

On Motivation of Learning English as a Foreign Language: Research Experience in Russian University Context

Maria V. Arkhipova^(✉) , Ekaterina E. Belova ,
and Natalia V. Shutova 

Minin University, Nizhny Novgorod 603950, Russian Federation
arhipovnn@yandex.ru

Abstract. In this article we focus on the problem of motivation to learn a foreign language. Researchers show that regardless of the subject matter students with a high level of motivation tend to achieve better academic results, get a deeper understanding of a subject, feel more satisfied with their results, and strive for success. To explore the topic, we outline three components of motivation, namely, interests, emotions, leading motives, and study their levels. The empirical study is based on the Russian students majoring in Linguistics. The results prove that a low rate of any motivation component has a negative impact on academic achievement. The results of the experiment show that students' interest in learning English is episodic. The leading motive is the coercion motive, i.e. seeking to avoid criticism and academic problems. The majority of students have a low level of overall emotional well-being. We conclude with the issue of exploring the prospect for further research, based on the obtained data, as to find psychological tools for creating an emotionally comfortable atmosphere and means of fostering students' interest in English, cultivating their motivation, making them realize the value of learning; and, as a result, enhancing the quality of education.

Keywords: Education · Foreign language · Motivation · Leading motives

1 Introduction

1.1 Building a Research Problem

Enormous transformations are currently taking place in learning paradigms and education practices in Russia. The English language, being the international language of communication and learning, is included into a wide range of academic programs letting more doors open for career opportunities. Nowadays education in Russia is aimed at developing students' intellectual and personal resources with its emphasis on self-actualization and personal growth. The focal goal of education is to support development of students' learning, cognitive and creative motivation providing them with a more comprehensive understanding of the value of personal activity, realization and fulfillment of their talents and potentialities.

Motivation is sure to constitute the backbone of learning process. Motivation is a power that dynamises behavior of individuals for certain purposes, directs these behaviors and ensures those to maintain consistently [1, 7, 10, 14]. It is motivation that starts, energizes, sustains, and directs behavior and actions. The amount of effort people feel eager to put in their work depends on the degree to which they feel their motivational needs will be satisfied. On the other hand, individuals become demotivated if they feel that something prevents them from attaining good outcomes.

One of the main goals of education is to increase the level of students' academic performance by creating an effective learning environment. In this sense motivation is seen as a significant factor contributing to academic success [2, 16, 21, 22]. Pintrich and Schunk state motivation as a continuous relationship between learning and achievement [26].

1.2 Literature Review

There are numerous theories on motivation and each theory emphasizes a different dimension of motivation. Motivation is one of the main terms used to explain driving forces of behavior and activities [4, 6, 8, 13, 23, 24, 32]. Researchers often contrast intrinsic motivation with extrinsic one, the first energizing and sustaining activities through the spontaneous satisfaction inherent in effective volitional action, the latter being governed by reinforcement contingencies [28]. Pintrich, Roeser, De Groot refer intrinsic motivation to participating in a learning activity for its own sake and extrinsic – to participating in an activity due to the enhancers (rewards or punishment components) like getting good grades, making others happy, success in competition and unwillingness to fail the class [26]. Traditionally, educators consider intrinsic motivation to be more desirable and to result in better learning outcomes than extrinsic motivation [28].

Keller divides motivation into two categories: trait motivation and state motivation [17]. Trait motivation is a general motivation and is stable across a particular time regardless of situational factors. In terms of student situation, student trait motivation is more enduring and refers to student's general motivation toward learning, not a particular course or subject content. State motivation, on the other hand, is not stable because it is significantly influenced by situational factors.

Utvær and Haugan distinguish Self-determination theory [31]. Different types of motivation are understood as different ways in which a person regulates his or her driving forces: from being externally motivated to becoming internally and eventually autonomously driven to perform certain behaviours. Self-determination theory highlights types of motivation, or regulation, in terms other than of quantity, level, or amount, as well as differentiates types of behavioural regulation in terms of the degree to which they represent autonomous versus controlled functioning.

Modern age-related and pedagogical psychology of language teaching has a number of researches dealing with various aspects of study motivation: kinds of motives of academic activity [5, 6]; emotional well-being during academic activity [3–5, 23, 32]; and interest as a kind of inner motivation [14, 15, 17, 18].

The studies of Gardner and Lambert reveal the most commonly used framework for understanding motivation that language learners typically have: instrumental and

integrative types of motivation [12]. The external needs, coming from outside, reflect the instrumental motivation, learning a language because of practical reasons. Integratively motivated learners want to learn the language so that they can better understand the people who speak that language, and their culture. Integrative motivation has proven to be a strong impetus to successful language learning.

Many scientists note that students in Russia nowadays have an ambiguous attitude to foreign language as a school subject, the level of motivation to learn it being inadequate [3–5, 7, 15, 19, 33]. Certainly it gives rise to a contradiction between the increasing demands of society, when good language skills increase the competitiveness of a specialist in any field, and the traditional system of learning a foreign language organized in most Russian schools. We believe that one of the reasons for this phenomenon is an insufficient level of theoretical and experimental research concerning the problem of motivation in foreign language learning. Consequently, the psychopedagogical organization in educational institutions does not meet the educational needs [4, p. 69].

When investigating motivation of language learners one should take into consideration the specific character of a foreign language as a school subject. Thus, following Zimnyaya we shall turn our attention to the analysis of three main features of foreign language as a school subject: objectlessness, infinity and heterogeneity. The essential feature of a foreign language as a subject in comparison with other subjects is that its learning does not give a person immediate knowledge of reality. The foreign language is a means of creating and forming the idea of objective reality. It is only a medium of communication. Foreign language has no separate topic sections, like other subjects. When studying a foreign language, it is impossible to know only vocabulary not knowing grammar. One should know all the grammar and the entire vocabulary required for communication. In this context language as a learning subject is infinite. Heterogeneity is also a significant feature of language. In a broad sense, language includes a number of other phenomena, such as speech activity (i.e. processes of speaking and understanding), and language system (i.e. language defined by a dictionary and grammar), etc. These features of a foreign language as a school subject form a negative attitude to it as a difficult subject [33]. Hence, these factors are one of the reasons why students suffer from a lack of motivation.

1.3 Basic Assumptions

The analysis of scientific literature and our own teaching experience show that it is of vital importance for teachers to foster students' enthusiasm and interest in a subject, build a supportive environment that will meet psychological needs, increase motivation and facilitate the process of learning foreign languages.

The goal of our study is to identify the components of motivation, determine the level of each, and find ways of enhancing motivation. The following questions constitute the foundation of our study: (1) What are the reasons why students feel reluctant to learn English as a foreign language? (2) What are the ways to promote students' motivation towards learning it?

2 Materials and Methods

The experimental study was conducted on the basis of Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University, the Faculty of Humanities; 30 students majoring in Linguistics took part in the study. To explore the outlined components of motivation, their levels we used qualitative research and content analysis; observation, interview were used to collect data for our study as well as the following questionnaires: (1) the questionnaire “Attitude to studying process and school subjects” [27]; (2) the questionnaire “Emotional well-being, activity, mood” [11]; (3) the questionnaire “Motives of studying” [27]. The questionnaires were aimed at distinguishing leading motives of learning English, emotional attitude, factors affecting students’ willingness and unwillingness to learn a language.

The following principles were the bedrock of the study: (a) voluntary participation of respondents in the research; (b) avoidance of offensive, discriminatory, or another unacceptable language in the formulation of questionnaire and interview; (c) privacy and anonymity of respondents; (d) maintenance of the highest level of objectivity in discussions and analyses throughout the research [9].

3 Research Data

At the first stage the experimental study was aimed at distinguishing the leading motives of learning a foreign language (see Fig. 1).

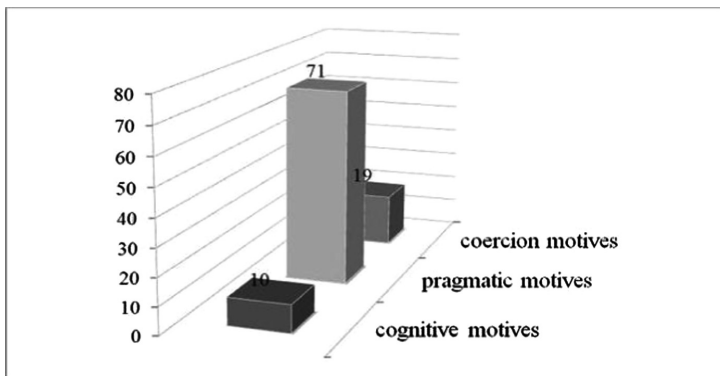


Fig. 1. Leading motives of foreign language learning.

Data received show that only 10% of students have cognitive motives as leading ones. These students are focused on acquiring deep knowledge and feel the need to study independently. This group notes that learning English provides them with the opportunity to know a lot of new, interesting and important things, and show their abilities. Pragmatic motives dominate in 71% of students. They consider learning a foreign language as it gives opportunity to get a prestigious job, stand out among

friends, and get a good grade. But still, realizing the importance of a subject studied, more than half of students note that difficulties cause a negative attitude, make the process less attractive. 19% of students chose coercion motives as leading, underlining that language learning is mostly connected with avoiding possible negative consequences. There is no doubt that such motives cannot promote motivation, eagerness to participate in class activities, so students do not take most out of their learning. From our conversation with the students we found out that mostly they have difficulty studying theoretical material, topics concerning phonetics, history of the language and grammar. Half of the students admit that they carry out the tasks, given at lessons, and participate in the discussions only under the teacher’s supervision. The presence of the teacher and the possibility of negative consequences in case of failure are the dominant factors when doing the tasks.

The second stage of the experiment is to study students’ confidence in a positive result of their activities. The results are shown in Fig. 2.

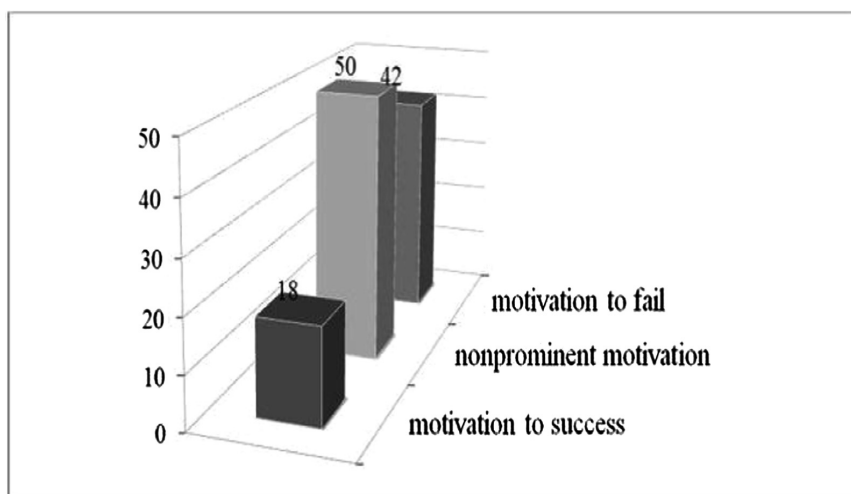


Fig. 2. Motivation to achieve positive results in language learning.

It should be noted that only 18% of the students are set up for success in learning a foreign language. This group of students is focused on achieving positive results. Hope and need for achieving success and positive expectations are the basis of their activity. Motivation to fail is typical for 42% of respondents. Accordingly, when starting the activity they a priori are afraid of a possible failure, and try to find a way to avoid a hypothetical failure. Without desire and will it is impossible to gain fruitful learning results. These students shared that difficult tasks make them panic rather than stimulate or arouse interest in learning. We found out that there is a large number of students (50%) with non-prominent motivation to achieve success and avoid failure.

At the third stage of the experimental study we identified students’ interest in lessons, activities and tasks. Interest is one of the main motives when learning any

subject, providing a positive impact on the process of learning, thinking, memorizing, and the result of academic activity. Our results show that only 30% of students can be characterized as interested in the content of the subject as well as the forms of teacher's presentation and style. 45% of students note that only some facts are interesting in learning a foreign language, so their interest is episodic. They are attracted by some topics discussed at the lesson, new facts related to culture, history, traditions and customs of the country, forms of work, films and presentations. 25% of students consider the educational tasks boring. They do not believe language to be purposeful and meaningful. They remain indifferent to learning a foreign language, do not strive for gaining new knowledge and achieving considerable results and show no determination and persistence. Certainly, lack of interest, enthusiasm towards learning affects motivation in a negative way, keep motivation levels quite low.

At the final stage we also studied the emotional attitude of students to the process of language learning and students' emotional well-being, the results of which are shown in Fig. 3.

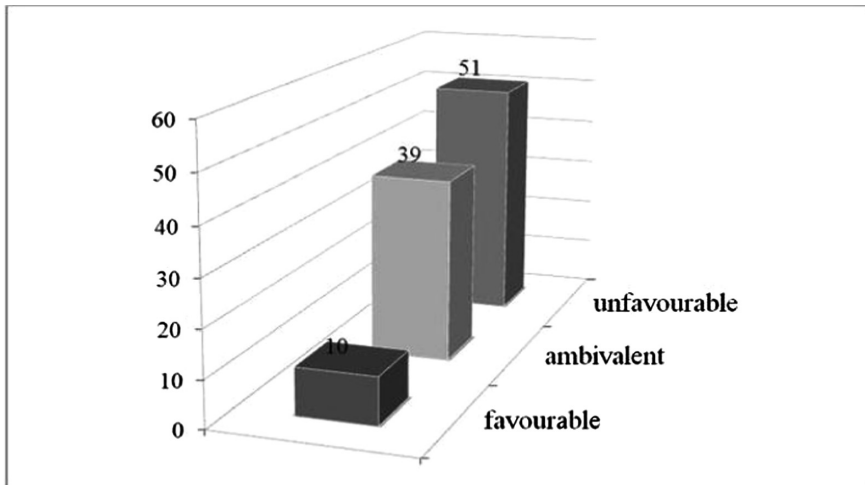


Fig. 3. Students' self-assessment of their emotional state at foreign language lessons.

Based on the obtained results, we can conclude that the minority of students have positive emotional attitude to the process and the result of their activity and feel emotionally comfortable. They are actively involved in discussions, eager to continue their activity and to achieve better results. Negative emotional attitude to the process and the results of activity and emotional discomfort at English lessons are typical of the majority of students. These students point out that in many cases teachers are impatient and unsupportive, have too high expectations of students. Thus, it makes students feel psychologically uncomfortable. The interviews with these students revealed that more than half of them remain indifferent at lessons, often feel nervous when answering, especially when they come to the blackboard, feel nervous about the "ironic smiles of

the classmates” and the “teacher’s comments”. Emotional state of 39% of students is estimated as ambivalent. We can conclude that it is necessary to decrease students’ anxiety, build a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere, warm and patient attitude. In this case, such healthy environment will appeal to students and positive emotions determining the level of success will promote students’ motivation. Negative emotions of students in the process of studying have a negative impact on motivation, because it is emotions that perform motivation functions in any activity.

The data received demonstrate the significance of finding such methods of teaching English which would best meet psychological needs of students and capture students’ interest maintaining motivation. Educators suggest different strategies of doing it, such as creating the situation of success, fostering intercultural communication [15], organizing collective teaching [10], team-work, various projects [7], and using bright hand-out material [29]. We suggest that emotions are motives of any activity. The emotionality of the pedagogical process is one of the most important conditions optimizing the activity of its participants. Feelings and emotions are sure to be paramount, as they provide energy which makes an action possible. A lot of scholars pay attention to music, being of the opinion that music is an art having the greatest power of emotional impact. Music stimulates imagination [25, 30], creative thinking [3, 4], develops speaking skills [20], has stimulative and sedative impact, improves mood and working memory [4]. Thus, we see the prospect of our further studies in the research of musical compositions and studying their impact on the process of education, creating a harmonious, emotionally comfortable and positive classroom atmosphere.

4 Conclusion

Development of society directly depends on the system of education. The aim of educational policy is to change the essence of educational process and organize the teaching process in such a way that it will solve acute problems of modern society and satisfy the modern society demands. Economic globalization has resulted in the ubiquitous use of the English language making it an indispensable part of educational curricula nowadays. However, despite all the efforts, the outcome still does not live up to expectation. Inadequate motivation can be referred to as one of the reasons. Motivation is stated as a significant factor of academic success. The results of our experiment show that students’ interest in learning English as a foreign language is accidental, and most of them are indifferent to the process of learning. Striving for success is a characteristic feature of only 18% of students. The rest of students tend to anticipate failure, have a high level of anxiety, are diffident about their achievements and abilities. Students are sensitive to criticism, remain silent being unsure of the correct answer. The results of the study allow us to draw a conclusion that most students have inadequate motivation to learn a language. We consider it significant to find out means and methods of teaching a foreign language that will meet physiological and psychological needs of today’s students and enhance motivation to learn a foreign language. More than other activities, learning relies on positive attitude of the student to acquire knowledge. Positive emotions and attitudes towards learning play a key role in increasing motivation and influencing students’ performance. Emotions are placed

into the forefront of the learning process in terms of enhancing academic achievements. We consider music to be an instrument of inspiration and a tool that can capture students' interest, build a positive classroom atmosphere, deal with negative motivating processes, thus increasing motivation and as a result school success.

References

1. Acat, M.B., Demiral, S.: Sources of motivation in learning foreign language in Turkey. *Educ. Adm. Theory Pract.* **31**, 312–329 (2002)
2. Aiken, L.A.: Update on attitudes and other affective variables in learning mathematics. *Rev. Educ. Res.* **61**, 880–915 (1976)
3. Arkhipova, M.V.: Muzykal'noe iskusstvo kak osnova sozdaniya uchebnykh jelektronnyh kursov v obuchenii anglijskomu jazyku studentov nejazykovykh vuzov [Music in e-learning courses of English language at non-linguistic universities]. *Hist. Soc.-Educ. Idea* **7**(4), 112–114 (2015). (in Russian). doi:[10.17748/2075-9908.2015.7.4.112-114](https://doi.org/10.17748/2075-9908.2015.7.4.112-114)
4. Arkhipova, M.V., Shutova, N.V.: Psihologicheskie vozmozhnosti ispol'zovaniya muzykal'nogo iskusstva v processe izuchenija inostrannogo jazyka shkol'nikami [Psychological opportunities of using music in the process of learning a foreign language by pupils]. *Hist. Soc.-Educ. Idea* **1**(17), 68–71 (2013). (in Russian)
5. Aseev, V.G.: Motivacija povedenija i formirovanija lichnosti [Behaviour Motivation and Personality Development]. *Mysl'*, Moscow (1976). (in Russian)
6. Atkinson, J.W.: *An Introduction to Motivation*. Van Nostrand, Princeton (1964)
7. Belova, E.E.: Metod proektov kak sredstvo intensivkacii obuchenija inostrannomu jazyku [Method of projects as a means of intensifying foreign language teaching]. In: Bikesheva, R. R., Chuvashova O.V. (eds.) *Key Problems of Pedagogy, Psychology, Linguistics and Methods of Teaching in Educational Institutions: Digest of Materials of the International Scientific and Practical Conference*, pp. 20–24. Astrakhan University Publishing House, Astrakhan (2014). (in Russian)
8. Bolte, A., Goschke, T., Kuhl, J.: The emotion and intuition: effects of positive and negative mood on implicit judgments of semantic coherence. *Psychol. Sci.* **14**, 416–422 (2003)
9. Bryman, A., Bell, E.: *Business Research Methods*, 2nd edn. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2007)
10. Dornyei, Z.: *The Psychology of Language Learner*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah (2005)
11. Doskin, V.A., Lavrentyeva, N.A., Miroshnikov, M.P., Sharai, V.B.: Test differencirovannoj samoocenki funkcional'nogo sostojanija [Test of differentiated self-assessment of functional state]. *Issues Psychol.* **6**, 141–145 (1973). (in Russian)
12. Gardner, R.C., Lambert, W.E.: *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Newbury House, Rowley (1972)
13. Gökçe, D.: The reasons of lack of motivation from the students' and teachers' voices. *J. Acad. Soc. Sci.* **1**, 35–45 (2013)
14. Grossman, S.P.: The Biology of Motivation. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* **30**, 209–242 (1972)
15. Guseva, L.V.: Principy sozdaniya situacij mezhkul'turnogo obshhenija dlja formirovanija mezhkul'turnoj kompetencii studentov po napravleniju "Turizm" (in Russian) [The principles of fostering intercultural communication to form intercultural competence of students majoring in Tourism]. *High. Educ. Today* **1**, 60–63 (2015)
16. Kauffman, D.F., Humsan, J.: Effects of time perspective on student motivation: introduction to a special issue. *Educ. Psychol. Rev.* **16**(1), 1–7 (2004)

17. Keller, J.M.: Motivational design of instruction. In: Reigeluth, C.M. (ed.) *Instructional-Design Theories and Models: An Overview of Their Current Status*, pp. 386–434. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale (1983)
18. Kesler, J.: *Let's Succeed with Our Teenagers*. David C. Cook Publishing Co., Elgin (1973)
19. Koroleva, E.V., Kruchinina, G.A.: Teoreticheskie i prakticheskie aspekty lingvistiki, literaturovedenija, metodiki prepodavanija inostrannyh jazykov [Theoretical and practical aspects of linguistics, literature, methodology of teaching foreign languages]. *Bull. Minin Univ.* **4**(27) (2015). (in Russian). <http://vestnik.mininuniver.ru/upload/iblock/1ef/koroleva.pdf>. Accessed 16 May 2017
20. Kudravets, O.V.: Muzyka i pesni na urokah nemeckogo jazyka [Music and songs at lessons of the German language]. *Foreign Lang. Sch.* **2**, 45–50 (2001). (in Russian)
21. Lane, J., Lane, A.: Self-efficacy and academic performance. *Soc. Behav. Personal.* **29**(7), 687–694 (2001)
22. Ma, X., Xu, J.: Determining the causal ordering between attitude toward mathematics and achievement in mathematics. *Am. J. Educ.* **110**, 256–280 (2004)
23. Moore, D.G., Burland, K., Davidson, J.W.: The social context of musical success: a developmental account. *Br. J. Psychol.* **94**, 529–550 (2003)
24. Moore, S.C., Oaksford, M.: Some long-term effects of emotion on cognition. *Br. J. Psychol.* **93**, 383–395 (2002)
25. Petrushin, V.I.: *Muzykal'naja psihologija [Musical Psychology]* Kompozitor, Moscow (1997). (in Russian)
26. Pintrich, P.L., Schunk, D.H.: *Motivation in education: theory, research and applications*. Prentice Hall Regents, Englewood Cliffs (1996)
27. Rean, A.A.: *Psihologija izuchenija lichnosti [Psychology of Personality Research]*. Izd-vo Mihajlova V.A, St-Petersburg (1999). (in Russian)
28. Ryan, R.M., Deci, E.L.: Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: classic definitions and new directions. *Contemp. Educ. Psychol.* **25**, 54–67 (2000)
29. Salanovitch, N.A.: Problemy motivacii i rol' uprazhnenij pri obuchenii francuzskomy jazyku v starshih klassah [The problem of motivation and the means of exercises in teaching the French language at secondary school]. *Foreign Lang. Sch.* **1**, 15–18 (1998). (in Russian)
30. Sopchak, A.L.: Individual difference in responses to different types of music in relation to sex, mood and other variables. *Psychol. Monogr.* **69**(11), 369–387 (1955)
31. Utvær, B.K.S., Haugan, G.: The academic motivation scale: dimensionality, reliability, and construct validity among vocational students. *Nordic J. Vocat. Educ. Train.* **6**(2), 17–45 (2016)
32. Zembylas, M.: Emotions and teacher identity: a post structural perspective. *Teach. Teach.: Theory Pract.* **9**, 213–238 (2003)
33. Zimnjaja, I.A.: *Psihologija obuchenija inostrannym jazykam v shkole [Psychology of Teaching Foreign Languages at School]*. Prosveshhenie, Moscow (1991). (in Russian)