

Sarah Mercer

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Towards an Understanding of Language Learner Self-Concept

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Back to school in autumn, my attitude towards the language was a very different one: I took actively part in English conversations in class and I was motivated again because I knew that I was good at speaking English. (A#8. Female: 42–45)¹

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Why Investigate Self-Concept?

The above statement taken from one of the learners in the study reported on in this book indicates the power of self-beliefs to influence learner behaviours, motivation and attitudes towards foreign language learning. The central importance for language teaching of the learner perspective has formed part of the underlying foundations of applied linguistics for some time now (e.g., Breen 2001; Dörnyei 2001; Nunan 1988, 1991; Tudor 1996; Williams and Burden 1997). Many practitioners intuitively recognise that how a learner approaches or engages with learning activities depends to a large extent on what the individual thinks and feels about both themselves and the learning activity or subject per se. Teachers often experience first-hand how learner behaviours and attitudes are driven by their sense of self and how this can vary across individuals in ways that are complex and often difficult to predict. In my own classes, I have encountered learners who differ in terms of their sense of agency, motivation, willingness to engage in activities or set themselves challenging goals, in the actual ways they approach their learning and the types of strategies they employ as well as the degree of self-directed behaviour they feel they are willing or able to engage in. Over several years working with learners, it has become clear to me that a key factor contributing to the development of this complexity and variation are the learners' dynamic self-beliefs.

Each individual learner holds their own unique complex set of self-beliefs, which influence not only the way learners choose to act and the kinds of decisions they

¹See Appendix F for details of data referencing conventions. This extract is taken from the autobiography data (A), participant #8, who is female, and covers lines 42–45 of the data.

make within the present setting, but also how they interpret their past experiences and what kinds of goals and challenges they set themselves for the future. These beliefs provide learners with a sense of continuity and help them to make sense of their position in the world and their relationship to it. When a learner enters into any language learning or use experience, be that in a classroom or contexts beyond, they do not come to the encounter as a psychologically blank sheet of paper but they bring with them their beliefs about themselves and their attitudes towards the foreign language, and these both impact on and in turn are influenced by the experience. Fundamentally, learner self-beliefs form the psychological basis that connects together and underlies learners' interpretation of their experiences, their current behaviours, motivations, affective reactions and future goals.

When examining the literature for self-related constructs to help better understand my learners, I soon discovered that this was an area fraught with confusion and difficulties. The main problem was that, due to the widespread popularity of self-related constructs, there is often an implicit assumption that it is obvious what exactly is meant by a range of terms such as self-esteem, self-concept, self-worth, self-efficacy and identity and hence, no precise definitions or explanations are offered. Even within the specialist field of psychology, various self terms have been plagued by problems of confused definitions, overlapping terminology, inconsistent usage and varied theoretical understandings (cf. Brinthaupt and Lipka 1992). Whilst there is indeed genuine overlap between these terms, these constructs do differ in ways that are important to understand in relation to both the claims made for them in the literature and the ways in which they translate into pedagogical and learner realities (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion of the similarities and differences between key self-related constructs).

From amongst the self-related constructs, self-concept most closely matched my interests in understanding different language learners in a range of contexts and settings. It is defined as one's self-perception in a particular domain, such as the domain of Foreign Language Learning (FLL). Self-concept refers not only to what one believes about oneself and one's abilities in a certain domain in cognitive terms but also to how one evaluates these beliefs and consequently how one feels about oneself in evaluative, affective terms in the domain.

Within psychology, it is widely acknowledged that self-concept plays a central role in all learning situations whatever the academic domain (e.g., Denissen et al. 2007; Hattie 1992; Marsh and Yeung 1997). Indeed, Pajares and Schunk (2005: 95) explain that, "the idea that students' self-beliefs play a central role in their academic success is so widely accepted that self-constructs are a regular staple in studies of academic motivation". However, although self-related constructs can be found in a wide and bewildering range of areas of SLA research, such as affect (Arnold and Brown 1999), anxiety (Cheng et al. 1999), motivation (Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009), strategies (Woodrow 2006), autonomy (Kenny 1993), beliefs (Horwitz et al. 2004), metacognition (Wenden 2001), identity (Noels et al. 1996; Norton 2000, 2001), Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Yashima et al. 2004), individual differences (Ehrman et al. 2003), and neurobiological approaches to FLL (Schumann 1999), studies that have focused explicitly and in detail on self-concept

are conspicuously and surprisingly absent. Yet, it is possible that self-concept may be especially important in the FLL domain compared to the learning of other subjects, given the heightened role of self-presentation, identity issues and the close links between language and self. As Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) conclude, “probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does”.

Compared with other self-related constructs, self-concept appealed to me in understanding my learners as it is a conceptual construct which is broad enough to have an explanatory power in connecting various aspects of learner behaviours and motivations. As a more widely encompassing set of self-beliefs, it subsumes the more tightly domain-specific constructs, such as self-efficacy and L2 linguistic self-confidence, and also forms the psychological basis underpinning the diverse range of identities learners want and feel able to adopt. It provides learners with their sense of agency, drives and guides their behaviours, can help learners to become higher achievers academically, be more motivated, more willing to expend effort and set more challenging goals and generally to have a more positive affective attitude towards their academic studies (see, e.g., Denissen et al. 2007; Green et al. 2006; Hattie 1992; Marsh 2006; Muijs 1997). Essentially, self-concept is a powerful central psychological construct that helps to explain learners’ varied behaviours, approaches and attitudes towards language learning.

Given the absence of explicit work investigating self-concept in SLA, it was necessary to turn to work on the construct in psychology, in order to provide a starting point and a more detailed understanding of the construct’s characteristics and relationships to other factors. However, despite the valuable contribution made by this literature, many questions remain unanswered as a result of the types of studies that dominate research of the construct. Most studies in psychology are situated in the positivist cognitive paradigm and are consequently heavily based on psychometric testing. The findings stemming from such studies do not tend to provide contextualised understandings of the construct or offer insights into the complexity and uniqueness of individual learners or contexts. Instead, such variation is often largely either ignored or downplayed as variables are separated out and isolated, in order to create “neat” theoretical psychological models. Indeed, scant attention appears to be paid to the dynamic complexity of learners’ self-concepts, and the scope for inter- and intra-learner variation, which I witness on a daily basis in my teaching, is surprisingly absent from much of the psychology-based literature.

The understanding of self-concept that I was striving for recognises the inherent complexity of the construct as played out in the real lives of particular learners in specific contexts. I felt that a form of inquiry was necessary that retains a holistic view of learners to help to elucidate how the construct develops and interacts with dynamic, changeable contexts and learners’ beliefs from other domains. Research was needed that attends to individual learners in all their rich diversity and uniqueness and is contextually grounded. As Ushioda (forthcoming) suggests, an approach was required that focuses and begins with “real” learners situated in “real” classrooms and living “real” complex and constantly changing lives that also stretch beyond the bounds of the language classroom. Whilst the answers emerging from

such a study are not likely to be straightforward and will not subsequently translate into easily interpretable forms of pedagogical advice, I am convinced that they are a closer reflection of the complex reality and variation present in many language classrooms, at least more so than abstracted, generalised models of theoretical learner self-beliefs.

1.1.2 Selecting a Research Approach

Given the absence of studies examining self-concept explicitly and in depth in the foreign language learning context, it was necessary to take an interdisciplinary approach, learning from and building on the insights already gained within the field of psychology but working within a paradigm that reflected my own interests as a teacher and researcher and was sensitive to the specific nature of the domain of foreign language learning. Consequently, a more exploratory study was deemed appropriate, in order to explore the construct in the specific FLL domain, open up a range of pathways for future work and provide potentially deeper understandings of the nature of the construct as lived out amongst specific language learners.

Therefore, I decided to carry out a qualitative, grounded theory study (cf. Mercer 2008). In addition to its suitability for an exploratory study, such a research approach is better able to accommodate the boundless complexity that is involved in the process of learning a foreign language which can be affected by an almost infinite number of possible variables (see Tudor 2001: 26). It means a research design can be taken that generates data solidly grounded in the particular holistic contexts of learners' lives. Such data can illustrate the functioning of the self-concept construct in situ and allow any potential individual learner variation and the possible influence of learners' "other" lives outside of the language classroom to emerge.

A qualitative study was also considered especially appropriate for capturing the inherent complexity of self-concept as a mental construct (Valentine et al. 2004). As self-concept beliefs are an abstract internal conception and thus not readily observable, research is largely dependent on various self-report measures. It is clearly problematic to impose predetermined categories and concepts on such a complex internal construct. Whilst my exploration of the literature had provided me with a clear definition of the construct that would enable me to recognise instances of it in data, I was keen to use methods that could remain open for unexpected complexities and variations in how learners employed and referred to their self-concepts.

In terms of analysing the data, it was decided that the study would take a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Charmaz (2006: 2) defines this as "systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves". The benefits of grounded theory seem particularly appropriate for an exploratory study such as this. Analysing the data in a grounded rather than predetermined way allows the analysis to remain true to the data as a whole and retain the contextualised meanings expressed in the learners' own voices, rather than imposing preconceived codes on the data. This can permit

fresh, “imaginative” (Charmaz 2006: 181) interpretations to emerge, from which abstractions and theories can be developed that remain grounded in the specific data. Charmaz further claims the approach can “lead scholars to new vistas” (ibid), which seems to be especially pertinent, given the exploratory nature of the study and the perceived need for an alternative approach to extend current understandings about self-concept, which stem mostly from similar-style quantitative studies in psychology. A grounded theory approach means honouring the meanings inherent in the data, without looking for any anticipated or preconceived patterns and employing codes that “fit” the data as closely as possible. It would be naïve to deny that reading and preparation for the research project have influenced the way data is coded. However, as Henwood and Pidgeon (1992: 103) explain, “success in generating good grounded theory which is faithful to the data depends upon maintaining a balance between full use of the researcher’s own intellect and this requirement of fit”.

1.1.3 Research Context of This Book

As three of the main chapters in this book (Chapters 3, 5, 6) report on findings from a programme of research carried out in an Austrian university context, it is first important to outline in more detail the rationale for the approach taken, as well as the main forms of data collection.

The research context was an Austrian EFL tertiary-level context which was chosen, in part, as it was my own teaching context and I was keen to understand the self-concepts of learners in my setting. As the context was one in which I taught and thus one with which I was familiar and had a certain degree of “insider” knowledge about, it was felt that my sensitivity and knowledge about the learners’ learning context could be invaluable during the analysis stages in being able to explain or interpret certain aspects of the data. The other advantages of this setting were that learners in this context and at this level possessed the meta-language and the ability to reflect and describe themselves and their experiences in sufficient detail. In addition, the more experienced an individual is believed to be in a domain, the more complex their self-concept is thought to be (Harter 1999a). Therefore, it was felt that investigating the L2 self-concepts of advanced learners would provide richer, more nuanced data that could reveal more of the complexity and help elucidate any potential variation.

The research design involved generating data using four different methods, each of which served as a form of triangulation for the others. Thus, although the research participants were all students at the same tertiary-level institution in southern Austria with English as one of their main subjects, none of them took part in more than one form of data generation. All the participants were students at the English department of a university in southern Austria, studying English as their major subject, either on its own or in combination with other subjects. Their average age was between 19 and 25 years. Any student, irrespective of their school-leaving certificate grades, may study English at university in Austria, and consequently

abilities often vary considerably among such learners, although the stated school-leaving ability for English is B2 according to the European Common Framework of Reference.² In more traditional terminology, this would be classed as upper-intermediate level. All the students must take the same language courses in the same chronological order. A stay abroad is not a compulsory part of a language degree at the particular department where the research was carried out, but some participants had voluntarily been on extended stays abroad. Participants were all provided with some form of general information about the study and a similar version of a consent form to sign, based on ideas from the format suggested by Burns (1999: 74) (see Appendix A for an example). They were assured that their anonymity would be protected and they could withdraw from the study at any point.

The research was designed to answer two main research questions in an exploratory and descriptive manner:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What appears to be the theoretical nature of the EFL learner self-concept?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What factors appear to influence the EFL learner self-concept?

Table 1.1 below illustrates the overall data-generation approach that was developed for this study, in terms of the purpose of each data generation method, the participants and the actual methods involved.

Firstly (see row A), it was felt that in-depth, exploratory data were needed to investigate the self-concept construct in the FLL context, given the absence of explicit studies into the construct previously and in order to complement the extensive quantitative studies that already exist into self-concept generally within psychology. To this end, a single, longitudinal case study was considered the most suitable way of generating detailed, rich, holistic and contextualised data. The participant was a volunteer female student who, at the outset of this study, was 20 years old and was commencing her second year of studies at the university. I will refer to her throughout using the pseudonym she chose, Joana. She was studying two languages, English as her major and Italian as her minor, in order to become a teacher. Joana already had quite a high level of spoken English at the outset of the study³ and had spent 7 weeks as an au-pair in the USA the year prior to commencing her university studies. Her English at the outset was approximately high B2, low C1 according to the European Common Framework of Reference.⁴ Although the focus is on Joana's EFL self-concept, she also refers extensively to her Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) self-concept, which is also reported on throughout this book. Joana

²See: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf (p. 24). Accessed 05 May 2010.

³She had received a grade A in her school-leaving exam and also for her first-year spoken language course at university.

⁴See: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf (p. 24). Accessed 05 May 2010. In more traditional terminology, she would be classed as upper-intermediate/advanced.

Table 1.1 Overview of data collection methods

To answer RQ	Participants	Data generation method	Purpose
A. RQ1 RQ2	20-year-old female student from the second year of studies at the English Department at a university in southern Austria “Joana” – one person (J) ^a	Individual exploratory case study – Interviews – Written texts October 2004–July 2006	Exploratory data to generate ideas for examining in other data sources. To provide answers to both RQs
B. RQ1 RQ2	12 students from all stages of their studies at the same university as the case study participant. (I) None of these participants took part in any other data generation methods	Oral Interviews Informal in-depth interviews March 2005–August 2006	A flexible interview method to provide a fuller picture for thick description and to probe and explore ideas. To provide answers to both RQs
C. RQ1	64 students from 3 first year spoken English courses at the same university as the case study participant. (N) None of these participants took part in any other data generation methods	Written Narrative Descriptive Texts <i>Me as a Language Learner</i> March 2005	Larger sample size, to attempt to look for patterns and variation if any. To provide answers to both RQs but with a focus on RQ1
D. RQ2	26 students from 2 spoken English courses in the second half of their degree studies at the same university as the case study participant. (A) None of these participants took part in any other data generation methods	Written Autobiographical Texts <i>Language Learning History</i> October 2005	To focus retrospectively on the development of self-concept over time. To provide answers to both RQs but with a focus on RQ2

^aThe letters in brackets in this column are used throughout the book to refer to the particular data source when providing extracts from the data. “J” refers to Joana’s case study data in any data extracts used. “I” = interview data; “N” = written narrative descriptions data; “A” = autobiography data.

spent an extended stay at a university in Italy between March and June 2006 towards the end of the research period.

The data with Joana were mostly generated through in-depth, informal interviews which began in October 2004 and ended in July 2006 but were also supplemented by three written texts that the participant wrote for sessions when we were unable to meet for an interview. The data from this case study were then analysed in a grounded way and hypotheses were generated that were explored in the other data sources. The ongoing analysis and data collection meant that later interviews with the participant were shaped by the analysis of earlier interviews as were the other data generation methods. The data from this case study were intended to cast light on both of the research questions addressed by the programme of research.

Extending the exploratory approach to understanding the self-concept construct in the FLL context, interviews were carried out with 12 volunteer students (2 male, 10 female) from various stages of their studies, including a first semester student and one in her final year (see row B). All the participants were aged between 19 and 24, had English as their major subject and were Austrian nationals who had not taken part in any of the other data collection methods (see Appendix B for the bio-data of each participant). This open data generation approach allowed responses to be probed in depth and provided data that were able to supplement the data from the single case study. The range of different participants also generated data that offered the potential to examine any individual variation. The interviews were carried out only once and ranged in length from approximately half an hour to over 90 min, depending largely on how talkative the individual was. The language of the interviews was English, and all the learners at this advanced level had the meta-language to cope with the interviews and content discussed. In terms of content, the interviews all addressed roughly the same topics based on open guidelines (see Appendix C), but the format was deliberately informal, in order to allow the participants to guide the content. The interviews were intended to provide possible insights into both the main research questions.

Focusing more but not exclusively, on the first research question, written narrative self-descriptions were also collected from a group of students enrolled in one of the first-year spoken English courses, which ultimately meant 63 students were involved, mostly aged, on average, between 19 and 22 years of age (see row C). As the participants were beginner students, it was felt they would be in a position to self-describe, given that they would have had to reflect on themselves as language learners shortly before the data were collected, in order to make the decision to study the language at university. Following experiences with a pilot study, students were given broad guidelines for the texts that suggested largely self-description (see Appendix D) as well as a consent form; however, the resultant texts were often strongly narrative in nature, highlighting the seeming narrative character of self-concept perceptions (McAdams 1993). Although the emphasis in these data was on answering the first research question and understanding the nature of the learners' EFL self-concepts and how these might relate to other self-concepts, they were also analysed in respect to the second research question, in order to provide insights to extend and support findings from the other data sources.

Data were also generated in the form of language learner autobiographies, in order to attempt to cast light onto the learners' perceptions of how their self-concepts have developed and perceived reasons for this and thereby addressing primarily the second research question (see row D). The participants in this form of data generation were 26 advanced EFL students attending a spoken language course in the second half of their studies.⁵ This particular student population was selected as

⁵At this stage in their studies, students are at C1 level according to the European Common Framework of Reference. In the Council of Europe nomenclature, it is termed as having effective operational proficiency. In more traditional terminology, this would be classed as an advanced learner.

it was anticipated that these students would have had a considerable number of experiences, possibly including a stay abroad, to report upon, given their age (all 22 years old or older) and advanced stage of their studies (in their third year and upwards). The students were asked to write their “Language learning histories” in approximately two A4 pages based on open guidelines (see Appendix E). The term “language learning histories” was chosen for communication with the learners, as opposed to autobiography, as it implied a focus on language learning experiences in particular and was intended to encourage more detailed, relevant description by the learners and avoid a simple chronological listing of experiences and dates. The data were also found to provide additional insights relevant to the first research question.

Finally, it is important to note the limits and scope of the research reported on in this book. Given the absence of any in-depth studies of the self-concept in the FLL domain, the study was specifically designed to explore the construct in detail and generate new context-sensitive insights about the precise nature of the construct. Consequently, this meant that the research needed to focus and create boundaries in order to gain depth, rather than breadth of understandings. Although the research approach employed in this study was planned to be sensitive to the situated dynamics of the psychological construct and take account of its contextualised nature and complexity, the decision was made to focus on one context and primarily, although not exclusively, on one FL in detail. Clearly, further research is needed to explore self-concept situated in and across a range of settings and contexts (e.g., with a range of levels and ages of learners, in compulsory and voluntary educational settings, in immersion settings, in ESL contexts, in informal/formal settings, with different interlocutors, in different classes) and involving a variety of FLs. Although the decision was also made to focus on EFL as the key foreign language studied in this context, the book also refers to other FL self-concepts and many of the findings are likely to be relevant to a range of L2 self-concepts in a variety of contexts. Instances that may be particular to EFL or this particular tertiary-level context are discussed explicitly.

1.1.4 Aim of the Book

This book hopes to achieve three main goals. Firstly, it intends to stimulate debate and research into self-concept within the FLL domain by providing a starting point for future studies. My research was initially hampered by the absence of any relevant studies in the FL domain, as well as by the definitional nightmares that surround and plague this area. It is hoped that this domain-specific study can provide some coherence and comprehensibility in a broad and “messy” field. Whilst this book attempts to cover a wide range of issues and topics related to the self-concept, the absence of studies in this domain and the extensive far-reaching implications of the construct and its connection to a myriad of related variables means that this book can only serve as a first step on the path towards an understanding of the FL self-concept and is not intended to be viewed as an all-encompassing comprehensive work.

Secondly, it is hoped that this book will encourage educators to consider the complex psychology of their learners. Through the research I have undertaken for this book, I have learnt a lot about my own learners and have hopefully become more sensitive towards them as holistic individuals living complex situated lives. Learners do not enter our classrooms as blank sheets of paper and, hopefully, this book may help us to reflect more on how our students see themselves as FL learners, how they come to hold these views and what the effects of these beliefs might be on their language learning behaviours.

Finally, given that the qualitative, grounded research approach taken in this study presents a quite radical contrast to the majority of self-concept studies in the field of psychology, which tend to be quantitative and use fixed-item, psychometric tools, it is hoped that psychologists, too, may gain fresh perspectives from the findings reported on and questions raised in this book to complement and extend the existing knowledge base in the field. The study aims to serve as a bridge between the disciplines of psychology and applied linguistics and show how deeper, more situated understandings of self-concept that recognise its dynamic, complex nature have much to contribute to furthering our understandings of learners. Hopefully, incorporating valuable insights from psychology studies to date with more socially situated studies can help to develop more internally consistent, comprehensive and realistic theoretical frameworks.

1.1.5 Outline of the Book

The book is divided into six further chapters. [Chapter 2](#) addresses the question of “what is self-concept”. Highlighting the key insights to date from psychology, it explores definitional concerns and explains the difference and similarities between key self-related constructs. To provide a framework for the chapter that follows and to contribute towards a thorough understanding of self-concept, the chapter also describes in part the theoretical nature and structure of the self-concept construct as it is understood in mainstream educational psychology. Additional research concerning learner self-concept from both the main disciplines that inform this book – psychology and SLA – are also discussed, in order to describe its key characteristics, situate the construct in relation to other important constructs and elucidate the central role it is believed to play.

Having established broad understandings of the nature of self-concept in the literature, the next chapter considers the findings from the analysis of the data in this study in respect to how self-concept appears to function in the FL domain in theoretical terms and how this compares to the existent literature as outlined in the previous chapter. It focuses primarily on the case study participant’s EFL self-concept and explores how this learner’s various FL-related self-concepts interconnect and vary across contexts. The other data sources are also examined and reveal the ways in which self-concept may be subject to variation across learners and contexts. The chapter concludes by proposing a network-based model of self-concept to describe the characteristics of the FL self-concepts emerging from the analysis of these specific data.

The book continues in [Chapter 4](#) by returning to the existent literature to consider the extent to which the self-concept is believed to be dynamic and which factors may affect its development. This chapter outlines the influential Internal and External Frame of Reference Model (Marsh 1986a) that is used in psychology to explain the processes by which learners form their domain-specific self-concepts. This model and other related findings from the existent literature serve as the framework that underlies the following two chapters. [Chapter 5](#) concentrates on factors within the internal frame of reference used by learners in this study in forming their L2 self-concepts, focusing in particular on the role of learners' self-concepts in other domains and their belief systems about the nature of FLL. In [Chapter 6](#), attention is then turned to external factors that appear to influence the L2 self-concepts of the learners in this study. The key external frames of reference considered are social comparisons, explicit and implicit feedback from significant others, perceived experiences of success and failure, as well as learners' subjective critical experiences.

Finally, [Chapter 7](#) draws overall conclusions from the exploration of the literature and examination of the data in respect to the L2 self-concept in the FLL context. It considers the potential implications of the findings for pedagogical practice and suggests possible approaches that may engender a climate conducive for learners to develop a positive but realistic L2 self-concept. It then sets out a possible future research agenda by raising questions that need to be addressed by further studies in this under-researched field within SLA.

As the title suggests, this book aims at contributing towards a better understanding of this important psychological construct in the FLL domain. It cannot possibly be entirely comprehensive and, indeed, it may well raise more questions than provide answers. However, it does aim to offer a starting point for future work in this area by clarifying definitional concerns, describing the detailed findings of this programme of research, outlining current gaps in our knowledge, suggesting directions for future studies and encouraging others to engage in researching this important construct in the unique context of FLL. For educators, such as myself, it hopes to provide an initial guide and inspiration to help teachers to develop their own local understandings of their learners and the self-concepts they bring with them to specific language learning and use contexts.

Chapter 2

What Is Self-Concept?

2.1 Understanding Self-Concept

Work investigating and understanding the nature of self-concept has been hampered by the intrinsic complexity and the multidimensional nature of the construct (Marsh 1990d), problems with overlapping, interrelated terminology, e.g., self-esteem, self-worth, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-beliefs, self-perceptions, subjective competence, identity etc (see, e.g., Boekaerts 1991; Byrne 1996; Eccles et al. 1993; Hattie 1992; Silverthorn et al. 2005; Wylie 1979), as well as differing theoretical understandings about the composition of the concept (see, e.g., Bong and Clark 1999; Marsh and Shavelson 1985; Marsh 1990a; Oosterwegel and Oppenheimer 1990; Pajares 1996). To further complicate matters, use of the construct often varies depending on the discipline and perspective of the respective study, such as whether a sociological, anthropological, social psychological, developmental or cognitive psychological perspective is taken. As Brinthaupt and Lipka (1992: 1) explain in the introduction to their book on the self, the huge amount of interest in issues relating to the self makes researching in the field exciting but also frustrating and difficult for anyone who wishes “to come up with a meaningful picture of the self”, given that there is “wide disagreement about how to define the self, measure it, and study its development”.

The presentation of self-concept in this book represents a choice of perspective that may differ from others in the field. It is a perspective developed from my own experiences as a language teacher in the humanistic and communicative traditions and also from my reading in psychology, in particular work in educational psychology, especially by those who attend to motivational and affective dimensions of learning. However, given the special interdisciplinary nature of this study, the perspective also reflects the strong sociocultural influences that have dominated many recent debates within applied linguistics. It is hoped that the reader will find the perspective balanced and informed by current research in both disciplines, but the reader should also be aware that others may conceive of constructs and their interrelationships differently. Primarily, this book takes a perspective of self-concept that views it as a dynamic, multidimensional psychological construct, which both influences and is affected by a person’s social contexts and interactions and that can vary

across individuals and settings but that has a certain degree of internal stability (see [Chapter 4](#) for a full discussion of the dynamic nature of self-concept).

In this chapter, the construct as it is used in this book will be defined in more detail and its perceived connections with other related constructs will be explained. The chapter will also describe some of the characteristic features of the construct in the FLL domain and possible ways of researching it based on a discussion of relevant work in the disciplines of psychology and SLA.

2.1.1 Defining Self-Concept

A person's self-concept consists of the beliefs one has about oneself, one's self-perception, or, as Hamlyn (1983: 241) expresses it, "the picture of oneself". It is not the "facts" about oneself but rather what one believes to be true about oneself. Self-concept appears to function in domain-specific terms (Marsh et al. 1988), i.e., self-beliefs are grouped to reflect a particular field or area. Although the term "domain" is often understood to mean a subject area, it may also refer to a type of skill: a definitional issue that will become central to discussions in [Chapter 4](#). As Bong and Skaalvik (2003: 17) explain, "the term domain-specificity should not be equated to a particular measurement level. Rather, a domain can represent from (*sic*) relatively limited skill areas such as reading comprehension in English to broader content areas such as social science". In this book, self-concept is defined as a psychological construct that comprises "a self-description judgement that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth associated with the judgement in question" in a specific domain (Pajares and Schunk 2005: 105). Academic self-concept is thus an individual's self-perception of competence and their related self-evaluative judgements in the academic domain. The focus in this book is on a learner's Foreign Language Learning (FLL) self-concept, which can be defined as an individual's self-descriptions of competence and evaluative feelings about themselves as a Foreign Language (FL) learner. The degree to which self-concept is best considered at the domain level of foreign language learning in general or at the more domain-specific level of a particular foreign language is discussed in detail in [Chapter 3](#).

2.1.2 Telling Self-Related Constructs Apart

In order to further clarify the sense in which the term self-concept is used in this book, it is important to differentiate between it and other key self-related constructs. Although there are many areas of commonality between the various self constructs, and, indeed, their boundaries may best be viewed as being permeable, the use of these constructs in research do differ in important ways. In order to properly appreciate the claims made in research and the pedagogical implications of studies, it is important to understand the nature of the relationships between the various constructs and the ways in which they may be similar and/or different.

Three types of self-belief constructs which are frequently confused are *self-efficacy*, *self-concept* and *self-esteem*. As Valentine and DuBois (2005: 55) point out, “theoretically self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy beliefs share a common emphasis on an individual’s beliefs about his or her attributes and abilities as a person.” Yet, they show that it is also possible and indeed necessary for valid research to distinguish each of these terms from the others. For example, it has been suggested that some of the contradictory findings about the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement have been caused by the use of different definitions of self-concept (see, e.g., Baumeister et al. 2003; Hansford and Hattie 1982; Marsh 1992; Marsh and Craven 2006; Swann et al. 2007; Valentine et al. 2004). The key differences in the three constructs (self-esteem, self-concept and self-efficacy) seem to reside primarily in the degree of specificity and also the relative importance of cognitive and evaluative self-beliefs involved.

Self-esteem is a global construct which is related to an individual’s value system and, thus, considered to have a more evaluative component. As Harter (1999a: 5) explains, self-esteem is focused “on the overall evaluation of one’s worth or value as a person” and she uses the terms self-esteem and self-worth interchangeably. Self-esteem is the broadest and most evaluative of the three constructs.

In contrast, self-efficacy is seen as being tied to very specific tasks within a domain, more cognitive in nature and more concerned with expectancy beliefs about one’s perceived capability to perform a particular task in a specific context (Bandura 1997). It is defined by Pajares and Miller (1994: 194) as “a context-specific assessment of competence to perform a specific task, a judgement of one’s capabilities to execute specific behaviours in specific situations”.

Self-concept is not measured at the level of specificity of self-efficacy, is less context-dependent than self-efficacy and contains both cognitive and affective elements. It concerns an individual’s self-perceptions and self-evaluations in a specific domain. It therefore differs from the more global construct of self-esteem by being more domain-specific and including a cognitive dimension.

In terms of the level of specificity, self-esteem is the most global of the constructs, whereas self-efficacy is extremely specific and highly context-dependent. Whilst self-concept is domain-specific, it is less tightly context specific than self-efficacy. One particular definitional problem for work in this area has been establishing when self-concept stops and when self-efficacy begins in terms of levels of specificity. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) propose that, when self-concept and self-efficacy are both measured in the same domain and at increasing levels of specificity, they become increasingly difficult to separate (ibid: 7). Pajares (1996) agrees and suggests that self-efficacy may be subsumed under self-concept. However, he cautions about the potential problems for research of subsuming self-efficacy under other more global beliefs which may distort the exact nature of relationships and research findings. Nevertheless, Bong and Skaalvik (2003: 10–11) state that, many researchers in fact acknowledge that self-concept includes a self-efficacy component and that “this component may be the most important building block in one’s self-concept”.

Self-concept is widely believed to be composed of more than just perceived competence, and this leads to its other distinguishing characteristic, namely the relative

degree of evaluative and cognitive beliefs the construct encompasses. Self-esteem is viewed as the most evaluative and affective of the three constructs, incorporating a global sense of self-worth (Harter 1999a) and self-efficacy is seen as the most cognitive. Pajares and Miller (1994: 194) offer the following distinction between self-efficacy and self-concept, highlighting the level of specificity but also the affective component of self-concept:

Self-concept differs from self-efficacy in that self-efficacy is a context-specific assessment of competence to perform a specific task, a judgement of one's capabilities to execute specific behaviours in specific situations. Self-concept is not measured at that level of specificity and includes beliefs of self-worth associated with one's perceived competence.

Pajares and Schunk (2005: 105) explain that, self-concept beliefs reflect “questions of “being” and “feeling”” in a specific domain. Marsh et al. (1999a) concluded that the competence and affective aspects of the self-concept construct are strongly related but distinguishable components.¹ This implies that the affective component and competency component could develop differently. However, Bong and Skaalvik (2003: 8) conclude that, the “issue of whether or not the competence and affective components of self-concept are empirically distinguishable has not been resolved”.

The current study does not focus on the nature of the connection between and relative interdependence of these two components but accepts that both affective and cognitive elements are part of the self-concept construct (Bong and Clark 1999; Bong and Skaalvik 2003). Hence, self-concept is regarded in this study as encompassing beliefs about perceived competence and related self-evaluative beliefs in a specific domain. Self-efficacy beliefs are considered to be an integral part of the domain-specific self-concept beliefs, whereas self-esteem is viewed as a holistic judgement of self-worth that does not function at the domain-specific level (e.g., the domain of learning English as a foreign language). In line with a Jamesian perspective (1890/1963), some researchers claim that a domain-specific self-concept may contribute to an individual's overall self-esteem, depending on the relative importance of that domain for an individual (Hardy and Moriarty 2006; Harter 1999a; Pelham and Swann 1989). In other words, if a learner has a low self-concept in a domain of great personal value, then this is more likely to have a significant impact on their overall level of self-esteem than a low self-concept in a domain that does not hold much personal value for the individual. Although this understanding of the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem is “intuitively appealing” and widely popular, its validity remains subject to debate as some empirical studies have failed to find evidence in support of it (Marsh 1993, 2008).

Within applied linguistics research, there are three other frequently used constructs that are related to self-concept: *Clément's L2 linguistic self-confidence*,

¹A similar discussion has evolved around self-esteem with what is known as the dualistic approach, which sees self-esteem as composed of self-competence and self-liking which are believed to be highly correlated but qualitatively different (see, e.g., Bosson and Swann 1999; Mruk 2006; Tafarodi 1998).

metacognitive person knowledge and identity. Clément's "L2 linguistic self-confidence construct" (Clément 1980, 1986; Clément and Kruidenier 1985) can be found primarily in studies of motivation, identity and willingness to communicate (WTC) typically carried out in Canadian ESL settings (see, e.g., Clément et al. 2001; Labrie and Clément 1986; Noels and Clément 1996; Rubinfeld et al. 2006). In the original article introducing L2 linguistic self-confidence, Clément (1980) does not offer a precise definition of the construct. Instead, the article indicates that it is to be understood in terms of perceived proficiency in communicating in the L2, which is considered as the cognitive aspect and also in terms of the degree of anxiety in using the L2, which is seen as representing an affective component. Clément and Kruidenier (1985: 24) explain that the construct is defined as "the individual's self-evaluations of second language proficiency". In other words, the authors use the construct to refer specifically to "self-confidence in one's ability to use the language" (ibid), as opposed to in one's ability to learn the language. In terms of production, it appears that the emphasis by the authors is on spoken language production, rather than written text production. A slightly different perspective is taken by Tremblay and Gardner (1995: 507) who note that Clément's L2 linguistic self-confidence construct "resembles expectancy and self-efficacy". However, L2 linguistic self-confidence does not appear to be used at the high level of domain-specificity typical in definitions of the self-efficacy construct in psychology (Bandura 1997). Further, Tremblay and Gardner (1995: 507) note that the L2 linguistic self-confidence construct differs from self-efficacy mainly in terms of "the inclusion of an anxiety component". Indeed, the construct also occurs in some anxiety literature in which anxiety is often closely associated with, or even alternatively defined as, low self-confidence in using the language (see, e.g., Cheng et al. 1999; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; MacIntyre et al. 1997). It thus seems that whilst L2 linguistic self-confidence reflects some aspects of self-concept, such as domain-specific beliefs of competence, the affective dimension differs as it focuses more on feelings of anxiety, whereas the affective aspect of self-concept is more typically concerned with evaluative feelings associated with the self-beliefs in the domain. As other studies have suggested that anxiety is actually caused by a low self-concept, rather than representing an integral part of it (Mills et al. 2006; Pellegrino 2005), it may be worth separating measurements of self-concept and anxiety, in order to avoid making assumptions about the potentially complex nature of the relationship between the two constructs. In terms of its relation to self-concept, it would seem that the competency aspect of Clément's L2 linguistic self-confidence construct could be subsumed by the self-concept construct and the affective, low anxiety dimension may be best viewed as a potential product of feelings of low competency.

Another term that is related to self-concept and is used within a number of studies within applied linguistics concerns one element of metacognitive knowledge, namely, *person knowledge* (Flavell 1979). A range of studies have investigated metacognition in FLL (see, e.g., Carrell et al. 1989; Graham 2003; Kalaja 1995; Wenden 1987, 1998, 2001), often in specific domains such as reading (Anderson 2003; Zhang 2008) or listening (Goh 1997) with some researchers placing more of a distinct emphasis on self-related metacognitive knowledge than others (see,

e.g., Cotterall and Murray 2009; Graham 2006; Victori and Lockart 1995; Wang et al. 2009; White 1999), although none appear to focus exclusively in detail on the exact content and nature of “person knowledge”. Wenden (1998: 518) defines it as “general knowledge learners have acquired about human factors that facilitate or inhibit human learning”, and this includes specific knowledge about how this applies to themselves, including their self-efficacy beliefs. Generally, “person knowledge” in metacognition is more tightly task-specific (similar to self-efficacy) and also includes knowledge about human attributes generally and how this person knowledge applies to others as well as oneself. It tends to be viewed as a more cognitive construct, although White (1999: 45) stresses that the metacognitive knowledge reported in her data was “overlaid with affective and evaluative elements”. Additionally, it is knowledge that is “statable”, in other words, learners can become conscious of and articulate this knowledge (Wenden 1998: 516). In contrast, self-concept as a construct does not include knowledge of others and people in general and focuses on self knowledge in both evaluative and cognitive terms in a broader domain than just the task level, rather, for example, at the EFL domain level. The degree to which self-concept is a construct that individuals are fully conscious of and able to articulate is encompassed in psychology in debates surrounding the “implicit self-concept” (see, e.g., Bandura 1986; Briñol et al. 2006; Fazio and Olsen 2003; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Rudman and Spencer 2007). Clearly, it would be important to understand to what extent an individual is fully conscious of all aspects of their self-concept and the ways in which a person’s unconscious or implicit self-concept could interact with and influence their explicit self-concept. In this book, the focus is largely on the explicit self-concept, which learners are able to report upon and, on reflection, are for the most part conscious of. However, in some instances, certain aspects of a learner’s self-concept have been deduced and interpreted from indirect statements by the learners and may reflect self-beliefs that the learner is not immediately aware of or able to articulate explicitly. Self-concept can be viewed as subsuming person knowledge in relation to the self and possibly when considered in respect to others could be viewed as a frame of reference affecting a person’s self-concept formation (see Chapter 5).

Finally, the other self-related construct that is currently receiving considerable attention in applied linguistics is *identity* (see, e.g., Block 2007; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009; Ivanič and Camps 2001; Morita 2004; Norton 2000; Pellegrino 2005; Solé 2007; van Lier 2007). Norton (2000: 5) defines identity as, “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future”. Thus, the focus in much identity work is on how the language learner negotiates their sense of self in relation to various contexts and the emphasis is on the social nature of the self, a person’s relationships with others and their construction of their identity in various settings, possibly also in imagined settings (see, e.g., Kanno and Norton 2003; Norton and Kamal 2003; Ryan 2006). The identity construct differs to self-concept largely in terms of the focus. Self-concept is concerned more with the inner psychological sense of self in a particular domain, rather than with the interplay of this with a particular socio-cultural context or community of practice. This is

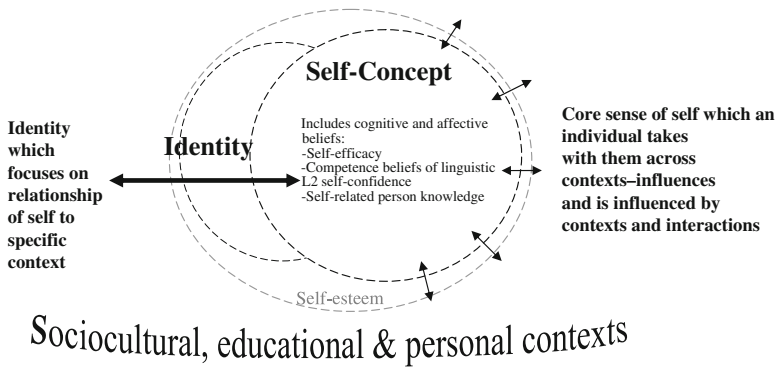


Fig. 2.1 Visual model of the interrelations between key self constructs

not to say the two constructs are unrelated or that self-concept should be viewed as detached and independent of its context, but rather it means that studies investigating either construct tend to have a differing emphasis and focus. However, self-concept can be understood as the underlying basis on which an individual constructs their identities in relation to specific contexts. Self-concept is the “mobile” core sense of self that an individual holds and takes with them into a range of different contexts; identity is then constructed on the base of an individual’s self-concept but is concerned primarily with the relationship between the individual’s sense of self and a particular social context or community of practice. A learner’s various identities are likely, in turn, to affect their self-concepts, and the two are most probably best conceived of as being reciprocally interrelated.

The diagram above (Fig. 2.1) is intended to facilitate an understanding of how this book conceives of self-concept and its relation to these other self-related constructs. Firstly, the diagram defines self-concept as including cognitive and affective self-beliefs. It shows how self-concept is a more global construct that subsumes other more tightly domain-specific psychological constructs, such as self-efficacy, aspects of L2 linguistic self-confidence and person knowledge. In the background, all of these self constructs are seen as contributing to varying degrees to an individual’s global sense of self-esteem. Finally, the diagram illustrates how self-concept forms the basis from which an individual constructs their identity in relation to a specific context, real or imagined. All of the constructs are influenced by various sociocultural, educational and personal contexts. Although this model indicates that an individual brings their self-concept with them into every context and interaction, it should be clear that it may change to varying degrees as a result and should not be viewed as a static construct although it may maintain a certain degree of stability (see Chapter 4).

Generally, both researchers and educators benefit from clear definitions and understandings of self constructs and, as such, there is a need for research to be precise and specific in the use of self-related terms. Whilst there are many points of intersection and areas of commonality between the different constructs, indeed, some may question to what extent it is possible to distinguish clearly between them,

it is, nevertheless, important to attempt to clarify the way in which self-concept is understood in this book, in order for the reader to be able to interpret the findings appropriately and position the study in relation to other existent work.

2.1.3 Understandings of Self-Concept in Psychology

Having now defined self-concept and having delineated it from other self-related constructs, this section will now consider some of the key characteristics of self-concept found in psychology-based studies.

As part of a perceived need to achieve greater clarity in definitions of the self-concept construct, much of the research in psychology about self-concept to date has been concerned with the theoretical nature of self-concept and related conceptual models. In this respect, as Marsh (2006: 8) explains, the Shavelson et al. (1976) model of self-concept was a “landmark”, and this model has played a key role in shaping definitions and understandings of self-concept in psychology-based studies. The model conceives of self-concept as being a hierarchical structure composed of domain-specific self-concepts. At the apex of the model is general self-concept, which is divided into academic and non-academic self-concepts at the next level. Each of these is further divided into subject areas and other domains. The authors hypothesised that each of these specific self-concepts could also be further divided into quite specific self-concepts at the base of the model which would more closely resemble behaviour in specific contexts and thus, in light of the conceptualisation discussed above, could be regarded as representing various forms of self-efficacy.

Marsh and Shavelson (1985) revised this model based on findings that questioned some aspects of how the relationships between the various elements involved were presented. The new model thus represented the construct in an even more multifaceted, though still hierarchical manner, at both the general and domain-specific levels of academic self-concept. The important difference from the original model is that, in the revised one, academic self-concept is divided into maths academic self-concept and verbal academic self-concept. Further research by Marsh et al. (1988) confirmed this dichotomous division and further elaborated on the suggestions made by Marsh and Shavelson (1985). The model presented by Marsh et al. (1988) is more detailed and contains a wider variety of specific subcomponents related to these two main academic self-concepts, as well as a representation of their interrelationships with both. It also includes a foreign languages self-concept and is displayed below in Fig. 2.2.

One of the main features of all three self-concept models is their overall hierarchical structure, in which subordinate constructs are defined in terms of higher-order ones. However, some researchers (see, e.g., Guérin et al. 2003; Hattie and Marsh 1996; Marsh and Yeung 1998; Yeung et al. 2000) have questioned the appropriacy of this configuration and propose that self-concept may be more complex than these models suggest, since it may vary in structure depending on context- and domain-specific factors. Indeed, Harter (1998: 579) has questioned whether self-concept is hierarchical in any respect and whether “the statistical structure extracted does, in

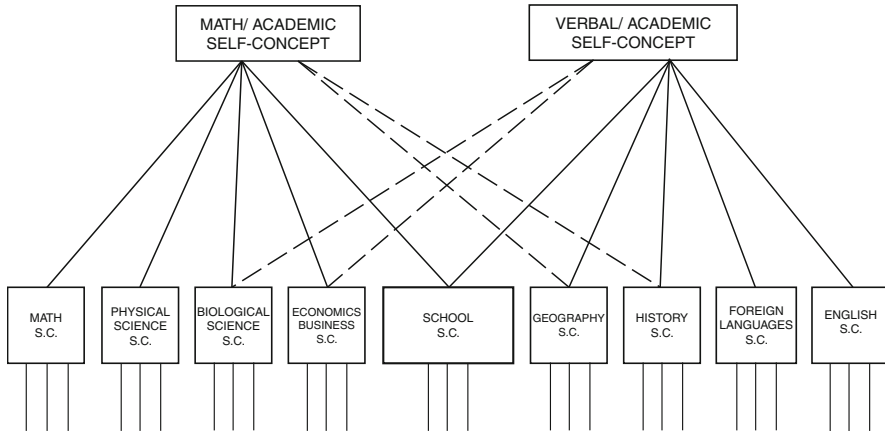


Fig. 2.2 An elaboration of Marsh and Shavelson’s (1985) model (Marsh et al. 1988: 378)²

fact, mirror the psychological structure as it is phenomenologically experienced by individuals”. In other words, Harter argues that such hierarchical models may reflect the statistical approaches used by the researchers, rather than the way in which individuals actually organise their self-concepts in their own minds (ibid). Given the dominance of the statistical form of analysis in work on the theoretical structure of the self-concept, Harter’s observation suggests a possible need for alternative forms of data generation and analysis, in order to attempt to understand the nature of the construct from a phenomenological position and, thus, as appropriate, to also propose an alternative model.

Research into the theoretical structure of the self-concept has been dominated by Marsh and his colleagues and consequently by their theoretical models, their understandings of appropriate, valid research and, importantly, their series of self-description questionnaires.³ These questionnaires were developed based on the original Shavelson et al. (1976) theoretical model, and many of the studies carried out since have employed these questionnaires, and the “empirical results were used to support, refute, or revise the instrument and the theory on which it is based” (Marsh and Craven 2006: 138). The majority of these studies have employed versions of the same self-report questionnaires in which the items are already pre-selected by the researcher, which thus may have inhibited original alternative theoretical models from emerging.

A further characteristic feature of much self-concept research, which stems from the Shavelson et al. (1976) hierarchical model, has been the acknowledgement, in light of the model’s multifaceted structure, of the value and need for domain-specific

² Reproduced with kind permission from the Journal of Educational Psychology.

³ ASDQ = Academic Self Description Questionnaires; SDQ = Self Description Questionnaires. (Marsh 2006: 9–16). Instruments available online: <http://www.self.ox.ac.uk/Instruments/packages.htm>. Accessed 21 May 2010.

understandings of self-concept. Marsh et al. (1988) questioned the usefulness of the global academic self-concept and unidimensional measurements tools, such as the well-known Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale. They suggest that research would benefit from being carried out in specific domains and within the individual components of academic self-concept, as self-beliefs appear to function in domain-specific ways and are related to domain-specific achievements. Indeed, a considerable amount of self-concept research has focused on validating the current theoretical models (Marsh and Shavelson 1985; Marsh et al. 1988) in terms of their multifaceted nature or discrediting previous unidimensional models of self-concept (see, e.g., Byrne 1996; Marsh 1990a; Marsh 1993; Marsh and Craven 1997).⁴ Indeed, Hattie (2008: 51) claims that “one of our successes of the past century is an agreed understanding of the multidimensional nature of self-concept”. Marsh (2006: 24) concludes:

... a unidimensional approach cannot adequately reflect the diversity of specific self-concept domains and their relation to different criteria and outcomes. A multidimensional perspective to self-concept can lead to a better understanding of the complexity of self in different contexts, to more accurate predictions of a wide variety of behaviours as well as appropriate outcome measures for diverse interventions, and a deeper understanding of how self-concept relates to other constructs. Over-reliance on a single self-esteem scale and a unidimensional perspective to self-concept is counter-productive in psychological research.

It is now widely accepted that research into self-concept needs to be carried out in domain-specific ways. As Marsh (2006: 16) explains, “if researchers are specifically interested in self-concepts in particular academic subjects, then they should measure self-concepts with scales specific to those subjects”. Similarly, in related fields such as anxiety (Cheng et al. 1999), attitudes (Azjen and Fishbein 2005), affect (Pekrun et al. 2002), and personal epistemologies (Hofer 2000), it has been shown that the more domain-specifically a psychological factor is measured, the closer the correlation to achievement and the stronger the predictability function of the particular factor concerned. Swann et al. (2007: 87) explain this phenomenon in terms of “specificity matching”. This means that “the specificity of predictors and criteria should be matched”; in other words, they suggest that research should not combine a mixture of global and specific factors but should remain consistent. Although much of this advice is clearly aimed at quantitative, correlational-style studies, the implications for domain-specific qualitative studies are equally important.

Thus, although much has been achieved in understandings about self-concept, in particular the findings emphasising the importance of domain-specific studies such as into the FL self-concept, rather than at more unidimensional levels, many questions remain and more research is necessary, in order to provide a more comprehensive, grounded picture. Firstly, some researchers have drawn attention to the

⁴It is also worth noting that in recent years there have been similar debates concerning self-esteem which so far has largely been viewed as a global and essentially unidimensional construct. Now some researchers question whether, like self-concept, self-esteem may in fact also be multidimensional in nature (see, e.g., DuBois and Hirsch 2000; Dusek 2000; Guindon 2002; Mruk 2006; Rosenberg et al. 1995).

dynamic nature of the self-concept depending on context (see, e.g., Harter 1998), as would be in line with more socio-constructivist approaches to the study of self constructs (Martin 2007). But as yet, studies that take a more situated approach to examining contextual variation and influences remain relatively uncommon (see Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of the dynamic self-concept). Secondly, fundamental questions have been raised about whether self-concept is indeed hierarchically structured at all, or whether this hierarchical structure may in fact reflect the statistical procedures from which it has emerged. Due to the dominance of the field by quantitative methods, largely all employing similar self-description questionnaires, it is suggested that a different, qualitatively-orientated research approach may provide alternative interpretations and insights to complement the findings from existing studies. In particular, given the inherent complexity of self-concept as a mental construct, a qualitative research approach may also be better suited to capturing some of this complexity in situ as it is phenomenologically experienced by individuals and thereby also reveal any possible inter-learner variation.

Finally, considering the domain-specific nature of self-concept and the very small number of studies focusing on self-concept in foreign language learning domains, there would seem to be a need to explore more fully the nature and structure of self-concept specifically in these domains. This may be especially important as self-concept is thought to play an even greater role in foreign language learning than in other academic subject domains. Williams and Burden (1997: 115), for example, see it as indisputable that language learning is different to learning other subjects in respect to the self, given the strongly “social nature of such a venture”. As they stress, “language, after all, belongs to a person’s whole social being; it is a part of one’s identity and is used to convey this identity to other people.” Furthermore, when learning a foreign language, one’s ability to express one’s true, inner self can be compromised, given the limited range of language that a learner may have at their disposal and the close ties between language and self-presentation (Pellegrino 2005). Learning a foreign language also often means engaging with other cultures, which may embrace different understandings of self-related values and qualities (see Chapter 4, Section 4.1.3). In addition, it is also often a highly visible process, at least in terms of oral communication and can consequently be a relatively face-threatening undertaking that may require a particularly strong and stable sense of self. This suggests, therefore, that there is perhaps a particularly heightened need to understand more fully how self-concept functions specifically in the FLL domain.

2.1.4 Self-Concept in the Foreign Languages Domain

Within psychology, the majority of studies looking at the verbal domain have focused on self-constructs in relation to the L1 (see, e.g., Marsh and Yeung 1998; Pajares and Valiante 1997; Pajares et al. 2000; Schunk 2003), and there have been only a limited number of studies that have examined the construct in relation to the FLL domain (Lau et al. 1999; Marsh et al. 2000a, 2001; Yeung and Wong 2004). In one such study, Yeung and Wong (2004) examined the distinctiveness

of the verbal self-concepts for primary and high school teachers in Hong Kong who spoke English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Their findings suggest that a single verbal self-concept construct could not adequately represent multilingual students and they propose distinct self-concepts for each language. Whilst this confirms the multifaceted nature of self-concept, it also suggests that you cannot infer a person's self-concept in one language by examining their self-concept in another language, and thus research needs to be language-specific to account for these differing distinct self-concepts for each language.

Focusing on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner self-concept, Lau et al. (1999) in their work in Hong Kong with university-level students show that the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) can be adequately represented by a single, global EFL learner self-concept construct. Although they find that students can and do discriminate between the four skills, they conclude that, "the inter-correlations between the four factors are strong enough to be accounted for by a single global higher-order factor" (ibid: 6) suggesting the appropriacy of a separate domain for EFL. However, Lau et al.'s work was carried out using a fixed-item questionnaire adapted from Marsh's Academic Self-Description Questionnaire (ASDQ) in which school subjects were replaced by skill area items. The questionnaire focused on the "traditional" four skills, namely speaking, writing, listening and reading, without allowing for any other aspects of foreign language learning to be considered separately, e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and the items used were expressed in rather broad, general, holistic terms. As advanced learners are likely to have rather complex, highly developed self-concepts (Harter 1999a), it is possible that such other aspects or "skills" involved in foreign language learning could have been included in order to capture a fuller, more detailed picture of the learners' domain-specific self-concepts at that level. Therefore, whilst Lau et al.'s study is important in establishing the possible and indeed likely, existence of a distinct EFL self-concept, given the methodological approach employed, it does not fully account for all potential subcomponents of such a self-concept, nor does it allow for the possible existence of distinct lower order self-concepts, such as "EFL writer self-concept" or "EFL speaker self-concept", especially amongst high-level learners.

Given the limited number of studies examining L2 self-concept specifically, it is necessary to also consider the findings and implications of studies into other related constructs, in order to learn more about the characteristics of self-concept within the FLL domain and to consider possible research methodologies. Clearly, a comprehensive overview of all possible related and relevant studies is impossible and, therefore, those discussed below represent a subjective selection as appropriate for the focus and approach underlying this book.

One broad area of research that is of relevance to self-concept work concerns studies investigating learner beliefs, given that self-concept represents a learner's self beliefs. The term "learner beliefs" is occasionally used interchangeably with the term "metacognitive knowledge" (Wenden 1998: 436), although Wenden stresses that these ought to be differentiated as "beliefs are distinct from metacognitive knowledge in that they are value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously" (ibid). As with self-related constructs, beliefs are also notoriously difficult to define,

can be found under a multitude of terms and are closely related to and overlap with other constructs such as metacognitive knowledge, assumptions, perceptions, attitudes and knowledge (cf. Barcelos 2003).

Amongst others, Wenden (1998: 517) has highlighted the importance of learner beliefs in guiding how learners “interpret their experiences and how they behave”. White (1999: 443) explains that learners’ belief systems “help them to adapt to new environments, to define what is expected of them and to act in accordance with those understandings”. Indeed, it would seem that nowadays the critical role assigned to learners’ beliefs systems in their language learning processes is beyond dispute, and there is an extensive volume of work to attest to the importance currently assigned to beliefs in SLA (see, e.g., Amuzie and Winke 2009; Benson and Lor 1999; Cotterall 1999; Horwitz 1999; Kalaja and Barcelos 2003; Kern 1995; Mori 1999; Rifkin 2000; Sakui and Gaies 1999; White 1999). In the studies to date, there have been two main focuses: the first tends to place an emphasis on establishing the types of beliefs that learners or teachers hold across various settings and creating lists or taxonomies (see, e.g., Benson and Lor 1999; Cotterall 1995; Horwitz 1988, 1999; Sakui and Gaies 1999) and in other work, the focus is often on the nature of the relationship between beliefs and specific key variables such as strategy use (Yang 1999), motivation (Oxford and Shearin 1994) and learner autonomy (Cotterall 1995). Although a number of belief studies have also included a measure of self-efficacy, for example, indicating a link between this and strategy use (Cotterall 1999) or revealing the dynamic nature of self-efficacy beliefs (Tanaka and Ellis 2003), few have focused explicitly, in depth on learners’ self-beliefs.

Barcelos (2003) illustrates the complexity surrounding definitions of beliefs and shows that how beliefs are understood in theoretical terms affects the way in which they are researched. She categorises studies into three different approaches: the normative, the metacognitive, and the contextual approach. Barcelos argues that, “beliefs do not have a cognitive dimension only, but a social dimension as well, because they are born out of our interactions with others and with our environment” (ibid: 8), and this more dynamic, contextualised understanding of beliefs underlies several recent approaches to work into beliefs (Kalaja and Barcelos 2003) and can be found in recent discussions of relational self-concept (see Chapter 4). Defining beliefs, Barcelos (2003: 26) explains that, “belief systems are not linear or structured, but complex and embedded within sets of beliefs forming a multilayered web of relationships”. Self-concept as a set of beliefs is also best understood as a complex, unbounded system that is closely interrelated with learners’ other beliefs, self-related processes and variables in an intricate “web of relationships”.

A pioneering key contributor to the field of work on beliefs is Horwitz who developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire (Horwitz 1985, 1987), and many studies into beliefs have been based on this (see Horwitz 1999 for a review of BALLI studies and cross-cultural comparison). However, as Woods (2003: 203) points out, the use of questionnaires, such as BALLI, in much of the work investigating beliefs sees beliefs as “discrete, static and finite”. The results tend to lead to taxonomies and lists of relationships between finite items. As Benson and Lor (1999: 460) argue, questionnaire data “tends to give a snapshot of learners’ beliefs”. They go on to suggest that understanding beliefs in

this way may not capture the true complexity of learners' belief systems. In order to reveal more of the contextualised intricate, dynamic nature of learners' beliefs, more qualitatively-orientated studies may be needed to provide richer insights, in particular concerning potential individual and contextual variation. Indeed, Horwitz's (1999) review of BALLI studies, whilst stressing the commonality of many beliefs, also points to the considerable potential for variation across contexts and individuals. She found that "within-culture differences in BALLI responses appear to be at least as striking as the between-group differences" (ibid: 574) and therefore concludes that, whilst there may be potential differences in beliefs across cultures, it is also important to examine the impact of more localised, micro-level language learning contexts on learners' beliefs: a finding which it is important to bear in mind when considering the situated nature of a language learner's self-concept (for a discussion of the impact of the environment on self-concept beliefs, see [Chapter 4](#)).

Another particular study that has implications for self-concept was carried out by Pellegrino (2005). Taking a grounded theory approach to data analysis, she investigated the role of self-representation in language use in a study abroad context with American students of Russian in Russia. Her study focuses in detail on the social construction of self and learners' resultant willingness to communicate in a foreign language. She discusses how when using a foreign language, an individual's ability to present their "true" self is often impeded, leaving the learner at risk of not only being misunderstood linguistically but also misrepresented in terms of their self-image. A range of factors that can affect the learner's construction of self are discussed and these are divided into learner internal factors, such as attitudes and beliefs, and socio-environmental factors, such as the reactions of interlocutors and comparisons with others. Pellegrino also describes a range of strategies employed by learners in order to protect their self-image while interacting in the L2, which in turn allows them to maintain a sense of security and control. She concludes that in order to be fully communicatively competent, a learner needs to be able to present themselves fully and comfortably in the foreign language. Her study highlights the central role that self-concept plays in managing learners' behaviour and willingness to use the foreign language. It also elucidates some of the complexity surrounding the self and its social construction, as well as learners' needs to protect and reduce perceived threats to their established sense of self. In terms of its methodology, it illustrates the value and benefits of a grounded theory approach that ensures that the findings are solidly situated in the actual data and that the emergent theories "are well grounded in the experiences of actual learners and are not preconceived hypotheses tested by the data" (Pellegrino 2005: 152).

Research involving Clément's L2 linguistic self-confidence, which may in part be viewed as a subcomponent of self-concept, has often examined relationships between the construct and a range of other key variables, such as identity (Clément et al. 2001), acculturation processes (Noels et al. 1996), motivation (MacIntyre et al. 2002), attitudes (Rubenfeld et al. 2006) and WTC (MacIntyre et al. 2001; Yashima et al. 2004). In one study by Noels et al. (1996), for example, a relationship is found between L2 linguistic self-confidence and the learners' identity with the cultural group using the language. The authors conclude that, "identity is strongly related

with both patterns of interethnic contact and with self-perceptions of competence in the second language” (ibid: 256). They suggest that feeling more self-confident in using the language helps learners to form a stronger sense of identity with a target community.

The construct is also employed in several studies investigating WTC which MacIntyre et al. (1998: 546), referring to McCroskey and Baer (1985), conceptualise as “the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so”. Given that learners with a higher degree of WTC are more likely to be active participations in their communities of practice, it is evident that developing a WTC in learners is a desirable goal both for inside and outside the classroom, especially in pedagogical approaches that emphasise communicative competency. MacIntyre et al. (1998) propose a hypothetical pyramid model for WTC that incorporates a range of variables in increasing layers of situation-specificity including L2 linguistic self-confidence which the authors consider to be one of the most immediate determinants of a learner’s WTC.

An interesting dimension to more recent studies into WTC (Cao and Philp 2006; Kang 2005) has been a shift in research methodologies, which have moved away from single-point, quantitative studies to more socially situated studies. These tend to collect data from a range of sources and over a period of time and recognise the dynamic and socially situated nature of learners’ self-perceptions (de Saint Léger and Storch 2009). As Macintyre (2007: 572) argues in his discussion of methodologies for WTC research, “qualitative methodologies have the advantage of providing rich descriptions of dynamic process (*sic*) in participants’ own terms”. Clearly, these developments in respect to WTC and the cognitive and affective variables contributing to it are of relevance to discussions of appropriate research methodologies for the self-concept. Whilst the development does not in any way diminish the value and continued relevance of quantitative studies, it does suggest a growing awareness of the rich insights that can be gained from other, more qualitatively-orientated studies to complement and extend understandings of psychological constructs.

Another self construct that has received more attention from applied linguistics researchers than its close relative self-concept is self-efficacy. The majority of studies have focused on its relationship to strategy use (see, e.g., Chamot et al. 1996; Chularut and DeBacker 2004; Graham 2007; Magogwe and Oliver 2007; Purdie and Oliver 1999; Wong 2005; Yang 1999), but it has also been investigated in connection with one or more other variables such as learner achievements (Huang and Chang 1998), anxiety (Ehrman 1996; Mills et al. 2006), attributions (Hsieh and Schallert 2008), autonomous behaviours (Cotterall 1999), goals (McCollum 2003), motivation (Dörnyei and Ottó 1998), and other metacognitive beliefs (Graham 2003). If we accept, as suggested by Bong and Skaalvik (2003), that self-efficacy may be a subcomponent and building brick of self-concept, then findings from these studies can also offer important insights concerning the potentially significant role played by self-concept and the nature of its relationship to other key variables.

Self-efficacy is also employed in a paper by Woodrow (2006) in which she provides a useful and clear differentiation in line with the distinction proposed at the

outset of this chapter between the three main self constructs – self-esteem, self-concept and self-efficacy (ibid: 298). In her study, she carried out a questionnaire survey in Australia with advanced learners who mostly came from Asian countries. In the correlational analysis, she found self-efficacy to be the strongest predictor of oral performance. Woodrow, therefore, proposes an adaptive model of language learning including variables such as motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, goals and strategies. She concludes that the implications of her model for classroom practices are a “need to promote a task-goal orientation, high self-efficacy, low anxiety, and the use of language learning strategies” (ibid: 311).

Considering self-efficacy’s links to strategy use, Mills et al.’s (2007: 422) study with intermediate level learners of French shows that students’ self-efficacy for self-regulation was the most significant predictor of achievement (ibid: 43), and the authors highlight the close relationship between these self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulatory strategy use. In another study investigating the relationship between learners’ beliefs and their strategy use, Yang (1999) found that learners’ self-efficacy beliefs were strongly related to their strategy use and a potentially cyclic relationship between the two was proposed. Magogwe and Oliver’s (2007) study showed that the relationship between strategy use and successful language learning was mediated by self-efficacy beliefs. They also reported a relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and strategy use across all levels of proficiency; although they point out that the factors of age and proficiency appear to combine in complex ways with these factors. Another study on self-efficacy, which also addresses demographic influences, was carried out by Mills et al. (2006) who examined the role of gender in relation to self-efficacy beliefs. Their findings suggest that females may have higher self-efficacy beliefs, at least for listening skills, than their male counterparts. In a longitudinal study examining ideal L2 self-concepts, Henry (2009) also found gender differences. Over time, the girls’ ideal L2 self-concept strengthened and that of boys weakened and, with increased age, the gender gap grew even more pronounced. These studies point to the interaction between demographic factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, proficiency level and self-beliefs and show the need for work involving self constructs to attend to and be aware of the role of demographic factors (an aspect which will be discussed more fully in [Chapter 4](#)).

The relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety is explored in a study by Mills et al. (2006). Their findings in respect to reading self-efficacy suggest that learners with low reading self-efficacy may experience feelings of anxiety, which may in turn also negatively influence their sense of self-efficacy. They suggest that educators should focus on strategies to enhance learners’ self-efficacy and thereby eliminate the need for anxiety-reducing strategies. This parallels work by Pellegrino (2005) in which she found that anxiety was caused by low self-concept or dissonance in self-presentation. She also proposes that educators should focus on promoting a learner’s sense of self to reduce anxiety, rather than on addressing the anxiety itself.

A range of studies in SLA also refer to or include self-esteem (see, e.g., Bolitho et al. 2003; Cohen and Norst 1989; De Andres 1999; Oxford and Nyikos 1989; Schmid 2007; Young 1999), although it is rarely the explicit focus of the studies (for exceptions see Rubio 2007) but is rather often simply used as an umbrella term

to refer to any self-related beliefs or emotions. Understandings of the self-esteem construct are discussed in a review paper by Ávila (2007) who examines the literature on self-esteem and shows how it can be related to key factors in the language learning process. He illustrates how “the quality of our L2 learning will be related to the way we feel whilst involved in the process and to our concept of ourselves” (ibid: 82) and concludes that, “self-esteem has a direct and significant impact on other factors such as motivation, learning anxiety, learner autonomy and information processing”: a finding which once again highlights the central role of the self in connecting a range of learner variables and behaviours.

Considering work on metacognition, the focus of most studies has again tended to be on the relationship between metacognitive knowledge, including person-knowledge, and strategy use, in particular self-directed and self-regulating behaviours (Victori 1999; Wenden 1998). One important issue raised in metacognition research concerns the claim that an individual’s metacognitive knowledge may not be accurate (Victori and Lockart 1995). This is equally important to bear in mind for self-concept studies as learners may hold accurate but also inaccurate self-beliefs which can thus help or hinder their approaches to learning. The importance of possessing accurate self-knowledge is emphasised in a theoretical paper by Pintrich (2002: 222) in which he explains that, “self-knowledge can be either an important facilitator or a constraint. Students who know their own strengths and weaknesses can adjust their own cognition and thinking to be more adaptive to diverse tasks and, thus, facilitate learning”. As Dunning et al. (2004: 85) stress, accurate self-assessment is valuable at all levels of education as it can help students to “make more effective decisions about where to apply their learning efforts” and thereby allow students “to become more autonomous agents in their education”.

Another area of research with implications for self-concept is concerned with identity. There have been two main approaches to this construct. Building on motivation studies carried out in a Canadian ESL setting by Lambert and Gardner, one branch led largely by Noels, Clément and their associates focuses on the relationships between identity and certain psychological factors, primarily L2 linguistic self-confidence, using quantitative methodologies (see, e.g., Clément et al. 2001; Labrie and Clément 1986; Noels and Clément 1996; Rubenfeld et al. 2006). Another approach also situated primarily in ESL contexts pioneered by Norton (2000) has highlighted the connection between learners and their contexts and considers identity as a site of struggle for power and acceptance into a particular community of practice. Norton’s work emphasises the potential for an individual to have multiple identities, and much of her research has employed qualitative methodologies such as situated, longitudinal case studies. An in-depth, situated, qualitative case study approach was taken, for example, by Morita (2004), in which she investigated how learners negotiated their participation and membership in an L2 classroom community. Exploring learners’ socialisation experiences, data were generated that focused on how particular learners negotiated and constructed their identities in a specific classroom community. She examined the extent to which learners were able to exercise their personal agency and also the role of significant others, such as peers and professionals, in identity construction. Her study emphasises the importance of

situated studies that maintain the learner voice and are able to reveal the complex, dynamic nature of learners' multiple identities.

In recent years there has been a notable growth in studies, such as Morita's, which take a socio-constructivist view of identity that emphasises the role of social contexts, discourses and relationships (see, e.g., Block 2007; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009; Ivanič and Camps 2001; Pavlenko 2003; Pellegrino 2005; Solé 2007; van Lier 2007). Building on such understandings of identity, Kanno and Norton (2003) suggest that learners can imagine connections with communities that lie beyond their "real", local and immediate settings in both spatial and temporal terms and refer to these as "imagined communities". They suggest that learners can engage in constructing identities in possible, imagined worlds, and their "investment" in this can be a key driving force connected with their motivations and behaviours. The concept of "investment" was introduced in earlier work by Norton (Norton Pierce 1995; Norton 2000) to extend understandings of motivation to explain the experiences of the learners in her study. She distinguishes between the motivation to learn the language and the learner's investment in the process of learning the language. As she explains, "if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (Norton 2000: 10). She stresses that a learner's investment in a language is not a fixed trait but may be "complex, contradictory and in a state of flux" (ibid: 11). Together these studies in the field of identity have been important in extending understandings of learners' relationships with contexts, real and imagined, and the connections between multiple identities and different kinds of motivations.

Indeed, the role of self-concept and identity has become the focus of much work in the area of motivation in SLA. Current motivation research is undergoing a radical shift away from traditional SLA approaches to motivation, which often focused on a specific target group of language users, in particular, social psychological approaches including the integrative concept (Gardner 1985), which may be more relevant in ESL contexts. Attention has now turned towards the internal domain of self and identity (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009). These are viewed by many as being more appropriate concepts to drive motivation than integration, particularly in the current increasingly globalised world (Dörnyei 2009) and given growing understandings of World Englishes and pluralistic identities (Coetzee-Van Rooy 2006), considering the role played by contemporary concepts such as "international posture" (Yashima 2002; Yashima et al. 2004), as well as the potential absence for some learners of a motive towards any specific target group of language users (Mercer 2009a).

The key drive in this recent change of focus stems largely from recent contributions by Dörnyei who has proposed a new model for understanding L2 motivation entitled "the L2 Motivational Self System" (Dörnyei 2005). The central premise of the model is based on work from psychology by Higgins (1987, 1996, 1998) and utilises two possible self guides, firstly, an "ideal self" which refers to "the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess" (Dörnyei 2005: 101), and secondly, an "ought self" which refers to "the attributes that one believes one ought to

possess” (ibid.). These self-guides are considered in domain-specific terms, namely as an “ideal L2 self” and an “ought L2 self”. The ideal self is considered to have a promotion focus and the ought self a prevention focus (Dörnyei 2005; Higgins 1998).

From a self-discrepancy theory perspective (Higgins 1987), these self guides function so that a person is motivated “to reach a condition where their self-concept matches their personally relevant self-guides” (Dörnyei 2005: 101). In other words, an individual is motivated to reduce the perceived discrepancy between their actual, current self-concept and their “ideal” and/or “ought” self guide. Although this theory is only in its initial stages in SLA, it has already created a considerable amount of interest and research (see, e.g., Csizér and Dörnyei 2005a, b; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009; Ryan 2006) and is already well-known in mainstream psychology research (see, e.g., Carver et al. 1999; Higgins 1998; Strauman 1996).

In Csizér and Kormos’ (2009: 109–110) conclusion to their study of the L2 self system of motivation in the Hungarian educational context, the authors claim that, “our research underlines the importance of self-concept in affecting motivated behaviour and shows that self-regulated behaviour is hardly possible unless students have a positive image of themselves as users of another language”. Alongside the existent work from psychology, it thus seems apparent that the self plays a key role in motivated behaviour; however, care needs to be taken when incorporating the self construct from psychology into SLA studies. As Macintyre et al. (2009: 54) caution, “the multitude of overlapping concepts in the literature on the self is more confusing than integrativeness ever could be”, and researchers need to be able to distinguish between the self constructs as they intend them to be used. In studies involving this new approach to L2 motivation, which admittedly is in its infancy in SLA, there is a need for conceptual clarity. Research to date appears to be investigating the L2 self system of motivation based on two slightly different, albeit related, self constructs, either a learner’s L2 self-concept, which is the type of construct used in many psychology-based studies, or a learner’s L2 identity in relation to a specific community of users. Whilst it is likely that both constructs have the potential to offer great insights in respect to language learning motivation, it is also important that constructs are not used interchangeably but are defined unambiguously to ensure the findings are properly understood by fellow researchers and educators.

A particular welcome development in motivation research in SLA, which also has implications for self-concept studies, is the growing openness to qualitative approaches. Motivation research has been dominated by quantitative methodologies based mostly on large-scale psychometric tests, as has also been the case in much self-concept research. In an attempt to move away from such “depersonalised” approaches, Ushioda (2009) has proposed a view of motivation which she terms “a person-in-context relational view”. Such a view focuses on learners as “real persons” embedded in a complex system of social relations and contexts (ibid: 220) and suggests the value of research methodologies that are designed to capture some of this dynamic complexity. As Ushioda (forthcoming) explains, “if our pedagogical

Table 2.1 An overview of the key implications of research for self-concept

Construct	Examples of selected studies (Listed alphabetically)	Key implications for self-concept
Learner beliefs	Barcelos (2003); Cotterall (1999); Horwitz (1999); Wenden (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Role of beliefs in guiding behaviour and how experiences are interpreted ■ Beliefs affected by micro- and macro-level contexts ■ Research methodologies reflect differing theoretical conceptions ■ Development of more dynamic, contextualised understandings of beliefs – move away from discrete item questionnaires to socially situated studies
Self-concept	Csizér and Dörnyei (2005a, b); Dörnyei (2005); Henry (2009); Lau et al. (1999); Ushioda (2009); Yeung and Wong (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Each language requires a separate domain and one FL self-concept cannot be implied from another language ■ Influenced by demographic factors ■ Key role in L2 self motivation model ■ Limits of questionnaire data for capturing complexity ■ Calls for socially situated qualitative studies – “person-in-context relational views”
Identity	Kanno and Norton (2003); Morita (2004); Noels et al. (1996); Norton (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Role in choice and construction of identities ■ Development of socio-constructivist inspired approaches that focus on contexts – real and imagined ■ Use of qualitative methodologies – especially case studies for contextualised depth, detail and dynamic complexity
L2 linguistic self-confidence	de Saint Léger and Storch (2009); MacIntyre et al. (1998); Noels et al. (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Links to motivation, identity and WTC ■ Recent shift to socially situated studies examining dynamic complexity of interrelations
Self-efficacy	Magogwe and Oliver (2007); Mills et al. (2006); Yang (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Links to strategy use, anxiety, attributions, autonomy ■ Influenced by demographic factors
Metacognition	Victori and Lockart (1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Self-beliefs can be accurate or inaccurate – importance of accuracy for effective self-directed behaviour
Self	Pellegrino (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Role in managing learner’s behaviour ■ Learner’s need to protect their self-image ■ Internal and external factors affecting construction of self ■ Value of Grounded Theory approach to data analysis

concern is to engage the motivation of particular (rather than generalised) learners, then we need a theoretical perspective that addresses its uniquely personal and contextually grounded nature”.

To conclude, this section has reported on the findings from a range of relevant studies in the disciplines of psychology and SLA. It has attempted to show the implications of these studies for self-concept in terms of its characteristics and inter-relations in the FLL domain and also appropriate research methodologies. Due to provisions of space and the selective subjectivity dictated by the focus and approach underlying this particular study, it has only been possible to consider a selection of the most relevant studies; however, there are many equally important studies in these areas that are not included but which researchers interested in self-concept will also perhaps wish to refer to.

As can be seen from the summary table above (Table 2.1), the main implications of this overview of the literature are, firstly, the significant role assigned to self-concept in language learning, given its close connection directly and indirectly with a range of other influential variables and, secondly, the noticeable shift across research into many related psychological variables towards more qualitatively-orientated approaches that prioritise socially-situated, complex and dynamic understandings of constructs.

2.1.5 Summary

In this chapter, self-concept has been defined as an internal psychological construct involving an individual’s self-perceptions of competence and related self-evaluations in a specific domain. It has been shown how it is related to but can be differentiated from other related self constructs. The chapter has attempted to provide an overview of the current knowledge base in respect to the L2 self-concept as far as that is feasible given differing understandings of self terms. It has described psychology-based theoretical models of self-concept and has indicated where a FLL self-concept would be situated. Key studies that specifically focus on related self constructs in the FLL domain were examined, and the implications of these for an understanding of self-concept were considered, in terms of the nature and characteristics of the construct as well as potential research methodologies. It has been shown how research methodologies towards psychological constructs, such as self-concept, have become increasingly open towards contextually-grounded, in-depth qualitative studies of “real” learners living complex, holistic lives, such as the approach underlying the study reported on in this book. It has been suggested that such studies could usefully extend and complement the valuable insights already gained from the quantitative studies that have tended to dominate work in this area to date.

The next chapter hopes to build upon and expand this knowledge base about self-concept by describing findings from the qualitative, grounded theory research study outlined in [Chapter 1](#) in respect to the structural and organisational nature of self-concept in the FLL domain.

Chapter 3

Understanding Self-Concept in the FLL Context

3.1 Introduction

As explained in the previous chapter, the current dominant model for self-concept has been developed by Marsh and Shavelson (1985)¹ and shows self-concept to be a hierarchical, multifaceted construct. Although the model does not display an EFL self-concept explicitly, it implies where such a self-concept might lie within the hierarchy of the model, namely subsumed under “verbal academic self-concept” in the facet entitled “foreign language self-concept”. In this chapter, I will present an analysis of data that explores the theoretical nature of the EFL self-concept and suggests how and in what ways, other self-concepts may be connected to the EFL self-concept. I will then consider to what extent the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model appears to adequately account for the data in this study and whether there may be grounds for attempting to offer an alternative understanding of the construct.

In seeking to clarify and explain the theoretical nature of the EFL self-concept, I have chosen to focus on the data from the case study for two main reasons. Firstly, the data from the case study were particularly rich and detailed and thus ideally suited to revealing complex relationships between multiple self-concepts and contextual influences. Secondly, it is hoped that it will be easier for the reader to envisage how the EFL self-concept construct may theoretically be conceived in all its complexity by focusing more holistically, in depth on one single individual for illustrative purposes. However, extremely useful and valuable data were also generated in respect to the theoretical nature of self-concept in the FLL domain from the other data sources, in particular concerning inter- and intra-learner variation. The chapter will therefore also include short sections on additional related issues which complement and extend the insights gained from the case study data.

¹I will normally refer just to the original Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model in my analysis, given that it serves as the dominant, key model in the field and forms the fundamental basis for the revised, elaborated version of the model in Marsh et al. (1988). However, if a particular aspect of the latter is relevant to the findings, this will be referred to as well.

3.1.1 Understanding Joana's Context

Before examining Joana's EFL and related self-concepts, it is necessary to partially describe her situation and background, in order to help to understand her particular context. As outlined in [Chapter 1](#), the data generated for this part of the study were elicited from a 2-year, in-depth, longitudinal case study involving a single, female, German native-speaking participant, who will be referred to using her chosen pseudonym, Joana. In October 2004, at the outset of this study, she was 20 years old and was commencing her second year of studies at a university in southern Austria. She was studying two languages, English as her major and Italian as her minor subject, with the aim of becoming a teacher. Her mother is also a secondary school English teacher but has never taught Joana personally. At the outset of the study, Joana already had quite a high level of English, having received the equivalent of a grade "A" in both her school-leaving exam and first-year language course at university. In addition, Joana had also spent 7 weeks as an au-pair in the USA in the year prior to commencing this study. Based on school-leaving levels of proficiency and on my assessment of her as a teacher, I would judge her English at the outset to have been high B2, low C1 according to the European Common Framework of Reference,² i.e., an independent/proficient user, also characterised in the Council of European nomenclature as having vantage/effective operational proficiency. In more traditional terminology, she would be classed as being at upper-intermediate/advanced level.

During the 2 year research period, we met for a total of 21 interviews and she also wrote 3 written narratives. The interviews were designed to be relatively open-ended and unrestricted, in order to allow the assumed complexity of Joana's self-beliefs to emerge and to enable a more, contextualised view of her FL self-concepts. As we progressed, Joana began to determine the specific topics and themes we discussed and she chose to talk about more general self-beliefs, as well as beliefs related to Latin, her mother tongue (L1), other subjects and noticeably her overall academic self-concept. In referring to her experiences and self-beliefs in such an open, unrestricted way, it was possible to gain a rich, holistic view of her as a FL learner from her own perspective. For these reasons, the data are exceptionally useful at revealing the complex ways in which her various self-concepts appear to interrelate and are contextually influenced.

As explained more fully in [Chapter 1](#), the analysis will focus on the EFL domain but will explore related FL domains as well. Although the data refer to many domains and self-concepts covering a broad spectrum of areas, e.g., French, Latin, maths, physical and personality, I will concentrate on six key domains, which appear to be connected most directly to her EFL self-concept and are most useful for illuminating the theoretical nature of the construct in the FL domain. Furthermore, focusing on a restricted number of domains ensures that the description and

²See: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf (p. 24). Accessed 21 May 2010.

discussion of the data remains manageable and a comprehensible overview is feasible. The six key domains in Joana's self-concept network addressed in this chapter are:

- *Academic self-concept*
- *General languages self-concept*
- *Mother tongue (L1) self-concept*
- *Foreign languages self-concept*
- *English as a foreign language (EFL) self-concept*
- *Italian as a foreign language (IFL) self-concept*

Each of these domains and its related self-concept will be examined in turn, explaining how it appears to connect with Joana's other self-concepts, considering in particular its relevance for her self-beliefs as a learner of English as a foreign language.

Finally, given its centrality to the analysis which follows, it might be helpful at this point to clarify the difference between domain-specific beliefs and the related self-concept. A domain reflects a particular field or area. It may mean a subject area but it can also refer to a type of skill, as its level of specificity may vary. In the data, there is evidence of beliefs expressed about a specific domain, such as, for example, beliefs about the domain of foreign language learning but there is not necessarily any expression of self-beliefs within this same domain; in other words, there may not be an explicitly expressed foreign languages self-concept. Therefore, a distinction is made throughout between beliefs that indicate the conceptualisation of a domain, such as a set of beliefs about a domain, and domain-specific self-concept beliefs, which are a set of self-beliefs expressed about a specific domain.

The expression of domain-specific beliefs suggests at least the perception of that domain as a separate category and thus also implies the potential for a related self-concept in that domain, even if such a self-concept is not explicitly expressed in these data. Therefore, in order to provide a comprehensive overview, I also explore both the extent to which Joana appears to possess sets of beliefs in specific domains, as well as any explicit expression of a related self-concept in such a domain, when this is relevant for a fuller understanding of her EFL self-concept.

3.1.2 Joana's Academic Self-Concept

In order to attempt to discover where Joana's EFL self-concept fits into her overall self-concept network, it is first of all necessary to examine the other self-concepts she describes and which she perceives as relevant to her EFL self-concept. Taking the model suggested by Marsh and Shavelson (1985) as a starting point, I will begin by exploring Joana's "academic self-concept" beliefs, which are located at the apex of the hierarchy in their self-concept model. It is hoped that by beginning with this more general domain, it may also help the reader to gain an overall impression of Joana as a learner and her experiences and beliefs about her general academic ability.

As already mentioned, as the first year of data generation progressed, Joana increasingly determined the content of the interviews, and the focus shifted from the emphasis I attempted to place on her English language learning to notes that she had made each week that referred to all the courses she took at university. The content of the interviews thus also included many references to courses and subjects that were not directly related to her English language learning, such as her cultural studies or pedagogy courses and notably her Italian language courses.

In the data, Joana displays strong evidence of self-beliefs relating to a general academic domain. What is of interest is how she calls upon these beliefs in relation to her foreign language learning. In fact, she often talks about her general learning skills, preferences, etc. and compares her language skills to skills in other non-language courses at university. This suggests the possibility that beliefs may be shared across domains.

An example of such shared beliefs across domains is when Joana talks about her memorisation ability. She talks first about her ability to learn by heart generally, such as for exams, then she relates this belief about herself to her experiences in one of the foreign languages she is learning. It is evident in the data excerpt that follows how she applies the same self-belief to learning a foreign language and not only in relation to her general academic self-concept:

Yeah, for example, when I compare myself or when I hear that somebody studies three thousand pages by heart and I feel like I'm really dumb because I can't do it, I can't study by heart, I can't even study a few pages by heart, I can't do it, I just can't memorize it that well and I can't memorize word by word, so when I'm studying for Latin, for example, I have to really study it in the first place like yesterday and today I did a revision and just repeated it because I wouldn't know it on Monday anymore. (J#6: 665–673)

On occasion, Joana even appears to equate a good memory with being intelligent:

J³ I think if I compare myself to her and she is really, she is almost, she is really intelligent, she is really, really clever and she is probably more able to learn or is a more efficient learner than I am.

S And why?

J Because she, I think she can pick up everything like that, she doesn't have to repeat it, she stores it right away. There are people that can do that, they just hear something in the lesson or in the course and they just know it and she is one of these people so she is really, really intelligent, she doesn't have to do a lot for getting good grades. (J#6: 1078–1090)

Specifically, these data indicate that Joana associates having a good memory and, as she puts it, “being able to store words”, with successful language learning. In combining this belief about foreign language learning with her general self-belief that she has a poor memory, it becomes clear how in Joana's belief system, these two areas overlap and influence each other, in particular in respect to her foreign languages self-concepts.

Another belief that stems from the general academic self-concept domain but which Joana perceives as being relevant in order to explain an experience with her written English, is her perception of herself in relation to note-taking and her

³J = Joana; S = Sarah (Researcher). For an explanation of referencing conventions used throughout this book, see Appendix F.

perceived ability to select relevant details. She nearly fails a written English exam, and based on the feedback given by the teacher, this is how she describes the result:

I just had a few, I didn't have any like grammar or vocabulary mistakes, I just had style mistakes, I just couldn't deal with that letter that well because I didn't know that I shouldn't give so many details, and we didn't really do a lot of exercises and I didn't have time to really, I don't know, work them out, to work them out, to work that out beforehand, so I thought I'd go there and I won't have any problems because I know all these phrases and I can do it but I didn't know, okay, I shouldn't give so many details that was the first point. I gave far too many details, for example, and things like that. (J#6: 964–974)

In the same session, she talks repeatedly about the problems she has with note-taking in lectures and sticking to relevant content:

- J I really realised that, she (*a friend*)⁴ is the more efficiently working, somehow she cuts it down to the most important . . .
- S The essentials.
- J The essentials. She knows how to do that and sometimes I find it hard and I realised that when I'm taking notes, so sometimes I have to force myself to really take notes, notes, don't write an essay, take notes. (J#6: 1255–1262)

She goes on to explain that she has always had problems with note-taking:

You've been doing that for years and if you grow up like that and go to school and do it always like that, I have like biology folders of things, they were, you know, huge, they were massive like even when I was thirteen or twelve, and I was writing everything down like almost whole sentences, I cut down on writing whole sentences. (J#6: 1301–1306)

Joana also mentions this self-belief concerning her problems with note-taking at other points in the data, implying that this particular self-belief also exists outside the boundaries of this specific context, e.g.:

. . . sometimes I tend to write too much if I'm sort of trying to take notes, I tend to write too much and I tend to sort of have a whole bunch of things which aren't important (J#3: 143–146)

She concludes that these two matters, her problem with note-taking from reading and in lectures and the difficulties she had adhering to relevant content in the written English exam, are related. Again this illustrates how Joana uses beliefs and experiences from other domains to explain and understand her current EFL self-concept. Thus, although her EFL and academic self-concepts appear to be distinct and separate, for Joana they are also related, and she refers to beliefs across domains in instances and specific contexts when she feels it is relevant.

Another particular shared self-belief that is present both in her general academic self-concept, as well as in various other domains, concerns her self-belief that she is a “communicative” (e.g., J#5: 1405) and “sociable” (e.g., J#24: 781) person. This self-belief could be considered as stemming from the domain of “personality”, but Joana expresses it in some form in virtually every domain and self-concept she refers to, and it seems to be central to her overall sense of self.

⁴‘Friend’ added for clarity.

For example, in relation to her general academic self-concept, Joana uses her belief about herself as being sociable to explain her general approach to preparing for exams, which she often does together with a peer, e.g.:

- J . . . I know with Clara, for example, we studied for grammar, for the grammar exam and for phonetics and phonology and we did a very, very good job and we could, you know, help each other a lot.
 S Excellent.
 J I knew things she didn't know and the other way round so we could really help . . . It was like peer work a bit, something like that and we had both all our papers and all our things and we compare it.
 S Oh, that's great.
 J That was good. (J#22: 617–631)

Specifically in the domain of language learning, Joana's self-concept of herself as a communicative person appears to affect her approach to language learning and her perceived needs as a language learner, both in terms of what she finds motivating and also which strategies she prefers to use, such as the social strategy of working with a peer:

I need that personal link by people I like, you know, people I like. I am not that type of student that reads books, goes to university, studies at home, you know, in their room and just doesn't need any other feedback and just you know, is very focused on this. I couldn't study without having personal links because I think because my parents looked after me a lot and listened to me, I am a very sociable person through my parents because they learnt me, taught me when I was little that personal relationships, interpersonal relationships are very important and that's always been very important to me. (J#24: 775–784)

In fact, the importance of social contact for her when learning a language is a central theme throughout all the data. The data show that this particular self-concept belief is also linked to her own approach to language learning. After talking extensively about the importance of being able to use her English out of class through her social contact with an English speaking *Stammtisch*⁵ and with her friends, she concludes:

I find it hard to talk in Italian because I've nobody to talk to and there is no Italian *Stammtisch* and so all the sort of social part, it's lacking the social part so . . . I have no sort of friends, Italian friends I could talk to. (J#1: 30–34)

Indeed, this absence of the social aspect in her Italian studies is a recurrent theme throughout the data and she compares this to her approach to learning English. For the moment, it is clear that this general self-belief about her personality as being sociable is important for Joana in many domains: it seems to be a strong underlying belief that occurs in her academic self-concept, her foreign languages self-concept and each individual FL self-concept. Its presence in several different domains suggests that it may represent a "core" self-belief for Joana (Harter 2006) and be a central defining self-belief for her.

Another example of a self-belief that connects two domains, including her general academic self-concept, is her belief that if she studies for a long period of time

⁵An informal weekly gathering in a pub where only English is spoken and a mixture of native and non-native speakers attend.

she needs to take a break, in order to do some sport or movement of some kind as she considers herself “an active person” (e.g., J#5: 697). This general academic self-belief clearly appears to be related to her self-beliefs in the physical domain and is also relevant for her within other domains too, as can be seen in the following data extract:

Oh, that’s for me very important because I’m, I’m like my dad and my dad, I mean he has built a house, he is an active person and I think I am a little bit like him, I need activity, I think I’m not a person who can stay in all the time in just studying, studying, studying. Other people might be able to do this because they are probably calmer inside or something is different but I am more the active person and it really helps a lot, I feel like great compared to before. (J#6: 541–548)

Indeed, her self-belief about being sporty and active can also be detected in her beliefs in the specific language domains, especially about how she needs to approach language learning. She often explains that she prefers to merely use the language and “be active” with the language, as opposed to sitting and studying or reading the language:

A bookworm, yeah that’s it, a bookworm. I’m just not that type of person, I’m much too physical or active, I’m like my dad who likes to do something and I, it’s still at university, I do a lot, then there was the Latin course, I think I just need exercise even if I go out or something, it doesn’t matter. Or if I talk with people in English, that’s still exercise. That’s actively taking part in something but sitting down and reading, I can’t do that or I can not, I don’t know I’m just not a regular reader, that’s just not me. (J#13: 785–793)

On the whole, Joana appears in general to have a high academic self-concept which is often reflected in statements referring back to past experiences. This highlights the role played by past experiences and the learner’s interpretation of these events in forming their current self-concept (cf. Bong and Skaalvik 2003; Marsh 1986a, 1990c. See also Chapter 4, Section 4.1.4.2):

I used to be good at school and I’m just used to being good which is also something like a habit, so you’re used to being good and you’re not used to having any failure (J#4: 1177–1180)

As a result of her high academic self-concept and previous successes, she has come to expect success in all academic domains and finds it difficult to deal with perceived failure or poor performance. It can thus be seen how she transfers her expectations from the schooling context to the university context:

Okay, I am not very good at coping with bad grades because I’m really bad at that because I’m not really used to getting bad grades and I really hate it because at school I rarely got bad grades . . . (J#6: 727–729)

However, an exception is mathematics, which is a subject domain she isolates as being different to other subjects in her academic self-concept domain. It is possible that, in order to protect her overall academic self-concept, she makes mathematics an exception and “isolates” her experiences in this domain, a strategy known as “compartmentalisation” (Showers 1992):

. . . sometimes, or it happened to me a few times in my career and I had to deal with mathematics, for example, so I knew beforehand how it feels like to fail or to you know just . . . (J#6: 730–733)

Interestingly, on several occasions, Joana explains how she feels the subjects of mathematics and Latin are similar:

I'm catching up on Latin gradually so I've been training every day, almost every day.
(...) It's like mathematics, it's really a matter of training, it's a matter of exercise. (J#11: 151–156)

Choosing to compare subjects in this way is suggestive of a perceived basis for comparison, namely the common domain of academic self-concept, even though she is able to make a distinction between the two subjects as separate domains. Nevertheless, she perceives a similarity between the two subject domains that may not otherwise have been anticipated but which this open form of data collection allowed to emerge. In Joana's case, it is interesting to note that she has also chosen to compare mathematics and Latin, which are the only two subjects that she has had problems or experiences of failure with, despite the seemingly different nature of these two domains. She may possibly have made such a comparison in order to explain her difficulties with Latin, which as a language would usually be a domain she would perceive herself as being good at, given her positive foreign languages self-concept, as will be seen later in this chapter (see Section 3.1.6). Thus, her underlying motive for such a comparison could be in order to protect her positive foreign languages self-concept. The perceived similarity for Joana of these subjects may also stem from her need to work more consciously, repeatedly and with more effort in these domains. This suggests the importance of understanding any perceived similarities between domains from each individual learner's perspective. It implies the likelihood of individual variation in learner self-concept networks and their interrelations, as learners may make unanticipated connections between domains, depending on an individual's own perceptions of the nature of the domains and potentially driven by different self-protection or self-enhancement motives.

Thus, in overall terms, it can be seen that Joana not only possesses beliefs about the academic domain but she also explicitly expresses a self-concept in the academic domain. As Joana is studying languages at university level, it was expected that there would be overlap and relevance from the academic domain for her FLL self-concepts, as this is the primary domain and current setting for her language learning experiences. When discussing herself as a language learner, Joana refers to her academic self-concept, as well as her self-concept in other domains, such as her physical or personality domains, in ways and in respect to contexts relevant from her own perspective. Certain self-beliefs from the personality and physical domains, such as "sociable" and "active", are linked by Joana to her general academic self-concept, as well as to her English as a foreign language (EFL) or Italian as a foreign language (IFL) self-concepts. These common shared beliefs seem to be central to her sense of self and may function differently to other self-beliefs. It has been proposed that the "centrality" of a self-belief to one's self-concept network may affect the nature and relative stability of the self-belief concerned (cf. Markus and Wurf 1987; Mercer 2009b) and as such, these "core" beliefs may function differently to other self-beliefs and may be less susceptible to fluctuation and variation across contexts (see Chapter 4).

Potentially, these findings suggest that Joana does not appear to subsume her foreign language self-concepts neatly under her general academic self-concept, as would be suggested by a hierarchical model. Rather, whilst it is extremely difficult to detect hard and fast structural relationships between the self-concept domains in Joana's detailed data, the analysis of this domain suggests complicated patterns of interconnections between her academic self-concept and her individual foreign language self-concepts. She appears to move between the different self-concepts and shares self-beliefs across domains in more complex, less hierarchical ways, depending on how she perceives the different domains to be related or relevant for each other in a specific context.

3.1.2.1 Academic Self-Concept in the Other Data Sources

In the other data sources, many of the elements emerging from Joana's data were confirmed, such as the existence of an academic self-concept which learners connected to their EFL self-concept in unique, complex ways. Individuals were seen to vary in terms of the various aspects of their academic self-concept that they perceived as being relevant to their specific language self-concept, thus implying the potential for individual variation in the specific type of connections made. This suggests that any theoretical model needs to acknowledge and adequately convey the potential for inter-learner variation. The other data were most valuable, however, in revealing contextual variation.

In the written narratives, for example, all instances except one in which learners explicitly made a comparison across academic subjects were found at the beginning of the narratives, when learners were describing themselves in the past, usually in relation to their experiences at school. It is possible that cross-subject comparisons and expressions of a general academic self-concept were perceived by the participants to be more relevant when discussing the school context and less so in the university setting. In the latter, learners study a narrower, more specialised range of related subjects and hence, a more general level of academic self-beliefs may no longer be of immediate significance as it is replaced by more focused, domain-specific self-concepts. This suggests variation in learners' reported self-concepts, depending on the perceived relevance for the individual in a particular context, in this case concerning the respective stage in the learning process.

It is interesting to note that in the context of the autobiography data, no explicit references to a general academic self-concept are made at all. One possible reason for this is that the participants in the autobiographies were students in the final part of their studies who have already spent some years specialising in foreign language learning at university level. In contrast, the participants in the narrative descriptive data, as well as Joana, were at the start of their studies and, as such, took part in courses focusing on the transition to university and the study skills necessary for this new learning context. It is believed (see, e.g., Harter 1999a, 2006; Jacobs et al. 2002; Marsh and Ayotte 2003) that the older you become and the more experience you gain in a specific domain, the more stable your self-concept in that particular domain becomes and the more domain-specific and integrated all other descriptions

of the self become. This could explain the absence in the autobiography data of the more overarching general academic self-concept, which may be less relevant for the learners at this, already rather specialised, stage of their studies.

These other data therefore seem to indicate that learners refer to certain self-concepts more in respect to specific periods of their development, or in certain particular contexts, and this raises questions about possible contextual variation and the dynamic nature of self-concept structure and inter-connections. These data seem to refute suggestions that self-concept is a static construct and rather indicate the potential for the content and saliency of various self-concepts to vary depending on the context and perceived relevance for an individual.

3.1.3 Joana's General Languages Self-Concept

Continuing the analysis by descending Marsh and Shavelson's (1985) hierarchical model in terms of increasing specificity, the next relevant self-concept one would reach would be the "verbal academic self-concept". In Marsh et al.'s (1988) theoretical elaboration of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model, the authors suggest this facet would primarily subsume language-based skills, such as the mother tongue (usually represented by English) and foreign language skills, as well as subjects such as history and geography. Usually the emphasis in researching this verbal academic domain has been almost exclusively on mother tongue (L1) ability, with little research examining any other separate facets of this domain. In this study, I have chosen to refer to this level of self-concept as a "general languages self-concept" for two reasons: firstly, in order to emphasise the focus in this study on a common general languages domain that unifies beliefs about both foreign languages and mother tongue self-concepts and secondly, in order to reflect the absence in this research setting of other supposed language-based subjects suggested by the model, such as history and geography.

The existence of a general languages domain is implied in the data through the way Joana expresses beliefs about language skills in general and in the way in which she compares her L1 (German) skills and her foreign languages skills, especially in specific contexts:

Yeah, probably. At the beginning, I thought it's a bit hard because there is so many, like, little words you've never heard about. Like special words and then I think, oh my god, my English is really bad, then I think, oh no, I don't know all these words but there might be, you know, there are words in German as well you've never heard about. (J#9: 554–557)

Generally, Joana seems to make a clear link between her mother tongue ability and interest in German and her decision to study foreign languages. Indeed, she does not even think it is necessary to expand on this or explain the perceived connection, as it seems to be self-evident for her, as the data extract below shows:

I like German, I liked German very much, so I thought okay to go for two (*foreign*)⁶ languages is sensible (J#4: 1220–1221)

⁶(*Foreign*) inserted for clarity.

Another interesting aspect of Joana's overall general languages self-concept is that she not only defines herself as a "languages person" but also in terms of who she feels she is not, namely, a "mathematics person". Indeed, throughout the data she explains that she is not a mathematics person but more the creative language type (see, e.g., in interviews #1, 5, 6, 11, 17, 22). Human beings frequently define themselves not only by who they feel they are but also by who they feel they are not (cf. Woodward 1997). The dichotomous distinction Joana makes between languages and mathematics may stem in part from the popular belief that the two domains are in some way in opposition to each other, as reflected in the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model. It is clear that Joana uses her mathematics self-concept to define and reinforce her current self-concept as a general languages person, as well as her self-concepts at the specific language level:

But ahm, I don't know I used to love German, I used to love writing essays in German and that probably influenced my attitude towards languages because I always used to be really . . . not, I didn't . . . I used to be bad at maths, really bad and I really used to hate it . . . (J#1: 229–232)

In Joana's case, this dichotomy between maths and languages is strengthened by her experiences, in which she reports having had difficulties with mathematics but not with foreign languages, or her mother tongue.

Nevertheless, despite having shown that Joana appears to hold beliefs about a general languages domain, she does not express the related self-concept very often and it does not appear to be very strongly developed in her data. Joana rather tends to describe herself in terms of the specific individual languages, rather than in terms of a general, common languages ability. A possible reason for this in Joana's case could be the difficulties she faced in another foreign language she studied at school, namely French. Having negative experiences in this one aspect of the overall domain could possibly weaken a strong general languages self-concept and thus her willingness to see herself in those terms:

I thought of actually acquiring then a third foreign language and I thought of French although I never really, really loved it at school (J#15: 676–678)

In terms of general languages experiences, Joana also encountered problems with her Italian at the beginning of her studies. She explains that if she had not been forced to continue studying Italian by her parents, she would have given it up:

I might have changed my mind if they had let me to change my mind, but my parents are pretty much like, okay, if you start something and even if it's one semester and even if you just you know get a little bit of an insight of how it is like to study that subject and how you feel like, if you're comfortable in that institute, they wouldn't even let me change it. (J#4: 1430–1437)

She explains it in the following way:

. . . in Italian it was kind of a struggle, so it put me off, it de-motivated me and, yeah, I just totally, totally lost the motivation to learn the language and it was always a struggle to learn grammar or to study vocabulary (J#24: 69–72)

These experiences may be possible reasons why the general languages self-concept is not especially predominant or strong in Joana's case. A further possible explanation could be that, this particular, more global domain is better established in her self-concept network and, as such, not expressed consciously or explicitly, given the advanced level of her studies as well as her age. As an individual gets older and improves in ability within a specific domain, they are likely to gain more complex, developed self-concepts within the domain (Epstein 1991; Hattie 1992; both cited in Harter 2006). In Joana's case, it may be that she has developed more differentiated, specific foreign language self-concepts, thus making a more global general languages self-concept less pertinent and less immediately relevant, as it is replaced by her individual specific foreign language self-concepts.

To conclude, throughout the interviews, Joana does not appear to have a strongly expressed general languages self-concept, although she frequently stresses that she is not a mathematics person, explaining repeatedly that she is the perceived opposite of this, namely a more languages-orientated person. Despite the seeming absence of this self-concept in her data, she often makes a link between her mother tongue ability and her foreign languages abilities, implying the presence of a perceived general languages domain and therefore potential for such a self-concept.

3.1.3.1 General Languages Self-Concept in the Other Data Sources

In the other data sources, there are also many instances in which learners imply the existence of a general languages domain through some kind of comparison with their mother tongue (L1) when describing themselves as foreign language learners. This form of cross-language comparison supports the suggestion that learners are able to conceive of a common domain that theoretically unites both their foreign languages and their mother tongue:

I am very interested in foreign languages in general so I seized every opportunity I got to learn a foreign language. I started learning English at the age of eight. Furthermore I had Latin classes for six years, French classes for four years and Italian classes for 2 years. But from all the languages I have learned so far I like English best. Sometimes I like it even better than my mother tongue, German, because some things can be expressed more easily by using the English language. (N#6: 4–11)

I've always liked writing, in German as well as in English (N#46: 13–14)

However, some learners also refer directly to a general languages domain:

Language has always played a very important role in my life because I've had a passion for talking (which is probably one of my most characteristic qualities)... This can, so I think, basically be traced to the fact that everyone in my family is quite talk-active and communicative. The ability to express oneself appropriately eloquently was considered to be a value; reading, discussing and listening to stories were part of my daily life. (N#64: 3–10)

An interesting instance of a reference to the general languages domain can be found in the autobiography data:

Starting to speak German in my parents' point of view seemed nerve-racking as I used to point at every object and thing I saw in order to learn its term. Hence, I considered all

these terms as too difficult and therefore creatively created my own language . . . After this creative language phase I got used to reading books and a bookworm was born . . . When I entered school I had my first experiences with a foreign language, namely English (A#1: 5–10)

In this example, the learner begins her autobiography by explaining how she creatively invented words. She then refers to the next stage in her development as a language learner, which involved her love of books and reading in her mother tongue. Finally, she explicitly refers to the period of transition when she encountered her first foreign language. After this point her narrative continues by focusing exclusively on foreign languages and does not return to any mention of her L1. Her extract clearly shows her perceived stages in her development, involving invented language, her L1 and then her foreign languages. It seems as if this learner refers to all of these language-related domains in order to provide coherence to the story of her development as a foreign language learner. This again suggests that these different language-related domains may be perceived as relevant at different stages in an individual's development as a language learner and indicates the potential influence of the context on a person's self-concepts.

It is interesting to note that this learner and one other in the autobiography data (A#17) seem to possess a general languages domain that need not involve the L1 specifically but rather languages as an overall concept, involving aspects of language use such as word play:

Ever since I can remember, languages have held a special fascination for me. As a preschooler I often employed myself in developing secret languages which were so 'secret' that I actually could not even understand them myself. (A#17: 3–6)

The data from these two learners suggest that it would perhaps also be worth investigating learners' conceptions of language as a construct, to try to better understand how or in what ways learners may consider certain subjects or experiences as being relevant to their foreign language learning experiences and related self-concepts.

Apart from these examples, there are very few other explicit expressions of a self-concept in the general languages domain, although there are instances of learners holding shared beliefs common to both L1 and L2 languages:

My greatest flaw is probably that I am not sure of myself, and find it very difficult to speak up, both in German as well as in English. (N#43: 13–14)

However, most of the learners seem to make a clear distinction between their mother tongue (L1) self-concepts and their individual foreign language self-concepts, which confirms findings by Marsh and Yeung (2001) about the need for a separation within the verbal academic domain of L1 and L2 self-concepts. In other words, although learners may compare their abilities across the languages, which would be suggestive of a common domain on which to base such comparisons, they seem to hold differential, distinct self-beliefs about each language. Thus, the data seem to indicate the existence of a general languages domain in which mother tongue and foreign language(s) are ordered together; however, expressions of a self-concept in this domain do not appear in these data explicitly. This does not necessarily mean that such a

self-concept does not exist but rather that it is perhaps not seen as being relevant by the learners in this context, or it is possibly no longer relevant for this advanced level of learner for whom more domain-specific self-concepts may be more predominant (cf. Harter 1999a, 2006; Jacobs et al. 2002; Marsh and Ayotte 2003). Further research is therefore needed with different levels of learners to explore the extent to which individuals may possess distinct L1 and L2 self-concepts and whether there may be particular contexts in which learners might choose to refer to a general languages self-concept.

3.1.4 Joana's Mother Tongue (L1) Self-Concept

The next self-concept to be considered in the analysis is that of Joana's mother tongue (L1), which is a key component of the general languages domain, and the one that has most frequently been investigated in self-concept research. On the whole, Joana rarely refers to her mother tongue self-concept except when she occasionally seeks to establish a link between her abilities in German (L1) and in a specific foreign language. Interestingly, however, there are three specific contexts where she notably refers more frequently to her mother tongue self-concept. The first is at the very beginning of the interviews when she describes her development as a language learner, for example:

- S Was it obvious that you were going to study languages or was it a decision really?
 J Hmm, I knew I wanted to do something with languages, I wanted to either be a journalist or to either be some sort of an artist, some sort of an actor, actress but I thought, yeah I really used to like German too. (J#1: 164–170)
 J I don't know I used to love German, I used to love writing essays in German and that probably influenced my attitude towards languages (J#1: 229–232)

The second context in which she mentions her mother tongue self-concept frequently is following her stay in Italy when, for the first time, her attention was focused on her mother tongue as she no longer used it daily but began teaching it as a foreign language. Indeed, the data extracts referring to her mother tongue self-concept in the final interview (#24), which took place after her return from Italy, make up half of all such extracts in the data. All the following are taken from this interview:

- J I actually I lost, I think I mostly lost the link of German. I didn't use German much. (J#24: 171–173)
 J ... actually you know what, I think in Italy English took up the position of German being my first language somehow.
 S Right.
 J And Italian the position of English being, you know, a first second language.
 S Second language.
 J So, because I missed out on speaking German totally. (J#24: 207–218)
 J I can't actually remember the last book I read in German, for example, and I think I spoke to some Italians and they said you have to look after your mother tongue, you know, you have to look after it, you have to brush your own mother tongue up and things and I felt like, oh no, I've missed out on that because I've been studying foreign languages, so I really the last things

or throughout the last two years I've read English and Italian books and I can't remember the last German book I read. I wasn't even interested, I didn't even go to the store because I thought, no it's nicer and it's better for me to buy an English book or an Italian book or to read something in English or Italian. (J#24: 405–409)

The third context in which Joana refers to her mother tongue ability is a very specific one, namely in respect to reading. Examples of this can be seen from the final data extract above and the following one, in which she talks about the fact that she does not read much in her foreign languages and again indicates a comparison between her perceived behaviour in the foreign language, a general self-concept belief and her mother tongue self-concept, when she concludes:

... but I'm not a reader, I've never been a reader, I used to read comics to sort of lift up my German in primary school, really I used to read comics like ... really hundreds of comics because I couldn't read books, I just couldn't do it. (J#1: 759–763)

These findings for her L1 self-concept again seem to suggest that the dominance or relevance of a certain domain-specific self-concept, in this case her mother tongue, is perhaps context-dependent. Thus, in the first specific context considered, Joana's L1 self-concept was possibly significant for her when other foreign language domains were not yet developed and, hence, in relation to other subjects, it was the natural comparator for her current FL self-concepts. In the second context, following her stay abroad, when her relationship to the language appears to have changed, Joana seems to have activated her beliefs in this domain more and this self-concept therefore seems to have greater significance and be more salient at that point. In the third context, reading may be a specific language skill domain that Joana feels is relevant and somehow similar across the different languages domains.

3.1.4.1 Mother Tongue (L1) Self-Concept in the Other Data Sources

In the other data, there are very few instances in which the L1 domain is mentioned and hardly any explicit expression of the self-concept. However, in the autobiography data, many of the texts begin with learners mentioning their L1 abilities in the context of their early language-related experiences, such as learning to speak in their mother tongue or in a primary or kindergarten setting, e.g.:

In order to describe my "career" as a language learner sufficiently I have to venture far back as my early childhood. Of course, first of all there was my mother tongue, German to be learned, or much rather acquired. (A#12: 3–6)

I believe that my language learning history started at the time I started to read books. We did not have a television at home and therefore I read about 100 books a year. I think that this greatly influenced my interest in as well as my ability for languages. (A#24: 9–12)

References to the L1 domain tend not to appear in the autobiography data after the context of this early age. As suggested in Joana's data, it seems that this domain is considered as relevant for the period of time when there was no other language present in the learners' lives. As soon as the learners began to have contact with other languages, the focus of the autobiographies changes and the learners refer only to a foreign languages self-concept or specific foreign language self-concepts. Once

again, this finding suggests that the relevance and saliency of a particular domain for an individual can vary depending on context.

An additional instance in which the L1 domain is mentioned across all data sources is when several learners use comparative L1 ability as a future goal for the level they would like to attain in their L2 (cf. Dörnyei 2005, 2009). The expression of goals in terms of becoming “perfect” (e.g., N#2: 5) or like a “native-speaker” (e.g., N#50: 19) or to be able to use a foreign language like one’s “mother tongue” (e.g., N#14: 41) appear in much of the data:

My greatest wish is to speak English in the same way as my mother tongue one day. (N#25: 41–43)

I would also like to get very close to native-like competence in speaking. (I#3: 466–467)

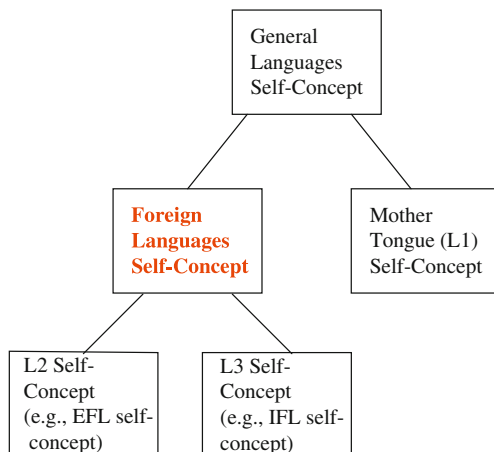
I want to reach a level in speaking English that is as close as possible to that of native speakers (A#13: 40–42)

It is interesting to note that many learners express the goal to become “native speaker like”, at least in respect to their speaking skills, even those who actually do not appear to identify with any particular country or culture. In fact, as these data show, it seems that, when asked, some learners, at least at this advanced level, may wish to take a native-speaker model as their ultimate goal (cf. Kuo 2006, 2007). These findings therefore raise interesting questions about advanced learners’ perspectives on international English models and the role of standard native-speaker norms (cf. Jenkins 2000; Seidlhofer 2003) and about the influence of different models of English on learners’ EFL self-concepts and related future goals.

3.1.5 Joana’s Foreign Languages (FL) Self-Concept

Continuing down the hierarchy of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model, the next proposed self-concept under verbal academic self-concept of relevance in this study would be the foreign languages self-concept, as suggested by Marsh et al. (1988). In their 1988 elaboration of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model, this domain appears to represent a specific single foreign language, as the authors suggest that each facet in the model is intended to represent one academic subject (Marsh et al. 1988: 377). Yet, it is conceivable that a general foreign languages domain and respective self-concept may exist that could incorporate more than one single foreign language, and indeed the hierarchical model implies the potential for such a domain by the nature of its structure which descends in increasing terms of specificity. Yeung and Wong (2004) suggest that within the verbal academic self-concept a distinction should be made between the mother tongue domain and the foreign languages domain, although they also stress differences between each individual foreign language. Thus, it was decided to explore Joana’s data to examine whether a general foreign languages self-concept might exist, one that unites self-beliefs about foreign languages in general but one that is distinct to the general overall languages self-concept, the mother tongue (L1) self-concept and each individual foreign language self-concept (L2 and L3), even though clearly these are likely to

Fig. 3.1 The potential position of a “foreign languages self-concept” in a hierarchical model



be interrelated. Figure 3.1 above shows the potential position in the hierarchical structure of such a self-concept.

On many occasions throughout the data, Joana expresses general beliefs about learning a foreign language (FL), including her beliefs about the characteristics of a “good language learner”. The level of expression of these beliefs indicates that Joana conceives of a common foreign languages domain:

- J I think a good language learner has to be really into the language, he has to really interested, he or she . . . to be not sexist.
- S It's okay.
- J And, ahm, I think if you're really, if you're really into a language then you find it easier to pick up new vocabulary, then you find it easier, if you would write down some new vocabulary, you wouldn't consider it to be work . . . you would just accept it as your own interest and so it doesn't appear to be work, it appears to be sort of fun, yeah. (J#1: 674–686)

Joana also refers to learning preferences and strategies which she employs in both her foreign languages. These tend to reflect her beliefs about foreign language learning in general and also consequently suggest a commonality in terms of a foreign languages learning domain:

I don't use vocabulary books and like booklets where I write down like from texts a vocabulary, I think there is no real use in that because it's just a huge long list of vocabulary, and you won't be able to store such a lot of input from the beginning on, so it's better to sort of try to get it out of the context, or I think it's important to store phrases, whole phrases with certain vocabulary in it and sometimes I know from a text an exact sentence with the use of a . . . of a word partnership or something like that, so you have to sometimes have a whole sentence to store one particular word . . . (J#1: 956–966)

Furthermore, throughout the data, Joana constantly and frequently compares her abilities across all her foreign languages, particularly in terms of her Italian and her English. This tendency to compare her foreign languages is again suggestive of a common domain for foreign languages:

I don't feel like I have really improved in seven weeks in English but in Italian a lot because I'm really concentrating on Italian at the moment, because I really need to concentrate on it and because I think because I know I speak a lot in English in my free time and I just use all, I don't know, I'm just, I'm just using it very often so it's probably different so I probably feel like I need to work harder for Italian and I don't feel like that so much in English (...) I just feel like okay, you have to remind yourself you've had English for I don't know eight, nine, ten years, whatever and you're now a language learner of Italian, and you've had Italian now for four years or something and the three years at school weren't really, you know, it just wasn't really a lot so to say but the basic grammar and a few words, you know, so I thought you have to really realise where you are now compared to my English when I was at school at that time (J#6: 866-882)

Although, as illustrated above, Joana's data display evidence of a common domain for foreign languages in terms of a set of shared beliefs about the learning of all foreign languages, she rarely expresses a general foreign languages self-concept. Given her current ongoing foreign language learning experiences, one might perhaps expect the foreign languages domain and self-concept to be more salient. Yet, as argued earlier, it is possible that this more global domain may have been replaced by more developed, specific separate foreign language self-concepts as a result of her advanced stage of studies and age and also her negative experiences within other FL domains, such as with French, Latin and initially Italian. It must be remembered that the lack of evidence of an explicitly expressed general foreign languages self-concept for Joana need not suggest that such a self-concept does not exist for younger or less advanced learners but does question its existence and potential role for this advanced level of learner, despite the evidence in these data of beliefs in a common foreign languages domain.

3.1.5.1 Foreign Languages (FL) Self-Concept in the Other Data Sources

The existence of a domain for foreign languages was confirmed in all the other data sources by the enormous number of references to learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in general. Additionally, many learners also compared their self-concepts across their foreign languages, which is again perhaps suggestive of a common domain on which to base such comparisons.

However, the other data sources also contained more explicit evidence of a general foreign languages self-concept than in Joana's data, as can be seen from the data extracts below:

I think the most important aspect for what I call my success in language learning was my wish to get almost perfect in each language or at least one of the best students at school. (N#8: 33-35)

When I analyse my time in Israel, I clearly can trace back the origin of my interest in foreign languages and affairs (...) Although I had just come back from a stay abroad and I was determined to learn new languages (A#3: 38-39; 41-43)

- S So, in, in all, in your languages the, the strengths are the same across languages?
 G I think so, yeah. I think communicating is the thing I'm liking . . .
 S Speaking . . .
 G Yeah, speaking I like most – in all languages. (I#4: 730-738)

Interestingly, one of the most common direct expressions of a foreign languages self-concept was by learners who believed they had a natural “gift” (N#33: 63) or “talent” (N#25: 37) for learning foreign languages, e.g.:

I think my strength as a language learner is to be found especially in the corner of “I want to know more and I want to become better”, combined with a certain “talent” for languages (I actually never used to learn languages – they just poured into me) and now with the hunger for learning and knowing more. (N#24: 23–27)

I believe that being able to pick up languages easily is a gift and I am very thankful that I have this talent. (A#9: 77–78)

These instances indicate that perhaps certain specific self-beliefs, such as the belief in a natural talent for foreign languages or beliefs about common language learning strategy preferences, may exist within a more global foreign languages self-concept, whereas other more detailed, differentiated self-descriptions may be situated within learners’ separate, distinct foreign language self-concepts.

In these other data sources, there is considerable evidence of the expression of a foreign languages self-concept. However, learners appear to vary in their ability or perceived need to refer explicitly to a foreign languages self-concept. It is worth considering whether the expression of a foreign languages self-concept may depend on the individual’s particular types of self-beliefs about foreign language learning, or on the learner’s experiences with other foreign languages or whether its relevance may depend on the learner’s level of proficiency. Advanced learners with considerable experience are thus less likely to refer to a general domain and more likely to differentiate between their specific FL self-concepts at a higher degree of specificity.

It will be important for future research to better understand the nature of this particular self-concept, its relationship to separate foreign language self-concepts and its potential relevance for individuals depending possibly on the individual learner’s level, types of beliefs or experiences of the individual learner.

3.1.6 Joana’s Specific Foreign Language Self-Concepts

The most predominant self-concepts evident in Joana’s data are those of herself as a foreign language learner of Italian (her IFL self-concept) and English (her EFL self-concept), as would perhaps be expected from the focus of the data generation context. In order to examine the types of beliefs involved in each distinct FL self-concept and their inter-relations, each one will be examined separately in turn. Although the focus of this analysis is on the EFL self-concept, a detailed analysis and examination of Joana’s IFL self-concept is also valuable in being able to cast further light on the nature and relationships surrounding her EFL self-concept.

3.1.6.1 Joana’s EFL Self-Concept

The data show that Joana possesses a range of self-beliefs that are, in part, unique to the domain of EFL and that are sufficiently complex to merit classification as a

self-concept of their own, quite distinct from a general foreign languages domain and separate, though related, to her beliefs about herself as an IFL learner.

Throughout the data it is noticeable how enthusiastic Joana feels about English as a subject at university and as a language per se. She explains how she feels, saying:

... it's passion. I just absolutely love it. (J#4: 1210–1211)

There are various possible reasons for her love of English. In part, she attributes her attitude towards the language to experiences with teachers she admired at school, which contrasted with previous experiences in her other foreign languages, both Italian and French:

I think English was always my favourite or has always been my favourite language. And I had two great English teachers and I really, really loved them and they had a special way of teaching and they had a special way of motivating their pupils and we did a lot of theatre plays in the gymnasium⁷ and things like that so we had a lot of interaction in the actual classes, so I had a totally different attitude towards English classes than towards Italian classes. (J#1: 40–48)

The most distinct and dominant theme throughout all the data is how Joana associates English with her free-time and social activities, largely it seems because of her many positive out-of-class experiences with the language:

... because I am really used to speaking English in my free time and I do relate free time, you know, there is a relationship between free time and AAC⁸ and English and my studies. It's all like one thing, you know, it all sort of fits together but then there is Italian and then in my free time there is nothing really there. No Italian natives, no friends and so it makes a difference somehow. I do relate Italian, I do like, I do identify Italian with university and English with more than university, so that's a big difference (J#22: 964–972)

Joana appears to strongly associate English with her many informal social contacts with the language and she emphasises how important these are for her feelings about English and herself when using her English generally. These experiences are central for her understanding of who she feels she is in English, her feeling of belonging with people using this language, and her ability to be communicative in the foreign language. In talking about her English and chances to use English she explains:

I'm not, I'm not, I hardly ever watch TV. I like communicating with people and if I have some free time then I go out and meet up with Debbie or Beth or we go to Flynn's⁹ or to the Stammtisch (J#12: 502–505)

I am really used to speaking English in my free time and I do relate free time, you know, there is a relationship between free time and AAC and English and my studies. It's all like one thing, you know, it all sort of fits together (J#22: 964–968)

⁷Gymnasium = Grammar school.

⁸AAC – Anglo-Austrian Circle which organises the weekly informal get together (Stammtisch) where non-native and native speakers meet.

⁹An Irish pub many native speakers regularly visit.

The other driving force behind her passion for the language may also be due to her perceived high level of competence in English and hence feeling of comfort when using the language:

As a learner, so far, as a learner of English, I think, you know, I've always enjoyed being in contact with English. Seeing something in English, makes me, you know, gives me that really nice and warm feeling inside, you know, I am really comfortable because I know that I can cope with almost everything. (J#22: 653–657)

One other possible influence on her EFL self-concept may stem from her English-speaking boyfriends. At the outset of the study, she had a British boyfriend (Roy) and, although the relationship did not last very long, Joana herself felt it had a partial impact on her attitude to English (J#3). Around interview #15, she began a new, more serious and influential relationship with another English-speaking boyfriend (Noah). However, it is worth noting how fixed her belief is concerning her love for English, as throughout all the interviews this aspect does not change and remains consistently strong. Indeed, when Joana was asked whether her boyfriend affects her attitude to English, she responded as follows:

... it wouldn't change my attitude towards English anyway because I absolutely love English and that will never change and even if this guy turns out to be a real asshole tomorrow, I'm not going to, you know, have a different attitude towards English, never, ever. No-one can really sort of, destroy that. (J#16: 1168–1173)

On the whole, Joana sees herself as always having a high-level of motivation for English:

I'm always motivated for English (J#11: 561)

When she gets the chance to go abroad to the US for a year, Joana makes a comment which reveals her belief in the stability of her EFL self-concept:

I mean, I think a lot of, my English has already been affected so it can't be that much more affected as it has already been, you know what I mean? (J#5: 970–972)

Generally, Joana has a very positive self-concept in EFL but she displays differing beliefs about her beliefs in different skill domains within the language. Most notably, she makes a clear distinction between her perceived abilities in spoken and written skills at several points throughout the data:

I always thought, oh my written English, in comparison to my, you know, oral English, there is a huge chasm between the two of them. (J#24: 650–652)

I'm completely sure that my oral and my writing skills, they really vary a lot. (J#13: 778–779)

Joana frequently contrasts her self-concepts in these two skill areas and displays quite different self-beliefs across these domains. Thus, it is possible that there could be a further domain division, namely, spoken and written, within the specific language. For example, there may be self-concepts, such as an “EFL speaking” and an “EFL writing” self-concept, at least for this advanced level of learner. However, whether such self-concepts (e.g., EFL speaking self-concept and EFL writing self-concept) exist and to what extent they might be distinct and separate to the overall

EFL self-concept is unfortunately not fully discernible from the data generated in this study. The data are insufficiently focused on attempting to detect such separate and distinct domains and self-concepts to any degree of complexity. Thus, although Joana's data imply the potential for distinct EFL writing or EFL speaking self-concepts, further research is needed to examine to what extent learners at this advanced level or indeed any other levels possess them as separate to an overall EFL self-concept and what their potential interrelations might be. For the purposes of this study and given these data, these sets of beliefs will be considered as a composite part of the EFL domain, although it appears that students can and do make a distinction between them.

Generally, Joana does not feel especially confident about her written English and this is then also compounded by the fact she nearly fails part of the written English language course at university. She makes a strong link between her writing and reading skills and, as Joana does not perceive herself as being a reader in any language, she sees this as a possible reason for her poor written English:

... now in English it's probably, I should have, I know I would be, I know I would be a lot better in writing if I had read more. I'm just not a reader but I think I can still improve on writing a lot and it has to do a lot of practice and I know that, you know the more often you write and the more often you use things, you know, the easier it gets, although you do not read, although you're not a regular reader. (J#13: 803–809)

... my writing skills are really not the best, you know, and I really need to, it's probably reading and writing. (J#15: 352–354)

Interestingly, Joana does not view herself as a writer in English or in Italian. In fact, she rarely comments on her written Italian as a skill, possibly because of the way in which the Italian courses at university are taught, given their focus on grammar and discrete-item grammatical exercises. However, she does consider herself to be a good writer in her mother tongue:

... because I used to be a really creative writer in German. I loved writing at school and my essays were quite alright I think and I used to love writing essays at school in German. (J#15: 389–391)

The data in respect to writing highlight the way that Joana's self-beliefs about a skill area are not necessarily the same across the languages. In other words, learners may hold distinct self-concepts related to the skill within each separate language, rather than self-concepts for the skill per se across all languages.

Within a particular language skill domain, in this case her written English, there is evidence that Joana is able to perceive of her competence at a very high level of specificity:

J Because there you have, make a really sort of distinct division between formal and informal register which is good because I have huge problems with that, I mean I can divide between 'see you later' and 'yours sincerely', I think I did divide between that ...

S Sure.

J But sometimes ...

S The fine things ...

J Yeah, the fine points, the really, you know, I could not divide these kind of things, like vocabulary, especially verbs or verb classes. That was hard for me . . . (J#5: 1414–1428)

Indeed, she notes the same difficulty with register in her spoken English:

Exactly because usually you do or I do usually, sometimes I really, I have the wrong or I use the wrong register when I'm talking to my friends, to my English friends. (J#6: 1144–1147)

This is also interesting as it appears to show a shared belief across skill areas within a language, namely her self-beliefs concerning register in both her written and spoken English, further highlighting the complexity of self-beliefs and their interrelations across and within domains.

Joana also holds beliefs about her abilities in very specific terms that are unique to a particular skill area:

J But I was like, I never knew how to spell cushion or something like that. So, like, normal words where you think, or attic, or things like that.

S Yeah, yeah.

J Like normal words, you know them but you don't know how to spell them and then you read them and then you really know exactly how to write them. (J#9: 576–584)

I can't pronounce my "th" anymore and that's like when I am tired or something like that, then I start like pronouncing things weirdly, like my "th" (J#19: 437–439)

J Yeah, if something sounds weird to me I have a feel for that. What I also recognised a lot, that I have a problem sometimes with "frequently" and "occasionally", words like that and you have to stick them in between.

S Yeah.

J If you have two parts of a verb you have to stick them in between or put them in between, and I realised whilst reading through an email twice that I didn't, had that mistake twice, I had made it twice.

S Twice, yeah.

J And I corrected it and I, you know, I made myself aware of the fact that you have to be careful because that sometimes, I don't have a feel for that.

S Right.

J I overlook that easily. (J#16: 1220–1240)

It is worth noting here that Joana expresses self-beliefs relating to "skill"¹⁰ areas, such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, both at a more general as well as at a specific level. For example, pronunciation is extremely important for Joana and she is very proud that she is able to speak with a perceived native-like accent:

I don't have to really practise a lot because sometimes you would have to say a word once, twice and I just store it and I know it exactly next time how to pronounce it. (J#5: 1433–1435)

Because she was really impressed and I could really get into my American accent and she said "if you got off the plane in Illinois, nobody would notice that you're not from the mid-west." (J#14: 67–70)

¹⁰Note: the term skill domain is understood in this study as an area of language and includes the "skill" areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

The inclusion of these other “skill” areas and high degree of specificity is important for research into foreign language learner self-concepts, which so far has focused only on more global measurements of the traditional four skills of writing, speaking, listening and reading (Lau et al. 1999). This kind of focus could possibly be too limited and too vague, as learners, at least at this advanced level, appear to hold relatively complex, detailed beliefs about themselves in other skill areas too and not just as subcomponent elements of the traditional four skills.

To summarise, Joana can be seen to possess a strong, distinct and highly developed EFL self-concept. Several of the beliefs that are relevant for describing herself as an EFL learner are shared across other domains, as can be seen in relation to characteristics, such as sociable, communicative and active and appear to be central to her overall sense of self. She sees herself as being highly motivated to learn English and feels comfortable using the language; she believes she has a passion and love for the language per se but does not feel especially attracted to a particular English-speaking country; she feels she is good at English generally but acknowledges that her spoken English is stronger than her written and she is especially proud of her pronunciation in English, which she feels very confident about; she associates informal learning experiences with English, which in her opinion gives her a positive attitude towards English, all of which, in her opinion, helps her to be highly motivated as far as learning the language is concerned.

3.1.6.2 Joana’s IFL Self-Concept

In contrast to her EFL self-concept, Joana’s IFL self-concept is not as positive and it seems as if many of her doubts about her ability and efficacy in Italian stem from a direct comparison with her perceived abilities in English. Put simply she explains:

... my Italian is not as good as my English (J#13: 733)

Interestingly, Joana got the same grade, “A”, in her school leaving exam in both subjects but she clearly has developed quite distinct self-concepts and feelings towards the languages, based on her self-perceptions of ability. This suggests that, whilst achievement and feedback through grades may affect her self-concept formation, there are clearly additional factors which also play a role and indeed may override more objective external factors, as will be seen in [Chapters 5 and 6](#) of this book. In order to account for her perceived lower ability in Italian, throughout the study she repeatedly explains the situation as follows:

... but I’m still you know when I probably like do something, I just feel like okay, you have to remind yourself you’ve had English for, I don’t know, eight, nine, ten years, whatever and you’re now a language learner of Italian, and you’ve had Italian now for four years or something, and the three years at school weren’t really, you know, it just wasn’t really a lot so to say but the basic grammar and a few words, you know, so I thought you have to really realise where you are now compared to my English when I was at school at that time (J#6: 874–882)

The difference in terms of the amount of experience with the language is not just related to past experiences. Joana also frequently explains that, in contrast to her

English, she misses the opportunity to speak and use Italian out of class currently and she blames her lack of motivation and the perceived difficulties she has with the language on this:

... because I am really used to speaking English in my free time and I do relate free time, you know, there is a relationship between free time and AAC and English and my studies. It's all like one thing, you know, it all sort of fits together but then there is Italian and then in my free time there is nothing really there. No Italian natives, no friends and so it makes a difference somehow. I do relate Italian, I do like, I do identify Italian with university and English with more than university, so that's a big difference... (J#22: 964–972)

This essential difference to her English and the lack of any social contact to the language seems to have led Joana to see Italian more as merely a subject at university. Importantly, Italian is also the language she feels she has to work hard for in the conscious study sense. In fact, in virtually every interview she stresses how she “must” work hard for Italian because she needs to, e.g.:

... but in Italian a lot because I'm really concentrating on Italian at the moment, because I really need to concentrate on it (J#6: 867–869)

It is interesting to note how Joana understands motivation throughout the data in relation to her two languages. It is evident that she has always enjoyed English and has very positive associations with the language but it is not a subject she studies for or works at in a conscious study sense. Rather it is a language she uses more in informal contexts and acquires subconsciously in more naturalistic settings. In contrast, Italian is a language she feels less proficient in, has fewer positive associations with and which she claims to lack motivation for. Yet, it is Italian she studies extremely hard for and works for in a conscious, focused way in the university setting, whereas English she seems to neglect, apart from its informal, leisure-time use. As she herself explains:

... because I think because I know I speak a lot in English in my free time and I just use all, I don't know, I'm just, I'm just using it very often so it's probably different so I probably feel like I need to work harder for Italian and I don't feel like that so much in English (J#6: 869–874)

Interestingly, she virtually fails an English exam (grade D)¹¹ and does excellently in an Italian exam (grade A), but her beliefs about her abilities in each language and the respective need to invest conscious time and effort in studying do not change. Her two distinct foreign language self-concepts seem to lead her to take two different approaches to learning the two languages. For Italian, she spends a considerable amount of time consciously studying the language but yet she feels that she does more for English. However, based on what she reports, her work for English does not appear to involve formal study of the language but rather a high number of contact hours with the English language outside of the formal learning context of university, in a range of informal settings.

¹¹Grade “D” is the pass mark. Grade “E” is a fail.

Within the Italian language domain, Joana is also able to distinguish between how she views herself in different language skill areas. The focus she places in Italian is on her grammar which she works hard on and claims to struggle with, as can be seen in the data extract below:

... so my teachers always tell me my Italian pronunciation is excellent, but it's just the grammar part where I'm struggling (J#5: 1436–1438)

Grammar is not mentioned at all in relation to English, except at the specific task level, in terms of particular tenses or prepositions but not as a holistic skill. This could reflect the nature of the courses she attends at university where Italian grammar is taught as a distinct and separate course. Indeed, when talking about her Italian abilities, Joana tends to describe herself in terms of the courses:

I feel really confident in the grammar course, in the spoken course, I don't feel confident. (J#9: 143–144)

This suggests a powerful connection between her IFL self-concept and the specific nature and content of her formal Italian learning classes. This contrasts with her EFL self-concept which she appears able to describe in more abstract terms, detached from the specific teaching/learning context at university. It seems that the content of her respective self-concepts is related to the approaches to and experiences she has in learning the language and the contexts in which she uses the language.

Although Joana expresses very specific beliefs about her abilities in Italian and refers to more than just the four broad traditional skill areas (reading, writing, speaking and listening), she gives far fewer examples of the kind of detailed self-beliefs that she possesses in her EFL self-concept. In fact, at the outset of the study, she never mentions her written ability in Italian and her self-concept concerning other skill areas remains comparably vague. As the study progressed and Joana gained increased competency in Italian, however, she began to offer more detailed self-descriptions in Italian, notably with comments about her spoken and reading abilities, which are the two skill areas that are referred to most frequently across both her foreign languages:

I really have to concentrate very hard to sort of read an Italian text, for example, so I'm fine with like newspaper articles but like short stories which have like twenty pages or something like that I can't read that in one go. It's impossible for me, I just can't do it because I just start losing concentration and then I would read over it and then I wouldn't understand it anymore, if it's a bit more complicated or intricate, you know... (J#18: 133–140)

Related to her consistent and dominant self-belief that she is not particularly good at Italian and needs to work hard at it, Joana decides to spend a semester in Italy:

I thought, okay, my Italian is not as good as my English so... so I am sort of forced to go to Italy, so I'll just go to Italy but I would love to go to an English-speaking country but I can't, I have no real choice because I have to really... (J#1: 132–136)

Following her period of time abroad, Joana returns with a noticeably more developed self-concept in Italian, with stronger and more nuanced beliefs about both herself in Italian and about Italian as a language, e.g.:

In Italian, I feel like being really fiery because the language basically brings that along, you know, temperament and, you know, I gesticulate much more than in German. In German I don't gesticulate at all I think, I don't use gestures, not many at all. In English I do and in Italian it's just, I've picked up everything you can possibly use, you know, like because they have got loads of things, they do things like this and they do things like this and they do things like this, you know. (J#24: 269–277)

J ... you know, the level of Italian has become much better.

S Right.

J So, I'd say, yeah, I do love Italian now, I really adore the language and I really enjoy speaking it, I enjoy using it, I can, you know, I notice that when I text someone or when I write an email I am much quicker and there is no problem of thinking about vocabulary, it's just there. You know, and that's what happened to my English a long time ago I think, so, well, I was just waiting for that last boost of knowing, wow, I can actually speak fluently, I can send an email without looking a hundred words up in the dictionary, you know, that's actually ... (J#24: 289–303)

The data reveal some of the changes that took place in Joana's Italian self-concept across the 2 year research period suggesting a dynamic character to the construct (cf. Mercer 2009b. See also Chapter 4, Section 4.1.1). As Joana's perceived ability improves, her IFL self-concept seems to become much more detailed and complex. Whereas her EFL self-concept is quite complex and highly developed at many levels and relatively stable across the 2 year period, her IFL self-concept appears less detailed, simpler in content at the outset but more notably dynamic as it ultimately grows in depth and complexity. These changes in her IFL self-concept seem to confirm a suggestion proposed by Harter (1999a) that as a learner increases in proficiency, their self-concept in the respective domain also develops in terms of complexity. This finding implies that theoretical models would, firstly, need to account for possible variation in the nature and content of one's self-concept depending on one's proficiency level and, secondly, need to be able display its dynamic potential.

To conclude, it can be seen that Joana's IFL and EFL self-concepts appear to be distinct and to develop differently from each other. Although these two self-concepts would theoretically be at the same level of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) hierarchy, it becomes clear that they are quite different in terms of the relative complexity of their content and their degree of stability. It has also been shown that the content of each FL self-concept can differ and appears to reflect Joana's learning contexts in terms of her differing experiences with and approaches to learning each language. Thus, whilst the IFL self-concept has been able to help cast light on certain aspects and relationships surrounding the EFL self-concept in this study, its distinct nature also highlights the need to examine each specific FL self-concept separately.

3.1.6.3 Specific Foreign Language Self-Concepts in the Other Data Sources

All of the data sources provide evidence that the learners make clear distinctions between their different foreign language self-concepts and that, although there may be some similarities or commonalities across their FL self-concepts, there is also

sufficient evidence that indicates they need to be perceived as separate constructs, albeit related:

I have learned four foreign languages and can speak them fluently – some better, some not that good – but I definitely know how to learn a language. (N#27: 30–32)

When I was 14 years old I also learnt French in school, which was very difficult at the beginning and it never became as “easy” as English is. (N#40: 4–6)

Looking back at language learning in school, I have to admit that I did not like foreign languages too much. I was never among the best at foreign languages: Italian, I could not stand, and English I had to study at home a lot with my mother in my first few years at grammar school. (A#3: 25–29)

The analysis of the other data sources suggests three key instances of self-concept variation. Firstly, it appears as if individual learners may vary in the degrees of complexity in the expression of their self-concepts. In the data, the learners generally display quite complex and developed beliefs about themselves in the EFL domain. However, when learners describe themselves in two foreign languages, it is interesting to note that one of the foreign language self-concepts tended to dominate and was usually described in more detail and complexity, not necessarily the EFL self-concept, despite the EFL data generation context: a finding that is comparable to the difference between Joana’s highly complex EFL self-concept and less developed IFL self-concept. These data, therefore, suggest potential variation in the complexity and content of the self-beliefs held by learners across two foreign language self-concepts, in some cases even at the same supposed level of proficiency.

The second issue concerns the potential for contextual variation in terms of the domain-specificity of the self-concept beliefs expressed. In the autobiography data, for example, only a small number of learners make holistic general statements about their level of English, perhaps because these advanced learners take it for granted that they have attained a certain overall level and, as such, they may not consider an overall general statement of EFL self-concept to be necessary:

I really hope to improve in English because unfortunately there is still a lot which has to be improved and to increase my knowledge and awareness in English. (A#10: 100–102)

In February I have been to NY which has also encouraged me to study harder. I found out how poor my English really is. (A#21: 34)

In the interview data, the learners mostly referred to a more global sense of EFL self-concept retrospectively, in relation to their perceived ability at school:

It was my favourite subject at school. Yeah, and I was good at it (I#1: 96–97)

I remember that except for the first few years of English learning in school in Austria I never really had to work for English. It always kind of came to me basically. I was never brilliant or anything but I never really struggled for it (I#11: 785–788)

This suggests the perceived relevance for learners of a more global, less specific self-description in the school context in which English would have been one of many subjects. As learners grow older and become more advanced in a specialised subject, their self-beliefs become more differentiated and complex (Harter 1999a,

2006; Jacobs et al. 2002; Marsh and Ayotte 2003), and thus the specificity and detailed nature of self-descriptions may be dependent on the context in which they are elicited, even retrospectively and possibly on the proficiency level of the learner.

Finally, focusing solely on the EFL self-concept, learners also appear to vary in terms of the complexity of their self-concepts with some learners offering detailed self-descriptions and others remaining more vague and global in their self-descriptions in this domain. Some learners were also able to describe their self-concepts in certain language skill domains in considerable depth but yet remained rather global in their self-descriptions in other skill areas, possibly not even mentioning certain other skill domains. The examples below offer an impression of how this was displayed in the data if one compares the first two with each other and then the second two:

And weaknesses yeah maybe, maybe just the expressions in writing. I think sometimes I have problems there. Linking words, I forget about them all the time and, and people tell me yeah you have to say however and nevertheless and finally. This is a bit boring for my part, but yeah, you have to do it, it's just the way it is . . . (I#4: 716–722)

My weakness is grammar and writing. (I#7: 200)

I feel that not only am I able to recognise lots of different accents of “Aussie-slang” but I can also distinguish between many varieties of English. (A#4: 51–53)

I knew that I was good at speaking English. (A#8: 44–45)

This individual variation in the depth and complexity of self-descriptions across domains may stem from the individuals' ability and self-awareness to describe themselves in particular domains. However, it is possible that some learners may actually have less developed or less complex networks of self-concept than other individuals at the EFL domain level or in terms of intra-learner variation at the skill domain level (see, e.g., Linville 1985, 1987; Rafaeli-Mor et al. 1999). Alternatively, it is possible that the relative complexity of an individual's self-concept may reflect their self-concept certainty (SCC). Campbell (1990) concluded that individual self-concepts may not differ with respect to whether they are more or less positive or negative but in terms of “self-concept certainty” (SCC), which she defines as “the extent to which the contents or self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined” (ibid: 539).

3.1.7 Implications of the Findings for Theoretical Models

Having explored Joana's reported self-concepts related to her EFL self-concept, it is now necessary to compare the overall picture evinced by these data with the dominant existent theoretical model of self-concept proposed by Marsh and Shavelson (1985), with a view to identifying possible lacunae in the model and establishing criteria to be addressed by any alternative theoretical model.

Within educational psychology, the current dominant model of self-concept remains the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model, based on the original model in

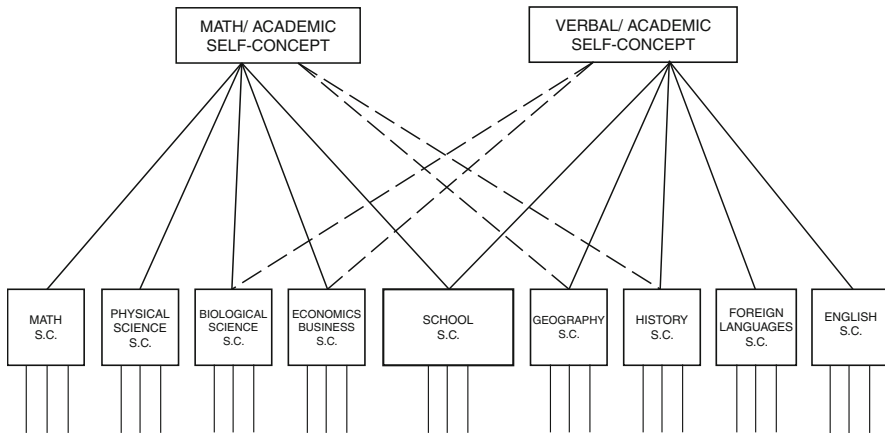


Fig. 3.2 An elaboration of Marsh and Shavelson’s (1985) model (Marsh et al. 1988: 378)¹²

Shavelson et al. (1976). Its structure was confirmed and elaborated upon in theoretical terms by Marsh et al. (1988). It has a hierarchical and multifaceted character, as can be seen in Fig. 3.2 above (reproduced here once again for convenience).

The model illustrates how self-concept is conceived of as having a hierarchical structure, with more global self-concepts subsuming increasingly domain-specific self-concepts. The model also proposes that self-concept is a multifaceted construct with each academic subject domain represented by its own separate self-concept. Indeed, all of the data analysed in this chapter seem to support the idea of a multifaceted self-concept structure by revealing several different self-concepts which are related but yet also distinct and separate. In particular, the data indicate the existence of separate and distinct self-concepts for each foreign language, e.g., different IFL and EFL self-concepts.

When focusing on the analysis of Joana’s data, it becomes clear that her network of different language-related self-concepts is extremely complex and highly inter-related. However, the organisation of the self-concept data does not appear to be appropriately characterised by the hierarchical structure of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model. One self-concept does not seem to be neatly subsumed by another, although there is evidence of shared beliefs to some extent, such as Joana’s core beliefs about herself as an “active”, “sporty” or “communicative” person, which appear in several domains. In overall terms, the data seem instead to portray a complex, interrelated network that seems to be context-dependent and may be moved across and accessed at various points, without necessarily progressing hierarchically, particularly, for example, as in the case of Joana’s L1 self-concept, which is present only in specific contexts. Indeed, the diverse and interconnected manner in which she moves across self-concepts does not suggest anything as rigid or linear as a hierarchy; it rather seems that Joana can move seamlessly across her various

¹²Reproduced with kind permission from the Journal of Educational Psychology.

self-concepts to access various beliefs, when and if she perceives them as relevant to the specific context, interestingly often connecting the most unexpected self-concepts, such as Latin and maths or sports and EFL reading. Further, self-concepts, which theoretically would be at the same level of the hierarchy, IFL and EFL, differed in terms of their relative complexity and the nature and content of self-beliefs involved. There was also little evidence of beliefs from other, broader self-concepts subsuming beliefs from different domains. Rather, as was shown, Joana displayed evidence of a complicated, interconnected network of overlapping and related but yet at times distinct self-beliefs.

Other researchers have also questioned whether self-concepts are hierarchically structured in the minds of individuals (Harter 1986, 1998; Hattie 1992). In particular, other researchers have shown in their analyses that any hierarchical structure for older learners may be weak (see, e.g., Guérin et al. 2003; Hattie and Marsh 1996; Marsh and Shavelson 1985; Marsh and Yeung 1998; Wigfield and Karpathian 1991; Yeung et al. 2000). As the participants in this study were older, advanced learners, it is possible that the findings may only be relevant for this level of proficiency and age of learner. Had the participants been younger or less advanced learners, then the hierarchical model may have been confirmed. Given that the majority of studies into the hierarchical model to date have taken place with school-aged learners, this could also explain the consistent findings confirming the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model and the absence of any alternative model (see, e.g., Marsh 1987; Marsh 1990a, d; Marsh et al. 1988). However, the data in this study clearly question whether a single, monolithic model can be justified and the findings suggest a more differentiated perspective may be more appropriate.

It is admittedly difficult to detect any structural patterns in a mental construct such as self-concept (cf. Kihlstrom 1993) and much depends on the researcher's interpretation of the data. Since, to the best of my knowledge, all the previous studies investigating the theoretical structure of the self-concept have been based on quantitatively-orientated research approaches, it is also possible that the structure of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model may be a product of the research approach taken (Harter 1998). Similarly, I am conscious that the same observation could be made about this study, namely that its qualitative data approach and analysis would tend to produce a model of a complex network-based kind, such as the one that will be presented below. As such, researchers from another paradigm might well disagree with the interpretative nature of the conclusions in this study; nevertheless, these findings strongly suggest that research should consider the possibility that self-concept networks may function in a more complex, dynamic manner than suggested by more quantitative, experimental studies (cf. Mruk 2006). It is thus hoped that this study may provide an alternative perspective on the nature of the construct and ignite debate about combining research approaches, in order to gain a fuller, more comprehensive picture of the construct as it is experienced by "real" learners living "real", complex lives.

Focusing in more detail on Joana's EFL self-concept, the data raised questions about the possible existence of even more domain-specific self-concepts, such as an EFL writing and an EFL speaking self-concept, although there were insufficient data to explore this suggestion more fully. Given Joana's advanced level in English and

her well-developed, relatively complex self-concept in this domain, it is possible that the more developed and advanced a learner is, the more differentiated their self-concept becomes and that, at this level, it may be possible to speak of distinct EFL speaking and EFL writing self-concepts. If so, such a finding would contradict those of Lau et al. (1999), in a study also carried out with students in higher education, where it is claimed that a global English language self-concept can also adequately represent the sub-skills involved. The discrepancy between their findings and those in this study could possibly be explained if the learners in the Hong Kong study were at a less advanced level than those who took part in this study, thus suggesting that it could be the proficiency level of the learners and not their age that may permit independent skill level self-concepts within the EFL domain to emerge. Given the importance accorded to domain-specificity in self-concept research studies, it would therefore seem important for future research to establish to what extent such distinct skill-domain level self-concepts may exist among advanced language learners.

In addition, within the EFL self-concept, Joana's data showed evidence of detailed self-concept beliefs that covered more than the traditional four skill areas (reading, writing, speaking and listening), such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. These other skill areas contained quite complex, differentiated beliefs that could not easily be subsumed under the broader and more vaguely conceptualised headings of the traditional four skills. This suggests that, at this advanced level, research should take into account the possible existence of detailed, specific self-beliefs in other language skill areas, such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, in order to attempt to gain a fuller picture of the self-concepts of advanced, tertiary-level EFL learners.

Finally, another key finding concerns the examples of inter- and intra-learner variation in the reported self-concepts. Firstly, learners appeared to vary in the selection and relative strength and dominance of self-concepts that they reported. It seems as if, for individual learners in certain contexts, particular self-concepts and connections may come to the fore, rather than others: for example, when learners referred to certain self-concepts as being relevant for specific periods of their development, or in certain specific contexts such as contexts when Joana referred to her mother tongue (L1) self-concept. Several developmental researchers suggest that learners' self-concepts may vary, depending on social context and their relationship to the person they are interacting with (see, e.g., Connolly and Konarski 1994; Hart 1988; Harter 1999b; Harter et al. 1997, 1998; Harter and Monsour 1992). It was also seen how the content of Joana's IFL self-concept differed to that of her EFL self-concept and appeared to reflect more closely the nature of her IFL learning context. This could support the suggestion here about the possible context-dependency of the self-concepts reported by the learners in this study. These findings suggest the need for research data generation methods to be sensitive to possible individual variation depending on context, as well as the limitations in the generalisability of any findings, given the contextual variation that may occur.

A further related finding in this study concerns the unexpected connections individual learners made between self-concept domains in ways that could not

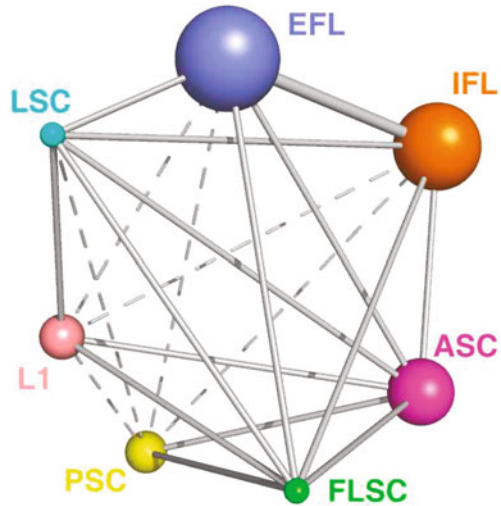
have easily been anticipated by researchers and in ways that were often unique to themselves as individuals. For example, Joana connected beliefs about herself between her sports/physical self-concept and her FL learner self-concepts, as well as self-beliefs about maths and Latin. The other data sets also provided considerable evidence of individual learner variation in the content and relative complexity of the reported self-concepts. In addition, learners also appeared to vary in their ability to self-describe as some learners remained more global and vague in their self-descriptions, whereas others were able to provide extremely specific and detailed self-descriptions, despite learners being at approximately the same level of proficiency. This suggests that, whilst it is important for research to seek theoretical models to describe commonalities and lead to broad insights into the nature of psychological constructs, the potential for individual variation should not be forgotten. Once again, such a perspective argues in favour of a flexible self-concept model that can readily display such individuality.

Therefore, in overall terms, the multifaceted nature of the self-concept model suggested by Marsh and Shavelson (1985) seems to be represented in the data. There is evidence of a general academic self-concept, a mother tongue (L1) self-concept and distinct, specific foreign language self-concepts (IFL and EFL). The data also imply possible separate EFL speaking and writing self-concepts and suggest at least the presence of the domains of general languages and general foreign languages, although explicit expressions of the respective self-concepts were relatively infrequent at this level. However, none of the data suggests a strong hierarchical structure for self-concept. Rather, they imply a complex, interconnected set of relations between various self-concepts which indicate potential for variation, depending on the context and the individual. The data also indicate the dynamic nature of the self-concept network which can grow as self-concepts are added to the existent network, such as when Joana begins to learn Latin, or changes as existent ones develop in complexity with increasing experience and proficiency in the domain, such as Joana's IFL self-concept.

3.1.8 Towards a Model to Describe Joana's Data

As has been shown, the analysis reported on in this chapter raised questions about whether an alternative model might be better able to display the possible theoretical nature of a learner's language-related self-concept network as evinced by the data in this study. Whilst it is not the intention of this study to dismiss or refute the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model, which numerous studies have validated and supported, these data do appear to call into question its usefulness in describing self-concept networks as they are perhaps phenomenologically experienced by individuals in a range of contexts (Harter 1998). It was thus felt that a model was needed that allowed the complex network of a learner's self-concept beliefs and their highly interconnected nature to be apparent. Ideally, any model should also be able to reflect the dynamic varying strengths/dominance of self-concepts, depending on context and the individual. In order to make sense of the complexity of

Fig. 3.3 Network model of Joana's self-concepts¹³



the findings and conceive of a comprehensible model, I will focus on developing a model to describe Joana's data, whilst mindful of the characteristics such a model must incorporate, in order to account for the findings from the other data sources.

In order to convey the interrelatedness of Joana's self-concept network, it was decided to employ a 3D model similar to the kind used to represent a molecular structure (see Fig. 3.3 above). Such a model appealed for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was felt it would be able to show the highly inter-connected nature of the self-concept domains in Joana's data, yet retain their distinct nature. In addition, by making some spheres (representing different self-concepts) larger than others, it would be possible to show how one self-concept may be more complex and more dominant for an individual than another, depending on how the person sees themselves and what values and beliefs are central to them at a particular time or in a particular context. This ability to show individual variation in the model could also be extremely valuable.

Secondly, as some domains have stronger, closer connections with each other, such as the seemingly close link between Joana's IFL and EFL self-concepts, given the frequency with which she compares the two and the degree of shared beliefs, the model is able to display this by using thicker (stronger) connectors/paths between such self-concepts.

¹³The figure was prepared with the kind help of Karl Gruber using the programme PyMOL (www.pymol.org)

Key: EFL = English as a Foreign Language Self-Concept
 IFL = Italian as a Foreign Language Self-Concept
 ASC = Academic Self-Concept
 FLSC = Foreign Languages Self-Concept
 PSC = Physical Self-Concept
 LSC = General Languages Self-Concept
 L1 = Mother Tongue (German) Self-Concept

Furthermore, the three dimensional nature of the model appears to allow other important aspects of the data to be adequately represented. Firstly, the model also seems to be able to show when a belief is shared across domains to varying degrees of importance, such as Joana's self-belief that she is sporty and active. This is part of her physical self-concept but for Joana it is related to her general languages, foreign languages and her academic self-concept – they all appear to be interconnected in relation to this “core” self-belief. Secondly, the model was also appealing as a dynamic structure that can “grow” as a learner develops new self-concepts in new domains, such as Joana learning Latin during the research period and thus developing a new self-concept in this domain which she connected to her existing self-concepts. A dynamic structure could also convey the changes in terms of increased complexity that were seen in Joana's IFL self-concept. Equally, some pathways between self-concepts may change and become weaker or stronger as one develops and indeed new connections may form. However, it should, of course, be remembered that this is only a model to describe this particular part of Joana's self-concept network in this specific context at this particular time. Her self-concepts would theoretically be interconnected ad infinitum with other self-concepts, again an aspect the 3D model can effectively portray.

For relative simplicity, the spheres have been restricted here to five different sizes to display each distinct self-concept. The largest represents the most dominant and complex self-concept in this data context, namely her EFL self-concept. They then decrease in size down to the foreign languages and general languages self-concepts, which were barely present explicitly in her data, although the domains were implicit throughout. The different colours of the spheres are simply for ease of recognition of the distinct nature of her different self-concepts. The pathway thickness has been restricted to three options, although clearly there is potential for more variations. The thickest bar is where the strongest interconnection was evident, namely between her EFL and IFL self-concepts. A solid bar was used for a strong connection between self-concepts and a dotted line if it was particularly weak in the data, or only implied. The order of the spheres was random although the EFL self-concept was placed at the apex simply for ease of recognition; however, the 3D perspective means this model can theoretically be rotated to any position. The model includes the physical self-concept as an example of a seemingly unrelated domain that is still part of her network of beliefs and was also perceived by Joana as being relevant when describing herself as a foreign language learner; others in her data that could have been included but which would have overcomplicated the diagram are personality, French, Latin, mathematics, etc.

At my current stage of thinking, this model seems best able to describe Joana's self-concepts, their individual strengths within the network and the interrelations between them as distinct but connected self-concept sets of beliefs. This model is also able to display how beliefs may be shared across domains and not necessarily in a hierarchy and these common beliefs are represented through the connectedness and pathways. The model does not suggest that the same beliefs cannot appear in all the self-concepts but the interconnections emphasise the shared points of influence and commonality.

The model also seems to have the potential to describe specific self-concept networks for particular individuals in particular contexts, thus displaying potential individual and contextual variation and complexity. For example, one could vary the sphere size, the colours of the spheres could be used in order to show relations, the relative distance of spheres to each other depending on the relationships between self-concepts could be varied, the connectors could be changed in terms of colour and thickness, again to display differing relationships, etc. The model here should serve as an illustrative example of the type of model that could be developed potentially for any individual in any particular context. It is not meant to serve as an abstract generalisable model but rather as a potential way of understanding a “real” individual learner’s self-concepts embedded in their own personal “complex web of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro-contexts” (Ushioda Forthcoming).

Thus, although the fundamental design of the network model appears to be able to capture the essence of the self-concept structure in terms of the non-hierarchical, interrelated nature of the self-concept networks for all of the learners, one single model cannot describe the nature of the self-concepts of all the separate individuals in their unique set of contexts. However, the model proposed has the flexibility inherent in its design to potentially be able to do so. This is because it permits itself to be adapted in terms of specific content, such as the types of self-concepts it contains, their relative strengths and connections to other self-concepts, in order to describe different individuals in specific contexts and thereby to reflect the way that learners may vary as individuals in the actual nature of their own self-concept networks.

In practical terms, the visual format of the model of Joana’s self-concept has certainly helped me to better understand her as an individual, her perceived connections between domains, areas of relevance for her EFL self-concept, as well as the dominant self-concept for her in specific contexts. It is possible that such visual descriptions of an individual’s self-concept network may be useful in practical settings, such as psychology, counselling, or various educational contexts. A modelling device of such a form may be more helpful for practitioners than a monolithic, hierarchically-structured one, as the former seems much better suited to capturing the complexities, preferences, complex relationships and unique nature of an individual’s self-concept network, as it appears to be experienced phenomenologically by individuals in different settings.

3.1.9 Summary

Whilst the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model has been invaluable in furthering our understandings in respect to the self-concept construct, especially in terms of its multifaceted nature, this study has suggested that the language-related self-concepts of learners of the kind focused on in this study are perhaps best seen as configured along the lines of a 3D network-based model as proposed here.

Firstly, it has been shown that the data in this study do not appear to reveal a hierarchical structure in the self-concept networks of the learners in question. Indeed,

their self-concepts seem to be interconnected in complex, often unanticipated ways. There appeared to be no evidence of a hierarchical structure in which more global self-concepts subsumed more domain-specific self-concepts and self-concepts at the same theoretical level were found to differ considerably in nature and content. A “molecular”, three-dimensional network structure was therefore adopted as a basic feature of the model that was seen to underlie these data, in order to display the interconnectedness and complexity of the self-concepts they described.

Secondly, such a representation was designed to allow self-concept structure to “grow” as new connections or new self-concepts are developed, or as specific existent self-concepts develop in increasing complexity, as an individual gains experience and ability (Burns 1982).

Thirdly, the model was created to be able to accommodate inter- and intra-learner variation, since, as the data have indicated, learners in this study make unique, unexpected connections in terms of structuring their self-concept networks, or vary in the relative dominance accorded to a particular self-concept, and also incorporate any other context-dependent changes and variation in the self-concept network. Indeed, in terms of displaying individual variation and complex networks, the potential offered by this model is sizeable, as the spheres, pathways and connections can all be varied in size and colour.

Having now considered the theoretical nature and structure of the self-concepts in the FL domain, it is now important to attempt to better understand how an individual comes to hold their domain-specific self-concepts. The next chapter moves on to explore the literature to examine to what extent the self-concept is believed to be dynamic and what factors and frames of reference can influence a person’s self-concept across domains and contexts.

Chapter 4

How Do Learners Form Their Self-Concepts?

4.1 Introduction

As explained in [Chapter 2](#), there appear to be various benefits to be gained from having a positive but realistic self-concept. It is, therefore, important, particularly for educators, to understand which factors may influence self-concept development and how individuals may come to hold their domain-specific self-concepts.

Although the focus in this chapter will be on studies investigating self-concept, once again work from other related self constructs will also be examined in instances where it can offer insights relevant to self-concept. This chapter will cover five main areas. Firstly, it is important to understand the ways and extent to which self-concept may be dynamic, as this dictates how and to what degree an individual's self-concept may develop and be open to change. Therefore, the first section outlines the main debates in the literature about the dynamic nature of self-concept. The second section then considers cognitive developmental approaches to self-concept formation, in order to help elucidate the impact of an individual's age and stage of cognitive development on their self-concept. In the third section, the effects on self-concept of other demographic factors, in addition to a person's age, are discussed, such as gender, ethnicity and culture. Assuming that self-concept is, at least in part, dynamic, the fourth section of this chapter examines key frames of reference individuals are believed to use when forming their domain-specific self-concepts. In the final section, the dominant internal/external frame of references model (Marsh 1986a), which is used to help illuminate the process of self-concept formation, is discussed. Together these five areas will provide an overview of key discussions in the literature to help us to understand what factors can affect an individual's self-concept and how this can develop over time and place. Finally, the chapter will conclude by considering open questions about these processes in the FLL domain.

4.1.1 *The Dynamic Self-Concept*

A fundamental issue related to self-concept formation that needs to be clarified concerns the extent to and ways in which the self-concept is dynamic. Although many

studies have concluded that some aspects of the self-concept are dynamic, certain aspects have been found to be more resilient to change. Fundamentally, researchers appear to differ in how they conceive of the different stable and dynamic elements of self-concept and there remains unresolved controversy in the literature about this (see, e.g., Burns 1982; Harter 1998, 1999a; Hattie 1992; Markus and Kunda 1986; Markus and Wurf 1987; Mercer 2009b; Onorato and Turner 2004; Purkey 1988; Shapka and Keating 2005; Young and Mroczek 2003).

Generally, it is considered that more domain-specific self-concepts are less stable (i.e., the lower domains in the hierarchy of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model), whereas more general, broadly-encompassing self-concepts (i.e., those near the apex of the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model) are believed to be less susceptible to change and more fixed (see, e.g., Marsh 1989, 2006; Shavelson and Bolus 1982). Following the growing tendency to investigate self-concept at domain-specific levels, some researchers have recently suggested that different domains of self-concept develop and change in different ways over time (Young and Mroczek 2003) and that self-concept is less stable than originally expected, especially when considered at the domain-specific level (Marsh 1989). Other theorists have explained (Epstein 1991; Hattie 1992. Both cited in Harter 2006: 553) that the higher-order, more global self-beliefs form early in an individual's development and thus often represent more deeply held beliefs and are possibly less open to conscious access, which would necessarily also make the beliefs difficult to alter. Indeed, Harter (1988) suggests that a learners' sense of self becomes more integrated and consistent across a range of domains and contexts over time and with increasing age and thus potentially less susceptible to change as a whole.

Markus and Wurf (1987: 302) in their frequently cited paper on the "dynamic self-concept" explain that the most important difference between different self-concepts is their "centrality or importance". They explain that some beliefs are "core" self-conceptions and others are more "peripheral". The core beliefs are the most "elaborated" beliefs which may be central to an individual's overall sense of self and, in contrast, the peripheral beliefs are less well-developed and less centrally important to the individual's overall sense of self. They perceive the self-concept as being "a continually active, shifting array of self-knowledge" (ibid: 306). They continue that "there is not a fixed or static self but only a current self-concept constructed from one's social experiences" (ibid: 306). They emphasise how such an understanding of what they call a "working self-concept, or the self-concept of the moment" (ibid: 306) also helps researchers to understand the apparently contradictory findings that indicate that the self-concept can be both stable and malleable. They suggest that core aspects of the self-concept may be less open to change because of their central role in defining the self than other more peripheral self-concepts that could be more prone to fluctuation.¹

¹Burns (1982: 10-11) also employs the idea of central, "vital and important" self-concepts and less important, more peripheral self-concept beliefs.

In a qualitative, 2-year longitudinal study, Mercer (2009b) investigated the dynamic nature of the foreign language self-concepts of the case study student, Joana, reported on in this book. The study revealed that certain elements of her FL self-concepts remained stable and did not appear to change over the 2 year period, whereas other aspects were quite dynamic. The stable elements of Joana's self-concepts tended to reflect self-beliefs that were shared across domains and seemed to be central, "core" elements of her self-concept. The more dynamic aspects of her FL self-concepts were those aspects that were more task-specific and often expressed more in terms of actual behaviours. These were aspects of the self, which were less central and more situational in nature, possibly reflecting more "peripheral" and context-dependent aspects of the self-concept which would support Markus and Wurf's (1987) claim that the self-concept can contain both stable and dynamic elements. The degree to which Joana's FL self-concept changed also appeared to depend on its initial degree of complexity and the learner's amount of experience in the domain. At the outset, Joana already had considerable experience in learning English and already possessed a quite developed, complex self-concept in the EFL domain. As such, her EFL self-concept appeared to change very little over the 2 year period. In contrast, Joana had more limited knowledge in and less experience in learning Italian and as such her IFL self-concept was less developed. However, as Joana gained more experience with Italian, her IFL self-concept changed quite noticeably, became generally more positive and also became more complex in terms of its content. One other finding from the study was the presence of more short-term, temporary fluctuations in her reported self-concept, which were often due to affective states such as mood or tiredness – an aspect of the data that could clearly have implications for single-point, self-report data collection tools (cf. Brinthaup and Erwin 1992: 143).

Another perspective on the dynamic nature of the self is offered by Harter et al. (1998) who suggest that self-esteem may vary according to the context in terms of interpersonal relationships. In other words, an individual's self-esteem may be different according to whether they are on their own or with a parent or a friend or a teacher. To explain this situational variance, the authors consider that there may be a "baseline" or "core" sense of self which provides a degree of consistency in the self but also fluctuations around the core which can vary across time and situations. A similar sociological view of self-esteem was suggested by Rosenberg (1986) who, following James' idea of an average feeling of self (1890/1963), proposed the idea that there is a "barometric" self which is more situational in nature and thus more prone to fluctuation, as well as the "baseline" self which remains more stable and consistent across time and settings.

The underlying theoretical framework used to explain such situational variance is based on symbolic interactionist views. Symbolic interactionism is a social constructivist approach to understanding the self which proposes that the self is "primarily a social construction, crafted through the linguistic exchanges (i.e., symbolic interactions) with significant others" (Harter 1999b: 677). The theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism stem from Mead's (1934) theory

of the interrelationship between self and social environment through social interactions. The importance of others in this respect is also reflected in the work of Cooley (1902), another important symbolic interactionist, who proposed the well-known “looking-glass self” which suggests that individuals form their self-concepts based on how they believe others perceive them in a particular social context. Individuals are believed to form their self-concepts to correspond with the feedback and perceived appraisals of others, also known in several contemporary psychology studies as “reflected appraisals” (see, e.g., Bouchev and Harter 2005; Cole et al. 1997; Felson 1985) (see Section 4.1.4.3 below for fuller discussion).

Similarly, Onorato and Turner (2004: 260) explain that the self-concept is best viewed of as a more fluid, situated construct which “is conceived as a context-dependent cognitive representation”. Referring to self-categorisation theory (Turner 1999), which is a process underlying social identity formation, they argue that self-concept “should not be equated with enduring personality structure because the self is not always experienced in terms of personality or individual differences” (ibid: 259). They show that under certain conditions, such as when a particular social identity is salient, the reported self-concept can be much more dynamic and an individual will be influenced more by the salient social identity at that moment in time than their underlying self-schema. An important aspect of their work is their argumentation in favour of the consideration of context in understanding the relative variability of the self-concept and the ways in which self-concept may interact with and be influenced by various social and group identities. For example, they show the importance of considering the situated nature of self-concept within a specific setting, in order to understand how an individual may evaluate their performance, typicality and suitability for a certain role in a particular context or interaction. Their work also highlights the potential for contextual variation in self-concept content, as described in Chapter 3, depending on the saliency of various contextual and situational factors.

Another comparable way of conceiving of the dynamic nature of the self concerns debates within the self-esteem literature that propose differentiating between “state” and “trait” self-esteem (DeHart and Pelham 2007; Heatherton and Polivy 1991; Leary et al. 1995; Mruk 2006). Leary et al (1995: 519) define trait self-esteem as, an “average of self-esteem over situations and time” and state self-esteem as, self-esteem that “inevitably fluctuates as people move about their daily lives”. In a study with learners crossing an educational transition, Silverthorn et al. (2005) examined the relationship between self-perceptions conceived of in terms of state self-perceptions and trait self-perceptions, and achievement. They found a more stable, trait-like self-perception of ability was more closely linked to achievement and emphasise the usefulness of making a state/trait distinction, especially at periods of transition when trait self-perceptions may have a greater role to play. Clearly, there are again parallels to the conceptualisation of a “core” sense of self-esteem that remains relatively stable over time and a more fluid “barometric” sense of self-esteem that fluctuates according to the specific context at a particular moment in time.

Another perspective concerning the dynamic nature of self-esteem is offered by Harter (2006: 553) who concludes that for some people “self-esteem remains quite constant over time and context, whereas for others there is considerable variation”. Recent research has found that there is the potential for individual variation in terms of the relatively dynamic or stable sense of self. It is suggested that some individuals are indeed more prone to short-term fluctuations in self-esteem than others (Kernis et al. 1993). Such individuals may generally also depend more on external social sources of self-esteem and may be more sensitive and preoccupied generally with self-evaluation. Kernis (2003, 2005) has recently characterised this difference in terms of those who have more “fragile” self-esteem (irrespective of whether high or low) and those with more “stable” levels of self-esteem. He suggests that research may need to attend not only to how high or low an individual’s self-esteem is but should also distinguish between whether a person holds a more fragile or stable sense of self. In recent work on depression, researchers have found that self-esteem instability is possibly more important in predicting vulnerability to depression than actual levels of self-esteem (Franck and De Raedt 2007). This research highlights the importance of avoiding oversimplified understandings of self-concept, particularly those that may not capture any individual differences or subtle differences across various dimensions of the construct.

Although a number of the studies considered here have been concerned with self-esteem, given the relative large volume of research for this self-construct in this respect and relative paucity of similar studies for self-concept, the findings also have implications for self-concept. Clearly, there appear to be parallels between the proposed “core” and “working” self-concepts, “barometric” self and “baseline” self, and the “state/trait” self-esteem distinctions. It seems that the self-concept is best conceived of as functioning at two interrelated levels, one of which seems to consist of more stable elements and the other more dynamic elements. Firstly, learners may hold central, “core” self-beliefs about themselves, and it is possible that the relative “centrality” and, in effect, the importance of a self-belief to one’s overall self-concept network may affect the degree to which it is stable. In other words, the more “central” self-beliefs will be more stable than self-beliefs that are more “peripheral” (Harter 2006; Markus and Wurf 1987; Mercer 2009b). A person’s core sense of self is developed slowly over time based on experiences and as a more trait-like sense of self, it provides the individual with a sense of consistency and coherence across time and place. In addition, learners may also hold a “working” or “barometric” self-concept of the moment possibly representing more peripheral aspects of the self-concept. It is possible that it is this dimension of the self-concept which is most likely to fluctuate and be influenced by contextual factors and situational variables.

4.1.2 Developmental Patterns in Self-Concept Formation

Certain influences on the self-concept are beyond the immediate control and influence of any given situation and represent more lasting, long-term changes in

self-concept such as developmental changes. A key researcher in the field of self-development, Susan Harter (1999a, 2006), describes six stages of self-development stretching from early childhood through to late adolescence. Despite the description in terms of distinct stages of development, she stresses that the development of the self is best viewed as a continuous process with each stage building on previous stages in a more fluid ongoing sense. She explains how the content, organisation and accuracy of self-representations vary across these different periods of the lifespan. For example, Harter describes how young children are not able to abstract or generalise and thus, their self-descriptions tend to be tied to actual specific behaviours rather than in terms of more general abstract conceptual categories. Young children are also unable to conceive of ideal or possible self-concepts as being separate from their own actual self-concepts and, at this age, their self-descriptions are often found to be unrealistically positive. At the other end of the developmental spectrum, there are late adolescents and early adults who are closest to the population investigated in this book. According to Harter, their self-beliefs tend to reflect more personal beliefs, moral standards and values that the individuals have internalised and made their own and which are thus often more detached from their original social sources. At this age, they are able to construct higher-order abstractions about the self and thus are able to accommodate seemingly opposing attributes that younger individuals often have more difficulties synthesising. It is generally suggested that with increased life experience, adolescents tend to hold more accurate self-beliefs than younger individuals as they have had more experiences and feedback on which to base their self-concept (Harter 1998, 1999a, 2006). Late adolescents are also more likely to be able to envisage possible selves and use them as future guides. Importantly, this implies that motivational systems based on possible selves such as the “L2 self system of motivation” may not be appropriate for individuals before this stage of development (Dörnyei 2009: 38).

Other researchers, such as Damon and Hart (1988), have also proposed a similar series of stages that individuals go through as they progress from childhood to adulthood. They characterise each stage as having differing types of self-beliefs at the core of the self-concept at that age. For example, in early childhood, they suggest self-knowledge focuses on characteristics such as preferences and aversions, whereas in early adolescence the focus is more on interpersonal characteristics and late adolescence is characterised more by moral beliefs and values.

A key change in self-concept that can occur with cognitive developmental changes is that as people get older, the self-concept is believed to become increasingly multidimensional and more complex (see, e.g., Harter 1999a, 2006; Jacobs et al. 2002; Marsh and Ayotte 2003). Thus, for example, established tools for self-concept research include different domains for different ages, such as the series of Self-Description Questionnaires (SDQ) (Marsh 1990a) which include various domains as deemed appropriate depending on whether the tool is to be used with children, adolescents or young adults. For example, SDQ III, intended for use with adolescents, covers 13 facets of self-concept including emotional stability, spiritual values/religion and peer relations with those of the opposite sex, whereas the SDQ I intended for use with pre-adolescents covers only 8 facets of self-concept including

a global perception of self-concept.² It has also been suggested that these changes in self-concept and its complexity coincide with increasing experience in a domain or a range of domains and thus, may not be directly dependent on age as such but rather on the amount of experience one has in a particular domain (Harter 1998, 1999a, 2006; Yeung et al. 1999).

A more complex view of how individuals' self-concept complexity and multi-dimensional nature may change with age has been suggested by Marsh and Ayotte (2003) who propose the "differential distinctiveness hypothesis". This suggests that as people get older, closely linked areas of self-concept become more integrated with each other and, at the same time, disparate areas of self-concept become increasingly differentiated. Thus, although they also propose that with age the self-concept becomes more multifaceted, they suggest that the extent to which the multifaceted domains of the self-concept become more distinct depends on the particular aspects of self-concept being considered, as certain domains may, in fact, become more integrated with each other if they are already closely related.

A large number of studies concerned with changes in self-concept across stages of development have tended to focus on periods of transition, particularly educational transitions. In a different school setting, a learner's peers, educational context and academic expectations change and so learners find themselves re-evaluating their self-concepts against these new frames of reference, which often leads to changes in their self-concepts (see, e.g., Cantor et al. 1987; Cole et al. 2001; Harter 1999a; Harter et al. 1992; Jackson 2003; Seidman et al. 1994; Silverthorn et al. 2005; Wigfield and Eccles 2000; Wigfield et al. 1991). These transitional changes and the impact on the self may also be compounded in young adolescents going through pubertal change and experiencing additional physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes (Harter 1998). In one of the few papers to examine the effects on self-concept of the transition to university, the period of time affecting a section of the participants in this study, Jackson (2003) finds that students' self-concepts are affected in a variety of ways by this change from a compulsory to non-compulsory educational setting. She suggests some of these changes may be due in part to the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (BFLPE) in which, based on social comparisons, learners in the university setting may now be able to compare themselves to more able students than in their previous peer group (for a more detailed discussion of BFLPE – see below in Section 4.1.5). Notably, she finds that the female students tend to suffer from lower self-concepts following the transition than males (see Section 4.1.3 below for discussion of gender). Indeed, the transition to university may be a particularly psychologically stressful period in respect to learners' self-concepts, as any effects on their self-concept could be compounded by the fact that it usually concerns a subject that is of great personal value to them and in which they previously had a positive self-concept, as the individual has often chosen to specialise in the subject. Harter (1999a) stresses that in order to fully understand the

²http://www.self.ox.ac.uk/Instruments/SDQIII/documents/_1-SDQIII.pdf

<http://www.self.ox.ac.uk/Instruments/documents/SDQI-Chapter1.pdf>. Accessed 21 May 2010.

nature of individual differences in self-related changes across educational contexts, it may be important to consider the relative importance of the domain to an individual, as well as assessing the type and magnitude of changes taking place in a person's self-concept.³ Collectively, these transitional studies highlight the fact that changes in a person's social context and surroundings can strongly affect an individual's self-concept. In addition, as the self-concept appears to be especially susceptible to change and re-evaluation at periods of transition, in particular across schooling contexts, learners, especially in tertiary settings, may need particular psychological support at these periods of time as they reassess their sense of self, possibly in domains of great personal value and importance.

Taken together these developmental studies of self-concept formation draw attention to the variation that can occur across age groups as individuals hold different types and forms of self-concept beliefs according to the degree of abstraction and type of thinking they are capable of depending on their stage of cognitive development. This naturally implies considerable scope for variation in terms of self-concept research findings carried out with different populations at various ages and stages of development. Fundamentally, through adolescence, key changes include the development of an ability to distinguish between different selves in different domains, to be able to abstract self-beliefs to more generalised perceptions, to base one's self-concept gradually more on social comparison, to be increasingly able to reconcile seeming contradictions in one's self-perceptions and to begin to be able to perceive ideal and possible selves (Harter 1999a, 2006). As the research reported on in this book focuses on young adults in post-compulsory education, it must be kept in mind that these findings may be particular to such a population and cannot readily be transferred across populations in terms of age and educational settings.

4.1.3 Demographic Factors Affecting Self-Concept

In addition to age, several studies have investigated the role of other demographic factors on self-beliefs and found that these can also affect the nature and degree of positivity of self-beliefs. In terms of gender, a meta-analysis of research found that males consistently reported higher global self-esteem than females across the lifespan, in particular across late adolescence (Kling et al. 1999). A recent study by Sullivan (2009) found that academic self-concept was "highly gendered" and appeared to vary across academic domains with males having strong self-concepts in maths and sciences and girls in English. Interestingly, she found that

³The role of task or domain importance can also be seen in expectancy-value models of motivation that consider not only an individual's sense of expectancy (often measured in terms of self-efficacy) but also their value of a task (Eccles et al. 1993; Wigfield 1994; Wigfield and Eccles 1992, 2000). James (1890/1963) also stressed that a person's self-esteem is based on their feelings of competence in domains of personal individual value, rather than on general overall feelings of competence (cf. Mruk 2006: 13).

single-sex schooling reduced the gender gap. In their longitudinal study focusing on expectancy beliefs, Jacobs et al. (2002) also found gender differences in self-concept and again these were also most noticeable in specific domains rather than at a global level. Other studies have also suggested the existence of gender differences in self-beliefs and the majority of these stress that gender differences vary across domains, frequently in gender-stereotypical ways, with females often displaying higher self-concept scores in verbal domains and males higher scores in mathematics, appearance and athletics (see, e.g., Bolognini et al. 1996; Eccles et al. 1993; Harter 1999a; Marsh 1989; Marsh and Yeung 1998; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2004; Wilgenbusch and Merrill 1999). It has been shown that these gender differences in levels of self-concept across different domains are greater than can be predicted from differences in achievement (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2004). Thus, researchers have proposed that these differences stem from socialisation processes and differential gender role expectations and stereotypes. Together these socialisation patterns may fail to reinforce positive attitudes, motivation and self-concept for girls in the domain of mathematics and for boys in respect to language skills (*ibid*).

Concerning the effects of race and ethnicity on self-concept, Craven and Marsh (2005) carried out a study with indigenous and non-indigenous Australian secondary school students. They found differences across the self-concepts of both sets of students with the results sometimes showing that the indigenous students have higher self-concepts and in other instances, the non-indigenous students. For example, the indigenous students were found to have significantly lower scores for facets of their academic self-concept, peer relations, honesty and emotional stability but higher scores for art, physical and appearance self-concept as well as general self-esteem. Again, the findings from this study suggest the importance of taking the multifaceted nature of self-concept into account and differentiating between different domains. In their discussion of the findings, they consider that being a member of a certain ethnic group may affect your self-concept formation, possibly in terms of group identity and group norms. Social identity theory (Hogg and Vaughan 2002: 401–407) suggests that people are likely to engage in certain activities and behaviour that concur with the values and beliefs of a group they belong to. The tendency to display more stereotypical patterns of behaviour and beliefs is even more likely if an individual feels a strong identity with that group. Although an individual's personal self-concept can be considered as separate to and conceptually distinct from a person's social identities, which may function at the group/collective level or at the interpersonal/relational level (Brewer and Gardner 1996),⁴ it is clearly also influenced by the stereotypical socialised views of the various groups with which an individual may identify.

A meta-analysis of the literature concerning self-esteem in various American ethnic communities was carried out by Twenge and Crocker (2002). They found that Black Americans tend to have higher global self-esteem than White Americans,

⁴The interesting motivational properties of group identities can be found in work on the “need to belong” (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

whereas White Americans seem to have higher self-esteem than other minority groups such as Hispanics, Asians and American Indians. They examined a variety of theories to explain these findings. As people are known to form their self-views based on other people's views of the self (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934: see below Section 4.1.4.3) and, as the American Black population have been targets of prejudice and racism, it was expected that they would have the lowest levels of self-esteem as a result of having internalised the stigma attached to their social group. However, the authors discuss how it has been suggested that employing the stigma associated with membership of a minority or ethnic group may protect an individual's self-esteem, when members attribute negative experiences to prejudice. Individuals may also overcome group stigma if they choose to value domains highly in which the social group does well or if they decide to compare their social group with other similarly or more disadvantaged groups. Another perspective to explain the findings related to social identity theory proposes that positive racial identity may contribute to high self-esteem if an individual has a positive and central in-group identity. However, they conclude that none of these perspectives can explain the findings as convincingly as a cultural perspective. They explain that because individualism and collectivism are associated with different views of the self and thus value different sets of characteristics and attributes (ibid: 374), scores on measurements of self-esteem may be tapping different understandings and placing emphases that do not apply across all cultures and ethnic groups. They conclude that cultural differences in self-concept and degrees of individualism will affect the likelihood that an individual will either internalise stigma or use the stigma to self-protect and thus the extent to which an individual is able to develop a positive racial identity (ibid: 387). Their findings also show that the relatively high self-esteem of Black Americans is not characteristic of other racial minority groups in America and levels of self-esteem differ across ethnic groups. However, despite discovering considerable differences between the racial groups examined, they caution against making sweeping generalisations across groups, as they stress that this is likely, at best, to be an oversimplification. Rather they suggest a need for research to focus not on which racial group has the higher self-esteem generally but to examine which individuals within each group have the highest or lowest self-esteem and why that might be (ibid: 389).

A related debate in the literature concerns the measurement of self-concept across cultures and whether tests designed in one culture can be transferred successfully to another culture. This concerns potential problems with construct bias, method bias and item bias, as well as with equivalence and also issues related to the translation of items (see, e.g., Abu-Hilal 2005; Marsh et al. 2006; Purdie 2005; van de Vijver and Tanzer 2004). In a meta-analysis of literature examining individualist-collectivist differences on various psychological factors, Oyserman et al. (2002: 32) conclude that cultural frames define the ways in which the self is understood. Although they caution that further research is needed to clarify the nature of any cross-cultural differences in respect to self-concept, their study does appear to show, for example, that collectivism tends to make more social and collective aspects of the self-concept salient. It is therefore recommended that any research needs to be culturally sensitive

to how constructs are best defined and understood in each particular cultural setting and research needs to be carried out in culturally-appropriate ways if the results are to be meaningful. As Harter (2006: 559) concludes in respect to the use of self-esteem tools, “we urge that investigators adopt a more culture-specific perspective, focusing on the very meaning of self-constructs and their potential correlates for a given culture”.

The findings from these studies indicate that demographic factors can impact on an individual’s self-beliefs and anticipated level of self-concept. They also show that more significant findings can be gained by investigating separate domains within the self-concept rather than employing more global, unidimensional constructs of self, as it appears that demographic factors may affect different domains to differing degrees for different populations. The studies indicate the potential role played by socialisation processes and an individual’s various group identities. The cross-cultural studies also highlight the importance of carrying out research into self-constructs using tools in terms that are appropriate to a specific culture rather than imposing frameworks and understandings of self-related values and attributes from one culture to another. Many of the studies also imply that whilst much can be understood by looking at demographic groups as a whole, examining individuals within groups may lead to richer and more enlightening understandings.

4.1.4 Additional Factors Affecting Self-Concept Formation

In addition to demographic factors and age, there are four additional key external influences on the self-concept which have received attention from researchers in respect to their effects on the self-concept: the environment, previous achievements, feedback and reflected appraisals from others, and social comparisons.

4.1.4.1 Environment

In general, there has been a growing acknowledgement about the need to better understand the sociocultural context in which the self-concept is embedded (Martin 2007), although the exact nature and extent of the role of the context is often debated, as is the degree to which a psychological reality can ever be separated from its sociocultural foundations (Markus and Kitayama 2003). As Pintrich (2003: 681) explains in relation to situated perspectives on motivation, some researchers take a more strongly “internal” cognitive-individual view, whereas others take a stronger contextual socio-cultural perspective. He concludes that rather than taking either view to an extreme, the most useful approach is likely to be one that attempts to integrate a balance of both perspectives. Thus, it is now widely accepted that self-concept is a situated construct and clearly sociocultural contexts influence the way the self is conceptualised as well as which values or characteristics are stressed as desirable qualities for the self (see, e.g., Ma and Schoeneman 1997; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Oyserman et al. 2002; Oyserman and Markus 1993). The role of socio-cultural influences on self-concept formation are generally emphasised more

in social psychological approaches and cross-cultural work, as well as in studies that examine multiple roles of the self.

The interaction between the environment and a person's self-beliefs is also highlighted in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Its underlying framework is a model of triadic reciprocity, which sees personal, behavioural and environmental events operating as interacting determinants of each other. The theory focuses on the role of self-beliefs, in particular self-efficacy beliefs and shows how these are informed by interaction with the environment. In this theory, motivation is viewed as goal-directed behaviour that is instigated and sustained by a person's self-efficacy beliefs and expectations concerning outcomes (Pintrich and Schunk 2002: 161). The use of self-efficacy as a construct is indicative of the theory's close connection to specific situations and contexts.

Other studies have investigated the role of the environment at a more micro-level and have found, for example, that the characteristics of different learning environments can affect various psychological variables including self-concept as well as learners' behaviour (see, e.g., Anderman 2002; Boekaerts 1993; Lüdtke et al. 2005; Murray and Greenberg 2000; Oettingen et al. 1994). Trautwein et al. (2006a) carried out a study examining the nature of the relationship between self-esteem and domain-specific self-concepts comparing 7th graders in East and West Germany. They found that the nature of the learning environment (meritocratic compared with ego-protecting) in each country mediated the dynamic relationships between self-esteem, domain-specific self-concept and achievement and they conclude that the learning environment is an important "moderator of the development of self-concept" (ibid: 346). It is therefore necessary to understand and consider self-concept formation within both its larger more macro-level socio-cultural setting, as well as within its more micro-level, immediate institutional, educational or situational context.

4.1.4.2 Past Achievement Experiences

The second factor to be considered is the effect of one's past achievements on the self-concept. Bandura (1997) suggests that one of the key sources for gaining a sense of self-efficacy is one's own mastery experiences. As Schunk (1991) explains, learners can often assess their own sense of efficacy best by considering their own performances and past successes and failures. In terms of the nature and directionality of the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement, psychology-based research has been involved in considerable debate. Initially, two models were suggested by Calsyn and Kenny (1977) and researchers focused on trying to prove either of the models. Firstly, "The Skill Development Model" proposes that academic achievement influences self-beliefs but that self-beliefs do not influence achievement. In contrast, the "Self-Enhancement Model" suggests that self-beliefs influence academic achievement but that academic achievement does not influence self-beliefs. However, there were many methodological problems with the models developed and differences in research approaches led to "a potpourri of contradictory and unsettled findings" (Byrne 1986: 174) (for a review, see Marsh

et al. 1999b). A compromise model, the “Reciprocal Effects Model” (REM) was thus proposed in which self-concept and achievement are reciprocally related and mutually reinforcing. (Marsh 1990b; Marsh and Yeung 1997). In other words, the REM model suggests that prior self-concept affects subsequent achievement but prior achievement also affects subsequent self-concept development. There has also been considerable research from cross-cultural settings to support the REM model (see, e.g., Guay et al. 2003; Marsh and Craven 2005; Marsh et al. 2002; Marsh and Köller 2004; Valentine and DuBois 2005). In his overview of self-concept research, Marsh (2006: 36) concludes that “not only is self-concept an important outcome variable in itself, it also plays a central role in mediating the effects of other desirable educational outcomes”. In a longitudinal study with adolescent learners, De Fraine et al. (2007) found that the relationship between self-concept and achievement became weaker over time and they suggest that the REM may function more strongly at certain developmental periods than others. Similarly, they recommend investigating not only the direction of the relationship but also the strength of the association, as it is possible that one direction of the relationship may be stronger than the other at different stages in an individual’s development. They also suggest that there may be potential gender differences in terms of the relationship between academic achievement and self-concept.

An important dimension to the effect on self-concept of past experiences is an individual’s subjective interpretation of an experience. Much research has focused on the possible effects of standardised test scores (Hattie 1992; Marsh 1986a, 1987, 1990b) or teacher-assigned grades (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002; Trautwein et al. 2006b) on a learner’s self-concept, but it is important to consider the situated nature of a success or failure and how the learner comes to perceive it. It is likely to be a learner’s own interpretation of an experience based on their values, perceptions and beliefs that will affect their self-concept, as opposed to the standardised test score or grade assigned. As Skaalvik (1997: 71) points out, how an individual evaluates a past experience as being a success or failure must be based on some criteria and thus, the interpretation of past achievements cannot be viewed as entirely independent of feedback, social comparison processes as well as contextual norms, values and expectations. In this sense, it becomes apparent that understanding factors that influence the self-concept cannot be viewed in isolation from other factors, the situated context and the subjective reality of the individual.

4.1.4.3 Feedback and Reflected Appraisals

The third key influence on self-concept formation examined in the literature concerns the direct feedback and reflected appraisals of others. The role of others was originally stressed by those whose work is informed by the symbolic interactionists (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Individuals are believed to form their self-concepts based on how they believe others perceive and judge them in a particular context. This “mirrored” image from others may stem from explicit feedback, such as teacher grades, or it may also stem from the reflected appraisals of significant others which an individual interprets or deduces. For example, a learner may deduce implicit

messages that teachers may send their learners from the way they interact with them and behave towards them (Marshall and Weinstein 1984). It is important to note that these are “perceived” appraisals: in other words, they are what an individual assumes the other person to think or judge, they may not be accurate appraisals of what others really think (Felson 1989). Thus, it is the individual’s interpretation of this behaviour and its implications for their self-concept that is important, not what the actual individual intended to convey in terms of explicit or implicit feedback. The most researched reflected appraisals are those of parents, teachers and peers (see, e.g., Bouchey and Harter 2005; Cole et al. 1997; Felson 1985).

An important dimension to reflected appraisals is that its effect on an individual’s self-concept can also depend on the relationship with and attitude towards the individual providing the feedback. This person needs to be perceived of as being a credible and respected source of feedback for a particular domain (Bouchey and Harter 2005; Burns 1982; Cole et al. 1997; Felson 1985; Harter 1998, 1999b). In his study with adolescents, Pekrun (1990) explains that although family members remain a central source of feedback for the self-concept at this age, other sources more closely tied to a specific domain affect that related domain more. Thus, teachers have a greater impact than parents on aspects of the individual’s academic self-concept, as they are perceived as being a more appropriate, valid and credible source of feedback for that specific domain. A further level of complexity was found by Cole et al. (1997) who propose a more complex pattern than a simple one-to-one domain correspondence between reflected appraisals and learners’ perceived competency. They suggest that domains within the self-concept are often interrelated and may overlap in various ways. Thus, feedback from a significant other may have implications for more than one domain. For example, a language teacher who tells a student that “you’re good at speaking activities because you are so sociable and communicative” provides a combination of feedback about the learner’s oral language skills and also their social competency and in this way feedback may combine or conflate domains.

There may also be differences across individuals or demographic groups in terms of whose opinion is important and the extent to which feedback may affect different domains of a person’s self-concept. For example, Trent et al. (1996) suggest that females and males may depend on the opinions of different others to differing degrees. For example, in the academic domain, males formed their self-concepts based on feedback from teachers, their fathers as well as their own internal perceptions. Females, in contrast, based their self-concepts much more on their own internal beliefs, in particular also their perceptions of their mothers’ academic abilities. The authors conclude that boys and girls utilise reflected appraisals from different sources for different domains. Harter (1998) also indicates a potential for contextual variation as individuals adopt various roles in their interpersonal relationships with significant others and these can occur in “multiple social contexts, with different significant others” (ibid). In Harter et al. (1997), the authors report on data from an earlier study (Harter et al. 1996) which found that for some individuals a particular relational context was more important than another in predicting their overall global measure of self-worth. Therefore, the authors point to the potential

for individual differences as some interpersonal contexts and relationships may be more important for some individuals than others and they therefore suggest also measuring the importance of each context. Harter (2006: 529–537) also stresses that across the developmental stages, different people’s opinions will have more importance than others and the influence of peers increases as a child moves up the developmental scale, although she claims that the influence of parents does not necessarily decline, as suggested by other researchers. Generally, beginning in adolescence, there is an altogether more heightened concern with how the self is viewed by others (ibid: 536). Thus, there may be individual differences as well as differences according to gender and age across domains in respect to which sources of feedback are perceived as most relevant and most influential. It can therefore be surmised that the relationship between feedback, reflected appraisals and domain-specific self-concepts may be considerably more complex than some of the literature suggests.

4.1.4.4 Social Comparisons

Another way in which individuals form their domain-specific self-concepts is by engaging in social comparisons. The term “social comparison” was first employed by Festinger (1954) but as Suls and Wheeler (2000: 3) explain, the concept of individuals comparing themselves in social contexts is not new and has been around since Plato and Aristotle. Yet, it was not until the work of people such as Cooley (1902), James (1890) and Mead (1934) that a focus on the influence of social feedback and contexts on the self emerged.

To a certain extent, social comparisons may be spontaneous, unconscious, unintentional, automatic processes (Gilbert et al. 1995) resulting in both an affective and cognitive reaction in the individual, which in turn affects their self-concept. Indeed, as will be seen, instances examined in the data reported in Chapter 6 were often inferred from the data rather than explicitly expressed by the learners and frequently included affective responses as well as more cognitive judgements. However, social comparisons may also be driven by learner needs and can at least partially illustrate the degree to which the individual can be “an active participant in the development of the self” (Markus and Cross 1990: 581). For example, the form of social comparison an individual engages in and how they evaluate feedback from their surroundings can depend on their self-related needs. Individuals can be seen in terms of the need to either self-evaluate (get an accurate sense of self), self-enhance (seen as a growth motive to get an improved sense of self) or self-protect (need to maintain consistency in one’s sense of self). Mruk (2006: 182) offers a summary of the two approaches which are driven by a motivation beyond the accurate self-representation: “the motivation to preserve a stable sense of meaning (consistency theory) and to maximize our potentials (enhancement theory) is what connects self-esteem to behaviour in terms of needs and calls, which is to say motivation in general”.

Therefore, learners may choose to compare with others in order to self-evaluate and thereby gain an accurate evaluation of their abilities in comparison to others.

However, they may also engage in upward or downward social comparisons in order to either enhance or protect their own self-concept (see, e.g., Collins 1996, 2000; Wills 1981). In other words, learners may decide to engage in downward social comparisons, i.e., with those considered less able than themselves, possibly to enhance their self-concept, or, in some cases, in upwards social comparisons, i.e., with those perceived as being better than themselves, in order to confirm a possibly already weak self-concept.⁵

However, it should be noted that the possible effect of social comparisons on an individual's self-concept cannot be assumed to be straightforward. Indeed, Burleson et al. (2005) highlighted the complexity surrounding the nature of the effects on the self-concept of social comparisons. Their research showed that, although one might expect upward comparisons to have a negative effect on an individual's self-concept, its effect appears to depend on the extent to which the individual sees themselves as being similar to the person and the specific context within which the comparison takes place. Thus, if an individual sees a more talented peer as being in a position that they believe they could realistically hope to aspire to themselves, then this can have a motivating effect, serve as a goal to aim towards and may not necessarily lead to a negative effect on their self-concept. The effects of social comparison may also depend on the extent to which an individual possesses a particular mindset (Dweck, 2006; Dweck et al., 1995). In other words, if a learner believes that intelligence or ability in a domain is fixed and not something that can be developed or changed, then an upwards social comparison may have a negative affect on their self-concept, whereas if the learner believes intelligence or ability in a domain is malleable, then such a social comparison could motivate the learner to see the other person as a model who represents an attainable goal (cf. White and Lehman 2005).

One notable theory concerned with the maintenance of one's sense of self is Swann's (1997) theory of self-verification whereby an individual seeks evaluations that confirm their self-views and provide them with a sense of coherence. Given the importance of an individual's self-views for their well-being and behaviour, Swann (1997) claims that individuals may go to great lengths to maintain a stable sense of self. In fact, the theory suggests (Swann 1997; Swann et al. 1987, 1992) that even those with negative self-concepts may seek some degree of negative feedback to confirm their sense of self, although they may actually wish for more positive feedback. In more recent developments, Bosson and Swann (1999) suggest a distinction should be made between the self-competence (cognitive) and self-liking (affective) elements of the self and that self-verification processes may function differently along those dimensions. In other words, somebody with low self-liking would search for feedback to confirm their unlikable self, whereas someone with low

⁵In addition to upward or downward social comparisons, there are a range of behaviours and strategies that learners can engage in, in order to either protect or enhance their self-concepts, such as adjusting their attributions or employing various self-handicapping strategies, e.g., withdrawing effort, procrastination, setting lower goals or avoiding challenge and risk (see, e.g., Collins 1996, 2000; Feick and Rhodewalt 1997; Harris and Snyder 1986; Midgley and Urdan 2001; Thompson 1994; Thomas and Gadbois 2007; Tice 1991; Tice and Baumeister 1990; Wills 1981).

self-competence would search for feedback that indicates their perceived incompetence. This work is important in raising questions about how self-processes and self-related motives may function, not only across domains but also across the cognitive and affective dimensions of an individual's self-concept.

A recent debate about the motive to self-enhance has been concerned with the degree to which this is a universal motive across cultures. Sedikides et al. (2003) claim that the motive is universal across cultures but that people self-enhance employing dimensions that are personally important and these differ according to different desirable attributes across cultures (in the literature often seen as individualistic attributes for Western cultures and collectivist attributes for Eastern cultures). Thus, they claim self-enhancement is a universal motivation although its manifestations are sensitive to cultural contexts (Sedikides et al. 2005). However, fellow researcher Heine (2005) disagrees and suggests Westerners self-enhance significantly more than East Asians and that problems may stem from differing levels of abstractions and definitions of self-enhancement. However, he does emphasise that there is a universal need across cultures for individuals to hold positive self-regard in order to succeed. In general, this particular debate again underlines the importance of examining self-related factors and processes in ways sensitive to a particular culture's understandings of values and self (see also Kitayama et al. 1997).

A more potentially harmful form of seeking to boost and enhance one's self-esteem can be seen in what researchers have termed "contingent self-worth" or "contingent self-esteem" (Crocker and Park 2004). People with high contingent self-worth actively seek to "pursue self-esteem by attempting to validate or prove their abilities or qualities in the domains in which self-worth is invested" (ibid: 393). In other words, such individuals' sense of overall self-worth is highly dependent on constantly proving their abilities or qualities in a domain of personal value and enhancing their self-esteem becomes their overriding goal, driving their behaviour or engagement in a task. Clearly, if a person's overall self-esteem depends so heavily on success in a particular domain, then these individuals are likely to be extremely vulnerable to the effects of failure (see, e.g., Crocker et al. 2006; Niiya et al. 2004).⁶

Additionally, some research suggests the potential for individual variation in respect to social comparisons, for example, depending on an individual's social comparison orientation (SCO), in other words the extent to which an individual generally engages in social comparison and their interpretation of the comparison (Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Gibbons and Buunk 1999). Thus, some individuals may rely more on social comparisons generally when forming their self-concept than others, irrespective of the context.

Social comparison processes may also differ across domains. For example, Trautwein et al. (2008: 990) suggest that the physical self-concept may be a domain more likely to incur social comparison as it is a domain in which peers' abilities are more visible than in a domain such as mathematics and the peculiarities of sports

⁶Crocker and Wolfe (2001), however, suggest that it is unlikely that any individuals exist with completely noncontingent self-esteem.

classes in terms of rankings, competition and team sports may make the effects of social comparison processes more salient. Considering the FLL domain, it is worth considering whether the same may apply to FLL or at least to the oral production aspect of FLL compared with, for example, written text production skills. These studies indicate considerable potential for intra- and inter-learner variation in social comparison processes and caution against simplistic understandings and models, particularly given the close connection to other factors such as learners' attributions and mindsets, and their underlying motives such as self-enhancement or self-protection.⁷

To conclude, the factors that are widely acknowledged as influencing an individual's self-concept are the environment at both the macro socio-cultural level and the micro situational level, a person's subjective interpretation of past experiences and achievements, feedback from others including reflected appraisals, and social comparisons. What emerges from this brief overview of the literature is the complexity, interrelatedness of many of these factors and processes as well as the potential for contextual and individual variation. It is also apparent that there may be complex self-related motives underlying the use of and interpretation of these factors, in particular the role of social comparison and it becomes clear that simple cause and effect relationships between these factors and the self-concept are unlikely.

4.1.5 Marsh's (1986a) Frame of Reference Model

An additional dimension to the complexity surrounding self-concept formation has been contributed in work by Marsh (1986a). In addition to the external factors already examined, he has drawn attention to the role also played by internal factors by developing the current dominant Internal/External (I/E) frame of reference model. Marsh (1986a) suggests that learners form their self-concepts through evaluations based on both internal and external frames of reference. Marsh (2006: 40) defines external (normative) frames of reference as being when, "students compare their self-perceived performances in a particular school subject with the perceived performances of other students in the same school subject and other external standards of actual achievement levels". Internal (ipsative-like) frames of reference are invoked when, "students compare their own performance in one particular subject with their own performances in other school subjects" (ibid).

The Internal/External (I/E) model was developed with the main purpose of attempting to explain seemingly paradoxical research, i.e., "why math and verbal self-concepts are almost uncorrelated even though corresponding areas of academic achievement are substantially correlated" (Marsh and Hau 2004: 57). As Marsh and Hau (ibid) explain, "it seems that individuals with good mathematics skills also tend to have good verbal skills and vice versa, but people think of themselves as either 'maths' persons or 'verbal' persons – but not both". The distinct nature of the maths

⁷For a detailed overview of social comparison research see Buunk and Gibbons 2007.

and verbal academic self-concepts led Marsh (1986a) to propose the I/E model to explain how learners employ both internal and external frames of reference to form separate self-concepts whilst possessing similar levels of skills. Up to that point, as outlined above, research in psychology had focused its attention on external factors, such as feedback, grades, the opinion of significant others and past experiences, rather than on any internal frames of reference. As Marsh et al. (2001: 545) stress, a “critical predication from the I/E model is that students also use information about their accomplishments in other school subjects as one basis of comparison in forming their self-concept in a particular subject”, as well as their external frames of reference.

The large majority of work involving the I/E model has utilised quantitative methods, which present maths and verbal skills (usually represented by the L1) as the basis for comparison by learners (see, e.g., Marsh 1986a; Marsh 1990c; Marsh and Yeung 1998; Skaalvik and Rankin 1992, 1995). However, Marsh and Craven (1997) make it clear that the internal comparison of maths and verbal domains is not an inherent feature of the I/E model, which they suggest could theoretically be extended to include internal comparisons across other academic domains. The question thus arises which subjects may be utilised by learners as the basis for their internal cross-domain comparisons.

Interestingly, one academic domain that has been investigated in terms of the I/E model is that of foreign languages, where studies have examined different languages, primarily English as the L1 and another non-native language, mainly exploring the relationships between achievement and self-concepts (Marsh et al. 2001; Möller et al. 2006; Yeung and Lee 1999). Two key studies in this respect are Marsh and Yeung’s (2001) re-analysis of Bong’s data (1998) and another study by Marsh et al. (2001). Both studies suggest that students might view foreign languages and their mother tongue language as distinct frames of reference. Both studies concluded that whilst the I/E model was confirmed by their findings, an important extension of the model was necessary with respect to verbal constructs, which needs to include separate mother tongue and foreign language domains, as success in one language need not necessarily mean gains in the other language’s self-concept as well. Indeed, based on the premise of the I/E model that contrasting domains may lead to decreases in one self-concept, it is possible that gains in the mother tongue self-concept could lead to a slight decrease in the L2 self-concept or vice versa.

One crucial aspect of the internal cross-domain comparisons by learners may depend on the perceived similarity of the subjects by the individual. Rost et al. (2005) suggest that subjects that are considered as being similar by learners, such as maths and physics, on the one hand, and English and German on the other, may not lead to the contrast effects that are typically detected for the verbal/maths domains in I/E research. Interestingly, they note that maths and physics appear to be perceived as being more similar than German and English (L1 and L2 respectively, in their study). This finding for these subjects is confirmed in a study by Möller et al. (2006). Their research supports the I/E model for additional subjects, namely physics and English as a foreign language and confirms the existence of separate specific subject domains. However, their study did not confirm the implied effects of the I/E model,

namely an increase in achievement in one domain leading to a small decrease in the self-concept in the other domain, between non-native and native languages, as found in the Marsh et al. (2001) study. Möller et al. (ibid) suggest a possible reason for the contradictory findings of the two studies is that the languages investigated in the Marsh et al. (2001) study, namely Chinese (L1) and English (L2), may be perceived of as being more different than German (L1) and English (L2), which were used in their own study. Möller et al. (2006) therefore conclude that, “the more similar two subjects are perceived the higher the degree of positive effects achievement in one subject on self-concept in the other subject” (ibid: 479). This clearly has important implications for the foreign languages domain and learners’ perceptions of the relative similarity of their L1, L2 and L3.

Clearly, when considering the I/E model, it is important for researchers and educators to better understand how learners may perceive subjects as being more similar or different. These perceptions may affect, firstly, which subjects learners select to use as an internal frame of reference for a particular subject and secondly, how their cross-subject comparisons could impact on their respective domain-specific self-concepts. Additionally, there would seem to be potential for individual variation, depending on the learners’ own perceptions, as one learner may see similarities between subjects, whereas another learner may consider them to be quite different. Given that it has been suggested that self-concepts in different domains may develop differently in their complexity and nature (Jacobs et al. 2002), it would seem to be important to explore the nature of the I/E frame of reference model in individual, specific FL domains.

Whilst the I/E model has transformed thinking about the potential frames of references used by learners by including an internal cross-domain comparison, it is a relatively simple model at present. Firstly, it does not accommodate any variation across learners or domains and, secondly, the model only encompasses two main broadly defined frames of reference. Skaalvik and Skaalvik’s study (2002) points, however, to the potential complexity in terms of the various frames of reference that learners employ in order to form their self-concepts. In brief, they propose four possible external frames of reference: “(a) school-average ability, (b) classroom average ability, (c) selected students in class, and (d) selected students outside of class” (ibid: 237). They suggest that learners may use several, or indeed all, of these processes in forming their self-concepts and that it may depend on the learner’s cultural and institutional context as to which processes may be most easily accessible and familiar to a learner. They continue their extension of the I/E model by considering possible sources of information for these external comparisons and suggest five possible sources: “(a) direct observation of achievement, (b) teachers’ responses and comments in the classroom, (c) responses from classmates, (d) responses from others outside the classroom, and (e) grades” (ibid: 237). They conclude that learners use multiple frames of reference and sources of information in a variety of combinations and weightings, although they concede that “some of those combinations seem more common than others” (ibid). In terms of internal frames of reference, they propose four internal frames of reference: “(a) comparison of achievements in different school subjects at a given time, (b) comparison of achievements in the

same subject across time, (c) comparison of achievements with goals and aspirations, and (d) comparison of achievements in different school subjects with applied effort in those subjects” (ibid: 233). Again, they extend this by also suggesting the same five possible sources of information for these internal comparisons, as already cited for the external comparisons. As the authors stress, the many possible combinations of frames of reference and sources of information point to the complexity of the processes used by learners to construct their self-concepts, especially if one considers possible multiple combinations being used by an individual at any given one time (ibid: 240).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002: 241) also emphasise that, although external and internal frames of reference are analysed separately in their study too, the distinction is not always clear cut and may not, in fact, be possible to make. They also question the degree to which internal comparisons are independent of external comparisons. In their article, they use a hypothetical, illustrative example to show how individual learners may select, process and weigh the information and relevant frames of reference differently (ibid: 241–242). Their article highlights the complexity and possible individual variation entailed in the psychological processes involved in forming one’s self-concept in a specific domain. It also illustrates the need for research to extend current findings and help to increase understandings of these complicated processes as they function in particular contextualised cases. Whilst making this dualistic internal/external distinction is likely to be an oversimplification of a much more complex reality,⁸ it has nevertheless proved extremely useful for facilitating an overview and understanding of the different dimensions of factors involved in the self-concept formation process.

One wider impact of the effects of the I/E model that should be mentioned, given its importance, concerns a related theory entitled “Big Fish, Little Pond Effect” (BFLPE) proposed by Marsh (1984). This involves the underlying premise that learners form their self-concepts based on social comparisons. It suggests that when an averagely able student attends a high-ability school, comparing themselves to more able students may lead to a lower self-concept than if they had attended an average school in which comparisons with less able students would have been possible. This proposition has been researched extensively, also across cultures (see, e.g., Marsh 1987; Marsh and Hau 2003; Marsh and Parker 1984; Marsh et al. 2007; Seaton et al. 2009; Zeidner and Schleyer 1999) as has its potentially significant pedagogical and policy implications for selective schooling, pedagogical streaming and special needs education programmes (see, e.g., Marsh and Craven 2000; Tracey et al. 2003; Trautwein et al. 2005). Marsh et al. (1995) carried out a study with individuals on gifted and talented programmes in different domains within the self-concept and found the BFLPE in math, verbal and academic domains but not in more

⁸Clearly, the internal frames of reference cannot be considered as entirely distinct to and separate from the external. The two interact and influence each other closely and both are embedded within the larger influence of a particular socio-cultural context. For the purposes of this book, it may be more useful to conceive of the two categories in terms of a matter of degree, i.e., a frame of reference is either more or less internal/external, rather than a dichotomous division.

global measures of self-esteem or in non-academic subjects, thereby suggesting that the BFLPE also functions in domain-specific ways.

More recently, Huguet et al. (2009) also found evidence of the BFLPE but show that its effect may depend on the way in which students engage in social comparisons with their peers, rather than who they compare themselves with. They discuss how their findings confirm work by Wood (1996), which distinguishes between forced social comparisons (under pressure of the environment) and deliberate social comparisons (strategic comparisons for adaptive purposes). For example, upward social comparisons can be motivating and beneficial if a learner strategically chooses to deliberately engage in upward social comparisons with a peer who they perceive to be somewhat more talented but who represents an achievable goal (White and Lehman 2005). Skaalvik (1997: 62–63) also suggests differentiating in terms of social comparison processes between group comparisons and individual comparisons. In the first, learners establish their rank within the group. This may be “forced” onto learners if grades and points are made public or can be inferred by students who interpret group processes and structures. In the second form of social comparison, learners compare themselves in depth with one or a few students and this form of comparison can often be more strategic in nature as the individual selects who to compare themselves with. Clearly, the I/E model may not function as predicted when one considers the potential differences in “strategic” or “contextually enforced” social comparisons.

Another way in which the I/E model may not lead to the effects predicted concerns questions raised in a study using diary data by Möller and Husemann (2006). They examined the internal comparison dimension of the I/E model and found that learners can engage in upward and downward internal comparisons in varied and complex ways (a parallel to upward/downward social comparisons). Generally, the participants reported more upward internal comparisons that were associated more with negative mood states: the motive for the comparison being to improve the person’s mood. It suggests that not only may the perceived similarity of subjects play a role in which domains are compared internally by learners, but the issues that have been elucidated in respect to social comparisons may also function in respect to internal comparisons. This could suggest that in the choice of their internal domain comparisons learners may similarly be driven by the motives to either accurately self-evaluate, to self-protect or to self-enhance, and these comparisons may have differing effects on a person’s self-concept and affective state.

To conclude, the I/E model, in particular its internal frame of reference dimension, presents a major contribution to our understanding of self-concept formation but there is also clearly scope for further research. The studies reviewed so far indicate that the I/E model represents perhaps a somewhat simplified view of the potential complexity of the internal and external frames of reference used by individuals in constructing their self-concepts, by focusing on only two possible broad processes in, by and large, only two subject domains: maths and verbal academic self-concepts. Indeed, the majority of the existing studies into possible factors affecting self-concept formation have attempted to verify or discredit the I/E model but have not attempted to generate grounded alternative models or extensions to the

frames of reference in the established, dominant model. Therefore, further research is needed to explore any other potential factors and frames of reference that could affect self-concept formation and thus, possibly extend the I/E model beyond the frames of reference it currently encompasses. Secondly, given the claims for the potentially domain-specific nature of self-concept formation, it would seem desirable to carry out research into factors that may affect specific domains, in addition to the maths academic and verbal academic domains that have been the focus of the majority of studies to date. As there are, to the best of my knowledge, very few studies exploring potential factors involved in the formation of self-concepts in the FLL domain beyond the I/E model confirmation and effect studies discussed earlier in this section (e.g., Marsh et al. 2001; Marsh and Yeung 2001; Möller et al. 2006; Rost et al. 2005), it would seem to be a rich, unexplored area for investigation.

Finally, much of the research into self-concept development tends to employ statistical methods that are perhaps less likely to reveal any unanticipated findings or individual differences, given the usual fixed-item tools employed for data collection. Indeed, Marsh et al. (2001: 552) conclude that, “most I/E research has been quantitative in nature, but this seems an ideal area to pursue rigorous qualitative research to better understand the nature of the comparison processes students actually use in the formation of academic self-concepts in different areas”. Further, in order to capture some of the potential contextual and individual variation that may exist, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002: 242) argue that there is a need for research “to move beyond student self-reports to qualitative data using introspection and retrospection in different learning contexts”. Thus, qualitative research, which examines data collected in situ such as in this study, could help to elucidate any potential contextual influences, detect any individual variation and potentially reveal additional, possibly unexpected factors affecting the self-concept development, as well as any mediating processes.

4.1.6 Summary

In this chapter, we have examined the extent to which the self-concept can be perceived as being dynamic. It was concluded that there are stable aspects of the self that are more closely tied to a person’s core sense of self and that often an individual a sense of consistency across time and place. There are also more dynamic aspects of the self-concept that represent more peripheral self-beliefs, which may be more closely tied to specific situations and contexts and that are more susceptible to change. It was seen how the self-concept varies with age and at each developmental stage an individual is only cognitively able to hold certain types of self-related beliefs. As a person progresses through adolescence, their self-concept becomes increasingly complex, multifaceted and abstract. It was seen that certain demographic factors such as gender, culture or ethnicity may affect the type or levels of self-concept in a particular domain that a person develops and socialisation processes can affect the self-concept in domain-stereotypical ways. The role of other external factors on self-concept formation was examined and four key

areas were considered as being influential: the role of the environment on a macro socio-cultural and more micro immediate situational level, a learner's interpretations of their past achievement experiences, feedback and reflected appraisals from significant others, and social comparisons. It was seen how the individual can be an active agent in constructing their own self-concept and may be driven by various self-related motives, namely, to accurately self-assess, to protect or to enhance their self-concept. The final section examined the current dominant model for self-concept formation, Marsh's I/E model (1986a). This introduced learner's internal cross-domain comparisons as another key factor that can affect self-concept formation; however, it was noted that other researchers (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002) have suggested that the processes involved in self-concept formation are likely to be considerably more complex than this popular model is able to convey.

In the specific foreign language domain, it is worth considering how the various factors and processes may function in ways particular to this domain. For example, as many learners begin learning a foreign language later than the usual maths and L1 verbal skills which are tested in the majority of studies, learners may be at a different developmental stage when they begin and may use different frames of reference to different degrees than in other subjects. For example, in their study of the I/E model, Möller and Köller (2001: 285) suggest that one reason for the difference in academic achievement impacts on maths compared to verbal self-concept may be that achievement affects maths self-concepts to a higher degree, as verbal self-concepts are partly developed before learners begin school and consequently have a greater number of sources of feedback (parents and peers as well as teachers and academic grades) than for the maths domain. In FLL, feedback may also stem from a wider range of sources, in addition to the usual peers, teachers and parents, such as native speakers and other users of the language, and these additional significant others may represent an important source of feedback or reflected appraisals. Also as FLL is a rather "public" undertaking, given that L2 oral performance in class is often a particularly "visible" dimension to the learning process, it is possible that social comparisons may play a larger role for FLL than for other subjects such as maths or history.

Clearly, many questions remain about the complex formation processes and self-related motives at work in relation to self-concept generally and, in particular, in relation to the FLL domain. The following two chapters hope to elucidate on some of the factors affecting the self-concept in the FLL domain by focusing on the results from the research outlined in Chapter 1 concerning the frames of reference used by tertiary-level EFL learners in Austria. Chapter 5 will begin by exploring more internally-situated factors and Chapter 6 will consider factors and frames of reference considered as being more external to the learner.

Chapter 5

Internal Frames of Reference in FL Self-Concept Formation

5.1 Defining Internal Factors

The factors that emerged from the analysis of the data in this study have been organised following Marsh's (1986a) suggestion of an "internal" and "external" frames of reference model (the I/E model). As indicated in the previous chapter, Marsh defines these categories in relatively narrow terms: "internal" is seen to refer to comparisons within the self of previous performances in other domains, and "external" is used to refer to social comparisons of one's perceived performance with those of others, including in terms of standardised external expressions of ability, such as grades. However, here, in contrast, these categories will be defined in broader terms in order to encompass a range of additional factors emerging from the analysis.

Thus, I have defined "internal" factors as being those that are centred primarily within the self, such as other self-concepts, beliefs, affective and cognitive reactions. Clearly, beliefs may be formed as a result of affective and cognitive reactions to external experiences and stimuli and, as such, the interrelationships between internal and external factors are more complex than can be portrayed here. Similarly, "external" factors are defined in this study as being those that stem primarily from outside the individual, such as one's own actual experiences, experiences with significant individuals, one's learning environment, feedback from others etc. Again, whilst the external factors can be processed internally by an individual in terms of affect and cognition, it was felt that, for ease of comprehensibility, it would be worthwhile distinguishing between these two categories of factors, whilst acknowledging the close and often overlapping relationship between the two.

Indeed, the artificial separation of factors into internal and external factors is likely to be an oversimplification of a considerably more complex reality. Ultimately, it may not be possible to separate factors affecting the self-concept clearly in terms of an internal/external distinction (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002), as they may not be independent categories and the distinction between the two may be more a matter of degree, i.e., the extent to which they are relatively internal or relatively external. There are many instances when factors appear to overlap, could appear in various categories and generally seem to be closely interrelated with one another. However, it is not the purpose of this book to assign the factors emerging

from the analysis to fixed categories of great significance but rather, it is hoped that the use of these categories will facilitate an understanding and overview of the factors that appear to affect the EFL self-concept and will help to relate the findings of this study to Marsh's (1986a) I/E model. In overall terms, the primary aim is to contribute to the identification of factors of various kinds, rather than to establish a strict dichotomous typology of them. The factors presented in this and the following chapter are thus not meant to be viewed as an exhaustive list, nor considered as necessarily functioning in isolation but are intended to serve as a starting point for exploring the complex range of factors that may affect the development of a learner's EFL self-concept. In this chapter, I will focus only on those factors I have classified as being internal and Chapter 6 will examine external factors separately. Each main factor will be discussed individually in detail and examples from across the different data sets will help to illustrate the lines of thinking.

5.1.1 Cross-Domain Comparisons

The Internal/External (I/E) model was developed with the main purpose of attempting to explain seemingly paradoxical research. As Marsh and Hau (2004: 57) explain, "it seems that individuals with good mathematics skills also tend to have good verbal skills and vice versa, but people think of themselves as either "maths" persons or "verbal" persons – but not both". The distinct nature of the maths and verbal academic self-concepts led Marsh (1986a) to propose the I/E model to explain how learners employ *both* internal and external frames of reference to form separate self-concepts whilst possessing similar levels of skills. Indeed, the principle prediction of Marsh's model (1986a) is that learners make internal comparisons within their self-concept network across subjects, comparing their own perceived ability in one school subject to another subject. This dimension of the model and its role in self-concept formation has been confirmed by multiple studies (see, e.g., Marsh 1990c; Marsh and Craven 1997; Marsh and Hau 2004; Marsh et al. 2001; Marsh and Yeung 1998).

However, the findings from this study found a range of domain comparisons that were more extensive than the usual maths/verbal domain comparison, which is examined in the vast majority of I/E studies. In this study, the findings indicated that learners made comparisons across several subjects, depending on their perceived relevance and relatedness for the individual in a particular context. Although the large majority of work involving the I/E model has presented maths and verbal skills (usually represented by the L1) as the basis for comparison by learners (see, e.g., Marsh 1986a; Marsh 1990c; Marsh and Yeung 1998; Skaalvik and Rankin 1992, 1995), Marsh and Craven (1997) make clear that the model could theoretically be extended to include internal comparisons across other academic domains, such as in this case foreign language domains.

5.1.1.1 Cross-Domain Comparisons – at the Subject Level

In the data for this study, there were several examples of learners comparing themselves across subjects, principally across maths and languages, as predicted by the I/E model:

I was much more the language type than the maths type at school, rather this playing with words than scientific facts that I like. (I#1: 636–638)

Because I don't like mathematics and anything with numbers at school it was terrible. (...) I'm into art, I'm into languages. . . (J#17: 552–553; 559)

As a little child I always liked languages and disliked math and chemistry. (N#27: 4-5)

The first data extract highlights the perceived similarity, for some learners, of sciences and maths. This suggests the importance of understanding the ways in which learners may consider subjects to be similar or different, as these groupings may influence which subjects learners select as frames of reference and could consequently affect their various self-concepts in different ways. Thus, Rost et al. (2005) propose that subjects that are considered as being similar by learners may not lead to the contrast effects that are typically detected for the verbal/maths domains in I/E research. Möller et al. (2006) conclude that, “the more similar two subjects are perceived, the higher the degree of positive effects achievement in one subject on self-concept in the other subject” (ibid: 479).

Clearly, when considering the I/E model, it is important for researchers and educators to better understand how learners may perceive subjects as being more similar or different. These perceptions may affect, firstly, which subjects learners select to use as an internal frame of reference for a particular subject and secondly, how their cross-subject comparisons could impact on their respective domain-specific self-concepts. Thus, there would seem to be potential for individual variation, depending on the learners' own perceptions, as one learner may see similarities between subjects, whereas another learner may consider them to be quite different. In terms of language learning, it would be worth considering the extent to which learners may perceive similarities or differences between their L1 and their L2 as frames of reference but also potentially between a particular L2 and an L3, especially given the mixed findings of the I/E model effects involving different language combinations (Marsh et al. 2001; Möller et al. 2006; Rost et al. 2005).

In terms of the possible effects of this internal comparison, it is believed (see, e.g., Marsh 1986a, 1990c; Marsh and Yeung 1998) that comparing relatively perceived weak grades in maths to perceived better grades in languages may in this way, for example, accentuate the self-concepts in the respective domains. In this instance, a language learner may thus develop even stronger self-concepts in language domains generally and an even weaker self-concept in maths and related domains than their actual abilities would possibly have implied.

The data also reflect and appear to confirm the perceived dichotomy of the two subject domains, maths and languages, as suggested in the Marsh and Shavelson (1985) model. However, there were fewer instances of this comparison between maths and languages than might have been anticipated. Naturally, it is possible that the guidelines for generating the data focused learners more on their language learning to the exclusion of other subject domains. However, it may also be due, in part, to the advanced level of these learners, for whom this cross-subject comparison may no longer be relevant. It is interesting to note that the large majority of the data extracts containing such a comparison stem from sections of data, in which the individual is describing themselves in the school context in which such a comparison would have been more likely. This raises the question of whether different frames of reference

and different cross-domain comparisons may be relevant for learners at different stages of their development and schooling careers and the extent to which internal comparisons are therefore context-dependent. Finally, it is difficult to anticipate which internal domains an individual may choose to compare, given that learners may be driven by motives of self-assessment, self-enhancement or self-protection when selecting internal domains to compare (cf. Möller and Husemann 2006).

5.1.1.2 Cross-Domain Comparisons – Across Foreign Languages

In the field of language learning, which was the focus of this study, the most common internal cross-domain comparison took place between a learner's separate foreign language self-concepts. Throughout all of the data sets, there were many instances where, if learners had experience of studying more than one foreign language learners, they compared their foreign language self-concepts, e.g.:

I think right now after this stay in France I'm much more fluent in spoken French than in English. (I#1: 205–206)

I can tell you something about French grammar and I guess my French grammar is still better than my English one because I can explain it. (I#6: 545–547)

I know that, I know that I'm ahead in English and I'm behind in Italian. (J#4: 1174–1175)

Considering the case study participant, Joana, the most common code in her data was assigned to segments in which she compared her foreign language self-concepts, namely her Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) self-concept with her EFL self-concept:

... my Italian is not as good as my English (J#1: 132–133)

I probably feel like I need to work harder for Italian and I don't feel like that so much in English (J#6: 872–874)

... when I read through an English text, although I am not, I don't even, I don't think, I don't always use all the vocabulary that I know in English but when I read through a text I can get, you know, almost any text, I can get the context and even if there are some words which I don't understand, it's no problem, I can always get the content, but with Italian it's not that, I am not that progressed really in Italian. (J#17: 609–616)

It can be seen how Joana judges her ability in and relationship with one language by comparing it to another. In this way, it is possible that the same processes, as suggested by the I/E model for the domains of maths and verbal skills, are at work between her two foreign languages. This may mean that, in terms of the effect of such a comparison, Joana could be heightening her perceived ability in English and thus strengthening her self-concept in that domain but, consequently, also weakening her perceived self-concept in Italian. Interestingly, throughout the research period, Joana is convinced that her Italian is quite weak and that her English is excellent. However, in terms of actual university grades she receives better marks in

Italian than English¹, except for the oral language course where she was awarded a grade “A” in both languages. Joana’s school-leaving exam grades were also the same for both languages, namely “A” grades. Thus, despite external evidence that would possibly suggest equal abilities, Joana has developed quite distinct self-concepts with a stronger, more positive EFL self-concept and a weaker, more negative IFL self-concept.

Although it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the nature of these internal processes of comparison and their relationship to her actual achievement in the two subjects, especially given the different ways in which the languages are taught and exams graded, the data do suggest that the processes implied by Marsh’s (1986a) I/E model appear to function between Joana’s two foreign language self-concepts in a similar manner. This finding would suggest that foreign language self-concepts may affect each other in potentially complex ways and that such an internal comparison may also possibly lead to the contrast effects implied by the I/E model between separate foreign languages. However, it is worth reiterating that it is important to understand the ways in which learners may perceive particular foreign languages as being similar or different, such as grouping Romance or Slavic languages together and thus the scope for variation in terms of the cross-FL domain comparisons.

Nevertheless, the implication of this internal comparison is that, if for research or pedagogical purposes we wish to understand, for example, a learner’s EFL self-concept, then we may need to also examine their self-concepts in and beliefs about other FL domains, in order to gain a fuller picture of the learner in this respect. It highlights the potentially important role played by learners’ other foreign language self-concepts and how they may interact and influence each other in complex ways.

5.1.1.3 Cross-Domain Comparisons – Across L1 and L2

Contrary perhaps to expectations, relatively few learners at this level compared their EFL self-concept and their mother tongue² self-concept, although there were a small number of instances across the data:

I feel more comfortable speaking German and I can express myself. (I#8: 163–164)

I can not fluently speak in German so it is much more easier to me, for me to speak in English because here I can make mistakes and nobody looks at me like, oh, you’re from, you know what I mean? So, it’s so easy for me to speak in English I feel much more freer than if I would speak to you in German (I#9: 988–993)

Comparisons between a learner’s mother tongue and EFL self-concept are of interest, given findings by Marsh and Yeung (2001) and Marsh et al. (2001), who suggest

¹She received a grade “B” in her first-year Italian course and a “C” in her first-year English course. As the courses are taught in different ways with differing content and examined without using comparable standardised procedures, it is difficult to compare the actual abilities implied by these grades. Nevertheless, as a form of external feedback for Joana, these could perhaps have been expected to have had more influence than they seemingly did on her respective self-concepts.

²German is the mother tongue for all of the learners unless specifically stated otherwise.

that the foreign language and mother tongue self-concepts are quite distinct. Whilst it does seem as if learners perceive of separate, distinct self-concepts, some of the learners also seem to conceive of a relationship between the two domains as the basis for the cross-language comparison (see also general languages self-concept in [Chapter 3, Section 3.1.3](#)).

Interestingly, instances of such a comparison tended to occur in very specific contexts, such as at the specific task level or in the context of learner's early language encounters, e.g.:

Another important point for me to improve is the punctuation in English. It already took quite a long time for me to know all the rules in German and I figured out that the rules in English are absolutely different. (N#16: 34–37)

But from all the languages I have learned so far I like English best. Sometimes I like it even better than my mother tongue, German, because some things can be expressed more easily by using the English language. (I#6: 9–11)

In the interview data, the two learners who made an explicit comparison with their mother tongue self-concept are the two weakest students in terms of overall language proficiency, from my knowledge of them as a teacher. From this small amount of data, it is not possible to say whether this is of importance but the need to compare one's EFL self-concept to the mother tongue self-concept may only be relevant for learners at a relatively lower level and, as they become more proficient, this may become less important as a frame of reference as the two become increasingly differentiated and distinct. Thus, an internal comparison to the L1 self-concept may only be relevant for certain EFL learners in certain contexts, such as depending on their level or depending on the specific task or skill being discussed.

The final context in which some learners made a kind of comparison between their current EFL self-concepts and their L1 self-concept was in terms of a future goal, namely to become "native speaker-like":

I am motivated because I hope to become a "perfect" speaker, to handle the language like my mother tongue. (N#8: 4–5)

My greatest wish is to speak English in the same way as my mother tongue one day. (N#25: 41–43)

Clearly, it would be important to understand the effects on one's L2 self-concept of comparing one's current abilities with a perceived L1-like level. Considering Dörnyei's (2005) L2 self system of motivation, any discrepancy could motivate some learners, if it is felt to be a level they could realistically aspire to but for others it could lead to frustration, demotivation and have a potentially negative effect on their L2 self-concept. Thus, more research is needed to clarify at what stage, for what level of learners, under what conditions and in what ways the L1 self-concept may be of relevance for a learner in forming their foreign language self-concept and whether the comparison may motivate or demotivate learners.

5.1.1.4 Cross-Domain Comparisons – Across Skill Domains

Within the EFL self-concept network, many learners also appeared to compare their abilities across skill³ domains within the specific language. To the best of my knowledge, there is no existing research on internal skill domain level comparison, but it would seem to be the logical extension of the research in psychology showing internal comparison across subject level domains to a higher degree of domain-specificity.

The most common cross-skill internal comparison was across the domains of writing and speaking within the EFL self-concept. Many learners appear to place these two skill domains in a dichotomy; a possible parallel to the subject level maths/verbal dichotomy in the I/E model and suggestive of a widespread perceived difference amongst learners between the two skills, e.g.:

I always thought, oh my written English, in comparison to my, you know, oral English, there is a huge chasm between the two of them. (J#24: 650–652)

My writing is not as good as my spoken English and I am trying very hard to get it on the same level. (N#27: 21–23)

Additionally I feel unconfident about talking in foreign languages. I am more certain about my writing and I prefer writing tasks to oral ones. (N#53: 23–25)

Such a comparison was present across all the data but particularly evident in the written narrative data. In this data set, the learners tended to place an emphasis throughout their self-descriptions on being either a speaking- or writing-oriented person in the foreign language. A possible reason for the starker writing and speaking dichotomy in these data may be the data generation context. Firstly, the guidelines suggest detailed self-description, which would imply skill level description and which therefore was likely to encourage learners to make reflections at this level of detail. More specifically, the data were generated in a course entitled “Varieties of Spoken English” which precedes a later course entitled “Varieties of Written English”. Although both skills are taught and used in both courses, the emphasis placed in the courses and the titles of the courses may also have enhanced this dichotomy and prompted the comparison within the learners. If this were the case, it would also raise questions about the possible influence of contextual factors on the domains selected for comparison by learners.

However, a skill-level internal comparison was also entirely absent from certain learners’ data, and it is worth considering whether learners only make an internal comparison at such a level of specificity, when their self-concepts in that domain are sufficiently complex and developed. All the learners were at an advanced level; however, some learners may simply tend more towards global self-descriptors and consequently only make more global level internal comparisons, irrespective of their ability (cf. Linville 1985, 1987). Thus, internal comparisons at the skill level may

³Note: the term skill domain is understood in this study as an area of language and includes the “skill” areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

only exist for learners with highly developed, complex EFL self-concepts, and further research is needed to understand possible learner differences in this respect, depending on the relative complexity of their EFL self-concepts.

In terms of the effects of this comparison across the skills, it is likely to contribute towards a learner's overall EFL self-concept but it may also accentuate their respective writing and speaking self-beliefs, as suggested by research into the possible effects of the I/E model (Marsh et al. 2001). Thus, learners may consequently develop a relatively weaker writing and a relatively stronger speaking self-concept or vice-versa, despite potentially having similar actual abilities in both domains. Additionally, the nature of this internal cross-skill domain comparison also raises the question first expressed in [Chapter 3](#): namely, whether there may possibly be separate self-concepts at the skill domain level within a language, especially for written and spoken skills at this advanced level.

In the case study data, within her IFL self-concept, Joana does not compare her writing and speaking skills directly, as she does in her EFL self-concept but, if at all, she seems to compare her pronunciation and grammar in Italian, although not as directly, or as frequently, as she does for her written and spoken English, e.g.:

It's the same in Italian with me, so my teachers always tell me my Italian pronunciation is excellent but it's just the grammar part where I'm struggling, so I think I do have a good Italian pronunciation (J#5: 1435–1439)

He just encouraged me to, he said to me, you know, you shouldn't ever, you know, you should not give up on Italian and, you know, just keep going and your pronunciation is really good, you just need to work on the grammar a bit and, you know, so he really encouraged me to go on doing that (J#20: 538–542)

From other sections of the data, these two skill domains seem to represent both her perceived strongest skill and weakest skill in Italian. Therefore, rather than writing and speaking being in some special kind of relationship, it is worth considering whether an EFL learner may compare their abilities across their perceived “best” and their perceived “worse” skill area, which for Joana's EFL self-concept would be speaking and writing respectively. It is also possible, as suggested in the previous chapter that, with respect to subject domains, Joana may select skill domains for comparison which she perceives as being, in some way, similar or different to each other (Rost et al. 2005). Alternatively, as suggested for writing/speaking in English, the selection of grammar and pronunciation in IFL may reflect the emphases placed in the teaching and learning context at university, which is the primary setting for her IFL learning.

A further set of skill domains that appeared to serve as dichotomous frames of reference for a small number of learners concerns vocabulary and grammar:

G ...sometimes I see that with Italian. I still know the grammar and everything but if I speak any Italian then I'll, I'll lose the vocabulary. The grammar fits and is in the brain, but the vocabulary gets. . .

S Lost?

G It runs away.

(Laughter)

- G Yeah, all the words run away.
 S So you feel comfortable with your grammar?
 G In Italian, yes, of course and in English not always because there are some things, some Ausnahmen. . .
 S exceptions. . .
 G . . .exceptions, yeah, and I just don't keep it, but, yeah, but with grammar actually yes. It's just vocabulary sometimes that. . . what's this word? What is, I can't remember. I don't know how other students feel about it, but vocabulary, if I study it, I know it, for at least a year, but then it's. . .
 S Lost, well it falls to the back.
 G It falls to the back, yeah. You have to remember it again and to study it again, to repeat it again.
 (. . .)
 G I only ever said sometimes I really have no vocabulary, but I have the grammar. So I go to Italy almost every year and try to speak it. (I#4: 854–883; 975–976)

I mean I knew a lot of vocabulary because this is really, teachers tend to stress the vocabulary, that you learn vocabulary by heart, but the thing was that I was not really confident when it came to grammar, you know, in using, in the conversation, the grammar, and I always was a bit, not quite satisfied and always was a bit hesitating and everything (I#10: 64–70)

It is not possible from the data here to ascertain whether these two skill areas are generally perceived as particular strengths or weakness by these individual learners. The comparison between these two skills may simply reflect the experiences that these particular learners have had as language learners, as indeed the second quote seems to suggest. One possible explanation for the dichotomy between the skills of vocabulary and grammar is that both of these learners emphasise the importance of communication and have spent extended periods abroad in English-speaking countries. In the communicative approach (see e.g., Hedge 2000: Chapter 2), which is popular in Austria and considering the role played by the skill of speaking within the context of a stay abroad, vocabulary would possibly be assigned more importance, given the emphasis placed on fluency rather than accuracy in both settings. It is thus possible that learners' beliefs and personal priorities concerning language learning may affect the comparisons they make across skill domains, a reflection of the possibly interrelated nature of an individual's belief systems, their past experiences in using/learning the language and their own perceptions of what constitute relevant frames of reference, as well as perceptions of similarities and differences between domains.

Finally, as stated earlier, it is worth contemplating whether the types of internal comparisons employed by a learner may in fact be driven by motivations to protect or enhance their self-concept by engaging in upward/downward internal cross-domain comparisons (Möller and Husemann 2006). Whilst it is beyond the scope of the current study to explore the possible motivations or criteria underlying a learner's cross-domain comparisons, these comparisons do appear to play an important role for learners when forming their L2 self-concept. Clearly, understanding the domains learners choose to compare internally and their motivations for doing so would be an important dimension of these findings, which further research needs to clarify.

5.1.1.5 Cross-Domain Comparisons – Across Task Domains

Another level of internal comparison was employed by some learners in the narrative data set, namely comparing their self-concepts at the task-level within a skill domain. Here I understand “task” to mean a sub-aspect of a skill domain, such as writing an email as compared to writing an academic seminar paper. It appears as if some learners may also compare their abilities at this high degree of specificity which could be conceived of as self-efficacy beliefs. This would be a natural extension of the internal cross-domain comparisons that have been seen throughout the data sources but at the even more specific level of task within a skill domain, e.g.:

I think my spoken English is really good. I have a good stock of vocabulary. Hence I do not have to search for words very often and I can speak very fluently. In contrast I have a few problems with my pronunciation such as “p” and “b”. (N#32: 20–23)

My pronunciation and my fluent way of talking are my strengths but it doesn’t mean that I do speak grammatically correct which is my weakest point. (N#42: 13–15)

One reason for the presence of these task-level domain comparisons in this particular set of data appears to have been the focused, detailed nature of the self-descriptions elicited from these learners. Also, the wording in these data may simply reflect the semantics of describing one’s strengths and weaknesses, as the learners were instructed to do in the guidelines (see Appendix D), and it may not actually reflect a genuine internal cross-task domain level comparison that affects the domain self-concepts. However, as it is believed that the more proficient and experienced the learners become, the more developed and complex their self-concepts within a domain also become (Epstein 1991; Hattie 1992; both cited in Harter 2006) and thus, in turn, the greater the potential for cross-task level comparisons will be. Although there is insufficient data to explore this more fully, it is worth considering whether the internal comparison dimension of the I/E model may also function at the specific task level for highly advanced learners. However, as pointed out earlier, learners may simply vary in terms of the complexity of the self-beliefs they possess and thus the presence of such an internal comparison at this level of specificity may depend on the individual and not necessarily the level of the learner. In the future, more focused research could cast light on possible variations across learners in terms of the level of specificity of their internal comparisons as well as the potential influence of the educational context on the types of internal domain comparisons learners engage in.

5.1.2 Belief Systems

The most significant additional internal frame of reference not included in the I/E model, but which occurred extensively across all the data in this study, concerns learners’ belief systems. It seems that their beliefs about language learning as a process, as well as each specific language, are used by learners in evaluating their own

self-concepts. There was also some evidence of a link between attribution beliefs and the learners' self-concept, in particular through statements about the value of hard work and practice; however, as will be seen, this relationship does not appear to be straightforward and these beliefs may play a mediating role or affect the self-concept indirectly. The beliefs have been separated into categories to facilitate an overview and each set of beliefs will be considered in turn.

5.1.2.1 Beliefs about Language Learning

The most prominent internal factor that appears to be able to affect the self-concepts of the learners in these data concerns their beliefs about foreign language learning. Although many of the beliefs are expressed explicitly, many are indirectly reflected in the learners' interpretation of previous learning experiences, their reported use of strategies, their perceptions of causality and their goals for the upcoming semester. The interviews show that all the learners have firmly established beliefs about FLL as a process, and the data contain a great number of examples in which such beliefs appear to act as a frame of reference for the learners' FL self-concepts. Interestingly, the beliefs tend to be expressed in more holistic terms and concern language learning generally and not just in respect to learning a particular language. Thus, it seems as if learners' epistemological beliefs about language learning may also function in domain-specific ways (Mori 1999; Muis et al. 2006) but to differing degrees, i.e., learners' specific FL self-concepts seem to be affected by general FLL-related domain-specific sets of beliefs, rather than by language-specific learning beliefs, at least at this advanced level. Hence, whilst learners appear to display, for example, distinct EFL or IFL self-concepts, all the foreign languages in question appeared to be affected by general FL learning beliefs:

In general I have to admit that I am very impatient, which is a little problem, as learning a language is a very slow process. (N#12: 27–29)

A good language learner should be open-minded and talkative too. I am of the opinion that I can fulfil all these aspects (N#61: 24–26)

G I'm quite a lively person or 'quirly' as you would say in, in German. Jumping all around all the time.

S Lively?

G Yeah, lively and I think it helps when you are trying to get in contact with other people. If you just sit in the corner and don't say anything people would think or foreigners would think here and even if you're a foreigner, foreigner abroad, they would think you're boring and you just don't want to communicate with anybody. It helps to be lively, I think, and I'm lively by nature already. (I#4: 948–959)

In the literature, it has been shown that beliefs about language learning can affect strategy use (see, e.g., Abraham and Vann 1987; Horwitz 1988; Kern 1995; Wenden 1987), autonomy (see, e.g., Cotterall 1995, 1999) and motivation (see, e.g., Dörnyei 2001). The data here also seem to suggest a link between learners' beliefs about language learning and their specific foreign language learner self-concepts. However, it is not possible to fully deduce from these data whether a learner's beliefs about language learning are formed, based on their self-concept, or in order to justify and

support their current self-concept, or indeed whether there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. Nevertheless, the data strongly suggest that a learner's beliefs about foreign language learning in general could affect their EFL self-concept by serving as an internal frame of reference. Given the apparent absence of any literature linking learners' beliefs about learning within a specific domain and their respective self-concepts in that domain, the identification of the seeming prominence of such a connection in these data suggests a promising area for future research.

Whilst there are a whole range of individual beliefs about language learning expressed by the learners in this data set, certain beliefs are worth highlighting, given their prevalence across the data. One specific belief about language learning concerns the importance of the amount of experience with the language or the importance of extensive practice when learning a language, as can be seen from the data extracts below:

- A I feel more comfortable than, I don't know, one year ago, to speak English. . .
- S So, what do you think contributed to that? What does influence the fact that you feel more confident now?
- A Because I speak more English. . . with my tandem partner. (I#8: 92–98)
- G While I was there at the end I was very confident, you know, I was really, oh gosh, I learned a lot, I thought well, you did a lot, you know, you read a lot of books, we had to and my English was quite fluent because I felt quite confident with my flatmates and you know when you know that there are people after three months you don't care anymore, at the beginning, sometimes, I was like, oh well, I'm not so sure if they say this or this after three months you are like, ok, I mean. . .
- S And has that changed now? Thinking back.
- G I'm not sure. Maybe it's, it's because I don't have to use English, you know for my daily life and it's somehow, it's, I am not so confident anymore because I have the feeling I lost something on my way back.
- S Do you think so?
- G Yeah.
- S In all respects or just in speaking or in writing?
- G In speaking maybe because I hardly speak (I#10: 273–295)

Another belief about language learning can be found in the data from the interview with one learner who strongly believes in a “natural talent” or “giftedness” for language learning:

My mother said “you're talented for languages so do languages”.

(. . .)

I'm doing English which I was always talented for

(. . .)

I think it's. . . I mean I'm. . . I firmly believe that. . . that when you are talented for a language, I'm very much into being talented. And I think I wanted to study pharmacy and I thought, well, I always hated chemistry at school, I didn't like biology but I said, well, I can learn this, I can, I can study whatever I want. I mean it doesn't mean that I'm not. . . when I'm not talented for it that I cannot study it at university. I'll find out. I'll just try. Then I found out that, no, that is just nothing for me. It's. . . It was. . . I mean I failed experimental physics like three times and then I said, well, no, no more. So I think it strongly depends if you are talented.

(I#5: 30–31; 76–77: 656–666)

It seems that based on previous language learning experiences and repeated feedback from her mother, this learner has developed an idea of there being a natural talent for languages and a belief that she has this talent. There is also evidence that, although the other learners do not refer to natural talent directly, they often imply that, in comparison to maths, they have more “talent” (I#10: 161), “feeling” (I#9: 190), “great skill” (I#1: 534) for learning languages. This could merely represent issues of semantics but it may also suggest that some learners may believe in a natural ability for learning a foreign language. If this were to be the case, this particular belief could have a potentially strong influence on a learner’s self-concept, attribution processes and motivation, given the implications of understanding language learning ability in this way.

Such beliefs about a natural talent for foreign languages could be symptomatic of a particular mindset towards language learning or a fixed entity view of intelligence about language learning (cf. Dupreyrat and Mariné 2005; Dweck 2003; Dweck et al. 1995; Mercer and Ryan 2010; Molden et al. 2006). Dweck (2006: 6–7) explains that “mindsets” are views that one adopts for oneself about the nature of intelligence and ability. In her book, she describes two mindsets and their effects on the self, achievement and attribution processes. She explains that individuals may possess either what she calls the “fixed mindset”, in which the individual believes that their qualities are fixed, or the “growth mindset”, in which the individual believes that their basic abilities can be developed through effort and that intelligence is, in this sense, malleable. Importantly, Dweck suggests that mindsets can be domain-specific (ibid: 47). The references in these data to “natural talent” raise the question of whether foreign language learning, similarly to the examples from the domains of sport or music Dweck uses in her book, may be dominated by a mindset that promotes the idea of a natural, innate ability for foreign language learning – a fixed mindset that represents a fixed entity view of intelligence for this domain. It seems apparent that if you believe in “natural talent” in a domain, then this implies that achievement in the respective domain should not require conscious effort, as Dweck suggests. It implies that the learner would believe that they either have the talent, or not, in which case they would not believe that hard work could achieve similar results. The effects of such a “mindset” on learners’ self-concepts, as well as their goals, motivation, attributions and effort are self-evident.

Another particular belief that is prevalent across the data concerns the particular belief that a stay abroad is essential for success in the foreign language, in particular for one’s spoken English:

I’m always getting nervous if I have to speak, although I know that I’m not speaking badly. I think the problem is that I haven’t practised speaking much by now, since we haven’t talked much at school and I haven’t been to an English speaking country longer than a few weeks as yet. (N#10: 21–25)

In fact, there seems to be an almost implicit suggestion that you “ought” to go and study abroad and such a belief was expressed explicitly by several learners:

Unfortunately, I have never been to an English speaking country, but I am really looking forward to going abroad. This is the best way to get familiar with the language, I think, when you are exposed to it in a foreign country. (N#39: 18–21)

The best thing to learn the English language, I can say, is to go into an English speaking country, where you are confronted with the language all the time. (N#41: 8–10)

The implication seems to be that you can only ever really become “truly” competent in a foreign language if you have spent an extended period of time abroad in a country where the language is spoken. Holding such a belief has potentially serious implications for learners’ self-concept development, especially for those who do not have the opportunity to go abroad. Such learners consequently risk developing a negative self-concept if they have not been able to do what they believe they “ought” to do in order to become “truly” competent.

Another “ought” belief concerns things which some learners feel you “ought” to learn by heart, mostly the learning of vocabulary but also grammar. This belief is expressed frequently across all the data sets and, as a frame of reference, it seems to elicit many self-descriptions of “lazy” by those who do not take this supposed “ought” approach to vocabulary learning, e.g.:

Obviously, I am a little bit lazy with studying grammar and vocabulary but nevertheless I know these are necessary things to do. (N#29: 34–36)

Well, a weakness is, for example, learning vocabulary, so on purpose, not... I can not really study vocabulary by heart, so this is something that I have never done in school and somehow never got used to this. So this is a big weakness for me (I#2: 172–175)

- D My weakness I think is I’m lazy learning vocabulary.
 S Right.
 D If you learn some words in your daily life from the newspaper or people shopping I pick it up and yeah, but I don’t want to sit down and ok, these are vocabulary for newspaper articles or reports or I don’t know reviews. (I#12: 259–266)

The following example shows how this “ought to” belief may stem, at least in part, from teaching approaches, whether explicitly stated or implicitly suggested by teachers, their approach or their materials:

I realised that you know with the school English I wasn’t really good in talking and it didn’t help a lot, I mean I knew a lot of vocabulary because this is really, teachers tend to stress the vocabulary, that you learn vocabulary by heart (I#10: 63–66)

The potentially negative effect on a learner’s self-concept if they do not do what they feel they “ought to” do is evident. This finding can be compared to work by Higgins (1987, 1998) on the “ought” self, which suggests that learners measure their current self-concepts against supposed “ought” self-concepts and that any ensuing discrepancy can motivate in various ways (Dörnyei 2005). There are clearly parallels in the findings from this study to those of Higgins (1987, 1998) concerning the “ought” self-concept, which contains the attributes that one believes one “ought” to have. Higgins (1987: 321) defines the “ought” self as “your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you should or ought to possess (i.e., a representation of someone’s sense of duty, obligations, or responsibilities)”. In his self-discrepancy theory, an individual is seen to be motivated to reduce any perceived discrepancy between their actual current self-concept and their perceived “ought” self-concept. His approach sees the “ought” self as an

integral part of the self-concept, and the emphasis of his work and the recent work by Dörnyei (2005, 2009) is on the effects of any potential discrepancy in terms of motivation and affect. In contrast, I consider these “ought” beliefs to be part of a learner’s internal frame of reference, rather than necessarily as part of a learners’ self-concept, and the focus of this study is on the effect these beliefs or any potential discrepancy between the two sets of beliefs may have on the learner’s current self-concept, as opposed to on their motivation. Indeed, considered from a self-concept perspective, it is possible that some learners would not be motivated in a positive sense by any such perceived discrepancy if they had a negative self-concept and were driven by processes of self-verification (e.g., Swann 1997; Swann et al. 1987, 2007). Alternatively, if a learner perceived the discrepancy between their current and ought or ideal self too great, particularly if they held a fixed mindset about FLL, then a learner may feel powerless to reduce any perceived discrepancy and so thus may resort to “learned helplessness” patterns of behaviour (Peterson et al. 1993). Indeed, Higgins (1991 cited in Harter 1998: 575) has also suggested that it is not just the discrepancy per se that is important but the magnitude of the discrepancy. Indeed, some of the learners in this study indicate being aware of the discrepancy between their current self-concept and their “ought” beliefs about language learning but as the example below illustrates, they do not necessarily seem motivated to change their behaviour:

- D My weakness I think is I’m lazy learning vocabulary.
 S Right.
 D If you learn some words in your daily life from the newspaper or people shopping, I pick it up and yeah, but I don’t want to sit down and ok, these are vocabulary for newspaper articles or reports or I don’t know reviews. Yeah, I don’t reviews, I don’t like this. (I#12: 259–267)

Interestingly, in these data, apart from the particular belief about vocabulary and grammar learning, there are very few other examples of beliefs about language learning that do not seem to correspond to learners’ own reported self-beliefs. This high concordance between these learners’ beliefs about language learning and their beliefs about themselves as language learners could be expected, given their decision to study the language at university, which implies a high self-concept in this subject. It was particularly noticeable that in describing their “ideal” language learner, many of those interviewed tended to refer to characteristics or strategies that they had, at some point, described themselves as having:

Well, I think that I really try to speak and try to, to improve my English so this is definitely a strength that I’m not a silent language learner, so that I really want to communicate and try to communicate. I think this is somehow... that I have learned from in school that oral work is very, very important. (I#2: 219–223)

For many of the learners, the statements about their beliefs about language learning and their respective self-concepts did not occur directly next to each other but were spread throughout the interview, which makes it difficult to illustrate concisely. However, the following extracts should illustrate the seeming high level of agreement between this learner’s beliefs about language learning and about herself as a

language learner. All the following extracts are taken from interview #7, which was chosen for its relative “transparency”:

F I just love to talk, I don't like grammar, I don't like writing but I love talking and I like to meet new people. That was the main reason for me to study languages.

(...)

F For me language learning is just one purpose, talking to all people.

(...)

F My weakness is grammar and writing. (...) I can't do anything, I just don't like it to be honest. I love talking. I could talk all the day, I love reading in English and I like to watch all kind of movies and I have a lot of English speaking friends and but I just don't like writing.

(...)

F One of the things I recognise is I am a very outgoing person so that's, I don't have any fear to use a new language.

(...)

S What makes a successful language learner?

F Use the language. I think that is the most important thing. I think of course you can study language just like learning all the grammar patterns and just be perfect and using the tenses or whatever but I think still the most important thing is to just go out and talk. . .

(...)

F Of course, you have to learn vocabulary and grammar in every language but I think still the most important thing is to just use the language

(I#7: 29–31; 88–89; 200; 204–207; 387–388; 422–428; 559–561)

A possible reason for this concurrence between the beliefs is that, if the participant's ideal language learner description matched their current specific foreign language self-concept, this would protect and foster a positive self-concept in that language (Higgins 1998). Indeed, a positive self-concept would be expected for most of the learners in this advanced tertiary-level setting, especially given their decision to specialise and study English at university. The seemingly high degree of agreement between the beliefs about language learning and the beliefs about themselves as language learners in these interviews would also appear to be of particular interest to researchers in SLA, who are at present investigating the “ideal self” as a motivating factor (see, e.g., Csizér and Dörnyei 2005a, 2005b; Dörnyei 2005; Ryan 2006). Naturally, it is possible that a learner forms their beliefs about language learning based on their past experiences and in line with their own current self-concept. Whilst the exact nature of the relationship between a learner's self-concept and their beliefs about language learning remains unclear from these data, its importance is apparent.

A further possible consideration in respect to beliefs as an internal frame of reference is the extent to which some beliefs may be more internalised by learners than others. Deci (1995: 94) suggests that some beliefs and values may be fully

integrated by an individual into their sense of self and become a part of themselves; a process he refers to as internalisation and one that he believes is necessary for autonomous functioning. In contrast, beliefs that are only partially integrated into one's sense of self are referred to by Deci as "introjects", which he defines as "internalisations that take the form of "shoulds" and "oughts"" (ibid). He explains how these values and beliefs remain like "voices in one's head" (ibid) and appear like instructions from outside or from others external to one's inner sense of self. This conceptualisation seems to be of interest to the findings in this study. It raises the question as to whether the degree to which beliefs are integrated into an individual's sense of self could affect one's self-concept differently; in other words, it is possible that fully integrated, domain-specific beliefs could potentially harmonise more with and positively reinforce one's self-concept in the related domain, whereas beliefs in the form of introjects could possibly be more in conflict with and lead to more negative effects on the related self-concept. Although, at present, this proposed distinction between these forms of beliefs and their subsequent differing effects on the self-concept are mere speculation, it does suggest that further research is needed to explore how various beliefs may differ in the extent to which they are internalised or, alternatively, remain as introjects and how consequently these various forms of beliefs may affect an individual's self-concepts in differing ways and may possibly lead to differences in motivation.

An additional consideration concerns whether some of the learners' "ought" beliefs may represent a kind of "scripted discourse" or schema about learning a foreign language, especially given that many of the beliefs expressed about language learning appeared to be shared across the learners. This would suggest that a common set of beliefs about the process of language learning, a "scripted discourse" about language learning, may be widely shared by all the learners in this context, and this discourse could affect their self-concepts, as well as the types of beliefs reported upon (Mercer 2007). In other words, all the learners in this particular setting might consider the same core set of factors, experiences and beliefs to report upon, in order to correspond to a perceived discourse or schema about FLL that functions in this cultural and educational context. It is also worth considering whether beliefs about language learning may also represent an aspect of an individual's group identity and social collective identity as a language learner. In this way, stereotypical beliefs about the perceived "group" of foreign language learners may be affecting an individual's self-concept in that domain (cf. Brewer and Gardner 1996; Hogg and Vaughan 2002). Alternatively, learners of the kind in this research, who choose to study English at tertiary level and are predominantly from the same learning culture, may actually share a comparatively common set of experiences and similar sets of beliefs. However, given the relative homogeneity across the data in this respect, it would be promising to explore what kinds of beliefs learners may share about language learning, how strongly these are held and the extent to which these may serve as an internal frame of reference and influence self-concept formation.

5.1.2.2 Beliefs about the Specific Language

The second set of beliefs used as an internal frame of reference by the learners in these data was about specific languages. Logically, these beliefs only appeared to affect the respective specific FL self-concept:

I felt like it's easier to catch up in English than in Italian because Italian, it's just a complex, a very complex language and there are much more tenses, much more grammatical exceptions, much more things to really pay attention to when you're writing something or even when you're speaking, you can make such a lot of mistakes, you can say a sentence where you can have ten mistakes in it (J#7: 674–682)

I mean, I have to listen to the stuff and that's very good for Russian because I have a very good ear, so to say, for voiceless and voiced sounds and that is very important for Russian. (I#5: 109–112)

A third reason for choosing English as the first language of my studies is that I view it as a language which follows more “logical rules” than some other languages. This means I consider it easier to study it than other languages. (N#4: 10–14)

As the examples above show, most of the beliefs that appear to affect a specific FL self-concept are largely beliefs specific to the domains of foreign language learning or the related specific FL directly. In these data, there do not seem to be any direct examples of where learners connect more general academic beliefs about learning with their specific FL self-concepts.

However, learners also appear to compare their different sets of beliefs about specific languages and these seem to act as frames of reference for each other. It is possible that learners in fact use the results of such a comparison to influence their specific FL self-concepts:

I'm also a bit worried about my grammar skills; especially the tenses because they are much more complicated in English than in German and I sometimes mix them up. (N#20: 16–18)

This language sounds so soft and also not very difficult to speak. If I compare this with another language, like Croatian or Russian I would say that English is much better, just because it doesn't even sound a little aggressive. (N#41: 3–6)

These examples illustrate the complexity of learners' belief systems about specific languages and language learning in general and indicate how belief systems may affect each other, as well as each separate FL self-concept.

5.1.2.3 Attribution Beliefs

The final set of beliefs that appears to influence learners' EFL self-concepts concerns attribution beliefs, which are known from the literature on the topic to be related to one's self-concept beliefs, albeit in potentially complicated ways (see, e.g., Marsh 1984, 1986b; Marsh et al. 1984; Simpson et al. 1996; Weiner 1985, 1986). Instances in the data that revealed this connection were limited but most noticeable in the detailed extensive case study data. In terms of attributions, it can be seen in the data extracts below that the case study participant, Joana, believes that hard work and practice will help her to improve, and it is clear that this concept

of hard work is important to her and also to how she feels about her successes and failures:

I think I can, I can take a failure if I know I haven't been working that hard for it or I haven't got the right work attitude because of my own, of my own sort of negative connotation. If I know that beforehand and know where it comes from. If I'm good at a subject like English and I just get a slap in the face with a five⁴ and you don't know where it comes from, then. . . (J#4: 1268–1274)

. . . my confidence was positively affected by: the presentation, and also by my Italian Midterm (and I'm really proud of that because I had been working really hard for it) which wasn't difficult to take for me as I was well-prepared. (J#8: 32–35)

Evidently, believing she can affect her achievement through hard work seems to have the potential to influence her self-concept, and there is an implied connection here to the mindset beliefs mentioned in the previous section. Clearly, attribution beliefs are closely related to beliefs about how fixed or malleable an ability is, and it would be of great interest to further clarify the nature of the relationship between these two sets of beliefs and their relationship to a learner's self-concept.

From the data in this study, it remains unclear whether Joana's attribution beliefs affect her self-concept directly, or whether they may, in fact, mediate the effects of an exam result or grade on her self-concept:

I think in Italian I wouldn't be, you know, I think if I knew or if I have in the back of my mind I haven't worked that hard for it then it would be more okay for me and then I know exactly, okay, I have to do more on that and there is no other way round it but if I know I've worked hard for it and I still fail then it's really painful, that's really painful. (J#7: 992–997)

It depends if you really study hard for something you will be very pleased or you will probably need a positive exam feedback that's then really important but if you know, okay, I haven't really given it my best shot, then you'll know later on as well, okay, it's alright the way it is and well, I'm glad, I'm like unhappy than whatever. It depends on how much you put into the exam before it or how much time you put into it, how much effort. (J#22: 832–839)

These data extracts seem to suggest that the results of an exam may not automatically influence her self-concept but may be mediated by the attributions she makes about the reasons underlying her success or failure. Thus, her attribution beliefs could affect her self-concept but possibly indirectly, as a mediating factor in relation to external feedback or grades (cf. Hsieh and Schallert 2008) – a suggestion that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Joana's belief about the value of hard work is also related to her belief that through practice, you improve in a language: this is again a possible indirect expression of a growth mindset about her abilities in EFL. She attributes her perceived competence in English to a large amount of practice in using the language on a regular basis, whereas she attributes her perceived weak ability in Italian to her lack of regular practice. For Joana, it seems that the more practice she feels she has, the stronger and more positive her self-concept seems to be:

⁴5 is equivalent to a fail in the Austrian grading system.

No, I am looking forward to having more English courses again because I can see that the less I speak, the less I practise, the less it, you know, the less progress I make, you know, you really need, you really need to practise it. I think language is only about practising and I do realise for example that when I go to the pub and I have like two nights of speaking again and then I get into it again. (J#22: 135–141)

My level of language is really entirely depends on practice, you know, how much contact you do have in your daily life with the language itself. (J#22: 368–370)

As the data extracts below indicate, a specific expression of this belief about the value of practice concerns Joana's explanation that her ability in a foreign language depends upon the number of years of experience she has had learning the language. In fact, she often uses this belief to explain the perceived difference in her abilities between her Italian and her English. She repeatedly stresses that she has been learning English for a longer period of time than Italian, and this is why she believes that she is better at English than Italian:

... I just feel like okay, you have to remind yourself you've had English for I don't know eight, nine, ten years, whatever and you're now a language learner of Italian, and you've had Italian now for four years or something and the three years at school weren't really, you know, it just wasn't really a lot so to say but the basic grammar and a few words, you know, so I thought you have to really realise where you are now compared to my English when I was at school at that time (J#6: 875–882)

Because I've only been confronted or have only had it for a couple of years, compared to English, I've had, you know, English I've had English twice as much in my whole life and that's, you know. I've had it at school and studies from the age of ten and I started with Italian at the age of sixteen which makes a difference really (J#17: 620–625)

This perceived lack of experience seems to affect her self-concept. Alternatively, Joana may be using this belief to explain her perceived weaker ability in Italian to herself and to me in the research setting. It is not possible with these data to show whether she developed this belief to justify her current self-concepts in the two languages, or whether the belief existed previously for Joana and has consequently affected her self-concept.

In the remaining data sets, there were also examples of statements that could also be considered as being a form of attribution beliefs, again often expressed in terms of practice and experience, or lack of it, e.g.:

To tell the truth it is easier for me to write an essay than to make conversation. A reason for this might be the lack of experience. We almost never talked in English at school mainly we had to do writing tasks. (N#3: 12–15)

... but the more I study and practise the better I become. (N#29: 7–8)

My great weakness as a language learner is that my pronunciation is not so good because my English teacher at school did very few pronunciation exercises in class. (N#61: 37–39)

An additional context in which a form of attribution beliefs was expressed was in relation to future goals and a learner's self-belief in their ability to achieve these:

I think with enough effort during this term I have the chance to do well (N#3: 37–38)

... what I feel confident about my language learning is that I will get better the more I will invest in my studies. (N#38: 29–31)

These statements can be interpreted as indirect expressions of a growth mindset in which the individual expresses beliefs about the nature of language learning. These learners imply that they believe in the potential to improve their language ability, in contrast to those who may hold a fixed mindset in which language learning ability is perceived as being non-malleable. This suggests these learners hold an optimistic view of FLL in which both their ability and self-concept could develop positively with time, practice and experience.

Clearly, there is much overlap and close interrelations between attribution beliefs, learners' FLL mindsets, beliefs about the value of hard work and practice and learners' interpretations of success, failure and future goals. As such, the ways in which they interact with each other and a learner's L2 self-concept represent an area of great complexity, which will be of interest for future studies to explore.

5.1.3 *Affect*

The final internal factor emerging from the analysis of these data, affect, appeared throughout the data, either as a factor on its own or as a response to or component aspect of one of the other factors, in particular the critical experiences (see [Chapter 6, Section 6.1.5](#)). It is extremely difficult to clarify the exact nature of the relationship between affect and the self-concept and, as such, the findings regarding this factor must remain rather tentative. However, other researchers have also emphasised a possible relationship between the two (Denissen et al. 2007; Goetz et al. 2008) and, given the considerable extent of affective statements throughout the data, it seems to merit categorising as a factor on its own. As a result of my own background in humanistic thinking, affect is perhaps a factor that I tend to search out in data and I am aware that I may have afforded it more attention than another researcher might have done. However, affective statements and responses appeared to permeate all aspects of the data and indeed, seem to be linked to many of the other factors which emerge from this study, suggesting the potentially significant role that affect may play in self-concept formation.

It is worth noting that, in some cases, the factor causing the internal affective reaction may be considered as external to the learner and often it is difficult to entirely separate the two categories. However, I have tried to organise the data analysis that follows according to where I feel the learner places the emphasis, i.e., on the external event or their internal reaction to it. In this section, the focus is on affect in terms of its internal emphasis. Naturally, there is a degree of subjectivity about this decision and another researcher may have categorised an instance differently.

Firstly, there were examples in the data suggesting a link between the self-concept and affective factors, such as fun, enjoyment and interest, particularly in the context of learning the language and encounters with teachers:

I've always enjoyed being in contact with English. Seeing something in English, makes me, you know, gives me that really nice and warm feeling inside (J#22: 654–656)

I really can read it, well, I don't understand every single word but I really... that I am able to do this. Yeah, and this is something I like doing so I am now used to reading books in English and I'm only buying English books now and I really enjoy reading in English in my free time as well. (I#2: 143–148)

I feel confident about talking to others in English, for example with native speakers. It's great fun and you can really learn a lot by doing so. (N#34: 21–23)

A possible link between feeling competent and a positive affective response to the subject would be expected (Denissen et al. 2007; Goetz et al. 2008) and indeed several learners appear to connect experiences of success with fun or pleasure in learning the language. However, it should be stressed that from the data it is not clear whether a learner's positive self-concept in a specific domain comes from their positive feelings and associations with the particular subject, or from having a sense of competence in the domain already, or whether the relationship functions in a bidirectional, reciprocal manner with self-concept influencing one's affective response to a domain and vice-versa.

In many instances throughout the data, affect also often appeared in relation to statements concerning the learner's motivation, rather than being directly linked to self-concept. Given the seeming link between motivation and self-beliefs (see, e.g., Covington 1992; Schunk 1991; Skaalvik and Valas 1999; Wigfield and Karpathian 1991; Zimmermann et al. 1992), it is possible that affective factors could also be influencing the learners' self-concepts indirectly via their motivation. As has been proposed elsewhere (Harter 1986), it seems that there may be a close relationship between self-concept, affect and motivation, although, at present, research appears to be unsure about the nature or directionality of such a link. It would be important to clarify the precise nature of the relationship between these key psychological factors, and the saliency of affective statements throughout the data at least draws attention to the importance of understanding and being sensitive to the potential role of affect in relation to self-concept development.

One particular affective state that seems to be important for several learners' self-concepts is a "feeling of progress" in a particular language and this is often mentioned together with their motivation and other positive affective states, e.g.:

S And why do you love Italian more than you did do, you think?

J Because I can actually see that there is something, that there is now, that I am progressing a lot quicker right now. I can see it myself, you know. I can virtually see that my understanding, it comes into, it's more, I don't know, I'm getting a feeling for the language. (J#21: 65–71)

I have never really had considerable difficulties in learning a language and it is very motivating for me to see improvements. (N#29: 3–4)

I really like the fact that since I have started my studies I have improved and learned new things. (N#34: 38–39)

Thus, to have a positive self-concept in the particular subject, it seems that several of the learners need to feel a sense of progress, a feeling that they are improving in the language. Indeed, throughout the data, there are many statements about learners' feelings of progress, even when not directly linked to their self-concept.

It is possible that a learner's sense of progress may reflect a comparison of their current self-concept with a prior self-concept, a process known as temporal comparison (cf. Wilson and Ross 2000, 2001). It is suggested that individuals may sometimes engage in comparison with perceived past selves in order to enhance

their current self-concept and feel more positively about their current self by seeking evidence of improvement and judging past selves as having been in some way inferior to their current self (see, e.g., McFarland and Alvaro 2000; Taylor et al. 1995; Wilson and Ross 2000, 2001). A particularly interesting example of such an internal comparison, unique in these data, occurs in a statement by a mature female student who is 62 years old. As a teenager, she spent some time in the United States and this appears to have been a “critical experience” for her in her language learning history. Interestingly, she compares herself now to herself at that time, which was the last time she considered herself to have been a language learner:

I am more communicative than I was as a teenager. (N#33: 52)

As has been shown earlier in this chapter, learners can make comparisons across a whole range of domains, if these are perceived as being relevant by the learner and, in this case, the learner compares her current self-concept to her prior self-concept in the same domain. Other research also suggests that prior self-concepts are likely to affect current self-concepts (Marsh, 1990b), and it is possible that the comparison between the two results in a sense of progress, or lack of it, and this in turn could affect an individual’s current self-concept. Indeed, the drive to enhance one’s current self-concept may be one possible reason why an individual may choose to engage in this kind of temporal comparison at all (see Wilson and Ross 2000, 2001 for a fuller discussion of issues surrounding and factors affecting temporal comparison).

Although exploring this idea in depth is beyond the scope of this study, some other examples from the data show the potential that this line of thinking may offer:

I am happy about the fact that my speech is getting better and better since I’ve started. (N#10: 19–20)

When it comes to English I am most confident about my spoken English, at which I must add that, at the moment, the fluency I normally have is decreasing. (N#63: 41–43)

It is also necessary to draw attention to the distinction made between the affective component of self-concept in a particular domain and affective reactions to the domain. Understanding the affective dimension of self-concept as the “beliefs of self-worth associated with one’s perceived competence” in a particular domain (Pajares and Miller 1994: 194), is clearly different to the affective connotations about the language as a subject. Two data extracts provide instances of the affective dimension of Joana’s EFL self-concept and serve to illustrate the contrast to the affective responses outlined above:

I just feel more comfortable with the other accent and I think every person has to decide upon this, and whatever you feel more comfortable with or whatever is easier to pronounce for you (J#2: 208–211)

I am really comfortable because I know that I can cope with almost everything. (J#22: 656–657)

Despite difficulties of this kind in distinguishing the nature of the affective aspects of a learner’s self-concept and affective responses to stimuli, it is worth considering the potential influence on an individual’s self-concept of their affective responses,

until the exact nature of the relationship is clarified in further research. At least from these data, it seems as if a learner's affective responses in a particular foreign language domain appear to be connected to their respective foreign language self-concept. Admittedly, this is an extremely complex area for research, and there have been very few studies examining the relationship between the affective experience of learning and the self-concept in a domain, with the exception of two recent papers by Denissen et al. (2007) and Goetz et al. (2008). Both papers suggest a relationship between within-domain enjoyment/interest, achievement and the respective self-concept. Accepting that affect can have a powerful influence on learning in many ways (see, e.g., Arnold 1999; Damasio 1994; Horwitz and Young 1991; LeDoux 1998; McLeod 1989; Pekrun 1992; Pekrun et al. 2002; Reeve 2005; Vail 1994; Young 1999), it would seem to be important for researchers and educators to understand more fully how affect may also be related to learners' self-concepts.

Finally, it is worth considering a proposal put forth by Pekrun (1990) in respect to the affective dimension of self-concept. He suggested that certain factors may only influence specific aspects of the self-concept and not necessarily all of its dimensions equally. As some factors emerging from the analysis in this study seem more affective in nature and some more cognitive, it is conceivable that such factors may be influencing, respectively, the affective or cognitive aspect of the self-concept. Alternatively, factors may affect both dimensions of the self-concept but in different ways. This suggestion is particularly interesting if the cognitive and affective dimensions of self-concept are considered as differentiated, as has been suggested (Marsh et al. 1999a). Whilst it is clearly beyond the scope of this current project to explore this suggestion, it raises the question of whether the factors elucidated in this book may not be affecting all aspects of the self-concept equally, and thus the relationship between the individual factors mentioned in this study and the self-concept could be considerably more complex than this research undertaking is able to portray.

5.1.3.1 Temporary Affective States

Affect also occurs in the longitudinal case study data⁵ in the form of affective states, such as mood, tiredness, stress etc. Although there are several instances of this throughout the data, these affective factors only appear to be influencing her self-concept in temporary ways, as the data extracts below indicate:

... sometimes I have bad days speaking English and sometimes I have good days, it depends really on my, probably whole mood, the whole mood I'm in or whatever. And today I feel like I can't really talk in English or I can't think of vocabulary and it's hard for me today (J#3: 232–237)

⁵It is worth noting that the absence of this internal factor from the other data sets is likely to be the result of the single-point data generation method, which would not be conducive to eliciting this kind of temporal factor. As such, it indicates the value of generating data at multiple points in time, in order to avoid distortion from the potential influence of these temporary affective factors on the reported self-concept of the moment.

I think that when I'm probably now speaking in English and I feel like I can't really talk then I feel not, I don't know I just feel a little bit uncomfortable speaking English and then there are other times when I'm really awake and really energetic, and then I feel like, oh my god, it's really, I can really speak fluently and I feel like I'm sometimes speaking English even you know, even faster than I do speak in German and that's really, I don't know I'm happy about that fact that I can speak in English very fast if want, wanted to. (J#6: 801–810)

In their key paper on the dynamic self-concept, Markus and Wurf (1987: 306) suggest the idea of a “working self-concept, or the self-concept of the moment” to help to understand research findings that indicate that the self-concept can be both stable and malleable. In the above data extracts, Joana makes statements about certain affective factors affecting her self-concept but these appear to be temporary effects. Thus, I would suggest that these affective states may be influencing her “working” or “trait” self-concept and not her “core” or “state” self-concept directly.

Importantly, the finding that certain affective factors may influence the reported self-concept of the moment, albeit temporarily, has considerable implications for research and single-point data collection methods. The effect of affective states, such as tiredness, mood and stress, on one's cognition, behaviour and motivation are well-documented (see, e.g., Isen et al. 1985, 1987; Reeve 2005), yet little work has been carried out into the relationship they have directly with self-constructs of any kind (cf. Nezelek and Plesko 2001; Sedikides 1992, 1994; Showers et al. 1998). Hence, the link between such temporary affective states and self-concept would be a fruitful area for future studies, especially for research concerned with examining the extent to which the reported self-concept may be dynamic and influenced by situational variables.

5.1.4 Summary

In terms of the I/E model (Marsh 1986a), the analyses of the data in this study have shown that the internal processes suggested in the model, namely internal cross-domain comparisons, also appear to function in relation to the EFL self-concepts of the learners examined here. However, the discussion of the findings also suggests that there may be some caveats about these factors, and there may also be other processes at work, apparently also highly influential, which would need to be incorporated into any model that attempts to understand how learners form their specific foreign language learner self-concepts.

Firstly, learners studied in this investigation appear to make internal cross-domain comparisons. However, the range of domain comparisons was found to be more extensive than the usual maths/verbal domain comparison, which is examined in the vast majority of I/E studies. In this study, the findings indicated that learners made comparisons across several subjects and at various levels of domain-specificity, depending on the perceived relevance and relatedness of the different domains for the individual in a particular context. It was also suggested that the motivations underlying internal comparisons, which may involve upward or downward internal comparisons, could be complex and related to self-enhancement and

self-verification motives as well as affective states. As such, these findings should caution researchers and teachers against oversimplifying the processes at work in internal comparisons within a learner's self-concept network and suggest domains selected for comparison may not be easy to anticipate.

The majority of the internal comparisons in this study were made by learners across separate foreign language self-concepts. One might have expected the two specific foreign language self-concepts to be similar in content to each other, given their commonality within the domain of foreign languages. Yet, many of the other learners studied also appear to compare and contrast their FL self-concepts, in a similar manner to learners who have been shown to make the maths/verbal comparison in other I/E studies. In terms of the effects of the I/E model, this would imply that a learner may develop a weaker self-concept in one foreign language, due to the perceived stronger self-concept in the other foreign language, despite potentially having a similar level of ability.

A further internal comparison of particular interest for the field of foreign language learning was made by some learners between specific foreign languages and their mother tongue (L1). The comparison was particularly notable at certain periods in the learners' reported development, such as when they were in primary school and no other foreign language existed, or when they were first learning foreign languages in secondary school: in other words, in contexts when such a comparison was possibly more relevant for learners, or also in respect to a future goal. This finding indicates possible contextual variation and suggests that the level or age of the learner may also influence the domains chosen for internal comparisons.

There was also some evidence in the data of internal cross-domain comparisons at the level of the skill domain within a language. Many learners, for example, appear to make internal comparisons at the level of speaking and writing within the language. This is an important extension of the I/E model to the skill domain level for advanced EFL learners. If learners make such a speaking/writing dichotomy, it could be expected that this would have the same effects, as are generally implied by the I/E model. Namely, a learner with possibly similar abilities in the two skill areas may make internal comparisons, which could lead to the self-concept in one skill domain being weaker than the other, so that learners may perceive of themselves as being either stronger in EFL writing or EFL speaking. Additionally, some learners chose to compare other skills rather than writing and speaking, and it was suggested that the domains chosen for internal comparison may reflect perceived weakest or strongest skills, or learner's perceptions of the ways in which skill domains may be similar or different (cf. Rost et al. 2005). Alternatively, the selection and comparison of skill domains may depend on the nature of the learner's classes and the emphases placed in their particular educational context and, as such, this may lead to contextual variation in skill domain comparisons.

Furthermore, in the very detailed written narrative descriptions data, some learners also appeared to make comparisons within the skill domain at the task level. However, there were only limited examples of this; nevertheless, it raises questions about the level of specificity at which internal comparisons may function for advanced learners with highly developed, complex EFL self-concepts, or,

alternatively, the extent to which individuals may vary in terms of the complexity of their self-concepts, despite potentially being at the same level of ability. It remains for further research to explore which domains learners choose to group together, which cross-domain comparisons they engage in, what the motivations for the comparisons are, what the effects of these comparisons on their respective self-concepts are and to what extent all of this may vary across individuals and contexts.

In terms of additional, new internal factors affecting the development of learner EFL self-concept that are not present in the I/E model, the most notable and common factor across the data were learners' beliefs about language learning. These beliefs seemed to function as an internal frame of reference against which learners evaluated their FL self-concepts. These beliefs did not appear to function at the very specific language level but rather at the more global level of foreign language learning in general. Several potential types of relationships between a learner's beliefs and their self-concept were proposed but given its complexity, more research is needed to clarify the exact nature and directionality of the relationships.

One concern arising from these findings was that some of the learners' beliefs about language learning seem to serve a rather prescriptive role about what they feel they "ought" to do or have done in the past. The potentially negative impact of possessing "ought" beliefs that do not correspond to one's current self-concept can be seen, for example, on those learners who described themselves as being "lazy" in respect to not learning vocabulary by heart, or those who had not been abroad for an extensive period of time and who felt they could not possibly be as competent as others unless they had. If the learner perceives a discrepancy between their "current" and "ought" self-concept, as was the case here with the belief about learning vocabulary by heart and the learners' use of the self-descriptor "lazy", it is clear that this may have a negative effect on their current self-concept. Research exploring this comparison has focused on the potential motivational effect of this discrepancy (Dörnyei 2005; Higgins 1987, 1998), whereas the focus in this study is on the possible effect of these beliefs on the individual's current self-concept.

Particular beliefs, such as the value of practice and experience, were particularly salient in these data. In addition, specific individual beliefs were present, such as the belief in a natural talent for language learning, which raised questions about the learners' mindsets and the effect of these on their self-concepts. The relative homogeneity of the findings across the data raises the question of whether such homogeneity really exists, or whether, in fact, this may reflect an internalised "scripted discourse" about language learning which influences the factors learners select to report upon. Thus, learners from similar learning cultures and communities may develop a common set of beliefs or a "discourse" about the process of foreign language learning, which could, in turn, affect their self-concepts in related, specific, foreign language domains, or, at least, what learners choose to report upon. Nevertheless, despite many commonalities across the data, there was also much evidence of individual variation in terms of the actual content of the beliefs reported.

The discussion also considered the extent to which beliefs may be differently integrated by learners into their sense of self (cf. Deci 1995). It was proposed that beliefs in the form of introjects could affect learners' self-concepts in a different

way, potentially more negatively, compared to more integrated beliefs, which could possibly harmonise more with one's self-concept and thus affect it more positively.

The data also indicated that learners' beliefs about specific languages may also affect their related, individual, specific foreign language self-concept. Again, this could function in more complex terms than this analysis is able to convey, as learners may also compare their beliefs about separate languages and the resultant beliefs emerging from such a comparison could affect the different FL self-concepts.

The third and final set of beliefs that appear to be connected to a learner's self-concept is attribution beliefs, which were expressed in these data directly and indirectly, in particular through statements about the value of hard work and practice. However, attribution beliefs often occurred in the data alongside feedback or grades, and it was suggested that these attribution beliefs may mediate the effects of feedback or grades on the learners' self-concepts and these will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. The attribution beliefs were also linked to learners' beliefs about the nature of ability in language learning (mindsets) and beliefs about the value of hard work and practice. How these sets of beliefs are interlinked and related to self-concept remains to be clarified.

The final internal factor that was elucidated upon in this chapter but which is not explicitly incorporated in the I/E model concerns affect. This chapter distinguishes between the affective component of self-concept and affective responses to experiences and events. The latter was expressed in statements of reactions to external stimuli and, most notably through a feeling of progress, which could possibly stem from an internal comparison of prior and current self-concepts in the same domain, although clearly many external factors, such as feedback, experiences etc. may influence this as well. The idea of progress was of relevance for many learners who stressed the importance of this for their feeling of well-being in the language.

Additionally, a range of temporary affective factors, such as tiredness, illness, mood etc., seem to be able to affect a learner's working self-concept: a finding which indicates that self-concept may be dynamic and influenced by situational variables and as such, data collection methods would need to consider the possibility that a reported self-concept may vary depending on the context and point in time.

A final caveat that needs to be kept in mind in respect to all of the internal factors identified in this chapter concerns the potential for individual variation. It is possible that some learners may place more of an emphasis on internal or external factors when forming their self-concepts. For example, Joana's data suggested that she placed more of an emphasis on internal factors, whereas the analysis of the interview data from other learners suggested that there may be some individual variation in this. Each interview was examined individually to explore the relative ratio of internal/external factors per learner. The most notable finding that resulted from this form of analysis was that, although each learner made reference to both internal and external factors, there seemed to be some variation in the emphasis they placed on one or the other frame. Only two learners were predominantly oriented towards internal factors, three learners appeared to be orientated equally towards both internal and external factors, and the remaining seven interviews suggested

an orientation primarily towards external factors.⁶ Possible reasons for this will be explored more fully in [Chapter 6, Section 6.1.6](#).

Furthermore, it is conceivable that learners could vary in the perceived importance they assign to separate individual factors within the internal/external distinction. In other words, learners may not just vary in terms of whether they place more emphasis on internal or external factors but some learners may attach more importance to certain specific factors within the internal or external categories than others. Thus, for example, within the internal factors, some learners may place more importance on cross-domain comparisons at the FL level, whereas others may be more influenced by their beliefs about language learning. Considering such scope for individual variation, it is important not to make broad generalisations across all learners and take care not to create oversimplistic, abstracted models to describe all learners which overlook these potentially fundamental differences across learners and contexts.

Bearing in mind the complexity of the psychological processes involved and considering the caveats and potential sources of variation outlined above, a summary of the key internal factors that may affect a learner's EFL self-concept is presented below (Fig. 5.1). This list is not meant to be exhaustive and indeed, the factors are not intended to be necessarily considered in isolation, as they may potentially function in interconnected ways simultaneously. Further, all of these factors can be themselves influenced by contextual and situational variables on the macro- and micro-contextual levels.

Internal Factors

- Internal comparisons across domains within the self- concept network
 - *Across subjects*
 - *Across languages*
 - *Across skills*
 - *[Across Tasks – limited number of learners only]*
- Belief Systems
 - *About language learning*
 - *About a specific language*
 - *Attributions [Possible mediating role]*
- Affective Reactions – incl. temporary affective factors on working/state self-concept

Fig. 5.1 Internal factors affecting a learner's EFL self-concept

⁶These results were calculated by comparing instances of the co-occurrence of codes for "causality" with the codes for the various internal/external factors emerging from this analysis.

Chapter 6

External Frames of Reference in FL Self-Concept Formation

6.1 Defining External Factors

As explained in [Chapter 4](#), in Marsh's (1986a) I/E model, "external" is used to refer to social comparisons of one's perceived performance with those of others, as well as a comparison of standardised external expressions of ability, such as grades. However, in order to encompass additional factors emerging from the analysis of the data in this study, the external category is again more broadly defined here. "External" factors are thus characterised as those that stem primarily from outside the individual, such as actual experiences, experiences with significant individuals, one's learning environment, feedback from others etc.

Ultimately, as explained in the previous chapter, it may not be possible to separate factors affecting the self-concept clearly in terms of an internal/external distinction (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002), as they may not be independent categories and the distinction between the two may be better conceived of along the lines of a continuum. Indeed, during the analysis of the data, it was often a difficult decision to assign instances of factors to one of the two categories. However, for ease of comprehensibility, it was still felt to be worthwhile to distinguish between these categories of internal/external factors, whilst acknowledging the overlapping relationship and potential false division between the two. Although there are several instances in the data which could be assigned to either category, a segment of data was classified as being external if that appeared to be where the learner themselves placed the emphasis in their descriptions. Naturally, there is a degree of subjectivity about this decision and another researcher may have categorised an instance differently. However, the focus here is on identifying factors of various kinds, and it is hoped that the use of the categories will facilitate an understanding and overview of the factors that appear to affect the EFL self-concept. The chapter will consider each key factor in turn, illustrating the discussion with salient examples from the various data sets.

6.1.1 Social Comparisons

In Marsh's (1986a) I/E model, one key aspect of the external frame of reference refers to social comparison with others: in other words, when students compare their

perceived performances and grades with those of others. As may be expected from what is said in the literature on the topic (see, e.g., Dickhäuser 2005; Marsh 1990c; Marsh and Parker 1984; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002; Suls and Wheeler 2000), many of the learners compared themselves externally with other learners. Most learners tended to compare themselves with their peers in the same class as well as with their peers at university generally. As the data extracts below illustrate, these comparisons seem to serve as an important external frame of reference for learners in forming their self-concepts:

Yeah, for example, when I compare myself or when I hear that somebody studies three thousand pages by heart and I feel like I'm really dumb because I can't do it, I can't study by heart, I can't even study a few pages by heart, I can't do it, I just can't memorize it that well (J#6: 665–669)

- G A weakness is like I am reading very, very slowly.
 S Really? Why?
 G I don't know.
 S What makes you say that you're reading slowly?
 G Comparison.
 S To who?
 G My girlfriend, to other people. (I#6: 426–438)

...like in C, I did use my English a lot but I never felt I was really that great or anything, whereas here sometimes in comparison my level of English is better than the ones that came out of school here of my age. (I#11: 196–199)

It might be expected that learners would be likely to choose people to compare themselves with who are perceived as being similar in some way and thus who would suggest an appropriate basis for comparison. Hence, it is unsurprising that the majority of learners make comparisons with peers either in the same class or at the same stage at university. However, there are other instances of social comparisons in the data which suggest a more complex picture.

Considering the case study data, in addition to with her peers, Joana also compared herself to other individuals within other domains perceived by her to be relevant. For example, the statement below was given by Joana in response to a question about her approach to studying for a language exam:

Oh, that's for me very important because I'm, I'm like my dad and my dad, I mean he has built a house, he is an active person and I think I am a little bit like him, I need activity (J#6: 541–543)

Joana often appears to select individuals to compare herself with who she considers to be an equal, or who might offer an advantageous comparison by being perceived as lower in ability than herself, as well as with family members, e.g.:

- J And my mum was always good at languages and very well, not very good at mathematics and stuff like that so...
 S So they encouraged you in that?
 J Somehow, yeah. Or it's probably just in the genes. (J#22: 758–763)

Joana also occasionally compared herself with others at a group level, not just with specific individuals:

. . .so I felt like, wow, my level is really, my level of spoken English, because that's the only thing I could compare really, is a way higher than most Italians' spoken English. (J#24: 606–609)

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002) stress that the basis for external comparisons may be a group or an individual or indeed both, but if the learner makes comparisons with individuals then there will generally be some perceived reason and motivation for selecting that individual for comparison. Trautwein et al. (2005: 308) refer to the concept of “closeness” as a possible basis on which individuals construct and select their external frame of reference. Closeness can be based on physical similarities, psychological variables or, most commonly, the physical environment.

Another example of a social comparison with a group perceived to be “close” rather than with an individual peer can be found in the data from a visiting French Erasmus exchange student who compared her pronunciation with that of French speakers generally:

My problem is that as many French people my accent is terrible. (N#45: 14)

It is likely that as she does not feel it is appropriate to compare her pronunciation to the German speakers in her current class and so she compares herself to her fellow French speakers, possibly a reflection of her perceived “closeness” to her own native-speaker group and subsequent perceived distance to her current immediate class peers. Furthermore, there may also be various motives behind such a comparison, such as supporting and protecting her current self-concept by selecting a more advantageous comparison, or simply by referring to a peer group that is conceptually “closer” and thus provides a “fairer” comparison.

In the other data sets, another interesting example of a comparison was made by a learner who compared herself to a native speaker:

I notice how my English is when I talk to native speakers. For example, when I was in Italy there was an American girl, she lived at my. . . she spent a week at my place and she was just chatting all the time and I had problems talking with her because, ok she talked really fast. . . she had these really specific words I didn't even know existed and then I noticed, oh, I got a long way to go. That affects my motivation. (I#3: 439–446)

This learner seemed to suggest that her motivation was affected by this comparison as it drives her to achieve her goal of becoming “native speaker-like”. The connection to her self-concept is implied in her statement that considering the level she feels she has achieved at present, she still has a “long way to go” to achieve the same level. Another learner also reveals how a comparison to a “near-peer” motivates her to aim to achieve the same level:

- G But she, it happened to her, that she was on a exchange scheme while at high school and her English was very, very good, really good, when you hear her speaking you assume she's not German, she's from England. So, that is the final goal. I think, when I go there, I mean it is very hard but she managed to do it, I mean after being abroad for one year in high school and during several visits, I mean, still keep in contact with the people in England, with her host family, and she managed to do it. I was really impressed.
- S Super. That's your goal now?

- G Yeah, I thought well, I want to be like her, you know. Not now but, you know, on the longer term I want to achieve that. (I#10: 887–900)

These two data extracts illustrate the apparent connection between the learners' external comparisons, their self-concepts, motivation and goals. Indeed, it seems that social comparisons can affect an individual in terms of their motivation and goals and certain individuals can serve as models to emulate. As was explained in [Chapter 3](#), the potential effect of a social comparison on an individual's self-concept and motivation may depend on the extent to which the other person is seen as representing an achievable goal.

A particularly interesting comparison to others occurs when the case study participant nearly fails a written English course and then compares her result to someone else's to try to rationalise and justify her result. She implies that it is the course that is too difficult, as the other girl was "very good" at English and yet she also only received an average grade:

- J Well, for English as a whole I'm not being that much put down by that fact because I know a friend of mine, she has always had ones¹ for her whole career through and she is very good at studying English and she usually gets ones or twos and I know that she had a three at that Varieties of Written English course and I know that she is a really good language learner and so I think, if I compare myself to her, for example, because she is Austrian and she has had English as long as I have had it, so if I compare myself to her, and she was half a year in Australia too, I wasn't, so I think if I compare myself to her and she is really, she is almost, she is really intelligent, she is really, really clever and she is probably more able to learn or is a more efficient learner than I am.
- S And why?
- J Because she, I think she can pick up everything like that, she doesn't have to repeat it, she stores it right away. There are people that can do that, they just hear something in the lesson or in the course and they just know it and she is one of these people so she is really, really intelligent, she doesn't have to do a lot for getting good grades.
- S There are very few people like that.
- J But she is one of those people, and if I, and then I feel like, okay, it's not a catastrophe (J#6: 1069–1095)

This data extract suggests a possible self-protection motivation behind the selection of this peer for comparison. From research, it is known that individuals may select people to compare themselves with in order to either protect or enhance their own self-concept and this results in either downward or upward social comparisons (see, e.g., Collins 1996, 2000; Wills 1981). In other words, learners may decide to engage in downward social comparisons, i.e., with those considered less able than themselves, possibly to enhance their self-concept, or, in some cases, in upwards social comparisons, i.e., with those perceived as being better than themselves, in order to confirm a possibly already weak self-concept. However, the possible effect of social comparisons on an individual's self-concept cannot be assumed to be straight-forward and depend on a host of other factors such as the

¹In Austria, the grading system is between 1–5. 1 is the best grade (equivalent to a grade "A"), 5 is a fail (equivalent to a grade "E").

learner's mindset and perceived similarity of the individual used for comparison (see [Chapter 4, Section 4.1.4.4](#)).

A particular context in which social comparisons are especially evident is during the transition from school to university. Transitions from one schooling context to another are known to be psychologically stressful and critical periods for the self-concept (see, e.g., Cantor et al. 1987; Chemers et al. 2001; Harter et al. 1992; Seidman et al. 1994; Silverthorn et al. 2005; Wigfield et al. 1991). Naturally, the learners' external frames of reference change as their peer group changes. For example, a learner who begins to study English at university may start their studies believing their English to be very good, possibly due to the fact that they were comparatively good in the school setting compared to their classmates. However, once they begin to study English at university and begin to reassess their abilities within a new frame of reference, comparing themselves to their new peer group, many of whom are also very good or who have already spent extended periods of time abroad, their self-concept may change as it readjusts through the evaluation with this new frame of reference. It is interesting to note that the comparisons with others across educational contexts do not tend to be expressed at the level of the whole language but rather in skill domain-specific terms, such as pronunciation and grammar, e.g.:

Yeah, I loved the language and I was, at school I was one of the best so I thought it's good for me to study English. (...) I am sometimes not really self-confident and so I am sometimes not really motivated because I am not as good as other students. . . (I#8: 29–30; 88–90)

In addition I am worried about my grammar skills. In school nobody told me that I have to study more grammar and I thought that my English is very good. In the first semester at university I have noticed that this is not true and that I have to study grammar. (N#1: 20–23)

In my first semester I had to face my different weaknesses and strengths in a new way. (...) In school I had no problem to speak in English and my teachers marked me very well for that but they never took care of my pronunciation. (N#13: 7–8; 10–12)

It seems as if during this period of transition from school to university learners are forced to re-evaluate their self-concepts in light of their new external frames of reference such as a new peer group and also new teacher expectations etc. (Jackson 2003). For some learners, it seems that reassessing their self-concept in the new educational setting appears to cause them a degree of concern and uncertainty. In the university context, the effects of this reassessment of the self may have a potentially even greater impact, given that it may concern a domain of great personal value that the individual has chosen to specialise in (Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Harter 1999a; Wigfield and Eccles 2000; Wigfield and Karpathian 1991). The effect of this transition on the self-concept could possibly be reflected in university drop-out rates, and it would be important for educators to understand the potential psychological effects on learners.

In the Austrian educational context of this study, the significance of the peer comparison at university is possibly compounded by the fact that there is no standardised school leaving examination. Hence, a grade "A" from one school compared

to a grade “A” awarded at another school can vary widely in terms of actual ability. This also makes it difficult for learners to compare themselves beyond the confines of their school or class. In addition, universities in Austria do not have a process of selection for commencing degree courses, and any student with a school-leaving certificate can choose to study a language, without having attained a specifically-defined, standardised level. This suggests that the cultural context could influence the degree to which social comparisons are of importance in self-concept formation. Thus, certain educational contexts, such as Austrian universities or competitive classroom environments, could draw more attention to social comparisons and thereby accentuate its role in self-concept formation processes.

Although the data in this study appeared to confirm the role played by social comparisons in self-concept formation, as suggested in the I/E model, there were also several caveats to this and the nature of this factor appears to be quite complex. In particular, it must be remembered that learners may choose various individuals to compare themselves with depending on perceived suitability of the individual or group for comparison (same level, age, ability etc.) in a particular context, or depending on the learner’s possible need to enhance or protect their self-concept. Indeed, a range of psychological processes may be at work concerning who one chooses as the basis for a social comparison, such as downward and upward social comparison (Collins 1996; Suls and Wheeler 2000; Wills 1981), or issues related to motivation or goals. As such, one must be cautious not to assume that the social comparison processes will necessarily be with peers in the same class or in the same educational setting, or that learners will automatically engage in only advantageous, primarily, downward comparisons. Work by Burleson et al. (2005) caution against assuming that the effects of social comparisons may be straightforward and predictable but rather may depend on both an individual’s perceptions and interpretations of their context and social comparison partners. Other researchers have also drawn attention to the potential for variation across individuals and contexts in terms of the types and effects of social comparisons an individual may engage in (see, e.g., Butzer and Kuiper 2006; Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Hemphill and Lehman 1991; Wheeler 2000; Wilson and Ross 2000). Indeed, the data here suggest that in particular contexts, such as transitions across educational contexts, as here from school to university, or in the Austrian educational culture, the factor of social comparison may play a more important role than at other times and in other contexts. Other researchers have also stressed the need to consider to what extent a social comparison may happen unintentionally and automatically or may be “forced” on an individual by the specific characteristics of a learning context (see, e.g., Gilbert et al. 1995; Wood 1996). Thus, these findings, whilst confirming the role played by social comparisons, also highlight the complexity of this factor and its close connection to other psychological processes and motives, as well as the potential for inter-learner and contextual variation in the types and frequency of social comparisons undertaken and the potential effects on the self-concept of such comparisons.

6.1.2 *Feedback from Significant Others and Reflected Appraisals*

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002: 234) explain that some researchers take the stance, based on work by early researchers into the self, such as Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902), that “in the course of time people come to view themselves as they believe they are viewed by others”. Whether they come to share exactly the same view as others have of them is debateable (Marsh and Byrne 1990) but, at the very least, the perceived opinions of others are widely believed to influence self-concept formation (see, e.g., Harter 1999b; Marsh 1986a, 1990c; Marsh et al. 1985; Marsh and Craven 1997; Shavelson et al. 1976). However, once again this appears to be a complex area with much potential for contextual variation. Indeed, the sources of feedback and the effects of others’ opinions have been shown to vary depending on the developmental stage of the individual as well across different relational contexts and domains (Harter 1999a, 1999b). Researchers have explained that different significant others affect different domains to differing degrees. In order to affect a learner’s self-concept, the feedback giver must be perceived as being a credible and valid source for providing feedback for that particular domain (see, e.g., Cole et al. 1997; Harter 1999b; Pekrun 1990; Trent et al. 1996. See also [Chapter 4, Section 4.1.4.3](#)).

In this study, many of the learners referred directly and indirectly to significant individuals who they often perceived as having had an effect on their EFL self-concepts. The individuals cited ranged from family members, to boyfriends/girlfriends, penfriends and, as might be expected from findings elsewhere (see, e.g., Leppänen and Kalaja 2002; Murphey et al. 2004; Oxford 1996), teachers featured most prominently in this category. Given their saliency in these data, I will examine these first and separately.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the EFL teachers seem to be the most prominent set of individuals who appear to be able to affect these learners’ self-concepts in the EFL domain (cf. Huang and Chang 1998), as would be expected given the “closeness” and credibility of this set of teachers for providing explicit and implicit feedback for this particular domain (cf. Pekrun 1990).

But the teacher always told me yes, you have the kind of feeling for the language and maybe you should do something with it. (. . .) What made me choose Italian? Yes, a teacher again. (. . .) It was the headmaster of our evening school and she said I must do something with it because I’m learning it so quickly. (I#9: 189–191; 354; 358–359)

Besides, the overall reaction of my teachers has always been positive, which made me feel very confident about writing in my first language. (N#37: 9–11)

Nevertheless, both of my grammar teachers have told me, as I guess you will see for yourself, that I tend to misuse present perfect, and in fact overuse it. (N#43: 9–11)

However, not all feedback from all teachers affects the self-concept equally. Rather, its potential effect appears to depend on the learner’s attitude towards the individual providing the feedback and whether they seem to respect the particular teacher.

An example of the importance of the perceived credibility of the source of the feedback for a particular domain is illustrated in the data extract below:

Well, what was a bit frustrating was with EAP² because all my homework was returned like red, red, red and at the final, then it was very good and I just ran through it again and I did some good homework and everything was red. I write a big piece of shit and it is very good. Something I don't understand. (I#6: 1245–1249)

In this extract, the learner's exam experience seems to contradict his experiences with homework in the same course. He is disturbed by the perceived discrepancy and, although he does not say so explicitly, he implies that this exam success did not have the same value due to its perceived lack of consistency and hence reduced perceived credibility.

In another example from the data, a learner mentions positive feedback that she received but casts doubt on its validity:

- X ...my aunt and my cousins said, well, I'm talking perfect.
 S Yeah.
 X But they are not used to foreigners talking English so well, but still I'm looking for words and I know that the accent is not right, so it isn't good enough for me. (I#1: 416–423)

Here the learner does not place great value on the feedback from her aunt and cousin, as she does not perceive them as properly qualified to judge her ability credibly, although the fact that she chooses to mention the feedback at all perhaps suggests that it may have had some effect on her self-concept, possibly in affective terms. Thus, it is worth considering whether various forms of feedback from different sources may be influential in differing ways for the self-concept development, for example, some feedback may be influential in terms of affect, whereas others may be more influential in terms of cognitive perceptions of ability.

A particularly salient example of the learner's perception and evaluation of the feedback giver is present in the case study data. The following data extract concerns one of Joana's written English teachers whom she does not esteem highly as a teacher at that point in time. Joana has several problems with her written English during the research period and at one point nearly failed a written English exam:

... I had to write a report and I felt really confident about the way I set it up, but unfortunately the teacher changed almost every phrase: I thought she was supportive of minimal correction and was aiming at keeping a text accurate but this is not the case: I then ended up with her own words (the words of a native speaker), I don't mind being corrected – I appreciate being corrected but she shouldn't have changed the text completely: I hardly stored any of the phrases she was using whilst correcting the text and she barely noted any of the corrections down on my sheet. I know that correction is necessary and this keeps you going in a language and I am the last person who wouldn't want to speak, sound and write like a native speaker, but her corrections were not effective and supportive at all. I stuck to all the structural instructions given in the hand out – what is the point of changing a text completely – this is only de-motivating and gives you the feeling that you are incapable of writing a text. (J#10: 8–25)

²EAP = English for Academic Purposes.

Ironically, her Italian teacher gives her feedback about her English and this appears to have a considerably more positive effect. It is worth noting that he had only heard Joana speak English briefly and he apparently does not have a strong command of English himself. However, it is clear from other parts of the data that Joana likes and respects this Italian teacher and has a positive relationship with him:

J ...I know your colleague sitting here or this girl sitting here, her English is really, he hardly, he once heard me talking English, she has a really good, una bellissima inglese, or something like that and he kept on saying nice things about it and he said, you just need a boyfriend or you need something you, you know, you can get excited about and then you will learn the language. This is the best example so to speak, he said that.

(Laughter)

S Oh!

J I was so flattered. . . (J#16: 632–645)

. . .but I like the teacher and I don't know, but he really flattered me with my English (J#20: 528–530)

Whilst it is not possible with these data to assess the magnitude of the effect of the two different types of feedback on Joana's EFL self-concept or their "actual" as opposed to "perceived" effect, it is worth considering possible motivations and processes mediating the potential effect of feedback on her self-concept. For example, a self-enhancement strategy would mean that it may be easier for Joana to accept and assimilate positive feedback into her self-concept than the negative feedback from her English teacher (see, e.g., Brown 1986; Tesser 1985), even though the positive feedback is given by somebody who may not be especially well-qualified to comment on her EFL ability. Alternatively, given her positive EFL self-concept Joana may employ processes of self-verification (see, e.g., Swann 1997; Swann et al. 1987, 1992), which means she may seek out feedback that would confirm her positive self-beliefs in this domain. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore possible interpretations of her reactions to the different types of feedback, it is perhaps important to note that feedback from others may not automatically affect a learner's self-concept, but other psychological processes may mediate its effect, as well as the learner's attitude towards the individual providing the feedback.

A final consideration in respect to teachers concerns the implicit and non-verbal messages that teachers may send their learners in the way they interact with and behave towards them (see, e.g., Ashmore and Ogilvie 1992; Felson 1993; Marshall and Weinstein 1984). Thus, teachers' expectations of and beliefs about learners may be conveyed to learners indirectly through their interactions and this may unconsciously lead to self-fulfilling prophecies in terms of learners' achievement, self-concept and behaviour (see, e.g., Brophy 1983; Jussim 1986; Jussim and Harber 2005; Rubie-Davies 2006; Weinstein 2002). Learners may perceive "reflected appraisals" which they interpret from teachers' behaviour and attitudes towards them. It is important to note that reflected appraisals are an individual's presumptions about what another person thinks of them and, as such, need not necessarily reflect the other person's actual appraisal of them (Felson 1989). Some

examples from the data may show how learners perceive teacher's attitudes and beliefs towards them:

Yeah, I think I'm not that good at German and I had a teacher, the German teacher at my evening school and he didn't like me and he said, what you are going to study English, like it would be impossible (I#9: 999–1002)

- J It wasn't, you know, that teacher is really, she is, I think she is a really, I don't know, I think she is a false person.
 S Okay, but why?
 J I don't, I don't get along with her, I just feel the vibes. . .
 S Yeah, yeah, sure.
 J . . .with people. With some, sometimes it doesn't work out, usually it does work out with me because I'm a really open-minded and friendly, but I think she doesn't like me somehow, I don't know why (J#6: 477–489)

Other potential sources of feedback in addition to teachers were family members, boyfriends/girlfriends, penfriends and native speakers. Below are some data extracts which illustrate the role of significant others:

- X From childhood it was my mum because she was always enthusiastic about languages and I just took that over and she also travelled with me.
 (. . .)
 S And did she encourage you to study languages at university?
 X Yes, more or less. Actually, they didn't interfere with me so they just said ok and she always said, well you're good at languages so that is your great skill. Yeah, I think that also my teachers encouraged me at school. (I#1: 521–523; 530–535)
- S . . .What kind of people have been influential? Maybe looking way back, people that have been influential of getting you to here now.
 F Yes, of course there is my dad, then one or two teachers who influenced me as well.
 S In what way?
 F In the way that they said, yes, that was good way, that was good work and you're getting well and they making me good so the feedback, the good feedback. Yes, and then the boyfriend I think so, but I'm not so sure if I wouldn't have studied English if I hadn't known him, you know. (I#9: 873–886)

From these data extracts, it is possible to see the potential influence of the feedback, advice and encouragement that these significant individuals provide on the learners' motivation, as well as their self-concept, again suggestive of the possibly varied role and nature of different forms of feedback that can be explicit or implicit, cognitive or affective.

These findings therefore seem to confirm that reflected appraisals and feedback from others can influence one's self-concept, depending again on the relationship with and attitude towards the individual providing the feedback directly or indirectly (Bouchey and Harter 2005; Burns 1982; Cole et al. 1997; Cooley 1902; Felson 1985; Harter 1998, 1999b; Mead 1934). The most prominent group of individuals in the data were teachers. Other significant individuals were also influential for self-concept formation, particularly in terms of their support, opportunities for practice they create, opinions, feedback or advice. An important caveat concerning the role of externalised sources of explicit or implicit feedback seems to be that any

possible effect on one's self-concept of such feedback may depend on the person's perception of and relationship with the feedback giver (Harter 1999a), as well as their perceived validity for providing feedback in a particular domain (Pekrun 1990). Finally, a dimension of the findings that requires further investigation is the question as to whether different forms of feedback from different sources may affect the self-concept in differing ways; some may be more influential in terms of affect and some more in terms of perceived competence.

6.1.3 Perceived Experiences of Success and Failure

The external dimension of the I/E model, as proposed by Marsh (2006: 40), also refers to comparisons with other learners based on other "external standards of actual achievement levels", which I have interpreted as incorporating grades, standardised test scores and explicit feedback (cf. Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002). On the whole, the findings in this study confirm that external sources of standardised feedback are important for learners' self-concepts, although they are perhaps less widely present across the data than expected. The factor was also more broadly defined in this study in order to accommodate the varied nature of the experiences of success and failure reported on by these learners. Namely, it was expanded to incorporate a learner's own perceptions of what they would class as a success or failure and it includes experiences that may take place in formal or informal settings, in either language *learning* or also in language *use* contexts.

Focusing firstly on the case study participant, Joana rarely mentions her grades on exams throughout the data, and certainly not to the extent that might have been anticipated from what is said about this aspect in the literature. Indeed, Joana herself alludes to the diminished role they play for her in her current university courses:

And I think the more exams you take, the less important grades get because you are just trying to get it all done and over with. (J#22: 550–552)

Interestingly, Joana's grades, in fact, appear to have had little obvious effect on her self-concept in the particular foreign language domain, e.g., in some instances she had better grades in Italian and yet a weaker self-concept than in English, in which she had partially worse grades but had a stronger self-concept. There can be various explanations for the more complex nature of the relationship in Joana's case, such as processes of self-verification (Swann 1997) or self-protection strategies for her self-concept in a domain of personal value. However, it is also worth considering whether internal processes generally may weigh more importantly for Joana in forming her self-concept than external factors (Marsh et al. 2001), in terms of explaining the seeming discrepancy between her grades and related self-concept, since the overall impression gained from Joana's data is that she refers to and utilises internal factors more than external ones in forming her EFL self-concept. Nevertheless, this potential discrepancy between her grades and her respective self-concept has interesting implications for educators in understanding that other factors and psychological processes may also mediate their effect on students' self-concepts, and

thus the relationship between grades, exam results and the respective self-concept should not be thought of as being uncomplicated or straightforward.

One of the most notable aspects of the data in respect to experiences of success and failure is that many of these take place in “informal” contexts, such as using the language successfully in the “real world” beyond the classroom, e.g.:

I think teacher’s feedbacks are important but also personal experiences when you meet native speakers in the streets, in the holidays, wherever (I#1: 707–709)

...when I watch TV or something and I understand pretty much everything, then it makes me feel good and it makes me feel confident. (I#12: 533–535)

My listening comprehension is good. When I was in England for 3 months I understood what other people told me with hardly any problems. And I also could tell them what I wanted to say. I think my spoken English is really good. (N#32: 17–20)

Joana’s data also reveal the potential influence of experiences of success or failure in informal language *use* contexts. It is likely that the influence of these informal experiences is particularly noticeable in respect to foreign languages, which often provide more opportunities for out-of-class language use compared to other subjects and which, in this respect, may be special and similar to other “performative” skills, such as music and sport.

I just chatted away to him. I had never been able to do this so properly without making mistakes without thinking too hard, so I thought, oh, this is brilliant, I’ve only been here for two months, great. (J#24: 857–860)

Thus, it may be for this reason that such informal personal perceptions of success or failure appear to have been overlooked by other researchers investigating self-concept in the field of psychology who have tended to focus on the verbal and maths domains. It is likely that these may be particularly significant for understanding learners’ L2 self-concepts.

A further consideration concerns the role played by attribution beliefs in mediating the possible effect of experiences of success and failure on a learner’s self-concept (cf. Hsieh and Schallert 2008). It certainly seems likely that the types of attributions learners make for their various successes and failures will determine the extent to and manner in which these experiences may affect the related self-concept:

...in Russian but then I failed because I got the pneumonia. (I#5: 87–88)

S Yeah... Has there been when you look back on the whole of your language learning history, has there been any sort of events or people that have had a big influence on the way you feel about your language learning?

D I had a *Schularbeit*³ in I think it was the first year of HAK⁴ and it was, I remember it was December the 6th, it was one day after the *Krampus*⁵ day.

S Yes.

³Schularbeit = Class Test

⁴HAK = A form of Business-Orientated Secondary School.

⁵Krampus = A traditional Austrian festival in December.

- D And I didn't study at all for the Schularbeit, so I went out and got drunk and stuff, and the next day we had this Schularbeit, and my English teacher had all three classes for one year so a, b, c and we all got the same test and I wrote the best test of all students and that was great. (I#12: 377–392)

...my confidence was positively affected by: the presentation, and also by my Italian Midterm (and I'm really proud of that because I had been working really hard for it) which wasn't difficult to take for me as I was well-prepared. (J#8: 32–35)

It is interesting to note that the first learner attributes failure to an external factor, her pneumonia, and the second attributes his success to internal ability, in spite of the reported obstacle of having not worked and having been drunk the evening before. As suggested elsewhere (Hsieh and Schallert 2008; Williams et al. 2004), learners may make differing attributions for successes and failures, and this may be driven by various psychologically motivated processes, such as self-enhancement, self-verification and self-protection. Marsh (1986b), for example, proposes a process called the “self-serving bias”, by which learners tend to attribute experiences of failure to external factors but accept responsibility for successes, which is seen as a self-protection strategy. Therefore, one must bear in mind the potential mediating effect of attributions on the effects of any experiences of success or failure on a learner's self-concept and this is concisely illustrated by the following data extract:

...exams results can affect my idea about me. . . if I've really worked hard but, of course, exam results also depends on how much effort you put in. . . it's not the mark itself but the mark in relation to the effort. (I#1: 696–700)

Indeed, it is worth considering whether successes and failures may affect self-concept differently. Interestingly, Joana's one experience of failure is worth examining separately, as it appears to be related to her self-concept in much more complicated, less apparent ways than the positive experiences of success she reports upon. Joana received a near-fail (grade 4 = D) in a written English exam. For some learners, such a grade would be perfectly acceptable but Joana's own subjective interpretation of the grade is apparent in the data extract below:

Because I had, okay, for me it is a really bad grade to have a four plus, and it is a really, for me that is really bad, it's almost like five, or I mean even if it is a four plus, it's not a three right or it's, it's nothing (J#6: 961–964)

However, this experience did not appear to affect her overall EFL self-concept but, if at all, possibly only her self-beliefs within the domain of EFL writing. Following the exam, she begins to find reasons for her failure and to “relativise” the seriousness of her near-fail:

I just had a few, I didn't have any like grammar or vocabulary mistakes, I just had style mistakes, I just couldn't deal with that letter that well because I didn't know that I shouldn't give so many details, and we didn't really do a lot of exercises, and I didn't have time to really, I don't know, work them out, to work them out, to work that out beforehand, so I thought I'd go there and I won't have any problems because I know all these phrases and I can do it but I didn't know, okay, I shouldn't give so many details that was the first point. I gave far too many details, for example, and things like that. I think I had one time mistake where I really, I forgot about the fact that you have to use past tense when you're telling a story and I wrote, I hadn't received the package or something or something like that, so I

used the past perfect tense once but I didn't have any spelling mistakes or things like that, but it's probably not so much. . . it's really about style and yeah, that was it. (J#6: 964–980)

As weeks pass by, she begins to explain her poor results in written English by first explaining that it was due to minor points of detail that she feels she can work on and then she begins to discuss how little work she felt the teacher had done with them to prepare for the exam:

Yeah, I think I feel confident because I thought that over again and I thought, okay, what is wrong about that text and I thought I have too many details and the style is quite, the style is not correct. Okay, I can do something for that style but there is, there are no essential mistakes, like, you know, basic mistakes, I haven't got any basic mistakes, so why should I be so worried, it's nothing really, it's nothing really deep or something. I can, I think it's easier, I know you said it's hard to get the feel but I think like doing summaries, if you train that, I can catch up on that and I feel like I'm better at doing summaries now. (J#9: 481–491)

J . . .the first point, the first point I have to mention is that Ms H didn't give us a lot of assignments, and we didn't have to read a book like Ms L has assigned, I think Ms L assigned a book for her course this term.

S Yeah.

J Because Alex told me she has to read one, but we didn't have to read a book, we had only like four homeworks, okay, I sat down for these four homeworks and for a bit of like, a few like exercises or whatever but it was not really intense enough to sort of, like, yeah, ahm, build up your knowledge of written English. . . (J#18: 363–375)

Williams et al. (2004) also explain how learners may employ differing attributions for success and failure. Here Joana begins by assigning responsibility to internal factors but as time passes and her grades do not improve, she begins to externalise responsibility for her perceived failure onto the teacher. As explained earlier, assigning responsibility for the failure to external factors is often described as the self-serving bias effect (Marsh 1986b) and would explain why she takes responsibility throughout the data for her successes but seems to, on occasion, make external attributions for her failure.⁶ It is also interesting to note that Joana generally has a growth mindset about FLL and believes she can improve through hard work, practice and effort. Thus, her persistence but lack of success may be especially difficult for her to reconcile given the subsequent implications for her self-concept.

Interestingly, on the whole, Joana's EFL self-concept appears to remain unaltered by her negative experiences in the written English course, and she retains her overall positive EFL self-concept and it remains her "favourite" subject. However, she finally completes the course with a grade "3" (equivalent to a "C"). I would suggest that Joana would perceive this as a relative "failure", as it is doubtless a lower grade than she would have hoped for in a subject, English, which she values highly. It is

⁶It is also worth noting that Joana has a positive self-concept. If a learner had a negative self-concept and employed processes of self-verification (Swann 1997), it is possible that the reverse may function, i.e., the learner may attribute experiences of success to external factors and make internal attributions for experiences of failure, in order to "confirm" their negative self-concept.

important to note that a “C” is not a failure in the typical standardised form but it is her perception of it as such that is significant.

Finally, after the end of this course, she begins to mention that she feels her written English is “not the best” (J#15: 353) and it seems as if ultimately her self-concept, at least in the domain of EFL writing, is partly affected by the experience in the writing course, e.g.:

... now in English it's probably, I should have, I know I would be, I know I would be a lot better in writing if I had read more. I'm just not a reader but I think I can still improve on writing a lot, and it has to do a lot of practice and I know that, you know the more often you write and the more often you use things, you know, the easier it gets, although you do not read, although you're not a regular reader. (J#13: 803–809)

Limiting this perceived experience of “failure” to the domain of EFL writing could be an example of what is known as a process of compartmentalisation (Showers 1992), by which learners isolate the negative feedback to one aspect of a domain, in order to protect the overall self-concept. Whilst it is not possible in this study to attempt to fully explain Joana's reaction to this experience of perceived failure and the seeming limited effect on her overall EFL self-concept, the data do seem to indicate that Joana may process the effects of negative feedback, or perceived experiences of failure, differently to the positive feedback and experiences of success. Further research needs to investigate in which ways success and failure may affect the self-concept differently, in particular, in terms of expectancy-value theories, in which the importance of a domain for the individual may also play a role in the extent to which experiences may affect the self-concept (see, e.g., Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Harter 1999a; Wigfield and Eccles 2000; Wigfield and Karpathian 1991), as well as whether an individual already holds a more positive or negative self-concept in the domain. Additionally, the potential mediating role of an individual's mindset and attributions beliefs on the effect of such experiences on a person's self-concept also needs to be clarified.

Interestingly, apart from Joana, the other learners in these data do not report any experiences of failure, which could be expected, both given the advanced level and largely positive self-concepts of these learners, who have chosen to specialise in the language at university, with only one exception:

Well, first of all. Marks, you know, I am really depressed if I get a bad mark, yeah, so then I really think, well, I'm pretty bad (I#2: 134–136)

However, as learners may wish to convey a positive picture of themselves and engage in “impression management”, this may lead them to choose not to report on any experiences of failure (cf. Collins et al. 2005; Dingwall 1997), particularly in the relatively short portrayal of the self that the data collection tools can offer. Learners in these data may simply not have had as many experiences of failure to report upon, given their largely positive EFL self-concepts. Nevertheless, it could be expected that experiences of failure would be equally as likely to affect the self-concept as experiences of success, although it is worth remembering that experiences of failure and success may be processed by learners differently, depending on a host

of other factors such as their motives, current self-concept, expectancy-values and attributions.

To conclude, a learner's own perspective of what they perceive as being a success or failure appears to be important for self-concept development and cannot be deduced solely based on standardised external measurements of success or failure (cf. Pajares 2006; Usher and Pajares 2009). The data in this study suggest that if a learner perceives an experience in either formal or informal contexts as a success or failure, irrespective of the objective, standardised view of the experience, this may affect their self-concept. An individual's own perceptions in defining success or failure appear to be an element that research on the I/E model has, to date, overlooked, given its focus on external standard forms of feedback and grades and formalised learning contexts. Thus, there is a need to consider which factors, criteria and processes affect how an individual comes to perceive of an experience as either a success or a failure. Further, informal experiences of success/failure are absent from research into the I/E model to date, which has tended to focus on verbal and maths self-concepts. It may be a particular, unique characteristic of foreign language learning, especially at the level of the students who are the focus of this study, that there tends to be a large number of opportunities for language learning and use outside of formal learning contexts.

6.1.4 Previous Language Learning/Use Experiences in Formal/Informal Contexts

In the data, learners' self-concepts often appear to be affected by their experiences in a range of various language learning or language use environments, as one would possibly expect, given the acknowledged role of the environment on self-concept (see, e.g., Burns 1982; Harter 1999a; Markus and Wurf 1987; Marsh 2006; Trautwein et al. 2006a). It is difficult from these data to discern exactly the nature of the role played by the environment in self-concept formation, given variation in terms of immediate interactional contexts as well as the role of micro- and macro-level contexts but its effect does appear to comprise a distinctly affective response to the respective context. Despite the internal nature of the affective dimension, I have chosen to categorise this as an external factor, given the emphasis on the actual context and its characteristics.

Interestingly, learners in these data often refer to language use situations in more informal contexts and as stated in the previous section, this may be a dimension of the findings that is particular to foreign language learning, which offers so many opportunities for these out-of-class language use experiences, especially at this advanced level. Learners were found to refer to informal situations in which they had used the language in the past and which they perceived as having been significant for their self-concept development:

And there we had a whole week, where we had a partnership with an Italian school so Italian pupils came to Austria for one week and we had one guest for one week and then in autumn we went to Italy to this person so this was something I really must say this influenced my

view of Italian and learning Italian very much because you were in a real family and there in the family I realised that I liked speaking Italian that I really love it and I try to improve and so on but in school this teacher, my Italian teacher was somehow very different, he rather focused on grammar and very strict going forward and I think there I realised that I liked the approach from my English teacher at school better. (I#2: 101–112)

This data extract also illustrates the affective dimension of the learner's response to the informal context and experience. Thus, it may not be the experiences per se that are significant for the learner's self-concept but their experience of success/failure and the affective and motivational dimension of the experiences.

In the case study data, perhaps the most predominant setting for Joana's EFL self-concept is the *Stammtisch*. This is a group of students of English, including some English native speakers, who usually meet in an English-speaking pub regularly every week. For Joana, this meeting appears to be important in several respects; in terms of the opportunity it offers her to practise her English, for the positive associations she makes through this context about the language and for the social contact and encouragement she feels she experiences there. It seems that the contact with this group is highly important for Joana's EFL self-concept and it is a strong recurrent theme throughout her data:

Yeah, I don't know just the *Stammtisch* the whole fact of being in contact with English people, doing things together with them, just being able to really talk to them affects my way of thinking and it also affects my dreams and it affects my whole way of, I don't know, it's just a huge impact and sometimes I feel like I can't talk German after a whole day of speaking English, it's the other way round and I think what a great feeling. (J#5: 1446–1453)

I was at the *Stammtisch* on Thursday night and I've realised that the *Stammtisch* people when I'm sort of amongst them, being amongst them helps me a lot to sort of strengthen my self-confidence in terms of spoken English, so they actually give me the feeling of being accepted and they used to always tell me like, Joana, your English is so good and blah, blah, blah. And that encouraged me a lot to speak English (J#18: 294–300)

Again it seems to be the opportunities for language use and positive feedback from others that she gets at the *Stammtisch* that possibly affect her self-concept, as well as her affective reaction to the context and not just the setting per se.

Many other positive experiences reported by the learners in these data took place whilst the learner was spending a period of time abroad, in either an English-speaking country or in a context where English was used as a *lingua franca*. In fact, the stay abroad experience seems to have been highly influential for the self-concept of many of the learners. It is actually difficult to show this, as very often the stay was a strong theme running throughout the text or interview, but the following concise example can hopefully show how such an experience can affect a learner's self-concept, seemingly both on a cognitive and affective level:

I have been to England for a couple of times now and I always had a great time there, which may also be the reason why I love the English culture with all its traditions and habits. (...) My strengths as a language learner are probably my pronunciation. This is due to the fact that I spent 11 months working as an Au-pair in London last year. (N#18: 4–6; 11–13)

Examining the data in detail, it seems likely that the potential influence on learners' self-concepts does not just stem from the stay abroad itself but rather from particular experiences of success, the chance to practise and use the language, and positive feedback from others during their stay. In other words, many of the factors already highlighted throughout this chapter seem to be influential within the framework of a stay abroad, rather than just the stay per se. However, the affective reaction to a stay abroad is also likely to have a potentially powerful effect on the learners' self-concept and is perhaps worth highlighting, given its prevalence in many of the descriptions of these experiences (cf. Freed 1995; Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide 2008), e.g.:

I simply decided to spent a year abroad and went to Santa Barbara, California. I lived with a family, who I have grown very attached to, and made some great friendships. These people and all my memories about the year are pretty much the main reason why I study English. I really miss the English surroundings here in Austria but I try to use as much English as possible. I read many English books, try to watch movies in English but most importantly for me is that I call my American friends and family every weekend and also have lots of email contact with my other international friends. (N#29: 15–24)

I was in London two times. That's the most interesting and greatest town I have ever seen. I wish to go also this year into the centre of this wonderful town again. There are so many interesting things that I want to see. But the most important thing to do there is speaking English with the people. They are nice and kind that I feel me at home in that wonderful town. (N#44: 13–19)

The fact that many learners highlight the importance of experiences in using or learning the language that take place in informal settings outside of the formal classroom context, raises questions about research that isolates the learner within the “vacuum” of the language classroom, particularly in respect to psychology. As Delamont and Hamilton (1984: 21) caution, “while it is possible, for research purposes, to regard the classroom as a social unit in its own right, it is only with considerable difficulty that it can be regarded as self-contained”. It is thus important in respect to FLL to also consider and attend to factors from both inside and outside the classroom in both informal and formal settings of both language learning and language use.

As perhaps expected (see, e.g., Burns 1982; Harter 1999a; Markus and Wurf 1987; Marsh 2006; Trautwein et al. 2006a), another context which seems to be highly influential for all of the learners is the more formal teaching and learning environment. In the case study data, its potential effect on Joana's EFL self-concept is not directly apparent in the data but is rather implied by her connotations with and attitude towards her two foreign languages. Her affective response appears to be based on a number of individual factors, such as the teachers' teaching style and methods, experiences of success/failure, organisation etc. This is most evident in her attitudes towards the two language institutes where she studies Italian and English. Joana has developed quite negative feelings towards and connotations with the Italian studies department (Romanistik) and positive connotations with the English studies department (Anglistik):

- J I think I'm, yeah, I don't feel comfortable at the Romanistik Institute. Every time I walk in there I feel like, oh I have to go, I have to leave the Anglistik, I have to go to the other institute, I don't want to go to the other Institute, it's just everything. Even though I think that the whole building is much more beautiful than the Anglistik is because it's very cold, it's sort of, but I do have different connotations, which are making up for the whole surrounding or the whole building, for the tiles and like, the glass and. . .
- S Yeah, and so why do you think you don't feel so positive about the Romanistik?
- J I think because the whole institute is, I think the teachers are differently, are differently teaching and they not that motivating, they are not that organized, most of them. Yeah, they are probably just trying to. . . I think they do try to keep or to hold up a different level than the Anglistik does, but the Anglistik is much more successful when it comes to learning progress actually, because they are motivating students and even if you are not teaching so much in a class, they are not trying to really put everything into the class, you can get so much more out of a class if you get the, the essential basics, you go out and you feel like, yeah, I really had something from this course, I really learned something. You feel you can take something home and you feel like, okay, yeah, I've made some progress or. . . (J#2: 1018–1045)

These data suggest that the effect of the learning context on her self-concept may be indirect and possibly stems from the affective attitude she develops towards the language as a result of her perceptions of and reactions to her experiences in the respective context.

Further examples from the other data sources of the potential influence of experiences in school, as well as teachers' teaching styles and the learning environment created by their teachers, are illustrated in the data extracts below:

And I think that had a major impact because we had such nice teachers that we just wanted that they and they said, well Russian is not difficult, and they always tell us. . . and we had a very nice teacher. Her name was T and she is half-Ukrainian and she always said, no, XYZ. And we were always like yeah, yeah. But her whole lessons were just made up so nicely that it was just special for us to study and it was not. . . I mean it was like. . . I mean childish stupid stuff, yeah? But it worked. We said, "oh it is not hard". We know like "XYZ" is the noun for colour and for flowers. (I#5: 462–471)

I realised that, you know, with the school English I wasn't really good in talking and it didn't help a lot, I mean I knew a lot of vocabulary because this is really, teachers tend to stress the vocabulary, that you learn vocabulary by heart, but the thing was that I was not really confident when it came to grammar, you know, in using, in the conversation the grammar, and I always was a bit, not quite satisfied and always was a bit hesitating and everything (I#10: 63–70)

In addition to the effect on learners' self-concepts, it is interesting to note that their reactions to the teachers and their teaching style were again often expressed in terms of motivation and affect. Thus, it is possible that these learning experiences may also have influenced the learners' self-concepts indirectly via their motivation and affective reactions to the experiences:

- X Well, English and French were the two languages that I knew. And I knew that I preferred English because I think it's because of the teachers I had in school.
- S Sure.
- X The French was well, not so, well it was interesting but the teacher was horrible. So I, well, I decided that English was my favourite language and I wanted to go on and learn more. (I#1: 380–388)

Previous language learning experiences at school were also referred to by many learners whilst explaining and describing their current self-concept. The exact relationships between the learners' beliefs about language learning, their subsequent interpretations of their previous experiences in respect to their current self-concept are complex but seem to be strongly interconnected. It is quite likely that learners' previous experiences have influenced their self-concept but it is also possible that the learners have interpreted those experiences in light of their belief systems about language learning which are likely to stem from their own experiences and contexts and these seem to be tightly interlinked:

The biggest problem for myself is learning the grammar, because we haven't gone through it in school in detail. (N#30: 15–16)

My previous learning experiences are all together not the best which definitively has influenced my confidence in learning. (N#47: 21–23)

J But I can remember that my mum, for example, she helped me a lot with German at school when I was little and later on with English as well and you know, in the first few years of English she helped me with grammar and explaining to me and that was so easy for me as well so...

S Sure.

J So I guess that made a difference. (J#22: 780–788)

Concerning school experiences, many of the learners refer to teachers and the effect they feel they have had on their self-concepts and their attitude towards the language. However, on closer examination, it appears that it was often the way the teachers taught or the learning climate that these teachers created, often in affective terms, which seemed to affect the learners' self-concepts, as opposed to the individual per se:

In the past I've always had nice and very good English teachers. I think it really matters a lot what kind of teacher you have. It influences your whole point of view. A good teacher makes you feel comfortable and you will not be afraid of asking questions. Further he/she can really motivate you. I think I have always been quite good in English because I really came along with my teachers and that's why I never was afraid or worried about speaking out or asking questions. (N#34: 29–36)

My English teacher in school was very competent, at least I think so; I still profit from what she taught me. (N#46: 6–8)

It is worth noting once again the strong affective dimension to their previous learning experiences, in particular in the first learner's data, as well as the implied connection between affect, self-concept and motivation (cf. Harter 1986).

6.1.5 Critical Experiences

In the data, there is also a particular type of past experience that appears to stand out as being distinct from the other factors mentioned so far. These are specific experiences that seem to possess a special, detailed, narrative quality and which seem to have been assigned some affective significance by the learner. Some learners

stressed the particular importance of these experiences explicitly, whereas for others it was simply implicit in the way they presented them with rich, detailed, narrative descriptions, especially in the autobiographical data.

I have chosen to define these as “critical experiences” and this encompasses critical incidents, critical phases and critical persons (Kelchtermans 1993) and as a term helps to distinguish them from the plethora of literature surrounding the “critical incident technique” (Flanagan 1954). The other common term “turning points” (McAdams and Bowman 2001) was also considered inappropriate, due to the implication of change. The critical experiences reported in these data may or may not suggest change but, actually for many learners in this particular sample, these experiences were merely building blocks in their ongoing development as EFL learners. These “critical experiences” tend to be experiences that have taken place in the past, either at a fixed point in time or over an extended period of time, and which have been assigned some kind of critical significance by learners retrospectively in their own subjective accounts of their language learning development (Mercer 2007).

The majority of these reported “critical experiences” involve many of the same factors, especially external factors, which were deduced from the analyses of the other data sources. However, given their distinct narrative and affective characteristics, it was felt necessary to classify them as a separate category, at least until the nature of these critical experiences and their relation to self-concept development is better understood. However, one must remain mindful of the fact that these critical experiences may simply be differently expressed forms of the same factors elucidated on in this chapter so far.

It is important to remember that the learners have assigned these events significance retrospectively and may do so in order to justify and understand their current self-concept, or in order to adhere to some perceived script or discourse about language learning. One also needs to take care with retrospection, given the potential danger of individuals subjectively selecting past events to report upon and issues of memory bias in which positive memories may be more easily remembered (see, e.g., Gramzow and Willard 2006; Walker et al., 2003). Nevertheless, accepting that what we choose to remember may be determined by who we currently think we are (McAdams 1993), these incidents may nevertheless offer valuable insights into which experiences may be influential, or at least perceived of as being influential, when learners form their EFL self-concepts.

Although concise data extracts have been selected in an attempt to illustrate the types of experiences referred to by these learners, the narrative descriptions often extend over longer stretches of text or over many turns frequently including diversions before returning to the narrative thread. Unfortunately, it is not possible to show their full narrative quality here, due to length restrictions, but the extracts selected can hopefully illustrate some of the more concise examples of experiences that appear to have been assigned some special significance by the learners in their development as language learners.

For ease of explanation, I have chosen to organise the findings according to the four dominant categories which emerged from the analysis of these data. There is much overlap amongst these categories and some data extracts could again belong

to more than one category. Consequently, other researchers might have organised the findings differently. However, I have chosen to label a particular experience according to the category that appears to dominate the particular event reported.

6.1.5.1 Travel Experiences

The most prominent and salient type of critical experience concerned travel, either to a country where English is spoken, or travel that enabled the learners to see the value of English as a lingua franca and as a way of communicating with people from different language backgrounds. Interestingly, within many of the travel experiences reported, the aspects which were highlighted concerned experiences of success, the belief about the amount of practice it afforded the individual, and the affective reactions to the trip. It may be these aspects that are important, individually or most likely in combination, rather than an extended stay abroad per se. It is interesting to note that these experiences, as indeed many of the critical experiences cited, again took place outside the formal learning contexts of school, as the data extracts below illustrate:

However, then I went to Ireland for ten months. This was probably the most important event in my language learning history. (A#24: 75–76)

My whole attitude towards foreign languages underwent a drastic change when I went abroad for the first time in the year 2000. Only two months after my school-leaving exams I left for Jerusalem, Israel to spend a year abroad. In a completely new country and culture I soon found out the advantages of being able to speak with the local people. English, of course, was a great help (A#3: 29–35)

...my language learning, as funny as it may sound, started when I was five years old because I once went to Los Angeles with my parents for five weeks and that was a really major experience in my childhood because there are no, I can't think of any experiences from that time, I can think of that. . . ahm, in detail or something like that so, ahm, I was there for I think five weeks, yeah and ahm, I learned a few words like "Good morning" and "Hi" and simple words, like I don't know. . . counting and things like that, so that was really, really a major experience for me or a main, a key experience probably. . . (J#1: 397–408)

For all the learners who referred to a travel experience as having been critical in their development, the fact that they could see the practical use of the language in that it changed from being a theoretical school subject to a form of communication situated in the real world beyond the confines of the classroom seems to have been central. Indeed, recognising the practical use of the language and its real world communication value was seen to be an important moment for several learners:

So for the first time I had a chance to try out my English on a native speaker (. . .) I suppose for the first time I realized that learning a language means more than just repeating grammar rules and translating texts. (A#14: 17; 20–22)

For the first time in my life I had to really express myself in another language and found out that I could make myself understood, which for sure boosted my enthusiasm for English as it could no longer be considered as another useless and out of touch with reality subject. (A#18: 30–34)

Many of the learners also seem to refer to affective gains in terms of interest and motivation resulting from their travel experiences. As has been suggested by some researchers (Freed 1995; Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide 2008), the benefits of travel or study abroad experiences may, in fact, be more related to affective than linguistic aspects. In terms of their self-concepts, learners' own perceptions of improvements in their ability and related affective responses are likely to be more important than whether they actually made linguistic gains or not.

In several of the interviews, for example, travel experiences are simply the main theme running through the entire interview, especially for those who have spent an extended period abroad and who tend to mainly tell detailed stories related to this during their interviews. For students #4 or #12, for example, the stay abroad dominates most of the data thematically and they often seem to identify in some way with the particular culture or country where they stayed:

- NZ Very important. Like I experienced the New Zealanders, the Kiwis, they are just so laid-back, and spontaneous, and they don't really worry about anything, I mean I grew up, or we had a farm, so I lived in the country. . . and it was just. . . and all the people were so. . . I mean they didn't care about what they, their clothes. . . They didn't care about. . . And that's just the contrary of how it is in Italy – the clothes is just everything and also like schools, or, "what do you want to do after school?" "oh, I don't know, I might go to England". So, they are really kind of, they didn't worry at all. Yes, I think that was a very nice experience.
- S And do you think that suits you as a person more?
- NZ More than the Italians. And the Italians, they are just, big business and trying to earn a lot of money, and high living standards, and working a lot the whole day. It always seems that the Italian values are family, and being together, and it is true but family. . . they all have baby sitters, they're not at home, they don't spend a lot of time with their families. So that I'm kind of disappointed.
- S It's not what you thought it'd be?
- NZ No, I thought it would be the contrary but. . .
- S And how would you describe yourself, your living style, your character?
- NZ Well, now I've lived both for a bit and I think I'm more a New Zealand type. Or maybe I would like to be like that, I don't really manage it here because I know that, I have to study a lot, I'm not so. . . I'm not that. . . I worry a lot. I'm not that spontaneous, I think a lot about my future, so I'm not really the way I would like to be. But. . .
- S I don't think so many of us are.
- NZ No. But I can't imagine like living in Italy or teaching there. . .
- S But you can in New Zealand?
- NZ Yes. (I#3: 234–276)
- S So, how important was your time in Oxford for your decision to study English?
- G I think very important because I found out that I liked the language and I liked the culture, that I even liked the weather.
- S Oh, my god!
- G No, it was. . . I loved the city, I loved the place, I loved being there. (I#6: 233–243)

As can be seen from the data extracts above, many learners appear to develop a different affective relationship and attitude towards the country following a stay abroad and as such they tended to form a stronger identity with the respective country.

6.1.5.2 Significant Others

The second largest category of critical experiences referred to by learners in these data concerns the perceived role played by significant others in the language learners' development. This category differs to the experiences mentioned earlier in Section 6.2, which was primarily concerned with the feedback provided by such individuals, and the focus here is on the quality and nature of the relationship and here there are parallels to the findings in Section 6.1.4. As was found earlier, teachers again were the most frequently mentioned group of significant others. It was often not necessarily the teachers themselves as people, but their teaching style which appeared to be significant for learners' perceptions of themselves as language learners. As the underlined section in the first example below illustrates, it is important to note that critical experiences involving their teachers often extended over a period of several years:

During the first four years of grammar school I had a very strict English teacher. She was very concerned about grammar, spelling, word structure, etc. Although we did not do a lot of practice and talking, our grammatical skills in English improved a lot. (A#5: 12–15)
(Emphasis with underlining my own)

After the 4th form we got a new English teacher and we were really afraid of her because she had a reputation of being very strict and somehow peculiar, both of which she was. I didn't really like her as a person but I somehow appreciated her as a teacher because she was near native, after having lived in the States and studied in Britain. Lots of my classmates had serious problems in English which she made even worse, because if she didn't like you, you hardly got the chance to improve. I think she was very competent and also enthusiastic, she brought a lot of materials to class etc, but she had her own values and beliefs and stuck firmly by these. To cut a long story short, I got on quite well with her, but I got more and more anxious of talking, because she corrected every mistake and sometimes even ridiculed people in front of the whole class. This experience somehow marked me because I still have to force myself to talk more freely in order to learn something instead of sitting back and saying nothing. (A#7: 52–66)

It is also important to note how many of the encounters with teachers and their teaching styles also referred to the affective dimension of the learning experience that these teachers created (Ryan et al. 1994). In particular, learners often described the influential teaching styles as having been "fun":

But the following years were the most significant years in my English learning career. My new English teacher emphasized the importance of conversation (. . .) we had a lot of fun in the lessons. (A#10: 34–36; 44–45)

I think English was always my favourite or has always been my favourite language. And I had two great English teachers and I really, really loved them and they had a special way of teaching and they had a special way of motivating their pupils and we did a lot of theatre plays in the gymnasium⁷ and things like that so we had a lot of interaction in the actual classes, so I had a totally different attitude towards English classes than towards Italian classes. (J#1: 40–48)

⁷Gymnasium = Grammar school.

I had a terrible teacher at the beginning of my upper classes and if I had had, if I had had her for the whole, the whole lot of five years, I would have not been encouraged at all to study English. That would have so depressed me and probably had such a bad influence on my language studies, she was absolutely, she was the worst teacher I've ever had and she was mean and she was false, yeah, she was terrible, she was terrible. (. . .) Yeah. . . I had her for one year and I think I made a step backwards instead of a step forward. (J#13: 591–598; 605–606)

Parents/guardians were the second main group of individuals mentioned by learners as having been influential, either in providing opportunities for encounters with the language, or by having served as a role model as a result of their own passion for or knowledge of the language:

I encountered English long before I started studying it at school because my mother, an English teacher at Secondary Modern School, taught me a few words, phrases, games and sang English songs with me. (. . .) If I had not talked and practised English with my mother at that time I would have lost my interests in English because the English lessons in Secondary School were boring and not motivating at all. (A#10: 11 -13; 26–28)

I have had contact with English ever since I was born as a result of having an English teaching mother. Even though my mother did not talk to me in English at home, she soon recognised the influence her job as an English teacher had on me, namely that I wanted to learn English as I longed to be like her. (A#25: 7–12)

Learners also mentioned other members of their families, such as siblings or more distant relatives, and also friends of the family. Individuals who had travelled or had some contact with an English-speaking person were also cited frequently as having been influential in terms of the development of their relationship towards and sense of self in English, e.g.:

The first time that I came in touch with the English language was when a friend of my parents, whose name is K and who lives in the United States, came to visit me and my family in Austria. I was five years and I can still remember that K was reading a book to me with many illustrations for children in it. I was so strange to hear this different sound of the English language, but even though I was not able to understand anything I loved listening to it. I was looking at the pictures and paying attention to her intonation. I admired her for speaking so fluently and accurately and I set myself the target to speak that language one day even I was such a little child at that time. I think that this was the beginning of my enthusiasm for the English language. (A#8: 3–14)

Another factor encouraging my wish to become a learner of English were my relatives living in America and Canada who always sent me birthday cards and little books for Christmas that were written in English. As I wanted to be able to read them without any help, my mother started to read them to me and answered all my questions concerning vocabulary. Even though I could not memorize them at that moment due to my young age, I only went to kindergarten!, it helped me to develop a feeling for English pronunciation and words. (A#25: 12–20)

Another set of significant others that emerged from the analysis were peers, either school friends, boyfriends/girlfriends or penfriends. The latter were, in fact, the most frequently mentioned set of friends. Once again, it appears to be the opportunity for practice they provided or their status as role models that was perceived as being important by the learners in their reported personal histories:

I was now able to produce (more or less) correct sentences and texts and with the help of an American pen friend extended my vocabulary, until eventually my skills exceeded those of my classmates significantly. (A#12: 40–43)

My boyfriend definitely also had an enormous influence on this new interest as he as well loved English literature and Scrabble. I do not want to ignore this game here. It really helped me to improve my range of vocabulary as my boyfriend's lexicon was quite extensive at that time already. (A#18: 51–56)

Encounters with significant individuals appear to be perceived by learners as having had a strong influence on their development as language learners and were common across the data. In terms of their actual EFL self-concepts, it is unclear whether the experiences themselves influenced the learners' self-concepts or whether the self-concept was affected indirectly through other factors, such as affect or motivation. Furthermore, the data do not make clear to what extent it was actually the perceived amount of practice and experiences of success in using the language that could have influenced their self-concepts, rather than the individuals per se. Indeed, given the seeming interrelated nature of many of these factors, I would suggest any effect on the learners' EFL self-concept is most likely to result from a combination of factors, including the affective dimension associated with these experiences.

6.1.5.3 Periods of Transition

Focusing on the autobiography data, there is naturally a strong narrative element, particularly in terms of chronology and time markers are evident throughout the texts. However, certain moments in time seem to be assigned more than the usual narrative significance. The most common of these special markers occur at periods of transition. For example, one of the periods of transition in the data took place as the learner moved from one schooling context to another, such as from primary school to secondary school, e.g.:

After primary school I went to grammar school and from then on learning English was quite different. It suddenly meant hard work, sitting all the time, learning an enormous amount of vocabulary off by heart. No more singing and no more innocent games in the playground. I still had no problems in English but I missed the talking and playing with words a lot. We started to do a lot of writing and listening comprehensions and I sometimes simply didn't understand what was the use of all this. I was forced to learn things that seemed quite unimportant for me or that made no sense at all. (A#7: 42–50)

When I started to attend grammar school, English became rather more difficult and I had to study very hard for it in order to pass the first year. I was really demotivated, because it was very stressful and difficult to pass the exams. I loved the easy-going atmosphere in elementary school and I could not really get used to this new situation. (A#8: 28–33)

The other, perhaps more notable, period of transition in these data is between secondary school and university (cf. Section 6.1.1 above on social comparison). Again, the expectations and demands on the learner change, as do their external frames of reference (cf. Marsh and Craven 2002; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002). It is not

surprising that these are times of change and development, as learners reassess themselves, the language and their understandings of the process of language learning within the new context, e.g.:

In comparison to learning English at school, the strategies, styles and methods concerning learning and acquiring new things have changed a lot. The emphases are out on different things now than during my life as a pupil at school, but I have to admit that I enjoyed and still enjoy both phases in my life. (A#8: 62–66)

A great shock was the first language class during my studies, Language Systems. Till then I thought that I am aware of the tenses, grammatical structures of English and so on, but that course proved me wrong. It was like I had never heard of any of the grammatical rules before. Consequently, in the first semester of my studies I really thought that I chose the completely wrong studies but once I got past those depressing thoughts and started working a little harder everything looked more promising. (A#19: 54–62)

As suggested earlier in Section 6.1.1, this finding suggests the need for teachers to be sensitive to these periods of transition that can be psychologically difficult periods of adjustment for learners, who are in a process of reassessing their self-concept within specific domains, possibly in domains of personal importance and value (see, e.g., Cantor et al. 1987; Harter 1999a; Harter et al. 1992; Seidman et al. 1994; Silverthorn et al. 2005; Wigfield and Eccles 2000; Wigfield et al. 1991).

Another possible period of transition when the learners' frames of reference appear to change seems to be when learners begin another foreign language. In this setting, most learners begin by learning English but, after a few years, many of them also start a second foreign language. The beginning of another foreign language was often used as a chronology marker in the narratives. Whilst it is perhaps natural that such a stage would serve as a time marker in the autobiographies, some learners seem to highlight this point of time and subsequently appear to begin to make comparisons across their foreign languages from this point onwards:

Thus, I ventured into the unknown realms of Latin and Italian which, however, turned out to be a quite devastating experience. I was used to not having to invest too much time or effort to exceed the expectations of my teachers – as was the case with English. Italian and Latin, however, demanded a far greater amount of discipline, which I stubbornly refused to accept at first. As a result my marks were not worth mentioning and try as I might, never exceeded an average level. (A#12: 49–57)

This love for languages is, by the way, not just restricted to English at all. On the contrary, I have also started to take French courses at university as French is almost as important to me as English. I also had French lessons at school and even though my French teacher was much stricter than my English teacher, this language appealed very much to me. (A#25: 46–51)

It seems as if learning a new foreign language now enables learners to compare their experiences and abilities across foreign languages. This is to be expected if we accept the languages' mutual roles for each other as internal frames of reference (cf. Marsh 1986a; Rost et al. 2005). In this respect, the period of transition does not primarily refer to a change in the external frames of reference, such as the schooling context but rather seems to point to altered internal frames of reference, as learners begin to compare themselves and their experiences across the foreign language

domains. Understood in this way, a period of transition may involve changes in either external, internal or, indeed, both frames of reference.

Similarly, another occasion when learners' frames of reference appear to change is when they begin working with a new teacher. Again, learners often appear to use this as a time marker but two learners in the autobiography data explicitly emphasise it as being a significant point of change in their language learning autobiographies, e.g.:

During the first four years of grammar school I had a very strict English teacher. She was very concerned about grammar, spelling, word structure, etc. Although we did not do a lot of practice and talking, our grammatical skills in English improved a lot. (...) After four years of grammar school I got a new English teacher who influenced my feelings towards English a lot. She put most of her emphasis on the speaking skills of her pupils. She tried to encourage everyone in the class to talk about any topic in English. In my point of view this is something very important in the process of learning a language. By means of this strategy language learners lose the fear of communicating in a foreign language. (A#5: 12–15; 22–28)

In the first year in Grammar School there was nearly the same procedure in English lessons as in Secondary School. We dealt with various grammar issues, read old-fashioned and out-dated articles and stories about celebrities and again we had to write many summaries or to form sentences with new vocabulary. But the following years were the most significant years in my English learning career. My new English teacher emphasized the importance of conversation, so we had to talk as much as possible either in front of the whole class or in group work. We discussed many topics, stated opinions and learned how to give advice and to transmit attitudes. Writing was second-ranked so we only had to write home exercises. Although we did not get any pressure on learning lists of vocabulary, we developed knowledge and features how to talk in and work with the English language. Added to that, my classmates and I were more willing to talk in English because we were not scared of making mistakes and we had a lot of fun in the lessons. (A#10: 30–45)

It would be expected that a change in teacher and thus possibly teaching style, could affect the learners' self-concepts, as indeed any change in frames of reference might. Thus, an interesting dimension to the findings here is the suggestion that periods of transition may not be restricted to changes between schooling contexts. If one understands a period of transition as stemming from a change in a frame of reference, internal or external, this may imply that learning another foreign language and working with a new teacher may also be considered as periods of transition in these EFL learners' development and hence, as critical experiences for learners' self-concept formation.

6.1.5.4 Isolated Events

The final category of critical experience emerging from these data concerns isolated events highlighted by some learners. Rather than particular individuals or periods of time, these are singular incidents that have been attributed significance by the learner and may take place within the framework of the other categories already mentioned. All the events tend to be related to the following factors that are familiar from the external factors, which emerged from the findings from the other data sources

reviewed in the preceding sections: either positive or negative feedback, experiences of success or failure, or a particular successful or unsuccessful experience of language use. As such, the incidents in this category are varied in their content and reflect the diverse realities and personal histories of the individual learners. Several examples from the data may illustrate the nature of this category:

In the sixth grade I used to spend lots of time on writing lyrics and even handed one of these in for homework once. It was a very personal text about my grandparents (...) my English teacher seemed to like it a lot since she presented the class with my text. I felt particularly proud of this fact since she gave me the feeling that she appreciated my work. This positive experience certainly influenced my decision to focus on language learning. (A#13: 16–18; 20–24)

There is one particular incident that I'll never forget about this trip, namely that we had to do a survey in the streets of Edinburgh and this experience showed me that theoretically practising one thing and then actually adapting it to a real situation is quite another cup of tea. I had prepared my first question thoroughly, namely "Would you mind if I ask you some questions?" and so I thought I give it a shot and asked an elderly woman. Although it was raining heavily she said NO. Smart as I was I said "thank you, goodbye" because I mistook the NO as a refusal without thinking about the way I had formulated my question. It was quite embarrassing, but after that slip everything went well and no further communication problems occurred. (A#19: 38–49)

NZ Yeah, I think so, my English teacher in the HBLA⁸, because she was like a human dictionary, she just knew everything. It was amazing, I mean she lived for English. . . and she kind of understood my passion for English and then she gave me a book on Celtic culture and then there was this. . . concorso. . . Wettbewerb. . .

S Competition.

NZ Yes, competition, on writing an essay. . .

S Oh?

NZ On spending one day in Ireland, and you could win a trip to Ireland. And then I wrote this essay. I didn't win the trip but a tin whistle. So the two, the ones who organized this, came to our school and gave me this tin whistle and we talked about my essay and that I really should continue with English, so that was kind of a motivation. (I#3: 104–122)

It is interesting to note that many of these particular isolated incidents can again be separated into experiences that take place in *formal* language learning contexts, such as schools, universities, etc., or that take place in *informal* settings, such as during travel experiences or in encounters with others not related to formal learning contexts. The findings again highlight the importance of taking a holistic approach to understanding EFL learners' self-concepts, as many factors which seem to be of importance for their development may stem from experiences that take place beyond the confines of the language learning classroom. Indeed, as some learners here point out, it is specifically the ability to see the real world use of the language which can have a considerable impact on their motivation, interest and self-concept in the language. Once again, the majority of the incidents reported in this category were successful encounters, as might be expected, given the learners' decision to specialise and study the language at university and, consequently, their positive

⁸Type of vocational college at secondary school level.

EFL self-concepts. However, three learners also cite unsuccessful experiences of language learning/use which were included in this category, implying that with a different sample of learners, there might have equally been more experiences of failure cited than were present in these data.

Critical experiences are of particular interest in respect to the case study data. Given the ongoing data collection, Joana reported on other incidents which did not lie as far in the past as those mentioned in the other retrospective data sources. For example, Joana would often highlight a particular experience from earlier in the week when we met:

- J Like today, today, what happened to me today was, in front of the whole room, Prof. T asked me who is studying inglese, English, right. Who studies English and there you know I had to raise my hand and I was obviously the only person in the room, and did you know what happened 1600 and something and I didn't know that the parliament was founded and the monarchy.
- S Right.
- J I did not, I couldn't think of that. I'm not very good with like dates anyway.
- S If she would have asked me, and I wouldn't have known.
- J I'm sure you would have known.
- S I wouldn't have known.
- J And she but you know but then she, you know, she sort of let me in with that silence and that was like, it almost killed me really because I felt so embarrassed because someone else knew it but this guy, he is like dork, nerd, hyper over super dork nerd.
(Laughter)
- J And I'm sure that he had already been to her course before otherwise he wouldn't have known that fact. I don't think so. He is not well, he is not like a reader or anything like that, he just sucks it all up from the courses and I think he has been in the course before from what I know, so he knew it and then I felt really bad. (J#16: 1026–1057)

It is unclear from the data whether such recent prominent experiences will remain salient in her memory in the long-term, or whether their significance is merely temporary. It is possible that such experiences contribute to her ongoing or working self-concept of the moment, which is constantly in a state of flux and development (Markus and Wurf 1987) but the extent to which they may affect her core self-concept remains unclear. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine why some experiences may remain more salient than others in her memory for longer periods of time, although it seems likely that their affective intensity may be a contributing factor (cf. link between memory and emotionally powerful experiences: Christianson 1992; Ochsner 2000). Fundamentally, these data extracts raise the question as to whether there may be a difference between critical experiences referred to by a learner in their recent history and those that lie further back in their autobiographies. It is not clear at which point an experience may become a critical experience and to what extent the effects of time, memory and retrospection distort the reporting and importance assigned by the learner to these experiences. For example, Walker et al. (2003) suggested, in autobiographical memory, people's recollections of past events are generally often positively biased. Whereas Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) argue that certain narrative memories retain their accessibility and affective significance depending on their relation to self-relevant goals. In other words, as long as the learner is concerned with goals that are relevant to

them in this domain, then such memories may remain accessible and salient in order to guide such goals. This suggests that reported critical experiences may represent complex self-related psychological processes and there is a need to be cautious when interpreting the relevance and nature of these reported experiences.

Given the relatively homogenous nature of the group as EFL learners of the same age and advanced level in their studies, it is perhaps not surprising that there is considerable commonality across the learners' types of critical experiences. Indeed, an ability to detect patterns across the data made the establishment of these four categories possible. Naturally, those learners who choose to study English at an advanced level may simply share a common set of experiences that tend to foster a love of the language and motivate learners to study at an advanced level. However, many of the statements by the learners seem to suggest established belief systems about the process of language learning and, in fact, one of the most common codes in the data concerns "beliefs about language learning". It is worth considering whether a kind of socialised "structured discourse" about language learning and in this case also related critical experiences, may exist for these learners (Mercer 2007). Such a discourse would act as a schema or script and would, thus, act as an internal frame of reference for learners and could possibly also influence the significance and saliency assigned to events in their development.

Learners may well selectively recall past experiences in a way that is consistent with a self-schema or self-relevant schema, such as within a particular domain (Neimeyer and Metzler 1994), in this case language learning. Within SLA specifically, Pavlenko (2001: 213) suggests that "social, cultural, and historic conventions shape stories that are told about language learning". It would be potentially fruitful for future research to explore whether such a "script" exists about language learning as a process, in particular in terms of critical experiences, which learners turn to in order to create narrative coherence in the story of their development as a language learner and the extent to which this may be culturally specific. Analysing the data in this respect could establish the learners' beliefs or "script" by examining the kind of critical experiences that were referred to by learners. In this case, such an analysis would suggest that learners may believe in the importance of stays abroad, the potential influence of teachers and learning experiences, the value of practice and experience in learning and using the language, as well as the value of feedback and the supportive value of experiences of success in formal and informal contexts.

In addition, the data in this study also revealed considerable individuality, variation and diversity amongst and within the learners in terms of their own experiences and developmental patterns. Many referred to very unique individual experiences, even if it has been possible to classify these in broad categories which are common across the learners. Yet, their own experiences and interpretations of events remain unique, as does what they select to report. What we cannot establish are the numerous experiences that they may have accumulated over the years, which the learners here choose not to report upon but which doubtless also played a role in their self-concept development. Furthermore, each learner also has different aspects of the language which are of greater and lesser importance to them (Eccles and Wigfield

Critical experiences

- Travel experiences:
 - To an English speaking country
 - To a non-English speaking country
- Encounters with significant others:
 - Teachers
 - Family, especially parent/guardian
 - Others, especially peers, penfriends
- Periods of transition implying new frames of reference (internal or external)
 - School – University
 - School – School
 - Starting another foreign language
 - Working with a new teacher
- Isolated events of success/ failure in language use/learning:
 - In formal language learning contexts
 - In informal language learning contexts

Fig. 6.1 Summary of categories of critical experiences

2002; Harter 1999a; Wigfield and Eccles 2000; Wigfield and Karpathian 1991), and this too will naturally affect what is assigned significance and what is not, as well as what is reported and what is not across the learners.

It is interesting to note that internal factors were conspicuously absent from the types of critical experiences discovered in these data, except for the implicit presence of the internal factor involving a comparison across foreign languages at periods of transition and the role of affect. The absence of explicit references to internal factors in the critical experiences may be due to the nature of these critical experiences, which means learners are perhaps simply less likely to reveal internal factors and they may be more likely to involve external factors. It is also possible that internal factors have been assimilated into the learners' self-concepts and are perhaps less accessible for direct reflection or reporting upon.

Above is a summary of the key categories of critical experiences that emerged from the analysis of these data (Fig. 6.1). There is clearly much overlap with other factors elucidated in this chapter but their special quality in the data meant that they were worth classifying separately until their precise role and nature in self-concept formation is clarified.

6.1.6 Summary

As was seen in the previous chapter in respect to internal factors, the analysis of the data revealed a multitude of highly interrelated factors, which were often difficult to separate clearly and distinctly. Consequently, the findings reported

here may pose more questions than provide answers about the complex relationships between various external factors, psychological processes and self-concept formation, especially considering the potential for inter- and intra-learner variation. However, these findings will hopefully provide a starting point for future research and help contribute, as the title of the book suggests, towards a better understanding of self-concept, rather than providing conclusive, all-encompassing answers.

Fundamentally, the findings appear to confirm Marsh's (1986a) suggestion that learners make external social comparisons by contrasting their own self-perceived performance in a particular school subject with the perceived performances of other students in the same school subject, as well as with other external standards of achievement, such as grades and exam results etc. However, there were additional findings in this study related to these external dimensions which extend Marsh's proposition and suggest a series of caveats.

Firstly, although the findings confirm the role played by social comparison in self-concept formation, they also raise questions about who an individual selects as the basis for a social comparison. The majority of the learners chose to compare themselves with either peers in the same class or in the same immediate study context. However, there were a few individuals who selected other individuals for comparison, such as, for example, native speakers (I#3), or an older, considerably more experienced student (I#10), or a much weaker group of learners (J#24), or family members (J#22) or an entire group of individuals (N#45). Thus, learners may not automatically choose peers to compare themselves with. They may engage in upward or downward social comparison and may select other individuals, depending on the purpose of their comparison (self-verification, self-protection or self-enhancement), or perceived suitability of the individual or group for comparison (same level, age, ability etc.), or the specific context or domain in which the comparison takes place and hence perceived relevance. An individual's self-concept may also be affected in varied ways by social comparisons, as learners may interpret the comparisons differently and in ways unique to themselves or the context (cf. Burlinson et al. 2005; Butzer and Kuiper 2006). The literature also suggests that social comparisons may function differently depending on whether a learner engages in it intentionally or unintentionally, voluntarily or forced by contextual factors such as a competitive learning environment (cf. Gilbert et al. 1995; Wood 1996).

Instances of the external social comparison were especially apparent in these data at periods of transition, such as from primary school to secondary school, or from secondary school to university. The findings showed that learners had to reassess themselves in the new learning context and that, for some, this was a psychologically stressful period of self-awareness, possibly in a domain of great personal value. Furthermore, the analysis also revealed that periods of transition as identified in the critical experiences could involve a change in either an internal or external frame of reference, such as when starting a new language or when beginning to work with a new teacher. Thus, educators would also need to be sensitive to the possible impact of such changes on learners' self-concepts in a domain, not just in instances when learners move across educational contexts.

The external dimension of the I/E model, as proposed by Marsh (2006: 40), also refers to the role played in self-concept formation by “external standards of actual achievement levels”, such as grades and explicit feedback (cf. Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2002). The findings in this study confirm that these external sources of standardised feedback are important for learners’ self-concepts, although they are perhaps less widely present across the data than expected. An important caveat concerning the role of externalised sources of feedback seems to be that any possible effect on one’s self-concept of such feedback may depend on the source of the feedback and whether the feedback-giver is perceived by an individual as being a respected and credible source for feedback in that particular domain. Furthermore, feedback may be perceived by an individual embedded in implicit, non-verbal messages from significant others and through reflected appraisals.

Importantly, the understanding of standardised forms of feedback and exam results was extended to also incorporate learners’ own perceptions of success/failure (cf. Pajares 2006; Usher and Pajares 2009). The data in this study suggest that if a learner perceives an experience as a success or failure, irrespective of the objective, standardised view of the experience, this is what may actually influence their self-concept. Furthermore, the analysis of the data also suggests that experiences of success and failure may take place in either formal or informal contexts. As highlighted earlier, informal experiences of success/failure may be a particular, unique characteristic of foreign language learning, and especially at the level of the students, which is the focus of this study, there tends to be a large number of opportunities for language learning and use outside of formal learning contexts.

Not surprisingly, the findings from across the data imply that experiences of success and failure are important for the learners in developing their self-concepts in a particular domain. Given the advanced educational level of the learners studied, most of the experiences reported were positive and involved success, although there were some instances where learners reported experiences of perceived failure. In this respect, Joana’s data suggest that learners may possibly interpret successes and failures differently, depending on a range of psychological factors and the learner’s current self-concept. Therefore, rather than assuming a straightforward connection between a perceived success or failure and one’s self-concept, it seems that such experiences may be mediated by learners’ attribution beliefs (cf. Marsh 1984, 1986b) and may depend on a host of other factors related to the experience itself, the perceived validity of the source of success/failure feedback, as well as other psychological processes, such as self-enhancement, self-verification, self-serving bias, compartmentalisation and self-protection (see, e.g., Brown 1986; Marsh 1986b; Sedikides and Strube 1997; Showers 1992; Swann 1997; Swann et al. 1992; Tice 1991).

An analysis of the data also suggested a role in self-concept played by significant others including teachers, family members and other individuals and their reflected appraisals (Bouchey and Harter 2005; Burns 1982; Cole et al., 1997; Cooley 1902; Felson 1985; Harter 1988, 1999b; Mead 1934). On closer examination, it was shown that it appeared to be mostly the significant other’s feedback, opinions and maybe the learner’s affective attitude towards and relationship with that person that were

important for their self-concepts. Unsurprisingly, one particular group of individuals that was prominent in the data were teachers. However, their potential impact on the learner's self-concept once again did not seem to stem from them as people per se but rather from their feedback and teaching styles, especially the learning environment they were able to create, often in affective terms, such as their ability to create a low anxiety classroom.

An additional external factor emerged, which was termed "critical experiences". These were classed as incidents that were in some way highlighted by the learner, which possessed a certain narrative clarity and depth of description and that appeared to have been assigned some affective significance by them. Potentially, the affective significance could be positive or negative, although all of the critical experiences reported by these learners were positive, as might be expected, given the generally positive self-concepts of these learners who had chosen to study the language at university level. On the whole, the critical experiences reported seemed to incorporate many of the external factors found in the data but until more clarity is gained about how, if at all, these critical experiences may differ from the other external factors reported in the data, it was decided to retain them as a separate category.

Below is a summary of the key external factors that may affect a learner's EFL self-concept (Fig. 6.2). Once again, it is worth reiterating that the list should not be viewed as exhaustive, and it should be kept in mind that many factors may function simultaneously and interact with each other as well as various internal processes in highly complex ways.

An interesting final consideration in respect to the findings, as suggested in [Chapter 5](#), concerns whether some learners may place more of an emphasis on internal or external factors when forming their self-concepts. Joana's data suggested that she was more orientated towards internal factors, whereas the analysis of the interview data from other learners suggested that there may be some individual variation in this. In contrast, the autobiography and written narrative description data implied more of an emphasis on external factors. This variation in the findings may stem from the focus of the type of data generated and the extent to which they were inherently more likely to reveal either predominantly internal or external factors. However, there may be scope for individual variation in this respect. Marsh et al.

- Social comparisons
- Feedback from significant others and reflected appraisals
- Perceived experiences of success and failure
- Previous language learning/use experiences in formal/informal contexts
- Critical experiences

Fig. 6.2 External factors affecting a learner's EFL self-concept

(2001) have cautioned that, the internal/external processes may be weighted differently by individuals and be of differing relative magnitude for individuals in forming their self-concepts. In his study investigating the I/E model, Dickhäuser (2005: 289) concludes that “external comparisons predominate over internal comparisons”, thus implying that external factors may generally be more influential in self-concept development. It would clearly be of interest to investigate whether some learners may be influenced more by internal or external factors and in what contexts the ratio in the relative weighting between internal/external factors may vary across learners, accepting, of course, the extent to which such a distinction is even possible.

Additionally, it is conceivable that learners could vary in the perceived importance they assign to separate individual factors within the internal/external distinction. In other words, learners may not just vary in terms of whether they place more emphasis on internal or external factors, but some learners may weigh certain specific factors within the internal or external category as being more important than others. For example, some learners by nature may be more likely to engage in social comparisons than others (cf. Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Gibbons and Buunk 1999). Further, even within the findings in this study, some factors appear to be more common across all the data than others, such as belief systems about language learning, internal cross-foreign language comparisons and external comparisons with peers. This suggests that some factors may generally be more common and significant across all language learners than others. Additionally, some factors may play a greater role in certain contexts, such as the heightened role of social comparisons at periods of transition and possible greater importance of social comparisons in respect to speaking skills, given the saliency and high “public visibility” of oral performance.

Moreover, given the potentially strong overlap between internal and external factors, it is worth considering whether it is, in fact, possible to make such a distinction at all. It is possible that the effects of some external factors may be mediated by internal factors, such as attribution beliefs, or may be processed via other internal psychological processes, such as self-verification, self-enhancement, self-serving bias, self-assessment etc. Thus, the external factors themselves may not affect the self-concept directly but rather it may be the way they are processed internally that is of importance in self-concept formation. As Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002) suggest, the two dimensions may not, in fact, be independent and it may be more useful to consider how individuals process experiences and other external stimuli internally. Nevertheless, the I/E distinction has still proved itself to be useful in facilitating a comprehensible overview of the extremely complex data in this study, but it should be remembered that this distinction may represent an oversimplification of the actual complex processes at work in self-concept formation and, in reality, even to the extent of it perhaps not being possible to sustain such a distinction.

Finally, this study did not examine any demographic factors which may cause individual variation in EFL self-concept development, such as gender, age, culture, socio-economic background, ethnic group etc. (see, e.g., Cross and Madson 1997;

Eccles et al. 1993; Marsh and Yeung 1998; Shapka and Keating 2005; Wigfield et al. 1997) or learners' language level and ability. The learners in this study were a relatively homogenous group, but certain "unusual" individuals, such as the bilingual student (N#42) or the mature student (N#33) in the written narrative description data, as well as the existent literature, imply that findings may differ across different groups of learners.

Thus, in terms of the factors that appear to affect a learner's EFL self-concept, the findings highlight the complexity of the processes involved in self-concept formation. As has been seen throughout the analysis, learners may react to experiences in ways that can be extremely complex and may be driven by multiple psychological processes which are often difficult to anticipate. Indeed, many factors may influence the learner simultaneously and other factors may mediate the possible effect of any one factor on the learner's self-concept. The findings also indicate the potential for individual and contextual variation and highlight the need to take a holistic view in order to understand all the processes and frames of reference embedded in a particular context.

In order to provide an overview of the findings and key questions arising from them and the literature, a pictorial summary of L2 self-concept processes is provided below (Fig. 6.3). Again, it is not intended to be seen as exhaustive but rather hopes to collate a complex, broad range of findings into one visual representation that can serve as a starting point for more detailed studies and further research. All self-formation processes are embedded within a larger socio-cultural context as well as the immediate situational context and all aspects of the self-concept are related to and influenced by these settings. When forming their self-concept, a person may be driven by three possible self-related motives: (1) to seek to accurately self-evaluate (when an individual wishes to know accurate "true" information about the self), (2) to self-protect (to seek information to confirm their sense of self – negative or positive – in order to maintain a coherent and consistent picture of the self), (3) to self-enhance (to seek information to improve one's self-concept and make one feel more positive about the self). All of these drives are possible within an individual to differing degrees at different points and their role can also vary according to the situational context. Although this model sees the individual as an active agent in the construction of their self-concept, it is also possible that a learner may be unconscious of processes of self-concept formation and these may not always be intentional or conscious. The underlying potential for individual variation in the role and effects of all of these processes must also be kept in mind. The self-concept that emerges from these formation processes can be seen in terms of behaviour, achievement, motivation, interest, strategy use, willingness to engage in challenges, goal setting and persistence.

At the outer level of the model is the macro-level of the socio-cultural context in which everything is embedded and which underlies all the processes, factors and indeed understandings of the self. The next level represents the demographic factors that affect every individual's self-concept within a particular culture. The third level represents the more micro-level situational context that influences all the immediate processes, which can lead to contextual variation in the self-concept formed.

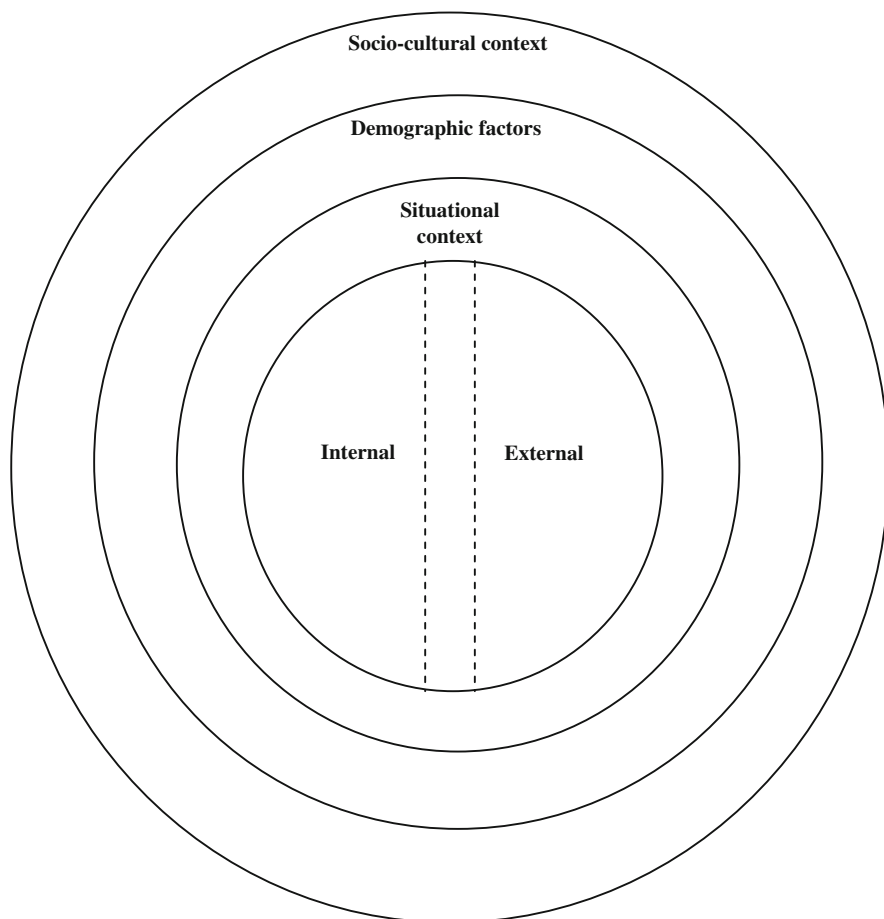


Fig. 6.3 Model of L2 self-concept formation processes

This level can also affect most directly the self-concept which an individual outwardly presents to others at a particular place and point in time, as well as the relative importance or saliency of particular frames of reference. The final inner circle sees an interaction between internal and external factors affecting a person's self-concept. They are represented as two halves of the same circle to indicate the overlap and interconnections between these two sets of factors. The dotted band is to indicate firstly, the fact that these frames of reference are not entirely independent of each other and secondly, it should also convey the potential for internal variation as one person may rely more on internal factors, whereas somebody else may depend more on external factors in their self-concept formation. Thus, the bar can be envisaged as moving to either side to represent a greater role for more internal or more external factors for an individual at a particular point in time.

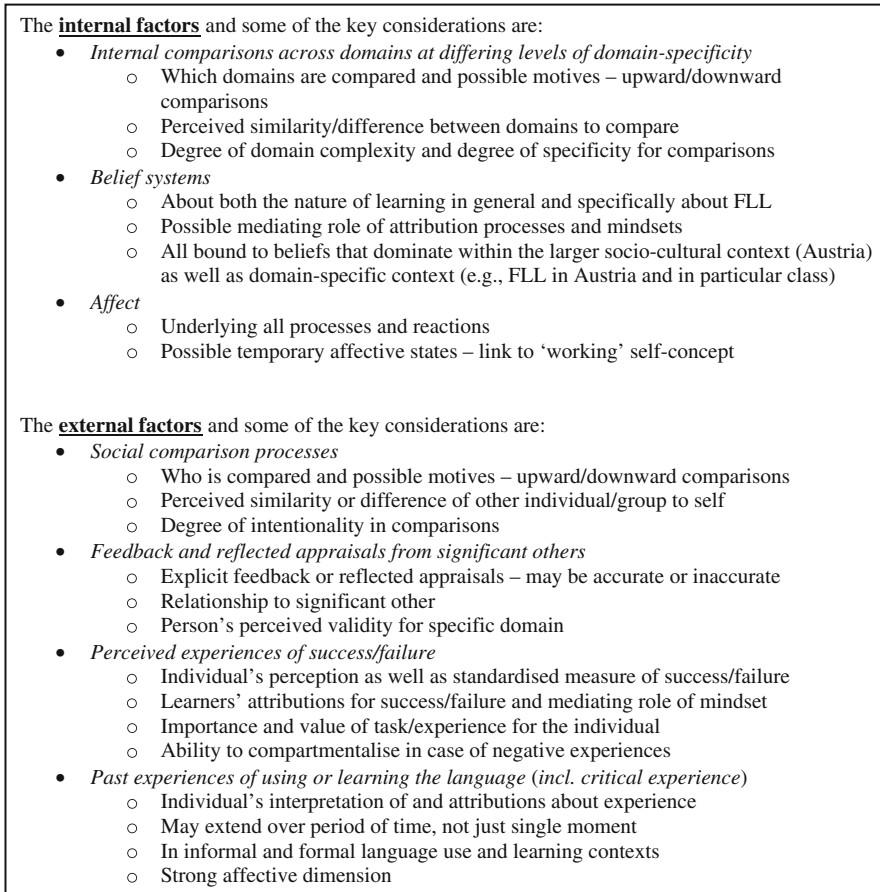


Fig. 6.4 Internal and external factors: key considerations

Finally, each segment (internal/external) of the model should be envisaged as including the internal and external factors elucidated in this book. These are listed above along with the key considerations in respect to each factor (Fig. 6.4).

In general, the findings should caution researchers and educators about making simplistic assumptions about learners’ behaviour and reactions to stimuli and the effect of any one factor on the individual’s self-concept. As has been seen, learners can vary greatly from each other in their self-concept formation processes and motives, and various contexts and situational variables can affect the nature and saliency of certain processes. Nevertheless, language teachers can perhaps engage in certain behaviours and approaches to help encourage a positive but realistic, self-concept in their learners. The final chapter will therefore consider the implications of the findings that emerged from the analysis of these data, bearing in mind the appropriacy of these implications for each individual learning and teaching context.

Chapter 7

Implications for Educators and Researchers

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter will consider the implications of the findings of this study and the examination of the relevant existing literature for both educators and researchers in the field. The chapter will begin by exploring how we, as educators, can encourage our language learners to develop positive but realistic FL self-concepts. Then the potential implications and further questions for research into the self-concept in the domain of FLL will be discussed. Finally, it will conclude with some personal reflections on the experience of having undertaken this programme of research and having written this book.

7.1.1 Implications for Foreign Language Teaching

The findings from this study and an examination of the literature immediately highlight how extremely complex the psychological processes surrounding the self-concept are, as well as how much potential there is for individual variation across learners and contexts. As such, there is a need to be careful not to overestimate the potential effectiveness of educational approaches that aim at enhancing global self-concept or self-esteem. It is evident from the findings reported on in this book that learners' FL self-concepts are part of a complicated network of multidimensional self-beliefs and are formed through a myriad of interconnected factors, all of which may be processed differently, depending on other psychological factors and motivations within the individual in the particular setting. It would therefore be naïve to assume that learners' EFL self-concepts can be easily influenced in predictable ways (cf. O'Mara et al. 2006).

However, whilst it is clear that there are no magic, straightforward solutions to enhancing learners' FL self-concepts, there are approaches that can help to create a learning environment which provides learners with a sense of security, does not pose any threat to a their sense of self and can lead to a positive attitude and motivation for the FL; all of which are conducive to helping learners to be able to develop a positive self-concept. Given the acknowledged benefits for learning of having a

positive but realistic self-concept, it is doubtless worth attempting to do as much as possible to encourage learners to develop such a self-concept, whilst still remaining mindful of the limits of teachers' influence and the array of other factors that are concurrently affecting a learner's self-concept. In reality, "good" teachers are likely to display many of the behaviours and approaches suggested below, but it is perhaps worth becoming more conscious of the psychology surrounding the foreign language learning experience, in order to become sensitive to learners' needs and individual psychology. The reader should also keep in mind that the following suggestions may not be appropriate for every learning and teaching context and their inclusion here reflects their suitability for the learning context from which the data were generated. Naturally, other considerations may need to be taken into account in respect to other foreign languages, in other FL learning cultures and with a different age and level of learner and as such certain suggestions may not be deemed appropriate. The reader must therefore decide for themselves which would be suitable for their own learning and teaching context.

Considering the findings and the literature concerning the theoretical structure and content of self-concepts in the FLL domain, the key aspect that educators need to be conscious of is that learners' self-concepts are formed in domain-specific ways and are part of a complex network of interrelated self-beliefs. Any interventions intended to focus on a learners' EFL self-concept should be addressed specifically at that particular domain, rather than at a more global level, in order to be effective (Craven et al. 1991; O'Mara et al. 2006). In particular, learners at this advanced level, whilst displaying evidence of some self-beliefs at the general FL level, generally held clearly developed, distinct and separate FL self-concepts. Thus, educators should focus on helping learners to develop each specific FL self-concept, rather than working towards developing a more holistic FL self-concept.

However, if a teacher wishes to attempt to understand the nature and content of a learner's EFL self-concept, they also need to remember that learners often refer to other domains, which they perceive as being relevant and related, maybe in unexpected ways, when describing themselves as EFL learners. Thus, in terms of understanding how a learner may view themselves in a specific FL domain, a teacher may need to take a holistic view of the learner, in order to gain an insight into a learner's self-beliefs in other domains which the learner perceives as connected. In the EFL context, it appears to be especially important to consider the learners' other foreign language self-concepts in order to fully comprehend their EFL self-concepts. Given that learners may make unique and possibly unexpected connections across domains, teachers need to be aware of the potential for considerable individual variation in individual learners' FL self-concepts. Further, it appears as if learners at this advanced level may describe themselves more in terms of either an EFL speaking or EFL writing self-concept. This means that learners could possibly hold quite different self-concepts across the two skill domains, for example, with one more positive than the other. Understanding the potential effects of learners making an internal comparison between these two domains can help educators to appreciate learners' differing approaches to these two productive skills, as well as their differing self-concepts and attitudes across the skill domains. Furthermore,

recognising the multifaceted nature of the L2 self-concept enables teachers and learners to appreciate that everyone has their strengths and weaknesses in different areas within the domain. Nobody is wholly bad or good at learning a FL. Hence, learners can be encouraged to value the aspects of FLL that represent their strengths and also work towards improving the areas of the domain with which they may need more support.

In Chapters 3 and 4, it was also suggested that learners' self-concepts appear to change and develop with time and experience. Thus, learners in the schooling context are likely to have different self-concept structures and content to those of advanced, tertiary-level learners. In terms of contextual variation, the findings indicate that learners' reported self-concepts and the salience of a particular domain may vary depending on context. As such, teachers need to be sensitive to variation amongst learners who may view themselves differently in different settings. As it is acknowledged that the teacher and learning environment can have a strong impact on an individual's self-concept, it is possible that different language teachers may experience different self-concepts in the same learner. On the whole, the findings highlight the importance for educators of viewing their learners, as far as possible, as unique, complex, psychological beings with distinct, defined self-views in each separate FL domain. Their self-concepts may sometimes be unexpected in terms of content and may vary depending on various factors, such as age, gender, level of proficiency and context.

The second main issue addressed in this book concerns how learners form their self-concepts in the FLL domain. As has been seen throughout the analysis, learners may react to experiences in ways that can be extremely difficult to anticipate and their reactions may be driven by multiple psychological processes, such as various self-enhancement, self-protection or self-assessment strategies. Indeed, it has been seen how many of the factors affecting the self-concept are interrelated and how several factors may influence the learner simultaneously and other factors may mediate the possible effect of any one factor on the learner's self-concept. Above all, the findings should caution educators about making straightforward assumptions about learners' behaviour and reactions to stimuli and the effect of any one factor on the individual's self-concept. It must also be remembered that learners are also active agents in the construction of their self-concept and can partially themselves ultimately dictate the extent to which they accept or reject the implications of various frames of references for their self-concept. Despite these caveats, language teachers can engage in certain behaviours and approaches to help learners to form a positive but realistic, FL self-concept, by attending to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning in ways that can influence the domain-specific self-concept either directly or indirectly.

In relation to internal factors, teachers could encourage learners to make internal comparisons focusing on their own sense of progress. As teachers will want all the learners in their class to improve and not just those who might benefit from an external comparison, learners should perhaps be discouraged from making external social comparisons. Learners could be supported in turning their attention from competitive, externally-oriented comparisons to attending to their own sense of progress

and, thus, more internally-oriented comparisons (cf. Bailey 1983). In general, learners may benefit from focusing more on the process of language learning and less on the product or outcomes of learning, taking pleasure from the learning per se. It may also help learners to discuss their beliefs about language learning to help eliminate any misconceptions that may be hindering successful language learning or negatively affecting their self-concepts, such as any potentially inhibiting “ought” beliefs (cf. Barkhuizen 1998; Cotterall 1995, 1999; Horwitz 1988; Kern 1995; Wenden 1986). In particular, learners need to believe that their language learning ability is something that they can change and develop. Teachers may therefore wish to discuss their learners’ mindsets about FLL (Dweck 2006; Dweck et al. 1995; Mercer and Ryan 2010) and help the learner to make more internal attributions focusing on purposeful effort. Learners need to be discouraged from holding the view that their language learning ability is dependent on some natural given fixed talent. In respect to the affective dimension, classes should be interesting, enjoyable and offer learners a chance to select personally relevant topics and to work in a learning climate that is conducive to positive affective reactions in the learner who should feel comfortable, supported and secure. Ideally, the in-class atmosphere should aim at reducing the need for any learner to engage in face-saving or self-handicapping behaviours and as such teachers could also attempt to develop positive group dynamics.¹ In this respect, the relationships and power dynamics between the teacher and the learners and amongst the learners themselves are likely to be particularly important.

In terms of external factors, the data showed that learners frequently appeared to engage in external social comparisons, particularly at periods of transition, such as from primary school to secondary school, or from secondary school to university. This indicates the potential problems some learners may face as they readjust and re-evaluate themselves in light of these new external frames of reference. Considering how this can be a psychologically stressful period for learners, an awareness and sensitivity to this in schools and at university would be important. In the tertiary-level context, it could also possibly help to reduce drop-out rates which, it is hypothesised, could also result from learners’ disappointment when reassessing their self-concept in the new context, particularly in domains that may be of great personal value (Jackson 2003). The analysis of the autobiography data also revealed that periods of transition could involve a change in either an internal or external frame of reference, such as when starting a new foreign language or when beginning to work with a new teacher. Thus, educators would also need to be sensitive to the possible impact of such changes on learners’ self-concepts in the FLL domains.

In terms of other external factors, teachers need to scaffold learning to allow learners to have genuine and believable experiences of success, which could positively affect their self-concept. Feedback from teachers ideally needs to focus on the learning process and not the learning outcome, in order to encourage a sense of

¹For practical ideas on developing group dynamics see Dörnyei and Murphey (2003).

progress, as well as a “growth” mindset which would incorporate internal attributions and an incremental view of learning (Dweck 2003, 2006). Feedback needs to be detailed and constructive in order to empower learners to act upon it to improve their abilities and make progress. Furthermore, the data indicate that, in order to be effective, any feedback needs to be perceived by the learner as originating from a credible and fair source. This suggests teachers should aim at making assessment procedures transparent and comprehensible for learners. Educators may also want to explore learners’ attribution beliefs, in order to understand their possible mediating effects on the individual’s self-concept and reactions to feedback and exam results. It may be useful to discuss attribution beliefs explicitly and raise learners’ awareness of the degree of internal control they can exert over learning outcomes through concerted and purposeful effort. Another more indirect approach to enhancing learner self-concept would be to engage in some form of strategy training as the literature suggests that a metacognitive knowledge of strategies enables learners to feel a sense of agency and can increase their self-efficacy and hence self-concept in the domain (see, e.g., Chamot et al. 1996; Graham 2007; Wong 2005).

As circumstances permit, it is also worth encouraging travel experiences but importantly ones that are likely to create a rich number of opportunities for practice, experiences of success and hopefully the chance to gain positive affective experiences associated with using or learning the language. The findings also imply the value of acknowledging that a considerable amount of language learning can take place in informal language learning and use contexts beyond the classroom. This may be a special dimension to language learning that may make it different to other subjects. It can be useful for teachers to acknowledge and incorporate such experiences into classroom life and allow learners the chance to share their stories with others. In this research and teaching context, I have found asking learners to write their language learning histories extremely valuable in affording me as the teacher a rich insight into the lives of my learners. It has enabled me to contextualise their language learning and development as language learners and, hopefully, better understand them as holistic individuals living complex lives inside and outside the classroom. In addition, the learners themselves reported that the process of writing their language learning histories helped them to gain greater self-awareness of themselves as FL learners by reflecting upon and evaluating their past experiences as well as by setting future goals.

Another pedagogical issue concerns the self-concepts of boys studying foreign languages. As was seen in Chapter 4, the levels of self-concept may vary across genders in gender-stereotypical domain-specific ways and thus lower FL self-concepts can be anticipated amongst boys (cf. Graham 2002; Henry 2009; Williams et al. 2002). Unfortunately, many boys do not feel that foreign language learning is a domain in which they can succeed and they often have negative attitudes towards FLL in general. This implies that educators need to ensure that the micro-level FLL educational culture of their classes and institution do not send explicit or implicit messages which may further reinforce boys’ lower self-concepts in and negative attitudes towards this domain. Indeed, educators may wish to engage in specific

behaviours and classroom interventions aimed at raising boys' FL self-concepts and challenging the misconception that foreign language learning is a "girls' subject".²

Finally, taking a self-concept approach to understanding language learner behaviour may help educators to gain an insightful perspective on certain, seemingly contradictory, learner behaviours. For example, a learner, who is rather weak but yet repeatedly fails to do homework, may be described by some as "lazy". From a self-concept perspective, one possible explanation for such behaviour is that the learner may possess a weak self-concept in their foreign language and thus may anticipate failure in the domain. The learner may then engage in self-handicapping behaviour (see, e.g., Collins 1996, 2000; Feick and Rhodewalt 1997; Harris and Snyder 1986; Midgley and Urdan 2001; Thomas and Gadbois 2007; Thompson 1994; Tice 1991; Tice and Baumeister 1990; Wills 1981), such as not doing homework, so that, if they fail, they have an external factor to blame for the failure and this would then protect their self-concept in that domain. Clearly, there may be innumerable causes of various learner behaviours, and the findings of this study have highlighted the exceedingly complex nature of the psychology surrounding language learning; however, understanding the self-concepts of FL learners may provide educators with additional valuable insights into their language learners and their behaviour.

7.1.2 Issues for Further Research

Whilst it has been stressed throughout this study and in much of the research literature (see, e.g., Marsh et al. 1988; Marsh and Yeung 1996, 1997, 1998; Valentine et al. 2004; Yeung and Lee 1999; Yeung and Wong 2004) that research into the self-concept ought to be carried out at the domain-specific level, this study has indicated that there are, in fact, also benefits from taking a somewhat broader situated, more holistic perspective to understand unanticipated connections made by individual learners across different domains. Many interesting insights in this study were gained from data in which learners connected self-concepts across a variety of different domains. To fully comprehend a learner's EFL self-concept, it seems to be particularly important to also understand their other foreign language self-concepts, more so than their L1 self-concepts at this advanced level. Whilst the recommendation to engage in domain-specific studies to reflect the multifaceted nature of the self-concept construct appears to be pertinent advice, especially for quantitative studies employing statistical procedures, it would seem worthwhile to also carry out complementary qualitative studies, which take a broader base for data collection and consider the learner from a more situated, holistic perspective. In particular, given the potential for individual variation revealed in this study, research approaches that allow this aspect to emerge and be explored would provide an important extension to the large number of experimental and quantitative studies that currently dominate the field.

²Cf. Häussler and Hoffmann (2002) who offer suggestions for interventions to enhance girls' physics self-concept

In this respect, I found the most illuminating data in my enquiry was from the single longitudinal case study. These data were analysed in a grounded manner and hypotheses were generated from them. These were then explored in the other data sources. Case studies can generate rich, detailed data particularly well-suited to providing insights into complex psychological experiences, such as self-concept development, as well as revealing possible individual variation. Given that case study data are usually contextualised, they also enable researchers to gain an understanding of how the self-concept functions in relation to its situational contexts. As Yin (2003: 2) states, “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events”. Therefore, I propose that case studies may prove to be a particularly useful research methodology to advance understandings of self-concept in a way that allows more individual and situational variation to emerge, in line with “a person-in-context relational view” of the construct (Ushioda 2009).

Future studies into self-concept also need to be conscious of and sensitive to potential fluctuations in reported self-concept. In the longitudinal case study data, temporary affective factors, such as tiredness, illness, mood etc., were found to affect Joana’s self-concept. It was suggested that these factors do not perhaps influence a learner’s “core” self-concept but, rather, their current “working” self-concept at that particular point in time. The data and literature also indicate that a learner’s self-concept may be affected at a particular moment in time by other situational variables, such as their relationship with the interlocutor or the saliency of a particular role identity. As such, methods for generating data need to consider the possibility that a reported self-concept may vary depending on the context and point in time. This, therefore, indicates the value of generating data at multiple points in time to avoid distortion from the potential influence of temporary affective factors on the reported self-concept of the moment and the value of employing differing settings and approaches for data generation to capture any contextual variation.

Further, as many of the factors that seem to affect the FL learner self-concept take place in informal contexts, outside a formal learning setting, it is important for research to acknowledge this and ensure that a holistic view of FL learners is taken, in order to incorporate such seemingly influential factors. Thus, to fully understand the development of a FL learner’s self-concept, research needs to account for factors which may not be neatly covered by fixed-item data responses and which may exist beyond the bounds of the formal learning context. Informal language learning and use contexts may be particularly important in respect to foreign language learning compared to the learning of certain other subjects. Generally, there is a need for research to examine how language teaching/learning/use environments can positively affect learners’ self-concept in a specific domain. To date, there is virtually no research from non-experimental settings that explores the effects of actual teaching approaches or characteristics of language learning or use contexts on learners’ self-concepts.

In respect to the findings reported on in Chapter 3 on the theoretical nature of self-concept in the FLL domain, it would be important to understand how the structure and connections in learners’ self-concepts may vary across individuals and what

the factors affecting this variation might be. In particular, it could be expected that a learners' level of proficiency in the language may have a significant impact on the content, structure and complexity of an individual's L2 self-concept. It would also be especially interesting to compare the nature of the self-concepts in the languages domain of those who have grown up bilingually or taken part in immersion programmes, compared to those who have attended regular foreign language classes. Concerning the EFL self-concept of advanced learners, further research is needed to clarify whether learners at this level may possess distinct EFL writing and speaking self-concepts and if so, to examine the ways in which these interact, affect each other and influence learners' approaches to the two skill areas.

Considering the findings reported upon in [Chapters 5 and 6](#) concerning the frames of reference affecting a learner's domain-specific self-concept, there are many open questions concerning current understandings of the dominant I/E model generally and specifically in relation to the FL domain. Primarily, the findings revealed the complexity inherent within this field and suggest the need for more strongly situated, detailed studies to build on the first steps taken in this current study. Specifically, various dimensions and caveats concerning each frame of reference need further investigation and clarification.

Firstly, concerning social comparisons, further research needs to examine what types of people learners compare themselves with, in what contexts and for what reasons. In this regard, FLL may be special due to the relatively "public" oral dimension of FLL which may call forth more social comparisons than in other subjects. Researchers may, therefore, wish to examine the kinds of social comparisons learners engage in and their effects on their L2 self-concept, such as comparisons with peers, classmates, other learners/users of the language and native speakers. The FLL domain may also be unique as far as the models learners choose to emulate are concerned. For example, comparisons to native speakers or "near-peer role models" (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003: 128), especially to those students who have spent an extended period of time abroad, could have an important range of effects on a learner's self-concept, potentially leading to negative effects, if the role model is seen as being unattainable in some way. Furthermore, language teachers' own self-concepts and language ability may play a more salient role than in other subjects, given that in FLs, teachers also serve as acting models of the language to be learnt. Therefore, it may be also particularly important to study teachers' FL self-concepts as well as the impact of teachers as models on learners' self-concepts.

In terms of internal cross-domain comparisons, future research could examine the domains that learners choose to group together and which cross-domain comparisons they engage in, what the motivations for the comparisons are and what the effects of these comparisons on their respective self-concepts are. This would be particularly interesting in the field of language learning in respect to the relationships between the L1, L2 and L3 and also concerning the seeming dichotomy between languages and mathematics, as well as between the skills of speaking and writing. It would also be worth considering whether different aspects of learning a FL may call forth different frames of reference. For example, oral production skills may by

their inherent nature lead learners to engage in more social comparisons, whereas, in contrast, learners may be more likely to engage in internal comparisons in respect to their writing, such as an internal comparison with their own L2 oral production skills. Therefore, research needs to clarify whether perhaps different aspects of the EFL self-concept may be formed based on different frames of reference to differing degrees.

A particular internal cross-domain comparison that suggests an interesting avenue for further research was made by a mature learner (N#33) who explicitly compared her current self-concept with a prior self-concept within the same domain. Although she was the only learner to explicitly compare her current EFL self-concept to her prior EFL self-concept, many learners referred to a sense of progress, which possibly stems from an internal comparison of prior and current self-concepts in the same domain. The idea of progress was also referred to by many learners who stressed how important this was for them and their feeling of well-being in the language. It is possible that in order to gain this sense of progress, learners compare their current and past self-concepts within a domain, although clearly many other factors may also influence and mediate this process. It was notable that many learners also mentioned a positive affective response stemming from a sense of progress. The exact nature of relationships and any causality between self-concept, a sense of progress and an affective reaction is beyond the scope of this study. However, its presence throughout the data suggests that it would be worth investigating further, in order to know what enables students to feel this seemingly important sense of progress and how educators can facilitate this, such as possibly through the use of portfolios, journals and other forms of self-assessment.

With respect to feedback, it would be essential to understand the potential effect on a learner's self-concept, depending on the various types of feedback given, the relationship to the person providing the feedback, the value of the specific domain for the individual and the possible mediation of any feedback through the learner's attribution beliefs and FLL mindset. In terms of experiences of success/failure, it has been seen how a learners' own perceptions of success and failure may impact on their self-concept more than standardised forms of success/failure, and therefore research needs to examine how learners come to interpret their experiences and achievements. In the domain of FLL, perceived successes/failures in both formal and informal contexts appear to be important for an individual's self-concept. It would, therefore, be particularly important to gain insights into the relative importance of these two settings for learners' self-concepts and, in this respect, it may be useful to differentiate between experiences in using and in learning the language, particularly in terms of the nature of the interactional context.³

³This is not intended to suggest that language learning is distinct to using the language. Based on the principles of learning by doing, the two are clearly interlinked. However, it is possible that in typical language learning contexts, different interlocutors, demands, expectations and frames of reference may be called forth compared to language use contexts. Thus, these differing contexts and purposes of language encounter may lead to differences and variation in the specific FL self-concept.

Finally, the data appear to indicate the importance of positive affect for learners to develop a positive self-concept in a domain. Future research is needed to examine the exact role played by affect, how this can be fostered and the ways in which it is connected to both self-concept and motivation. An unresolved question for researchers concerns the nature of the relationship between affect and different components of the self-concept, such as between the cognitive and affective dimensions, as far as it may be possible to distinguish between the two. In terms of FLL, research could explore the relationship between a learner's L2 self-concept and their affective attitude towards either an L2 target culture, the language as an international communication tool and/or the language as a linguistic entity: indeed, particularly for EFL the potential for various affective orientations is considerable. In terms of affective states, it has been suggested that FLL may call forth more anxiety, particularly in respect to oral performance, than in other academic subjects and, as such, the relationship between self-concept and anxiety is an important one that needs to be understood more fully (cf. Cheng et al. 1999; Gardner and MacIntyre 1993; Mills et al. 2006; Pellegrino 2005).

One particularly prominent additional factor in the data was individuals' belief systems. This is of particular interest, given, to the best of my knowledge, the absence of research into the relations between an individual's beliefs about a specific domain and their respective self-concept in that domain. As one of the most prevalent factors in these findings, it is essential to further examine the extent to which beliefs about language learning may function as an internal frame of reference and, consequently, affect an individual's L2 self-concept. A learner's belief system is also the frame of reference most reflective of an individual's personal and sociocultural setting. Belief systems are formed within a culture and reflect its values, attitudes, traditions, norms and understandings. Thus, the belief systems held by an individual are likely to reflect not only the wider sociocultural context but also the more micro-level settings of the educational culture of FLL within a particular country, as well as the particular class in which the learner is taking part. Hence, although clearly wider macro-level beliefs influence a learner's self-concept, the beliefs of most immediate relevance to understanding how an individual forms their FL self-concept are likely to be those belief systems developed within the domain-specific educational context of FLL in a particular culture, classroom and/or institution. Understanding how different FL learning cultures may conceptualise, think and talk about the process of language learning would help us to appreciate how learners across contexts may use differing sets of domain-specific beliefs to form and evaluate their FL self-concepts.

A particular set of beliefs that may have a notable impact concern beliefs about a "natural talent" for FLL. The widespread belief about the importance of language learning aptitudes for successful language learning may suggest a stronger tendency towards a fixed mindset for the FL domain (Mercer and Ryan 2010). This means that learners may believe that ability in FLL is beyond their control as it is dependent more on fixed natural talent, rather than on an ability that can be developed through hard work and effort. Such a fixed mindset removes the learner's sense of agency and restricts their belief in their potential for growth. Clearly, this can have a negative effect on the individual's self-concept, especially for those who already have low

self-concept in the domain, particularly when they encounter any kind of setback or failure or if they engage in upward social comparisons with role models they do not feel they are able to emulate.

Various other factors also seemed to be connected with the FL self-concepts in complex ways throughout the data. Most notably, these included a learner's goals, strategies and motivation. As the data in this study did not seem to indicate that these factors affected the self-concept directly, they were omitted from the analysis in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#), but their strong presence in all the data and their seeming close link to self-concept, possibly as a mediating factor or in reciprocal relationships, implies that further, more focused research is needed to understand these factors and explore the ways in which they interconnect with each other and a learner's L2 self-concept. An important future goal for research in the field would be to attempt to develop a more comprehensive model that would indicate how self-concept relates to other key variables in the language learning process such as attributions, goals, motivation, beliefs, identity, strategies and actual achievement in specific contexts.

In respect to variation across learners, this study did not examine any demographic factors that may cause differences in FL self-concepts, such as gender, age, and ethnicity, or the impact of the learners' language level. The learners in this study were a relatively homogenous group, but certain "unusual" individuals, such as a bilingual student (N#42) or a mature student (N#33) in the written narrative description data, imply that findings may differ across various groups of learners. Also, for FLL, it would be important to understand how learners' self-concepts may vary depending on age and gender, especially given that age and gender are often believed to be influential for language learning (see, e.g., [Oxford 2002](#); [Oxford and Ehrman 1988, 1993](#); [Schumann 1975](#); [Singleton 1989](#); [Sunderland 2000](#)). In particular, research needs to clarify whether the self-concepts of boys in FL may be a contributory factor to their frequently cited underachievement and lower motivation in the domain (cf. [Graham 2002](#); [Williams et al. 2002](#)).

Finally, it is necessary to consider whether certain aspects of the findings in this study may be particular to EFL. For example, the critical experiences learners reported that involved the use of English with non-native speakers or English as a Lingua Franca often reflect the status of English as a global language. Technology has opened up access to communities of English language users, virtual and real, well beyond the confines of any language classroom or specific L2 culture. Indeed, many of the interactions reported on in this study, which were deemed influential for the learners' EFL self-concepts, were not with L2 native speakers but often with other users and learners of the language. Learners of English today also have unprecedented access to a range of different types and forms of "World Englishes", and ELT is currently involved in debates about standards, such as native-speaker or English as an International Language (EIL) measures (see, e.g., [Jenkins 1998, 2000, 2002](#); [McKay 2003](#); [Seidlhofer 2003](#)). Clearly, any decisions about standards and norms for exams and teaching programmes create specific frames of reference which are likely to have a considerable impact on learner's EFL self-concepts. Furthermore, English differs from other foreign languages given its central role for many careers in which English is a compulsory requirement, such as in areas of

technology, science, aviation, and academia. Naturally, a learner's motivation can be influenced by the status of the language but, in such contexts, learners' other frames of reference, sources for social comparison and standards or expectations are also affected. Another element that may be distinct to EFL is that, at least in this educational setting, learners usually start learning English earlier than any other foreign language. This means these learners have begun to study English at a different stage in their cognitive development and generally attain a higher actual level than for their other foreign languages by a certain age. Research in SLA therefore needs to investigate how the EFL self-concept compares with other FL self-concepts, in particular how these may be affected by the length of experience of learning the language, age at outset of learning, level of proficiency and history of language learning approaches and experiences – all set against an understanding of the unique backdrop of the “cultural environment” of each individual FL.

7.1.3 Summary

To summarise, we have considered what language teachers can be aware of and do to help learners to develop a positive but realistic self-concept in the domain of FLL. Self-concept formation is a complex and individual process and one single method in isolation is unlikely to be able to affect any lasting changes. However, certain approaches to teaching can contribute towards creating a secure and positive learning climate in which learners could potentially develop a more positive domain-specific self-concept. This chapter has also considered some of the questions which remain for future research to explore in more detail, in particular in relation to the FLL domain. Very little empirical work exists focusing in detail on the nature of L2 self-concept and, given its acknowledged central role in successful learning, it promises to be an exciting construct that may help us to appreciate more fully the exact nature of the learner's psychology surrounding the L2 learning process. The research here has shown that learners do possess language-specific self-concepts, and it is likely that these are important psychological variables that need to be better understood and incorporated into various models and a range of types of studies within SLA, particularly given the close relationship of self-concept with other key factors such as affect, beliefs, motivation, goals and strategies.

It is hoped that this book has helped to contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and role of the self-concept construct in the field of FLL. It has aimed at establishing some fundamental characteristics of the L2 self-concept by examining specifically the EFL self-concept and its relation to other FL self-concepts. It has taken a strongly interdisciplinary approach and hopes that, by having incorporated detailed insights from psychology, to have avoided oversimplifications and confusion concerning this important psychological construct. It has also examined some of the factors that appear to contribute towards the formation of a learner's L2 self-concept and has considered ways in which these factors and processes may function specifically in the domain of FLL.

Through my work on this research and book, I have gained an appreciation of the psychology surrounding the foreign language learning experience, even though my focus has only been on one aspect of this. However, I have been humbled by the vastness and the inherent complexity of this field and am conscious of the inadequacy of any single book to fully capture this. Nevertheless, the insights I have gained have helped me as a teacher to become more sensitive to the complex psychology of my learners and to better understand how a learner's self-concept can affect their approaches, motivation and interest in foreign language learning. Above all, I have realised that attempting to understand a learner's FL self-concept is a rather daunting and extraordinarily difficult task, given the highly interrelated nature of the many psychological factors involved and the great individuality in terms of psychological processes that learners may employ in various contexts. The experience has cautioned me against trying to unduly simplify or attempt to find straightforward answers to the psychological processes involved in any undertaking, let alone one as complex as learning a foreign language. This book cannot provide simple, uncomplicated understandings about the self-concept in the FLL domain; indeed, it may well have generated more questions than answers. However, it is hoped that the insights offered can contribute in some small part towards a greater understanding of the role of the individual's psychological self-concept in the process of FLL. It is a fascinating construct that has the potential to exert a considerable influence on a person's learning processes, approaches and their interpretations of their experiences. Continuing to search for more detailed and comprehensive insights into the construct in the FLL domain promises to be an exciting undertaking for SLA researchers and teachers and one that will hopefully ultimately be of great benefit to our foreign language learners.

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Appendix A

Example Consent Form

Consent Form

I would like to use this text that you will write for my research. If you would be willing to let me use your text for my research, could you please sign your agreement below and attach it to the homework. Naturally, your identity will be kept anonymous and all your texts and comments will be confidential. In my writing up of the research, I will use fictitious names to ensure your identity is protected. Taking part, or equally not taking part, will not affect your grade for the course in any way.

If you have any questions about my work or this particular research project, please do not hesitate to contact me: sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at

Your agreement to allow Sarah Mercer to use your text for research:

If you agree:

- You can ask me about any aspect of it at any time
- You can choose to withdraw your text from the project at any time if you wish
- Your real name will not be used in the reporting of this project
- Your work and responses will be confidential
- You can have access to a copy of the report when it is completed if you wish

I, _____, agree to be part of the research project.

Signature:

Date:

If any of this is unclear or if you have questions about any aspect of this project, please do not hesitate to contact me either via email, sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at or in my office hour.

Adapted from: Burns, A. 1999. *Collaborative action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix B

Bio-data of Interview Participants

All of the interview participants had English as their major subject and were Austrian nationals. In-depth, informal interviews were carried out with 12 volunteer students (2 male, 10 female) from various stages of their studies, including a first semester student and one in her final year, all aged between 21 and 29, with an average age of 24. The reported information is valid for the time at which the interviews were carried out.

Assigned pseudonym	Interview number	Male/female	Age	Year of study	Date of interview
V	1	F	23	3	01.02.05
St	2	F	21	2	06.12.05
NZ	3	F	23	3	21.02.06
G	4	F	24	3	20.12.05
X	5	F	22	3	24.10.05
Gerrard	6	M	23	4	06.04.06
FR	7	F	22	1	19.12.05
Andrea	8	F	28	1	22.07.05
Francis	9	F	24	1	20.05.06
Gina	10	F	29	3	19.12.05
Dena	11	F	26	6	01.08.06
Dan	12	M	26	7	06.02.06

Appendix C

Open-Ended Interview Guidelines

General Background About Self

- How long have you been learning English? (and studying it at uni)
- Do you study any other languages? (do they affect each other?)
- What has been/is the relationship between your languages?
- How old are you?
- Do you have any multicultural/lingual background?
- Tell me about your language learning history.
- Critical experiences/people.
- Have you had any specific previous language learning/use experiences that have been significant? (people or events)
- Have you ever been abroad for a period of time?
- Why did you decide to study languages?
- Any significant events in your language learning history?
- How did/do your family feel about your decision to study languages?
- How do you see your future use of languages?
- Tell me about your language learning history at university/school/out of schooling contexts.

About Self as Language Learner

- What affects the way you feel about a specific language?
- What affects the way you feel about yourself as a language learner?
- What characteristics do you possess that you think are useful for learning a language?
- Do you think you're a 'typical' language learner? Explain.
- Role of affective factors (how does the way you feel affect your language learning?)
- Role of feedback (how react to it, what type prefer, etc)
- Role of teacher – how important is the teacher? What is your ideal teacher?
- Role of other factors (e.g., mood)

- Learning preferences (habits) (incl. do you set yourself goals? Why/not?)
- In/out of class experiences (link, relation, influence)
- How do you feel about learning generally and in particular languages? (link, compare, your past experiences, current experiences)
- How do you think your self-awareness affects your language learning?
- Links between language learning and other learning experiences (similarities and differences)
- How has your language learning changed over time? (proficiency – different approaches?)
- Goal setting/organisational skills/time (how do you do this? In what ways does it help?)
- Exams – role and affect – feedback from exams success/failure, teacher comments, locus of control
- Motivation (incl. influences and changes) (what was motivation to start, how do you maintain it, what affects it?)
- Self-confidence (incl. influences and changes) (how confident are you overall, in specific areas? Why, what affects your confidence?)
- Strategies (previous experience, needs, changes over time, etc.)
- How would you describe yourself as a language learner?
- Have you changed as a language learner over time? If so, in what ways?
- Can you describe yourself in different skill areas/tasks?

General About Language Learning

- How would you describe a ‘good language learner’?
- What are your beliefs about how to learn a language?
- How do you feel language learning is similar/different to other subjects?
- What factors are necessary for successful language learning? Across skills.
- What advice would you give to somebody starting to study languages at university? (should/ought to)
- How important do you think languages are for a future job/career?

Any Questions for Me?

Appendix D

Written Narrative Descriptions: Guidelines

You as a Language Learner Guidelines

For homework, you should write a piece describing yourself as a language learner. This will help your teacher to gain a better understanding of you as a learner and will help you to become more aware of your own needs and preferences which will help you to learn more effectively.

Please think carefully about the following points and mention some or all of them in your written piece:

- Your motivation for choosing English
- Your strengths as a language learner
- Your weaknesses as a language learner
- Aspects of your language learning that you feel confident about
- Aspects of your language learning that you are worried about
- Any previous influential language learning experiences and their effect on you
- Your likes and dislikes as a language learner
- Your preferred strategies and techniques for learning a language
- What goals you have set for this term, and beyond, and how you intend to achieve them

Appendix E

Autobiographies: Guidelines

Your Language Learning Life History

In order to enable your teacher to better understand your language learning development and to support research carried out by Sarah Mercer, we would like to ask you to write about your language learning life history. In doing so, it will also crucially give you chance to reflect on issues and events of your own experience, which should help you to become more consciously aware of your own behaviour and preferences as a language learner.

The research is interested in gaining insight into learners' experiences of and perspectives on the language learning process. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' versions; all your stories are interesting in their uniqueness. The texts are, of course, confidential and your anonymity will be protected. The texts should be typed and around 2 pages in length, but you may write more if you wish.

You should write about your language learning life history from the point where you first developed an interest in languages or started to learn a language to the point in your language learning where you are now. Although the focus is on your language learning experiences, in particular English, you may wish to mention other experiences that you think have played an important role in your development too. Try to be as descriptive and detailed as possible about key events, rather than just writing a superficial chronology. You should also describe how you see yourself and would describe yourself as a language learner now. Finally, you should write about your specific goals for this semester and your plans for the future. In this way, the text will cover your past, present and future.

Appendix F

Referencing Conventions for Data Extracts

Throughout the book, references to data extracts follow the same pattern.

Firstly, the data source is given, as represented by a letter:

J = Joana case study data

I = Interview data

N = Written narrative descriptions data

A = Autobiography data

Secondly, the number of the primary document from which the extract is taken is provided.

E.g., #5 or #23

Thirdly, the line numbers of the particular data extract are provided.

E.g., 123–136 or 23–26

If a section of the data is omitted in the extract, this is indicated in the body of the extract with (...) and in the reference a break is made in the line numbers, which then continues after a semi-colon.

E.g. (A#15: 79–82; 84–89) refers to an extract taken from the autobiography data, primary document 15, lines 70–82, then there is a section of the extract omitted, then lines 84–89 are included.

If a citation begins mid-sentence, this is indicated by ...at the beginning of the extract.

E.g., ...but needless to say, mistakes do occur.

An example from each data source is provided below for illustrative purposes:

- An extract from Joana's data, primary document number 4, lines 1950–1957 would be represented as (J#4: 1950–1957).
- From the interview data, primary document number 1, lines 636–638 as (I#1: 636–638).
- From the written narrative description data, primary document number 63, lines 41–43 as (N#63: 41–43).
- From the autobiography data, primary document number 18, lines 30–34 as (A#18: 30–34).

Glossary and Abbreviations

Terminology

AL	– Applied linguistics
ASC	– Academic self-concept
ASDQ	– Academic self description questionnaire
EFL	– English as a foreign language
ELT	– English language teaching
FL	– Foreign language
FLL	– Foreign language learning
FLSC	– Foreign languages self-concept
IFL	– Italian as a foreign language
L1	– Mother tongue
L2	– First foreign language
L3	– Second foreign language
LSC	– General languages self-concept
PSC	– Physical self-concept
RQ	– Research question
SDQ	– Self description questionnaire
SLA	– Second language acquisition

Expressions Used in the Data Transcripts

AAC	– Anglo-Austrian Circle. Intercultural organisation which runs a ‘Stammtisch’. (A regular’s table for native and non-native speakers of English in Austria to meet)
Anglistik	– English studies department
EAP	– English for academic purposes
Fachdidaktik	– Language teaching methodology
Flynn’s	– Irish pub in the local town in which English is spoken
Frau	– Mrs/Ms
Germanistik	– German studies department

Grüß Gott	– Austrian greeting which means ‘hello’
Gymnasium	– Grammar school
HAK	– Business vocational secondary school
Hauptschule	– Secondary school
HBLA	– Vocational secondary school with emphasis on tourism
Herr	– Mr
Hochgestochen	– High-brow style (implies convoluted)
JAWS	– Student English magazine at the English department
Krampus	– A character from an Austrian festival that takes place on the 6th December
Literaturwissenschaft	– Literature studies
Matura	– Austrian school leaving certificate, approximately equivalent to A-levels
Orientierungstest	– Initial placement test
PSS	– Professional speaking skills (Final spoken English course)
Romanistik	– Romance languages department
Schularbeit	– Class test
Stammtisch	– Get together of regulars, usually at a pub. ‘Regular’s table’. A meeting every week for native and non-native speakers in an English speaking pub
Volksschule	– Primary school
VSE	– Varieties of spoken English (First year spoken English course at the university)
VWE	– Varieties of written English (Second year written English course at the university)
Zeugnis	– Certificate students receive for taking part and successfully completing in a course
Zivildienst	– Social service (an alternative option instead of the compulsory military service)

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