How to be a skilled English learner:
A sociocultural analysis of Finnish adults’ learner beliefs

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1 INTRODUCTION

I am just not good at languages and I find learning them difficult; I am not a ‘language person’.

This is a familiar phrase to many English teachers and students. During my studies I too have heard this many times, in addition to a plenitude of other beliefs about language. The current year, I have been teaching English lessons to small groups of adults. Planning and conducting these lessons has led me to contemplate the language beliefs of learners, those of Finnish adult learners in particular, and to come to the realisation that they greatly influence the motivation and learning of the students. This setting inspired me to choose the topic of learner beliefs for this thesis, and to further explore the concept of learner beliefs.

Theories of language are constantly evolving and developing, but the knowledge is often only shared between language professionals. Therefore, we may ask how well these developments manifest themselves in ‘the real world’ of the language learner and in the language classroom, and how much the beliefs about language of students differ from those of the researchers. The aim of this research is to find out what kinds of learner beliefs Finnish adult English learners have and how they reflect the modern concept of sociocultural learning. Adult learners were chosen for this study as they are an especially interesting research group; they have often had no contact to formal language teaching, let alone language learning theories, after school. I have also found that while learner beliefs have become a topic more popular among researchers, adult learners are still considerably less represented in the studies than younger learners and children.

This research was conducted by studying and analysing material gathered from a group discussion interview conducted for four of the adult learners on my English course of autumn 2015. I interviewed the students on their language beliefs, hoping that this would benefit not only me as a teacher and student, but also the students by allowing them to ponder their beliefs and perhaps evaluate and even update them if need be. The contents of the discussion interview were then analysed and compared to the sociocultural and ecological theories of language. In this study,
these theories represent the so called modern theories of language. They are theories which are often referred to in current research on language and language learning, and according to my experiences, are in the centre of language teacher training today.

In this thesis, after introducing the data and methodology used, I will firstly explore the theoretical background for this study by discussing the concept of learner beliefs and the benefits of studying them, and also briefly present the sociocultural and ecological approaches to language learning and teaching. I will discuss concepts such as autonomy and self-directed learning, which are linked with sociocultural theory, in addition to ideas which contradict it, such as reductionism and some common assumptions of learning. Secondly, I will present the findings and analyse them from the viewpoint of the theoretical background, by highlighting examples from the research material. Thirdly, I will further discuss the findings and the possible implications of this study.
2 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this section, I will explain how this study was carried out and what kinds of methods were used. I will also strive to explain the reasons behind choosing certain methods. The research data will also be introduced.

The backdrop for this interview was an English course for adults. Therefore, all four of the participants in the discussion had just spent the autumn term studying elementary English skills on weekly lessons, which mainly focused on everyday English, speaking, listening and reading comprehension. The majority of the interviewees were female, as only one of them was a man, and from the age range of 35 to 55. They were also from various educational backgrounds. Most of the interviewees had very little experience of studying English after school, but two of them had been to brief English courses in the past. They are all work colleagues and work in the same office. Therefore, they all knew each other well beforehand and were quite comfortable discussing things with each other. Also through the past course, I as the teacher had become familiar to them.

The main source for the research material was a discussion interview conducted after the course had ended. The aim was to make the discussion as informal as possible, and to allow it to steer in the way it naturally did, while making sure that it did not stray too far from the topic. As the conductor of the discussion, I was also a contributor and offered new topics if the conversation seemed to die down. The discussion interview was conducted in Finnish, as this allowed for more in-depth discussion and made it more comfortable for the interviewees.

The interview discussion was recorded and later transcribed. As the focus of this research was on the topic of the discussion and its content, not as much on the language choices of the interviewees, a very detailed transcription was not thought necessary. The direct quotes from the discussion given in this paper are translated into English, with the aim of translating the content on the speech, not as much to recreate similar spoken language format.
2.1 The focus group interview method

The group interview method utilised in this research is sometimes also called the focus group interview method. Although traditionally one-to-one interviews are definitely more common in academic research, group interviews have also begun to be accepted as a useful method to gather research material. According to Kvale (2007) these focus group interviews are characterised by “a non-directive style of interviewing, where the prime concern is to encourage a variety of viewpoints on the topic in focus of the group” (p. 72). This was also one of the motives behind choosing this type of method for this research.

The role of the interviewer in a group discussion interview is to facilitate and moderate the discussion, and to introduce the topics in focus. An ideal group focus interview is one in which the moderator or the interviewer manages to facilitate a “permissive atmosphere” in which the participants feel free to express personal and even conflicting points of view on the topic. This kind of method is suitable for a discussion in which the focus is not necessarily to reach consensus, but to highlight the opinions and points of view different people have on the topics. It also often spurs more spontaneous and expressive discussion. (Kvale, 2007, p. 72.) Kvale (2007) adds that as this kind of an interview method reduces the amount of control the moderator has on the discussion, a down-side for this might be a somewhat difficult to follow and chaotic structure, which might cause similarly disorderly transcripts (p. 72). In this study however, I did not feel that the perhaps more chaotic transcripts lessened the value of this interview method, especially as a very detailed transcript was not necessary to research the findings.

As this research was set out to map some of the beliefs English adult learners may have, a loosely structured discussion interview was a useful method as it did not restrict the discussion too much. It is also possible that facilitating more spontaneous and expressive discussion may have allowed for more truthful beliefs to be expressed than what perhaps would have been in a more traditional one-to-one interview setting. In this kind of format, as the participants voice their own opinions, they might invite the others to view the topic from different perspectives and therefore bring forth a discussion which is more complex, thoughtful and in-depth.
The fact that all the participants knew each other beforehand possibly also positively impacted the effectiveness of a discussion interview, as they were perhaps more ready to speak openly and the discussion started to flow immediately without a formal or a rigid start. It is difficult to say for certain, whether the discussion would have gone a different route, if the participants had not known each other before. Of course the topic of the discussion was one which they perhaps were not so used to discussing around the office coffee table. I also did not tell them the topic in advance to allow for spontaneous reactions.

2.2 Conducting the discussion interview

The whole discussion interview evolved around the question “Millainen on hyvä kielenosaaja?” What is a skilled language speaker like? This question was chosen as it was broad enough to allow for varied topics to be discussed. It was also chosen to focus the discussion especially on a skilled language user rather than a skilled language learner, to prevent it from concentrating mainly on effective or non-effective learning methods. However, the format of the interview was very free and the participants were able to raise any aspects that occurred to them.

Based on the key question of the characteristics of a skilled language speaker, also questions like what good language skills are and in what kind of situations they manifest were discussed. The discussion evolved into talk on whether a skilled language speaker has perfect language skills and to the various ways in which languages are learnt. At times the discussion strayed a little off the topic, but was soon steered back to the right track. It could be said that perhaps straying off the topic is not necessarily negative as it proves that the discussion is spontaneous and that the participants have a say in what they want to talk about and contribute.

The role of the researcher was to take part by moderating and ensuring that the discussion kept going. It was also to try and steer the conversation back to the topic, if it seemed to stray too far. To keep the discussion going, even some provocative statements or questions were posed to provoke a reaction from the interviewees. An example of this is the question related to
pronunciation which was asked the participants: “Pitääkö teidän mielestäne kuulostaa siltä, että ei ole ulkomaalainen?” Do you think one should sound like a person who is not a foreigner?

As in all natural conversations, the personalities of the participants showed in the discussion. This is seen, for example, in how some of the participants spoke more than others and took a more active stance in keeping the discussion flowing. It seemed that the participants each had a topic which they were more comfortable discussing, whether it was own past experiences, down-to-earth examples of the discussed topics, how children learn languages or something else. This is also where a discussion interview is beneficial, as it allows the participants to contribute in the way which is more natural to them. On the other hand, it could be said that the participants taking a less active role in the conversation might have been more confident in contributing more in a one-to-one discussion.

All in all, the focus group discussion interview method was seen to be the best suited for the topic of this study. In the following section I will discuss the reasons for choosing learner beliefs as a topic for this thesis and introduce the theory on which the findings from the discussion interview are reflected on.
3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I will discuss the theoretical background for this study. Firstly, I will explore the benefits of researching student beliefs and why it might be useful for researchers, teachers and students. Secondly, I will briefly describe the sociocultural approach to learning and teaching, which is the point of view from which I will evaluate the findings of this study. In the field of sociocultural learning I will also touch on the approach of ecological linguistics, here referring mostly to Leo Van Lier’s works on the subject. Other aspects of sociocultural theory which will be discussed are the concepts of autonomy and self-directed learning, and contrary phenomena such as reductionism.

3.1 Learner beliefs

Learner beliefs can greatly affect not only the learning of the student, but also the actions of the teachers and the other learners. In this section I will strive to give reasons for the importance of studying the beliefs of language learners and also teachers and researchers. I will also define the concept of learner beliefs.

3.1.1 Learner beliefs as a concept

Aro (2009) discusses the complex nature of the definition for the concept belief. The term is undeniably complicated and can be seen as vague and indefinite. (p. 12.) The online version of the Oxford English dictionary gives the word belief at least eight different definitions which include:

- Philos. A basic or ultimate principle or presupposition of knowledge; something innately believed, a primary intuition. Usu. in pl.
- Acceptance that a statement, supposed fact, etc., is true; a religious, philosophical, or personal conviction; an opinion, a persuasion. (www.oed.com)

Both of these definitions refer to the individuals believing or accepting something as being true.

Although beliefs are very often linked to systems, religions and personal convictions, among others, people have beliefs ranging from aspects like how to raise children to the rather mundane seeming questions, such as which brand of orange juice is the best (Aro, 2009, p. 13). Aro (2009) also points out that although, according to these definitions, the individual believes a thing to be true, it naturally does not automatically mean it is true in reality. However, she refers to Alexander and Dochy (1995), who conducted a study to discover how differently people define and conceptualise knowledge and beliefs. In the study, knowledge was more often described to be something that is “learned” and “factual”, whereas beliefs tended to be thought as more “subjective”, “personal” and “unproven”. (As cited in Aro, 2009, p. 13.) Other definitions for beliefs and knowledge are for example Nespor’s (1987) idea that “knowledge [is] more rooted in reality, more objective and based on perhaps more scientifically valid facts than beliefs are”, or the definitions of beliefs by Kagan (1992), which define them as “a particularly provocative form of personal knowledge” or “tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions” (as cited by Aro, 2009, p. 14). No matter which definition one wishes to comply to, it seems that beliefs are in all cases something which have an influence on the individual’s actions in one way or another (Aro, 2009, p. 15).

Although belief seems to be a concept that is difficult to define, the use of the term learner belief seems to be fairly established in similar research (see e.g. Aro, 2009; Alanen, 2003). It shall also be used in this study. Aro (2009) argues that the “less-than-definite nature of the concept” might actually be beneficial as it does not limit the scope of the study and allows it to include not only topics such as learning strategies, but also thoughts, opinions and concepts that the learner has in general about learning and English as a language (p. 12). In the case of this study this is ideal, as the research method was a very loosely structured interview, in which the aim was to gather learner beliefs of a skilled language learner of as wide a scope as possible.
Language learning is a subject which provokes strong opinions and it is hard to find a person with no beliefs on it. For example, Horwitz (1987) lists that many Americans believe that children are better learners than adults or that second language learning is mainly just learning as many new words as possible (p. 119). These assumptions are also evident in some of the results of this study. Learner beliefs originate from various different factors and may often differ vastly from the opinions and research of second language scholars. Horwitz (1987) claims that often in these cases the word ‘myth’ might be a more accurate description than ‘belief’ (p. 119). In the following section I will explore the benefits of studying learner beliefs.

3.1.2 What are the benefits of studying learner beliefs?

Learner beliefs are an area which is seen “to influence the processes and outcomes of second language learning/acquisition” (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003, p. 1). According to Barcelos and Kalaja (2003), learner beliefs are related, for example, to the different and even at times clashing agendas which teachers and learners may have in the classroom, the learners’ anxiety and choice of learning strategies and to autonomous learning (p. 1). In recent years, more research has been devoted to learning how learner beliefs affect the nature of the students’ learning and the effectiveness of the learning strategies which they choose (Mori, 1999, p. 378). In multicultural classrooms, varying beliefs among the students and also between the students and the teacher may lead to culture clashes (Horwitz, 1987, p. 119).

Differing beliefs of language learning between the students and the teacher may also lead to the students’ dissatisfaction in the teaching and even to them losing confidence in the instructional approach and failing to reach all the set aims. Even if beliefs about language learning do not clash this dramatically, differing beliefs may still have a negative impact on the students’ learning in the end. Therefore, understanding learner beliefs may help the learner and the teacher to begin to understand the chosen learning strategies of the students and the reasons for choosing them. (Horwitz, 1987, pp. 119–120.)

The metacognitive knowledge of learner beliefs, for example, seems to be a prerequisite to the self-regulation of a language student, which means planning and self-evaluation of learning.
Alanen (2003) discusses the importance of self-regulation also in the Vygotskian sociocultural approach (p. 56). Sociocultural theory is at times criticised for the lack of research in the role of metacognitive knowledge in the self-regulation of learning, although it does recognise the "role of beliefs or knowledge as a powerful motivating factor in human activity" (Alanen, 2003, p. 59). Alanen (2003) assumes that beliefs may affect second language learning if they are used as "mediational tools" and that as mediational tools they may or may not be utilised by the learner in the learning process (p. 60). Therefore, it could be said that as beliefs can be used as mediational means in action in the same way as for example words or signs can, they greatly influence language learning. As a part of self-regulated learning, the acknowledgement of these beliefs is important for the sake of research, and also for the learner to understand the factors which affect their learning.

Wertsch (1998) discusses sociocultural theory with the concept of human action in the centre. He defines it as having the task to “explicate the relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other” (p. 24). According to him action may be carried out by individuals or groups and be external or internal, and in all cases has an “individual psychological dimension”. He specifically focuses on what he calls mediated action, focusing on the mediators of action such as the agents and their cultural tools. (p. 23.)

It [analysis of mediated action] provides a kind of a natural link between action, including mental action, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which such action occurs. This is so because the mediational means, or cultural tools, are inherently situated culturally, institutionally, and historically. (Wertsch, 1998, p. 24.)

According to Wertsch (1998), almost all human action can be considered to be mediated action (p. 25). In addition, mediational means should not be viewed in isolation from action (Wertsch, 1991, p. 120). As previously discussed, learner beliefs are also mediational means or tools.

While mediational means, like learner beliefs, are usually discussed through how they enable action, they can also in some cases constrain action. Wertsch (1998) gives an example from pole
vaulting, how before the invention of fiberglass poles, aluminium poles were thought to be the best poles there could be, and before that bamboo poles. The constraints of the poles were not recognised before the better alternative came along. Even after the appearance of fiberglass poles some users insisted that the aluminium pole was the only legitimate pole to use in pole vaulting and fiberglass poles were not ‘proper’ poles at all. The aluminium pole could be viewed as a cultural tool, which the pole vaulters had been primarily using “in terms of the affordances it provided” and which they viewed failing to recognise any constraints or limitations it may have. This example highlights how mediational means are often chosen not because of them being superior in performance, but because we are accustomed to using them through historical precedent and also because they are preferred with cultural or institutional power or authority. (p. 41.) It could also be said that only after becoming aware of their beliefs, the learners may begin to evaluate and even question them and strive to develop even more effective ones.

3.2 The sociocultural approach to learning

In this section I will briefly explore the concept of sociocultural learning in general and from the point of view of ecological linguistics. I will also discuss the idea of autonomy in language learning. The topics will be covered by studying works and ideas of some of the major researchers of the field such as Vygotsky, Schoen, Lantolf, Van Lier and Benson. I will begin by briefly outlining some aspects of sociocultural theory from the early ideas of Vygotsky to more current interpretations of the theory. Similarly, I will then discuss the concept of ecological linguistics, mainly through the works of Leo Van Lier. Other topics which will be discussed are reductionism, some common assumptions about language learning, autonomy and self-directed learning.

3.2.1 Aspects of sociocultural theory

The concept of sociocultural learning was originally conceived by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky after the Russian Revolution (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1). Vygotsky was especially intrigued by the role which consciousness plays in human mental activity, self-regulation, inner speech and
metacognitive thinking (Alanen, 2003, pp. 56‒57). Naturally the concept has evolved through time and is connected today with various different views on learning, like the ecological linguistics approach discussed in this thesis. The exact definition of the theory is also debated, mainly as it is used in such a wide scope of research fields from medicine and business management to education and linguistics (Schoen, 2011, p. 11).

Sociocultural philosophy is concerned with how individual, social, and contextual issues impact human activity, especially learning and behaviour. Socioculturalism acknowledges that humans are both social and reflexive and that the complexity in the social world alters human thought and behaviour; to overlook these forces leads to an incomplete understanding at best. (Schoen, 2011, p. 12.)

This was the way socioculturalism was defined by Schoen in 2011. She stresses the importance of understanding the significance of the context in which the individual operates, and the effect it has on behaviour. She adds that sociocultural psychology has been adapted to suit various fields and cannot therefore be necessarily treated as one single concept or approach. In the scope of this study, socioculturalism is viewed both from the point of view of linguistics and education.

As a sociocultural researcher, Schoen (2011) views education from the sociocultural perspective as holistic and stresses the importance to understand the context of actions. She studies the work of teachers and administrators in schools and other organisational units. Her work focuses on the situated context of the research subjects in what she calls the three domains of sociocultural construction: individual, social and cultural. According to her, these are the domains which are believed to affect human behaviour in socially situated contexts. (p. 13.) In the domain of the individual factors which affect the behaviour of people, Schoen (2011) lists the following intrapersonal factors: intelligence, aptitude, prior knowledge, developmental stage, task difficulty, personal history and experience, health, skill level and immediate stimuli in physical environment. Social factors can be things like family and social ties, past social influences, influence of peer groups and the onsite leadership and management in schools. In the larger societal domain, factors like cultural and political expectations and conditions may have an effect. All these domains also effect the motivation for the person to act. (p. 14.) All of them need not be present in sociocultural research but it should “take into account more than one domain of human
experience and address the role of social interactions upon the effect in question” (Schoen, 2011, p. 13).

Schoen (2011) claims that sociocultural theory strives to fill in the gap which is left in research on the field of education, which has traditionally focused on individual learning and behaviour, and at times the educational context, but left out the study of social dynamics which surround individuals. It therefore strives to see people from a more holistic perspective and helps to explain multiple levels of dynamics involved in a given phenomenon and provides insight as to how the interplay of these dynamics impacts outcomes. (Schoen, 2011, p. 15.)

In the field of language education this could be thought to expand into the approach that language is not one isolated part of a person, but one part in a whole which is influenced by context. Neither can language learning be therefore considered as a phenomenon separate from its context.

According to Lantolf (2000), one of the key concepts of sociocultural theory is the *mediated mind*. The human mind is mediated and thus we:

> do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labour activity, which allows us to change the world, and with it, the circumstances under which we live in the world, we also use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships. (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1.)

These symbolic tools are factors such as numbers and music, but above all language. With these tools we create *mediated* relationships between ourselves and others.

Similarly to physical tools being developed through time (Lantolf gives an example of the 1950s computer, which back then seemed the height of development, but know very clumsy and old-fashioned), symbolic tools also evolve as they are passed on from one generation to the next. In this way language also constantly changes and evolves as its user’s communicative and
psychological needs develop. (Lantolf, 2000, pp. 1–2.) Lantolf (2000) notes that the use of a graphemic writing system, in which it is difficult to indicate such linguistic features such as intonation, stress, volume, might be the reason for these areas being largely neglected or pushed to the side in linguistic theorizing, until fairly recently (p. 2). He notes that areas like syntax and phonology are often viewed as the key areas of languages and are therefore focused on in research, and areas such as pragmatics are often limited to the margins of linguistics and even at times left out completely or pushed into other disciplines such as, for example, communication theory, philosophy and sociology (Lantolf, 2000, p. 3).

According to Lantolf (2000), sociocultural theory rejects the idea that thinking and speaking are the same exact thing, but also that they are completely separate phenomena, as is thought in the communicative view on language. Through the sociocultural approach, it is argued that although thinking and speaking are separate, they are “tightly interrelated in a dialectic unity in which public speech completes privately initiated though”. (p. 7.) Therefore, neither of these may be explained without taking into account how they manifest in each other: linguistic activities are “manifestations of thought” and thought is “made manifest through linguistic means” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 7).

Another key idea in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory was the activity theory. This was later refined in his theory of activity by A. N. Leontiev. According to this theory, activity is not merely an act of doing something but action which is influenced and motivated by biological needs (like hunger) or culturally constructed needs (like the need to be literate). When directed at a specific object, these needs become motives, which are in turn only realised in specific goal-oriented actions, carried out in specific conditions (spatial and temporal) through appropriate mediational means. (Lantolf, 2000, p. 8.) Therefore, activity is “comprised on three levels: the level of motivation, the level of action and the level of conditions” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 8). Thus observable actions operate on the level of conditions, and the motivation and goals of an action cannot be determined only by observing.

One of the main tools or theories Vygotsky developed for education is the so called zone of proximal development (ZDP). Put very simply, in teaching this means that the teacher should strive
to teach the student something that is slightly too hard for them to acquire on their own, but that they with assistance can manage to (Wass & Golding, 2014, p. 1). This assistance can come from, for example, the teacher or another more advanced student or peer. Lantolf (2000) discusses that the most commonly accepted interpretation of ZDP is that it is the relationship between a ‘novice’ and an ‘expert’, but that scholars have begun to call for a broader interpretation. He claims that: “It seems clear that people working jointly are able to co-construct contexts in which expertise emerges as a feature of the group” (p. 17). Therefore, it could be said that the relationship in ZPD could also be one of equals in terms of advancement.

When discussing the sociocultural approach, specifically its view on the mind, it is usually described by referring to the concept of human action. This has spurred various theories of action discussed by scholars such as Wertsch. The theories of action contradict other theories which view the individual perhaps more through the environment and context it operates in, by isolating action to the forefront of analysis.

When action is given analytic priority, human beings are viewed as coming into contact with, and creating, their surroundings as well as themselves through the actions in which they engage (Wertsch, 1991, p. 8).

Instead of focusing on the human agent or the environment in isolation, disciplines such as cognitive science emphasise schemas and patterns of action when discussing human mental behaviour. In these approaches, action and interaction are seen as basic analytic categories from which accounts of the environment and human mental behaviour emerge from. (Wertsch, 1991, p. 9.) Wertsch (1991) employs a sociocultural approach to the human mind by exploring how “human action is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings” (p. 119).

According to Wertsch (1991), human action often “employs ‘mediational means’” (p. 12). One mediational means is language, and as a tool it shapes action in essential ways. These actions and mediational means are so interlinked that although it is possible to separate them analytically, Wertsch (1991) suggests that when referring to the agent involved one should regard them as “individual(s)-acting-with-mediational-means” instead of merely “individual(s)” (p. 12).
Consequently, language or other sign systems as tools should not be focused on as individuals “in isolation from their mediational potential”, but to acknowledge that “action and mediational means are mutually determining” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 119). Wertsch (1991) adds that this tendency to view language in isolation also leads to it being regarded as a set static structure (p. 119).

The sociocultural approach views cognitive development as “dialectical, expansive and transformative” (Engeström, 1999, as cited by Yang & Kim, 2011, p. 326). It is thought to happen through participation and transformation, instead of as an accumulation of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991, as cited by Yang & Kim, 2011, p. 326). This process is called remediation. Yang and Kim (2011) discuss that with regard to learner beliefs, it is thought that changes in beliefs can:

- promote L2 remediation process because the changes of learner beliefs can invoke a tension between the environments and learner perception, leading to qualitatively different actions (p. 326).

### 3.2.2 Van Lier on ecological linguistics

Van Lier (2004) discusses the idea of ecological linguistics by highlighting it with examples from the field of natural sciences. In natural sciences, ecology is an approach in which people’s relationship with the environment is studied. He introduces the concepts of *deep ecology* and *shallow ecology*, the two basic approaches to environmental work which, according to him, can also be used when discussing linguistics. He illustrates the two concepts by taking an example from environmental work. From the viewpoint of environmental work, shallow ecology is work that strives to minimize, solve and prevent the harmful environmental impact of humans. On the other hand, deep ecology is the will to seek for new methods of research, which take into account the complex nature of the relationship between people and the environment. (pp. 3–4.)

Ecological engineering, management and repair are necessary in a world in which the environment is clearly under extreme stress. It is not too farfetched to say that the same is true of educational, social and economic systems. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 4.)
From explaining the two approaches to environmental work, Van Lier (2004) goes on to claiming that these concepts could also be used to discuss language learning. He emphasises the need to view ecological linguistics from a deep ecology viewpoint, but adds that the two points of view are not always mutually exclusive. The shallow ecology approach on language may create an idea that everything can be ‘fixed’ and even promote emphasis on crisis management rather than critical evaluation of the current methods and ideas. The deep ecology approach “adds a sense of vision, purpose, and an overt ideology of transformation”, instead of merely striving for damage control (p. 4).

### 3.2.3 Main characteristics of ecological linguistics

Van Lier (2004) lists the main characteristics that define Ecological Linguistics (EL). He categorises them under subheadings, which are Relations, Context, Patterns and Systems, Emergence, Quality, Value, Critical, Variability, Diversity and Activity. He describes EL as an approach which “focuses on language as relations between people and the world, and on language learning as ways of relating more effectively to people and the world” (p. 4). Therefore, language could be seen more than a system of relations than a collection of objects. This is connected with the concept of affordance, which according to Van Lier (2004), is the relationship between the learner and the environment, which may either instigate or inhibit action. The environment here means “all physical, social and symbolic affordances that provide grounds for activity” (pp. 4–5).

One of the most crucial aspects of EL is context. It is not merely regarded as something that surrounds language, but as something which defines and is defined by it. Often when talking about language, context is referred to as something which acts as a supplementary. “It depends on the context” is a phrase often heard, and does not imply the close relationship between language and context. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 5.) Similarly, EL sees language as patterns and systems, which form new patterns and systems. These are preferred over the more traditionally used ideas of rules and structures, which refer to a static, predetermined state of language usage situations and do not allow flexibility. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 5.)
Another of the main characteristics of EL is emergence: the idea that language acquisition is not a linear and gradual process but an emerging one, in which language proficiency emerges from a combination of its elements (Van Lier, 2004, p. 5). This could perhaps be connected to the idea that language proficiency is not merely a fusion of all the parts of language, like good pronunciation or sufficient vocabulary, but rather a new whole, which has emerged from these ‘building bricks’.

According to Van Lier (2004), quality is a central notion in EL. It wishes to separate the quality of an educational experience from educational standards. In education standards, the focus may be on raising the level of education by making more difficult exams and disregarding activities like music, field trips and art. The notion of values is also explored in EL and all action, research and practise are claimed to be “value-laden, value-driven and value producing” and that language teaching is always a “science of values”. (p. 6.) EL is also a naturally critical approach and requires a constant evaluation of educational practises. It also emphasises the need to evaluate both what we do (for example in the classroom) and what we think we are doing, i.e. what kinds of values and ideas are behind our actions. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 6.)

Van Lier (2004) calls the main characteristics of EL variability and diversity. These are related concepts but not the same. The notion of variability stems from the idea that all learners are different and therefore cannot and should not be treated the same. Learners learn in different ways, which impacts teaching. EL challenges the common presumption that everyone should be “treated equally”, as a good teacher understands the need to vary teaching according to the needs of the students. Variation does not only happen on a micro (for example, classroom) level, but on a macro-level as well, as there is variation in educational systems. This variation may promote inequality between regional and socio-economical areas. On the other hand, the characteristic of diversity is the ideal that diversity in students, teachers and people in general is valuable and essential. In addition, EL views language as not a “monolithic standardized code, but a collection of dialects, genres and registers”. (p. 7.) Van Lier (2004) also notes that:

[i]t is often tacitly assumed that learners would be confused by being presented with a diversity of dialects, cultures, social customs, but it can be argued that more confusion
ultimately results from the presentation of a homogeneous language and a single speech community, generalizations that in fact do not exist. (p. 7.)

EL also considers language and language learning to be areas of activity and discards the old fashioned vision of a “classroom with rows of empty heads passively soaking up knowledge issuing forth (in the form of pedagogical discourse) from the talking head in front of the room” (Van Lier, 2004, pp. 7–8). The learners have autonomy, which means having the ability to independently decide and evaluate their actions. This is sometimes incorrectly thought to mean individualism or independence, but as Van Lier (2004) points out it means “having the authorship of one’s actions, having the voice that speaks one’s words, and being emotionally connected to one’s actions and speech, within one’s community of practice” (p. 8). The concept of autonomy is further discussed in section 3.2.6.

3.2.4 Reductionism

As Van Lier (2004) discusses various theories of language, he claims that most “theories deal with aspects of language rather than the whole thing, and they tend to practice one or more forms of reductionism” (p. 23). Reductionism is a concept also used in philosophy, and refers to the notion that complex entities are and may be defined by simpler or more basic entities (Encyclopaedia Britannica). In linguistics a form of reductionism could be for examining only one aspect of language, like grammar, and setting aside the rest.

Sometimes such reductions or bracketing off of parts of the object under investigation are useful or even necessary. However, the study of the part should never be confused with the study of the whole, and at some point whatever is said about the part must be reconciled with the whole. And that is the difficulty. (Van Lier, 2004, pp. 23–24.)

As referred to in the previous quote, reductionism can at times be useful, but it should never replace a more holistic view of language.
In ecological linguistics it is claimed that language cannot be simplified into aspects like meaning or grammar only. In the same way language cannot be separated from the ways of communication and world views. “Gesture, expression and movement cannot be stripped away from the verbal message, and meaning making cannot be boiled down to syntax or lexical constructions.” (Van Lier, 2004, p. 24.)

3.2.5 Some common assumptions language teachers and learners have

According to Van Lier (2004), there are seven common assumptions about language, language learning and language theory that learners and teachers may have. He describes the theories and also the effects they might have on teaching practices. (p. 25.) He does not dispute that these theories all have some truth in them, but that they often “emerge as half-truths that can easily lead to questionable teaching and learning practices” (p. 27). Many of these assumptions are also present in the findings of this research.

The first common assumption about language is what Van Lier calls computational assumption. This is associated with the “sender-receiver model” of language:

A sends a message, B receives it. Then B sends a reply message, and A receives it. The messages begin as thoughts, they are then encoded into language, and at the other end they are decoded again so that the thought A had is now conveyed to B. And so on. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 27.)

This is usually connected with the theories called information processing and early cognitive science theories. It heavily concentrates on what is going on in the brain, which like a computer runs programs; what actions are incontrollable and perhaps even innate like a computer’s processor. These theories have been popular for many decades, but have also been strongly criticized, especially in the way they consider language to be a fixed code and discard the notions of the influence the environment may have. In the classroom the computational assumption often leads to exercises which promote the exchanging of messages, for example through pair work. (Van Lier, 2004, pp. 27–28.)
The computational assumption is closely related to what Van Lier (2004) calls the *storage assumption*. It is also concerned with the importance of the brain as the storage of language, especially from the point of view of “how does it get there” (p. 28). It associates language skills as an acquired competence and a “fixed code” (p. 26). The storage assumption is associated with two competing theories: the behaviourist and the universal grammar theory. The behaviourist concept is that the brain is a *tabula rasa* at birth and languages are learnt and stored in the brain through experience, by imitation, association and rote learning. This, in classroom practice, translates into the drilling and memorising of lists of words and sentence practise. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 26.) The universal grammar theory deals with the idea that from the time they are born the child is equipped with a “language organ” and language skills are acquired merely by exposure to language. Therefore, universal grammar advocates believe that the ways in which this exposure happens are inconsequential, just as long as they happen. This approach stresses the importance of being able to be in an environment in which the language is spoken. A third approach is the “cognitive or psycholinguistic proposal”, which focuses on schema building and advanced organizing activities. This approach is still considered a good instructional approach and is supported by many studies, especially in the field of listening and reading comprehension. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 28.)

The *either-or assumption* advocates the belief that language consists of two separate areas: form and function. This is supported by theories such as structuralism, which only concentrate on the form of the language and consider meaning to be an entirely different domain. At times the focus in classrooms is on form and sometimes on function. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 28.) There are also attempts to integrate the two, but Van Lier (2004) claims that this is not always easy. He gives an example of a classroom in which the teacher acts as if they are two teachers in one: communicative in communicative parts of the lesson and form-fixated in the grammar drilling parts of the lesson. Van Lier argues that the difficulty is in great part due to the *componential assumption*, in which language is believed to consist of building blocks (like vocabulary, grammar and meaning), which are somehow supposed to be brought together to create a whole. (pp. 28–29.)
The componential assumption is common throughout the field of language learning. This is seen, for instance, in the way many language courses and books are divided into the traditional components of language: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Language skills are ‘built’ by first acquiring smaller building blocks like sounds and then moving on to perhaps more difficult areas such as reading and writing texts. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 29.) In classrooms this manifests itself in the concentration on smaller components of language (like pronunciation of a certain sound), which are believed to eventually form a larger and full idea of language (Van Lier, 2004, p. 26).

Another common assumption of language is the correctness assumption, which is the assumption that language can be used either correctly or incorrectly, depending, for instance, on how accurately the used language complies with commonly accepted standards (Van Lier, 2004, p. 26). Through this assumption, it is believed that avoiding errors is crucial; if they should however occur, they should be corrected in order to avoid them becoming ‘fossilised’ and untreatable. On the other end of the spectrum, some believe that correcting language errors might actually hamper language development, by for example negatively affecting the students’ motivation. Difficulties arise when trying to define what is considered as error: is a native speaker who speaks non-grammatically in a text message making a mistake? How about when a non-native speaker does the same? In addition, the, perhaps controversial, question is whether the concept of a native speaker even exists. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 31.)

The correctness assumption leads to the thought that there is one ‘correct’ version of language and all others are ‘incorrect’ by default. These ‘incorrect’ versions are perhaps various dialects, accents, foreign adoptions and so on – the non-standard and non-official versions of language. It is also easily thought that these ‘incorrect’ versions should not be used as models or target languages for learners. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 31.) This could perhaps be related to the much debated question on what language variation should be used in the classroom and whether for example the English language teacher should speak a certain variation of English, and whether they are ‘allowed’ to ‘sound foreign’, in other words have a non-native accent.
There is also an assumption that languages compete with each other for storage space in our brains and for our attention. Van Lier (2004) calls this the *warring languages assumption*. This assumption has led to the criticism of bilingualism and to claim it has a negative impact on the bilingual child, although research points out that bilingualism is more likely an asset in any point of life. (p. 30.) Another question which arises from the warring languages assumption is that the use of more than one language should be avoided in the classroom, and that students should not be permitted to use their native language in the foreign language classroom. It is assumed that using more than one language in a classroom may “lead to a pidgin, to incorrect speech, to code-switching, to students avoiding making the effort to practice the target language”. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 32.) However, research has shown that the use of one’s native language in classroom may in some cases benefit the learning of the foreign language, for instance, through meaningful and interesting project work. Van Lier (2004) describes this by giving an everyday example of learning to drive a manual or automatic car. If one has only ever used a stick shift car, suddenly having to jump behind the wheel of an automatic may cause difficulties. On the other hand, for a person who regularly drives both types of cars, adjusting to the car in question will not cause nearly as much trouble. (p. 32.)

The belief that language is separate from other aspects of life and environment is called by Van Lier (2004) the *separateness assumption*, in which, at least for the purposes of theorising, language is considered autonomous. In practise this assumption manifests again in two different approaches. If language is believed to be an autonomous system that must be learned (like behaviourists for example do), then explicit teaching and drilling on language points is thought beneficial; “explicit bits of the system must be systematically presented, studied, drilled, practiced and so on” (p. 32). On the other hand, if the theory is one of Universal Linguistics or Generative Linguistics, in which language is considered a “mental organ” which grows instinctively just by being exposed to it, then explicit teaching is thought unnecessary and exposure to the language is emphasised (Van Lier, 2004, p. 26).
### 3.2.6 Autonomy and self-directed learning

A broad definition of autonomy in learning is “the capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 2). It can even be claimed that it is not useful to strive to define it further, as it can vary so vastly depending on the individual person or situation. It may even take different forms for the same individual in different contexts or times. Nevertheless, it is commonly agreed that autonomy is a multidimensional concept with no one single way of behaviour. (Benson, 2001, p. 47.) According to Benson (2001), it is not a method of learning but rather “an attribute of the learner’s approach to the learning process” (p. 2).

Benson (2001) argues that autonomy is “a legitimate and desirable goal of language education” (p. 2). Among the advocates for autonomy, Benson (2001) claims that there are three main points made. Firstly, it is said that autonomy is a “natural tendency” for a learner, but that it manifests in individual ways according to the individual learner and/or learning situation. Secondly, autonomy is a skill which may be developed if appropriate conditions and preparation are provided. For example, being able to have control over one’s learning allows for the development of one’s autonomy as a learner. Therefore, teaching methods have a great effect on the development or non-development of autonomy. Thirdly, it is claimed that autonomy in language learning allows for more effective learning than non-autonomy. As Benson points out, these claims are not automatically facts and should naturally be reviewed critically and carefully and research on the subject should be studied and conducted, when applicable. (p. 2.)

The concept of autonomy is often considered to be the same as self-directed learning, especially when considering the field of adult learning. Self-directed learning could be defined as:

> a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (Knowles, 1975, as cited by Benson, 2001, p. 33.)
Benson states that perhaps the most important distinction between the two is that self-directed learning, unlike autonomy, is a “particular mode of learning”. Autonomy is more of an attribute or characteristic of the learner and is therefore a “capacity that learners possess to varying degrees”, not an action. (Benson, 2001, p. 34.)

In addition, autonomy does not diminish the role and responsibility of the teacher and does not mean that one should learn without a teacher or independently outside of the classroom (Little, 1990, as cited by Benson, 2001, p. 48). Benson cites Voller (1997), who lists three assumptions of the teacher’s role in developing autonomy in students. These include giving the student more control of their own studies and making sure that the chosen teaching practices are based on negotiation with the learners. In developing autonomy in students, it is also crucial that the teacher strives to self-monitor their teaching and evaluate them to see whether they enable the development of autonomy in students. In addition, the question of the teacher’s own autonomy in regard to the curriculum has been discussed. (Benson, 2001, p. 15.)

Autonomy is a concept which provokes reactions from both its critics and advocates. It is either thought to be the enabler of effective learning, which allows one to develop as a learner and as a more responsible and critical human being, or to be merely an idealistic goal, the promotion of which is not realistic or useful. It is at times even considered to have negative influence by distracting from what is thought to be “the real business of teaching and learning languages” (Benson, 2001, p. 1). However, Benson (2001) claims that too often misconceptions about the approach are evident in these discussions. One of these misconceptions is that autonomy implies isolation and downplays or even discards the role of the teacher and the classroom. (p. 1.)

To summarise, sociocultural theory is closely linked to the holistic view of language and of people. It explores how human learning and behaviour is impacted by individual, social and contextual issues. Similarly, ecological linguistics is also a theory which is concerned with the relations between people and the world, a relationship which is enhanced by language learning. In the following section I will compare the thoughts brought up during the discussion interview to the aspects of sociocultural and ecological theories discussed in this section, which are in this study considered to be the ‘modern conceptions of language’. In addition, I will discuss how the
common assumptions of language learning appear in the research material and whether aspects such as reductionism arise. I will examine in what areas the research material seems to comply with the theoretical background and correspondingly in which areas they contradict.
4 FINDINGS

In this section, I will discuss the main points raised by the participants in the discussion interview and compare them to the modern sociocultural and ecological approach to learning. I have divided this section under three subheadings: Components of language, Characteristics of a skilled language learner and Learning and teaching. These subsections represent the topics and findings most prevalent in the discussion deemed to belong to the scope of this study. In the first section I will discuss, among others, the componential assumption and vocabulary, reading, writing, grammar and cultural knowledge. The second section will deal mostly with the correctness assumption, pronunciation, confidence and the idea that good is not the same as perfect. The third section covers the topic of learning and teaching, which was also one of the main talking points in the discussion.

4.1 Components of language

When asked about good language skills, the interviewees stressed the different categories of language learning, such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, which have traditionally been crucial in language learning. As discussed earlier in section 3.2.5, this is what Van Lier (2004) calls the ‘componential assumption’; the idea that language consists of smaller building blocks which are concentrated on separately to form good language skills (p. 26). From a sociocultural and ecological approach, language is thought to be a more holistic part of the human experience and not an autonomous part separate from its context. Similarly, it is not advantageous to simplify language into components, such as vocabulary. This componential assumption is also a form of reductionism (see 3.2.4) as it is believed that the complex nature of languages can be explained by smaller components.
The areas of language that were brought up in the conversation interview were vocabulary, reading and writing, pronunciation, grammar, listening comprehension, confidence and non-verbal language skills. According to the interviewees, good language skills are needed in real life situations: on the phone, face-to-face discussions, emails, online shopping, travelling and at home.

In various parts of the discussion the interviewees stressed the importance of a sufficiently large vocabulary. When asked what they think are the aspects of good language competence, Interviewee F brought up the idea that perhaps vocabulary is the most important aspect. This was agreed to by the other participants. Interviewee C added that a lot can be conveyed just by putting words together and not worrying about the correct grammar.

**Example 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: In the end, could it be that vocabulary is the most important [aspect]? B: Mm, yes. C: Yes it probably is vocabulary, as you can be understood quite well by just putting words after each other.</td>
<td>F: Voisko toisaalta sanat olla kuitenkin kaikista tärkeimmät? B: Mm, kyllä C: Kyllä se varmaan on se sanasto, että sitähän tullee aika paljon ymmärettyksi ku pannee vaan sanat peräkkäin.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This example highlights the componential assumption, as it is based on the idea that language is formed out of smaller components, such as vocabulary. It also contradicts the holistic view of language of sociocultural theory, as it separates vocabulary as an individual factor instead of focusing on language as a whole. In the example the interviewees strive to decide which component is the most crucial to language learners. Nonetheless, having a sufficient vocabulary is not thought to be important on its own, but rather to assist in managing to convey the desired message as effectively as possible. In this way, the importance of being understood is emphasised, and the component of language, vocabulary, is merely considered necessary in relation to effective communication.
According to the interviewees, the vocabulary of a person with good language skills should be adequate to allow them to manage in everyday situations and be able to use language through different mediums, such as emails, road signs and discussions, when travelling or when staying home. In example 2, Interviewee B claims that a sufficient vocabulary gives one enough confidence to use English:

**Example 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B: -- to have the confidence and to have a large</td>
<td>B: -- että on semmonen varmuus ja on sitä sanavarastoa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enough vocabulary so that you aren’t nervous --</td>
<td>niin paljon, että ei niinku jännitä –</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also in this example language is reduced to its components. Again the component, vocabulary, is not however considered to have value on its own but to be a part of a confident language speaker. It is reductionism in the way that the large concept of good language skills is discussed through smaller components. Nevertheless, it is also an example of how the participants considered components, like vocabulary, to be linked to non-verbal aspects of language, such as confidence.

As the componential assumption is such a common one, even among language professionals, it is no wonder that it was prevalent also in this discussion interview. It could also be assumed that it was even more prevalent during the time the research subjects have formally studied languages before, in their school days. As Wertsch (1998) points out, people’s perspectives do not easily change and they are easily taken for granted (p. 42). This could be said to be the case also when discussing language beliefs; people are rarely quick to change and update their beliefs about language, especially as often they are not even consciously aware of them. The names of language components used are also probably well known to the research subjects and it is therefore easier for them to speak about the subject using language that they are already familiar with. It could also be argued that perhaps the phrasing of the discussion questions encouraged the componential assumption. However, as can be seen in the previous two examples, the participants did not claim that these components are useful on their own, but are important in aiding the message to be conveyed.
The participants continued the discussion by adding that sufficient language skills enable one to use language even in unsuspected and spontaneous situations. With enough confidence a language speaker can also continue the communication situation, even though they lack some of the required language skills. They have the ability to keep the discussion going even though they might not know or have forgotten the correct word, by rephrasing or using non-verbal communication, such as gestures.

The interviewees seemed to consider a sufficient vocabulary to be the most important aspect of good language skills. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Simon and Taverniers (2011), in which they surveyed Dutch University students of English on their beliefs about the learning and teaching of English grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. One of the results of the study was that learners perceive vocabulary to be different from pronunciation and grammar by considering it to be more useful in efficient communication. It also showed that the learners interviewed in the study believed that making vocabulary errors causes more problems for understanding than errors in pronunciation or grammar. The researchers discuss that this may be because forgetting the correct word is thought to be more likely to cause a disruption or even a breakdown in the communication than using incorrect grammar or pronunciation would. (p. 905.)

In the discussion interview for this study, it was agreed that a good language speaker knows their way around different mediums, not just face-to-face discussions. The interviewees brought up several instances in which good language skills are needed through reading and writing, for example when reading and writing emails, doing online shopping and reading signs. Two members of the group had just had a short vacation in Germany, and they brought up examples of language usage that came up there, for instance the importance of understanding signs at the airport:

**Example 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: Yeah and it is made up of other things as well, other than just speaking, like if [when] we just were there abroad, then as you see some directions, signs, then if you understand</td>
<td>F: Niin ja siihen kuuluu muutakin tosiaan, ku pelkkä puhuminen, että jos vaikka oltiin nyt siellä ulkomailla, niin niinku näkee jotakin ohjeita, kylttejä niin jos ymmärtää niistä jotakin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
something from them then that it is also good language skills, like at the airport.

niin sekin on hyvää kielitaitoaa, vaikka lentokentällä.

Although the participants in the discussion interview seemed to assume language is made of components, they did not see a skilled language user as fluent in only speaking but also in able to fluently use other mediums, read and write. Interviewee B, who has to use English in email correspondence for his work, especially emphasised that to be a good English speaker one should be able to easily communicate via a written format such as email.

The discussion moved into talking about the different ways people learn and acquire English. Interviewee C brought up the idea that some people may be fluent in some areas of language, but lacking in others. She gave an example of her own circle of friends, in which there are people who have learned to speak English fluently while living in an English speaking country. However, as they have not had the need to use English in written form, they lack writing skills.

**Example 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: Yeah, there are those who have learned the language like children do, which is learning by listening. I have that kind of adults even in my circle of friends, who have learned the language when they have been in the country. They have learned. They can speak perfectly, but they don’t necessarily know how to write. That can of course be then learned gradually, but it comes after speaking.</td>
<td>C: Niin, onhan semmosia, jotka on oppinut sen kielen niinku lapset elikkä oppinu sen kuulemalla. Semmosia aikuisia mun ystäväpiirissäkin on, jotka on oppinu sen kielen ku ne on ollu siellä maassa. Ne on oppinu. Ne osaa täydellisesti puhua, mutta ne ei ossaa kirjata sitä välttämättä. Sekin tietenki oppii sitte vähitellen, mutta se tulee jällessä siihen puhumiseen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is also perhaps an indication that the interviewees believed that to be a good language speaker one must be sufficiently good in all areas of language. This complies with the sociocultural view of language in which language cannot be seen through one or more areas of language, but as a whole, which operates inextricably in the environment. The influence of the environment is also implied in example 4 by mentioning that living in an English speaking country has influenced
learning. The idea that language can be acquired through exposure is, according to Van Lier (2004), a belief held by advocates of the so called universal grammar theory (see 3.2.5). It stresses that as long as one is exposed to language, learning is possible.

When asked about the different areas of good language skills, the need for good grammar skills was also brought up. Whether it was thought very important or not so much, changed depending on who the speaker was and as the discussion evolved. When listing the aspects of good language skills, Interviewee F mentions the need for some grammar knowledge:

*Example 5*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: It includes many different areas, like you should know vocabulary, and grammar, at least a little bit […]</td>
<td>F: Siihen kuuluu just monia osa-alueita, niinku sanastoa pitää tuntea ja kieliooppia jonku verran ainaki [...]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She mentions that grammar is needed “at least a little bit”. However, a little later as the conversation turns to discussing vocabulary, she agreed that vocabulary might be the most important component, and that one can be understood even by just putting words after each other (see example 1).

Towards the end of the discussion, Interviewee F suggests that if one really wants to be good in speaking a language, it is important to have understood grammar rules and be able to put them into practice:

*Example 6*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: But, I’m also thinking about grammar rules that you must understand them if you want to really have good language skills. That you can apply them to use and not just [learn] everything by heart.</td>
<td>F: Mutta myös mietin kielioppisääntöjä, että pitäähän ne ymmärtää jos meinaa olla oikeesti hyvä kielitaito. Että ossaa soveltaa niitä eikä vaan niinku kaikkea ulkoo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviewee C, who in example 1 claimed vocabulary to be the most important aspect of language instead of grammar by referring to the idea that one is understood “just by putting words after each other”, now agreed with her and added that it is especially important to be able to speak in different tenses. In a way the idea of the importance of grammar in good language skills evolved during the discussion.

The participants were also asked if they thought cultural knowledge is a part of good language skills. On this question, the participants had slightly different opinions. In the following example the participants discuss this question.

**Example 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: Well, it probably does make things easier... If you know the culture then maybe even the words might be easier to remember.</td>
<td>C: No kyllä se varmaan helepottaa... Jos niinku tuntee sen kulttuurin nii sitä voi ehkä jäädä ne sanatkin mieleen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: But, wouldn’t you think that if you know English well, shouldn’t you get by with it all over? That is it just like something extra if you also know about the culture of the country in question? Of course, there might be some words that belong only there [to one language variation of one country], but in my opinion basic language skills should be enough – like good language skills</td>
<td>F: Mutta toisaalta tuntuis, että jos osaa vaikka englantia hyvin niin eikö sillä pitäis pärjätä joka puolella? Että onko sitte semmosta lisää vaan, jos tuntee vielä kulttuurinksi kyseisestä maasta? Tietenki joitaki sanoja voi olla jotka kuuluu vaan sinne, mutta minusta tuntus että perus kielitaito riittää - niinku hyvä kielitaito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Yet always that culture that you know for example local addresses [?] it does give some additional value, it does help. But it is not an essential [...]</td>
<td>B: Ainahan tuo niinku kulttuuri, että tietää niinku paikallisia osuutuja [osoitteita?] kyllä se niinku semmosta lisäärvoa antaa, kyllä se niinku helpottaa. Mutta ei se välttämättömyys oo. [...]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants contemplated that perhaps if you have cultural knowledge it is easier to expand your vocabulary. Interviewee B also added that cultural knowledge might be useful when travelling, by knowing where things are. Interviewee F voiced her opinion that to have good
language skills does not necessarily mean having a lot of cultural knowledge. She alluded to the number of different areas in which English is spoken, and that to manage in those countries a good knowledge of the language should be enough. According to her, cultural knowledge is merely an extra bonus.

Some of the interviewees seemed to connect cultural knowledge mostly with geographical knowledge and not knowledge of the cultural implications and uses of language. According to Drewelow and Mitchell (2015), culture as a concept is difficult to define, which leads to students having varied ideas of what counts as cultural knowledge (pp. 245‒246). They describe several studies (such as Schenker (2013) and Magnan, Murphy & Sahakyan (2014)) in which cultural knowledge is often regarded as an aid when travelling and a static entity tied to a specific homogenous group, rather than a social construct of perceptions of self and others (Drewelow and Mitchell, 2015, pp. 245‒246).

4.2 Characteristics of a skilled language speaker

In the discussion interview, one of the key features seemed to be the correctness assumption, in which it is assumed that there is a ‘correct’ language and a ‘correct’ way of for example speaking or writing. This was discussed in more detail in section 3.2.5. The correctness assumption was mostly related to the discussion of pronunciation and whether one should have ‘perfect’ language skills.

In a way it could be said that this whole study is based on the correctness assumption, as in asking the question “what are good language skills” one easily assumes that there is on the other hand ‘bad’ language skills. It could be claimed that as this is already presupposed in the setting of the question, it is only natural that this assumption is prominent in the discussion as a whole. Alternatively, it could also be argued that an interview question, which is perhaps relatively provocative, could encourage more discussion and thought in the conversation.
During the interview discussion the question of whether a good English speaker should sound like a native or, in other words, have ‘perfect pronunciation’ was discussed. Again the interviewees agreed that the most important aspect of pronunciation is to allow all participants in the conversation understand each other.

**Example 8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B: I think [with] good language skills that it can be heard, one’s own nationality and that you are from Finland, as long as you pronounce reasonably [well].</td>
<td>B: Minusta tuota niin, hyvä kielitaito, niin kyllä se saa kuulua se tuota niin se oma kansalaisuus ja että on Suomesta, kun se ääntää niinku kohtuudella.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here Interviewee B mentions that it is acceptable for a good language speaker to ‘have an accent’ and not sound ‘like a native’. It was also brought up in the discussion that as English is such a widely spoken language with a large number of different variations and dialects, not even native English speakers necessarily understand each other. For example, a person speaking English as their first language from North America might not understand a native English speaker from rural Scotland, and so forth.

It was also discussed that even a good language speaker also sometimes makes mistakes. This was brought up especially when considering vocabulary. The participants stated that at times even a good language speaker comes across words that they do not know. Interviewee C states that even in one’s native language there might be words that one does not know, especially vocabulary that is mostly only used in certain dialects:

**Example 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: Yes, even in Finnish you may come across words you don’t know the meaning to. I suppose it must be the same thing in other countries as well.</td>
<td>C: Niin tulleehan se suomessakin vastaan sellasia sanoja, että ei tiää mitä se tarkoittaa. Kait se on ihan muissa maissa sama juttu.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviewee C recognises that to have ‘good’ language skills is not the same thing as to have ‘perfect’ language skills. The rest of the participants also questioned whether ‘perfect’ is something even a native speaker can attain.

In example 10, Interviewee F refers to the trip to Germany she had recently been on and said that although she thought that her own pronunciation had been relatively correct, she had not always been understood.

**Example 10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: In that as well understandability is perhaps the most important. But then again one can’t always evaluate how one pronounces, that how they [the other person] understand. At least I noticed on the trip that even though in my own opinion I pronounced normally, it isn’t understood straight away.</td>
<td>F: Siinäki se ymmärrettävyys varmaan on tärkeintä. Mutta sitte eihän ite aina osaa arvioida, että miten ääntää, että ymmärtääkö se miten. Ainaki ite huomasin senki tuolla matkalla, että nii, vaikka omasta mielestäni äänsin ihan normaalisti, niin ei heti ymmärrä.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This highlights the idea that without testing one’s language skills in an authentic environment it might be difficult to self-evaluate one’s level of skill. In a way, here Interviewee F acknowledges the importance of self-evaluation in language learning.

This notion of ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ language and the arguments for which accent should be used in the classroom, are directly related to Van Lier’s warring languages assumption, which was discussed in section 3.2.5. In example 10, Interviewee F refers to pronouncing ‘normally’, which could be thought to mean ‘correctly’. At any rate, the idea of ‘normal’ pronunciation implies that ‘abnormal’ pronunciation exists and is perhaps less desired than ‘normal’ pronunciation. In addition to the previously mentioned example, the topic of which accent one should speak was discussed with the participants outside of the interview, in the very beginning of the course. As I have learned to speak in a British RP accent and use it when speaking in the classroom, I made a promise to try and bring authentic material, in which a variety of accents could be heard, to enable the students to get accustomed to them.
According my experiences from teacher training and other contact with the school books used in Finnish schools at the moment, I feel like the question of which accent is the preferred accent in language classrooms is addressed more and more, as teaching materials strive to bring more authentic examples of people speaking in varied dialects to the listening comprehension and other materials. This debate of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ accents is at times covered in the Finnish media, as for example the Finnish matriculation examination for English listening comprehension has at times been criticised for having exercises in which the speakers have a ‘difficult’ accent. An example of this is the thread on the vauva.fi website in which one of the parts of the exam of autumn 2014 was described to have a speaker whose “accent was ridiculously difficult, as he/she slurred and spoke inarticulately” (Englannin yo kuuntelu syksy 2014).

Although at times implying that there is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pronunciation skills, the participants in the discussion nevertheless stressed that good language skills are not the same as excellent, let alone perfect, language skills. Two of the interviewees mentioned that good language is one that you get by with, one of them Interviewee F in the following example:

**Example 11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Here again language is considered from the point of view of how effectively it can be used in communication, not as necessarily having a value of its own.

The idea of not having to be perfect is closely connected to confidence. When asked whether one should have perfect language skills to be able to get along in English, Interviewee C answers:

**Example 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: good is enough. If you are perfect then you don’t make those mistakes, but in good</td>
<td>C: hyvää riittää. Täydellinen jos on niin sittenhän ei tuu niitä virheitäkkään, mutta hyvässä mun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As already previously discussed, the participants counted the ability to learn from one’s mistakes one of the most integral parts of good language skills. Interviewee B reminded that “we also do accept a little broken speech from others”. Therefore, it is mainly a positive thing that even though one’s language skills are not perfect, one still strive to use the language and improve.

In addition, the ability to go around the forgotten word or rephrase a forgotten grammatical structure was thought to be important by the group. Interviewee B brought up an example from the time when he studied sign language. The students were taught to rephrase words or phrases that they could not remember in a way that the other participants of the conversation did not even notice. In contrast to the concept of reductionism (see 3.2.4), interview B seems to agree with the sociocultural theory in which the verbal message is thought to be inseparably linked to gestures, expressions and movements. He appears to consider non-verbal communication skills to be an integral part in language, as is also thought in sociocultural theory.

All of the interviewees were unanimous in the idea that the most important things in good language skills are courage and the confidence to use language and not be afraid of making mistakes. In addition, if one makes mistakes one tries to learn from them. The participants in the discussion interview emphasised that sufficient skills in the different areas of language allow them to be confident when using the language. This also relates to the modern holistic view of language, in which it is thought to be a part of a person, not a separate entity, similarly to other attributes such as confidence.

A language speaker with enough confidence also tries to make the most of the authentic language using situations. In the following example, Interviewee D stresses the importance of not actively trying to avoid situations in which one could authentically practice English.
Naturally these kinds of situations are more common when travelling. However, as an example of authentic language practice, an everyday situation in which the use of English is needed was brought up in the discussion. This was meeting foreigners in the streets, who might for example be asking for directions. Confidence and courage could be said to be also needed in the language lessons, as learning requires confidence to leave one’s comfort zone. As discussed in section 3.2.1 according to Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development, the most effective learning happens outside of the area in which one already knows, with the help of sufficient scaffolding and in collaboration with others. Especially when practicing spoken English, it is thought important to have the courage to open your mouth and not be embarrassed or afraid of possible mistakes.

It could be said that this emphasis on the importance of confidence in oneself is in accordance in the holistic approach of sociocultural theory, which was discussed earlier in section 3.2.1. In a way the interviewees viewed language skills as something which are affected by the context and for example the self-esteem of the learner. They believed that merely by drilling and repeating certain vocabulary and phrases one cannot be a good language speaker, if one lacks the confidence to put that knowledge in use.

### 4.3 Learning and teaching

The discussion often touched upon the topics of learning and teaching. It was brought up how people learn in different ways. Especially, the difference between the way how children and adults learn seemed to be of interest to the group. Interviewee C called attention to the way how some children she knows have been sent to English speaking schools with no prior knowledge of English,
and how it only took them a few weeks to acclimatise and start to understand something. Later she mused that perhaps this is because children do not have similar inhibitions as adults do.

This assumption is the same that Van Lier (2004) also mentioned: “younger children learn second languages faster than older children or grownups” (p. 26). This assumption has, also according to Van Lier, been claimed untrue in many cases. In their article ‘Three misconceptions about Age and L2 learning’ Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) discuss this assumption and the reasons why it is common among learners, teachers and even researchers, although it has often been proven to be untrue. They claim that although adults may be less likely to learn a second language, this is because of the differences in the situation of learning, not the capacity to learn. They also argue that adults have the same capacity to become as fluent in a second language as children do, in some cases even quicker and with more ease. (p. 9.)

In the discussion interview, the interviewees also referred to the difference in how they were taught English in school, compared to the way they believe and have seen children being taught now-a-days, with much more emphasis on listening and speaking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Translation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: It [writing] has been emphasised in our schools, at least in our time. Now-a-days it might not necessarily be so. In our time even the comma had to be in the correct place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here Interviewee C refers to how during the time she was in school the English lessons concentrated much more on teaching correct grammar than helping pupils to learn how to use English in real-life situations. This again refers to the assumption that language should be taught keeping in mind the context in which it is needed, instead of merely concentrating on perfecting certain small areas of it. The participants agreed that the recent development in language teaching in schools is going into a good direction. However, when referring to the English spoken in schools, Interviewee F brought up that as for her work she is more in contact with American people, she
sometimes finds it hard to understand them as they speak a different variety of language than the more British one she became more accustomed to hearing in school:

**Example 15**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: That is why at least for me it is hard to understand Americans, when in school everything was pronounced in such a British way.</td>
<td>F: Siksi ainaki minun on vaikeet ymmärtää amerikkalaisten, ku koulussa oli niin brittiläisittäin äännet ja lausutti kaikki.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When talking about good language skills, the interviewees agreed that the motivation to learn the things you do not yet know is an important part. A person with good language skills also knows where to find the information they lack. Interviewee C claimed that “everyone learns what they want to learn” *Jokainen oppii mitä haluaa*. Interviewee F added, however, that it is not possible for one person to learn everything, therefore one has to choose where their interests lie. She however agreed that anyone can learn anything, just with enough repetition.

All the participants seemed to agree that in language learning repetition and revision are very important. Interviewee D brought up the Finnish saying “kertaus on opintojen äiti”, of which the idea roughly translates into ‘revision is the key to learning’. They also mentioned that in learning basic and practical language skills, learning useful phrases by heart might be beneficial.

**Example 16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F: In principle, learning some phrases by heart is not a bad idea as by then you have a ready model for some situation. How to act in a shop, train station or...</td>
<td>F: Periaatteessa niinku joku fraasien ulkoa oppiminenkaan ei oo niinku huono asia ku niinku onki valmis malli johonki tilanteeseen. Miten toimia vaikka kaupassa, juna-aseella tai...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
They continued on to discuss the language learning CDs that they had recently bought, in which commonly used English phrases are taught by repeating after the reader. During the course we had also had exercises in which we tried to simulate real-life situations in which English is needed. Although at some points these discussions may seem very artificial, the interviewees agreed that they are a good way to safely practise their English skills for possible future situations.

This idea of the benefits of drilling and repetitive memorising is partly what Van Lier calls the ‘storage assumption’ (see 3.2.5). It is the view which focuses on how to get new things to be stored in the brain, i.e. learned. As discussed before, the behaviourist notion translates in the classroom often into exercises focused on enhancing the memorising of things like word lists or phrases. Naturally, as is the case in most of the assumptions which Van Lier lists, teaching in ways which seem to comply with the assumptions might sometimes also benefit the learners. It could be said that the key idea is for the teacher to realise the underlying assumptions and evaluate them and consider whether some other methods could have more advantages.

In conclusion, it seems that while many of Van Lier’s assumptions seem to be apparent in the findings, and in many cases they contradict the sociocultural and ecological approaches to learning, there are cases in which the participants voiced very similar ideas to those of the theories. Both of these instances were highlighted by giving examples from the material. I will further discuss the findings on a more general level in the following section.
5 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In this section I will further discuss the findings introduced and analysed in the previous section. I will strive to find out in what ways they reflect the modern sociocultural approach to learning, and in what ways they perhaps contradict each other. I will also hypothesise why certain aspects came up in the discussion interview and what would have perhaps changed them.

In the interview discussion, aspects arose which both contradicted and complied with the sociocultural and ecological approaches to language learning. As already discussed in the previous section, many of Van Lier’s assumptions (see section 3.2.5) can be found in the interview. The most apparent ones were the so-called storage assumption, componential assumption, correctness assumption, separateness assumption and the warring languages assumption. In some cases, these assumptions were also denied. For example, the interviewees denied the correctness assumption by stating that there is no ‘correct’ accent that a skilled language speaker should adopt.

The componential assumption and the separateness assumption both refer to the idea that language is formed from building blocks, which exist separately from the context. This is seen in the findings especially in the way in which the participants approached language by discussing the building blocks of grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation. As this assumption is prevalent in schools, and was presumably even more at the time the interviewees were in school, it is no great surprise that it was evident in their opinions. As this is the usual way language is discussed, it is natural for it to be discussed in the same way in the interview as well. It must also be taken into account that the interviewees are not specifically interested in linguistics and theories of learning, and it cannot be presumed that they would be able to discuss the subjects, for example, with using specific vocabulary. In addition, as discussed in section 2.3.5, these assumptions are common even among teachers and researchers.
The behaviourist view of the separateness assumption stresses the importance of explicit teaching and drilling. This was brought up in the interview through the idea that one should have enough repetition to learn and that for example memorising phrases is a good way to learn sufficient language skills. The storage assumption also emphasises drilling and memorising as its advocates see language as a fixed code and an acquired competence.

As discussed before, the correctness assumption was also apparent in the discussion interview; that there is one ‘correct’ language opposed to ‘incorrect’ language. However, this was also disagreed with as the participants often stressed the idea that the aim of being a skilled language used is not to be ‘perfect’ but to be able to convey a message which is understood. As it could even be said that the correctness assumption is a key element in language teaching in schools (this is evident in the importance given to test results and matriculation examinations and how it is thought that mistakes should be immediately corrected to prevent the same mistakes from happening twice), it is perhaps surprising that it was contradicted in the interview. As mentioned earlier in section 4.2, it could also be argued that the topic of the discussion interview, “what are the characteristics of a skilled language learner”, and the debate on what are ‘good’ language skills already implied the correctness assumption by referring to ‘good’ language and implicitly also to the existence of ‘bad’ language.

The sociocultural approach sees people, and language, from a holistic point of view. This was in some cases echoed in the interview. For example, in the way that the interviewees thought that a ‘skilled language user’ needs to be relatively skilled in all areas of language use, in reading and listening comprehension and in producing language through speaking and writing, and in various contexts, such as when travelling or talking to foreigners in Finland. Another point which arose in the discussion was the idea that in addition to managing verbally, a skilled language user is also able to use and understand appropriate non-verbal communication.

It is also notable that the participants in the discussion interview seemed to bring up subjects which are relevant to them. For example, the importance of being able to communicate through different mediums, such as email correspondence, was emphasised. Interviewee B, the person who specifically brought this up for discussion, needs English mostly when writing and reading.
emails at work. During the lessons as well he often emphasised that this is what he would like to improve. As is only natural, it seems that the participants would emphasise the characteristics of a skilled language user that they themselves thought especially important and also thought that they themselves needed to improve. Before the course started, I asked the participants to write down what their expectations for the lessons where, and a majority of them wrote that they would like to improve their confidence in communicating in English. Consequently, in the interview, sufficient confidence to use English was listed as the major characteristic of a skilled language user. Other aims listed in the expectations for the lessons were to become better at everyday language and ‘small talk’ and to widen their vocabulary. Both of these were also given as characteristics of good language skills in the discussion interview.

The interviewees also brought up examples which were relevant to their lives and came from their own experiences, such as from the recent trip to Germany or from a sign language course they had recently been on. They had not been told beforehand what the specific topic of the interview would be, and therefore it is only natural that they were able to illustrate the discussion using phenomena that they were familiar with. Perhaps it could also be said that as adult learners who had voluntarily decided to take part in the course, they had identified the areas in which their language skills needed improving and had prior experience of the everyday situations in which English skills are required. According to my everyday experience, in many cases adult learners are perhaps more motivated to learn English than younger learners, as they have already identified the importance of learning languages in their life. They also might have more realistic aims as they accept that it is not easy to learn to speak any language fluently, but that it is perchance more important to be able to be understood and ‘get by’ with the language.
6 CONCLUSION

When taking into account the lack of prior knowledge of modern learning theories that the research subjects have, it is notable in how many areas their ideas complied with the modern sociocultural and ecological theories of language and how even the contradictions were in many cases presumably mainly due to the participants discussing the topics using vocabulary which they were already familiar with and which is often fairly established even among language professionals. It is difficult to know, whether the results of the discussion interview would have been the same if the participants had not previously been studying English on weekly lessons. After the interview I asked some of the participants whether they evaluated that their opinions had changed or developed during the course, and they answered that while their opinions probably had not completely changed during the course, they had certainly become more aware of the subject and thought about it more actively. One of the interviewees stated that she believes that studying English has deepened the understanding of the nature of language learning and of how good it is to actively work to maintain the skills already acquired.

As the sample size of this study is quite small, it naturally cannot be a definitive study on the subject, but perhaps a qualitative glimpse into the learner beliefs of a certain group of Finnish adult English learners. This study aims to contribute in the discussion on learner beliefs and inspire teachers, learners and researchers to consider the topic and acknowledge their impact on language learning and teaching. This realisation is useful for not only researchers, but for teachers in planning their teaching and for learners in self-evaluation and choosing relevant learning methods. As an almost qualified teacher, this has also been a useful study and helped me to develop professionally and to evaluate my own beliefs and how they affect the way I teach. While teaching adults, I have also made most of the material myself and the understanding of learner beliefs and my own beliefs has helped me to develop perhaps more efficient materials. The understanding of learner beliefs is crucial to language learning material developers.
In the future, the results of this study could be utilised to plan English teaching for adults, as they provide insight into what kinds of beliefs adult learners might have. They could also be beneficial in reminding teachers that it is perhaps good at times to reflect on the learner beliefs their students or pupils might have, in addition to considering their own beliefs about language and learning. Although the scope of this study was limited, and the research subjects for example were all acquaintances who worked in the same office, they were in some respects a diverse group: they were from various age groups and had different educational backgrounds. Despite this and although, owing to the nature of a discussion interview, the aim of this study was not necessarily to reach consensus but to allow for debate and the exploration of different viewpoints, the participants seemed to be relatively unanimous in most topics. This could perhaps indicate that the opinions they had might be common among other Finnish adults as well, although naturally generalisations cannot be claimed by studying such a small group.

As a method, the focus group interview method worked for this study and could be utilised in future research of the similar kind. As the participants were already familiar with each other, the discussion flowed easily and there was no initial awkwardness. The interview situation also functioned as a learning opportunity for both the teacher and the students, as perhaps while discussing one’s beliefs and reflecting them on the opinions of others, one is able to become more conscious of their own beliefs and evaluate them. In addition, conducting the interview after the final lesson was a good way to end the course, as it also encouraged the students to give feedback on the teaching and the lessons overall. This study could also serve to encourage teachers to conduct similar discussions during language courses even if they did not plan to use the results as research material, just to allow the students to reflect on their own beliefs.

The methods of this study could in the future be utilised to widen the scope of the study and to interview more Finnish adults from different backgrounds, professions and ages. Also a comparative study with a group of adults who have not recently studied English could be conducted, and if later they would attend English courses it could be studied whether their views changed in any direction. This study concentrated on the topic of a skilled language speaker, but as learners have beliefs concerning a plethora of topics, the methods of this study could also be used to research them further. Future research could also be conducted to explore the impact of
raising up the question of learner beliefs in a language classroom and to find out whether it would benefit the learning of the students by allowing them to evaluate their own methods and beliefs.

As English is a language which is increasingly needed in the professional life of many Finnish adults, the need for language teaching for adults is apparent. Interconnected with the increased need for adult English teaching in Finland is the need for more and more research on what impacts the learning of adults and how it can be made as effective as possible. This study has aimed to be a contributor in adding to the research, by exploring the learner beliefs of adult learners, and by highlighting the importance of the topic and the need for it to be studied also in future research.
REFERENCES


