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INDIVIDUAL HISTORIES OF LEARNING ENGLISH

Habilitation thesis

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Annotation

The habilitation thesis presents the study of individual histories of learning English. The aim of the thesis is to uncover in what contexts Czech learners of English learn the language and which factors, both internal and external, influence the process. The study was designed as a retrospective longitudinal mixed methods study; the quantitative part preceded the qualitative one, each providing a different perspective on the issue being explored. Furthermore, through the format of a multiple case study, the outcomes of the investigation of individual learning histories are interrelated with the assessment of aspects of the learners' spoken language and the possible contributions of various learning contexts to the development of selected communicative language competences are discussed.

Key words

English, individual learning histories, learning contexts, age factor, attitudes, motivation, native and non-native teacher

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Introduction

The title of the habilitation thesis, *Individual histories of learning English*, implies that learners, or, more specifically, their English language learning experience, appear at the centre of attention. Learning a language is a multidimensional process, which happens in various contexts and as such is shaped by the interplay of internal and external factors. The aim of the thesis is to uncover in what contexts Czech learners of English learn the language and which factors, both internal and external, influence the process.

My personal interest in this topic resulted from my long-term experience as a teacher educator; plentiful encounters with student teachers reflecting on their experience of learning English contributed to the choice of the research focus.

The habilitation thesis is a collection of my previously published scholarly work. The research outcomes, which are included in the thesis, were selected with the intention of creating a homogeneous and coherent whole shedding light on Czech learners' individual histories of learning English. The research was conducted in the context of a larger project within the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Therefore, in order to contextualise the investigation in learner biographies, the research is linked to the research agendas of SLA in the first part of this commentary. The second part offers a brief overview of the issues which constitute the theoretical background of the study. The selected issues represent internal (e.g. the age factor, motivation) and external factors (e.g. contexts of learning English) shaping the individual learning experience of Czech learners of English. Furthermore, the third section of the commentary introduces the research design of the explanatory study, which was built following the principles of mixed methods research. The fourth part summarises the main conclusions of the quantitative and qualitative study, as well as providing overall conclusions. On top of that, it presents the implications for teaching English at basic and secondary schools and for teacher education. Moreover, it includes the limitations of the study and possible directions for future research. The fifth part of the commentary presents the components of the thesis and provides technical information about the selected chapters and short annotations.

1. Context

The research into individual learning histories is set within the field of enquiry called second language acquisition (SLA), which

investigates the human capacity to learn languages other than the first, during late childhood, adolescence or adulthood, and once the first language has been acquired. It encompasses the study of naturalistic and formal language acquisition in second, foreign and heritage learning contexts. It seeks to understand universal, individual and social forces that influence what gets acquired, how fast, and how well, by different people under different learning circumstances. (Ortega, 2009, p. 10)

Consistently with the definition, foreign language learning (FLL) is perceived as a subcomponent of second language acquisition (SLA), which is the umbrella term for the field of study. In concord with Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 7), the distinction is maintained between FLL and SLA, reflecting the significant differences in access to the community of target language users, which is substantial in the second language context. Nevertheless, the terms *acquisition* and *learning* are used interchangeably in this thesis, which is a strategy used by many authors (e.g. Ellis, 2008; Ortega, 2009). If it is necessary to distinguish *acquisition* from *learning* in Krashen's terms (1985)¹, then it is stated explicitly in the text.

The goals of SLA involve both the description of processes and various ways of explaining them (Ellis, 1997, p. 4). With the purpose of relating the research aims to the existing body of research in SLA, *A framework for investigating L2² acquisition* (Ellis, 2008, p. 34) is used for reference (Table 1). Regarding my research into individual learning histories, it targets *Area 2 – Learner external factors* (e.g. social settings of L2 learning, age, attitudes) and *Area 4 – Inter-learner variability* (e.g. motivation). Exploring inter-learner variability extends the body of research in the area, which is still marginalised in SLA because of the prevailing concern with more universal aspects of L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2008, p. 643), or, in the case of motivational research, because of the fact that its outcomes are not related concretely and in detail to the processes of second language development (Cook & Singleton, 2014, p. 102).

¹ Krashen (1985) made a distinction between two ways in which language development takes place, i.e. between conscious learning and natural acquisition. The two mechanisms result in different types of knowledge, which are used for different purposes.

² Second language, i.e. any language other than the first language (Ellis, 2008, p. 5). Since SLA includes FLL, L2 may also mean a foreign language. If it is necessary to maintain the distinction, the term *foreign language* is used in the text.

Table 1
A framework for investigating L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2008, p. 34)

	General SLA				Instructed SLA		
Description of learner language	Explanation of learning						
Area 1 Characteristics of learner language	Area 2 Learner external factors	Area 3 Psycholinguistic processes	Area 4 Inter-learner variability	Area 5 The brain and L2 acquisition	Area 6 Inside the 'black box'	Area 7 Intervening directly in interlanguage	
Errors	Input and interaction	L1 transfer	Individual differences in L2 learners	<u>Neurolinguistic</u> accounts of L2 acquisition	Classroom interaction and L2 acquisition	Form-focused instruction and L2 acquisition	
Acquisition order and developmental sequences	Social accounts of L2 learning	Cognitive accounts of L2 acquisition					
Variability		Cognitive accounts of L2 use					
Pragmatic features of interlanguage		Sociocultural accounts of L2 acquisition					
		Linguistic accounts of L2 acquisition					

The research into individual learning histories was conducted in the context of a larger project³ that aimed at identifying external and internal factors which influenced the process of learning English as a foreign language by Czech learners, as well as its results, or, more specifically, the level of selected communicative language competences that was achieved (Council of Europe, 2001), as manifested in speaking.

The focus on the spoken language was motivated by my interest in pronunciation-related issues. Together with my colleagues, we investigated student teachers' pronunciation awareness (Černá et al., 2011); the results of this study generated questions as to whether and how the immense inter-individual differences in student teachers' spoken English may be attributed to their idiosyncratic learning experience.

³ The project titled *Aspects of English Language Acquisition of Czech Students at the Onset of Teacher Education* was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GA ČR 13-25982S).

2. Individual histories of learning English

As language learners in general follow distinctive paths towards proficiency in a language, learning a language is a multidimensional process which is influenced by a number of internal and external factors, which interact. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to present an in-depth discussion of all the relevant issues. Consequently, only those factors that are deemed to contribute to the variation in the learning paths of Czech learners of English are dealt with (Chapter 2⁴).

First, a distinction will be made between explicit and implicit learning of a language, then selected internal and external factors will be discussed.

2.1 Explicit and implicit learning

When engaged in explicit learning, learners consciously and deliberately attempt to master some material or solve a problem. Being a conscious process, explicit learning takes effort and strategic expertise (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 136). In order to define implicit learning, Dörnyei (2009, p. 138) summarises its main properties: (a) bottom-up mechanisms are involved in language processing; (b) there is no conscious attempt to learn the target material; (c) learners are not aware of learning; (d) implicit learning is an automatic process; (e) learners lack awareness of the result. On top of that, a temporal dimension may be added since implicit learning needs a substantial amount of time (Ellis, 2005; Ellis, 2015).

The characteristics presented above imply a distinction made by Krashen (1985) between conscious (explicit) learning and natural (implicit) acquisition. The two mechanisms result in different types of knowledge, which are used for different purposes. There has been a lack of consensus among researchers as to whether there is an interface between explicit and implicit learning. Three standpoints are reported in the SLA literature: a non-interface position, weak interface position, and strong interface position (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Gass & Selinker, 2008). The non-interface position is best represented by Krashen (1985), who concluded that what had been learnt could not become part of the acquired system. The weak interface position perceives explicit and implicit knowledge as “dissociable but cooperating” systems (Ellis, 2005, p. 305). Furthermore, Dörnyei (2009) provides research-based evidence of different forms of

⁴ See Table 2, which provides details about individual components of the habilitation thesis.

cooperation between explicit and implicit learning, e.g. explicit learning increases the overall level of accuracy of implicit knowledge. The strong interface position means that “explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit knowledge through practice” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 161). The mechanism was explained by De Kayser (1997, in Gass & Selinker, 2008), who proposed that “learning progresses from knowledge *that* (declarative) relating to some skill or behaviour to knowledge *how* (procedural) and finally to automatisisation of procedural knowledge” (p. 247). In conclusion, explicit and implicit learning contribute to the development of different aspects of language proficiency and, consequently, it is desirable to create balanced learning opportunities.

2.2 Internal factors

Second, three internal factors, i.e. age, attitudes, and motivation, are examined in relation to language acquisition. The *age factor* (Section 2.1.2) has been one of the most hotly debated issues in SLA. Ellis (2015) distinguishes the effect of age on ultimate attainment, the rate of acquisition, and the route of acquisition. In this thesis, the effect of age on ultimate attainment is of interest. For decades researchers have attempted to answer the question whether there is a critical period for language acquisition, i.e. “a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire” (Brown, 2007, p. 57). The existence of such a “biological timetable” (Brown, 2007, p. 57) was postulated in 1959 by Penfield and Roberts, who proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Recently, researchers have rather referred to a “sensitive period” and used a “critical period” only to denote a special category of sensitive periods resulting from irreversible changes in the brain (Knudsen, 2004, in Hummel, 2014, p. 170).

The research conducted in second language environments seems to support the earlier-is-better position; for example, Herschensohn (2013, p. 330), having summarised research-based evidence on the effects of age on grammatical competence, foreign accent, and speed of processing, advocates the existence of a sensitive period for learning a second language. Similarly, Ellis (2015) also reports that young learners are capable of a higher level of attainment than older learners. He attributes this higher achievement to the fact that young learners are better equipped to engage in implicit learning. While implicit learning is a slow process, explicit learning may lead to more immediate results. In the long run, however, implicit learning wins out.

Apart from considering the cognitive benefits of starting language learning early, it is necessary to take into consideration the affective domain, too. Brown (2007, pp. 68-71) discusses the following variables in relation to an early start of L2 learning: egocentricity, inhibitions, language ego, and second identity. He concludes that early starters are at an advantage since they have not developed inhibitions about their self-identity and negative attitudes towards the target language and the target culture.

The question is whether the research evidence obtained in the SLA context applies to the context of FLL. Lojová (2015) reports a growing body of evidence favouring an early start because “learners are likely to gradually achieve a higher level of FL proficiency and, what is of vital importance, their achievements will be more stable and long-lasting” (p. 135). Regarding research originating in a foreign language setting, specifically in the Czech Republic (e.g. Ivanová & Černá, 2016; Najvar, 2010; Najvar & Hanušová, 2010), the results suggest that the effects of an early start seem to be eclipsed by the influence of other variables. This conclusion is in concord with the research-based opinion of

Ellis (2015), who asserts that the “provision of language instruction in most school systems is insufficient to enable the potential advantage that young learners hold to manifest itself and doubts that “starting foreign language instruction early will confer any real benefit” (p. 34). The main reason is that children engage in implicit learning, which needs massive exposure to the target language for a long time. In the foreign language environment, however, such exposure is not available for the majority of learners. Nevertheless, in Europe for about fifteen years there has been a trend to start foreign language education in the pre-school period (Mourão & Lourenço, 2015), including in the Czech Republic (Černá, 2015).

Language learners hold different *attitudes* (Section 2.1.3) toward learning in general, toward languages and learning languages, and toward the target language and the target culture. Čáp and Mareš (2001) define an attitude as an “acquired motive expressing an individual’s relationship to an object, i.e. to a thing, a person, an activity” (p. 149). Attitudes develop during socialisation in various social contexts, including the family, the school class, and the peer group. Additionally, Nakonečný (2013) proposes other sources of attitudes, for example, specific experience undergone in social interaction or models, which are imitated. Given the importance of attitudes in the process of learning, the question of turning a negative attitude into a positive one arises. Generally, this type of change, i.e. a change in the quality of an attitude, is more difficult to achieve than an

alteration in the intensity of an attitude, especially under identical conditions (Nakonečný, 2013).

Regarding SLA, consistently with many authors (e.g. Brown, 2007; Gardner, 1985), positive attitudes to the target language and the target language culture are believed to enhance the outcomes of language acquisition. More importantly, they are closely linked to motivation, as the analysis of several motivational models in SLA suggests (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009).

According to Skehan (1989, in Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 426), *motivation* appears to be the second strongest predictor of success, trailing only aptitude. The current understanding of the concept of second language learning motivation is the result of decades of L2 motivation research. Throughout the years various schools of thought in psychology have contributed to the (re-)construction of the concept – moving on the path from Lambert and Gardner’s influential concept of *integrativeness*, introduced in the 1970s, toward the *L2 Motivational Self System* proposed by Dörnyei at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. (For an overview see e.g. Cook & Singleton, 2014; Ellis, 2008, 2015; Ortega, 2009; Williams & Burden, 1997).

While a generally accepted definition of motivation is still lacking, recently there has been a consensus among scholars regarding the complexity of L2 motivation (e.g. Dörnyei, 2001; Ellis, 2008, 2015; Williams & Burden, 1997) and the understanding of motivation as a “desire to initiate L2 learning and the effort employed to sustain it” (Ortega, 2009, p. 168). Nowadays, motivation is conceived as a dynamic construct, with the emphasis being placed on temporal variation, context-related variation, and changes in learner behaviour.

With the research aims in mind, Dörnyei and Ottó’s *Process Model of L2 Motivation* (1998) was chosen as the most suitable framework for the analysis of individual learning histories. Furthermore, in spite of its limitations, specifically its linear view of motivation, it is still considered “the fullest attempt to represent the complex, dynamic nature of motivation” (Ellis, 2015, p. 51). Another benefit of the model is its link to the L2 classroom (Dörnyei, 2001), thus providing “a basis for identifying specific strategies that teachers can employ to help motivate learners” (Ellis, 2015, p. 51). The model (Dörnyei, 2001) consists of preactional, actional, and postactional phases (see Figure 11.1).

In the preactional phase motivation needs to be generated to select the goal or task to pursue. Therefore, motivation in this phase is referred to as choice motivation. In the actional phase, “motivation needs to be actively maintained and protected while the action

lasts” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 21). Dörnyei labels this motivation executive and maintains that it is particularly relevant to classroom instruction, where learners are exposed to distracting influences. In the postactional phase learners go through retrospective evaluation after completing the action. That is why the phase is called motivational retrospection (Dörnyei, 2001). The distinctive nature of the three phases implies that the motives which influence learners’ behaviour are different in each of them; for example, in the preactional phase goal relevance and values associated with the learning have an impact on learners’ motivation, while the quality of the learning experience matters in the actional phase.

Given the dynamicity and temporal variation of language learning motivation, learners are likely to go through periods of motivational upheavals. In their inspiring study Shoaib and Dörnyei (2004) analysed individual learner biographies and identified what they termed motivational transformation episodes, i.e. recurring patterns of motivational change present across varied learning situations which result in profound restructuring of the individuals’ disposition:

Maturation and gradually increasing interest.
Stand-still period.
Moving into a new life phase.
Internalising external goals and “imported visions”.
Relationship with a “significant other”.
Time spent in the host environment.

(Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004, p. 31)

In conclusion, the *Process Model of L2 Motivation* (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998) and the study of motivational transformation episodes (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004) provided the essential theoretical support for the part of the qualitative analysis of individual learning histories which focused on motivational influences in individuals’ lives (Chapter 3, Chapter 11).

2.3 External factors

Last, attention is shifted towards external factors; family influences on the educational outcomes of a child will be discussed first (Section 2.1.4), then contexts of learning (Section 2.1.5) will be elaborated, and lastly, attention will be focused on the teacher (Section 2.1.6).

The *family* is supposed to have multiple functions. Given the focus of the research, the attention is focused on its educational function. It is especially the socio-economic status of

the family which is, along with the cognitive characteristics of a learner, the main factor determining a child's level of educational attainment (Průcha, 2009, p. 107). Consistently, the relevant research-based evidence originating in the Czech context suggests that the parents' educational status correlates positively with the educational outcomes of the child (e.g. Rendl & Škaloudová, 2004). Moreover, parents with higher education appear to be more effective in providing their children with direct assistance with home preparation (Štech, 2004).

In addition to socio-economic status, Helus (2007, p. 167) asserts that parents' educational style and family structure also represent powerful influences. As concerns the former, it is especially a style which is balanced in terms of demands and support that enables children to become self-confident, more independent, happy, capable, and successful (Fontana, 2003). Regarding the latter, a structural deficiency of family affects children seriously, especially if it is hidden – the family is seemingly complete, both parents are physically present, but one of them does not function properly. This is consistent with Coleman's social theory; children can only benefit from their parents' human capital, which provides “the potential for a cognitive development for the child that aids learning” (Coleman, 1988, p. 109), if adults are physically present in the family and, at the same time, there are strong relations between adults and children. Concerning the family structure, Helus (2007) emphasises the role of siblings in the family, specifically their potential to become models to identify with.

As regards parental influence on their children's foreign language learning, parents are important decision makers since they decide, for example, about the age at which their children start learning English or about their involvement in various free-time activities related to English. Those decisions may affect their children's learning positively or negatively, as may parents' attitudes to the target language and the target language community, since parents are major determiners of children's attitudes. Gardner (1985) distinguished two roles of parents: an “active” role and a “passive” role (p. 110). The parents play an active role in those situations in which they encourage their children to do well at school, when they monitor their language learning performance, and when they reinforce their success at school. A passive role involves the parents' attitudes to the second language community. Parents with positive attitudes to the community demonstrate those through actions or opinions. Thus they enhance the development of positive attitudes in their children. The two roles are independent and can be in harmony. If they are not, it is the passive role which is the more effective, as Gardner (1985, p. 122) concludes.

As regards the *contexts of learning a foreign language* (Section 2.1.5), several classifications are available in the SLA literature: natural versus educational settings (Ellis, 2008), the foreign language environment versus the second language (L2) environment (Gass & Selinker, 2008), communicative contexts versus learning contexts (Batstone, 2002), and, most importantly, the distinction between formal, non-formal, and informal contexts (Kotásek, 2002).

The *formal context* of learning in the Czech context is defined by the system of curricular documents, i.e. Framework Education Programmes (FEPs) for pre-primary, primary, and lower- and upper-secondary education, which started to be implemented in the first decade of the 21st century (Greger & Walterová, 2007). The curricular reform has enhanced the autonomy of schools, which have to design their own School Educational Programmes (SEPs) reflecting their vision and human and material resources, but, at the same time, SEPs should be in alignment with the respective FEPs. Consequently, the distribution and the number of lessons of English may vary across schools but it must remain within the limits defined by the FEPs.

Concerning English, it is conceived of as a foreign language (MŠMT, 2016; VÚP, 2007) within the educational area called Language and Communication through Language. The expected outcomes regarding the first foreign language are formulated with respect to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) in the following way: learners should achieve the A2 level when completing basic school and the B1+ level when finishing secondary school, depending on the type of schools; secondary grammar school learners should aim at the B2 level (VÚP, 2007).

Since 2011 the reformed ‘maturita’ exam has been implemented after it was introduced by the New Education Act in 2004. As a consequence, nowadays the maturita exam is a complex system which consists of a common (state) part and a profiling (school) part (www.novamaturita.cz). For 2017 the common part included a mandatory exam in the Czech language and a mandatory exam in the first foreign language or mathematics, from which every examinee was obliged to choose one. As regards the profiling part, it contained the subjects which were stipulated by the principal of a school in relation to the relevant FEP. Optional exams in the common part included mathematics and a foreign language; optional profiling exams were specified by the leadership of schools.

Introducing the common maturita exam in the foreign language has brought a new format of the exam: it consists of a didactic test (including the use of English and listening and reading comprehension), a writing test (two writing tasks involving different genres,

lengths, and topics), and a speaking test (four different tasks, one of them prepared by the school). In order to pass the exam, one must succeed in all the parts. The introduction of the new format necessitated the large-scale training of foreign language teachers, who learnt to use new sets of standardised criteria to evaluate writing and speaking.

In the course of its implementation, the reformed *maturita* exam has undergone considerable changes concerning the foreign language. Originally, there were two levels of exams, B2 and B1, reflecting the target levels given by the relevant FEPs. The examinees were expected to choose the appropriate level. However, because of problems of various kinds, the policy changed after two years, with the B1 level being retained.

Learning in a *non-formal context* is defined as learning in various forms of free-time courses, which are provided by all kinds of institutions, including freelance teachers. Regarding the nature of the learning, it is similar to learning in a formal context since it usually happens in classes. Batstone (2002) states that learning contexts tend to prevail over communicative contexts in language classrooms, which means that input and learner output are fashioned with the assistance of the teacher. To a lesser extent, learners use language for “exchanging information and participating in important social and interpersonal functions” (Collentine & Freed, 2004, p. 155). On the other hand, learning in a non-formal context includes learning in summer camps or during intensive courses, which are environments in which learning and communicative contexts may be well-balanced, especially if native speakers are involved. There seems to be a potential drawback of learning in a non-formal context, i.e. the qualifications of teachers. It is because not all institutions have a transparent policy for hiring new teachers and an internal system of quality management. Unfortunately, possessing the *maturita* in English often qualifies people to teach pre-schoolers, which may have detrimental effects on their subsequent learning if an inappropriate methodology is used. On the other hand, an obvious advantage of courses or private lessons is that they may be tailored to the needs of a learner.

Learning in formal and non-formal contexts is complemented by learning in an *informal context*. Learners are engaged in informal learning if they use English for communication. Using English, they respond to their needs, such as to understand actors in an English-language TV series, but improving their English is not a primary aim. While each of the environments offers different types of input and interaction that typically occur in it, it is not possible to make straightforward links between a learning context and a type of

learning. On the other hand, it may be concluded that extensive involvement in informal learning represents opportunities for implicit learning.

To complete this introduction of learning contexts, the *target culture context*⁵ of learning is presented. Though it lies outside their environment, it is also relevant for Czech learners of English, many of whom spend some time in an English-speaking country. The nature of the experience individual learners gain while staying in an English-speaking country differs considerably, depending on many factors, e.g. opportunities for interaction with native speakers. Though communicative contexts prevail during a stay abroad, this does not have to be to the benefit of the learners; Batstone (2002) argues that particularly initial learners may have inhibitions about taking risks and using the new language in communication. Furthermore, the impact of staying abroad on learners' motivation may be significant, albeit both in a positive and a negative sense (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004).

Lastly, reflecting the aims of the research, the *teacher of English* (both native and non-native speaker teachers) as a source of input in English classes will be discussed. In the Czech environment, the teacher of English is the main source of target language input. It is desirable to maximise the use of English because there is research evidence (Turnball & Arnett, 2002, in Ellis, 2008) that teacher use of the target language correlates with achievement. In the Czech context, an analysis of 89 videoed lessons (Najvar et al., 2013) revealed a great difference in the use of the target language among individual teachers. Non-native teachers thus differ substantially in the amount of input they provide, unlike native speakers, who are potentially a source of extensive input. Nevertheless, both groups of teachers have their strengths in terms of providing a model for imitation (Medgyes, 1999).

The next part of the commentary introduces the research design of the study.

⁵ Being aware of the simplification, in this study the term *target culture context* is used to denote English-speaking countries where English is spoken as the first language.

3. Research design

The study of individual histories of learning English is conceptualised as a longitudinal retrospective study (Oppenheim, 2001). Its design reflects the principles of mixed methods research; more specifically, it is an explanatory study of a sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, pp. 217–218). In this type of study the quantitative data is elicited first, and then a research sample for the qualitative phase is selected (i.e. type QUAN → QUAL). Such a design is preferred if there is a need to “not only obtain quantitative results but to explain such results in more detail, especially in terms of detailed voices and participant perspectives because little is known about the mechanisms behind the trends” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 151).

The *quantitative* part of the study (Chapter 2) attempted to answer research questions that were formulated consistently with the aims of the study: (a) to provide a comprehensive characterisation of the subjects’ English learning histories; (b) to identify possible correlations between selected variables. The research questions are provided in Section 2.2.1.

The participants in the quantitative part of the study (n=228) are Czech first-year students entering English language teacher education study programmes at three Czech universities.⁶ They are young adults (average age 20.1 years) and are native speakers of Czech. The gender ratio is 160 females (70.2%) versus 68 males (29.8%).

In order to elicit the quantitative data, a questionnaire was constructed as a research instrument (Section 2.2.2) and used for data collection in the autumn of 2013 and 2014. The 2013 version of the questionnaire contained 62 items; the introductory part of the 2014 version was restructured, which increased the number of items to 70. Most of the items were closed (77%); four different formats were used, depending on the nature of the required response: categorical items, multiple-choice with one possible answer or with several possible answers, and a Likert-type scale (Švec, 2009). The remaining questions were open-ended (23%).

The content of the questionnaire is divided into six sections. The first section is introductory and focuses on the respondent and his/her family background. Each of the following sections targets a specific period in the respondents’ lives (pre-school period,

⁶ The cohort contained 68 students from the Faculty of Education of Palacký University, Olomouc, 102 students from the Faculty of Education of the University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice, and 58 students from the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of the University of Pardubice.

basic school⁷ period, secondary school⁸ period, the period between the matura⁹ exam and admission to the university), or a specific context of learning (informal learning). The data obtained through the questionnaire was statistically analysed, and apart from it providing the descriptive statistics, the relationships between selected variables were also investigated. Regarding the open-ended items, they mostly elicited a unique answer (e.g. the number of teachers they experienced while at basic school). There were seven open-ended items which complemented closed items (e.g. giving reasons why they liked/did not like the English language); they elicited more extensive responses that were subject to content analysis and quantified.

The questionnaire contained items which required the respondents to recall events from early childhood or their early school years. Therefore, to prevent guessing, the respondents who could not remember an event or a piece of information could admit it by choosing such an option. Furthermore, the reliability of the questionnaire was checked using the test-retest method (Chapter 1).

The *qualitative* study of individual learning histories (Chapter 3, Chapter 11) falls within the framework of (auto-)biographical research in SLA. Biography is understood, consistently with Benson (2004), as “the province of ‘life history’ research, which is usually based, in the context of second language learning, on recollective data collected either through interviews or in the form of written essays” (p. 16). The implementation of a qualitative methodology, a minority interest in SLA, responds to the call for “greater emphasis on qualitative research directed at the holistic description of second language learning experiences and for greater emphasis on the social, affective and conceptual dimensions of the learning process” (Benson, 2004, p. 12). Thus, the main contributions of the chapter lie in its providing a holistic description of the language learning experience and uncovering the personal significance of events in the learners’ lives, i.e. the identification of critical incidents. Furthermore, biographical research contributes to the shift in focus from “‘the learner’ as an abstract, or universalised, construct to actual learners and their historically and contextually situated experiences of learning” (Benson, 2004, p.18).

The respondents for the qualitative study (n=20) were selected on the basis of the questionnaire data; the cohort was divided into four groups according to the shared

⁷ In the Czech Republic, basic school provides primary and lower-secondary education.

⁸ i.e. upper-secondary

⁹ The school-leaving exam taken at the end of secondary school

characteristics of their learning histories, mainly of the contexts in which they learnt English. Each group had two sub-groups: the students whose attitudes toward English and learning English were positive all the time and the students whose negative attitudes underwent considerable modifications in the course of their lives. Consequently, the respondents to be interviewed were randomly selected from each group. The number of students selected from each group was roughly proportionate to the size of the group. Moreover, the ratio of women and men in the sample for the qualitative study (65 per cent of women) was similar to the gender composition of the large cohort (70.2% of women). The choice of students was influenced by their availability and willingness to cooperate.

Three research questions (3.2.2) were formulated with the aim of finding out in what learning contexts the participants in the study learnt English, whether the process of learning was continuous, and what factors influenced the process and how and in what life phase they did so. Given the need to elicit the respondents' biographies, i.e. recollective data, narrative interviews (Elliot, 2005) were selected as the most appropriate technique (Section 3.2.3). The elicited data was first transcribed and then analysed using the technique of open coding.

Furthermore, the learning experience of the chosen 20 students was interrelated with their achievement in the selected categories of communicative language competences in spoken English (Chapter 6) with the aim to identify the likely tendencies of the influences of various learning contexts on the achievement attained in the selected aspects of linguistic and pragmatic competences as manifested in spoken English.

For the purpose of the study, the multiple case study turned out to be the most relevant methodology (Section 6.1) since the focus of this type of study is not "on one particular case, but a number of cases are studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon or general condition" (Dörnyei, 2007, p.152). Our multiple case study utilises the data elicited by means of a variety of instruments: a questionnaire, interview, and diagnostic speaking test. In addition, it deploys both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis. Those characteristic features correspond to the type of a multiple case study that was proposed by Yin (1994, in Hendl, 2012, p. 111).

As a result, portraits of individual students were constructed. Each portrait contains the following parts:

- a) individual learning history – a profile based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis;

- b) aspects of phonological competence – holistic assessment in the form of a pronunciation commentary (i.e. a qualitative component) accompanied by an analytic and holistic assessment (i.e. quantitative components);
- c) aspects of grammatical and lexical competences – the overall score, representing the mean of the chosen categories, and the holistic judgement of a student's performance from the point of view of grammatical and lexical competences;
- d) aspects of pragmatic competences – the analytic assessment of selected aspects is supplemented by the holistic assessment of the students' performances, which is focused on their ability to maintain efficient communication, chiefly the application of strategies of interaction and cooperation.

Consequently, the sample of twenty learners was grouped into five groups according to the frequency of score distribution, i.e. according to noticeable similarities with regard to the holistic and analytic assessment of their linguistic and pragmatic competences. Then, possible contributions of various learning contexts to the development of the selected communicative language competences were investigated. In conclusion, this methodology enabled the researchers to bring together the data which provides a holistic description of the students' learning experience up to the beginning of their university studies, and the data of a qualitative and quantitative nature describing particular aspects of their current performance in spoken English.

In conclusion, it should be noted that validity and reliability of the tools and analytic procedures were carefully considered by the researcher, details are provided in the respective chapters.

4. Results, conclusions and beyond

This part of the commentary will first provide a summary of the main results of the quantitative study, and then the results of the qualitative study will be briefly introduced. Subsequently, the results of both studies will be interrelated and conclusions will be drawn. Finally, the findings from the study of the individual learning histories will be linked to the assessment of selected communicative language competences and implications for educational practice will be summarised.

4.1 Results of the quantitative study

The *quantitative part* of the study confirmed that learners of English in the Czech Republic primarily learn the language in a formal educational context. Nevertheless, for a proportion of learners other contexts extend substantial opportunities for their language learning.

Since learning English in a formal context is the crucial learning experience for the majority of learners, attitudes toward the English language and attitudes toward learning English appear to be the central issue. With reference to the statistically significant relationships (Section 2.5), it is possible to conclude that the outcomes corroborate the importance of the initial phase of language learning at school for the development of positive attitudes toward the language and learning the language. Since the quality of the attitudes tends to persist into later phases, therefore, efforts should be invested into establishing positive attitudes at the beginning of English language education.

Interestingly, the attitudes to learning English correlated positively with the number of teachers the learners experienced while at basic school. This result seems to disprove the common perception that the turnover of teachers while a child is at basic school is a disadvantage. The finding may be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the variety which diverse teachers inevitably bring into classes. Individual perceptions of the significance of the issue might vary.

The study further revealed which factors determine attitudes toward the English language and learning English. While the sources of positive attitudes are diverse (e.g. English phonology, the novelty of the language, the culture of English-speaking countries, teaching methods and techniques), the negative attitudes are predominantly related to the teacher and the way of teaching.

Learning in a *non-formal context* complements formal education; its main asset rests in responding to varied learner needs and providing additional time for learning. The

percentage of learners learning in such contexts varies in individual phases, the highest being in the post-maturita period (31.6%).

The research suggests that learners' engagement in non-formal learning is a matter of their parents' education. Regarding pre-school age, involvement in non-formal learning depends on the parents' educational status and communicative competence in foreign languages. Parents with a higher educational status also decide about their children's participation in language courses and in private lessons while they are at basic school. Secondary school learners' involvement in non-formal learning is not substantial and is driven mainly by learner needs.

Almost exactly half of the students (49.6%) also learnt English in the *target culture context*. The study did not reveal any mechanisms behind making a decision to travel abroad; the influence of the parents' educational status, as well as the influence of attitudes to English/learning English, on the respondents' stays in English-speaking countries was not confirmed.

Learning in an *informal context* appears to be a crucial component of learners' overall English learning experience because it discloses the learners' autonomous goals and their real-life use of English. The conclusions suggest that some learners use English very frequently, even while at basic school. The engagement in autonomous English-related activities while at basic school correlated positively with attitudes toward English, which implies a potential link between formal and informal learning. Likewise, the link is established for the secondary school period, which is marked by an increased involvement in informal learning.

4.2 Results of the qualitative study

The conclusions of the quantitative part of the study confirmed inter-individual differences among the learners' biographies, as well as certain common tendencies. The *qualitative study*, i.e. the analysis of the twenty students' stories (Chapter 3), uncovered critical incidents in their learning of English which are linked to their attitudes toward English and learning English. Significant events in the interviewees' lives contributed to a change in either the intensity or quality of their attitudes and affected their motivation (Chapter 11). The next part briefly summarises the most important conclusions; it discusses the influence of several factors (the family, the teacher, interaction with native and non-native speakers of English, and personal goals) and their impact on learners' motivation.

Regarding the influence of the *family*, it was manifested through the parents' provision of indirect support or through various interventions in the processes of children's learning English; furthermore, a facilitative influence of the siblings was also observed. Indirect support included showing positive attitudes to English, as well as providing material support. On top of that, the parents with a higher educational status tended to be directly involved in their children's learning of English or initiated the English-related free-time activities of their children, including pre-school English courses, more actively than the other parents.

A lack of parental initiative was balanced by the active role of siblings in some families; if coupled with a limited opportunity for social interaction with peers or siblings, it provided space for autonomous action. It was the case of three introverted male students, who learnt English while playing PC games extensively.

As concerns the influence of the *teacher*, the interviewees perceived the turnover of teachers as being significant. Negative perceptions of this phenomenon were mainly linked to discontinuity in teachers' requirements and teaching styles. The results show, however, that the frequent turnover of teachers did not necessarily influence the students' attitudes negatively if they could rely on motivation coming from other educational contexts (e.g. informal ones), and if their attitudes were thus firmly established. Learners with a higher level of autonomy were more likely to resist the possible negative influences of constantly changing conditions, since they were less teacher-dependent.

The findings confirmed the central role of the teacher in teaching and learning English in a formal context. Most importantly, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge made the difference between "good" and "bad" teachers in the perceptions of the interviewees. In relation to that, they highly appreciated the teachers' ability to plan differentiated and varied lessons focusing on all aspects of English with the help of diverse materials. The research results suggest, however, that textbook-based and grammar-oriented lessons dominate and internal differentiation is implemented only sparsely. On the other hand, external differentiation is deployed quite often, but no action is taken to prevent its possible negative effects, such as the negative impact of the permanence of groups on learners' motivation.

The findings also highlight another problem area, i.e. teachers' lack of ability to evaluate learners' progress in learning. Teachers' mistakes in evaluation, the negative backwash effect of tests, and mistaken focus of evaluation, had a negative impact on students' learning English. Consequently, the motivational potential of evaluation was lost.

Another significant factor in the learning histories of the interviewees appeared to be opportunities to *interact in English with native or non-native speakers in English*. As concerns interaction with native speakers, it occurs in all learning contexts. In the formal context, native speaker teachers bring variety to lessons, as well as a focus on speaking, which students often miss in the lessons of non-native teachers. On top of that, native speakers represent the culture of their country, which creates opportunities for intercultural communication. At the same time, however, coping with native speaker input represents a challenge that not everybody is able or willing to face.

Regarding interaction with native speakers in other contexts, it is appreciated by most of the learners. Being able to negotiate meaning is a powerful driving force in their subsequent learning. Similarly, communication with non-native speakers of English was also considered very beneficial, for example in the context of international projects.

Moreover, having *personal goals* in learning or *personal interests*, e.g. in sports entertainment, Asian culture, or PC games, which required using English for a particular purpose, turned out to energise learners' motivation to improve their English.

Furthermore, the study of the learners' histories uncovered individual patterns of *motivational dynamicity* (Chapter 11) and confirmed the significance of the impact of the factors discussed above. Alice's story implies how significant the effects of external differentiation may be in a negative sense. Cindy's story shows that the impact of the teacher's behaviour (lack of empathy, mistaken focus of evaluation) on the learner may be immense. George's story provides evidence of the power of learner autonomy. By the same token, potentially strong motivational influences, such as native speakers and visits to English-speaking countries, may fail to be influential.

The results clearly indicate that the quality of the learning experience and the teacher are major motivational influences, especially in those situations where choice motivation does not apply. Moreover, the findings suggest that motivational influences across contexts are complementary; under favourable circumstances influences that are missing from the formal setting may be replaced by those originating in informal and/or non-formal environments.

To conclude, the qualitative study of individual learning histories confirmed the added value of biographical research, i.e. learning about the meaning which people attach to events in their life. The study revealed the routes which the students followed to their entry to their university study of English. Some of them were straightforward, some of them rather crooked. In terms of motivation, some routes were linear and some sinusoidal. The

most important thing is, however, that all the respondents in the study eventually managed to overcome obstacles of various kinds. It means that sooner or later they succeeded in finding a relevant source of motivation to learn English, no matter in which educational context.

4.3 Conclusions

While the quantitative study approached individual learning histories from the point of view of common tendencies and trends, the qualitative study dealt with detailed voices offering participants' perspectives on their individual learning paths. In this section conclusions will be drawn that interrelate the outcomes of both studies, and then, they will be linked to the assessment of selected communicative language competences.

First, conclusions regarding the role of parents will be formulated. Second, multiple conclusions concerning attitudes to English and to learning English will be presented including sources of attitudes and relationships between attitudes and selected variables. Third, the conclusions shedding light on the relationship between non-formal and informal learning will be introduced. Last, the conclusions uncovering the relationship between individual learning histories and the achieved level of selected communicative language competences will close the section.

4.3.1 The role of parents

Regarding the role of parents, both studies converge. Both studies confirmed that pre-school exposure was related to the parents' educational status and communicative competence in foreign languages. Additionally, the qualitative study showed that the reasons behind the parents' decisions were mainly linked to the perceived instrumental value of English, i.e. to its importance and usefulness in contemporary society. Similarly, the relationship between basic school learners' engagement in non-formal learning and their parents' level of education was identified by both studies.

4.3.2 Attitudes to English and to learning English

Both studies agree in that attitudes represent a central issue. The quantitative study disclosed the idiosyncratic nature of the foundations of individuals' attitudes toward English and learning English and also the relationships between attitudes and selected

variables. The qualitative study offered significant insights into what caused alterations in the students' attitudes.

4.3.2.1 Sources of attitudes to English and to learning English

The quantitative study identified potential sources of positive attitudes of basic school learners (e.g. the usefulness of English for their interests and for the future (12.8%), the sound of English (25.9%)). The qualitative study confirmed the immense driving force of having a personally relevant reason for learning English but revealed that the motivational potential stemming from the features of English was not used much: pronunciation was reported to have been a neglected aspect in English classes. For secondary school learners the usefulness of English for communication and for the future became the most influential factor (26.3%). Conversely, the qualitative study underscored the motivational influence of students' personally relevant reasons for learning English.

Regarding attitudes toward learning English, the quantitative study revealed that the foundations of positive attitudes were varied and they were linked to the learners' satisfaction with learning English initiated by manifold stimuli (e.g. the teacher's personality, the features of English). Contrary to that, negative attitudes were predominantly related to the teacher (93.6%). The qualitative study depicted the negative influence of teachers' lack of pedagogical content knowledge and their inability to plan differentiated and varied lessons focusing on all aspects of English and to evaluate learners' progress.

4.3.2.2 Statistically significant relationships between attitudes and selected variables

The quantitative study also revealed the correlation between the number of non-native, i.e. Czech, teachers of English and attitudes to learning English while at basic school. The qualitative study uncovered inter-individual differences among the respondents in terms of the impact which a frequent turnover of teachers had on their attitudes. The learners with a higher level of autonomy in learning English and those who found sources of positive attitudes in other contexts were less affected by frequent changes of teachers.

Additionally, the quantitative study also uncovered statistically significant relationships between attitudes toward the English language and attitudes toward learning English while at both basic and secondary school. From this perspective the learners with positive attitudes to English are also positive about learning English at school, while the learners

with negative attitudes to the language also feel negative about learning it at school. The qualitative study, however, shed light on the learning biographies of several individuals whose attitudes to English and to learning English were not in accord for diverse reasons (e.g. a discrepancy between personal and curricular objectives, teachers' inability to explain the subject matter clearly, a perceived low level of challenge).

Furthermore, the relationships between attitudes toward the English language/learning English while at basic school and attitudes toward the English language/learning English while at secondary school were identified as statistically significant. This finding of the quantitative study highlights the continuity in the quality of attitudes: once positive or negative attitudes are established at basic school, they persist into later phases of education. Though this was an observed tendency, the qualitative study confirmed the possibility of altering the students' negative attitudes, especially those toward learning English at school. The modification was initiated by altered conditions at school or by finding personally valued reasons for learning English outside the formal context.

The last statistically significant relationship to be presented is the relationship between attitudes toward the English language and involvement in autonomous English-related activities while at basic school and while at secondary school. At this point both studies converge; the qualitative study revealed the surprisingly extensive involvement of some learners in real-life use of English in terms of time and/or the scope of their activities. Several stories provided evidence that using English outside school for personally relevant purposes has a positive impact on attitudes to English.

4.3.2.3 Non-existent statistically significant relationships between attitudes and selected variables

The quantitative study did not prove a relationship between pre-school exposure to English and the learners' attitudes to English while at basic school; however, the qualitative study implied possible effects of such exposure (e.g. the positive influence of older siblings who functioned as a source of inspiration and a model to follow; pleasant memories linked to the joyful atmosphere of a pre-school course).

The number of teachers the students experienced while at basic and secondary school appeared to correlate neither positively nor negatively with attitudes to English. The qualitative study uncovered a variety of opinions regarding the frequent turnover of teachers, which concerned learning English rather than the language itself.

No statistically significant relationship was identified between attitudes to learning English while at basic and secondary school and the type of textbook used. Consistently, the findings of the qualitative study indicate that what was more important was how the textbook was used in lessons – predictable, textbook-based lessons were a source of negative attitudes to learning English on the part of some students.

The quantitative study did not identify relationships between attitudes to English/learning English and stays abroad. Likewise, the qualitative study illustrated different perceptions of the significance of stays in English-speaking countries in individuals' lives, as well as diverse motives for travelling there. Regarding the benefits, though they varied among the students, they were mainly linked to the motivational potential that the visits to the stays generated and, in the case of a long-term stay, also to making progress in English. The opportunity to interact with native speakers was perceived as a valued asset. It was clearly apparent that in order to benefit from interaction with native speakers one must be proactive in communication and, moreover, must be willing to overcome potential initial obstacles.

Lastly, no relationship was identified between attitudes to English/learning English and participation in English-related free-time activities. Participation in such activities is not just a matter of attitudes but the decision to take part in language courses or private lessons is also motivated by instrumental incentives or by the decision of others – the statistically significant relationship between involvement in free-time activities and parents' education was already mentioned. Consistently, the qualitative study confirmed the above-mentioned motives for the students' involvement in non-formal learning. The participants were students with both positive and negative attitudes toward English and learning English. Those who liked the language and studying it attended extra lessons as they were intrinsically motivated to learn. Those with negative attitudes were encouraged by their parents to do so. For some of them learning in a non-formal context compensated for what formal education failed to provide and thus contributed to a change in their attitudes.

4.3.3 The relationship between non-formal and informal learning

The quantitative study proved no relationship between participation in free-time activities (e.g. language courses) and involvement in autonomous English-related activities (i.e. the use of English outside school) either while at basic or secondary school. This is consistent with the findings discussed in the previous sections. Participation in non-formal learning is

not dependent on attitudes to English and learning English, but is related to the education of parents in a statistically significant way. Regarding involvement in informal learning, it is significantly influenced by attitudes to English and learning English. The qualitative study confirmed the distinct nature of learning in both contexts. The learning experience in non-formal contexts, with the exception of English camps, was in fact very similar to formal education, which means that learning contexts prevailed. Contrary to that, in informal learning English was a tool for exchanging information and participating in important social and interpersonal functions – obviously, communicative contexts dominated.

4.3.4 Path to university studies

The quantitative study revealed that 44.7 per cent of the respondents graduated from a secondary vocational school. The professional interests of those people apparently changed in the course of their secondary education, since they preferred to study English when choosing a university study programme. The qualitative study implied certain answers: e.g. a wrong choice when selecting a secondary school; a change of priorities as a result of success in learning English while at secondary school.

Interestingly, 47.8 per cent of the respondents experienced a gap between the matura exam and entry to university lasting from one to seven years. It may be called the period of seeking a future direction. 22.4 per cent of the students attended a one-year intensive course. The qualitative analysis suggested that they later considered it a significant event in their lives for several reasons: they especially appreciated the quality of their non-native speaker teachers, as well as the opportunity to interact with native speakers of English. Being successful in interaction with them generated intrinsic motivation to learn.

The explanatory study into the individual learning histories showed some benefits of mixed methods research. The quantitative study uncovered relationships which were found statistically significant, as well as others which were not. Additionally, the qualitative study contributed by providing possible explanations for the observed trends and also formulated potential reasons why some of the relationships were not confirmed.

4.4 The relationship between individual learning histories and the level of selected communicative language competences that was achieved

The multiple case study investigated the possible contributions of various learning contexts (the formal, non-formal, informal, and target culture contexts; communicative and learning

contexts) to the overall development of selected communicative language competences. It is not possible to make direct links between a particular context and a type of interaction, since, for example, every non-formal learning situation represents a unique mixture of learning and communicative contexts. Nevertheless, it may be hypothesised that the prevailing type of learning in the formal context will be explicit, whereas in an informal context implicit learning may predominate.

In awareness of those limitations, conclusions will be formulated that present the tendencies revealed. Most importantly, informal and rich contexts of learning influence the level of competences acquired, depending on the particular activities and also students' attitudes. Only the students who had positive attitudes to English or to learning English throughout their whole learning histories or those who managed to alter their negative attitudes to learning English at school appeared in the group of high-achievers. The results underscore the importance of interaction in the target language; mere exposure is insufficient. Furthermore, though ICT-mediated interaction helps, quite extensive involvement in face-to-face interaction with native speakers differentiated the students in the top group from those in the second-best group. Thus, a limited amount of interaction may be one of the reasons why some students scored relatively low even if they learnt in a variety of contexts that were very similar to those of the best students.

What seems to matter most, however, is the learner's proactive attitude to their own improvement. A longer stay in a target language country proved to help students improve their performance in the area of pragmatic competences, as well as the other competences, provided the student was exposed to a large amount of spoken English and, in particular, was made to and/or wanted to participate in interaction with both non-native speakers and native speakers. The student's tremendous inner drive to learn English and sound native-like in spite of the adverse conditions of the formal educational context seems to be as powerful as, or even more influential than, their positive attitude to English and/or learning English, having an excellent teacher of English, or a longer stay in an English-speaking country.

Another shared characteristic is that all the students in the top group were exposed to some English in early childhood. Unlike a pro-active approach to using English, this does not seem to be a distinctive feature, since the students who experienced English as pre-schoolers are distributed across the groups, including the bottom group.

The analysis of the profiles of the students in the bottom group revealed that most of them learned English only at school. It means that they were primarily engaged in

explicit learning and, most probably, learning contexts (Batstone, 2002) prevailed. There is research evidence originating in the Czech context that classes vary tremendously in terms of the extent to which teachers provide target language input (Najvar et al., 2013). Furthermore, numerous studies suggest that the instruction in schools is persistently based on the grammar of the written language only (e.g. Hellermann & Vergun, 2006; Timmis, 2005). McCarthy and Carter (2001) even claim that “there can be little hope for a natural spoken output on the part of language learners if the input is stubbornly rooted in models that owe their origin and shape to the written language” (p. 51). It is also consistent with the findings of Goh and Burns (2012), who propose that it is often the case that teachers provide space for speaking in lessons, but relevant feedback, including the specifics of spoken grammar, is still missing.

To conclude, learning in a variety of contexts supports achieving a higher level of communicative language competences if a learner is proactive in searching for opportunities to interact with other speakers of English and to improve. The results are consistent with the conclusions formulated by Ellis (2015) regarding the effects of explicit and implicit learning; while implicit learning is a slow process, explicit learning may lead to more immediate results. In the long run, however, implicit learning wins out. The findings also resonate with the opinion of Ellis (2005) that explicit and implicit learning contribute to the development of different aspects of communicative competence and, therefore, a need arises to create balanced learning opportunities. Dörnyei (2009) foresees that finding an optimal sequence and balance of the explicit and implicit components will be one of the main future directions in SLA research.

4.5 Implications for educational practice

This section summarises the implications of the study of individual learning histories for teaching and learning English at basic and secondary schools, as well as for teacher education.

4.5.1 Implications for teaching and learning English at basic and secondary schools

Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the individual learning histories confirmed the importance of *positive attitudes* to English and learning English. Therefore, especially in the initial phases of formal education in English, affective aims seem to be more important than cognitive ones. Enhancing learners’ positive attitudes is a priority, since it

has a long-term impact on their learning of English. Furthermore, the learners with positive attitudes to English and to learning English are those who use English for communication in a variety of situations occurring outside school. And those learners who are extensively involved in informal learning are likely to achieve a high level of communicative language competences.

There are many factors which determine attitudes toward English and learning English which teachers can build on or influence. The research results suggested the following teacher-related factors which appeared to influence learners' attitudes positively:

- being sensitive to *learner needs*, including *special educational needs*;
- *challenging* learners;
- being able to plan *varied and challenging lessons reflecting learner needs* and deploying *interesting teaching techniques without total dependence on the textbook*;
- having *expertise* in the subject of English;
- being able to *explain the subject matter* comprehensibly to their learners;
- focusing on *all aspects of English*, i.e. language systems and skills, paying more attention to the *spoken grammar, pronunciation, and speaking*, and providing *relevant feedback*;
- being able to deal with a heterogeneous class, especially by applying the principles of *internal differentiation*;
- being able to construct *tests with positive backwash*, including tests of *spoken production*;
- creating opportunities to *interact* in English with non-native or native speakers face to face or online.

Attitudes are closely related to *motivation* to learn a foreign language. Learners' motivation needs to be energised through various incentives. The research findings showed that the following strategies are likely to maintain learners' motivation:

- motivating learners by *relevant incentives*; in the case of young learners by those available here and now, i.e. related to the teacher, teaching techniques, or the language;
- developing children's *intrinsic motivation* by helping them find personally relevant reasons for learning English;
- making the *curriculum* and the teaching materials *more relevant to learner needs*;
- being able to *explain the subject matter* comprehensibly to their learners;
- relating students' learning English at school to their everyday real-life experience and background, for example, through implementing a *language portfolio*.

Furthermore, the research confirmed the crucial importance of stimulating learners' responsibility for their own improvement of their level of English, which could be achieved by:

- making learners aware of their strengths and weaknesses in the aspects of linguistic and pragmatic competences under examination;
- setting realistic and attainable short-term and long-term targets in English;
- relating the subject matter dealt with in English lessons as much as possible to their learning English in informal contexts;
- inviting learners to be *active* contributors to lessons;
- making them able to reflect on their own achievements in English.

Lastly, another important finding emphasises the temporal dimension of the learning process. Even non-achievers at basic school may find personally relevant motivation to learn English later in their life and they may become competent users of the target language. Therefore, the window of opportunity should never close too early for any learner.

4.5.2 Implications for English language teacher education

Implications for teacher education go hand in hand with the implications presented in the previous section. The issues which emerged as significant should also be given prominence in the curriculum of English language teacher education study programmes.

The findings of the research project confirmed the crucial role of the field of didactics, more specifically *foreign language didactics*, in English language teacher education, since foreign language didactics is responsible for the development of trainee teachers' pedagogical content knowledge.

The findings of the study actually impact on many areas of foreign language didactics, especially:

- choice of content and its didactic transformation according to learner needs;
- designing varied learning activities that respect learner needs;
- textbook evaluation and the role of the textbook in teaching and learning English;
- teaching pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and speaking;
- evaluating learners' progress in learning English, especially the construction of valid and reliable assessment tools with positive backwash, especially for spoken production;
- learner-centredness and autonomy in learning English;
- teaching English to heterogeneous classes;
- attitudes and motivation in learning English.

Thus, the findings should inspire modifications of the content of English language teacher education study programmes as well as teaching methods, techniques, and strategies.

4.6 Limitations of the research

Regarding the limitations of the study, there are several. First, since it was a retrospective longitudinal study, there was no possibility of validating the data. Therefore, the interpretation remains within the limits of the respondents' subjective perceptions. To a certain extent, but only in the case of the students who were also interviewed, the subsequent interviews validated the data obtained through the questionnaire. Nevertheless, this procedure did not bring a different perspective on the issues which were investigated, so it did not contribute to triangulation.

Second, another limitation was linked to the qualitative analysis of individual learning histories because only the analysis of several interviews was validated by a second researcher. However, the procedure uncovered a high level of agreement in the coding (Chapter 3).

Third, it is desirable to extend the scale of further research in order to find a causal link between students' learning experience and the level of their communicative language competences.

Last, the qualitative study of individual learning histories generated huge amounts of data; therefore, it was inevitable that it would be selective in terms of both focus (e.g. motivation) and the number of respondents (three people in the study of motivation).

4.7 Further research

As concerns further research, there are many future directions to follow.

One of the studies, *Predictors of the acquisition of selected English phonemes*, represents a continuation of the previous research into learners' individual learning histories and selected aspects of their phonological competence. Building on the quantitative research into individual histories of learning English, it attempts to explain the inter-individual variation in the acquisition of selected English phonemes using the method of multidimensional regression analysis to uncover the significance of individual variables.

Regarding individual learning histories, further qualitative analysis may be conducted; for example, the analysis of individual biographies from the point of view of motivational transformation episodes may be replicated in order to verify the results of the original

study. Furthermore, continuation of the longitudinal study may be planned – following the respondents in the course of their lives and focusing attention on investigating the effects of teacher education.

5. Components of the thesis

Since the habilitation thesis is a collection of my previously published academic work, this section introduces its individual components. All the constituent parts are chapters which were published in the following monographs as the outcomes of the previously mentioned project:

1. Černá, M., Hornová, L., Ivanová, J., & Ježková, Š. (2016). *Routes and Destinations. Learning histories of Czech speakers of English and their achievement in selected communicative language competences*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice. 406 pages. ISBN 978-80-7560-034-9.
2. Černá M., Ivanová, J., & Ježková, Š. (Eds.). (2015). *Learner Corpora and English Acquisition*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice. 227 pages. ISBN 978-80-7395-946-3.

Regarding the individual chapters, technical details are summarised in Table 2 below; short annotations follow.

Table 2
Components of the habilitation thesis

	Title of the chapter	Mono-graph	Authorship* (%)	Pages
1.	Chapter 1 – <i>Research methodology</i> + Appendices 1–3	1.	80	17–42 365–370
2.	Chapter 2 – <i>Individual learning histories: quantitative study</i> + Appendices 6–7	1.	100	43–101 372–389
3.	Chapter 3 – <i>Individual learning histories: qualitative study</i>	1.	100	103–153
4.	Chapter 6 – <i>At an intersection of research findings</i>	1.	40	255–327
5.	<i>Conclusions</i>	1.	40	329–346
6.	Chapter 11 – <i>Motivation in language learning: Focus on individual learners' stories</i>	2.	100	143–160

*See Appendix 1 of this commentary; it contains documents confirming my authorship.

Chapter 1 presents the research project¹⁰ and its aims, as well as the research methodology. First, the rationale of the research is introduced, and then the development of

¹⁰ The research was conducted within the framework of the project titled *Aspects of English Language Acquisition of Czech Students at the Onset of Teacher Education* was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GA ČR 13-25982S).

all the research instruments is described (diagnostic speaking test including pronunciation subtest, questionnaire, narrative interviews, multiple case study, and methodology for corpus compilation). Furthermore, attention is paid to the pilot stage because its results initiated the necessary modifications either of the tools or the process of their administration.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 together represent a retrospective longitudinal mixed methods study of individual learning histories; it was an exploratory study, the quantitative part preceding the qualitative one. Because each of them provides a different perspective, I decided to include each study in a separate chapter rather than combining them into a larger unit. Furthermore, it was desirable to keep the range of individual chapters relatively in balance. For the same reason, I extracted most of the statistical data from Chapter 2 and presented it in Appendices 6 and 7. Consequently, only the essentials remained in the text, which made it more reader-friendly.

Chapter 2, the quantitative part of the study, reveals the role of various contexts of learning English in individuals' biographies, as well as common tendencies. On top of that the relationships between selected variables, e.g. attitudes toward learning English on the one hand and characteristics of learning contexts on the other, are investigated.

Chapter 3 introduces the qualitative part of the study of individual learning histories, in which I explored the lifelong experience of learning English through the voices of selected respondents, focusing on the significance of events in the individuals' lives. At the end of Chapter 3, I interrelated the results of both studies, discussing in which cases they converge or diverge.

Chapter 6 brings the reader to the intersection of the research findings. Through the format of a multiple case study, the outcomes of the investigation of the individual learning histories are interrelated with selected communicative language competences, more specifically linguistic (phonological, grammatical, and lexical) and pragmatic ones. Conclusions regarding the influence of learning contexts on the level of the competences listed above that was achieved are formulated.

The concluding part summarises the research findings and offers implications for educational practice, including the teaching and learning of English at basic and secondary schools and English language teacher education. In addition, it debates the limitations of the current study and suggests possible directions for further research.

Regarding the last chapter, *Motivation in language learning: Focus on individual learners' stories*, I concentrate on one of the core factors which account for individual learner

differences, i.e. on motivation. More specifically, I explore the dynamic nature and temporal variation of English language learners' motivation, while applying a process-oriented approach. Through the analysis of three selected learners' biographies, I uncovered the dynamicity of individual learners' motivation and its fluctuations resulting from changing contexts.

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Appendix 1

Appendix 1 contains documents confirming the researcher's authorship of the chapters, which were written by a team of researchers.

PROHLÁŠENÍ O AUTORSKÉM PODÍLU

Součástí předložené habilitační práce PaedDr. Moniky Černé, Ph.D. jsou tři kapitoly, které jsou výsledkem týmové práce a které byly publikovány jako součást monografie:

Černá, M., Hornová, L., Ivanová, J., & Ježková, Š. (2016). *Routes and Destinations. Learning histories of Czech speakers of English and their achievement in selected communicative language competences*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice. 406 stran. ISBN 978-80-7560-034-9.

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V Olomouci 1.8.2017

datum



doc. PhDr. Libuše Hornová

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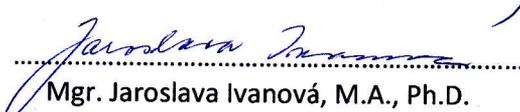
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