

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Pedagógiai és Pszichológiai Kar

**THE UPS AND DOWNS OF MOTIVATION:  
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF A GROUP OF SECONDARY-SCHOOL  
LEARNERS OF ENGLISH**

**A MOTIVÁCIÓ VÁLTOZÁSÁNAK HOSSZÚ TÁVÚ VIZSGÁLATA EGY  
KÖZÉPISKOLÁS ANGOLOS CSOPORTBAN**

Dissertation summary  
A doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei

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## **1 TOPIC AND AIMS**

The dissertation is concerned with the fluctuation of motivation to learn a foreign language (L2) in an institutional setting. Its aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the various motivational influences by approaching this hotly debated question from the perspective of the participants of the learning process. The purpose of the study was (a) to identify the most important classroom-related motivational features and examine their interaction, (b) to explore the evolution of students' motivational thinking over the years, and (c) to define the teacher's role in the motivational process. To address these issues, I conducted a longitudinal participant research involving a group of 16 secondary-school students. My intention was to examine the relevance of theory in the classroom context, that is, to explore how different affective factors that are emphasised in the literature relate to everyday teaching practices. Another goal was to consider how I, as a researcher teacher, could utilise the findings in the classroom for the sake of the students' progress, alternatively expressed, how I could become a better teacher and help them become successful learners.

My investigations were guided by the following research questions:

- 1 How do students see themselves as language learners?
  - How do they conceptualise success in learning English?
  - What impact do beliefs about L2 learning have on their motivation?
  - How pervasive is foreign language anxiety amongst the students?
- 2 What impact do content and form of teaching have on students' motivation?
  - What are their perceptions of various task types?
  - How motivating and effective do they perceive different working modes?
- 3 How does the atmosphere of the classroom shape students' motivation?
  - What factors trigger their choice of action?
  - What role does the teacher play in enhancing motivation in the classroom?
  - How do peers contribute to a supportive atmosphere?
- 4 How does motivation change over time?
  - What is the relationship between proficiency level and motivation?
  - How do students' changing goals interact with motivation?

## **2 OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION**

The dissertation falls into two parts. Part 1 provides a theoretical background to the study, while Part 2 gives a report on the actual investigations conducted for the thesis. First a summary is given of those trends in motivation research that directed my attention towards its educational aspect, and gave me inspiration to investigate the effects that the classroom milieu exert on students' attitude and behaviour (Chapter 2). I describe different approaches to motivation and show how Gardner's (1985) fundamental socio-educational model has been expanded over the past two decades. This is followed by a presentation of theories that view motivation from an educational perspective and by an outline of three models of L2 learning motivation that provide the theoretical framework for my investigations. Next, I review previous studies into motivation in the classroom together with the research methods traditionally used in the field.

Part 2 of the dissertation is organised into seven chapters as follows. Chapter 3 provides the contextual background for the study. First, I outline recent changes in the structure of the Hungarian educational system and the reforms implemented in the curriculum and in the school-leaving examination system. Then I propose an explanation for the privileged status of foreign languages in this scenario and give a description of the setting where the investigations were conducted. A detailed account of the research design is given in Chapter 4. This includes the statement of the rationale for the methodology as well as a description of the participants and the data collection instruments and procedures adopted in the different phases of the research.

The results pertaining to the main research questions of the study are presented and discussed in four consecutive chapters. Chapter 5 presents the picture that students form about themselves as language learners. It clarifies issues such as students' conceptualisations of success and failure, their beliefs about learning English as a foreign language (EFL), and anxiety. The subsequent two chapters are concerned with actual classroom procedures. Chapter 6 examines how motivating and effective students perceive different task types and working modes, while Chapter 7 explores the climate of the classroom. After identifying the factors that influence the atmosphere of various lessons, I discuss the role that teachers and peers play in creating the learning environment. Finally, Chapter 8 looks at the impact of time on students' motivation. In the last chapter of the dissertation, the most important findings are summarised together with the limitations of the study. As a conclusion, possible pedagogical implications are considered.

### **3 METHOD**

### 3.1 Research design

The study followed the qualitative research tradition. Its unique feature is that it was a longitudinal investigation lasting for four years, thus making it possible for the researcher to trace the continuous ebb and flow of students' motivation. The majority of information was provided by self-report verbal data, which allowed the examination of the investigated issue from an emic perspective. The qualitative methods were supplemented by a questionnaire on student beliefs, a test on their language learning aptitude, and language proficiency measures. Each phase of the data collection procedure was guided by specific themes. The table below summarises the focal points and the data gathering instruments used in the different stages of the research.

Phases	Focus of study	Sources of data
Phase 1 2002-2003 academic year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' self-conceptions as language learners</li> <li>• language learning aptitude</li> <li>• beliefs and expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• interviews</li> <li>• narratives</li> <li>• feedback notes</li> <li>• language aptitude test</li> <li>• questionnaire on learners' beliefs</li> </ul>
Phase 2 2003-2004 academic year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• content and form of teaching</li> <li>• the teacher's role</li> <li>• the teacher's reflections</li> <li>• classroom climate</li> <li>• students' EFL development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student diaries</li> <li>• teacher's diary</li> <li>• lesson observations</li> <li>• focus group interview</li> <li>• language proficiency measures</li> </ul>
Phase 3 2004-2005 academic year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' EFL development</li> <li>• changes in orientation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language achievement measures</li> <li>• participant observation</li> <li>• student diaries</li> </ul>
Phase 4 2005-2006 academic year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' EFL development</li> <li>• students' persistence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participant observation</li> <li>• test results</li> <li>• school-leaving examination results</li> <li>• feedback from students</li> </ul>

temporal changes in motivation

Focus of investigation and data sources in the different phases of the research

### 3.2 Setting and participants

The research participants were 16 students at a secondary grammar school (III. Béla Gimnázium, Baja). The eleven girls and five boys took part in the school's six-year

educational programme and at the beginning of the data collection procedure they were in year 9 (ages 14-15), in the middle of their secondary education. They had already gained a great deal of experience as language learners and they also proved to be open and mature enough to express their ideas. Compared to the average Hungarian secondary-school student, their general academic motivation could be described as fairly high. They all came to the school with the aim of continuing their studies in tertiary education and were working hard towards that goal: six of them attended special classes in mathematics and another six opted for communication and media studies, leaving only four students with no optionals at all.

Besides the students, external observers and EFL experts were involved in certain stages of the research.

### 3.3 Data collection instruments

- **Structured interviews** asking students (1) about their preferences, (2) about their attributions for their successes and failures regarding their L2 studies, and (3) about effective language learning strategies.
- **Narratives** written about an event in their lives during which they experienced a feeling of success in connection with English.
- **Feedback notes on self-assessment** written at the end of English classes.
- **Language aptitude measure:** the *Hungarian Language Aptitude Test (HUNLAT)* by Ottó (2002).
- **Questionnaire on student beliefs:** a modified version of Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)* adapted for Hungarian learners by Sheorey (2007).
- **Students' diaries** focusing on
  - reflections on tasks,
  - perceptions of language exams,
  - self-assessment,
  - English compared to other school subjects.
- **Teacher's diary**
- **Lesson observations**
- **Focus group interviews** discussing
  - students' expectations,
  - the use of lessons,
  - students' progress.

- **Language proficiency measures:**
  - grade point averages in English,
  - progress test results,
  - standardised proficiency scores.

### **3.4 Analyses**

All the verbal data was analysed using the constant comparative method, as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), to find emerging patterns. This involved a thorough analysis of the information gathered from the different data sources, during which I first determined initial categories then modified these groupings and constructed new categories.

As regards the questionnaire, given the small number of participants (n=16), complex statistical analyses were not considered. Instead, I made frequency calculations in order to distinguish salient responses.

## **4 A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Students' self-perceptions as language learners**

The aim of the first research question was (1) to analyse students' conceptualisations of success in learning English, (2) to show how their beliefs about L2 learning influenced their motivation, and (3) to find out how pervasive foreign language anxiety was in the group. The research was inspired by a study conducted by Williams and Burden (1999) and the findings modified their categorisation of success in learning an L2. Rather than highlighting performance at school and the importance of good exam results, my students defined success as the ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations. They tended to attribute internal reasons such as effort, attitude, and motivation for their successes and failures and they assessed their development on the basis of feedback from the teacher as well as by their self-perception of competence. Several students proved to have developed an internal measure of success and compared their performance to their own abilities. Success emerged as an influential motive, a finding which was also confirmed in later phases of the research.

Furthermore, it was found that students had a positive self-concept and were generally optimistic and confident about their development. It is an important finding of the study that they were aware of the differences between learning an L2 and other subjects at school. On the one hand, there appeared to be differences between the instructional strategies that their teachers employed. While in certain classes the students were expected to absorb declarative

knowledge, in L2 classes the main emphasis was on procedural knowledge and skills development. On the other hand, there were differences between learners' goal setting. In the case of most subjects only part of the students wished to acquire higher levels of knowledge, whereas in L2 classes everybody pursued the same goal: to develop communicative competence including social skills. Considering English, this goal was expressed more explicitly, in all probability because of its privileged status as a global language.

As regards foreign language anxiety, although the findings unveiled occasional feelings of apprehension, in most cases it could be defined as facilitating anxiety given the fact that it acted as a motivational factor, a driving force to achieve better results. It should be mentioned that one student was found to suffer from debilitating anxiety, however, in her case it turned out to be a character trait. On the whole, it is apparent from the results that anxiety was not pervasive amongst the students. Even the most anxiety provoking situation – writing tests – was put in a favourable light. This was partly because the tasks were considered manageable, thus posing the right level of challenge, and partly because these tests measured procedural knowledge allowing students to keep track of their own progress.

#### **4.2 The motivational influence of the teaching material**

The second research question examined the motivational influence of the teaching material through an analysis of students' perceptions of various task types and working modes. Although the students adopted a favourable attitude towards a wide range of classroom activities, the findings brought certain individual differences to the surface, as students assessed the tasks in light of the goals that they were pursuing. Performance-oriented students appreciated the utility of classroom activities that gave them opportunities to practice their skills, while their peers with predominantly learning goals were motivated by appropriate cognitive challenges. They preferred the discovery approach to the tasks, which allowed them to work out solutions and make use of their creativity. Apparently, successful completion of the task enhanced their intrinsic motivation.

It is an interesting finding of the study that authentic material which was not prescribed by the curriculum aroused students' interest and triggered engagement in the given activity. Viewed from the students' perspective, such materials represented 'real' English, where the L2 was a vehicle of conveying specific content knowledge.

As for students' perceptions of different working modes, co-operative techniques were found to be more motivating for several reasons. Firstly, students were involved in the learning process and everybody was expected to contribute to the outcome to the best of their

knowledge, which fostered team spirit. Secondly, collaboration in pairs or in small groups reduced stress and alleviated feelings of anxiety; and thirdly, such techniques developed students' socio-linguistic competence as well.

### **4.3 The influence of the classroom climate on students' motivation**

The third research question focussed on the climate of the classroom and my aim was to identify various teacher-related and group specific motivational characteristics and examine their interaction by looking into actual classroom practices. My investigations found that the students had a clear understanding of the learning process and effective classroom management. As their attitudes towards different school subjects were greatly influenced by their goals, they expected the learning environment to help them achieve those goals. They needed a supportive atmosphere which was characterised by consistent work, well-paced lessons, discipline, and also peer co-operation. Consistent with the findings to the second research question, students' mastery motive proved to enhance their cognitive engagement and the development of highly regulated learning strategies.

It is a particularly important finding of the study that students appeared to be capable of assessing and exercising control over their learning. A basic conflict was unveiled caused by the difference between students' and teachers' conceptualisations of knowledge and the learning process. It was found that students considered understanding as the key to development and, consequently, they failed to see the purpose of rote learning and declarative knowledge. On the other hand, the English class surfaced as a positive example, where procedural knowledge was given priority and where students' expectations were met. The fact that their goals, the classroom tasks, and their progress were in harmony apparently fostered their motivation. All these findings suggest that the participants of the study became autonomous learners who took responsibility for their own development.

### **4.4 The effect of time on motivation**

The fourth research question addressed a current issue in L2 learning research, as it dealt with the temporal dimension of motivation by examining what influence students' developing proficiency and the changes in their goal setting exerted on their motivation. The findings revealed an interaction between students' proficiency level, their motivating experiences, and the goals that they pursued at various stages of the L2 learning process. The changes in their motivational behaviour indicated a discernible trend roughly corresponding to annual cycles. It was found that at an early stage they were mostly inspired by positive L2-



related experiences and instrumental motives. Over the years, however, these were complemented by mastery motives, as students set themselves various short-term goals. By attaining these sub-goals they became aware of their progress, which strengthened their mastery goal. This in turn enhanced their intrinsic motivation and had a positive effect on the learning outcome. Consequently, students achieved the original goal of passing a high-stakes language exam, which had lost its importance by that time, as their attention was transferred to mastery development. These findings give support to the views in the literature that motivation is a dynamic concept and students' motivational thinking evolves over time.

Most importantly, the study modified Dörnyei's (1994) concept of motivation as a static construct. It was found that the temporal dimension was apparent on the learning situation level affecting course-specific motivational variables. Furthermore, the present investigations revealed that the process model of L2 motivation proposed by Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) can be applied to an institutionalised setting, where the different phases of the motivational process described in the model correspond to the various stages of the learning process.