantia vapaa-ajallaan, mikä kertoo englannin kielen muuttuvasta asemasta Suomessa vieraasta kielestä toiseksi kieleksi (vrt. Kalaja, Menezes ja Barcelos 2008, 9). Kriittisiä kokemuksia aineistosta tunnistettiin kolme: yhtenä esimerkkinä alakoulussa luokkatovereiden edessä tapahtunut epäonnistuminen, jonka opettaja oli taitavasti kääntänyt onnistumiseksi. Pienestä lukumäärästä huolimatta ne olivat hyvin merkittäviä kyseisille oppijoille, ja niiden vaikutus minäkäsitykseen oli pitkäaikainen.

Viimeiseksi tarkasteltiin oppijoiden uskomuksia ja niiden vaikutusta minäkäsitykseen. Toistuvimpia uskomuksia aineistossa olivat harjoittelun tärkeys, englannin kielitaidon hyödyllisyys sekä erilaiset syiden ja seurausten selitykset. Lähes kaikki oppijat (N = 40/44) ilmaisivat narratiiveissaan, että harjoittelulla on suurempi osuus kielen oppimisessa kuin synnynnäisellä kyvyllä, kielipäällä tai kielikorvalla. Tämä eroaa sekä useista tutkimustuloksista (esim. Mercer ja Ryan 2010, 438) että arkisesta kielipää-ajattelusta. Sen sijaan oppijat uskoivat, että englantia oppii parhaiten käyttämällä sitä tosielämässä (N = 29/44) ja erityisesti puhumalla (N = 13/44). Pitkää kohdekielisessä ympäristössä oleskelua ei tarvittu, toisin kuin Aron (2015, 46) tutkimukseen osallistuneet, noin kymmenen vuotta aiemmin syntyneet oppijat uskoivat. Lisäksi kaikissa ryhmissä englantia pidettiin hyödyllisenä: 19 oppijaa tasaisesti eri ryhmistä totesivat eksplisiittisesti, että englannista tulisi olemaan hyötyä, eniten matkustettaessa ja työuralla. Tämä havainto on linjassa

Leppäsen ja muiden (2011, 152) kyselytutkimuksen kanssa, jossa suomalaiset arvioivat, että kahdenkymmenen vuoden kuluttua Suomessakin jäisi monesta paitsi ilman englannin kielitaitoa. On mahdollista, että englannin yleistyminen johtaa sekä siihen, että sitä pidetään tärkeänä, että siihen, että sen oppiminen on mahdollista myös Suomesta käsin.

Viimeinen tarkasteltu minäkäsitykseen vaikuttava tekijä oli attribuutiot eli onnistumisten ja epäonnistumisten selitykset. Oppijat selittivät menestystään useimmin sillä, että he olivat käyttäneet paljon englantia vapaa-ajallaan. Epäonnistumisia taas selitettiin kiinnostuksen tai ajan puutteella tai opettajan negatiivisella vaikutuksella oppimiseen tai omalla huonolla asenteella englantia kohtaan. Kukaan oppijoista ei kuitenkaan selittänyt epäonnistumisiaan kyvyn tai lahjakkuuden puutteella tai huonolla kielipäällä, mikä tarkoittaa, että he uskoivat kykyihinsä oppia englantia, jos vain ulkoiset olosuhteet sen sallivat.

Seuraavaksi pohditaan tulosten merkitystä minäkäsitystutkimukselle sekä kielen oppimiselle ja opettamiselle. Ensinnäkin tämän tutkielman tulokset tukevat näkemystä minäkäsityksestä moniulotteisena, muuttuvana ja hierarkkisena, eikä kahden ääripään välisenä jatkumona (Kostoulas and Mercer 2016, 132). Oppijoiden asettaminen yhdelle asteikolle "huonosta" minäkäsityksestä "hyvään" olisi jättänyt huomiotta esimerkiksi oppijoiden tunteet, aiemmat kokemukset ja odotukset tulevista saavutuksista. Toiseksi, tässä tutkielmassa saatiin selville oppijoiden itsensä näkemyksiä heidän minäkäsitykseensä vaikuttaneista tekijöistä. Sekä kielenopettajat että -tutkijat hyötyvät tällaisesta oppijalähtöisestä näkökulmasta: eri oppijat tulkitsevat eri tekijät eri tavoin, ja herkistyminen havaitsemaan näitä eroja on ensiarvoisen tärkeää sekä onnistuneessa kieltenopetuksessa että tulevassa minäkäsitystutkimuksessa. Kolmanneksi, oppijat ilmaisivat haluavansa oppia englantia nimenomaan käyttääkseen sitä todellisessa elämässä ja erityisesti suullisesti. Suullista kielitaitoa ei kuitenkaan edelleenkään testata ylioppilaskirjoituksissa, jolloin se saattaa jäädä opetuksessa vähemmälle huomiolle (Nyman 2011, 108). Opettajien tehtävänä on siis varmistaa riittävä aika, materiaalit sekä ohjaus niin, että suullista kielitaitoa voidaan harjoitella turvallisessa ja rohkaisevassa ympäristössä.

Tutkielmalla on kuitenkin myös joitakin rajoitteita. Osallistujien määrä oli rajallinen, ja he edustivat tiettyä, osin valikoitunutta ryhmää oppijoita. Lisäämällä osallistujia eri ikäryhmistä ja taustoista voidaan saavuttaa yleistettävämpiä tuloksia. Lisäksi kyseessä oli poikittaistutkimus, jolloin saatiin tietoa oppijoista vain yhtenä tiettynä ajankohtana, ei erilaisista ajan mittaan tapahtuvista muutoksista. Vaihtelemalla ja lisäämällä erilaisia tutkimusmenetelmiä, kuten haastatteluja, päiväkirjoja tai määrällisiä menetelmiä, voidaan

saada luotettavampaa ja monipuolisempaa aineistoa. Jatkossa olisikin mielenkiintoista täydentää narratiivien näkökulmaa pitkittäistutkimuksella eli seuraamalla samoja oppijoita pidemmän ajanjakson, mielellään useamman vuoden, ajan. Näin saataisiin tietoa minäkäsityksessä ja sen osatekijöissä tapahtuvista muutoksista. Toisaalta, näkökulmaa voitaisiin siirtää minäkäsitykseen vaikuttavista tekijöistä siihen, millainen vaikutus minäkäsityksellä taas on esimerkiksi uskomuksiin, oppimistuloksiin tai oppijan käyttäytymiseen luokkahuoneessa. Lisäksi minkä tahansa tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelluista tekijöistä voisi nostaa omaksi tutkimuskohteekseen minäkäsityksen osatekijänä: voitaisiin tarkastella tarkemmin esimerkiksi sitä, miten epävarmuuden tunteet vaikuttavat minäkäsitykseen, ja miten minäkäsityksen vahvistaminen voisi vähentää negatiivisia tunteita.

Tässä tutkielmassa haluttiin siis selvittää, kuinka lukioikäiset englanninoppijat kuvailevat itseään oppijoina, ja mitkä tekijät ovat heidän mielestään vaikuttaneet heidän minäkäsitykseensä. Lisäksi tarkasteltiin oppijoiden uskomuksia ja niiden yhteyttä minäkäsitykseen. Ensiksi huomattiin, että oppijat kuvailevat itseään hyvin yksityiskohtaisesti ja yksilöllisesti, siis paljon monipuolisemmin kuin "hyvinä" tai "huonoina" englanninoppijoina. Tulokset tukevat siis minäkäsityksen moniulotteisuutta ja hierarkkisuutta. Todettiin myös, että monenlaiset ulkoiset ja sisäiset tekijät olivat oppijoiden mielestä olleet merkityksellisiä heidän minäkäsityksensä muodostumisessa, mutta jotkin tekijät, kuten tunnereaktiot ja aikaisemmat kielenkäyttökokemukset, olivat yleisimpiä kuin toiset. Oppijoiden uskomukset taas paljastivat, että oppijoiden mielestä harjoittelu on kielen oppimisessa merkityksellisempää kuin synnynnäinen lahjakkuus, ja että englannin osaamisesta tulisi olemaan hyötyä heille tulevaisuudessa.

Oppijoiden kertomuksista siis huomattiin, että jokaisella kielenoppijalla on oma tarinansa kerrottavanaan. Näiden tarinoiden kuunteleminen tuo sekä opettajia että tutkijoita lähemmäs monipuolisempaa ymmärrystä kielen oppimisen prosesseista.