Mind the Gap: Age-Related Differences in Students' Perceptions of English Foreign Language Teacher and Motivation

Morana Drakulić[1]

∾ The present paper addresses the age issue in the context of learning English as a foreign language in instructional settings. Our attention has been directed towards the examination of potential differences in students' perceptions of their foreign language teacher and motivation in relation to age. A total of 592 participants attending higher grades of elementary school participated in the research. The results have shown that students' perception of English language teacher characteristics and competences varies in relation to age. Although elementary school students perceive their language teacher to be the most competent in the area of instructional competences, younger students seem to put more emphasis on teacher's personal characteristics over professional competences. The study also indicates differences in motivation, with an accentuated decline in relation to students' age. The study offers a valuable information for teachers and policy makers and emphasizes the need for further adjustment of teaching methodology to various age groups.

Keywords: age, foreign language teacher, motivation, students' perceptions

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1   Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka, Croatia; morana.drakulic@ufri.uniri.hr.

Upoštevanje vrzeli: s starostjo povezane razlike v učenčevih dojemanjih učiteljev angleščine in motivacije

Morana Drakulić

∼   V raziskavi smo preučevali vprašanje starosti v kontekstu učenja angleščine v učnih okoljih. Pozornost smo posvetili preučevanju mogočih razlik v dojemanju njihovih učiteljev tujega jezika in motivacije v povezavi s starostjo. Skupno je v raziskavi sodelovalo 592 učencev višjih razredov osnovne šole. Izsledki so pokazali, da učenci različno dojemajo značilnosti učiteljev angleščine in njihove kompetence glede na starost. Čeprav osnovnošolci dojemajo svoje učitelje angleščine kot najsposobnejše na področju kompetenc poučevanja, pa se je izkazalo, da mlajši učenci dajejo več poudarka osebnostnim značilnostim kot profesionalnim kompetencam. Raziskava kaže tudi na razlike v motivaciji s poudarjenim upadanjem glede na učenčevo starost. Raziskava daje pomembne vpoglede za učitelje in odločevalce ter poudarja potrebo po nadaljnjem prilagajanju metod poučevanja različnim starostnim skupinam.

Ključne besede: starost, učitelj tujega jezika, motivacija, dojemanje učencev

Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at an early age has become a more prominent topic in the last two decades or so as both policy makers and field practitioners have begun to realise the potential benefits an early start may bring. This raising awareness is partly the consequence of national politics that advocate the necessity of communication in at least one FL (European Commission, 2006) and the assumption that younger children learn better as well as easier and that the extended period of learning a language leads to higher levels of proficiency and attainment.

The impact of the global pressures to learn English from an earlier age gave rise to uncertainties regarding effective programme design for this age group (Enever & Moon, 2009, p. 9). This has, as a consequence, again initiated extended research on the age-related issues in the context of early FL learning in formal educational settings.

The age factor in L2 attainment has long been a subject of a debate whether differences in the FL achievement may be explained in terms of maturational constraints (Critical Period) or in terms of the effect of a wider set of factors. In regard to the latter, a substantial amount of research has turned their focus to the examination of a complex interplay between age and a plethora of variables that may affect the quality of acquisition. However, as Cenoz (2003) points out, much of the studies on, what they call, age issue, have been conducted in second language situations where children are exposed to a FL both in and outside of the classroom. Such a surrounding is very different from a FL setting and calls for s new research perspective which should focus on those factors which are relevant to the classroom teaching and learning context. In this connection, one line of the research recognized the importance of investigating contextual factors as well as learner-related variables. Within this research paradigm, an emphasis is put on a more detailed examination of students' subjective perceptions of the language learning environment especially in relation to younger students whose subjective interpretations and views on the classroom activities as well as on the FL teacher work and behaviour may strongly affect the level of their FL learning motivation.

Motivated by these arguments, the aim of the present study is threefold. First, we wanted to determine effective FL teacher competences as perceived by elementary school students. Guided by the premise that students' subjective perceptions serve as an affective base for the development of attitudes towards the learning situation (Gardner, 2010), we also wanted to explore the nature of the relationship between students' subjective perceptions and language

learning motivation. Lastly, the study is to shine a new light on age-related debates through the examination of potential differences in students' perceptions and, consequently, their level of motivation in relation to their age.

Issues related to optimal age for learning a FL

The issue of the ideal or optimal age for successful language acquisition has been initiated approximately sixty years with the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which has since been a topic of controversy and critic. Differences in the interpretation of its main fundamental postulates, such as relevant age span (Vanhove, 2013) and varying research results that argue for and against CPH, led to reasoned as to whether age-related differences in attainment may be explained in terms of a Critical Period. In this context, much attention has been drawn to the notion of ultimate attainment, which has been set on a level of native-like proficiency. Despite empirical evidence that supports the assumption that exposure to a FL from an early age facilitates the level of proficiency (Butler, 2015; Chen et al., 2020; Domínguez & Pessoa, 2005), the question of whether reliance on this particular comparison is really the best way of exploring age effects and maturational issues has been raised (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Arguments made by those taking this perspective seem to suggest that a native speaker model in the FL teaching context is unfounded, since there is no reason why a FL learner's ultimate attainment should be the same as that of a native speaker (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Furthermore, research focused on late beginners attaining native-like proficiency suggested that the differences in FL acquisition between younger and older learners may be attributed to a large set of factors, and not only to biological maturation constraints as CPH implies (Johnstone, 2002). Moreover, as Mihaljević Djigunović (2014) points out, this new approach has come to a realization that age is difficult to disentangle from other variables and its impact on SLA can be better understood if we take into account its interactions with other factors (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2014, p.420).

With the aim of focusing their work on promoting new research paradigms in language education, recent empirical studies have involved a plethora of relevant variables that may facilitate and debilitate the process of FL learning. Thus, the attention has been drawn to factors such as attitudes and motivation (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei & Muir, 2019; Dörnyei, 2020; Muñoz & Singleton, 2011), quality and the amount of home support (Enever, 2011; Muñoz & Lindgren, 2011) the role of the teacher (Borg, 2006; Dewaele et al., 2019); Drakulić, 2018; Sert, 2019; Tragant & Lundberg, 2011), the learners self-concept (Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011), willingness to communicate

(Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Dewaele, 2019) etc. In recent overview chapters of the age effects, it is possible to discern a growing interest in the investigation of the learners' subjective perceptions of the language learning situation (Ahn & West, 2016; Enever, 2011; Jakominić & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2004; Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2014; Nikolov, 1999; Nikolov, 2002; Yuksel & Halici, 2010), i.e. the relationship between the learner's perception, age and the ultimate attainment. In this line of work, further evidence of age-related difference has been reported with regard to students' perceptions of their FL teacher work and behaviour as one aspect of attitudes towards the learning situation. However, this particular issue has often been investigated alongside the wider set of contextual variables and has, unfortunately, rarely been formulated as the main research aim of the empirical research conducted so far.

Motivation and attitudes in FL learning

Motivation refers to a factor that provides an initial impetus, which later turns into a drive that pushes learners throughout the whole learning process. Attitudes refer to the learner's feelings about the FL community and the learning situation and, as such, represent the affective base for the motivation to develop.

Research on FL learning motivation has been heavily influenced by Gardner's motivational theory which has been built around two key principles: integrative orientation (i.e. identification with L2 community), and instrumental orientation (i.e. practical value of learning a language). Despite its dominance in the social-psychological period, the integrative-instrumental dichotomy was argued to be insufficient to describe motivation on other language learning contexts, such as a classroom context, where learners do not have a direct contact with a target language community (Dörnyei, 2009). Therefore, Dörnyei proposed the L2 Motivational Self-System, consisting of three components: (1) the ideal L2 self (i.e. learner's imagined ideal future self as an L2 speaker); (2) the ought-to L2-self (i.e. learner's beliefs on the attributes they should possess to meet expectations or avoid possible negative outcomes); and (3) L2 learning experience (i.e. motivating factors of the learning situation such as the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group etc.). The component addressing the language context acknowledges the fact that the two-self guides do not impact the learning process in an isolated way (Csizér, 2019, p. 73).

More recently, the research has also pointed out to the dynamic nature of motivation and its sensitivity to temporal dimension which, in consequence, gave rise to longitudinal approach to the investigation of this multifaceted

phenomenon (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). In the context of early FL learning, Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) proposed the framework of young learners' motivation which illustrates the complex interplay between motivation and valued others (i.e. family members, the teacher, and peers) along three stages. At stage one (6-8 years) the teacher holds the central motivating role and is the primary source of learners' motivation. The impact of the family in this stage is quite significant as well. At the second stage (9-11 years) the teacher and the family still have an effect on the level of motivation, whereas peers' role gains more importance. Finally, in the third stage (12-14 years) the impact of the family and the teacher declines, giving rise to peers who take over the function of main motivator and a role model.

Research on young language learners' motivation, attitudes and age

Research on the relationship between age and other factors relevant for the instructed language learning settings has coherently pointed to the importance of individual learners' characteristics. Research to date suggests that young learners' motivation is a specific phenomenon due to its sources and dimensions, as well as to the complex and dynamic interaction it enters into with other language learning variables (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). However, Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006) warn how these claims should be interpreted with caution, since superficial considerations may lead to already widely accepted assumption that early FL instruction will, as a rule, contribute to children's favourable attitudes (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006, p. 246). Positive language learning experiences, in other words, do not develop *per se*, or just because of the fact that FL instruction has been introduced at an early age. This shift in the perspective has consequently resulted in research based on a more situated approach which showed that classroom and learning processes are the primary sources of formation and variation of young learners' attitudes and motivation (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019).

Concerning the relation between motivation and attitudes at the one hand, and immediate learning environment on the other, there seems to be an agreement that the teacher has an important, multidimensional motivational role. Insights from classroom studies suggest that teachers' choice of activities as well as their personality may raise and maintain students' motivation but may also cause demotivation (Mihaljević Djigunović & Letica Krevelj, 2010).

One good illustration of the variety of sources of motivation in the EFL classroom, and their variability in relation to age, is the study conducted by

Nikolov (1999) who examined possible age effects on primary school students' attitudes and motivation. The study showed that the most important motivating factors for elementary school learners are attitudes towards the teacher and intrinsically motivated materials, tasks and activities (Nikolov, 1999, p. 53). This was especially evident among the youngest (6-8 years old) participants, while intrinsic motivation was gradually replaced by instrumental-knowledge motives for learning around puberty. Similar results were found by Fenyvesi (2020) who investigated young learners' attitudinal and motivational changes between two age groups across one year. The results revealed that children's dependence on significant others decreased significantly over time. The study also confirmed more positive attitudes among the early starters at the end of the first year, but revealed that after the second year of instruction their attitude levels dropped to the approximately same level as the late starters' attitudes after the first year (Fenyvesi, 2020, p. 708).

Perhaps one of the most extensive studies exploring the variety of both contextual and learner-related factors within the context of language learning at primary level is the trans-national, longitudinal project Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE). The principal aim was to investigate children's perceptions on their language learning environment, while simultaneously looking at their attitude and motivational changes throughout the four-year period. The project reports on highly complex interactions of learner characteristics (attitudes, motivation, and self-concept) with the other factors, contextual ones in particular. The analysis of children's responses shows that young learners display favourable attitudes and high level of motivation for FL learning which emerge from age-appropriate, game-like activities that, in turn, provide a feeling of achievement and language confidence. When it comes to language achievement, the results indicate a strong interdependence between this variable and motivation, attitudes and self-concept. Finally, the findings also suggest that language achievement becomes increasingly more associated with the learners' individual characteristics as the children mature (Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011).

Mihaljević Djigunović (2007) investigated the relationship between the learners' affective characteristics in predicting achievement in English as a FL among primary and secondary school students. The comparison of the two age groups revealed certain differences in terms that older students have a more positive affective profile and that this profile serves as the best predictor of achievement. Somewhat similar results were also confirmed in a project conducted by the research group at the University of Basque County. One of the aims was to investigate the effect of the introduction of EFL at different

ages on the rate of achievement, the development of attitudes and motivation between the groups of learners who have had the same amount of exposure to language (Cenoz, 2003, p.81). The results indicate that young learners obtain significantly lower results in all of the measures of English proficiency except for the mechanics in writing, where no significant differences were found. On the other hand, younger learners 'outperformed' their older colleagues in the affective domain since they displayed significantly more positive attitudes and higher levels of motivation.

Data analysis from these and other extensive studies point to several important issues as well as drawbacks found in the current theoretical and empirical research. It suggests that FL learners' attitudes and motivation are highly dependent on their language learning experience, that is, on their subjective perceptions of the language learning environment. Acknowledging the fact that teachers represent a cornerstone and the prerequisite for the development of the quality of the language learning experience, one would expect a plethora of studies devoted to this specific issue. However, the research on how the (perceived) quality of the teacher contributes to the language learning in general is still rather scarce, except for few noticeable exceptions (Beaudrie et al., 2004; Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2009; Kadha, 2009; Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009; Zamani & Ahangari, 2016). For this reason, Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović (2006) accentuate the necessity for exploring classroom practices over time and the triangulation of data collected from learners, teachers and observers.

Method

Research aim

The study aimed at getting an insight into the potential differences in students' perceptions of teacher's professional competences and intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills and the way the potential differences in perceptions affect students' level of motivation in relation to age. We expect that there will be a statistical relevant difference in the students' perceptions of their language teacher as well as in their level of motivation in relation to age.

Participants

The study was carried out in the Croatian socio-educational context and involved a total of 592 participants out of which 302 (51%) were male and 290 (49%) were female. Participants attended higher grades of elementary school (age: 10/14 years) i.e. 139 students (23.5%) attended fifth grade, 152 students (25.7%) attended sixth grade, 162 students (27.3%) attended seventh grade and,

finally, 139 (23.5%) students attended eighth grade of elementary school. All students follow the same curriculum, that is, they learn English as the FL from the very beginning of their compulsory education.

Instruments

The participants' perceptions of their FLT work and behaviour were measured by the questionnaire designed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire examined students' views of their FL teacher professional competences and intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills, to what extent the competences and characteristics were present in students' real or actual language teacher. The final version of the instrument, after the pilot study was conducted, consists of 27 positively worded items distributed across three components assessing FL teacher work and behaviour: Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills (12 items), Intercultural competence (6 items), and Competences related to FL classroom instruction (9 items). Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1)'*Not important at all* to (5) *Very important*) (see Appendix). Prior to the construction, we examined some of the already constructed and available instruments (Barnes & Lock, 2010; Beaudrie et al., 2004; Bell, 2005; Carvalho, 1999; Sakurai, 2012) and took into consideration those items which best suited our instrument purpose. However, taking into account the importance of the specificity of the socio-educational context (Gardner, 2010), the primary source which we consulted was the competence description from the Competences of Primary School FL Teachers in the Republic of Croatia (Radišić et al., 2007).

Information about learners' motivation for learning EFL was gathered through Motivation questionnaire which is comprised of 30 items and assessed on a Likert-type scale ranging from strong disagreement (1) to strong agreement (7). The instrument is the adapted version of Gardner's international version of Attitude Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 2010). It consists of three subscales assessing affect-based constructs of motivation: motivational intensity, desire to learn English, and the attitudes towards the learning situation. Since the instrument is originally written in English, the order of the items was taken from the original whereas the translation to Croatian was provided by Gardner and Mihaljević Djigunović (2003).

Data analysis

We used the following statistical procedures: descriptive statistics, correlational analysis, and one-way analysis of variance. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation values) was used with the aim to inspect the

distribution of results within each component and construct. On the basis of descriptive statistics it was also determined which aspects of FL teacher were perceived as more or less favorable. The level of students' motivation was also observed and explored at the descriptive level. Correlational analysis (Pearson correlation coefficient) was carried out with the aim to determine the degree and the type of relationship between all the aforementioned variables. As minimal correlation coefficient the value of 0,30 was used. The analysis of variance was used to investigate whether there are statistical significant differences between mean values of variables included in this research.

Results

The distribution of the statistical data was first investigated through the variables' mean and standard deviation values for each instrument separately. Potentially statistically significant differences in relation to age were then investigated through the analysis of variance.

Table 1

Composite scores for components assessing ELT competences and characteristics

Component		Mean	St. deviation
Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills	Sum score	44.10	9.58
	Scale average	3.67	.79
Intercultural competence	Sum score	20.10	6.12
	Scale average	3.35	1.02
Competences related to FL classroom instruction	Sum score	33.80	8.45
	Scale average	3.75	.93

The analysis of the questionnaire assessing students' perceptions of their FL teacher (Table 1) indicates that the component assessing language teacher's instructional competence has the highest sample mean score ($\bar{x}$ = 3.75, SD = .93), followed by the component assessing the teacher's personal characteristics ($\bar{x}$ = 3.67, SD = .79), and by the component assessing the teacher's intercultural competence ($\bar{x}$ = 3.35, SD = 1.02).

In order to determine if there is any statistical difference in students' perceptions in relation to their age, we used the analysis of variance (Table 2). The analysis confirmed statistically significant differences between the means of all groups under the analysis (p < .01). Regarding the teacher's intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills, a statistically significant difference

of perceptions was found between the sixth ($\bar{x}$ = 44.88, SD = 9.34), and seventh ($\bar{x}$ = 42.79, SD = 7.94) graders, and between the sixth and eighth ($\bar{x}$ = 42.00, SD = 10.41) graders. These age groups differ in relation to their perceptions of their actual teacher intercultural competences since significant differences were found between sixth ($\bar{x}$ = 22.22, SD = 4.80) and seventh ($\bar{x}$ = 19.14, SD = 6.61) graders and between sixth and eighth ($\bar{x}$ = 18.61, SD = 5.53) graders as well. Differences in perceptions were the most evident in relation to students' assessment of competences related to FL classroom instruction. Here, statistical significant difference was found between fifth and seventh graders; fifth and eighth graders; sixth and seventh graders and, finally, between sixth and eighth graders.

Table 2

Analysis of variance for ELT perceptions in relation to age

Component	Grade	Mean	SD	df	F	sig.
	5th	44.88	10.04			
PER	6th	46.72	9.34	3.58	7.55	.00
	7th	42.79	7.94			
	8th	42.00	10.41			
	5th	20.43	6.72			
CUL	6th	22.22	4.80	3.58	10.74	.00
	7th	19.14	6.61			
	8th	18.61	5.53			
	5th	36.07	7.92			
INSTR	6th	36.14	7.05	3.58	16.95	.00
	7th	32.50	8.17			
	8th	30.46	9.31			

Note: PER – personal characteristics and skills; CUL – intercultural competence; INSTR – competences related to FL classroom instruction

The results obtained from the preliminary analysis of *Motivation* questionnaire reveal that the motivation for learning English is present within our sample (Table 3).

Table 3

Mean and standard deviation values for items assessing motivation

	Items	Mean	SD
1	I don't pay much attention to the feedback I receive in my English class.	2.65	1.74
2	Learning English is really great.	5.02	1.91
3	I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English.	5.63	1.69
4	I make a point of trying to understand all the English I see and hear.	5.74	1.44
5	Knowing English isn't really an important goal in my life.	1.87	1.64
6	I hate English.	1.95	1.66
7	I don't bother checking my assignments when I get them back from my English teacher.	2.43	1.83
8	I really enjoy learning English.	4.72	1.93
9	If it were up to me, I would spend all of my time learning English.	3.27	1.99
10	I keep up to date with English by working on it almost every day.	3.70	1.86
11	I sometimes daydream about dropping English.	2.79	2.19
12	I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English.	3.03	1.97
13	I put off my English homework as much as possible.	2.37	1.96
14	English is a very important part of the school programme.	6.32	1.21
15	I want to learn English so well that it will become natural to me.	5.94	1.54
16	When I have a problem understanding something in my English class, I always my teacher for help.	4.56	2.03
17	I'm losing any desire I ever had to know English.	2.16	1.74
18	Learning English is a waste of time.	1.66	1.40
19	I tend to give up and not pay attention when I don't understand my English teacher's explanation of something.	2.36	1.66
20	I plan to learn as much English as possible.	5.97	1.48
21	I would like to learn as much English as possible.	6.11	1.41
22	I really work hard to learn English.	5.50	1.65
23	To be honest, I really have no desire to learn English.	1.62	1.35
24	I think that learning English is dull.	2.34	1.79
25	I can't be bothered trying to understand the more complex aspects of English.	2.17	1.62
26	I love learning English.	4.84	1.96
27	I wish I were fluent in English.	6.45	1.21
28	When I am studying English, I ignore distractions and pay attention to my task.	4.80	1.83
29	I haven't any great wish to learn more than the basics of English.	1.92	1.50
30	When I leave school, I will give up the study of English because I am not interested in it.	1.65	1.36
	Sum score	111.54	50.55
	Scale average	3.71	1.68

The analysis of the learner's responses reflect the presence of motivational intensity, i.e. the effort, persistence, and consistency in learning. Students, in other words, invest an effort to learn and understand English as much as possible (#4, #22,), are willing to concentrate on tasks and to the feedback

they receive from their teacher (#1, #28) but are, to a certain extent, reluctant to work on the improvement of English on daily basis (#7, #10). High mean values obtained for the items within a questionnaire implicate the existence of positive attitudes and a desire to learn English as well. Learning English is perceived as enjoyable activity and the possession of the knowledge of English is considered as important competence to acquire both in the present and in the future.

Possible statistically significant differences in the level of motivation in relation to the students' age were explored on the basis of ANOVA results and post hoc analysis.

Table 4

Analysis of variance for motivation in relation to age

Construct	Grade	Mean	SD	df	F	sig.
MOT	5th	172.97	30.21	3.58	7.04	.00
	6th	165.87	32.28			
	7th	166.31	28.02			
	8th	156.60	29.05			

As it is apparent from the Table 4, there was significant difference found in relation to age and level of motivation ($F(3.58) = 7.04$, $p < .05$) between the means of all groups under the analysis. Post hoc tests revealed that eighth graders statistically significantly differ from the fifth, sixth and seventh graders. It appears that the level of motivation decreases with age.

The final set of analysis investigated possible significant differences in relation to gender on the basis of an independent sample t-test.

Table 5 shows that the level of motivation significantly differs in relation to students' gender, that is, that female learners display higher levels of motivation in comparison to male learners.

Table 5

T-test on gender differences in relation to motivation

Construct	Gender	Mean	SD	Test for Equality of Variances		t-test		
				F	p	t	df.	p
MOT	M	160.21	31.68	6.722	.010	4.38	583.08	.00
	F	170.98	27.92					

Contrary to that, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to students' perception and their gender. As can be seen from Table 6, the perceptions of ELT competences and personal characteristics are rather similar in male and female students since p-values are all greater than 0.05.

Table 6

T-test on gender differences in relation to Actual ELT perceptions

Component	Gender	Mean	SD	Test for equality of variances		t-test		
				F	p	t	df.	p
PER	M	43.66	9.86	.68	.40	1.13	587.56	.25
	F	44.55	9.27					
CUL	M	20.27	6.10	.06	.80	.66	589	.50
	F	19.94	6.14					
INSTR	M	34.03	8.18	1.57	0.21	.70	582.90	.48
	F	33.54	8.73					

After the examination and the analysis of the results obtained by each instrument separately, we wanted to determine whether there is a relationship between all variables included in our research. For the estimation of possible correlations between the variables, a Pearson correlation coefficient was used.

Table 7

Correlational analysis between motivation, age, gender and ELT perceptions

Variables	GEN	AGE	MOT	PER	CUL	INSTR
GEN	1					
AGE	.026	1				
MOT	.178**	-.173**	1			
PER	.047	-.147**	.359**	1		
CUL	-.027	-.157**	.236**	.617**	1	
INSTR	-.029	-.266**	.342**	.762**	.667**	1

*p < .05
**p < .01

The results of this investigation also show that there is correlation between all variables assessing good English teacher competences. Thus strong positive and significant correlation was found between PER and CUL (r =

0.61, p < .01), PER and INSTR (r = .76, p < .01) and CUL and INSTR (r = .66, p < .01). Motivation was found to correlate moderately and positively with students' perceptions of language teacher intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics (r = .35, p < .01), with perceptions of teacher's competences related to FL classroom instruction (r = .34, p < .01), and weakly and positively with gender (r = .1, p < .01).

The results indicate a weak, negative but significant correlation between age and all variables under the analysis, especially between age and the perceptions of the teacher's instructional competences (r = -.2, p < .01) and between motivation (r = -.7, p < .01).

Discussion

This study set out with the aim of assessing the importance of relationship between students' age and other contextually relevant variables in the instructional FL learning setting, namely the students' perceptions of their ELT and motivation.

Generally speaking, students, regardless age, ascribed more importance to the teachers' intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills than to other assessed aspects of their profession. These findings are in line with the qualitative research conducted by Drakulić (2018) who found the more importance was ascribed to teacher's personal characteristics than to competences related to FL classroom instruction. Learners accentuated characterictis such as calmness, rationality, emphaty, flexibility and sense of humor as attributes that positively affect their motivation. Conversely, overt reaction to criticism, as well as overt criticism towards the learners, were perceived as sources of demotiovation (for more details see Drakulić, 2018).

In accordance with our initial assumptions, students perceived their language teacher differently with regard to their age, i.e. grade they were attending. Younger students, those attending 5th and 6th grade, assessed their teacher's personal characteristics more positively than their older peers did. The inspection of mean values indicate that the difference between younger (5th and 6th graders) and older (7th and 8th graders) is significant, with the younger students evaluating teacher's personal characteristics more highly. The same pattern may be observed for students' evaluation of their teacher's intercultural competence as well. The present findings seem to be consistent with that of Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) who found that the positive perceptions of teacher's ability to inspire decrease as students get older. In her study on reasons for learning English, Nikolov (2002) also states that young learners (aged 8-11) report teacher's

personal characteristics more frequently and in a more enthusiastic way when compared to the older learners (aged 11-14).

The greatest differences in students' perceptions were found in assessment of competences related to FL classroom instruction. In this connection, teacher was perceived as more competent by younger students and less competent by older ones. These findings are in agreement with those of Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) which showed that younger students tend to assess teacher's competence more highly than the older students do. Same observation was also reported by Nikolov (2002) who found that students tend to give fewer positive statements related to teacher's qualities as they get older.

As can be seen, students' age affects the way students perceive their ELT competences and characteristics. This conclusion is further supported by the results of correlational analysis which indicate a rather weak but significant negative correlation between students' age and all three components assessing language teacher competences and characteristics. While younger students tend to perceive their teacher more positively, it seems that this tendency weakens as they enter the last two grades of their compulsory education. A possible explanation for this result is that younger students perceive emotional link to the teacher as a relevant factor within the learning context and, thus, attach more importance to teacher's personal characteristics than to some other aspect of teacher profession. Another possible explanation may be, as Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) points out, young students' tendency to perceive a person who knows more than they do as a very competent person. The older they get, the more proficient they become in the language which may affect their perception of the teacher's expertize and competence negatively. Finally, the age-related decline in perceptions could be related to the growing difficulties imposed by the more demanding syllabus. We may assume that students who experience difficulties in mastering the content would probably perceive their language teacher as too demanding and strict and the use of his methods and procedures as inappropriate. This may further be enhanced by the critical attitude towards adults and education in general which usually appears around puberty (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019) and potentially leads to, as Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) argue, demotivation.

One surprising finding was that the 6th graders, not the 5th, view their FL teacher as more competent in all three components. A possible explanation for these results may be related to the fact that 6th grade students know their teacher better and are more familiar with both his personality and instruction methodology than the 5th graders are. After the 6th grade, it seems that a sort of 'shift' in perception occurs, since the positivity in perception weakens all the way to

the 8th grade, for which the lowest assessments were found. A possible interpretation for these results is that students attending 6th grade have probably not yet entered the sensitive time of puberty which is generally characterized by (too) critical attitude towards adults and school in general. For these reasons, it may not be surprising that a shift in perception occurs after the 6th grade, after which learners enter the preadolescent stage.

An unanticipated finding of this study was that boys and girls share a rather consistent views on the importance of FL teacher competences and personal characteristics. This is rather surprising since female students have often been reported to exert general sensitivity towards a language learning situation and, as such, tend to emphasize interpersonal characteristics of a teacher (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998; Shishavan, 2010). This may be explained by the non-existence of teachers' gender-biased attitudes and expectations (Rúa, 2006). Dewaele, Gknou and Mercer (2018), on the other hand, draw attention to the teacher's emotional intelligence which has shown to contribute to the effective working in heterogeneous classrooms.

In line with our expectations, the results have also shown differences in the level of motivation in relation to students' age. The comparison of mean values revealed that the 5th graders exert the highest level of motivation contrary to the 8th graders who statistically significantly differ from other age groups. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have also demonstrated age-related differences in motivation. In this connection, Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) found significant differences in the level of motivation across three different age groups which all go in favour of the youngest (elementary) school population. Much of the same results were reported by Williams et al. (2002) and Fenyvesi (2020) who also found a decrease of motivation with age. In their study younger students had a higher integrative orientation, more positive attitude to their teacher as well as perception of their ability, success and invested effort.

Building on these findings, it seems possible to state that younger students generally start FL learning with very positive attitudes and motivation which are later shaped by the language learning environment and the experience. In this connection, one of the possible explanations may be that students, as they gain more learning experience, become more aware of likes and dislikes of the various elements of the learning process (Ahn & West, 2016).Closely connected to this is a strong critical attitude towards adults and learning in general which typically appears around puberty and, as such, may explain a decrease in motivation among older students in our sample. Another possible explanation could be related to growing difficulties with the language learning itself. A more demanding

syllabus as well as pressure about achieving good grades as a condition for enrolment in secondary school may result in losing desire to learn altogether (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). All in all, it could be conceivably hypothesized that age-related differences in motivation are affected by various aspects of formal learning environment but at the same time they are also related to a more general adolescent dissatisfaction with the whole process of education.

Finally, the analysis conducted on gender differences in relation to motivation confirmed previous findings which often report higher levels of motivation among female learners (Bećirović, 2017; Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998; Heinzmann, 2009). In an attempt to clarify possible reasons behind gender differences, Yashima et al. (2017) argue that gender-biased responses are socially and culturally conditioned. This tendency is, as the authors imply, strongly linked to the Ought-to self, that is, to the learners' experience of the strong external pressure to succeed academically, and internal pressure to measure up to who they wish to be as educated persons (p.705). The aforementioned is closely linked to a folk belief that girls are better at languages than boys, i.e. that (foreign) languages are female subjects, whereas maths and physics are male subjects (Heinzmann, 2009, p. 20). These stereotypic beliefs about gender-biased aptitude may not only give rise to unequal social expectations, but may also impact students' beliefs about language learning and, consequently, their level of motivation (Horwitz, 1999).

Although the presented research is correlational in nature and, as such, does not allow causal conclusions, the interpretation of the potential causality may be interpreted within the context of the socio-educational model of second language acquisition (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). In this connection, attitudes towards the learning situation are represented through students' subjective evaluative reaction to the teacher's work and behaviour. Since attitudes serve as an affective base for motivation to develop (Gardner, 2010), it may be assumed that one source of higher levels of motivation are positive perceptions of the language teacher. This notion is further supported by moderate, positive and significant correlations found between motivation and all three constructs assessing language teacher competences and characteristics. In fact, as Hattie (2003) points out, teachers are the greatest source of variance in students' achievement and it is our responsibility to concentrate on enhancing these sources of variance to truly make a difference (Hattie, 2003, p. 1).

Conclusion

Despite its exploratory nature, the findings of the present study suggest that age is a powerful factor which affects students' perceptions of the language learning situation in the interrelation with other individual learner characteristics and contextual factors. Bearing in mind teachers' powerful motivational role, it seems plausible to assume that students' subjective perceptions on FL teacher competences and personal characteristics may be one of the explanatory factors for the variation in language learning motivation. It has been shown that younger students attach more value and importance to intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills such as empathy, flexibility and a sense of humour than to competences related to FL classroom instruction. Although age is just one of the plethora of factors which may attribute for the differences in students' preferences, we can say, with almost complete certainty, that young children are not as similar to one another as it is often assumed (Nikolov, 2002).

These results are very indicative and offer valuable information and guidelines for teachers and policy makers who need to be aware that only competent teachers who are able to adjust their methodology to various age groups can really contribute to the quality of the teacher-student relationship and the quality of the learning process as a whole.

Due to practical constraints, this study cannot provide a comprehensive review of other potentially relevant variables that may have also affected the observed differences. A deeper insight into the various constituents of language learning motivation will surely contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of age-related differences found in this research. Moreover, additional clarifications, such as a control type of rating, may potentially delineate the reasons behind a negative answering strategy of the older learners. Thus, the future research should be directed towards the incorporation of a wider set of methodological procedures as well as variables relevant for the FL learning in instructional settings.

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Biographical note

MORANA DRAKULIĆ, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher in the field of foreign language teaching methodology currently employed at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka. Her main areas of interest are individual differences in foreign language learning, foreign language teacher competences, the relationship between students' perspectives of foreign language teacher and the affective variables within the elementary school context.

Appendix

Current language teacher questionnaire

My real languge teacher...					
Gives me enough time to answer a question.	1	2	3	4	5
Is patient.	1	2	3	4	5
Is fair.	1	2	3	4	5
Accepts my opinion and my ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
Has a sense of humor.	1	2	3	4	5
Respects me.	1	2	3	4	5
Explains the teaching content in a manner that is clear and comprehensible to me.	1	2	3	4	5
Is a lenient grading teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
Understands me and establishes a good (friendly) relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
Speaks English in a manner comprehensible to me.	1	2	3	4	5
Speaks about her/his personal experiences.	1	2	3	4	5
Enjoys teaching English.	1	2	3	4	5
Often teaches about the culture and customs of the English language speaking countries.	1	2	3	4	5
Emphasizes the similarities and differences between Croatian culture and the English language speaking cultures.	1	2	3	4	5
Is well familiar with the culture of the English language speaking countries.	1	2	3	4	5
Uses different materials and activities during lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
Chooses interesting texts which describe different customs of the English language speaking countries.	1	2	3	4	5
Develops an understanding for cultural and social customs which differ from those in Croatia.	1	2	3	4	5
Sets clear rules which I should follow.	1	2	3	4	5
Examines the content that has been covered and practiced during lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
Cares about how much I have learned.	1	2	3	4	5
Always knows what we did and what has to be done.	1	2	3	4	5
Holds English language lessons in which I can work in peace.	1	2	3	4	5
Makes the lesson pleasurable and relaxing for work.	1	2	3	4	5
Encourages me to work and to actively participate during lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
Explains what I did well and what I need to work on in a manner comprehensible to me.	1	2	3	4	5
Checks understanding of the content by asking me questions.	1	2	3	4	5