A Study of Students' Metacognitive Beliefs About Foreign Language Study and Their Impact on Learning

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Abstract: *This article reports on an investigation into the language learning beliefs of students of French in England, aged 16 to 18. It focuses on qualitative data from two groups of learners (10 in total). While both groups had broadly similar levels of achievement in French in terms of examination success, they differed greatly in the self-image they had of themselves as language learners, with one group displaying low levels of self-efficacy beliefs regarding the possibility of future success. The implications of such beliefs for students' levels of motivation and persistence are discussed, together with their possible causes. The article concludes by suggesting changes in classroom practice that might help students develop a more positive image of themselves as language learners.*

Key words: *attributions, learner strategies, metacognitive beliefs, motivation, self-efficacy*

Language: *French*

Introduction

Numerous studies have sought to uncover what distinguishes more effective learners from less effective ones, from the 1970s and the "Good Language Learner" study by Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, and Tödesco (1978) onwards. This search has resulted in a continuing interest in two key areas. The first is an interest in learner strategies, in the "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Research over the last 10 to 15 years has increasingly shown that in terms of strategy use, in all language skills, it is the use of metacognitive strategies that characterizes the 'good language learner' (Graham, 1997; Macaro, 2001)—strategies that are "higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, pp. 44–45).

Furthermore, it has been argued that effective metacognitive strategy use is in its turn dependent on learners' metacognitive knowledge or beliefs (Vandergrift,

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2002), what Wenden (2002, p. 46) defined as "what learners know about language learning: the nature of the task, how best to approach it, and personal factors that may inhibit or facilitate the process." The second key area of interest is motivation, with recent research distinguishing between those motivational influences that operate at the choice level (i.e., "how intentions are formed") and those that affect "motivational maintenance" during task completion (i.e., perseverance and staying with the task or activity) once the choice has been made to undertake it (Dörnyei & Ottó, 2004).

This paper reports on a study whose findings suggest that both effective learner strategy use and motivational maintenance are influenced by learners' metacognitive knowledge or beliefs about language learning. Thus an understanding of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning has implications for classroom instruction and interaction with learners.

Review of the Literature

Definitions

The terms *metacognitive knowledge* and *learner beliefs* are often used interchangeably in the literature, as Wenden (1999) observed. The term belief implies a degree of subjectivity, something which is "value-related" (Wenden, 1999, p. 435), while knowledge has more objective connotations. The work of Flavell (1979, 1987) has influenced several studies of language learners' beliefs. He identifies three aspects of metacognitive knowledge: knowledge of person variables, task variables, and strategy variables. The first refers to what learners know about how humans in general learn, and what they know about how they as individuals learn; the second to what learners know about the nature of a task and what demands it might make on them in terms of specific knowledge and skills; and the third to learners' knowledge of different strategies and their appropriate use.

Another interpretation of metacognitive knowledge is offered by Paris and Winograd (1990). Preferring the term beliefs

to knowledge, they suggest that metacognitive beliefs have a strong impact on learning behavior, particularly on motivation. This is underlined by their categorization of beliefs into three core dimensions, which overlap with Flavell's forms of metacognitive knowledge but place a slightly different emphasis on certain factors. *Agency*—learners' beliefs about their own abilities and competences—encompasses elements of Flavell's knowledge about person variables, but stresses more firmly the role of *self-efficacy*, or belief in one's ability to accomplish a task. Self-efficacy is a construct that has attracted much attention in the literature on general educational psychology, but less in literature on foreign language learning. Its importance is however recognized in a study by Tremblay and Gardner (1995), who found that for secondary school learners of French, their self-efficacy had a direct influence on motivational behavior. Self-efficacy theory originates in the work of Bandura (e.g., 1993, 1995) and is concerned with individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform a task. These beliefs guide people's choices, efforts, and persistence. High levels of self-efficacy appear to be particularly important in maintaining motivation in the face of difficulties and failure (Bandura, 1995).

The second element of metacognitive beliefs in the framework of Paris and Winograd (1990) is *instrumentality*. This concerns learners' perceptions of the relationship between the learning strategies they employ on tasks and learning outcomes. The importance of foreign language learners recognizing such a relationship is underlined by Dickinson (1995), who argued that it is essential if learners are to have any sense of control over their learning.

The third element is *purpose*, learners' ability to value success in the subject. This is of direct relevance to foreign language learning, particularly regarding the learning of "non-world languages" like French and German (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002), where learners may question how important it is for them to learn a language.

Purpose also underlines the importance of learners' goals. Achievement goal theory, as discussed in the work of such authors as Ames (1992), suggests that different types of learners place different kinds of value on tasks, depending on their goal orientation. Covington (2000) argued that two basic types exist: on the one hand a learning, task, or mastery goal orientation, on the other, a performance or ego goal orientation. Those who are focused on mastery goals believe that learning has its own intrinsic value and try to develop new skills in order to improve on past performances. They believe that both effort and effective strategies are important for success (Covington, 2000). By contrast, learners with a performance goal orientation pursue achievement in order to increase their sense of ability and self-worth (Covington, 2000). Success is measured in terms of doing better than others, and the most prized form of achievement is that which is attained without effort (Jackson, 2003). There is also evidence that while performance goals lead to shallow, superficial learning, mastery goal students show a greater degree of self-management (Covington, 2000), a tendency that in itself has been associated by some authors with more successful language learning (e.g., Graham, 1997).

Language Learners' Beliefs: Insights from Previous Studies

Many studies into the beliefs of foreign language learners have been concerned with the relationship between learners' beliefs about themselves and their use of learner strategies. Learners with positive self-beliefs seem to have better control over and knowledge of effective learner strategies (Goh, 1999; Victori, 1999; Vogely, 1995). The small number of studies that have looked specifically at self-efficacy beliefs also report a strong positive correlation between that construct and the range of strategies used by learners (e.g., NCLRC, 2000; Yang, 1999). Cotterall (1999) investigated a range of learners' beliefs including self-efficacy beliefs and beliefs about

learning strategies. She found that while learners showed a willingness to adopt and accept responsibility for the use of some key strategies, few believed that they knew how to monitor and evaluate their learning. The author attributes this to the low levels of self-efficacy that a number of learners displayed.

The Present Study

The foregoing review has highlighted a number of issues. First, in spite of differences in terminology, there is some agreement concerning the central aspects of learners' thinking about learning that are worthy of investigation: beliefs relating to the self, to the task, and to strategies that contribute to successful task completion. Second, there is a tendency to overlook the key construct of self-efficacy and its attendant theoretical framework when investigating learners' beliefs about themselves as language learners. Third, few studies offer insights into how such beliefs develop and the impact they have on learning behavior.

The present study seeks to address these issues through an integrated investigation into the metacognitive beliefs about language learning of learners of French in England, their nature, development, and impact on learning behavior. The term beliefs rather than knowledge has been chosen because the focus is on what learners perceive to be true about language learning, rather than what they know as a fact. In view of the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on levels of perseverance in the face of difficulties, it seems especially important to investigate such beliefs within a context where new and possibly unexpected difficulties are encountered. In this study that means the transition from intermediate to more advanced language learning, a stage that can bring with it difficulties for learners.

The data presented form part of a larger study, discussed in detail in Graham (2004). There, the author presents a rather depressing picture of intermediate and advanced learners, aged 16 to 18, in England, where studying a foreign language beyond the

TABLE 1

Questionnaire Data: Students with Negative Self-Efficacy Beliefs

	Emily	Stuart	Amanda	Alan	Robert
Sex	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male
Level[a]	Int.	Int.	Adv.1	Adv.1	Adv.2
Own grade prediction[b]	A*	B	C/D	D/E	B
Teacher prediction[c]	A*	A	—	C	C/B
'Doing well in French?'	4	4	3	2	3
Success attributions	Task ease	Effort	Ability Effort	Ability Task ease	Effort Ability
Failure attributions	Task difficulty	Low ability	Low effort Task difficulty	Low effort	Low ability
Additional comments on low ability, future failure	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Note.
[a] Int. = Intermediate students, last year of compulsory schooling (Year 11, preparing for the GCSE); Adv.1 = first year advanced (Year 12, preparing for the Advanced Subsidiary examination); Adv 2. = second year advanced (Year 13, preparing for the A2 examination).
[b] For the GCSE examination, grades A* to G are awarded, with A* the highest. For AS and A2, grades range from A (the highest) to E (lowest).
[c] When the questionnaire was completed (November), not all Adv.1 students had received a grade prediction from their teacher.

age of 16 is undertaken by an increasingly smaller number of students. The paper, based chiefly on data gathered via a questionnaire, reports that many intermediate students had a low sense of self-efficacy, given that out of 287, 108 significantly underestimated the grade they anticipated gaining in their final examination, as compared with the grade their teacher had predicted for them. For both intermediate and first year advanced students, there was a tendency to see ability as key to doing well or not doing well, over and above effort or using learning strategies, which suggested a passive approach to the learning process.

Although these quantitative data provided preliminary insights into learners' beliefs, questionnaires offer limited opportunities for exploring these in depth. Hence these areas were further investigated through semi-structured interviews with 28 learners, focusing on the key elements of learners' beliefs about learning French

that had arisen from the questionnaire: their beliefs about themselves as learners, their belief in their capacity to achieve (or self-efficacy), and the value they placed on effort, ability and strategies as factors contributing to achievement. (See Appendix.)

Participants
The 28 interviewees were selected using "criterion sampling" (Patton, 2002) whereby cases are chosen that meet certain criteria. In this case, as far as possible, an equal balance of numbers was sought in terms of year groups, male/female, successful/less successful learners, high/low self-efficacy, continuing/not continuing with French post-16 (for intermediate learners).

This article discusses the data from 10 students (see Tables 1 and 2), between the ages of 16 and 18. Intermediate students (age 16) had been studying French for approximately six years and were in the last year of compulsory schooling. Advanced

TABLE 2

Questionnaire Data: Students with Positive Self-Efficacy Beliefs

	James	Martin	Ann-Marie	Gareth	Toby
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male
Level[a]	Int.	Int.	Adv.1	Adv.1	Adv.2
Own grade prediction[b]	A*	A*	A	A/B	A
Teacher prediction[c]	B	A*	—	A/B	A
'Doing well in French?'	5	6	5	5	5
Success attributions	Effort Strategies	Ability Effort	Ability Effort Strategies	Effort	Ability
Failure attributions	Task difficulty	Task difficulty	Strategies Bad luck	Strategies	Strategies Task difficulty
Additional comments on ability, future success	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

Note.
[a] Int. = Intermediate students, last year of compulsory schooling (Year 11, preparing for the GCSE); Adv.1 = first year advanced (Year 12, preparing for the Advanced Subsidiary examination); Adv 2. = second year advanced (Year 13, preparing for the A2 examination).
[b] For the GCSE examination, grades A* to G are awarded, with A* the highest. For AS and A2, grades range from A (the highest) to E (lowest).
[c] When the questionnaire was completed (November), not all Adv.1 students had received a grade prediction from their teacher.

students (age 16–18) had been learning French for seven to eight years. The examination for which intermediate pupils were preparing, the GCSE, places emphasis on students' ability to communicate meaning, mostly within the framework of concrete, transactional topics. Typically, these students would have two to three hours of French classes per week. Students in the first year of advanced study were preparing for the Advanced Subsidiary examination (AS), for which, by contrast, they would be assessed on their ability to manipulate the foreign language accurately, "to organize facts and ideas, present explanations, opinions and information" (QCA, 2001). Second year advanced students, working towards the subsequent A2 examination, would be required to show, in addition, "a high level of critical awareness . . . a capacity for critical thinking" (QCA, 2001). Both year groups would typically attend four to five hours of French classes a week.

Analysis
All 28 interviews were transcribed verbatim. Several preliminary readings were conducted, in which key themes were noted. Cross-references were made with the questionnaire responses of the interviewees, particularly to those items that asked students to (a) rate how well they were doing in French; (b) give reasons for doing well or not so well in French; and (c) predict what examination grade they would gain (as well as stating their teacher's prediction, where known, and any previous examination grade for French). For 10 subjects, their questionnaire responses indicated self-efficacy beliefs that were clearly positive or negative (five students in each category). The transcripts of these 10 stu-

dents were then further analyzed using the qualitative analysis software package, QSR NUD*IST, with a specific focus on the following questions:

1. What are important characteristics of learners with low self-efficacy and how do they differ from learners with high self-efficacy?
2. What factors appear to influence the development of these beliefs?
3. What task-related beliefs do learners hold, with regard to the respective roles of ability and effort in language learning?

Results

Important Characteristics of Learners with Low Self-Efficacy and How They Differ from Learners with High Self-Efficacy

As stated above, the initial phases of the analysis revealed 10 students, in whose transcripts and questionnaire responses there was a clear expression of self-efficacy beliefs. These formed two distinct groups, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. From the questionnaire, all 10 appeared to have very similar high levels of achievement. Among the intermediate students, all were predicted one of the top three examination grades for the GCSE. For the advanced students, all had achieved one of the top three grades at GCSE.

Yet the students had very different profiles, with one group displaying low self-efficacy beliefs, the other high self-efficacy beliefs. They were placed in the high or low group according to their questionnaire responses in the following areas:

1. Was the grade they predicted for themselves for their next examination equal to, higher or lower than the grade their teacher predicted?
2. Did they make explicit references to high or low ability in French or to the likelihood of doing well in the future?
3. Was their assessment of how well they were doing in French on a scale of 1 to 6 (6 = very well) at the upper or lower end of the scale, or in clear contradiction to the examination grade they were predicted (e.g., predicted top examination grade but feeling they were doing badly at French)?

Subjects were deemed to display positive self-efficacy beliefs if their responses in at least two out of three of the above areas were "positive," negative self-efficacy beliefs if their responses in at least two out of three of the above areas were "negative."

Students were also asked in the questionnaire to explain the reasons behind their success or lack of it in specific language skill areas. Self-efficacy theory emphasizes the influence on self-efficacy beliefs of causal attributions, the explanations individuals give for success or failure. Those with low self-efficacy tend to make maladaptive attributions for failure, that is, to factors over which they have no control, such as supposed low ability. People with high self-efficacy, however, are more likely to attribute failure to insufficient effort and to other factors that are amenable to change and control by the individual, such as effort or strategy use (Bandura, 1995).

Tables 1 and 2 suggest that attributions are an important difference between the students with positive self-efficacy beliefs and those with negative ones. In the negative group, two out of the five students cited low ability as the main contributory factor to their lack of success in a certain language skill area. As stated earlier, low-ability attributions are likely to lead to, and reflect, low self-efficacy, in that the possibility for improvement is limited, if low ability is viewed as fixed and inherent. None of the group cited poor strategy use as the main reason for their lack of success (although three students agreed partially with the statement, giving it a score of 4 out of 6). As Graham (2004, p. 187) has suggested, an absence of strategy attributions "may indicate a reluctance to accept responsibility for one's own lack of success, or a sense of mystification as to how to improve one's language learning."

This element of passivity in the face of difficulties in language learning is also

present in the interview transcripts of students from the negative group. A particularly striking feature was the tendency of students to refer to personality traits that supposedly limited their ability in French. Alan, for example, claimed that he found concentrating in class difficult, because "I'm that sort of person, I suppose, it's down to personality." Problems with oral work in particular were blamed on personality factors, such as being reserved or self-conscious. Robert explained that he had done less well in written work, and felt lacking in motivation in that area, because he was, he felt, "not a very writey person."

Such comments were absent from the transcripts of the group of students who expressed positive self-efficacy beliefs. Similarly, in their questionnaire responses, none of them suggested low ability in a certain skill area as a reason for lack of success. More importantly, three out of the five were aware that not using strategies effectively can hinder success. All felt that speaking was the area in which they had had the least success. Toby and Gareth in particular were able to talk in some detail about what they saw as being wrong with their current strategies. Toby explained how his fluency was affected when he tried to meet the examination criteria by using complex language and trying to translate thoughts directly from the first language (L1). Gareth was similarly aware of the problems of trying to apply strategies better suited to writing tasks to oral work:

> I don't know, I just try and . . . what I do is probably think about how I'd write it and if I . . . before where I've had to prepare an oral piece I write it down and sort it out and then take prompts from that, but that's probably not the right way of going about practicing speaking French, because you really have to be able to think and speak at the same time.

Although lacking in any clear ideas about how to replace these perceived faulty strategies with more effective ones, these students did at least display an awareness of the link between their own actions (or

strategies) and learning outcomes—a sign of strong self-efficacy and autonomy.

Factors Influencing the Development of These Beliefs About Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1995) identified two factors in the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs which are relevant to academic learning and which were identifiable in the participants' interview transcripts. First, what he called mastery experiences, the achievement of success but not just "easy success," which is less likely to promote perseverance and a problem-solving approach. Second, "social persuasion," verbal persuasion from others, that one is capable of achieving in a given domain. Individuals need to receive positive appraisals of the likelihood of their success, but also need to be encouraged to "measure their success in terms of self-improvement rather than triumphs over others" (Bandura, 1995, p. 4).

Many students in the low self-efficacy group seemed, however, to measure how well (or badly) they felt they were doing in French by comparing themselves with their peers. Amanda, for example, explained why she felt that speaking was her area of least success:

> because I feel the other people in the class are better, I suppose to be perfectly honest, if I don't really understand, then I just sort of leave it to them, because when they're motivated they just take over.

Exaggerated language was frequently used in these negative self-comparisons. Robert asserted that "everyone else" but him understood in his French class, that he often felt "demoralized" because some of his classmates were "completely fluent in French."

There were several instances in the interviews of comparisons of other kinds that seemed to have an influence on levels of self-efficacy. First, comparing one's current performance with one's past achievements. For many students this meant a change in their perception of themselves as a language learner as they were confronted by difficulties they had not met before.

When asked whether she thought "good language learners were born, not made," Amanda agreed with this view, adding "And I thought up to now, that I was one of those people," but that she no longer saw herself in such a light. Second, comparing oneself favorably with others in the past seemed to have built up a rather shaky level of self-efficacy, dependent on the kind of "triumphs over others" that Bandura (1995, p. 3) suggested are not conducive to true self-efficacy. Amanda and Robert talked about their language learning experiences at intermediate level in which Robert felt he was "like the best in the class at the time," and Amanda felt "there were always people who were at a quite substantially lower level than me . . . that did boost my confidence a bit." Moving from a position of relative superiority at intermediate level to one where they felt themselves to be of lower ability than their classmates seemed to have a negative impact on these students' self-efficacy, which appeared to depend on doing better than other people rather than on any in-built self-belief.

In addition, Amanda's sense of being a good language learner came, she asserted, from the high external grades she received at intermediate level and from the lack of difficulty she had experienced then. She claimed to have done minimal work in preparation for her earlier examination, like many other first year advanced students who completed the questionnaire part of the present study (Graham, 2003). It seems doubtful that these successes constitute the "mastery experiences" referred to above as fundamental to the development of strong self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995) . Amanda displayed a lack of resilience to the demands of advanced level French, after the "easy" success of intermediate level, reflecting that "there seems to be such a big gap between my French GCSE and AS level, I can't sort of, uh, like motivate, it sort of all seems to wash over me sometimes."

Task Beliefs—The Role of Effort and Ability in Language Learning

Within the study as a whole, the sample showed a strong belief in the importance of effort for doing well in language learning at advanced level, with intermediate students placing more emphasis on ability (Graham, 2004). The interview sought to explore subjects' views on the relative importance of effort and "ability" in being a good language learner—was one more important, and could shortcomings in one be compensated for by the other?

None of the students interviewed believed that ability alone was sufficient to achieve highly in language learning and all claimed that to do really well, some effort was needed by even the most "gifted" linguist. However, they varied in their views on the importance of each factor and in their attitudes towards effort. Across the two positive and negative self-efficacy groups of learners, it was possible to detect three sub-groups who held quite different views about the respective values of effort and ability.

Minimalists

This group comprised three intermediate students, two from the positive and one from the negative group of learners. They had in common the view that success at this level was likely with minimal effort, but for different reasons. For the boys, James and Martin, the fact that they did not have to try hard in French to achieve was viewed positively, a sign of high ability, of being "clever," "quite intelligent," as they wrote in their questionnaire comments. They saw no need to work to their full capacity. By contrast, for Emily, success achieved without effort was regarded less positively. She emphasized that it was the ease of the GCSE examination that meant that a top grade was attainable with low effort, and even low ability. She wrote on her questionnaire that "GCSE seem v.easy to pass regardless of the fact that many A grade students cant speak the language" [sic throughout].

As Graham (2003) suggested, Emily saw no point in trying hard in French because she felt the examination could be passed with little effort. She implied that this view had been partly gained from her teacher, who had suggested, she claimed, that passing intermediate French required a knowledge of only a small number of verbs. At the same time, however, this "easy success" was not a source of satisfaction for Emily, as it was for the male "minimalists." It made her feel that in spite of the high grade she was predicted, she had little "true" ability in French, with "great voids where grammar should be."

Stagnators

An important characteristic of this group was that in the past, at intermediate level, they had been minimalists. That is, they had believed that success in French was possible with little effort. Alan remarked that at intermediate level, learning French "wasn't too straining or anything." French post-16, by contrast, posed a challenge to these views. Robert explained how at intermediate level he had been told by a teacher that he was "a very good linguist and could do a language degree if [he] wanted to," but that now he felt "overwhelmed by the holes in [his] knowledge." The effect of this was a kind of paralysis, stagnation, in which he tended to "get a bit sort of withdrawn from my studies, sort of think, 'Well, can't do it, give up.'" An underlying cause of his difficulties may have been his belief that one of the key characteristics of a "good language learner" was effortless achievement, "being able to reel off verb endings without having to think about them, being able to write lots in high register language easily and being able to respond spontaneously in discussion." Previous research indicates that effortless achievement, or at least the appearance that it is effortless, is especially prized by males, for three reasons: first, because in many Western societies such as the United Kingdom, working hard is not considered to be "cool" or appropriate masculine behavior; second, because lack of effort provides a convenient excuse if success is not attained (as a form of self-worth protection, Covington, 2000, see below); and third, because it is presumed to signal very high ability (Jackson, 2003).

At times the "stagnators" displayed a more ambivalent attitude towards effort. They conceded that "working harder" might bring about progress, but felt that such improvement was likely to be limited and fall short of what they hoped for, because, as Robert said, "there's only so much work you can do." "Working harder" was thus a vague term, unsupported by clear strategies, or ones that were easily implemented. For example, Robert, when asked what he could do to improve his French, replied: "Go to France? Um, I don't know." Stagnators showed little sign of accepting responsibility for their own performance, a core aspect of robust self-efficacy beliefs (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

Likewise, Alan recognized the need to work harder to improve, but seemed unable to put this into practice, even though he felt he was not doing well at French. In his questionnaire, he also attributed his lack of success in speaking mainly to low effort. Further exploration in the interview, however, revealed an underlying sense of low ability as well. The student explained that he tended not to participate in class oral work, because "my speaking's just not very good." Both these characterstics seem to suggest a tendency towards self-worth protection, in the terms of Covington (2000). Self-worth theory argues that individuals strive to maintain a sense of value "in a society that values competency and doing well" (Covington, 2000, p. 181), and in which ability is the most prized attribute of all. Individuals who indulge in self-worth protection fear that lack of success will be attributed to low ability on their part. In order to avoid this assumption, when failure is a possibility they withhold effort, so that any lack of success can be blamed on not trying rather than on low ability.

Mastery Students

Three learners were classed as "mastery students": Ann-Marie, Gareth, and Toby, all from the positive self-efficacy group. The term mastery was applied to them because their interviews suggested that they valued learning for its own sake. They differed from the minimalists and the stagnators in a number of ways. First, in their attitude towards effort. Effort had positive connotations for them. When asked whether good language learners are "born" or "made," two students, Ann-Marie and Gareth, were adamant that if there was such a thing as natural language ability, it was neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for success. Ann-Marie voiced the opinion that "if you put effort in then you're going to get good at French, but if you don't then you can't, you can't just naturally." Gareth claimed that effort alone could lead to success: "I think it is something that if you work hard at you'll get it and anyone who works hard in languages will get it."

The value placed on hard work was apparent in Ann-Marie's views on what a "good language learner" was like, someone who would "pay attention in class and do the homework, and take part in the class as well, not just sit there at the back of the class." This contrasts sharply with the vision of Robert in the stagnator group, for whom being good at French meant effortless achievement.

Both students said that they had worked hard at intermediate level, which made them very unusual among the advanced level students in the sample as a whole. Gareth explained that he had not needed to work hard to gain his top grade, but had put in effort over and above the bare minimum, to keep him "occupied," explaining that "you could make it as difficult as you like, so I used to go that extra way to make it more complicated, to do that bit better . . . I think it's just the satisfaction, I like being able to construct something which I'm pleased with, and something that I know I've tried hard in." Intermediate French thus clearly provided him with "mastery experiences"

(Bandura, 1995), in which the goal is not just outward success in the form of high grades but learning for its own sake and improving on past achievements.

As such, the mastery students addressed the challenges of advanced level French with greater resilience and perseverance than the stagnators, although students in both groups entered this stage of their language learning with very similar levels of prior achievement. Ann-Marie referred to her perseverance in the face of difficulty, of coping with increased demands from her teachers in terms of the accuracy of her written French:

"I keep going . . . if I've made a mistake, keep going over it, try and realize why I've made a mistake, or how I can improve it."

As discussed earlier, these mastery students were also unusual in their insight into the role played by learner strategies for both their achievements and for skill areas where they had done less well.

Discussion and Implications

The picture presented here of students moving to a higher level of language learning suggests that few have robust confidence in their ability to meet the challenges brought by this change. Success in earlier language learning does not seem to have been sufficient to help them cope with new and perhaps unexpected difficulties or to maintain a view of themselves as a "good language learner." Many are unclear as to how they can improve their learning and retrieve this "lost" self-image.

While authors in a variety of contexts (e.g., Byrnes, 1990, referring to the United States; Stables & Stables, 1996, in the UK) have emphasized the importance of continuity and even progression between different levels in language courses, it is inevitable that most learners will encounter at some point challenges that test their language skills and require a great deal of perseverance. If they are to be prepared for these challenges, it is important that from the start of their language study learners do not just experience "easy success," or

else they will be "easily discouraged by failure" (Bandura, 1995, p. 3). Teachers need to give learners tasks that enable them to work to their full potential, even if this is beyond the level of proficiency required by the examination for which the class is studying.

This might involve learners establishing their own language learning goals, based on what they hope to achieve—goals that are separate from the examination. This was the position the mastery student, Gareth, seemed to have reached by himself, doing more than the bare minimum required to pass an examination, for personal satisfaction. Learners would then be able measure their progress against these goals, rather than by comparing themselves with their classmates. The present study suggests that a strong sense of self-efficacy is not developed in learning environments where students are more focused on doing better than their peers, rather than on improving their own performance.

Such an approach would be beneficial to students in the minimalist category of the present study. Those who, like the stagnators, feel at a loss how to move their language learning forward, would in addition benefit from help in developing a greater sense of their own agency, a realization that what they achieve depends on the learner strategies they use rather than on less controllable factors like the difficulty of the work they are set. For this to happen, teachers need to do more than just advise learners to try out different strategies. There is general agreement in the literature on the basic pattern that learner strategy instruction should follow: (a) consciousness-raising (regarding what are learner strategies, which strategies do learners currently use); (b) modelling of selected strategies by the teacher; (c) guided practice in using the strategies; (d) setting goals for the areas of learning the student wants to improve; (e) selecting strategies as a part of an action plan to bring about that improvement; (f) an evaluation of the impact of strategy use on learning outcomes (Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Macaro, 2001).

For this instruction to have a real impact on learners' self-efficacy beliefs, certain elements of the above need emphasizing. First, in the consciousness-raising stage, learners' current beliefs need to be explored as well as the strategies they employ. Teachers might do this through group discussions based on some of the questionnaire and interview themes presented in this study. Or, some of the comments made by the students in this article can be displayed, and learners asked to sort them into two groups: students who seem to be in control of their learning, and those who seem to take a passive approach, blaming their difficulties on factors beyond their control, like task difficulty. Learners then need to be shown that some of the problems they experience can be overcome by using strategies effectively. After the modeling of selected strategies (see Oxford, 1990, for ideas), learners need to try them out for themselves and evaluate their success so that they perceive a direct link between the strategies they have used and the learning outcome. Drawing learners' attention to this link is thus a way of encouraging them to make strategy attributions. The power of such attributions comes from the sense of control and personal agency they give to learners (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1992). These authors add that self-observation, including verbalization of strategy use, and record-keeping that monitors strategy use and outcomes, can further increase levels of self-efficacy. On a practical level, this can be achieved by asking learners to keep a strategy log for language tasks carried out, for example:

1. How well do you think you performed on this activity?

(Please circle a number.)
Very badly   *Very well*
1   2   3   4   5   6

2. What were the main reasons for this?

3. What difficulties did you have?

4. Which strateg(ies) did you use to try to overcome these difficulties?

5. Which strateg(ies) did you find the most helpful? Why?

6. What do you plan to do next time you have a similar activity?

Feedback from the teacher plays a vital role in helping learners to see the link between the strategies they use and what they achieve. As well as commenting on what learners achieve in terms of their language use, teachers should also consider commenting on learners' strategy use. So, for example, a learner might complete a strategy log for a listening activity and comment that they only did moderately well on a comprehension task, because they could not work out what the important parts of it were, despite of trying to predict its likely content from accompanying questions. Feedback from the teacher might be to suggest that they also try to listen for discourse marker phrases (e.g., "First," "Second," "IT is evident that," etc.) next time they listen—a strategy that they would then evaluate.

Conclusion

From the 1990s, attention has been focused in classrooms in England on improving the examination grades of learners, with schools and colleges compared through "league tables" which list the percentages of students who achieve certain examination grades. This, it could be argued, has led to a learning climate in which "performance goals," where learners pursue achievement in order to increase their sense of ability and self-worth and where success is measured in terms of doing better than others. Such a climate may well prevail in other Western soceties, such as the United States (as argued by Woods, Fox, & Buehl, 2003). The present study suggests a need to move away from this concentration on performance and to create a learning climate instead where the emphasis is on mastery experiences, learning for its own sake, where learners are encouraged to view success as the result of effort, perseverance, and problem solving in the shape of effective strategy use.

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Appendix

Outline Interview Schedule
Note. *This was adapted according to the interviewee's questionnaire responses. Only questions relevant to this article are given.*

- I asked you to say how well you were doing in French, and you ticked [Nos 1–6]. Can you explain why you put that? How can you tell how well you have done?
- You expect a good grade, yet you say you are only doing reasonably well/badly. Why is that?
- Your teacher thinks you will get grade X in your examination, and you said you expected to get grade Y. Why the difference?
- What have you found particularly easy about . . . [language learning skill identified in questionnaire]?
- What have you found particularly hard about . . . [language learning skill identified in questionnaire]?
- When I asked you to say how much you agreed with certain reasons to explain your success, you put . . . [level of agreement shown with statements referring to ability, effort, luck, strategies, task ease]. Can you tell me a bit more about it? What is the most important reason? Why? Are there other reasons? Are some more/less important?
- Similarly for reasons to explain your lack of success. Why did you put what you did? What is the most important reason? Why? Are there other reasons? Are some more/less important?
- You say you use good/poor strategies for [specified skill]. Which strategies do you use?
- How could you do better in French, do you think?