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PROFILES OF UNSUCCESSFUL EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

Inspired by Marianne Nikolov's *A study of unsuccessful language learners*, this qualitative study tries to find and recognize unsuccessful learners among 91 learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) attending a four-year vocational program in an urban high school. In this paper, the term 'unsuccessful' is purely based on the learners' own opinion of themselves as EFL learners and, as such, the study has its own limitations as far as applying its results on a macro-level. In order to successfully identify unsuccessful learners, we presented the participants with an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 21 questions regarding their English learning experiences, motivation, attitudes, language anxiety, self-concept etc. hoping we would discover the reasons behind why they perceive themselves as being unsuccessful and to find some common features they share. The results show relatively low motivation, positive attitudes toward English language and high language anxiety among the 17 self-perceived unsuccessful EFL learners. As for the theoretical groundwork, we will define the above mentioned concepts relevant for this paper and describe important findings and theories concerning each of them in order to have a better understanding of the individual differences that help define a successful, or in this case, an unsuccessful learner. In the end, we offer some suggestions for further research based on the present research study.

Keywords: unsuccessful EFL learners, individual differences, motivation, language anxiety, self-concept

Profiles of Unsuccessful EFL Learners

1. Individual differences

As Dörnyei (2005) explains in the preface of his *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*, the study of individual differences (IDs) has a long tradition in second language studies and is one of the key contributors to successfully mastering a foreign language (FL). IDs stand for language learners' traits or characteristics that make them different from other individuals/learners (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 1). While the focus in classroom settings is mainly on the learners as a group, ultimately language is learnt by individuals and not by groups, states Cook (1996). Therefore, it is important to explore the features of the learner's mind or personality that can either inhibit or encourage second language (L2) learning (Cook, 1996, p. 95).

Acknowledging the importance of IDs when it comes to second language acquisition (SLA), the study of IDs has become a prominent research area in L2 studies since the 1960s, only to gain an even bigger momentum in the 1970s by exploring not only motivation and language aptitude, but other factors that help explain a learner's success or failure in L2 such as language learning strategies and styles (Dörnyei, 2005). However, the very concept of IDs is somewhat loose, allowing for a broad interpretation of its components. Dörnyei (2005) distinguishes between a smaller number of certain core variables and a larger number of optional ones (p. 7). Besides personality, ability/aptitude and motivation, he chose learning strategies and learning styles as main learner variables, and among the optional ones, or as he calls them "other Learner Characteristics", he lists anxiety, self-esteem, creativity, willingness to communicate (WTC) and learner beliefs (Dörnyei, 2005, p.8)

Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) group IDs into three broad categories: Cognitive Variables that involve different aspects of cognition such as intelligence, language aptitude,

language learning strategies, previous language training and experience; Affective Variables that can refer to attitudes, motivation, language anxiety and feelings of self-confidence about the language; and finally a miscellaneous category that would include factors such as age or socio-cultural experiences. They believe that all of these variables have significant impact in predicting a learner's success in L2/FL which they incorporated and represented in their socio-educational model of SLA.

2. Cognitive and affective variables

As Cook (1996) states, Gardner devised a rather complex view of L2 learning called the *socio-educational model* in order to explain the interaction of individual factors and general features of society in the L2 learning context (p. 168). A schematic representation of an earlier version of this model is represented in Figure 1. In this dynamic model, Gardner distinguishes between four segments: socio-cultural milieu, individual differences, language acquisition context, and language learning outcomes. In this context, the socio-cultural milieu plays an important role in determining factors that influence language acquisition mainly through cultural beliefs that are connected to both cognitive and affective variables (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1992). Next, it is proposed that IDs have influence on both formal (situations that involve direct instruction in language such as the formal classroom situation) and informal (voluntary situations where an individual can acquire some knowledge or practice in the language) language acquisition contexts. In formal contexts, the cognitive variables help the smooth transition of the learned material while the affective ones influence the individual's reactions to the learning environment. Both contexts result in both linguistic (changes in individual's competence, knowledge and skills) and non-linguistic (changes in the individual's reactions to language, situation and factors associated with language) outcomes. It goes without saying that successful and positive experiences will result in improved levels

of both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes, while the unsuccessful and negative ones will have an opposite effect.

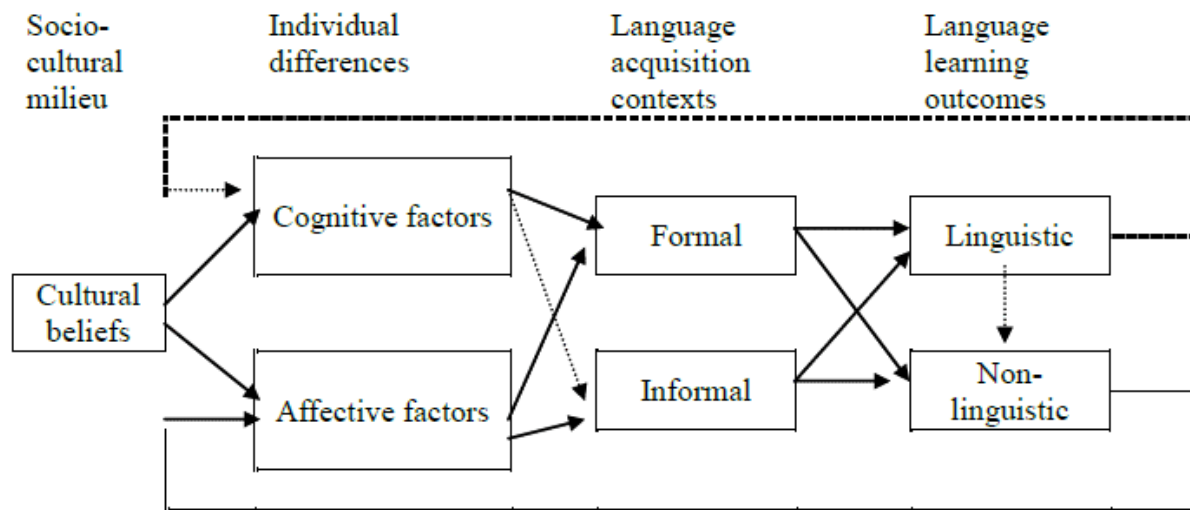


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the socio-educational model of second language acquisition (R. C. Gardner and P. D. MacIntyre, 1992, p. 2)

This model underwent many changes since its first appearance and the most recent version puts emphasis on the role of aptitude and motivation on learner’s success (Figure 2). Motivation is seen as consisting of two main factors: attitudes toward the learning situation and integrativeness, and together they form integrative motivation. Attitudes toward the learning situation involve attitudes to any aspect of the situation in which the language is learned and they can be directed toward the teacher, the course, classmates, materials etc. On the other hand, integrativeness reflects an authentic interest in learning a L2 in order to come closer to that language’s community (Gardner, 2001, p. 5). Language aptitude is often referred to as an ‘ear’ for languages (Chastain, 1988) or as having a ‘knack’ for languages, but it usually indicates the ability to learn the L2 in an academic classroom, i.e. the ability to learn from teaching (Cook, 1996). When joined with motivation, it leads to success in L2 learning and acquisition. The ‘other factors’ in this model indicate that there could be other supporters

for motivation than just integrativeness, such as instrumental factors. In the same manner, the other factors that influence language achievement could be language learning strategies, language anxiety, and/or self-confidence.

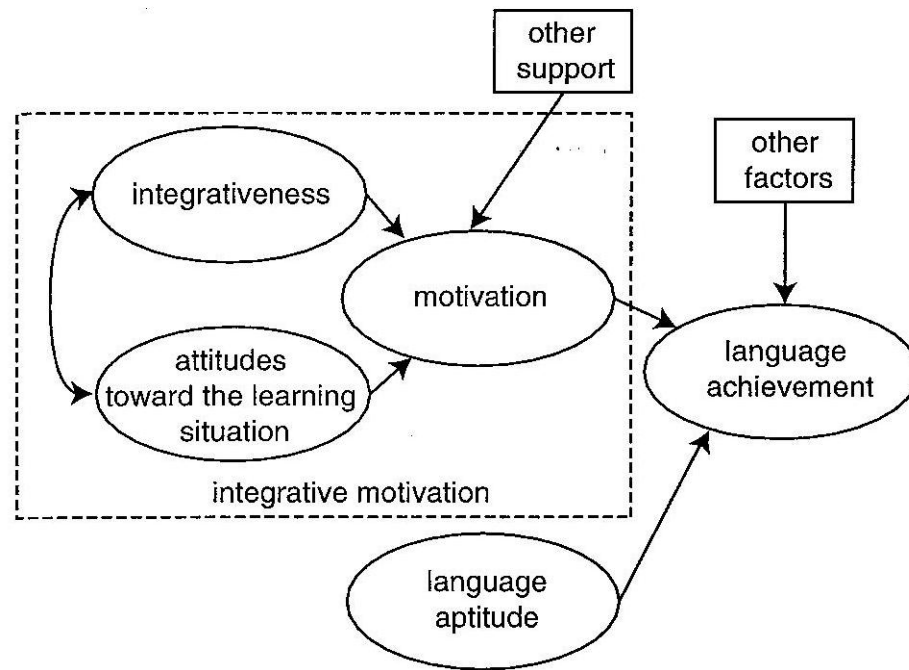


Figure 2. Basic model of the role of aptitude and motivation in second language learning (R. C. Gardner, 2001, p. 5)

In terms of aptitude and attitude, Krashen (1981) brings forward the acquisition-learning hypothesis that claims aptitude (seen mostly as grammatical sensitivity) to be directly related to conscious learning, while attitudinal factors (affective variables) are closely linked to acquisition. He further suggests that aptitude is important for formal, artificial situations such as a classroom, and that attitude is important for informal, natural situations (as cited in Cook, 1996, p. 101). Krashen argues that both formal and informal linguistic environments contribute to second language proficiency in different ways. The informal one can provide the learner with the input necessary for language acquisition, while the formal one can provide him/her with instant feedback (Krashen, 1981, p. 50).

A study by Gardner, Smythe, Clement, and Glikzman (1976) confirmed that aptitude related much more to the classroom skills than to communicative skills in French as a FL in grades 7 to 11 in various English-speaking communities in Canada where the effects of aptitude on performance in general was stronger for older students (as cited in Krashen, 1981, p. 25). Another study conducted by Gardner (1960) with eighty-three tenth-grade students of French showed that motivation was important for the development of communicative skills, while aptitude was important in the acquisition of L2 skills acquired through direct instruction (as cited in Krashen, 1981, p. 26).

3. Affective variables

3.1 Motivation

As it was possible to conclude from the previous chapter, motivation is a major ID variable that is proven to significantly affect language learning success. Dörnyei (2005) believes it provides the learner with the initial desire to start L2 learning and later on in serves to sustain the long and often tiresome learning process. If one has no motivation, they will find it hard to achieve success in L2 despite of their skills and abilities. On the other hand, those with high motivation can overcome their lack of aptitude and learning conditions.

Dörnyei (2005) divides the research of the L2 motivation into three periods or phases: the social psychological, the cognitive-situated and process-oriented periods. The most influential researchers in the social psychological period were Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert who based their findings on the research of the coexistence of English and French communities. They believed that motivation is the most important factor in learning a language of another community since it can help these communities establish communication and grow closer, or even the opposite. According to Garden and Lambert (1972), FL is

different from other school subjects because it is affected by factors such as language attitudes, cultural stereotypes or geopolitical considerations (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 67).

Gardner's theory of second language acquisition is also known as the socio-educational model of second language acquisition. He describes motivation as a complex construct involving effort, the desire to achieve the goal of learning the language and positive attitudes to L2 (as cited in Noels, 2001, p. 43). Since we already described this model in the previous chapter, now we focus on some of its shortcomings. Even though this theory has been used and accepted by L2 researchers and practitioners, Dörnyei (2005) argues that the interpretation of the model is made difficult for its confusing use of the concept *integrative* (it is used at three different levels – integrative motivation, integrativeness and integrative motive). It is not clear what Gardner perceives as motivation in his works – L2 motivation in general or maybe integrative motivation? That's why there's been a need for a different interpretation of the original theory, one that would focus only on two dimensions of motivation that are: *an interpersonal/affective* (referring to integrative orientation/motivation) and *a practical/utilitarian* (referring to instrumental orientation/motivation) *dimension* (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 70). The latter one indicates an interest in learning the language for practical reasons that do not involve any kind of identification with the other language community (Gardner, 2001, p. 8).

Another prominent figure from the social psychological period was Richard Clément. Together with his colleagues, he was mostly interested in the interrelationship of motivation and self-confidence. Self-confidence is seen as the belief that an individual has the ability to achieve results and successfully accomplish goals or tasks (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 73). Clément (1980) believed that in contexts where two language communities coexisted, linguistic self-confidence can have a great impact on learning this other community's language making the concept a socially influenced one (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p.73).

As for the cognitive-situated period, it was characterized by important findings from the field of psychology that were mainly focused on cognitive concepts. Motivational psychologists believed that motivation is significantly influenced by people's previous successes and opinions about their own weaknesses and capabilities, and there was the desire to take the focus off whole communities and put it on actual learning situations (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 74). One of the most important theories in motivational psychology is *self-determination theory*. Developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) it divides orientations/motives into three broad categories: *intrinsic* and *extrinsic orientations* and *amotivation* (as cited in Noels, 2001, p. 45). Intrinsic orientations refer to reasons for L2 learning that come from one's inherent pleasure and interest in the activity itself and in a sense of competence, while extrinsic ones refer to reasons that are instrumental, such as for getting a job position, or to pass a certain exam (Noels, 2001). Amotivation is the opposite from the other types of orientations and it results in disengaging from the language activity and in language anxiety.

Another important motivation theory from this period is the *attribution theory*. This theory is unique in that it links learners' past experiences with their future achievement efforts (Dörnyei, 2005). As Weiner (1992) explains, the personal reasons we link our prior successful or unsuccessful performances to greatly shape our motivation for future activities (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 79). In accordance with Weiner's theory, Ushioda (1996, 1998, 2001) came to the conclusion that positive motivation is based on two attributional patterns: positive results are attributed to internal factors and personal ability, while negative ones are the result of non-permanent weakness which can be conquered (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 80).

Since the L2 learning process is in itself very complex, researchers have been using tasks in order to break that process into defined sections, making tasks into basic building blocks of SLA (Dörnyei, 2005, p.80). Dörnyei (2005) introduced the *dynamic task processing system* to explain that a range of different motivation-related attitudes are actually influenced

by a task itself (p. 81). The system includes three interconnected mechanisms: *task execution* (referring to learner's learning behavior), *appraisal* (connected to accomplishing the goal while taking into account external factors that influence the learner and while processing the input from the outside world) and *action control* (referring to regulating the learning process).

The last stage of motivation research is the process-oriented period that pays attention to the fluctuations in learner's daily motivation. It explains the relationship between motivation and learner's behavior in the classroom over time, and as such it is both dynamic and temporal (Dörnyei, 2005). Taking this into account, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) introduced a new model of L2 motivation (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p.84). They divided it into three phases: *preactional stage* – motivation is generated to determine certain goals, *actional stage* – learner needs to remain undisturbed so their motivation needs to be kept throughout the learning process or classroom activities, *postactional stage* – in this phase one looks back to the previous experience and analyzes the process that might influence any future activities.

Amidst different views on motivation, Chastain (1988) notes that this term is usually used in classrooms by teachers and as such it refers to student's effort to learn leading him to name it *achievement motivation* (p. 172). He distinguishes between three types of achievement motivation: *desire to know* (cognitive drive where learning is a goal in and of itself), *enhancing one's self-concept* (ego enhancement where they strive to do well for themselves), and *social factors* (social affiliation where learners try to please their parents or peers). Based on the type of the learner's academic motivation, different types of class activities and other external factors are suited for them.

In general, motivation has always been seen in a positive light as incentive in FL learning, ignoring the possible negative effects. However, practical experience from classrooms shows those effects. There are negative stimuli coming from the surroundings as

well (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 90). The results from an investigation by Ushioda (2003) point that demotivation appears when the learner's inner motivation is negatively influenced by external factors. There have also been cases when the motivation of a group transforms into negative attitudes and behaviors in the classroom (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 90).

3.2 Attitudes

As Chastain (1988) justly observes, learners arrive to their language classes with a number of attitudes about L2 learning that can either improve their performance in class or have quite the opposite effect (p. 123). These already existing opinions can refer to the language itself, the classroom, the teacher, the native speakers and their culture, the course materials etc., and can be positive, negative or even mixed. If they value the language and its speakers, or believe that they will benefit from L2 knowledge in the future, or simply want to travel and meet new people, they will certainly have a more positive, enthusiastic attitude. However, if they feel that learning a language is too hard or takes up their free time, their attitude is likely to be negative.

Furthermore, Krashen (1981) sees attitude towards the classroom and the teacher as a personality factor that can relate to both acquisition and learning (p. 23). A learner who is relaxed in the classroom and has positive attitudes towards the teacher is more likely to accept the teacher as a source of intake and volunteer more in class resulting in more learning. In their study of French as a L2 in Toronto, Naimon, Frölich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) found out that the learner's 'general attitude' was the best predictor of success (as cited in Krashen, 1981, p. 33).

Cook (1996) believes that an individual's attitudes towards the learning situation measured by feelings about the classroom teacher and joined with the level of anxiety about the classroom contribute towards the student's motivation (p. 131). Most agree that teachers

play a key role in establishing motivation in a classroom setting. As Chastain (1988) explains, they set goals, adopt teaching materials, develop curricula, prepare lesson plans that are actualized in language classes, set certain standards and continuously assess students' achievement (p. 130), and as such they greatly influence students' attitudes to themselves (teachers) and the language in general.

As for the measurement of the mentioned variables (motivation and attitudes), Gardner and Smythe and their colleagues made an effort to construct a consistent and valid instrument that would measure motivation and attitudes as they relate to SLA (as cited in Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993, p. 1). In 1981 they presented the summary data of the beginning version of the *Attitude/Motivation Test Battery* (AMTB). The final AMTB was developed to measure several concepts that can be grouped in five categories: *Motivation* (referring to desire, motivational intensity, and attitude toward learning the language), *Integrativeness* (including three measures - attitudes toward the target language group, interest in foreign languages, and integrative orientation), *Attitudes toward the learning situation* (targeting evaluation of the language teacher and evaluation of the language course), *Language anxiety* (referring to language class anxiety and language use anxiety) and *other attributes* (instrumental orientation, parental encouragement, orientation index). The AMTB proved to be a useful instrument as it even measures motivation and behavior influenced by it, and by doing so it improves the legitimacy of the instrument in foretelling the results of the learning process (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 73).

3.3. Self-concept

We briefly mentioned self-confidence when talking about Clément's research into its correlation with motivation, but as Rogers (1947) explains, central to any motivation study is the individual, and at the core of any individual is their perception of self (as cited in Syed,

2001, p. 128). How we perceive ourselves and how other see us will, to an extent, dictate our actions, motives and involvement. The process of developing the self and self-concept have been positively linked with academic achievement, states Syed (2001). This process reaches its peak during the teenage years, claim Csikszentmihayli and Larson (1984), since it's a time when adolescents go through big cognitive, social and emotional changes (as cited in Syed, 2001, p. 129). When all these changes take place, the feeling of knowing oneself results in greater confidence.

As Chastain (1988) points out, learners who have positive self-concepts think highly of themselves and their abilities and are more likely to take more risks in the language learning process, such as oral partaking (p. 122). In case the learner has doubts about his abilities and himself/herself, they will assume defensive measures in order to protect themselves from the uneasiness that failure brings. As Chastain (1988) notes, experiences that produced favorable results will most likely be repeated and those with negative ones will be avoided, especially since the self-concept develops as a result from the feedback received from the interaction with one's environment.

The notion that positive self-concept is a key variable in achieving maximum academic achievement is mostly accepted by teachers, but their relationship might not be so straightforward. Pottebaum et al (1986) concluded that a positive self-image may be the result rather than the cause of academic achievement, while Lerner (1986) suggests that unrealistically high self-concept may be more detrimental than beneficial (as cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 168). Furthermore, Chastain (1988) distinguishes between *damaging* and *improving* self-concept. Tolar (1975) lists three ways in which teachers might damage a learner's self-image: use of *threat* (producing feelings of fear and anxiety), appealing to *guilt feelings* (equating self-worth to classroom achievement), and *unchallenging classroom experiences* (as cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 168). Improving one's self-concept falls down on

the individual himself/herself. Swartz (1974) underlines competence, virtue, significance to others, and power as main components of self-concept, and the importance of each of these factors depends on the learner (as cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 168). What the teachers can do is be aware that their actions, manners and words greatly influence their students' self-image.

3.4 Language anxiety

Anxiety is known to considerably influence language performance. It involves negative reactions when forced to use the L2 in classroom or non-classroom circumstances (Gardner, 2001). These may manifest as forgetting things one already knows, making mistakes, having difficulty speaking in or out of class, being unable to understand the teacher or being frightened by tests, etc. (Chastain, 1988, p. 171). As Arnold and Brown (1999) note, anxiety is probably the most influential variable that impedes the learning process (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 198).

Anxiety is a complex construct and researchers are often uncertain about its nature. Is it an emotion, a part of the motivation construct or a personality trait? Dörnyei (2005) differentiates between two basic anxiety categorizations, one being *beneficial/facilitating anxiety* (it positively influences performance), vs. *inhibitory/debilitating anxiety* (it negatively influences performance). Scovel (1978) draw the same conclusion from his study where he found out that because of anxiety, some learners became super-conscientious overachievers, while others gave into their fears and became underachievers (as cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 171). The second category Dörnyei (2005) mentions is *trait anxiety* (one's permanent characteristic meaning one tends to become anxious in various situations) vs. *state anxiety* (becoming anxious in a particular situation, on a certain occasion).

Considering the anxiety which appears in specific situations, Horwitz et al. (1986) focused on anxiety in the language learning context and they named it *foreign language*

anxiety (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 199). In order to measure it, they developed an instrument called *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS). As Horowitz (2001) points out, foreign language anxiety appears to be an independent construct that has minimal correlation with trait anxiety, and MacIntyre (1999) supports this view by claiming it to be a uniquely L2-related factor (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 199). Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) investigated the relationship between anxiety and academic performance by deliberately creating feelings of anxiety among students of French by introducing a camera during classes. The results showed a significant increase in state anxiety as well as lower vocabulary acquisition proving that anxiety leads to a lower performance (as cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 200).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) claim language anxiety has to do with three general sources of fear: *communication apprehension*, (negative) *social evaluation*, and *test (evaluation) anxiety* (as cited in Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993, p. 5). McCroskey (1977) puts communication apprehension into spotlight since it presupposes interpersonal interaction and it manifests itself when one is expected to take part in an act of speaking, and Krashen (1981) builds on this by explaining that by forcing a learner to communicate might heighten his fear and lower his motivation, both resulting in low achievement (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, pp. 20-21). In classroom environments, communication is usually beyond a learner's control and his performance is constantly evaluated and that results in test anxiety that appears out of fear of failure. Even though making mistakes is now considered as a natural and unavoidable part of language learning process, some learners will still feel like making mistakes only proves their lack of ability. Empirical research in this field led by Holmes (1972), Rosenzweig (1974) and Ohlenkamp (1976) prove that learners with lower evaluation anxiety usually do better and are more successful than their more apprehensive peers (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 49). As for social evaluation, learners have

to deal with what their teachers and/or classmates think of them, and since they expect negative evaluation, they will most likely avoid such situations where they could be made fun of.

The question on how language anxiety develops produced quite a few theories, the most famous one by Gardner and MacIntyre (1989). They claim that language anxiety appears as a reaction to repeated negative learning experiences making it a learned emotional response (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 15). According to this theory, the learners might experience some state anxiety at the early stages of language learning with no effect on the learning process. If these occurrences persist, the learner relates that fear with the language itself. With time, the intensity of anxiety can become as high as to greatly influence the learning process and future activities. However, an increase in language competence usually brings a rise in positive learning experiences resulting in lower language anxiety which leads to conclude that anxiety might be more prominent in early learning stages.

3.4.1 Listening anxiety

In her work dealing with language anxiety, Mihaljević Djigunović (2002) distinguishes between three types of language anxiety: *listening*, *reading* and *writing* anxiety. Listening anxiety has often been referred to as *reception anxiety*. Wheelles (1975) defines it as a fear of not being able to fully understand, comprehend and/or adapt to messages or information sent from others (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 53). This type of anxiety can appear when one is expected to receive a message as well as when they actually receive it. Individuals suffering from reception anxiety are more prone to making mistakes in information processing and are unable to successfully evaluate information. These claims are supported by researches conducted by Daniels and Whitman (1979), Roberts (1986), and Shehan (1976). They were able to connect this type of anxiety to low ability of recalling

information during the listening process as well as relating that information to others (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, pp. 53-54).

There are several interpretations explaining receptive anxiety. For one, Wheelless and Scott (1976) believe it to be the anxiety that occurs in situations when one encounters new information (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 54). Another approach sees it as a part of one's reaction to anxiety connected to processing of information. The third understanding of listening anxiety believes that it is common among people who do not possess enough prior knowledge necessary to analyze information, causing them to unsuccessfully interpret the message. The study by Preiss et al. (1995) detected that anxiety was connected with factors such as situations (language course, discussion), language speakers (speed and rhythm of speech), different topics and one's physical surroundings (factors of distraction). They established that the level of anxiety was connected to the complexity of the message and the learners' ability to process the information (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 54).

As Mihaljević Djigunović (2002) concludes, it is generally accepted that individuals with a heightened reception anxiety are left with less cognitive resources for information processing since they spend most of it on anxiety itself. It is a vicious circle where one piles unassimilated information that in turn cause the inability to process the message, and that further leads to negative experiences in listening that will most likely affect future listening experiences as well.

3.4.2 Reading anxiety

While conducting their research, Saito et al. (1999) noticed that FLCAS focused mostly on listening and communication apprehension while overlooking reading anxiety. They strongly argue that in a foreign language learning situation, reading can also cause

anxiety (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 55). They give two reasons as to why this fear might manifest itself. Firstly, anxiety can appear due to the different way of writing letters and due to a new system of writing. This is especially accentuated when learning a language (such as English) where letters and sounds do not match. Secondly, one has to be familiar with various cultural aspects of the FL in order to fully read and understand a text. It is worth noting that researches conducted by Aida (1994), Horwitz (1986), and Truit (1995) all showed that the level of reading anxiety varies depending on which foreign language is being learned (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 56).

Based on their researches, Saito et al. (1999) created an instrument for measuring reading anxiety named *Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS)*. It measures anxiety in relation with different aspects of reading, reading difficulties and the level of reading difficulty compared to other language skills (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 56). However, there is still no definite agreement on whether reading anxiety is a cause or consequence of difficulties in reading in the foreign language. It is possible that general language anxiety leads to reading difficulties, which was shown in Sparks and Ganschow (1991) research where they found that students with an increased level of general language anxiety had more issues with reading comprehension. On the other hand, one can presume that reading anxiety is likely to be caused by objective difficulties with understanding a text, and this interpretation is supported by Saito et al.'s work (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 57).

Lastly, Mihaljević Djigunović (2002) concludes that the existence and development of reading anxiety depends on each individual's motivation for learning a language, his/her previous experiences in learning it, as well as on one's self-concept and reading in one's native language.

3.4.3 Writing anxiety

Writing anxiety has been noticed previously by teachers in classroom settings, but those observations were not systematic and students' behavior could have been easily misinterpreted without a deeper insight into their anxieties. For these reasons, Daly and Miller (1975) worked hard to develop an instrument for measuring this type of anxiety called *Second Language Writing Apprehension Test (SLWAT)* (as cited in Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, p. 57). The results showed that learners with writing anxiety usually avoid situations which require writing competence, they don't hand in their homework on time or they skip classes, they avoid job positions that have to do with writing, and writing itself makes them unhappy. The same research showed that anxious learners use a less complex and expressive writing style, and the researchers could only conclude that in order to be a successful FL learner, one must have positive predispositions towards writing.

Finally, Mihaljević Djigunović (2002) emphasizes that in order to help learners overcome writing apprehension, they should not be forced to write since that could only have a detrimental effect. Instead, they should be taught writing strategies or some direct help in fighting their anxiety should be provided to them.

3.4.4 Sources of language anxiety in Croatia

Since we already described the general sources of anxiety in one of the previous sections (communication apprehension, social evaluation, test anxiety), here we will concentrate on the research conducted by Mihaljević Djigunović and her associates (2002) in order to identify the most common sources of anxiety among Croatian foreign language learners. The basis of this research was the assumption that language anxiety has some social implications that might account for the difference in results based on different socio-cultural milieus. The research itself was conducted on a sample of 392 participants from different

schools from the capital divided into four age groups (ages 7-10, 11-14, 15-18, and adults). The youngest and oldest of the participants frequented foreign language schools, while the rest learned English as an obligatory subject. They were asked to describe in as much detail as possible the fear/anxiety they feel when studying or using English as a foreign language.

The results showed a great number of anxiety sources, the most common being the use of language in class (25.75%). It proved to be more frequent among those learners that learned English in formal contexts where English was an obligatory subject. All three types of language anxiety were present, with communicative apprehension in first place. The next source was evaluation (17.52%). As expected, this source was again more prominent in obligatory contexts where more weight is placed on continuous evaluation and the final grade itself. In third place was negative self-perception (14.32%). Once again, those in the middle two groups were found to be more vulnerable to this source, which isn't as surprising considering what was previously said about adolescents and self-concept. Another source of anxiety among Croatian EFL learners were the features of English (12.18%) such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and writing. A possibly surprising source was the use of language out of class (10.15%). It seems that many of the participants regarded their competence to be too low to participate in a meaningful conversation either with a native speaker or a highly competent learner of English. Other sources include mistakes (8.12%), teacher (4.81%), general anxiety (4.06%), problems of comprehension (2.03%), and objective circumstances (1.06%). Mistakes were found to be a significant source of anxiety in all groups where the learners felt they were directly connected to their lack of competence and skills. The teacher was a sensitive topic mostly for the adolescent group. Participants listed strict and demanding teachers as a source of anxiety, as well as certain teaching styles that are either incompatible with their own learning styles or that don't help them achieve language competence. The small percentage of participants that picked general fear as their source of

anxiety did so because they couldn't connect it with any aspect of learning or using English. They simply perceive it as challenging and leading to failure. As for the problems with comprehension, this source rose with age. The main preoccupations the participants highlighted were the fear of not understanding the teacher or their interlocutors due to the high rate of speech or strong accents, as well as their own fear of not understanding correctly what they heard. With the lowest percentage, the objective circumstances refer to the participants' lack of time to dedicate to language studying which results in them being unprepared. It was most prominent among the adult learners. Another reason was the lack of real-life situations where they could use the language.

As Mihaljević Djigunović (2002) concludes, the most common sources of anxiety among Croatian learners of EFL had to do with their active participation in the classroom situations. Those kinds of situations are regularly accompanied with communication apprehension, negative social evaluation and test anxiety, which is in agreement with the three general sources of anxiety discussed previously. What the author highlights is the need to uncover the sources of anxiety in order to actively manage them, and perhaps with time, be rid of them.

4. *A study of unsuccessful language learners by Marianne Nikolov*

Since our own study was greatly based on Nikolov's (2001), we find it opportune to present its findings in this section. Her qualitative study aimed to explore how different variables such as attitudes, motivation, early start classroom experiences, teachers, and materials influenced the levels of FL proficiency in adulthood of unsuccessful Hungarian learners of various foreign languages. All of the participants started learning a FL between the ages of 6 and 9, and were chosen based on their own perception of FL proficiency. The sample consisted of 94 low-achieving young adults (ages 19-27) with different backgrounds,

but what they had in common was their opinion of themselves as unsuccessful language learners. In addition, they belonged to the group of language learners who were able to choose to study a language of their own choice due to the changes in Hungarian FL policy. The instrument included a structured interview focusing on their background and language learning experiences, but there was no mention of failure. The rest of the interview included general questions about attitudes, motivation, aptitude, self-evaluation, and future plans.

As for the results, the author wanted to emphasize that the participants in this study do not form a homogenous group of unsuccessful learners, but could be placed anywhere between successful and unsuccessful. Still, some common features can be found among them. What she found is that the perceived usefulness of FLs definitely influenced the participants' attitudes, motivation and proficiency on the language level. They demonstrated an extremely positive attitude towards foreign languages and cultures, particularly towards English and German, but that wasn't the case with the languages of their neighboring countries and Hungarian minorities. Another difference was between intrinsic and instrumental motives where languages such as Italian, Spanish and French were learned for their intrinsically motivating features, while English was seen as the most useful language for international communication. When it comes to self-assessment, the results rather vary. Some tend to underestimate their abilities and achievements, while others are more realistic. A number of participants considered persistence, will-power, and hard work as crucial for success, and others gave that role to aptitude, memory and enthusiasm, but they all believed they lacked those factors and tended to blame themselves for failing to learn. Only a small percentage blamed the teachers and the learning environment. However, when asked to assess themselves in accordance to their aptitude, the results showed they did not consider aptitude to be the best predictor of success. Persistence seems to be more important in forming and maintaining motivation. As for the participants' classroom experiences, most of the negative ones

concerned testing and tasks that weren't very motivating. This had a direct impact to their gradual demotivation and low achievement, and is further supported with the frequency of oral and written tests among the disliked classroom activities. Both kinds of tests also caused most of the anxiety experiences. When talking about teachers, participants emphasized consistency, strictness, knowledge, patience and being nice as the most appreciated characteristics. Moreover, they appreciated when teachers were genuinely concerned with them and understood their problems. Among the negative characteristics, being boring, picking on errors, and being unprofessional emerged on the top. The teaching materials did not come out as a predictor in learning success, but importance is placed on how teachers use them. Furthermore, private tutoring was common among low-achievers and that seems to indicate dissatisfaction with the teaching of FLs. As far as using FLs in real-life situations, participants had the opportunity to use them when traveling, but they opted not to.

As Nikolov (2001) concludes, the negative attitudes, motivation and self-perception of the participants are closely linked with their classroom experiences. She believes there is a need for syllabuses that are tailored to learners' needs, interests and aptitude, accompanied by a caring teacher. The results provide insights into which type of activities should be favored in order to maintain motivation from class to class, as well as how teachers can better understand and support FL learners.

5. The study

5.1 Aim

The aim of this study was to identify unsuccessful Croatian EFL learners and to examine their profiles in order to have a better understanding of why they perceive themselves as such. The study shows the students' self-assessment of their motivation to learn English and their language competence in comparison to other students in class. Furthermore, the study aims at discovering what, in the learners' opinion, achieving success in English learning really depends on and what they connect the 'knack' for languages to. Finally, the research will offer insights into the learners' attitudes to English and English classes, what they like and dislike about it, where their strengths and weaknesses lie, what causes their language anxiety, and what kind of characteristics a good language teacher should have.

5.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 91 vocational school participants attending the first grade. All of them were enrolled in a four-year program in electrical and mechanical engineering streams. Since this type of school is more popular with boys, the sample was overwhelmingly male (89) with only two female participants out of the five that were enrolled in their first year. Taking this into consideration, we must emphasize that this sample is not representative of Croatian EFL learners as a whole, but focuses on it on a micro-level that could be important for further research. Out of the 91 participants, 17 male learners labeled themselves as unsuccessful and those learners are the focus of this study.

5.3 Procedure

The data for this qualitative study was collected at the very end of the participants' school year through an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 21 questions drawn from Nikolov's (2001) research. The survey was conducted during English classes, and the

questionnaire, which can be found in the appendix, was in Croatian. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, the participants were told that it was anonymous and that the study focused on the language learning experiences of Croatian EFL learners. There was no mention of failure in order to minimize possible external influences on the students. At the very beginning of the questionnaire, the participants had to state their gender, year of birth and their average English language grade from the first four and then eight years of primary school, as well as their final grade at the end of that school year. The Croatian educational system uses a 1 to 5 grading scale, 1 indicating failure, and 5 being the highest possible grade. The students were asked if they agreed with their grade that served as an objective basis opposite to the learners' self-assessment of their current language knowledge and competence which was evaluated through their statements on how often they used English, how much of it they understood (referring to movies and TV programs without subtitles, newspapers and instruction manuals, and simple conversations), on where they saw their strengths and weaknesses, as well as where they placed themselves in their own class based on their current knowledge of English. They were further asked to assess their level of motivation as well as point out the key factors to maintain motivation for learning English. Their attitude to English classes, teachers and the language itself was made obvious when asked about the importance of the language and the grade compared to other subjects, as well as about teacher qualities. Furthermore, they were asked if and when they felt uncomfortable during class in order to determine possible anxiety sources. The last couple of questions asked them to identify what played the biggest role in being a successful language learner and what they connected the talent for languages to. At the very end they were asked if they felt successful or unsuccessful based on their previous answers and whether they would make any changes in their current language learning process in order to improve their competence.

5.4 Results and discussion

This being a qualitative study, we will focus on the results of the 17 self-perceived unsuccessful learners presenting their profiles in a numerical order from UL-1 to UL-17 (UL standing for ‘unsuccessful learner’). The focus will firstly be on each individual and then on the whole group in order to identify some common features they share.

UL-1. Our first unsuccessful learner started learning English in the 5th grade which is relatively late compared to others. His average and final grades show a continuous decline which might account for his negative self-evaluation of his language competence since he disagrees with his final grade (2) and is unsatisfied with his current level of knowledge claiming he wants to know more even though he never took any extra lessons outside of the school context. He feels he is among the average students in his English class simply because he is average revealing a somewhat low self-concept which is connected to his low achievement. Although he stated grammar to be his biggest weakness, he felt he was competent enough to manage a conversation with other English speakers as well as understand most of the information when watching the TV program without Croatian subtitles. He perceives English as being useful in life and places great importance on the grade. Even though he has his parents support in the process of learning, he chose self-motivation as the key factor to maintaining motivation which, when linked with his attitudes about English, reveals his motives to be rather instrumental. His ideal teacher should have patience and be funny, and avoid translating activities which proved to be his least liked ones. As for language anxiety, he shows signs of receptive anxiety since he fears he won’t be able to understand everything the teacher is saying. On the topic of what separates successful students from the rest, he chose hard work, persistence and an early start proving further he regrets not starting English earlier. He felt some changes in the learning process were necessary, but couldn’t name any.

UL-2. This unsuccessful learner started learning English in the 3rd grade and had excellent marks all throughout primary school. Upon arriving in his current high school, that changed to an average one (3), but he believes it to be realistic since he didn't study enough and is willing to put himself among average ranks claiming he at least knows some English. He lists comprehension, speaking and grammar as his biggest weaknesses which is further reflected in his avoidance of interacting in English (for example with tourists), showing he might suffer from communication apprehension. He enjoys activities that are more passive, like reading and translating, where he doesn't have to participate actively in the class. Still, his attitude towards English is a positive one since he recognizes its usefulness as a lingua franca, and connects it with the importance of a good grade. However, he claims not to be very motivated which might be connected to his anxiety and be the main cause of his lower than usual achievement. Once again, hard work and persistence came up as the key factors in successfully learning English, and he connects the talent for languages with good memory. The one thing he would change would be to pay more attention in class proving he is aware of his own shortcomings.

UL-3. Here we have an early starter who didn't hesitate to label himself as unsuccessful from the get go. He shows signs of frustration with himself and the learning situation since he is failing English and yet doesn't understand why. He couldn't identify one single thing he is good at in English and prefers to not participate in classroom activities. He assessed his competence to be very low, with him using English almost never and understanding little to none in informal contexts. He often felt uncomfortable during English classes since his knowledge is so low despite his high motivation and favorable attitude toward English. Since his own efforts seem to fail, he concludes he lacks talent which, in his own opinion, is necessary for success and is connected with easy and fast learning. When

asked what changes he would make, he simply wrote he didn't even feel like trying to change anything, showing strong signs of disengagement from the learning process.

UL-4. In this learner's case, he started English in his first year of primary school and while he did well during that time, that changed in high school. Failing English does not make him happy since he believes he deserves at least a 2, but he admits his competence is not on a high enough level because he isn't able to use it proficiently in both formal and informal situations. So far, he is the first one to express negative attitudes toward English and English classes claiming English has no other use but to raise or lower one's GPA. He reported to feel no motivation at all in learning English and this, in combination with other here present factors, might be the real reason for his failure. He even went as far as stating he would be more helpful with the research if he wasn't failing English showing just how strong his amotivation is when it comes to anything having to do with English.

UL-5. Having started English in kindergarten, this unsuccessful learner had the earliest start among the 17 ULs, suggesting this factor is not that important in the process of acquiring a language. His English grades were average and dropped to a 2 in high school. He seems to be satisfied with his knowledge for some parts, but feels it's necessary to work more on his grammar and for that, he places himself among the worse than average category of students. He uses English mostly on the internet and believes English to be very important since it's something we will always need, showing a positive attitude and instrumental motivation. In his opinion, hard work and persistence are central for succeeding in language learning, and it would appear he lacks them since he needs to work harder on making those 1s into 5s.

UL-6. Another student that's failing English, but this time he actually agrees with it saying his knowledge is not very good. He feels very self-conscious since he believes others to know and understand English better than him causing him to avoid oral exams or any other

form of communication (communication apprehension and fear of negative social evaluation). His use of English is limited to video games that allow him to take on a more passive role. He doesn't feel motivated although he emphasizes the importance of English when going abroad. Still, without any motivation and a negative self-concept, his favorable attitude to English goes to waste. He considers himself untalented when it comes to languages and blames his lack of success on it.

UL-7. The next unsuccessful learner is in agreement with his grade (2), but is very dissatisfied with his knowledge of English saying it's not good enough to interact with other speakers of English. He would like to get some extra lessons, but his parents do not encourage him which is most likely why he feels unmotivated. When asked about any uncomfortable classroom experiences, he says there are many, but he would rather not talk about them. From his preferences, it is possible to conclude those experiences have to do with reading aloud, meaning he must be affected by language anxiety that only adds to his bad performance. In conclusion, he said he would like to change everything about the learning process indicating his great dissatisfaction with the current curriculum.

UL-8. This learner starts by saying he doesn't really know 'that language' (English) and that's why he's ok with his grade (3). Despite his less than average use of the language, he stresses that English is very important to him since he would like to become a professional football (soccer) player and, in order to do so, he needs to know it very well (instrumental motives). Football seems to be his main source of motivation and this is further enhanced by his parents' support towards his dream. Still, that dream might be hindered by the fact that he seems to suffer from communication apprehension. He strongly dislikes anything that has to do with oral activities since he is afraid to make mistakes, but instead prefers grammar and more passive tasks. According to him, a good teacher possesses excellent language

knowledge and is very patient with his/her students, and is also one of the main reasons in achieving success in the learning process, along with hard work, persistence and talent.

UL-9. Here we seem to have a peculiar case since this learner is the only one whose grade went up in high school (from 3 to 4), and yet he perceives himself as unsuccessful. This is a strong indicator how one's negative self-assessment can have a harmful effect on every other aspect of language learning. He lacks motivation and his attitudes towards English and the teacher are particularly negative. He even stated that all teachers are bad and that he would be the happiest if there was no more English. This is a somewhat puzzling result since his grade is very good even though he lacks in the field of motivation and positive attitudes.

UL-10. This unsuccessful learner starts off rather confidently by saying he is very satisfied with both his grade (3) and his knowledge of English since he knows a lot. He is well aware that there are those who are much weaker students than him, but by the end of the questionnaire, he claims to be unsuccessful because he is not very good at it, showing signs of a conflicting personality. His main source of motivation are his parents who incite him furthermore by taking him on trips abroad. He believes English to be quite useful when communicating with strangers, showing both positive attitudes and instrumental motives.

UL-11. Another late starter, this learner started English in the 4th grade. He didn't have much to say on his competence except that it's very low and that he can't even manage a simple conversation with his peers. He reports he doesn't feel motivated at all and has no language learning activities he enjoys. His attitudes are negative as well: English is not useful at all and it's not important as a school subject. He says he doesn't know what a good teacher is or what makes for a successful language learner so he wouldn't change anything about his learning environment since he wouldn't know where to start. It is difficult to say which factor played the biggest role here, but it would seem his past classroom experiences (most probably

with teachers) affected negatively his attitude toward English, causing him to feel demotivated and damaging his self-image.

UL-12. Just as the previous learner, this one started learning English in the 4th grade. His grades were never good to begin with, resulting in failing the class in high school, but he seems to take it well by saying he doesn't deserve to pass since his knowledge is insufficient. In order to increase his competence, he's been attending extra classes once a week with full support from his parents. Although he claims to have no strengths or favorite activities in English due to an increasing sense of embarrassment, he is still very motivated and lists his friends, parents and teachers as his sources of motivation, making it a socially-conditioned motivation. Furthermore, his attitudes are very positive as he believes English to be useful when it comes to finding better job positions, proving he is instrumentally motivated as well. Persistence, hard work and stimulus are crucial to success, and he connects talent with easy and fast learning.

UL-13. Here we have another learner that has average grades, but perceives himself as unsuccessful because he knows he can do better. He is not happy with being average like the rest of his class and would like to see some improvement over time. Just from this much we can conclude he is very motivated to learn English and his attitudes are positive as well. He thinks English is very useful as an international language and is more important than some other school subjects. He praises his teacher and names her his number one source of motivation. Competence-wise, he admits to not being able to understand and use English all that well, but believes he will do better in the future if he becomes more persistent, which is the very quality that in his opinion leads to success. He is a good example of what happens when unrealistically high self-concept can be more of a disadvantage than a benefit to the learning process.

UL-14. This learner seems to be realistic as he states he is content with his grade (2) since he isn't doing very well in English, but at the same time he is dissatisfied with his level of language competence. He doesn't use English very much, only when playing video games and for occasionally giving directions to tourists, but even then he has difficulties doing so. He exhibits signs of listening anxiety since he is afraid he will understand something incorrectly. The driving force behind his language learning are his parents, but they fail to motivate him sufficiently since he lacks his own motivation and doesn't like to study. Still, some of it is reflected in his positive opinion of English as a means of communication in foreign countries, as well as in giving importance to the final grade in English since it can help him get into a good university proving he at least has some instrumental motives in learning it. As for what he would change, he would like to become more hardworking and persistent since he believes those are the key factors in making the transition from an unsuccessful to a successful learner.

UL-15. This particular unsuccessful learner didn't have much to say. He was satisfied with both his grade (2) and his knowledge, but that might be because of his own unawareness of the complexity of the English language. He only used it in school, avoiding any other contact with it. He couldn't read a book or watch a movie in English since he understood little to none of it. He named his teacher as the main factor of his motivation that wasn't all that high to begin with, and displayed signs of language anxiety; in particular, he was afraid of making mistakes. Still, his attitude to English is a positive one as far as its usefulness goes.

UL-16. Our penultimate learner had an average grade of 3 and was quite content with it since it showed he at least knew some basics of English, but wasn't happy with his level of competence claiming a lot of people couldn't understand him when he spoke. He was able to follow the TV program as long as the words were clearly spoken; otherwise he failed to comprehend their meaning. Except in class, he only uses English to play online games and to

occasionally chat with other players. He reports no motivation on his part for learning English and he doesn't like studying in general, which is probably why there's a lack of more positive results on his side. He doesn't like any language learning activities which is likely due to his fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood by others. He also experienced being laughed at in class so his fear of negative social evaluation is pretty high. All of his anxieties, paired with no motivation and negative classroom experiences, clearly hindered his language learning progress.

UL-17. The last learner who perceived himself as unsuccessful did so because he thought his knowledge of English was lacking and not good enough. He often felt uncomfortable in class since his knowledge level was too low and he avoided active participation in classroom activities, especially in reading out loud. While he sustains English is very important for communication with foreigners, he himself doesn't feel motivated to do so. He thinks he has no talent for languages and lists hard work, persistence, the teacher and quality teaching materials as vital for achieving success. His negative self-concept definitely had an impact on both his attitude and motivation leading him to bad results in English.

As we can observe from these 17 profiles, there seem to be some emerging patterns that we can represent as common features of unsuccessful learners of EFL. Firstly, there seems to be a trend in grade dropping as they progress through their primary school education, reaching their lowest point in high school (Table 1), with the exception of UL-9.

Table 1. *Representing a trend in grade dropping in unsuccessful EFL learners over time*

Unsuccessful learner (UL)	4 th grade English GPA	8 th grade English GPA	1 st year final grade
1	-	3	2
2	5	5	3

3	3	3	1
4	4	3	1
5	3	3	2
6	4	2	1
7	3	3	2
8	5	3	3
9	3	4	4
10	5	3	3
11	3	3	2
12	-	2	1
13	4	4	3
14	4	3	2
15	3	2	2
16	5	3	3
17	3	3	2

One can only speculate as to why such a trend exists among unsuccessful learners. It might be due to their lack of motivation or the increasing harmful self-evaluation that stems from bad results, or it might be because of negative classroom experiences that accumulated over time causing them to choke from language anxiety. It is not impossible that all of these variables had their role in hindering their success since it's hard not to put one and the other into correlation. As for their self-assessment, most of them were conscious of their shortcomings and seemed rather realistic when comparing their evaluation to that of the teacher (as seen through the final grade). They all placed themselves in the lower than average group within their own classes, while thirteen of them wanted to improve their knowledge and do better seeing that they had difficulties engaging in a simple conversation in English or

following the TV program without subtitles. Still, from only this much we cannot know for sure whether a learner’s negative self-perception is indeed due to their lack of competence in language learning (objective) or is influenced by their low self-confidence and the grade the teacher gives them (subjective). Their most frequently mentioned strengths and weaknesses are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. *Unsuccessful EFL learners’ self-perceived strengths and weaknesses*

	STRENGHT	WEAKNESS
Reading	5	2
Writing	3	4
Speaking	2	4
Comprehension	4	3
Translating	3	4
Grammar	2	11

As we can observe, the majority see grammar as their biggest weakness, while reading emerged as the most common among their strengths. In turn, reading came out as the least frequent among weaknesses, as well as grammar among strengths. Two learners said they had no strengths, that is, that everything was their weakness.

Another common feature is the perceived usefulness of English that definitely had its impact on the positive attitudes these learners had toward the English language and toward the importance of the final grade and their matura state exams. Fifteen of them strongly agreed that English is extremely useful when it comes to communicating with foreigners, whether abroad or in their own country, as well as for getting better job positions and applying for universities. Some of them even mentioned its usefulness when playing online games with

people from all around the world. These results show high instrumental motivation in all unsuccessful learners since they are aware of the concrete use of English and the actual benefits from knowing it. This somewhat clashes with their statement that they have low motivation for learning English which indicates their lack of integrative motives, and that is probably why they fail to achieve better results. As a main factor in learning English, they listed self-motivation four times, but expressed they didn't have any of it themselves. Other factors that came up were football, communication, friends, teachers, and parents. In the case of those learners that listed parents as their driving force, it is observed that the parents encouraged their children by paying for private English lessons (three such cases).

As for what they believed was crucial for success in learning English, several factors were listed (Table 3). On the bottom of the list we can find early start and materials and textbooks, indicating those don't have a very big influence on a learner's success, at least according to our participants. Ability and talent, two terms that are often equated with aptitude, proved to be less important to our learners than persistence and hard work that were mentioned most frequently. When asked further what they linked the talent for learning foreign languages to, the most common answers were good memory and easy/fast learning. So, in their opinion, it was not necessary to possess a gift for languages, but to be persistent and hardworking. Those were the very same factors they admitted to lack and would like to change about themselves, further indicating they tend to blame themselves for their failures in learning English.

Table3. *Factors crucial for success as perceived by unsuccessful learners*

CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS	FREQUENCY OF MENTIONING
Persistence	12
Hard work	12

Ability	2
Talent	6
Teacher	4
Early start	2
Materials and textbooks	1
Incentive	1

Another thing that can be seen from Table 3 is that teachers were found to be not particularly important or unimportant for success. When we asked the participants to list what characteristics they thought good or bad language teachers possessed, most of them opted to list only the good qualities. A funny, young teacher who has a great deal of knowledge and is patient was found to be the ideal language teacher. On the opposite side, we have a strict, nervous teacher who lacks competence. Two learners mentioned a good teacher is someone like their current English teacher, while one said that all teachers are bad no matter what.

As for the classroom experiences, most of the negative ones included some form of language anxiety. Our learners experienced both communication apprehension and the fear of negative social evaluation. They were afraid of making mistakes and being ridiculed by their classmates, or were embarrassed by their lack of knowledge and the inability to understand what the teacher was saying or what the topic was about. This certainly had an impact on their motivation, which would explain why it was so low, as well as on their overall achievement. These anxieties were further reflected in their choice of liked and disliked learning activities. They preferred more passive activities like writing, and avoided the more active ones where they had to engage in speaking activities, as well as grammar drills since grammar was identified as one of their weaknesses (Table 4). Five of our unsuccessful learners stated they disliked everything and would much rather do something else than attend English classes.

Table 4. *Liked and disliked learning activities of unsuccessful EFL learners*

LEARNING ACTIVITIES	LIKED	DISLIKED
Reading	2	3
Translating	1	3
Grammar drills	1	7
Written exam	1	4
Oral exam	1	6
Writing	5	-
Rote learning	-	1

6. Conclusions and suggestions for further study

Analyzing the results of this research study, we came to some conclusions that help us describe profiles of unsuccessful EFL learners. First of all, we noticed that their English grades dropped quite a bit in the course of their formal education. In estimating their knowledge of English, it was shown that most of the learners believed their knowledge to be lower than that of the average student in their class. This shows a relatively negative self-concept, as well as low self-confidence. Their biggest weakness was identified to be grammar, while they seemed to enjoy reading. Their attitudes are mostly described as positive when it comes to English language, and they are aware of the benefits of a good final grade in English. They perceive English language as a life skill that is important and necessary for both the present and the future. Despite their positive attitudes, the motivation to study English is shown to be quite low and can be described as instrumentally oriented without any integrative motives whatsoever. They believe that hard work and persistence are more important than aptitude or an early start when it comes to successfully learning a foreign language, and they admit to lack those qualities. In their opinion, a good, ideal teacher should

be patient, young and funny, and possess a great deal of knowledge in order to be able to pass it on to the students. Furthermore, we have seen that language anxiety is relatively high, with speaking and receptive anxiety being quite prominent, as well as the fear of negative social evaluation, which causes them to avoid active participation in the learning process. Just as Nikolov suggested, we could help minimize this by creating specialized syllabuses that are tailored to learners' needs, interests and aptitude. Although our unsuccessful learners didn't find teachers to be important in the learning process, an understanding and knowledgeable teacher would surely make a difference. As long as the teachers know what type of activities to avoid/do more frequently, they should have less problems getting the learners to participate in class, as well as maintaining motivation in the long run. Unsuccessful learners need to be supported and understood better in order to uncover their sources of anxiety and negative self-perception, so engaging with them in conversation and showing you're willing to work with them could do them good.

Lastly, we would like to point out that this research study, even though quite limited in its sample and focus on unsuccessful vocational students, may serve as a good basis for further research in this field since not many have studied the profiles of unsuccessful foreign language learners. For example, a possible comparative study might focus on comparing the profiles of unsuccessful EFL students with the profiles of their classmates who perceive themselves as successful. It would be interesting to see the differences in their motivation and anxiety levels, as well as if they show more signs of integrative motivation or not. It would be even possible to incorporate the teacher's experiences as a variable since the focus here was purely on the learners' experiences and opinions. Moreover, it would be very interesting to make a research study comparing profiles of unsuccessful grammar or language school EFL learners with vocational ones to see if they differ in any way based on the school program. It would also be possible to compare unsuccessful vocational school learners based on the

location of the school since it is usually believed that schools in bigger cities have better learning environments, as well as more competent teachers. It would also be interesting to compare their success in learning English with their success in other subjects.

To conclude, focusing on learners' individual differences and constructing their profiles is an important field of language learning research. It allows us to better understand the learning processes of different languages and to find out just how exactly language learners 'tick'. We hope this research study has presented some interesting results concerning profiles of unsuccessful EFL learners. Even though the sample was not very big and all unsuccessful learners turned out to be males, we believe the findings are significant and will provide a good foundation for further studies of profiles of unsuccessful EFL learners.

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Appendix

UPITNIK O UČENJU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA

Ovaj upitnik se provodi u svrhu istraživanja za diplomski rad na temu iskustava u učenju engleskog kao stranog jezika. Upitnik je potpuno anonimna pa te stoga molimo da na pitanja odgovaraš iskreno i čitko. Zahvaljujemo na tvojoj suradnji. ☺

Godina rođenja:

Spol:

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1. Kada si počeo učiti engleski jezik?

2. Tvoja prosječna ocjena iz engleskog jezika na kraju 4. razreda osnovna škole?

3. Tvoja prosječna ocjena iz engleskog jezika na kraju 8. razreda osnovne škole?

4. Tvoja ocjena iz engleskog jezika na kraju 1. razreda srednje škole? Slažeš li se s tom ocjenom? Zašto da/ne?

5. Jesi li zadovoljan/zadovoljna svojim trenutnim znanjem engleskog jezika? Zašto da/ne?

6. Gdje po tebi leže tvoje snage i slabosti u engleskom jeziku?

7. Gdje bi se svrstao/svrstala u vlastitom razredu s obzirom na tvoje znanje engleskog jezika (među boljim, prosječnim ili lošijim učenicima)? Zašto?

8. Jesi li uzimao/uzimala privatne lekcije iz engleskog jezika u svrhu poboljšanja tvog znanja/ocjene? Ako jesi, koliko dugo/često?

9. Koliko često koristiš engleski jezik i u koje svrhe?

10. U kojoj mjeri možeš pratiti TV program/filmove bez podnaslova, čitati novine/instrukcije ili voditi jednostavan razgovor na engleskom jeziku?

11. Koliko si motiviran/a za učenje engleskog jezika i koji je po tebi glavni faktor motivacije za učenje istog?

12. U usporedbi s drugim predmetima, koliko je važna dobra ocjena iz engleskog jezika i zašto?

13. Tijekom učenja engleskog jezika, koje su ti omiljene, a koje najomraženije aktivnosti u razredu?

14. Jesi li se ikada osjećao/osjećala neugodno na satu engleskog jezika i zašto?

15. Kakav je po tebi dobar, a kakav loš učitelj engleskog jezika?

16. Potiču li te roditelji da učiš engleski jezik i na koji način to čine?

17. Smatraš li da je engleski jezik koristan? Zašto?

18. Što je po tebi ključ uspjeha u učenju engleskog jezika?

19. S čime bi povezoao/povezala talent ili dar za učenje stranih jezika, pa tako i engleskog jezika?

20. S obzirom na tvoje prethodne odgovore, bi li se svrstao/svrstala među uspješne ili neuspješne učenike engleskog kao stranog jezika? Zašto da/ne?

21. Postoji li nešto što bi promijenio/promijenila u učenju engleskog jezika, a da bi ti to pomoglo da budeš uspješniji/uspješnija u učenju engleskog kao stranog jezika?

Sažetak

Nadahnuto istraživanjem Marianne Nikolov na temu neuspješnih učenika stranog jezika, ovo kvalitativno istraživanje pokušava pronaći i prepoznati neuspješne učenike među 91 učenikom engleskog kao stranog jezika koji pohađaju strukovnu školu. U ovom radu, pojam neuspješnosti je baziran isključivo na učenikovom osobnom mišljenju o samom sebi kao učeniku engleskog kao stranog jezika te su time rezultati ovog istraživanja pomalo limitirani. Kako bismo uspješno identificirali takve učenike, sudionicima smo dali otvoreni upitnik koji sadrži 21 pitanje o njihovim iskustvima u učenju engleskoga, motivaciji, stavovima, strahu od jezika, samopoimanju itd. u nadi da ćemo otkriti razloge zašto se percipiraju neuspješnima i koje zajedničke karakteristike dijele međusobno. Rezultati pokazuju relativno nisku motivaciju, pozitivne stavove prema engleskom jeziku te visoku razinu straha od jezika među 17 učenika koji su se izjasnili neuspješnima. Što se tiče teorijskih temelja, definirat ćemo gore spomenute koncepte važne za naš rad i opisati za njih važna otkrića i teorije kako bismo imali što bolji uvid u individualne razlike koje pomažu definirati uspješne, tj. neuspješne učenike. Na samom kraju, predlažemo ideje za daljnja istraživanja temeljena na ovome istraživanju.

Ključne riječi: neuspješni učenici engleskog kao stranog jezika, individualne razlike, motivacija, strah od jezika, samopoimanje