

What motivates language learning in primary school and beyond

What this paper was about and why it is important

This paper reviews recent research (published between 2000 and 2016) that looks at motivations for language learning among young learners in the United Kingdom. The author was interested in how motivation differs among different groups of children: those in primary school (aged 7-11), in secondary school (aged 11-16) and in university language programs (aged 18+). Also included were the attitudes expressed by teachers, parents, and peers in terms of how they may influence language learning motivation. As a final statement, the author proposes a new model to understand how motivation affects language learning in students. In this model, the author introduces novel influences on language learning motivation: *rebellion/resistance*, and acknowledges that the learners' self-image may be a complex and multifaceted construction, encompassing both how they see themselves and how they believe they are seen by others.

What the author did

- Explained the history of official policy on language learning provisions in the UK in the period between 1994 and 2016.
- Discussed how policy differed in each nation in the UK and reflect on the impact those policy decisions may have had.
- Reviewed the literature on motivation in language learning published between 2000 and 2016.
- Described how different motivations may be related to difference conceptions of the self in the learner.

What the author found

- Among primary school students (aged 7-11), intrinsic motivation is high: students appear to enjoy language learning for its own sake and not because they feel they 'ought' to be learning a language.
- Secondary school students (aged 11-16) show radical changes in motivation. Motivation in general is low, and dominated by a sense of what is expected of them by teachers and parents.
- University students (aged 18+) again show a radical change in motivation. Motivation in this group is high, and reflects a desire for proficiency, viewing language skill as a critical instrument.
- University students may also adopt a purposefully 'International posture', and reject the notion of the UK 'monoglottal attitude'.
- Parents are generally less supportive of language learning than some of their European counterparts, and teachers expect fewer students of lower socio-economic means to take an interest in language learning.
- Motivation among language students in the UK is a complicated mix of political/policy elements, social elements, and internal psychological factors.
- Language learning motivations can be modelled as interactions between motivations of *Self* and motivations of *Others*, both of which have primarily positive *Ideal* states and externally motivated *Ought* states.

Things to consider

- Motivation for language learning changes over time among students: from a high level in primary schools, to a very low level in secondary school, only to rise again among university students. There are, however, many fewer students at university level than in secondary school.
- Changes in educational policy lead to changes in motivation: secondary school children were less motivated when aware that they could opt out of language instruction at age 14.
- In secondary school and beyond, language learning is associated with an 'elite' or 'brainy' set of students, which interacts negatively with socio-economic differences in uptake.
- Highly motivated older learners reject British insularism, and use *rebellion* as motivation within their *Own Ideal*, rather than relying on pressure from *Other* influences.
- Students who view language skills as cultural capital rather are more likely to continue their studies. Schools could benefit from reflecting on this, and implement language policies that promote this view among their own cohorts.