

What do learners think about studying foreign languages?

What this research was about and why it is important

Motivation is one of the most important factors in language learning. It is important to understand why learners want to study some languages more than others and how their motivation to study foreign languages might change over the years. This study looked at the motivation of learners aged 11-14 in the South-west of England. The researchers used questionnaires and interviews. The study showed that learner motivation decreased with age and motivation was higher among girls than boys. Learners preferred to study German than French. This was even more so for boys than girls. Learners saw French as a more 'feminine' language and thought that it was not cool for boys to make an effort at French.

What the researchers did

- Participants were 228 11-14 year old learners in 3 schools in the South-west of England.
- Learners filled in a questionnaire on 16 concepts related to motivation. These concepts belonged to one of the following five categories:
 - Attitude: i.e.: thoughts and feelings about the language and its speakers
 - Liking: e.g.: I enjoy French lessons.
 - Desire: e.g.: I want to learn to speak French well.
 - Need: e.g.: It will be important for me to know French.
 - Integrative orientation: e.g.: I want to meet French people.
 - Intrinsic motivation: I'd like to learn French even if I did not have to.
 - Identity: i.e.: perceptions about oneself as a speaker of another language
 - Perceived success: e.g.: I usually do well in French lessons.
 - Perceived ability: e.g.: I think I am good at French.
 - Agency: i.e.: effort one puts into learning languages
 - Effort: e.g.: I work hard at French.
 - Result of effort: e.g.: However hard I'll try, I'll never be good at French.
 - Responsibility: Doing well in French is up to me.
 - Awareness of strategies: e.g.: If I do badly at French, I usually know how to do better next time.
 - Metacognitive awareness: e.g.: When I get good marks in French, I usually know why.
 - Metacognitive strategies: e.g.: I try to set myself goals when I study French.
 - External factors: i.e.: parental interest and support, quality of teaching, etc.

What the researchers found

- The general level of motivation was fairly high in all three schools. Learners had a strong desire to do well at languages and wanted to meet French- and German-speaking people. They thought that the teaching they received was of a high quality and that parents had positive attitudes to language learning.
- Learners did not think that it was important to learn other languages. They also did not find their language lessons particularly enjoyable or interesting. Learners also had little intrinsic motivation to learn another language.
- Learners felt responsible for their own learning and that the effort they put into their learning paid off. They usually knew why they did well or badly at the language they were studying but rarely set themselves goals.
- Girls were more motivated to learn languages than boys. Girls had a more positive attitude and felt more responsible for their own learning and progress.
- Older learners were less motivated than younger learners. They were less motivated to meet speakers of the language they were studying. Older learners also thought it was less important to learn another language and assessed their teachers' competence more negatively.

Things to consider

- This study showed that learner motivation was higher for girls than for boys but girls were generally more motivated to do well in school, not just in languages. Motivation decreased with age but it is unclear if older learners were only less motivated to learn languages or if they were less motivated to learn in general.