

MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Abrudan Caciora Simona Veronica

University of Oradea, Faculty of Electric Engineering and Information Technology, Univeristatii street no. 3, phone number 0744 241599, e-mail: veronicaabrudan@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper represents an attempt to evaluate students' motivation in learning a foreign language in general and English in particular. It is mainly a theoretical approach to the concept of motivation including a definition of the concept, a presentation of the most important theories of motivation, and the factors influencing it

Key words: motivation, foreign language learning

Introduction

The success of any action usually depends on the extent to which individuals strive to attain their purpose, along with their desire to do so. In general people have come to refer to this psychological factor – the impulse that generates the action – as motivation. As the term itself indicates, it is a “motive force”, something that prompts, incites or stimulates action. According to *The Short Oxford English Dictionary*, motivation is “that which moves or induces a person to act in a certain way; a desire, fear, reason, etc which influences a person’s volition: also often applied to a result or object which is desired.”

To think of motivation as belonging only to the initial stages of an action, - that is as concerned with arousing initial interest and turning it into a decision to engage in some activity – is only a limited understanding of the term. The need to maintain this state of arousal, to determine someone to make the necessary effort to complete an action is also of great importance. This idea is reflected in the definition given by Williams and Burden (1997: 120) who see motivation as “a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, a state which leads to a conscious decision to act and gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort”. Thus intellect and affect combine with volition and perseverance to result in what is known as motivated behaviour. The same idea is conveyed in different words by R.C. Gardner who seems to explain the term with the precision of mathematical demonstration: motivation is a combination of effort plus desire to achieve a goal plus favourable attitudes towards the goal to be accomplished (Gardner, 1985:11).

Thus the simple existence of desire, strong reasons for doing something or favourable attitudes towards a particular thing or action do not reflect motivation in and of themselves. The same R.C. Gardner gives the example of individuals who may have a strong desire to do something or may enjoy an activity and who cannot be considered to be motivated, since their intentions are not linked with a striving to accomplish that particular thing. Similarly, a person can put a great deal of effort toward a goal without being necessarily motivated: the decision to accomplish something may be triggered by different causes, both internal – such as interest, curiosity, or even a general desire to achieve – and external ones such as another person, social pressure, material rewards, etc.

1. The Concept of Motivation

Each concept or idea has its own history determined by the general evolution of human thought. For many years, the understanding of the term and the research on motivation were dominated by the so-called *drive-reduction theories*. Psychologists identified a large number of human needs (both biological and psychological ones), all of them causing inner tensions, which had to be released in one way or another.

In 1964, Atkinson (quoted in Williams and Burden, 1997: 113) tried a more promising reformulation of the drive reduction approach to motivation. Its basic premise was that people differ quite markedly in their need to achieve or be successful. The lives of some people are dominated by the drive to succeed, to be high achievers in everything they do, whereas for others, it really does not seem to matter whether they do well or not. In addition, a person might be inclined to avoid engaging in a particular activity because of fear of failure.

Such assumptions might have brought into the light the problem of motivational intensity (i.e. the degree of effort the individual expends to achieve a goal), but they are not sufficient in themselves: focusing only on intensity does not completely describe the concept of motivated behaviour.

The first decades of the 20th century marked an important contribution in the definition of motivation as concept. During the 1920s and 1930s, most behavioural psychologists were committed to a non-introspective study of human behaviour that concentrated mainly on what could be objectively observed, described and measured, without resort to the presumption of inner motives or innate mechanisms as determinants. Since much of overt human behaviour takes the form of actions repeated in similar circumstances, learning theorists of that period focused on habits and the way in which they were acquired (the theory of stimulus – response and reinforcement). In practice, the overemphasis on tedious mechanistic processes to which the student was not expected to make any spontaneous or personal contribution, left little room for the idea of doing something for pleasure or satisfying a subjective purpose and interest. However, behavioural psychologists were the first to recognize the power of feedback as a motivating influence, though the latter was largely considered in terms of external forces (i.e. what specific conditions give rise to what kind of behaviour and how the consequences of that behaviour affect whether it is more or less likely to happen again). Several other motivational strategies used by teachers all over the world have their roots in the principles of Behaviourism: the importance of stimuli survives in the form of giving pupils meaningful, relevant and interesting tasks to do and the importance of response, praise and encouragement for the learners' positive efforts cannot be contested by anyone.

Another important step in the evolution of the concept of motivation was the appearance of cognitivism, a trend emerging as a reaction to Behaviourism. It was based on the ideas of the linguist Naom Chomsky who maintained that, far from being a form of behaviour, language was a ruled-based system from which an infinite number of sentences can be created. The concept of “language creativity” and the idea of choice could not remain without an echo in the sphere of language learning and had an important influence upon the concept of motivation. From a cognitive perspective, motivation was concerned with such issues as why people decided to act in certain ways and what factors influenced the choices they made. It also involved decisions as to the amount of effort people were prepared to expend in attempting to achieve their goals.

This view on learning put motivation (i.e. the inner desire to do something leading to a conscious decision to act and sustained effort) at the basis of any action.

Though language teaching has never adopted a methodology based on Chomsky's work, his ideas opened the way to Krashen's theory of language acquisition, to socio-linguistics and humanistic approaches. Although they bear different names, all these trends are based on the belief that the individual learner is the centre of the learning process. The *natural order hypothesis* and the theory of the *affective filter* have come to emphasise that learners make sense of various external influences in ways that are personal to them so, according to their internal disposition, they will allow or prevent the exterior input to be received; hence, the importance of creating a relaxed atmosphere in the language classroom and of adopting a positive attitude towards the learner. Certain language points may take learners some time to absorb, so praise and encouragement will keep motivation up.

Another factor influencing student motivation is the perceived value of an activity. In 1960s and 1970s, the promoters of socio-linguistics threw light upon the fact that, in order to communicate effectively in a foreign language, people need to know more than how to express ideas in correct grammatical terms. They also had to be aware of appropriate levels of language to use in different situations. The necessity of teaching language as it was used everyday, real-world situations and the importance of numerous *receptive* activities were reflected in the creation of syllabuses designed to serve the actual social, cultural or vocational needs of the learners. The application of humanistic theories in practice has resulted in the incorporation in the language-learning materials of activities for expressing one's feelings, for sharing one's values and viewpoints with others. New methods such as Suggestiopedia, Community Language Learning, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, role-play and drama techniques are meant to help more inhibited students to express themselves freely. Foreign Language Teachers have become conscious of the fact that individual students have preferred modalities of learning, that what is good for one is not always good for everybody. They have been encouraged to adopt a more flexible outlook upon the process of language teaching, adapt their programmes to the needs of their students and the area where they are teaching.

2. Types of motivation and factors influencing it

In order to summarize briefly the ideas presented so far, we could define it in terms of two factors: learners' communicative needs and their social and educational attitudes. An extension of the first part of the definition would take into consideration the types of motivation as identified by researchers at different moments in time (Gardner, 1985; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Wright, 1987; Spolsky, 1989). They all have come to draw a distinction between two types of motivation: when the only reason for learning a foreign language is to gain something outside the activity itself, such as passing an exam, obtaining financial rewards, getting a job or pleasing another person(s), the motivation is likely to be *extrinsic/instrumental*. As the terms themselves indicate, it is caused by a combination of external factors and used as a means or instrument to obtain something. When its purpose is to enable one to communicate with the members of a specific language community, then motivation is considered to be *intrinsic* or *integrative*.

In order to offer a clear image of the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy, Spolsky (1989:124) borrows Harter's model (1982) and represents it in the following way:

Intrinsic		Extrinsic
Preference for challenge	vs	Preference for easy work
Curiosity/interest	vs	Pleasing a teacher/getting grades
Independent mastery	vs	Dependence on teacher in figuring out problems
Independent judgement	vs	Reliance on teacher's judgment about what to do
Internal criteria for success	vs	External criteria for success

Following this model, it comes out clearly that the greater the value the individuals attach to the accomplishment of an activity, the more highly motivated they will be to engage in it and later to put sustained effort until they achieve their goal.

This distinction also tells us that both internal and external factors have an important role to play in motivating learners.

3. Factors influencing motivation

3.1 Motivation and personality variables

In general, many people see an association between personality attributes and the successful acquisition of a second language. While successful student may display different types of characteristics (they may be extrovert, self-confident, active, passive, independent as well as introvert or shy), unsuccessful students are more frequently described as demonstrating a lack of self-confidence and being shy, afraid to express their opinions and nervous. Whatever their form of behaviour, students who try to adopt a more flexible attitude towards the learning of a foreign language seem to have greater chances of success than those whose affective filter is constantly up.

Referring to the problem of motivation, W. Rivers (1964) has observed that personal motifs such as fear or anxiety may combine with learned social motifs such as a desire for status in a group and for social approval, creating a series of reactions that may inhibit or work towards progress in a foreign language. Up to a point, an anxious learner may try hard to catch up with the group and acquire proficiency in a language. A friendly/supportive environment may be decisive in such a situation. But the judgement of classmates can also be harmful, destroying the self-belief in one's ability to succeed. Combined with a generalized fear of negative evaluation, it may inhibit or distract the learner from the task of attending and remembering new items.

Williams and Burden (1997:100) also speak of a state called "learned helplessness" referring to people who feel that they had no control over their actions and see intelligence as something unchangeable and failure as essentially due to a lack of ability. In conclusion, learners' inhibition may be the result of both internal and external factors, and being related to the ability or inability to find solutions to problems in the past.

Another important component influencing motivation to learn is the individual learners' feelings of competence and self-efficacy. Displaying no signs of inhibition, they are usually eager to take risks, are not

afraid of making language mistakes and ready to adopt some of the identity characteristics of another cultural group. Their affective filter is low and they can grasp much of the comprehensible input they are faced with. Such people often referred to as “mastery oriented” tend to understand failure in terms of lack of effort and seek to improve their subsequent performance.

Obviously, there might be other categories of learners between these two extremes such as those who hide their shyness behind a face of openness and willingness to take risks or people who avoid situations in which failure would signify low ability, trying to look smarter by all means. But in those situations we can speak of the appearance of motivation, rather than the reality of it.

Given the diversity of personality types, some researchers have tried to find connections between them and receptivity to different aspects of language learning. In a book dedicated to the way in which languages are learned, Lightbown & Spada (1993:36) do not exclude the possibility of motivation to be more related to particular aspects of language proficiency than others. They base their suppositions on several studies among which a language proficiency test in which highly motivated students were found to be more successful in the part of the test which measured oral communication skills but not more successful than others in the part assessing grammatical knowledge. Though, motivated student may have a better self image and more confidence than non-motivated ones, and such characteristics might make them feel more at ease when interacting with others, the fact that the two things occurred at the same time do not necessarily mean that one caused the other. Even if cases when students preferred oral practice to written assignments or work on grammatical structure do exist, they cannot make us jump at the conclusion that motivated students will draw a line between different aspects of a language, accepting some and rejecting others.

Attitudes and motivation

In general, most people seem to agree that attitudes and motivation are closely related to success in language learning. This explains perhaps why some people have a much easier time of learning languages than others; in the same classroom setting, some students progress rapidly, while others just struggle along and never achieve command of a second language. Krashen has drawn attention to the fact that variables in second language acquisition derive both from the amount of comprehensible input the acquirer receives and understands and from the strength of the affective filter.

When the only reason for learning a second language is external pressure, internal motivation may be minimal and attitudes towards learning are likely to be negated. On the other hand, if students have favourable attitudes towards the foreign language and its speakers, towards the teacher and the course, they will probably be more attentive in the class, would take assessments more seriously and, willing to achieve more, would look for situations when they can obtain further practice in the foreign language. Some critics (Gardner, 1985) make a distinction between different types of attitudes according to factors in the environment or subject characteristics such as age or sex. Thus we can speak of attitudes revolving around the educational aspects of second language acquisition (*educational attitudes*) and of *social attitudes*, focusing on cultural implications of second language acquisition. Sex differences are also thought to influence attitudes and motivation: experience indicates that girls tend to demonstrate significantly more positive attitudes towards learning languages than boys, a good example in this respect being the overwhelming majority in the faculties of philology and foreign languages.

Though many researchers (Spolsky, 1989; Williams and Burden, 1997) do not believe in an absolute biological basis for learning, there are cases when differences of age may have an important influence upon the process of foreign language learning. The notion that young children pick up foreign languages more easily than older learners is clearly challenged by the evidence of areas in which the latter do better. However, the adults' emphatic capacity and openness to get involved in “real communication”, their ego permeability may be lower especially because of external causes.

The role of the teacher/professor in all the stages of the motivational process

Nowadays the role of the teacher is recognized as being highly significant in all the stages of the motivational process. Motivation is no longer thought of only as integrative or instrumental. It is also considered a key to learning something in many cases created, fostered and maintained by an enthusiastic and well-prepared classroom teacher. Because of the importance of the nature of the interactions that occur between learners and teachers, many studies have been dedicated to the discussions of the influence of

teachers in the process of foreign language learning. Given the complexity of the issue it may well constitute the subject of a separate paper. What we shall attempt here is just a summary of important qualities a good teacher usually displays. At the top of the list I should place the teacher's enthusiasm, acknowledgement and stimulation of students' ideas, the creation of a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom, the presentation of activities in a clear, interesting and motivating way, the encouragement of pupils with difficulties, helping them to increase their expectations of themselves. In an article published in 1982, Mary Finocchiaro has added to all these the importance of (a) making sure the students comprehend every dialogue, utterance, the gist of the reading passage; (b) giving them extensive practice in using verbal or non-verbal alternatives for communicative expressions, structures or language items; (c) correcting important errors tactfully by rephrasing a question, expanding an answer, or by merely saying "listen" and giving the correct answer; (d) letting them either grade their own papers or do so with a partner; (e) showing concern for school or community problems of individuals; (f) making it possible for them to enjoy small successes and the feeling that they are making definite – even if slow – progress toward their goals. As Finocchiaro argues in points (c),(d),(e), the problem of error correction plays a very important role in the process of motivating or de-motivating students. Being constantly aware that all human learning is fundamentally a process involving the making of mistakes may help any teacher in using mistakes and errors creatively during the teaching activity, for they hold in them some of the keys to the understanding of the process. When teachers help the learners to develop an internal sense of control as well as feelings of effectiveness in their ability to carry out tasks, then there are great chances for the learners to become motivated to learn. External reinforcers in the form of rewards, good marks or simple praise, are often considered to be excellent ways of motivating underachieving or reluctant learners. Conversely, extra homework, punishment or other sanctions, proved not only ineffective in bringing about positive change, but also having exactly the opposite effect. As Williams and Burden (1997) have rightly observed when "feedback actually provides information to learners that enables them to identify specific aspects of their performance (...) it should prove both motivating and helpful to them to move into the zone of next development. If, on the other hand, the feedback fails to provide this kind of information, it could have entirely the opposite effect". (1997: 138)

3.4 Motivation and learning styles

Closely related to the problem of students' attitudes towards the language course is the problem of their different learning styles. Researchers and foreign language teachers have gradually become conscious that individual students have preferred modalities of learning. Consequently, when learners are given some freedom to choose one way of learning or another, they might do better than those who find themselves forced to learn in environments where a learning style, which does not suit them, is imposed as the only way to learn. One of the views put forward by the initiators of humanistic approaches to learning was that teachers should be allowed to adapt their programmes with due attention to the objectives of their students and the needs of the area where they are teaching. Though, this might not always be easy, a concern for the students' learning styles might be of great help in motivating them to learn.

Motivation and the power relationships between languages

The existence of power relationships between languages is one of the reasons why people have favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards learning a particular language. Subjects, who select instrumental reasons over integrative ones, often take into consideration the economic and practical advantages of learning a foreign language. A good example in this respect is the present situation in Romanian schools where learners and the parents, faced with the opportunity of choosing between English and French, generally choose the former as it has become a kind of *lingua franca*, placing those who are able to use it in a more favourable position than those who are proficient in French. In the same way, members of a minority group may have different attitudes and motivation when learning the language of a majority group than those of a majority group members learning a minority language. Here, the case of immigrants is perhaps the most relevant.

The intent of this section was to focus attention on the variety of factors influencing motivation in language learning. A review of the literature indicated how personality variables, learning styles and different kinds of attitudes might relate to success in or willingness to acquire a particular language. Before coming to an end, I thought it might be interesting to see how individual students perceived the complex problem of motivation and how their attitudes relate to their behaviour in the language classroom.

4. Conclusions

As indicated in this paper, motivation is a crucial factor in learning a foreign language, which is influenced by different variables: personality variables, the attitudes of learners, their learning styles, and even the power relationships between languages.

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