

Developing the proficient language learner: motivation, strategies, and the learning experience of Irish learners of French in a university setting.

Rachel Hoare
Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to simultaneously examine the relationships between motivation for learning French, preferences for class activities, language learning strategies, and language proficiency for a cohort of first-year Irish university undergraduate students of French. More specifically, it examines these relationships with reference to the attitudes of the learners towards, and their motivation for, learning French grammar. The research was stimulated by both practical and theoretical concerns.

Theoretical concerns

Motivation has been widely accepted by both researchers (Gardner 1985, Dornyei 1998, Clément et al 1994) and educators (Spolsky 1989) as one of the key factors that influences the rate and success of learning a foreign language in the classroom. For the purpose of the current study, motivation may be considered as a combination of the learner's attitudes, aspirations, and effort in respect of learning French as a foreign language. The integrative nature of the research means that the structure of foreign language learning motivation in a university setting is examined in terms of its relationship with the choice of learning strategies used by undergraduate learners, and the kinds of classroom structures and types of activities to which they react positively (research often characterized by independent investigation). The success of any language programme must ultimately rely on the knowledge we have of the way in which learners learn, and research carried out into learning strategies may be classified into three main categories (Brown, Robson, and Rosenkjar 2001): (1) the elicitation of strategy data from learners using some form of *retrospection* (see Oxford 1989 for a review), (2) *introspective* methods, including the use of think-aloud protocols in tasks (cf. Vann and Abraham 1990), and (3) studies which examined the training of students in strategy use

(cf. Chamot 1987). In addition, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on how form-focused instruction contributes to language learning (cf. Engel and Myles 1996), and the view that formal instruction is important for raising learner consciousness of grammatical structures has gained currency in recent years. In spite of the increased prominence accorded to this area of research, there has been very little discussion of the role of attitudes and motivation for learning grammar and of the way in which this influences the overall language learning experience.

Research questions

The following aspects of language learning are examined in this paper, using responses to both open-ended questions and to a series of statements using rating scales:

- (1) The interaction of the affective learner attributes, as identified in the *language learning* section of the questionnaire, with *language learning strategies* and *preference for class activities*.
- (2) The interrelations of the aforementioned variables and their effects on target language proficiency as measured by the end of year language examination.
- (3) Attitudes towards and motivation for learning French grammar.
- (4) The interaction of attitudes towards learning French grammar, with the affective learner attributes, *language learning strategies* and *preference for class activities*.

Subjects

Subjects of the study were 120 first-year university students of French registered for one of the following three courses in Trinity College Dublin for the academic year 2001-2002: (1) *Two Subject Moderatorship* (students take French with one other subject), (2) *European Studies* (students take French and another language along with courses in European history, sociology and politics in their first two years), and (3) *Computer Science Linguistics and French* (the French component of this course comprises 25% of the overall course mark, with Linguistics on an equal weighting and the Computer Science component being allocated 50% of the overall mark).

*Research instruments**Questionnaire 1: open-ended questions on language learning*

The complexity and multi-dimensional nature of L2 motivation means that in order to obtain a comprehensive motivation measure, a rather elaborate (and therefore long) instrument, with every variable assessed by multi-item scales, is often administered. However, practical constraints in the current study imposed a significant limitation in terms of time spent during class administering the questionnaires and some items from the original instrument were therefore omitted. In order to ensure that the instrument had appropriate psychometric properties, the items used were adapted from established motivation questionnaires.

The instruments used for the study consist of two questionnaires. The importance of reflection on the university-level learning and teaching of French rather than on that experienced at Leaving Certificate level was emphasized to the subjects before the administration of each questionnaire. The first questionnaire comprises the following open-ended questions:

- (1) List the major factors that have a *positive* influence on your study of French in Trinity College.
- (2) List the major factors that have a *negative* influence on your study of French in Trinity College.
- (3) Think of a time when, in your French class, something very *favourable* and *positive* happened that made you feel good about learning French.
- (4) Think of a time when, in your French class, something very *unfavourable* and *negative* happened that did not make you feel good about learning French.
- (5) List the activities which you *most* enjoy doing in class.
- (6) List the activities which you *least* enjoy doing in class.
- (7) List any special methods you find help you to learn French more effectively.
- (8) How important is it to learn French grammar?

The second questionnaire consists of seven different measures of language learning which are described below.

Questionnaire 2: measures of language learning

The measures were given to the participants in the study as a battery of questions in a single administration of the questionnaire. The first five measures were assessed in the section of the questionnaire labelled *Learning French*, using items adapted from Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner 1985). The items used to measure class activity preferences in the second part were adapted from the scales used by Schmidt et al. (1998) in their study of the motivation of adult learners of English in Cairo, and those used to measure language learning strategies in the third section were a modification of the scales used by Pintrich (1989) in his study of the dynamic interplay of student motivation and cognition in the college classroom in Michigan. In the current study the items were presented in a random order on the questionnaire and students were asked to state their level of agreement with them using a Likert-type scale which used six scales in an attempt to eliminate neutral responses.

- (1) *Attitudes towards learning French*: Four positively worded and four negatively worded items related to learning French and particularly to the degree of enjoyment and perceived objectives of the language learner.
- (2) *Desire to learn French*: Four positively and four negatively worded items, all of which examine varying degrees of the subjects' desire to learn French.
- (3) *French class anxiety*: Five positively and five negatively worded items assessing students' degree of discomfort while participating in the French class.
- (4) *French use anxiety*: Five positively and five negatively worded items referring to feelings of anxiety when having to use French in social situations.
- (5) *Motivational intensity*: Five positively and five negatively worded items assessing the students' self-perceptions of the extent of their motivation to learn French.
- (6) *Preference for Class activities*: Nineteen items concerned with preferences for instructional activities and other related aspects of the French language classroom including the language of instruction and different types of learning situation.
- (7) *Language Learning Strategies*: The 22 items examine the cognitive strategies employed by language learners for learning vocabulary and grammar and preparing for language

classes and tests. Several items also examine the issue of learner self-direction.

Both questionnaires requested the following biographical data: course of study, sex, and age. Informants were also asked for their Leaving Certificate examination result in French.

Procedure

The administration of the first questionnaire (the open-ended questions) took place during a first-year lecture at the beginning of the academic year (during the second term); the session lasted approximately 30 minutes. The second questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the same lecture the following week and the informants again took approximately half an hour to complete it.

Results and analysis

A preliminary exploration of the data from the second questionnaire was undertaken using means and standard deviations to gain a clear indication of the dominant attitudes of the sample. Factor analytic and correlational methods were then employed to investigate the relationships between the different items. Factors are thought to reflect underlying processes which have created correlations among variables. Responses to the open-ended questions on the first questionnaire were used at a later stage to establish (a) whether the open-ended questions had elicited additional variables not covered by the structured questionnaire, (b) whether the questionnaire had dealt with items which were not addressed by the informants when asked open-ended questions, and (c) whether this more interpretative approach would provide different kinds of insights into the different aspects of learning French.

Means and standard deviations

Tables 1 to 3 list the most and least agreed-with statements from sections 1 to 3 of the questionnaire. Only those statements achieving mean scores of less than 2 or more than 5 on the following scale are included in the analysis:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) Strongly agree | (4) Slightly disagree |
| (2) Agree | (5) Disagree |
| (3) Partly agree | (6) Strongly disagree |

Table 1. Learning French: most and least agreed-with statements from the questionnaire

Most agreement	Mean	SD
I plan to learn as much French as possible	1.67	0.67
I want to learn French so well that it will become second nature to me	1.61	0.97
I wish I were fluent in French	1.19	0.47
Least Agreement	Mean	SD
Learning French is a waste of time	5.81	0.43
When I finish this course I shall give up the study of French entirely because I'm not interested in it	5.34	0.84
Students who claim they get nervous in the French class are just making excuses	5.41	0.71
I haven't any great wish to learn more than the basics of French	5.34	0.88

Table 1 shows that, in general, the informants were very committed to learning French and that they were keen to become fluent in the language. This was confirmed by their tendency to disagree with the statement that learning French was a waste of time and the voicing of their intentions to carry on studying French. They also expressed a desire to learn more than just the basics of the language and empathized with the nervousness involved in speaking in the French class.

The highest scores for preference for class activities, displayed in Table 2, indicate that the informants consider communication in French to be a priority in the language classroom and that they recognize the importance of asking questions when a point has not been understood. This is again reinforced by the highly negative response to the statement that communication activities are a waste of time in language classes.

Table 2: Preference for class activities: most and least agreed-with statements from the questionnaire

Most agreement	Mean	SD
Students should ask questions whenever they have not understood a point in class	1.45	0.62
Listening and speaking should be emphasised in French language classes	1.94	0.98
Activities in French language classes should be designed to help the students improve their abilities to communicate in French	1.60	0.69
Least Agreement	Mean	SD
Communication activities are a waste of time in this class, because I only need to learn what is necessary to pass the end of year exams	5.35	0.87

Table 3 shows that the only statement which fulfilled the specified criteria for most or least agreement in section three on language learning strategies was that concerning contextual meaning, which emphasizes the perceived importance of this strategy amongst the informants.

Table 3: Language learning strategies: most and least agreed-with statements from the questionnaire

Most agreement	Mean	SD
When I do not understand a word in something I am reading, I try to guess its meaning from the context	1.98	1.02
Least Agreement (no mean scores above 5)		

Dimensions in the data

Factor analysis is particularly useful in identifying how many unique concepts underlie a large set of variables. Responses to each of the three parts of the questionnaire were factor analysed to determine relevant dimensions in the data. Separate factor analyses were used to reduce the data from each of the three main sections of the questionnaire on (1) learning French, (2) preference for class activities, and (3) language learning strategies to a

smaller set of underlying variables in order to investigate the relationships among a number of attitudinal and motivational constructs. The results led to the identification of a number of factors characterizing interrelated responses to the statements. The factors were given labels, based upon the identification of the statements contributing to them, to reflect overall dimensions of judgement of the different issues involved. The following factor extraction criteria were applied: (a) minimum eigenvalue of 1.0, (b) each factor to account for at least 3% of the total variance, and (c) each factor to contain individual items using a minimum loading of .30 as a criterion of factor salience (cf. Tabachnick and Fidell 1989). The same criteria were used for the factor analysis applied to the fourth section on learning French grammar.

Learning French: factors

Forty-nine variables were entered into the analysis. After varimax rotation this analysis yielded seven factors with eigenvalues of more than 1, which accounted for 61.9% of the total variance as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: *Learning French: factors*

Factor	Label	E	%	CV
1	Attitudes towards learning French	11.91	25.9	25.9
2	French use anxiety	5.23	11.4	37.3
3	French class confidence	2.64	5.7	43.0
4	Motivational intensity	2.52	5.5	48.5
5	Enthusiasm for learning French	2.38	5.2	53.7
6	Enjoyment of learning French	2.01	4.4	58.1
7	Confidence in using French	1.76	3.8	61.9
E = Eigenvalue		CV = Cumulative variance		
% = Percent of variance				

Factor 1, with high loadings from fourteen variables, is best identified as *Attitudes towards learning French*. Six variables relating to the *Attitudes towards learning French* scale and five relating to that of the *Desire to learn French* define this factor along with three items from the *Motivational intensity* scale. All items loading on this factor reflect negative attitudes with positive loadings on negative variables and negative loadings on positive variables. This factor therefore corresponds to an attitudes orientation similar to the *Attitudes toward the learning situation*

factor reported by Gardner et al (1993: 177) with the difference that in the current study this tendency is closely interlinked with a *Desire to learn French*.

Factor 2 obtains high loadings from eleven variables and is best defined as *French use anxiety*. Nine of the 10 variables of the *French use anxiety* measure load on this factor, together with three *French class anxiety* variables. In addition, one measure of *Desire to learn French* receives a high negative loading on this factor.

Factor 3 clearly reflects *French class confidence*. Eight variables from the *French class anxiety* measure loaded on this factor in addition to three measures from the scale of *French use anxiety*. All loadings reflect positive attitudes, hence the labelling of the factor as *French class confidence* rather than *anxiety*.

Although all three measures of *Motivational intensity*, *French class anxiety* and *Desire to learn French* load on Factor 4, that of *Motivational intensity* is dominant, with high loadings from five items relating to this measure. All items loading on this factor reflect negative motivational intensity with positive loadings on negative variables and negative loadings on positive variables.

The items loading highest on Factor 5 can be divided into four categories: the first item indicates a strong desire to learn French; the second asserts a positive attitude towards learning the language; the third item shows a lack of anxiety about speaking French; and the final (negatively coded) item suggests a conscientious attitude towards learning the language. This factor therefore corresponds to an *Enthusiasm for learning French* orientation.

Factor 6 consists of six items which are concerned with the interesting and 'fun' aspects of learning French. This dimension has therefore been labelled *Enjoyment of learning French*, and comprises items from the following scales: *Attitudes towards learning French*, *French use anxiety*, *Motivational intensity* and *Desire to learn French*.

Factor 7 is labelled *Confidence in using French* as the four items which load on it reflect the common concerns of learners of French when they are using the language in different situations and consists of items from the scales of *French class anxiety*, *Motivational intensity* and *French use anxiety*.

With this particular sample, there tended to be some overlap between *French use anxiety* and *French class anxiety* and between *Desire to learn French* and *Attitudes towards learning French*. In each case, however, the two variables would be expected to covary

so it is reasonable that different forms of measuring them might tap similar variance in the other of the pair. The variables in each pair are both representative of the same higher level construct.

Preference for class activities — factors

Nineteen variables were entered into the analysis. After varimax rotation this analysis yielded five factors with Eigenvalues of more than 1, which accounted for 58.5% of the total variance as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: *Preference for class activities: factors*

Factor	Label	E	%	CV
1	Active participation	3.7	19.7	19.7
2	Groupwork preferences	2.6	13.7	33.4
3	Facilitation of communication	1.7	9.1	42.5
4	Lecturer responsibility	1.7	8.8	51.3
5	Traditional approach	1.4	7.2	58.5
E = Eigenvalue		CV = Cumulative variance		
% = Percent of variance				

Factor 1 is labelled *Active participation* as the items with high loadings on this factor are concerned with proactive student communication in French and the active contribution of the student to the language class.

Four items load highly on factor 2 which can be defined as *Groupwork preferences*. The factor loadings indicate that the informants display an overwhelming preference for working on their own and for taking responsibility for their own learning. It is important to point out that teachers may have preferences for teaching styles which do not necessarily correspond with those of their students. In a study of Japanese learners of English in Hawaii, Stafford (1995) found that the least popular class was that which was based on a communicative approach, which included work in pairs and groups. The students preferred the more structured teacher-fronted grammar and pronunciation classes to such an extent that some concluded that the 'communicative class' was not necessary.

Factor 3 is labelled *Facilitation of communication* as the four items loading highly on it reflect student perceptions of the ways in which communication can be facilitated in the language class.

Factor 4 clearly reflects the perceptions of the informants of the relationship between the conduct of language classes and the responsibility of the lecturer. It is therefore defined as *Lecturer responsibility*.

Factor 5, with high loadings from four items, may be conceived of as a factor which promotes a structured teacher-fronted approach to language learning. This also includes evidence of an instrumental attitude to language learning which emphasizes the primary importance of the end of year examinations. Factor 5 is therefore defined as *Traditional approach*.

Language learning strategies — factors

Twenty-two variables were entered into the analysis. Using Varimax rotation the factor analysis resulted in seven factors with eigenvalues of more than 1, which accounted for 62.3% of the total variance as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Factor analysis: language learning strategies

Factor	Label	E	V	CV
1	Proactive learning	4.59	20.9	20.9
2	Memory strategies	2.71	12.3	33.2
3	Communicative strategies	2.13	9.7	42.9
4	Comprehension strategies	1.72	7.8	50.7
5	Strategies for identifying meaning	1.38	6.3	57.0
6	Coping strategies	1.17	5.3	62.3
7	Preparation strategies	1.12	5.1	67.4
E= Eigenvalue % = Variance		CV = Cumulative variance		

Factor 1 obtains high loadings from nine variables and is best defined as *Proactive learning* as the items that load on this factor are all concerned with the *active involvement* of the learner in the learning process and the *self-monitoring* of learning.

Factor 2, with high loadings from four items, is best identified as *Memory strategies* as the items with high loadings on this factor promote memorization of the material being learned.

Factor 3, *Communicative strategies*, also consists of four items, which reflect the learner's own initiative in out-of-class learning situations and indicate an active task approach to learning

through seeking out opportunities to use the language and being exposed to it as frequently as possible.

The five items comprising Factor 4 reflect the learner's attempts to organize his or her learning by recognizing and understanding (a) the important concepts/areas in a test situation and (b) the comprehension strategies to employ when he or she is unsure of someone else's meaning. The attempts at verifying comprehension reflect, in a way, a kind of monitoring of the learner's performance in French.

Factor 5 receives strong loadings from two highly focused items which both concern searching for meaning. The factor is therefore defined as *Strategies for identifying meaning*. Factor 6, which consists of four items representing the learning strategies of time and resource management as well as ways of coping with lack of comprehension, is labelled *Coping strategies*. Finally, Factor 7 consists of high loadings from three items which are all concerned with preparation for various aspects of language classes and is therefore labelled *Preparation strategies*.

Having investigated the relationships among the variables, attention can now be directed toward the correlations of the measures identified.

Correlations between the factor scores and with language examination results.

In order to be able to use these factors in further analyses, composite scores were computed for each factor identified for the questionnaire categories of *Learning French (LF)*, *Preference for class activities (CA)*, and *Language learning strategies (LLS)* by summing the scores of the items loading on each factor. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were then computed between the factor scores in order to identify correlations. Correlations between the factor scores and (a) the end of year language examination grades and (b) the Leaving Certificate results in French were also examined. Because this analysis involved a large number of correlations, a relatively stringent value of alpha at $p < .01$ was set. Significant correlations were found for eight combinations which are displayed in Table 7 and discussed below.

Table 7: Significant correlations between factor scores

Correlations between:	r value	p
Language exam and French class confidence (LF)	.435	.001
Language exam and Lecturer responsibility (CA)	.357	.006
Attitudes towards learning French (LF) and Active participation (CA)	.389	.004
Motivational intensity (LF) and Communicative strategies (LLS)	.460	.000
Motivational intensity (LF) and Coping strategies (LLS)	.487	.000
Confidence in using French (LF) and Comprehension strategies (LLS)	.496	.000
Strategies for identifying meaning (LLS) and Active participation (CA)	.363	.005
Language exam and Leaving Certificate result	.479	.000

Significant correlations

(i) *Language examination and Learning French* (ii) *Language examination and Preference for class activities*

Inspection of Table 7 reveals that there were two factors (*French class confidence* and *Lecturer responsibility*) which were significantly correlated with the results of the end of year *Language examination*. These correlations suggest that if learners have a high level of confidence in the French language classroom, they are more likely to do well in the end of year *Language examination*. Moreover, learners who favour *Active participation* in the classroom and who perceive there to be a strong relationship between the conduct of language classes and the *Responsibility of the lecturer* are also likely to do well in the *Language examination*.

Learning French and Preference for class activities

High correlations between the *Attitudes towards learning French* and the *Active participation* factors revealed that learners with positive attitudes towards learning French tended to enjoy active participation in the French language classroom.

Learning French and Language learning strategies

An evaluation of the correlations between *Learning French* and *Language learning strategies* revealed that *Motivational intensity* was significantly correlated with both *Communicative strategies*

and *Coping strategies*, thereby suggesting that strongly motivated learners tend to have highly developed tactics for effective communication and for coping in situations which present particular language difficulties. *Confidence in using French* showed a strong association with *Comprehension strategies*, indicating that learners who are confident in using French tend to have highly developed strategies for understanding the language in different situations and contexts.

Language learning strategies and Preference for class activities

The evaluation of correlations between the factors identified for the questionnaire categories of *Language learning strategies* and *Preference for class activities* revealed that learners who have highly developed strategies for identifying meaning advocate active participation in the language classroom.

There is also, rather predictably, a strong correlation between the results of the end-of-year language examination and the Leaving Certificate result.

Summary

The descriptive statistics for language learning motivation show that these informants generally have a high degree of interest in learning French and a good attitude towards it, as well as a strong desire to learn the language. The importance of communicating through French in the language classroom appears to be one of the main concerns of the informants and the use of context to identify meaning is perceived as one of the most useful language learning strategies. Factor analysis identified a smaller number of underlying concepts for the rather large set of variables in each category which were then used to see what links could be discovered between motivation, language learning strategies, and preference for class activities. Significant correlations revealed a strong relationship between a high level of confidence in the French language classroom and a good performance in the end of year language examination. Learners who recognize the importance of active participation and the role of the lecturer to be important in the classroom, are also likely to do well in the language examination. Positive attitudes tend to be closely related to active classroom participation and confident users are inclined to have highly developed learning and coping strategies.

Responses to the open-ended questions

In order to pursue the various aspects of language learning motivation, unconstrained by the closed response format of the attitudes and motivation scales, the answers to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire were examined. Recall that our informants (numbering 120) were asked to list separately those factors that have positive and negative influences on their study of French, as well as to describe critical incidents that made them feel good or bad about their learning and finally their preferred activities and successful methods. A close examination of the results revealed that the open-ended questions elicited responses which provided additional insights into the different aspects of learning French. These will now be examined using the questions as descriptive categories. Responses to the question on the importance of learning French grammar will be examined after the statistical analysis of this question using the rating scales.

Major factors which have positive and negative influences on learning French

The majority of informants (75%) cite the effectiveness of the teacher as being the single most important factor which has had either a positive or negative influence on their language learning experience. A relatively large number of informants (45%) mention specific instances where 'a good language teacher' has encouraged and motivated them to continue with language study. A 'good language teacher' is variously defined as 'someone who obviously enjoys teaching', 'a person who knows French grammar inside-out' and 'someone who makes the class interesting and makes us do the work'.

An even larger proportion (57%) provides examples of situations where the style and/or skills of a particular language teacher had a de-motivating effect. It is interesting to note that of the 57% of informants who had experienced this de-motivating effect, the majority (85%) define a 'bad language teacher' as one having a lack of motivation and bad communication skills, particularly when asked about specific grammar points. A further important negative influence identified by 48% of the informants was the use of too much English in the classroom.

Critical incidents

Although the responses to the question concerning the identification of positive and negative incidents in the French language classroom were varied, they were all generated by the teacher/lecturer/language assistant, again illustrating the motivational importance of this role.

Positive incidents

Responses to this question concentrated on the feelings experienced by informants when they got something right – this ranged from an informant being happy with himself for answering a question correctly 'It was the first time she didn't correct me and something clicked – I suddenly understood how to use that particular pronoun – it was a feeling of relief and kind of pride' to an informant enjoying well-deserved praise: 'She never said anything positive about anyone's work, so when she said that my essay was very good I was delighted with myself as I'd put lots of work in and it had finally paid off – at last!'.

Negative incidents

Incidents falling into this category typically involved the informant experiencing severe anxiety as the result of not knowing the answer to a question and being ridiculed in front of the entire class. Sixty percent of the students mentioned such an incident, with comments such as 'I completely froze and couldn't think of the verb ending and he just kept going on at me' and 'She made me feel really stupid when I didn't know the answer and said that I shouldn't be at university doing French if I didn't even know that'. In all cases the informants said that they dreaded going to this particular class and that it ruined their experience of learning French.

Most enjoyable activities

The majority of informants (78%) claimed that they enjoyed activities in which it was clear whether an answer was right or wrong: 'I really enjoy doing grammar exercises because it's very clearcut – at least you know whether you're right or wrong and it's only one thing – with an essay there could be lots of different things wrong and you can get a bit lost'. A substantial number of informants (68%) also said that although it could be 'quite tiring

and stressful at times' they preferred the class to be conducted entirely through French.

Least enjoyable activities

A clear majority of 83% of informants said that they didn't really enjoy groupwork as they felt that it did not make them work hard enough: 'it's easy when you're doing groupwork for one person to take over, and then you can get lazy and not bother'. This finding corresponded with the identification of the Groupwork preferences factor where the factor loadings indicated that the informants had much more favourable attitudes towards working on their own (cf. Stafford 1995).

Special language learning methods

In response to this question, a number of informants claimed that they found learning French 'a long hard slog' and that they would welcome any suggestions of methods and or techniques which would make it easier. A small number of informants (23%) made reference to trying to learn vocabulary lists but added that they didn't find it very successful as they found it hard to retain that which they had learned in the long-term: 'that's how we used to learn vocabulary at school and we'd be tested every week. Now there aren't really those kinds of tests so it's much harder to find the time to do it and then you do you don't really remember it'. These responses highlight the need for additional training in different language learning strategies and study skills. For example, there are a number of memory techniques which can be very successfully employed in the learning of a foreign language (cf. Buzan 2000).

It seems that most of the items on the second questionnaire using statements and rating scales were related to issues that informants brought up when asked more open-ended questions, although the more open-ended questions shed light on the possible reasoning which lay behind the answers given on the second questionnaire and gave further insights on attitudes and perceived identity to supplement these answers. We will now have a look in more detail at a specific aspect of language learning, that of learning grammar.

Research on learning French grammar: motivation and objectives

The development of the communicative approach to foreign language instruction was the product of educators and linguists who expressed dissatisfaction with the audiolingual and grammar-translation methods. They felt that students were not learning enough realistic, whole language which would enable them to communicate in the culture of the language studied. A communicative approach to language teaching was therefore developed in the 1970s which was characterized by authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engaged in real communication with one another. This approach resulted in a shift in emphasis in language learning from a focus on linguistic form to activities which involved the negotiation of meaning (Wright 1999).

In the intervening years, the communicative approach has been adapted to the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels, and the underlying philosophy has spawned different teaching methods known under a variety of names, including notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction, and communicative language teaching (Johnson 1982). For the most part this approach has met with a great deal of success; second language learners who study in classrooms characterized by this method are generally found to be more successful communicators than their predecessors who received instruction which focused solely on the form or structure of the language. However, many researchers have now begun to question whether it is enough to provide the students with varied and interesting input and opportunities to interact and practice. There is a widespread feeling among university teachers that there has been a sharp decline in the grammatical accuracy of their students (Klapper 1998). This section of the questionnaire is designed to elicit from the subjects their attitudes towards, and perceptions of, the importance of learning grammar and their motivations for doing so, with a view to using this information to design appropriate language courses in which the learner is encouraged to focus on form within content and task-based curricula. Means and standard deviations were firstly calculated to obtain an overall picture of the data and factor analytic and correlational methods were then employed to investigate the relationships between the different items.

Means and standard deviations

Table 8 lists the means and standard deviations for the statements from section 4 of the questionnaire. All statements are listed due to the relatively small number of items.

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) Strongly agree | (4) Slightly disagree |
| (2) Agree | (5) Disagree |
| (3) Partly agree | (6) Strongly disagree |

Table 8: Learning French grammar: means and standard deviations

	Mean	SD
Most agreed-with statements		
Knowledge of French grammar is essential for producing good written French	1.56	1.00
The grammar lecture provides a good opportunity to revise grammar points I already know	2.45	1.18
Grammar classes should be conducted through English	2.48	1.30
I find it hard to understand grammatical terms used in grammar books	3.21	1.62
It's easy to apply grammatical rules when I'm writing compositions in French	3.24	1.41
I have a strong interest in French grammar	3.49	1.51
I don't know anything about English grammar	3.78	1.52
Least agreed-with statements		
You don't need to know French grammar to be able to communicate effectively in speech	4.03	1.52
It's easy to apply grammatical rules when I'm speaking French	4.14	1.23
I don't want to learn grammar, I just want to be able to communicate in French	4.45	1.26
Studying French grammar is boring and a waste of time	4.87	1.08

The means and standard deviations for the grammar section of the questionnaire suggest that although students are aware of the importance of a solid base of grammatical knowledge, they find it very difficult to apply this in communicative situations. In order to investigate this phenomenon further, the data was firstly factor-analysed in order to detect patterns in the relationships between variables, i.e., to classify the variables. The factor analysis was followed by the calculation of correlations between the four

identified factors and questions 13 to 20 in section 4 of the questionnaire on Grammar issues in the classroom.

Learning French grammar: factors

A varimax rotation of the four factors having an eigenvalue of 1.00 or higher indicated that they account for 64.3% of the total variance.

Table 9: *Learning French grammar: factors*

F	Label	E	%	CV
1	Grammatical awareness	2.64	24.01	24.01
2	Importance of learning grammar	1.96	17.84	41.85
3	Attitudes towards learning grammar	1.32	12.01	53.86
4	Practical application of grammatical knowledge	1.15	10.44	64.3
F= Factor		% = % of variance		
E= Eigenvalue		CV = Cumulative variance		

Factor 1 was labelled *Grammatical awareness* because it contains three items relating to metalinguistic knowledge and understanding of native language grammar. Three of the four items that have high loadings on Factor 2 emphasize the importance of learning grammar for communicating in French. The fourth item concentrates on the perceived tedious and repetitive nature of this task. The five items with high loadings on Factor 3 have been labelled *Attitudes towards learning grammar* because they reflect the views of the informants on a number of aspects of grammar learning, including their (largely positive) reactions to the grammar lecture part of the language course. All of the items with high loadings on Factor 4 are concerned with the *Practical application of grammatical knowledge* and more specifically with the application of rules when various language functions are being carried out.

All correlations between the factor scores for *Learning French grammar* and the individual scores which examined *Grammar issues in the classroom* (questions 13 to 20, section 4) were then examined. The value of alpha was again set at $p < .01$ and Table 10 below shows that there were four significant correlations.

The high negative correlation of Factor 1, *Grammatical awareness* with the individual score for the *Standard of grammar expected* suggests that learners who perceive themselves to have a

strong grammatical awareness consider the standard of grammar expected in the classroom to be too low.

Table 10: Significant correlations between factor scores for Learning French grammar and individual scores for Grammar issues in the classroom

Correlations between:	r value	p
Factor score 1 – Grammatical awareness		
Standard of grammar expected (14LFG)	-.361	.005
Factor score 3 – Attitudes towards learning grammar		
Usefulness of the lecture handout (16 LFG)	-.424	.001
Factor score 4 – Practical application of grammatical knowledge		
Time devoted to grammar in class (13 LFG)	.354	.006
Standard of grammar topics covered in the lectures (15 LFG) and Usefulness of the lecture handout (16 LFG)	.436	.001

The high correlation between the third factor score, *Attitudes towards learning grammar*, and the individual score for the item *Usefulness of the (grammar) lecture handout* (an interactive handout where the student is given the main grammar points and required to complete the handout with examples from the grammar lecture) suggests that learners who have positive attitudes towards learning French grammar recognize the usefulness of the lecture handout. In addition, the fourth factor score, the *Practical application of grammatical knowledge* is highly correlated with the individual score for the time devoted to grammar in the classroom, thereby suggesting that learners who find it quite easy to apply grammatical rules in their written and spoken French consider the time devoted to grammar in class to be sufficient. The high correlation between the two individual items *Standard of grammar topics covered in the lectures* and the *Usefulness of the lecture handout* indicates that learners who are happy with the standard of grammar topics covered in the lectures also consider the lecture handout to be useful.

Responses to the open-ended question 'How important is it to learn French grammar?'

Although further research is needed to demonstrate the generalizability of the statistical findings reported here, these results, together with responses to the open-ended question 'How important is it to learn French grammar?' confirm the widespread feeling

amongst university language teachers that there is a lack of grammatical awareness amongst students, which, coupled with a perception of grammar as being 'difficult' and 'boring', results in an overall despondency and lack of motivation for this aspect of language learning: 'There are a lot of complicated terms which can be confusing when trying to grasp a concept in French grammar. There always seem to be a lot of exceptions to rules which are really confusing and there's no way you can learn them all, so why bother?'.

Responses to the open-ended question indicate that a sizeable minority of students (36%) made some reference to the necessity of putting some work into 'getting to grips with grammar': 'the difficulty is in the application of yourself, not in the application of the grammar. Running hard and long at it seems to be the only way'. There was also widespread consensus that it was simple enough to learn the rules but much more difficult to have the skill to apply them in communicative situations: 'the most difficult thing about learning French grammar is that knowing the rules is one thing but implementing them into actual written or spoken French is much more difficult, especially if trying to achieve perfection'. According to the majority of students, the most obvious way in which to remedy this lack of skill is by having more contact hours: 'there isn't enough grammar done in class. An extra tutorial once a week, devoted entirely to French grammar would be a great help'. The perception of a need for more formal grammar instruction is widespread amongst university-level language learners (Engel and Myles 1996: 10), although research has shown that more autonomous language learning strategies would be beneficial to learners at this level (Benson 2001: 2). This perception indicates that it is important for those involved in foreign language teaching to help their learners to reflect on their own goals and suggest effective strategies for language learning in which grammar is acquired within a communicative framework, an approach adopted by a number of more recent French language learning textbooks (cf. Jubb and Rouxville 1998).

Concluding remarks

The descriptive statistics for motivation show that, in general, learners of French at this university are characterised by their self-reports as having high levels of motivational strength for learning

the language. The major theoretical motivation for this study, however, was not to examine motivation in isolation but to see what links could be discovered between motivation, language learning strategies and preferences for class activities and which combination of these different aspects of language learning is the most likely to make a proficient language learner.

Although the study provides a far from complete profile, certain generalizations can be made. One of the major findings has shown that this population of students studying French in an Irish university setting perceive that a combination of active participation in their own learning with proactive facilitation on the part of the language teacher, will lead to an increased confidence and a greater probability of well-developed learning and coping strategies and hence more successful overall language learning. In order to develop and maintain this perceived ideal language learning environment, the study identified a need for the specific teaching of learning strategies focusing on language which would enable the students to become more active participants in their own learning, whilst at the same time encouraging them to process material more effectively. This would include both generic skills such as the teaching of self-management skills for determining what and when to study, as well as a set of specific strategies for learning how different types of language material can be learned most effectively. This would be of particular relevance for the processing of grammar which was identified by the students as highly problematic.

The perceived importance of the proactive role of the language teacher is reinforced by responses to the open-ended questions which particularly stress the influence (positive or negative) which the teacher can have on student motivation and their strategies for learning: 'The teacher should encourage the students as much as possible and be critical in a constructive way rather than put people down in front of the class. He should also help more with explaining the best way to go about learning grammar and vocab rather than just leaving it up to us to guess'. Classroom activities are also very much influenced by the teacher and although the students tended to favour active participation, this was in the sense of them being actively involved as individuals, as they also voiced a preference for working on their own: 'I really don't like groupwork – I work much better if I am given a task to do as an individual'.

The nature and quality of language instruction evidently affect motivation. Learners bring to any classroom a sense of themselves as students and a set of expectations derived, in part, from all their past history of school learning. Whenever L2 learning takes place in school, L2 motivation must be identified and assessed in conjunction with general academic motivation. What makes life in classrooms worthwhile for participants? Such a question lies at the heart of all formal education. The conceptualization of effective learning environments is one of the areas most in need of greater specification in understanding L2 motivation. These findings clearly imply that it is not merely the teaching that counts, but rather the way in which the language is taught which makes a difference, that is, the quality of the learning experience.

References

- Benson, P. 2001. *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. London: Longman.
- Brown, J., G. Robson, and P. Rosenkjar. 2001. Personality, motivation, anxiety, strategies and language proficiency of Japanese students. In Dömyei and Schmidt (2001), 361-398.
- Buzan, T. 2000. *Use your Memory*. London: BBC.
- Chamot, A. 1987. The learning strategies of ESL students. In Wenden and Rubin (1987), 71-84.
- Clement, R., Z. Dömyei, and K. Noels. 1994. Motivation, self-confidence, and group cohesion in the foreign language classroom. *Language Learning* 44: 417-448.
- Dömyei, Z. 1998. Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching* 31: 117-35.
- Dömyei, Z. and R. Schmidt, eds. 2001. *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Engel, D. and F. Myles. 1996. *Teaching Grammar: Perspectives in Higher Education*. London: AFLS/CILT.
- Gardner, R. C. 1985. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C. and P. D. MacIntyre. 1993. On the measurement of affective variables in second language learning. *Language Learning* 43: 157-194.
- Johnson, K. 1982. *Communicative Syllabus Design and Methodology*. Oxford: Pergamon Institute of English.

- Jubb, M. and A. Rouxville. 1998. *French Grammar in Context: Analysis and Practice*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Klapper, J. 1998. Language learning at school and university: the great grammar debate continues (II). *Language Learning Journal* 18: 22-29.
- Oxford, R. 1989. Use of language learning strategies: a synthesis of studies with implications for strategy training. *System* 17: 235-247.
- Oxford, R., ed. 1996. *Language Learning Motivation: Pathways to the New Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Pintrich, P. R. 1989. The dynamic interplay of students motivation and cognition in the college classroom. *Advances in Motivation and Achievement: Motivation Enhancing Environments*, ed. by M. Maehr and C. Ames, vol. 6, 117-160. New York: JAI Press.
- Schmidt, R, D. Boraie, and O. Kassabgy. 1996. Foreign language motivation: internal structure and external connections. In Oxford (1996), 9-71.
- Spolsky, B. 1989. *Conditions for Second Language Learning*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Stafford, M. 1995. Views on English language teaching. Unpublished paper, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu.
- Vann, R. and R. Abraham, R. 1990. Strategies of unsuccessful language learners. *TESOL Quarterly* 24: 177-198.
- Wenden, A. and J. Rubin, eds. 1987. *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Wright, M. (1999) Grammar in the languages classroom: findings from research. *Language Learning Journal* 19: 33-39.