

Motivation and attitudes of German language learners at NUI Maynooth: an empirical study

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Abstract

This paper describes some of the results of a study undertaken in 1997, in the form of an M.A. thesis, on attitudes and motivations of undergraduate students of German at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. It examines students' perceptions of the learning process and learning outcomes, as well as student recommendations for the enhancement of the learning process. Within the theoretical framework, it seeks to establish the relationship between attitudes and motivation, based on student perceptions. As the debate on motivations and attitudes continues, current theories and hypotheses have been subsequently applied to these findings.

Introduction

In Foreign Language Learning (FLL), as in every other field of human learning, motivation is the crucial force, which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he or she perseveres. Teachers may be unsure, however, as to what exactly motivates their students to learn a foreign language. In this context, a questionnaire was designed for the purpose of establishing students' evaluations of their attitudes and motivation for learning German as undergraduates in the Department of German at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. This study seeks to gain a profile of the students' motivational drives, as well as greater insight into the influence of affective variables on students' performance in the foreign language classroom.

Motivation

Much of the research on motivation has been initiated and inspired by Gardner and Lambert's (1959, 1972) instrumental-integrative dichotomous categorisation. Although this motivation construct did not go unchallenged over the years, it was not until the early 1990s that researchers started calling for a more pragmatic

education-centred approach to motivation research, which would be consistent with the perceptions of practising teachers (Dörnyei 1994: 273). It was argued that the Gardner and Lambert conventional classification of motivation fails to provide a meaningful developmental model for teachers and students (Green 1999).

'Motivation' is the most frequently used term for explaining the success or failure of virtually any task. However, this claim glosses over a detailed understanding of exactly what motivation is. Research in the context of FLL indicates that motivation directly influences how often students employ learning strategies, how much students interact with native speakers, how much input they receive in the target language, how well they do on course-related assessment tests, how high their general proficiency level becomes, and how long they persevere and maintain their acquired skills after language study is over (Oxford and Shearin 1994: 12).

Based on the aforementioned integrative–instrumental dichotomy, an integrative motivation is that engendered by positive perceptions of the target language and its community. Instrumental motivation refers to motivation to acquire a language as a means of attaining instrumental goals, learning the language for an ulterior motive unrelated to its use by native speakers, e.g. to get a certain kind of job or to pass an examination. The distinction between both orientations has been researched and discussed extensively. Gardner and Lambert (1972) claim that the key to success in FLL lies in the adoption of an 'integrative' orientation toward the target language community.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, new motivational theories have been developed which view motivation as a dynamic and developmental construct, rather than a set of limited binary opposites as in the instrumental–integrative dichotomy. Green (1999) believes that a more expanded view of motivation empowers teachers, as they are no longer at the mercy of a given and immutable form of motivation. In order to integrate the various components into an all-embracing motivational construct, Dörnyei (1994: 280) has conceptualized a general framework of FLL motivation. This framework consists of three levels: the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level. The three levels coincide with the three basic constituents of the language-learning process (the language, the language learner, and the language-learning environment).

The most general level of the construct is the language level, where the focus is on motives and orientations related to various aspects of the language such as the culture it portrays, the community in which it is spoken, and the potential usefulness of proficiency in it. These general motives determine basic learning goals. The integrative motivational subsystem is centred on the individual's language-related predispositions, including social, cultural, and ethnolinguistic components. The instrumental motivational subsystem consists of well-internalized extrinsic motives centred on the learner's future career endeavours. The learner level involves a complex of affects and cognitions that form relatively stable personality traits. Two motivational components underlie the motivational processes at this level, according to Dörnyei (1994), namely the need for achievement and self-confidence, the latter encompassing various aspects of language anxiety, perceived competence, attributions about past experiences, and self-efficacy. At the level of the learning situation, class, teacher, and group factors influence motivation. This level consists of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational conditions: (1) course-specific components are related to the interest, perceived relevance, expectancy, and satisfaction with the teaching materials, course content, teaching methods, and learning tasks, (2) teacher-specific components relate to whether the teacher is more an affiliative or an authority type, and the importance of the direct socialization of motivation (feedback), and (3) group-specific components are made up of goal-orientedness, group cohesion, and classroom goal structure.

A consideration of the motivational construct suggests that attitudes and motivation relate to other aspects of behaviour which are related to FLL. Two of these, persistence in language study and classroom participation, reflect volitional behaviour on the part of the learner, and a consideration of them demonstrates that attitudes and motivation are involved in the learning process. Their importance lies in the fact that they reflect an active involvement on the part of the student in the entire process of learning a foreign language.

Attitudes

It is argued that attitudes are directly related to motivation, which in turn is directly related to FLL learning. In other words, attitudes should be viewed as motivational supports and not as factors

level, various, amu-, profi-, goals. divid-, tural, tional, ntred, el in-, tively, derlie, rnyei, e, the, eived, cacy. group, e and, nents, , and, ching, ts re-, ority, ation, p of, re. at at-, which, study, n the, s that, ocess. re in-, ss of

which have a direct effect on FLL learning (van Els 1984: 117). Furthermore, the relation of attitude to motivation is dependent on the type of motivation. An integrative motivation, for instance, presupposes a positive attitude towards the target language community and culture, but a learner who is instrumentally motivated does not necessarily have a positive attitude towards the target language community. If learning has to take place because of external compulsion, it may proceed only to the minimum level required by these external demands. One important aspect of this experience is the image of the community which the learner derives from the teacher and the teaching materials. If this image remains second-hand, however, it may remain a weak factor compared with more general aspects of motivation, such as enjoyment, stimulation through variety, and, above all, the experience of success.

The various theories and new developments in the motivational research agenda highlight the dynamic nature of motivation and the difficulty in defining the concept in concrete terms. Schlak et al. (2002) raise the question as to whether motivation refers to the reasons why a learner chooses to learn a language or whether it refers to the attention, effort, and persistence expended by the learner. In this context, Tremblay and Gardner (1995) differentiate between motivational antecedents and motivational behaviour. Motivational antecedents are mainly the factors described by Dörnyei (1994) and discussed above. Motivational behaviour, conversely, is characterized by attention, effort, and persistence. Equally confusing is the question of whether motivation is a cause or a product of FLL success. A study by Hermann (1980, cited in Ellis 1994: 515) suggests that it is success that contributes to motivation, rather than vice-versa. Thus, Hermann developed the 'Resultative Hypothesis', which claims that learners who experience success tend to develop motivational intensity, and as a result are more active in class. More recent FLL theories, however, underline the dynamic nature of motivation, in the shape of reciprocal causation between motivation and achievement (Gardner and MacIntyre 1992).

Need for achievement

According to Van Lier (1996: 118), achievement can be defined against societal expectations, standards, programme goals, and so

forth, on the one hand, and on the other hand against the personal, inner perspective. Students must believe that doing the specified tasks will produce positive results and that these results are positively valued. Past success encourages greater effort in the future by heightening the need for achievement, as long as the value of success is perceived as high. If, however, the student wants to succeed but feels that success is unobtainable for some reason, that is, the probability of a desired goal does not appear to be increased by any action or effort, the student adopts a resigned, pessimistic state.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is one's judgement of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations (Weiner 1992). Self-efficacy involves the idea that performance will lead to rewards and focuses on one's ability, creativity, adaptability, and capacity to perform in a particular situational context. Self-efficacy results in higher effort toward a goal, even in response to negative feedback. The implications of this notion are that learners with established goals and a sense of self-efficacy will focus on learning tasks, persist at them, and develop strategies to complete tasks successfully so that they can meet their goals. Learners must feel that they have some control over the outcome (failure or success) as a result of their performance; they must feel a sense of effectiveness within themselves so that they will want to continue learning the target language. The learning strategies that students employ are influenced by goals, expectancies, and self-efficacy. If goals are unclear, if the student's expectancy of success is weak, or if the student's sense of self-efficacy is low, the student is unlikely to use learning strategies, because progress in learning the language does not seem possible.

Foreign language learning ability

So far in this essay motivation has been viewed as a contributing factor to success in a foreign language. We now turn to a second set of variables: those that make up the person's ability to learn. The term 'ability' is often restricted to cognitive aspects of a person's ability to learn, notably intelligence and a set of more specific language-learning abilities called 'language aptitude.' Here, I

will take it to refer to a broader set of factors which, given similar motivation and opportunities to learn, make some people more successful at learning a foreign language than others. Foreign language learners vary on a number of dimensions to do with personality, motivation, age, and aptitude. It is, however, by its very nature difficult to distinguish between variables relating to cognitive style and personality. Language learners vary considerably both in how quickly they learn and in how successful they are.

Researchers have identified an abundance of individual learner variables which may influence learner outcomes. Ellis (1994), in his investigation of individual learner differences, identified three sets of interrelating variables. The first set consists of learner variables, which are of three main types. First, learners are believed to possess strong preconceived ideas about the nature of language learning (Wenden 1987). Second, learners are believed to be influenced by their affective states. Both learners' attitudes and anxiety are subject to change as a result of language experience. The third set consists of general factors. General factors can be subdivided into those that are modifiable (that is, likely to change during the course of FLL), e.g. motivation, and those that are unmodifiable, e.g. aptitude. The second set of variables consists of the different strategies that a learner employs in learning the language, for example note taking, analysis (cognitive strategies), and cooperating with peers (social strategies); for further examples, see Oxford and Crookall (1989: 404). The third set concerns language-learning outcomes. These three sets are related in complex ways.

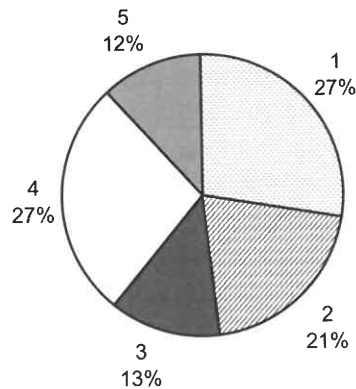
Students' views on their motivational drives to learn German

The empirical part of this study was based on a self-designed questionnaire with 33 questions (mainly multiple-choice), which was evaluated in detail in my M.A. thesis (1997). In the following discussion I will present some of the findings. Some 80 questionnaires were completed and returned, which represents a return rate of 57%. Of the 80 respondents, 57% were first-year students, 14% second-year, and 29% third-year students of German at the NUI, Maynooth. 98 % had previous experience of learning German prior to third level education. The various questions posed in the

questionnaire attempt to identify both general motivations and attitudes towards German language study and specific, course-related motivations and attitudes.

The following question sought to ascertain student motivations for continuing to study German at third level; answers are presented in Figure 1.

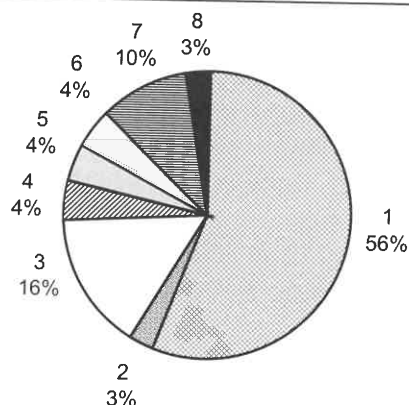
Figure 1: Factors which influenced students' decisions to study German at third level.



- 1= Teacher aroused enthusiasm
 2= Trips to German speaking countries
 3= Family links
 4= Previous classroom or exam success
 5= Other

Responses to this question indicate that previous experience of exam or classroom success and enthusiasm aroused by their former teacher were equally important motivations for students choosing to continue the study of German. This relates to the theory that past experience of language learning plays a major role in shaping attitudes towards language learning.

The question on student initial expectations of the study of German was responded to as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Student expectations of studying German.

- 1= Gain fluency
 2= Greater cultural understanding
 3= Overall appreciation of language, people and culture
 4= Improve language for travel purposes
 5= Find course interesting and stimulating
 6= Greater job prospects
 7= Find difficult but manageable
 8= Other

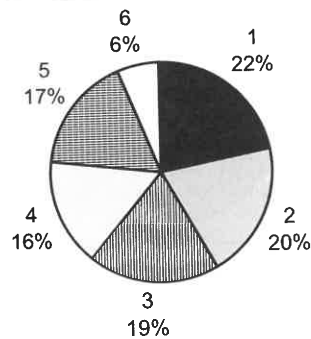
Student expectations are characterized predominantly by a desire to increase language proficiency in order to attain eventual fluency. General comments (where numbers refer to the course of the respondent and the letter to the respondent's sex) included: (1) 'I hoped to develop a high degree of proficiency in the language and be able to communicate through German and understand it, particularly in a German speaking country' (3F) and (2) 'I expected it to be tough, I was right. I didn't expect to excel at it, just to survive' (1M).

Expectations and the extent to which they have been fulfilled are crucial in determining the learner's motivation to learn. Expectations can manifest themselves in various forms, ranging from expectations of the teacher, course material, classmates, the institution, and so on, to expectations that the individual has of his or her performance. The majority of respondents from each year estimated their expectations as being extensively fulfilled. General positive comments included: (1) 'I think that the German department is great. The variety in classes, for example language lab and conversation tutorials, means that German never becomes boring. Exceeded my expectations' (1F) and 'My language skills have greatly improved since coming to Maynooth' (1F).

A positive estimation of having reached goals was largely expressed by third-year students, with 26% stating that their expectations in regard to linguistic and cultural competence had been fully reached and 44% perceiving their expectations as extensively reached. It seems that some students overestimated their ability to excel in one year of language study, as characterized by the following statement: 'My German flows better, but I am nowhere near being fluent' (1F).

The following question sought to assess the predominant reasons for studying German. Results were as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Reasons listed for studying German.



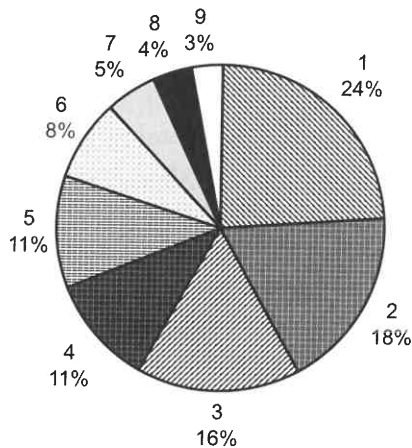
- 1= Employment and business opportunities
 2= Developing inter-cultural awareness
 3= Enjoying elitism/challenge of taking a 'difficult' language
 4= Satisfying curiosity about German-speaking people and culture
 5= Receiving intellectual stimulation
 6= Other

Evidence suggests that the theory of FLL motivation based on an integrative-instrumental orientation does not cover all possible kinds of FLL motivation. More than two thirds of respondents had additional reasons for studying German that did not relate well to this dichotomy. These reasons included receiving intellectual stimulation, enjoying the challenge of taking a 'difficult' language (knowledge-orientation as referred to by Schlak et al. 2002), and so on. This points out once again that there is no single means of learning a foreign language: some learners in some contexts are more successful in language learning if they are integratively oriented, and others benefit from an instrumental orientation. The

findings also suggest that the two types of motivation are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The next question was 'How do you think your attitude has changed towards German-speaking people and culture as a result of your time spent abroad?'. Responses to this question are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Attitude change due to exposure to German-speaking people and culture.



- 1= Determined to improve proficiency
- 2= Find people more interesting
- 3= Enjoy culture
- 4= More interested in language
- 5= Realize importance of integrating with fluent speakers
- 6= People not as unfriendly as expected
- 7= Makes language alive
- 8= Greater understanding of mentality
- 9= Find people unfriendly

It seems that exposure to a foreign language and community promotes favourable attitudes towards that group. Given that there is reason to expect possible attitude change as a result of foreign language exposure, the question still remains as to the nature of this change. The findings of subsequent questions in the questionnaire suggest that a positive experience in German-speaking countries enhances students' motivation to improve language proficiency, as attested by 98% of respondents. The 28% of respondents who had a negative experience of German-speaking people unanimously agree that it did not diminish their original

motivation to learn the language. It seems likely, therefore, that students' total experiences of FLL, not simply the time spent in the foreign language community, influence their attitudes and motivations. Results to the question of how time spent in German-speaking countries affects students' own perceptions of motivation show that the majority view themselves as motivated (70%), while 7% expressed an indifference. The follow-up question was directed at those who had not spent time in German-speaking countries, and results were similar; 18% responded that they were very motivated to learn German, 76% said they were motivated, and 6% claimed indifference. These similar results may suggest that attitudes relate more directly to learning as it is experienced in the language classroom, rather than in the target language community. Furthermore, this may indicate that students who regarded themselves as very motivated, without having spent time in a German-speaking country, are driven by an instrumental motivation.

In response to student perceptions of teaching methods, it is evident that students perceive the need for a relaxed, non-threatening learning environment, as identified by the majority of respondents (24%), who believe that a light-hearted atmosphere enhances learning: 'Those who are humorous and do not criticize motivate me more' (1F).

According to Young (1991: 432), FLL anxiety can be reduced by providing students with regular, enhancing feedback and by instilling in students the view that mistakes are not necessarily a negative part of the language-learning experience. It is hypothesized that inhibition and anxiety discourage risk-taking, which is necessary for progress in language learning. A 'willingness to guess', i.e. a preparedness for risk-taking, is an important characteristic of successful language learning, as identified by Rubin (1975). Researchers in FLL unanimously support the importance of taking the risk of being wrong in order to facilitate successful learning. Self-esteem seems to be closely related to a risk-taking factor; when mistakes are being made, a person with high self-esteem is not daunted by the possibility of being laughed at. Furthermore, a teacher who supports autonomy, as opposed to a controlling teacher, enhances students' feeling of self-determination and intrinsic motivation.

In a follow-up question, students were asked which methods of teaching they found particularly demotivating. The majority of respondents (24%) related their dissatisfaction to uninteresting

areas of study, e.g. an over-emphasis on the study of literature. As discussed earlier, interest, relevance, expectancy, and satisfaction are the four main factors relating to classroom motivation. In the context of this study, it emerged that 24% of respondents view aspects of their language course as both uninteresting and irrelevant, in that it does not satisfy the individual's desire to learn more, nor is it connected to personal needs or goals.

A significant proportion of respondents experience language anxiety, as confirmed by the 14% of respondents who expressed feelings of inferiority about giving incorrect answers. Rivers (1964: 82) believes that such personal motives as fear of anxiety, learned through past experience, may combine with learned social motives, such as desire for social status in a group and for social approval, creating complex reactions which can work powerfully toward inhibiting oral language responses.

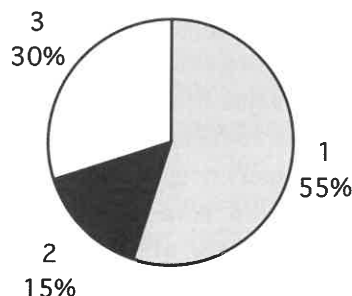
It seems that for different learners, personal goals may crystallize, strengthen, or change at different stages of the learning time span. Intrinsically motivated learners may also develop an instrumental motivation, or lose some of their intrinsic motivation in the face of exam-oriented motivation. Some may find their motivation focusing on overriding short-term incentives, such as passing exams or spending the summer in a German-speaking country.

Evidence suggests that some students experience a decrease in motivation as a result of disheartenment in the face of failure to improve, or frustration with increasing difficulty of the course: e.g., 'Disencouraged by my abject failure to come to terms with the written language' (1M) and 'My spoken German is so bad, I find it hard to initiate conversations' (2F).

The question of whether students actively seek out opportunities to communicate orally in German was posed in order to assess whether students invest time and effort in consciously improving their language skills. Surprisingly, a mere 45% of respondents selected 'yes', as compared to 55 % who admitted not making the effort to communicate in German outside the language classroom. When we consider once again the four elements that constitute motivation, we understand that a person who actively seeks out opportunities to communicate in German must be truly motivated.

In response to the question on student perception of their goals in terms of language proficiency, results were as shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Students' goals in terms of language proficiency.



- 1= Want and expect to develop high levels of proficiency in speaking and writing
 2= Want to develop skills that will enable me to pass exams
 3= Want to develop sufficient proficiency to pursue a career in German

The findings in Figure 5 indicate that the majority of students are driven by an intrinsic motivation towards language study. Some 15% of respondents are driven by an examination-oriented motivation, whereas 30% of respondents have gained a clear perception of more long-term goals, such as the pursuit of German language related careers, indicating an instrumental orientation towards language study.

In order to assess levels of classroom anxiety, students were asked why they do not actively participate in class. This question was directed at the 10% of respondents, who previously claimed that they did not participate in class. Results were as follows: 'Lack of confidence, I get nervous and make a mess of it' (50%) and 'Unsure and afraid of failure' (25%).

For many students, foreign-language courses are deemed the most anxiety-provoking courses that they take (MacIntyre and Gardner 1989). A somewhat more relevant aspect of the research on anxiety lies in the distinction between debilitating and facilitative anxiety (Scovel 1978: 135). The notion of facilitative anxiety is that some apprehension over a task to be accomplished is a positive factor. Otherwise, the learner might lack the necessary tension that keeps him or her poised or alert. The above comments indicate cases of debilitating anxiety.

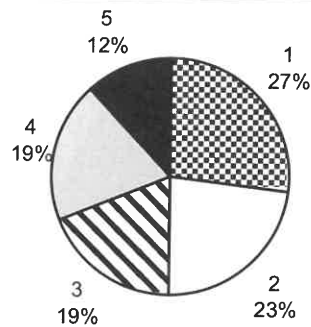
Anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It manifests itself in students quite differently, depending on prior language experience, learner personality, and circumstances. It seems a large majority are afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes may be

viewed as threats to one's ego. According to Brown (1987: 103), mistakes pose both internal and external threats. Internally, one's 'critical' self and one's 'performing' self are in conflict. Externally, the learner perceives others exercising their critical selves, even making personal judgements when he or she makes a mistake. Again, the importance of impulsivity or risk-taking cannot be overemphasized. If we never ventured to speak a sentence until we were certain of its total correctness, we would likely never communicate productively at all.

How students perceive feedback from the lecturer or tutor was responded to as follows: 20% of respondents find positive feedback encouraging, while 8% find negative feedback disheartening. The majority of respondents, 29%, indicated they receive sufficient feedback, as compared to 19% who stressed the opposite.

Suggestions for the improvement of feedback were provided by students and are reported in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Recommendations for the improvement of feedback



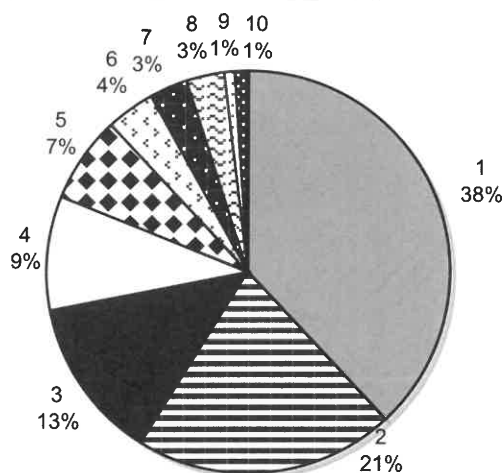
- 1= More one-to-one meetings with lecturers
 2= More detailed explanations of mistakes
 3= Encouragement needed, not just criticism
 4= All written work corrected and graded
 5= More feedback on classwork, not just exam results.

According to Van Lier (1996: 119), feedback can enhance a person's knowledge of success, but only if the person feels that the behaviour was self-determined and the praise warranted. This, however, does not imply that achievement from the institutional perspective in the form of continuous assessment and examinations is irrelevant, since a framework of expectations and goals can assist learners in their efforts to attain academic success. Moreover, responses to the perceived necessity of continuous assessment

indicate that 54% of respondents find it necessary, and 25% find it supportive, as compared to the negative responses of 19% who find it stressful and 3% who find it unnecessary.

Finally, students' perceptions of their long-term goals in relation to the German language were addressed. This question relates to the 84% of respondents who expressed a desire to pursue a career with German, and also the 16% who have no intention to utilize their skills after language study is over. As is evident from Figure 7, the majority of respondents value German highly as a career tool. Respondents rate highly both enjoyment of the language and an interest in the culture and people. In conclusion, it seems reasonable to assume that the majority of students are optimistic about their future prospects in relation to the German language. This desire to pursue careers related to the German language appears to stem from students' genuine love of the language and interest in its culture and people.

Figure 7: Students' long-term goals in learning German.



- 1= Desire to enter teaching profession
- 2= Love of the German language
- 3= Good job prospects
- 4= Desire to live in Germany
- 5= Language fast gaining importance in Ireland
- 6= Desire to pursue something that student has excelled in
- 7= Interest in people and culture
- 8= Feel too incompetent to consider career with German
- 9= No interest
- 10= No intention to use German, despite general enjoyment of language

Conclusion

As is evident from student responses, there are many reasons to learn languages. Additional psychological perspectives have yielded greater insights for rethinking FLL motivation: goal-setting; cognitive components, such as self-efficacy; self-confidence, need for achievement; course-specific motivational components, teacher-specific motivational components, and group-specific motivational components. It seems, therefore, important to take into account the dynamic, developmental potential of motivational drives within the individual learner, rather than accept the somewhat limited dichotomy of the instrumental vs. integrative categorization, which views motivation as a fixed phenomenon, not amenable to change.

Oxford and Shearin (1994: 23) provide a summary of practical implications for language teachers based on a synthesis of the relevant theories of motivation mentioned previously. First, teachers can identify why students are studying the language. Integrative and instrumental reasons are likely to be among the most frequently mentioned motivators; however, other reasons include cultural curiosity, travel interests, and intellectual stimulation. Teachers can be aware that over time, students' motivations might change in kind and degree, so asking students periodically about their motivations may be a good idea.

Second, teachers can help shape their students' beliefs about success or failure in the language. Teachers can inculcate the belief that success is not only possible but probable, as long as there is a high level of effort. Students can learn to have realistic, but challenging, goals regarding their eventual proficiency. Some students have more ambitious goals than others. Some want and expect to develop high levels of proficiency, while others just want to develop skills that will enable them to pass exams.

Third, extrinsic rewards provided by the teacher are part of the instructional design, but teachers can also urge students to build their own intrinsic reward system by emphasising mastery of specific goals, not comparison with other students. Teachers can thus enable students to have an increased sense of self-efficacy, whereby they attribute the outcome of their study to their own efforts, rather than to the behaviours of teachers. Greater self-efficacy increases motivation to continue studying the foreign language. One way to enhance intrinsic interest is by increasing

opportunities to communicate. It seems reasonable that the essence of motivation lies in the act of communication itself rather than in any general orientation as implied by the integrative vs. instrumental distinction.

It seems that the adoption of a wider vision of motivation presents an interesting challenge when we consider that there is no single motivation theory suited to an understanding of all factors involved in motivational behaviour. Future research on the relationships between motivational dispositions, motivational aspects of the classroom, and motivational changes would not only extend our theoretical knowledge of language-learning motivation, but would also suggest ways to improve motivation. It is crucial to understand what motivates students, as motivation is seen to have a direct influence on how often students interact with native speakers, how much input they receive in the language being learned, how well they do in exams, how high their proficiency level becomes, and how long they maintain their skills after language study is over.

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