

# Motivational Factors Between Individuals with Different Learning Goals for Acquiring English at Different Levels

Hanna Flores-Enríquez

*University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, MEXICO*  
*Division of social sciences and humanities*

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## *Abstract*

Motivation is an important factor for successful learning. However, the teaching methods, activities, strategies and content influence in the development and direction of students' motivation. With a narrative approach which categorizes the experiences of each of the participants; supported by a quantitative approach, by showing quantitative data to have a broad view of the data collected. This research study collects the opinions of 4 participants from the University of Guanajuato who take English language classes as a graduation requirement showing that language learning approaches reflect an important effect on students' motivation being a complement to the learning objectives. Thus, increasing the motivation of the students to continue with the process of acquiring and learning a second language.

**Keywords:** motivation, teaching approaches, second language acquisition and learning, English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

## 1. Introduction

For several years now, motivation has been considered an important weapon that triggers success in learning. As is supported by Dörnyei (1994), motivation is one of the main determinants of performance in a second/foreign language. Nowadays, thanks to the work of former teachers who have created models that explain the phenomenon of motivation in the learning process of students, we have a broad view of the effect that motivation has on second language learning or acquisition. However, some of these models do not consider other factors such as teaching methods, forms, strategies and contents that act together with motivation for the learner's linguistic development and progress, or they may do so as in the case of Garden's model (Dörnyei, 1994). Even so it directs motivation within a social context instead of the foreign language classroom which is the main context to which learners are accustomed. The following case study analyzes the factors that most affect students' motivation to continue with the study of a second language that is a prerequisite for their bachelor's degree level, comparing ESL students at the University of Guanajuato at different levels within a foreign language context learning. By obtaining specific information about their concrete contexts, it would be possible to identify the concepts or ideas that were obtained through the interviews and observation notes that were made to know if the language learning approaches affect the motivation of students at different levels with different learning objectives or if having an extrinsic motivation as a mandatory basis

affects the motivation process of students to continue with this process of acquiring and learning a second language.

## 2. Literature review

In this section, the main concepts which integrate the theoretical framework of this paper will be discussed: Motivation in SLA, Teaching Methods, Attitudes towards English as a Second Language.

### 2.1 *Motivation in SLA*

Over time, there have been several researchers on the main factors affecting the acquisition of second languages, in particular, English. Among these factors, motivation has acquired a value of its own. Adwani and Shrivastava (2019) state emphatically that motivation is the heart of any language teaching and learning, as within the field of language teaching “it is observed that all learning activities are filtered through the learners’ motivation” (Adwani & Shrivastava, 2019, cited in Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020) and indeed, without learners’ motivation, classes will not fulfill their teaching objective. Those who do not feel any motivation, every language class will be meaningless or aimless as a side effect the learning of that language would be delayed. This can be reflected within the statement of Williams et al. (2016) that motivation is the stimulus that makes one set specific goals, making extraordinary efforts to achieve them.

Understanding that motivation is one of the triggers of the learning process of students, it has been commonly classified into two types which are: intrinsic motivation, in which the individual has a real desire or intention to engage in a specific learning (Scheifele, 1996, cited in Krapp, 1999), and extrinsic motivation in which individuals perform the activity in order to obtain an external reward by not enjoying the learning process (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

However, in the research on Second Language Acquisition and the English as a Second Language field, there are two classifications of great importance, the language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation. By motivation for language learning we mean the type of motivation to effectively learn or acquire any language other than the mother tongue; however, as Gardner (1968) mentions, it is a characteristic for those individuals whose context allows them to do so. An example of this is the acquisition of the English language by immigrant families to the United States from other countries, who have to learn the language in order to communicate. Benefiting in a certain way from being in a country where in most cases the main language of communication is English, thus becoming one of the main factors of their motivation. The second class of motivation, classroom learning motivation refers to “motivation in the classroom situation, or in any specific situation. It focuses on individuals’ perception of the task at hand, and is largely state-oriented. It will be influenced by a number of factors associated with the language classroom” (Gardner, 1968: 11) such as the types of tasks, the type of teaching, the materials, the needs of the learner, the environment, among others. In other words, this motivation will depend on the learner's initial aim, which will be affected in a positive or negative way depending on the external factors of the classroom. That is to say, individuals can acquire a second language, by their own decision or by being a requirement, however, factors such as the teaching method or the materials implemented will shape their experience so that it will be satisfactory or not.

### 2.2 *Teaching methods*

An important factor in the students’ learning process is the teacher, who must be able to teach the basics of the language to the students, but also to encourage them to learn. As Gardner

(2001) mentions “the teacher plays an important role in the language learning process by motivating the students” (p. 8). One of the ways to achieve this is by selecting the best material, and making the appropriate adaptations for the best use according to the needs of the students. Through this, the teacher can help his students to make the process easier and more attractive. This idea is supporting by Han (2021) since mentions that “in order for students to be successfully engaged in learning rather than just spending time sitting in class, teachers need to provide clear learning intentions and to set up clear criteria for successful learning” (p. 5).

However, lack of student motivation is a constant problem facing not only education in general, but also language teaching. Increasingly, learners attend classes with little enthusiasm, dedication and motivation. This may be due to cultural factors, such as the social or professional circumstances they have been subjected to in order to learn a language or the social idea with which the country of origin and the individual have grown up with regard to the target language. As stipulates Gardner (1979, cited in Skehan, 1993 & Norris-Holt, 2001) “expectations regarding bilingualism, combined with attitudes toward the target language and its culture, form the basis of an individual's attitude toward language learning” (p. 212). Thus, proving that personal thoughts also influence language learner motivation.

The individual's personal goals, and even the emotions with which he or she comes to the classroom (Williams et al., 2016) in conclusion, cause students to not fully integrate into the learning process. Consequently, this leads to a lack of motivation for the educational process as a consequence of cultural problems and inadequate teaching methodology.

For that reason, motivation in teaching must be a constant practice in the teacher's work. To achieve this, the teacher must understand the needs, interests and concerns of the students, as mentioned above. Leading to the fact that “the teacher's main goal is to systematically plan and create a classroom environment that inspires the learner and encourages him/her to acquire new knowledge, skills and habits” (Popovska & Kuzmanovska, 2020: 42) moving from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach. Increasing the levels of motivation in students which as seen in previous research successfully helps the student's learning and acquisition process.

### *2.3 Attitudes towards English as a Second Language*

Attitudes and motivation according with Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) are two different concepts but are related to the language learning process. While an attitude is a set of beliefs and motivation is a reason for doing something, both intervene to create a perception. For example, your level of motivation to learn English can be affected for your attitude towards English culture, or towards your teacher. Some psycholinguists define attitude as “an enduring evaluation of something, where that something is called the object of the attitude. The object of the attitude can be a person, a product, or a social group” (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014) or, in this case, a language, and depending on whether this preference is negative or positive, it can affect whether or not the learner actively participates in the language learning process. Holmes (1992) believes that when people feel positive towards the target language, they will be highly motivated and, therefore, will be more successful in acquiring the target language.

On the other hand, Horwitz et al. (1986) cited in Hashwani (2008), mentions that having a lack of comfort or fear will influence their performance in language tasks that require attention and deliberate effort, and they may lose concentration in language learning processes. Not achieving the established linguistic objectives or achieving them in a mediocre way. Therefore, attitude is considered one of the key factors contributing to the success of L2 learning (Spolsky, 1969, cited in Ming et al., 2011). A study conducted by Liu (2007) on the attitudes and motivation of Chinese university students to learn English gives us an example of the correlation of both

factors since in his results he obtained that Third-year university students had positive attitudes and a high level of motivation towards learning English, obtaining adequate grades for them.

### 3. Methodology

The focus of this study case is to analyze by comparing ESL students of the University of Guanajuato at different levels to find out the kind of factors that have a higher weight over students' motivation, by using a narrative analysis of the results.

#### 3.1 *Research questions and analysis method*

The research questions used to lead this research study were the following:

- To what extent do language learning approaches affect the motivation of learners at various levels with different learning objectives?
- What effect does having imposed or independent goals have on learner motivation when acquiring a second language through guided learning?
- What are the differences in attitudes and motivation among students of different proficiency levels?

In order to analyze the results obtained for this academic research, a qualitative approach was used. This approach consists in “examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants” (Maycut & Morehouse, 1994 cited in Mora Pablo et al., 2015) in order to offer the reader a complete framework of the situations in which the case studies are situated. By obtaining specific information about their specific contexts, we could identify the concepts or ideas that are repeated in their results and thus be able to answer the research questions planned in this research. Also, it is focused on being a case study, which is an “intensive study on a person, a group of people or a unit, whose objective is to generalize over several units” (Heale & Twycross, 2018: 7). This type of research examines complex phenomena as it allows researchers to take a broad topic, and reduce it to such a manageable investigation. By using this methodology, it might be possible to transform the ideas and expressions of the participants into metalinguistic concepts in accordance with our field of study, second language acquisition.

#### 3.2 *Context and participants*

The participants required for this study were 4 persons: 1 male and 3 females. They are between 19 and 26 years old. The participants belong to different undergraduate programs at the University of Guanajuato. The students attend English courses at the language center of the same educational institution at different levels as is the case of participants Y (level 500) and W (level 600). However, some of them share the same English level as participants U and V who are at level 400 of the English language. All of the participants have previously studied English throughout their educational life. However, there is special cases. One of the participants decided to complement his classes through private education in language centers and spent 1 month in Canada for study purposes. So, they have been immersed in the teaching and acquisition of the English language throughout their lives. Finally, all participants are studying this language because it is a mandatory requirement of their degrees in order to obtain their titulation.

### 3.3 *Data collection instruments*

Data collection was carried out through observation of the subject's environment and face-to-face interviews with both participants. Data collection through observation will be by means of personal notes of the researcher, while for the structure of the interviews, it was decided to be divided into two parts. The first part was the open-ended interview, where there is more interaction between the interviewer and the participant, feeling free to express their personal thoughts and ideas about the subject. On the other hand, the second part was the semi-directive interview where the researcher controls the question, she wants the participant to answer, limiting their communicative freedom but focusing the participants' answers for the objectives of the study (Budar & Belmonte, 2012). The interviews were audio-recorded and analyzed. Letters of consent were given to the two participants to protect their privacy and rights. In addition, according to the interview, there were 15 questions that will be attached as an appendix, and are found at the end of this paper.

## 4. Analysis and discussion of results

The data analysis procedure during this academic research was done through a narrative analysis which, according to Oliver (1998), is based on people's accounts of their daily lives, classifying these data into certain categories of belonging, beside by giving a quantitative data to have a broad view of the results.

First, it is important to mention that 67% of the participants decided to take English because of the graduation requirements of their corresponding degree programs. Making this reason a goal imposed on students to fulfill throughout their university years. However, this is not the only reason, 33% of these 67% of participants mention that the ease of scheduling the language played a role in the decision to take it. Although their undergraduate programs gave them the option of completing one of the following languages in its entirety; English, French, Italian or German, this percentage of participants chose English not only because of its flexible scheduling, but also because of certain perceptions they had about the language itself.

Therefore, two factors have been generated that show their involvement in the development of their motivation, which they established have an effect on their learning process.

The responses on their personal reflections on the possible factors show that the personal perceptions they have about the English language on a general level and their teacher's way of teaching affect their enjoyment and/or motivation of the language.

### 4.1 *Personal perceptions towards English language*

Beginning with personal perceptions, the participants demonstrate having a positive perception regarding the English language. Beltran (2017) states that English has been considered worldwide as the most useful language, so many educational institutions integrate it into their educational programs since 1887, at least in Mexico (Mancilla, 2015) Thus assuming a fundamental role in the lives of the participants, that almost all their educational life they have been exposed to the teaching of the language. As mentioned by participant (x) "I have studied it since I am in high school"<sup>1</sup> given its importance, which they have seen reflected throughout their lives. Below is an extract from the response of participant (u) in which we can observe this perception of the language from a cultural point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> Original interview in Spanish. Translated by the author of the article.

“It’s necessary speak the language for the *job opportunities* besides is one, or maybe, one of the most recognize language to be able to communicate globally.”

It is important to mention that the fact that the word is in bold is due to the fact that in the recording participant (U) is heard with a more emphatic tone; however, this fact shows a somewhat negative perception. Despaigne (2010) mentions that “our perceptions towards languages will be influenced mostly through our parents’, teachers’ and peers’ perceptions, which in turn will be defined based on the social context in which we are living” (p. 55). All participants are students from different undergraduate programs at the University of Guanajuato, which means that they share different educational systems. 50% of the participating students have studied English before, through their same governmental educational institutions, which in both cases started from high school level. 25% of them studied English through the University of Guanajuato starting from 100 level up to their final 600 level which they are currently at. While the other 25% have had a combined formation since they are currently in the 500 level of the Guanajuato University program, however they have studied English in private institutions as well as in private schools. So, I discuss the following data based on the collection of the responses of the 4 participants.

#### 4.1.1 Perceptions towards English Language

*100% consider English to be a useful language for obtaining better job opportunities.*

Students who graduated from the public school system are more attracted to U.S. culture than students from the private school system because English means hope and a better income. They have observed throughout their lives the beliefs of their family members and the cultural beliefs about the language, which encourage the population to prepare themselves in this language since it has been globalized in business and economics fields.

Students coming from the private sector have the opportunity to be in contact with the U.S. culture, however it is this overwhelming view that makes them more likely to strive to reach a native-like level of proficiency and fluency. For them, gaining these characteristics can provide more opportunities.

“I have been immersed in English since I was a little girl, however my parents decided to put me in private schools in order to improve my pronunciation, which I like because I feel I belong to this group and given my proficiency in my language I will have more opportunities to advance in my career and get better jobs” (P.I.V)<sup>2</sup>

*75% of the participants believe that English has become undervalued over the years.*

The 3 participants representing 75% of the responses mentioned that the idea of wanting to study another language in addition to English was because they thought that English has been a language that has been given a lot of attention over the years and that it has centralized the idea that it is a business language, however most of them think that there are other languages such as German or Japanese that can provide them with the same job opportunities.

And finally, another 75% feel that English is an easier language to learn.

These results clearly show that students feel an extrinsic motivation to learn English. All of them are aware that English is mandatory to find a good job and really important to continue their studies. These results clearly show that students feel extrinsic motivation to learn English. They are all aware that English is mandatory to find a good job and really important to continue

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviation for (Participant, Interview, Participant reference).

their studies. Unfortunately, these data show negative perceptions as students perceive, consciously or unconsciously, that English is related to economic, political and socio-cultural problems between the United States and Mexico. They also think that native English speakers are ethnocentric which puts pressure on them to want to speak like them and would like them to speak other languages.

Therefore, this clearly indicates that negative perceptions may be the root of problems in the learning process. Subsequently, as Despaigne (2010) mentions, it is extremely important to analyze attitudes from an approach that includes the social and historical context of the students.

Students have mostly negative perceptions regarding English language, however their response regarding how motivated they were to attend classes showed that their feelings about the classes have a contribution to their level of motivation. The 3 most prominent characteristics about their classes were stressful, tedious and grammar focused, classes all of them with 25% of the responses from the total population of participants. Referring that 75% of the participants share this same understanding. And only the 8% mentions the word dynamic to describe their classes. These results are strongly related to the methods that the participant's teachers used.

However, not everything will depend on these perceptions, the work on how classes are taught is also part of the impact on the learning process of its participants, becoming the second factor that can affect the motivation of students.

#### 4.2 Teaching methods

Observations made in the participants' respective classrooms showed that 75% of the participants' teachers assume to teach using a communicative approach, yet show that they are lost in translation when it comes to putting it into practice in their classrooms. In fact, through such observations of these 75% of the participants it was seen that they use a grammar-centered methodology combined with an audiolingual method that does not focus on the learner's production of the language. The participants argue that everything is based on grammar and that learner participation is less than that of the teachers in the classroom. This impedes the increase of their motivation and prevents them from exploring their abilities in the language as expressed by participant (u) *"just teaches us rules and rules on and on, and with very little conversation practice [...] I feel unable to engage in conversation without having to think about grammatical rules."* There are other cases in which the teacher takes stock with grammatical structures and language practice by the learners however they do not pay much attention to this participation, which causes an impact on the learner. Assuming a class that uses the communicative approach, it is necessary for teachers to give feedback about the learners' language production since is one of the main principles for the CLT approach (Richards, 2006) this with the purpose of helping them to improve and learn from their mistakes. However, as participant (y) mentions teachers *"does not give any feedback or motivate you with words of encouragement, thing that in my previous years help me as students"* affecting in this way its motivation to assist to class or in other cases, to prevents them of studying the language due to they do not see a progress in their language production.

It is important to mention that 50% of this 75% of the participants take their classes online while the rest do so in face-to-face mode. The fact that the classes are online does not have as much impact as the methodology and the type of activities, while some say that being in online classes discourages them to enter to them because *"there is no motivation being online, the classes are more tedious [...] being in front of a computer is not the same as being in front of a person"* (P.I.U) others think that being online is more comfortable, however both opinions agree that it does not affect their level of motivation as much as the teacher's methodology does.

The 25% of the participants show having a problem with the methodology in the fact that even their teachers are creative in their teaching, they are not paying attention to developing fluency in the class. A study by Kettler et al. (2018) provides some evidence to support that having “a positive relationship between teachers’ personal creativity and students’ creative characteristics” (p. 165) helps students’ creative process, which awakens their motivation to continue discovering their abilities. A special case comes out in this group. This participant mentions that is studying English as a requirement for her degree program, however, since she has previous training in private institutions, she is looking to develop fluency to sound like a native speaker.

Therefore, it is this idea that prevents him from having a motivation to study the language, thus contrasting his acquisition experience with his current learning. The fact that she had the opportunity to be immersed in an English-speaking country for a one-month stay to focus on language acquisition increased her motivation to acquire this language, as she mentions that she noticed an improvement in her pronunciation and in the expansion of her vocabulary. She also stopped paying attention to the grammatical composition of her ideas and was able to develop some fluency. However, the fact that her teacher is creative in teaching the rules does not prevent her from feeling discouraged by not seeing progress in her language production.

This shows that in this study, having creative teaching has a minimal impact on students' motivation depending on the goals or objectives they have. In fact, having a creative way of teaching will alleviate the feeling of rejection that the student has to attend classes; however, if this creative teaching is not accompanied by a method that addresses the needs of the students it will overwhelm the students and their motivation levels will be very low. As shown in the results, most of the participants range between 3 and 6 in motivation (on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is unmotivated and 10 is motivated) which is interpreted as a poorly motivation.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the result shown in this case study, having a method focused only on technique and grammar discourages learners, as it prevents them from showing their ability to speak and be autonomous in the language. Demonstrating that, the learning approaches that each teacher selects to carry out in the classroom affect learner motivation to a greater extent than the type of objective the learner has. On the contrary, the study shows that the type of objective, the learner’s perceptions and attitudes, and above all, the teachers’ teaching methods act together to have an effect on learner motivation. In this way, becoming the last one the major factor that affect students' motivation.

Finally, it is important that we as teachers take into account the goals and perceptions that students have when they enter the classroom. In order to be able to work with them in the classroom, as well as to be able to implement these considerations in our way of teaching. Since, as it is observed, the selection of teaching methods has an important role in the motivation of those students who study the language through an imposed objective (extrinsic motivation), as well as motivating those who enter the classroom with an intrinsic motivation.

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