

Evidence for a motivational dip in foreign language learning during Year 7

What this research was about and why it is important

The research looked at the motivation of year 7 pupils in the UK to learn a foreign language and whether this motivation declined over the course of the school year. The research investigated four potential factors likely to play a role in pupils' motivation: the teacher, the language being learned, the pupil's gender and the pupil's ability level. There is increasing evidence for a crisis in foreign language teaching and learning in the UK as many pupils are dropping language subjects at GCSE and A-Level. This research aimed to uncover whether the lack of motivation to study a foreign language starts early on in secondary school education. The study used data from two questionnaires given to a Year 7 group. The findings show that, overall, there is a decline in motivation to learn a foreign language over the course of the school year. The impact of the factors investigated, however, revealed a more complicated picture; while each factor on its own appeared to have little effect on the overall downward motivation trend, in combination with each other, some of these factors appeared to have some effect on motivation levels.

What the researchers did

- A year 7 cohort of 335 pupils from one inner-city urban school in central England took part in the study. 144 pupils were studying French and 201 were studying German across four ability sets for each language.
- Phase 1: The pupils were given a questionnaire at the beginning of the school year. The first part of the questionnaire asked them for background information, including their gender and what language they were studying. The rest of the questions asked about the pupils' levels of motivation for language learning. These included rating scales Qs (e.g. 'Do you enjoy your language lessons?') where the participants could indicate their answer on a line ranging from 'Very much' to 'Not at all'.
- Phase 2: The same pupils were given a similar questionnaire at the end of the school year. This time, some of the questions were asked in relation to their answers from Phase 1 (e.g. 'Do you enjoy your language lessons more or less than in the beginning of the year?').
- Data was analysed by categorising the responses into 'positive' and 'negative' opinions and looking at changes in percentages between the two phases. Differences in percentages were also analysed in relation to the background factors.

What the researchers found

- There were overall trends showing a shift from positivity towards negativity between phases 1 and 2 in both (1) the pupils' own opinions and (2) the pupils' perceptions of their classmates' opinions of their language lessons.
- These overall trends were the same across both female and male pupils' responses and mainly the same across both French and German pupils' responses.
- The data was further categorised according to (a) groups showing more positive trends than the overall data (b) groups matching the overall trends (c) groups showing more negative trends than the overall data.
- There was some evidence of a relationship between the combined factors 'language' and 'ability' and such groupings; all lower set French classes showed more positive trends than the overall data and higher set German classes showed either more positive trends or trends in line with the overall data.

Things to consider

- The trend found here towards a loss of motivation during year 7 also correlated with a weaker trend towards negativity in children's opinions about school in general.
- There were different trends between individual classes, suggesting positive/negative group cultures developing at the class level. It was not the case that lower ability classes were less motivated than higher ability classes across the board. A reason for this might be that lower ability students are more motivated to progress to a better ability level in the language.
- There are other factors to consider, such as the lack of choice the pupils had in whether to study French or German and how this might have contributed to their motivation levels.
- A complicated picture emerges and a more in-depth analysis of individual's motivations would be beneficial.