ESL Learning Motivation: what the students have to say.

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Motivation is an important concept when looking at second language acquisition. This concept has been vastly studied. Students and teachers have different conceptions of what is motivating. According to Dörnyei (2001a) motivation is mostly seen as the addition of three concepts, “the choice of a particular action; the effort expended on it and the persistence with it” (p. 7). Most studies about motivation have been done through questionnaires administered to students such as the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985; Gardner, & al., 2004), the Experience Sampling Method (Csikszentmihalyi, & Larsen, 1987; Schmidt, & Savage, 1992) and other adaptations (Cohen & Dörnyei, 2001; Julkunen, 1989). The strong history of quantitative research linked to motivation brought some researchers to call for more qualitative research (Ushioda, 1994) or for researches that combine both qualitative and quantitative methods (Dörnyei, 2001b, p. 242; McCraken, 1988 as cited in Dörnyei 2001b). In this pilot study, I will concentrate on the qualitative end of research methodologies and look at motivation through the students’ eyes, through free writing. Using this different technique, I hope to have a better insight on the students’ opinion as the participants will only have a short but general prompt so that their comments will not be oriented by any specific question. In this paper, I will look at the student’s idea of what English classes should be and link these findings to existing motivation theories. I will first guide the readers through different theories of motivation, I will then look at a study involving the same type of data collection and finally I will report on the present pilot study.
An overview of L2 motivation research

Motivation can be divided in various types depending of what one focuses on. Here, we will look at different concepts of motivation, from trait to state motivation, to motivation related to tasks and finally at motivation as a process.

Trait motivation

Motivation has been looked at through different angles. One of them is trait motivation, which has been widely researched. Gardner’s socio-educational model of second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001b, p. 51) is considered a central theory in motivation theories. His model of motivation (Dörnyei, 2001b; Gardner, 2001) has looked at motivation in terms of integrativeness, which can be seen as the attitude toward the language and its speakers, attitudes towards the learning situation. These attitudes are oriented toward the classroom, the teacher and the material, and other motivational factors which are related to the efforts, desire and enjoyment related to learning the language. They are consistent over time (Gardner & al., 2004). On the other hand, some other researchers have looked at other aspects of motivation. For example, Clément has looked at self-confidence (Clément, 1980; Clément & Gardner, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001b) in terms of how positive interactions with the community of the learned language is, and how it affects the learner’s motivation to learn the language and to interact with its community. These two important models look at how different factors influence motivation in a long term point of view. This general motivation is referred to as trait motivation by Boekaerts (1988, as cited in Julkunen 2001). Several other factors have
been looked at: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, goal orientedness, attribution and several other (Do\textsuperscript{r}nyei, 2001a; 2001b). But they will not be treated here.

**State motivation**

Motivation is often used with a different meaning by teachers and students. They often refer to motivation as a state, which is state motivation. This is motivation in the specific situation which is qualified as state motivation (Boekaerts, 1988, as cited in Julkunen, 2001). Julkunen (2001) explains that motivation orients and guides the learner’s actions while participating in an activity. In the same vein, Schumann (2001; Schuman et al., 2004) explains that neurobiologically, motivation is a positive stimulation that pushes the person to repeat an action as they receive a reward. In the brain, dopamine functions as the reward system. It is why, when an individual receives a dopamine signal, he or she will be more likely to repeat the action. If that reward is not received, the action might not be repeated. Also, when the learner is placed in a situation where a reward has been received previously, a stimulus will be received. This stimulus will influence positively the learner’s motivation. Schumann (2001) explains that the stimulus received by the learner is influenced by the novelty, the relation between the coping capacity and the challenge of the activity, the perceived significance for the goals and needs, and the impact on the learner’s self and social image, of the activity.

When looking at the self-determination theory, motivation is divided in two types, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is motivation that is related to the activity, while the extrinsic motivation is related to the motivation that is related to rewards that are not the activity itself but outside of it. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that
children are born with intrinsically regulated motivation and that it needs to be supported to be maintained or enhanced. Three types of intrinsic motivation were identified by Vallerand (1997, in Noels, & al., 2000), they are related to knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation. The IM-Knowledge is related to the feeling brought by learning new things and discovering new ideas. The IM-Accomplishment, is related to the feeling related to finishing a task or mastering an activity. Finally, the IM-Stimulation, is related to the sensations felt when doing the activity. When extrinsic motivation is concerned, three different types are distinguished. The first one, external regulation is related to stimulation that comes from outside the person, usually a tangible benefit or cost. Without that external stimulation, the person would not be doing the task. The second type is introjected regulation, it is when the person has internalized a pressure that was first external. The last one, identified regulation, is when the person chooses to do an activity for personal reasons, the person feels that doing the activity is important, even though the activity itself is not what motivates the person. The last important aspect of this motivational model is amotivation, which is determined by the absence of motivation in any form, they just go through the motion, which is when people feel that there are no consequences related to their actions. There are evidences that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have different outcomes when looking at second language learning. Also, Noel et al. (2000) consider that there is a similarity between instrumentally oriented motivation and externally regulated motivation.
Motivation and tasks

Another way to look at motivation is to look at its relation with tasks. In the students’ everyday life, the task they are accomplishing and their outcomes are important in terms of motivation. Three different concepts will be discussed here. The first theory that will be explored is the theory of flow. Egbert (2003) explains that a flow experience brings the participants in a higher level of engagement in a task. It is characterized by an acute concentration and performance in the task. He reports that the rewarding aspect of the flow experience motivates the participants to repeat their participation in the task. Egbert identifies 6 components of a flow experience: 1- the challenge of the task is close to the participant’s skills, 2- it is possible to concentrate deeply, 3- the goal is clear, 4- positive feedback is given, 5- the participant doesn’t feel self conscious and 6- doesn’t feel time go by. He also report that the flow experience is considered to be related to learning and is viewed as a positive experience by the people who experience it.

Schumann (1998, as cited in Dörnyei, 2001b) looked at different environment facets that are related to students’ motivation. He explains that “novelty, pleasantness, goal/need significance, coping potential and self and social image” (p. 129) need to be present for motivation. In other words, if a task is new and pleasant, if the goals are linked to the needs of the participants, if the participant can cope with the activity and if it has a good influence on the participants’ self and social image, they will be motivated.

Johnson and Johnson (1985, as cited in Julkunen, 1989) identified three different characteristics that influence students’ motivation when tasks are concerned. They divided tasks in three categories: competitive, individual and cooperative. They explain
that the competitive task is the least motivating, has the students feel they have the lowest chance of success because when one person is the winner, the others cannot win. This type of task is characterized by extrinsic motivation. They add that it tends to result in low task persistence. When individual tasks are concerned, the motivation level is better than in competitive tasks and lower than in cooperative tasks. The motivation is extrinsic like for the competition task, but the learner success depends on his own ability and efforts, not on the other people ones. Finally, the cooperative tasks are characterised by intrinsic motivation and a stronger chance of success. The learners are sharing their knowledge and skills; they also feel responsible toward the others. Learners show more persistence when these tasks are concerned.

**Motivation as a process**

Motivation can be seen as a process that contains several phases that explain the different types of motivation seen earlier. This is what Dörnyei and Otto’s (Dörnyei, 2001b, 2005) model of second language motivation does. It illustrates three phases of motivation. These three different phases are the preactional phase, the actional phase and the postactional phase. In the 2005 version of the model, the different phases can be attributed to an activity or a task. The first phase is the phase where the goals are set and when the action will be launched. Dörnyei explains that this phase corresponds to Gardner’s model of motivation. The different attitudes toward the language, its community, the learning environment and other prior experiences have an impact on the motivation. In the actional phase, the activity itself has the biggest impact. It is when the appraisal and self regulation take place. The motivation is influenced by elements such as
reward, people’s influence and self-regulatory strategies. Dörnyei also places the characteristics of the flow experience in that stage. The postactional stage takes place after the activity, the activity and its outcomes are evaluated. The results are attributed to a certain cause and it is the end of the planning. The motivation is then influenced by the final attribution, self-concepts and the feedback received.

**Qualitative enquiry**

The strong history of quantitative research linked to motivation brought some researchers to call for more qualitative research or for researches that combine both qualitative and quantitative methods. This is the call made by Ushioda (2004), Dörnyei’s (2001b), and McCraken’s (1988), who all comment on the importance of using both qualitative and quantitative data, when researching motivation. The present paper was therefore undertaken from a qualitative perspective. The methodology was also partially inspired by Lucy Tse’s *Student perception of foreign language study: a qualitative analysis of foreign language autobiographies* (2000) study. Tse used autobiographies to look at the students’ perception of their language classes. She reported that retrospective autobiographies are used to understand through the students’ eyes how instruction and affect are related in the classroom. Also, Rod Ellis (1989, as cited in Tse, 2000) explains that autobiographies can be used to triangulate results that were found through the administration of surveys. These results could confirm or challenge what was found through quantitative methods.

Tse had the participants answer 10 questions related to their language learning experience in the classroom. They were asked to write not more than 5 pages double
spaced. The questions were meant to suggest a reflection on their learning experience. They were told that their answers would not be graded and only used to feed classroom discussions. The texts were analysed looking at the general themes uncovered by the participants’ answers. To do so, the researcher read the productions several times and identified the different segments of texts in the margins. The margin comments were reorganised in various categories, so as to find more important and less important ones. McKay (2006), suggest the same type of analysis. She suggests looking at the data several times to find key ideas or general themes. She explains that the categories should come from the data and represent it. When the categories are formulated, one has to code the data using them. She particularly stresses the importance of going back and reading the data over and over again. In this pilot study, the analysis corresponds to these descriptions, but the means is freewriting. Freewriting is commonly used by teachers as a pre-writing activity, to help the students find ideas and as a fluency exercise (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 212). During freewriting, the students have to write without pausing for a determined amount of time. The focus is on keeping writing and generating ideas, not on grammar or accuracy.

**Method**

The present study aimed at answering a simple research question: What do student think motivate them in the ESL classroom? The participants were 11 international students in an English language learning program in a North American university. These students were studying English as a second language in an English speaking environment and pursuing higher education in an English speaking North American university. They
were undergraduate students at the advanced level of English in writing. In other words, their level of English was advanced even though it was not judged sufficient for them to function in their academic studies without some support. They had to succeed in the highest level of their ESL classes to be allowed to pursue their studies full time. This writing class fulfills the requirement for all undergraduate students to take a core course in written communication. That course is the ESL equivalent of the introductory college composition class offered by the English Department in that university. At the time of the pilot study, the participants were enrolled in a writing class where they did some freewriting twice weekly, once during class and once at home. Therefore, they were used to freewriting and were efficient doing it.

The researcher met the participants prior to the experiment. The participants were asked to sign a consent form after being told about the study. They were told that their instructor would not have access to their writing. The only information the instructor would get would be the final result of the pilot research in which the identity of the participants is not revealed after the end of the semester when the grades would have already been handed in.

The participants were asked to freewrite for 15 minutes. They were prompted with a beginning for their writing that was: Learning English is most motivating when... Their papers were collected after 15 minutes.

The analysis consisted of repeated readings of each paper. Notes were taken on the paper as to help find the themes and their frequency. The themes were then organized in a table and associated together as to find general themes and particular ones. Students’
writing about the different themes was associated with the particular category to
determine how frequently each theme was represented. The students’ comments are
referred to as item and the themes as categories. Only two items were placed in two
different categories, as they contained two themes, the others were placed in only one
category. It is important to keep in mind that the goal is to find out more about what
students find motivating in the ESL classroom.

Results

After several readings, the participants’ comments were grouped in 5 categories
and 4 items were left individually. The first category deals with the communication
components of language learning. Three items were related to communication itself.
These participants thought that communicating in English was motivating. For example
one participant says that he likes to speak with native speakers of English, he wrote:
“Learning English is most motivating when I talk to English speakers in English”.
Another one talks about general communication with other people through the English
medium, he says that when he interacts with a “person I really have to communicate
well”. He says that this feeling is motivating to him. This communication category also
includes communication breakdown. Five items were related to it. The participants
explain that when they cannot communicate effectively with other people, they feel like
they have to work harder and it motivates them. One participant explains that he is
motivated to learn when “I am attending the lecture class and I can’t understand what the
teacher says”. He explains that then, he wants to study more. Some other explained that
sometimes they were not understood by others, and it was also a motivation. It seems that
communicating with people whether it is efficient or not is perceived as motivating to the participants.

Another important category is related to comparison with others, this category has 7 items. The participants expressed that when they felt like others were better than them, they felt motivated to learn the language. They talk about how they want to be as good as others, how they want to “keep up with classmates” or how if the others could improve, they should be able to do the same too. One student said: “When I have new native friends, especially if they speak my language well. When I see it, I feel I need more effort”. This student was not comparing only English to English, as most of them did, but proficiency between two different languages. One participant even explains that when he speaks with other people who are at a lower level of proficiency, he feels like he doesn’t have to make more efforts. But when he talks with people who are better, then he is motivated to improve his English. The comparison of their language skills with others’ was a source of motivation for these participants.

The next category is related to the language itself. There were two types of comments about the language; the first one was about the international aspect of English. Three participants mentioned they were motivated to learn English, because it was an international language. The second type is about the love of the language. It was represented in three different items, one saying he liked the language, one saying that English is beautiful and the last one was commenting on other people’s beautiful pronunciation when speaking in English. The relationship between the learner and the language seems to be an important source of motivation for the participants.
Motivation is also influenced by professional goals. Three items were related to professional goals, whether it was related to studies or working opportunities. Two participants mentioned their choice of studying abroad as being a motivation to work on their English, and one student stressed the importance of English for his future career.

The last category is related to the class itself. Three different elements were mentioned by the participants as being important, for the class to be fun, for the teacher to be motivated and motivating, and for the other students to be at a similar level of proficiency. The first element was mentioned three times and the second one twice. The last element was mentioned only once, but the participant explained that when he was with other students who are at a lower level of proficiency, he felt like he was good, and didn’t work on his language skills. But he said that during the current term, some students were better than him, and that it was motivating to him. It seems that the class itself is important for the students when motivation is concerned.

The last four items are not related to each other or to the previous categories. As they are not linked with other items or categories, they are not reported here.

Discussion

When looking at the results, it is important to think about the participants’ situation. As their present experience has an impact on their motivation, it is important to remind oneself, that these participants are international students now living in a second language context and who are enrolled in some university classes.

This situation is well reflected in several categories. For example, the importance of the communication on motivation is very interesting and is related to intrinsic
motivation. But it also corresponds to the participants’ everyday life. They need to communicate in this environment where the language is the one they need to learn. It seems logical that they feel the need to work on their language skills when they experience a communication breakdown, as they need the language to accomplish their everyday activities. Their environment is also represented when native speakers of English are mentioned or when their classes are. Another important category is linked with their life around that university, when some of them compare their English with others. They relate to other international students and use it at a motivating tool. This need to communicate proficiently with other people, at least when they compare themselves to other international students, might be related to their life in this foreign country. It is important to be understood to go through everyday activities.

It also seems that the participants need to relate to other people or are very competitive. Several of them report the need to be challenged, so that they get motivated. Seeing that others are better or improved more, was mentioned several times as being a motivating event. One participant even mentioned that when he is in class with students who are at a lower level of English, he feels demotivated, because he feels like he is good enough. He explains that he prefers to be with participants at the same level of proficiency or at a level that is a little higher. This need to be challenged could be seen as a way to get a new goal to reach. As they find that someone is better than them, students adjust their goal so that they need to better their English to attain the new level of proficiency they want to reach. This could loosely be linked to the idea of goal mentioned by Schumann (1998). In this case it is not related to tasks, but as the students get new
goals, they see themselves as more motivated. In this situation the goal would be one of the motivators.

Even if the participants are in a second language environment, the class in which they learn the language is still important. As a strong emphasis was put on the environment and the students’ everyday life, one could have thought that the class itself was considered as less or not important by the students. But in fact they mentioned two important aspects of the class itself. The first one is about the class being fun, and the second one is about the teacher being motivated and motivating. As the students are forced into the language classes, it could have been expected that they would not find motivating aspects related to the classes, but they did. Pleasantness was also an important aspect of Schumann (1998) theory. Also, as the freewriting took place in the classroom, one could have expected to read about the activities and events that take place in the classroom. But it seems that it was not a major concern for the participants as it was not mentioned. In that sense, tasks don’t seem to be important for the students’ motivation.

It is also interesting that one category was related to the language, both as its function as an international language and in itself as being a beautiful language. These two categorizations reflect two types of motivation to learn a language, intrinsic and extrinsic. When talking about the beautiful language, the motivation comes from the language itself which is characterized as intrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 1997). When talking about the usefulness of knowing an international language, the emphasis is not put on the language itself, but on what can be done with the language or what the language will give oneself. It is also similar to both idea of being motivated because the language
will be useful to study abroad or to do a specific job. As the language itself is not the
target, but what will be accomplished through the language is. It would be qualified of
extrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 1997). It also shows that some participants in this study
already have clear goals they are aiming to.

When trying to link these results to motivation in the classroom, only some
deduction can be made. It seems that the participants in this pilot project would be the
most motivated when the class is fun and the instructor is motivated and motivating.
Another important aspect of this motivating class would be to have students at the same
level of proficiency, so that some students are better in different aspects of the language
and that they can compare themselves to others and find aspects of the language they
want or need to work on to be the same as their peers. Trying to reach the level of these
other students who would be at a similar level of proficiency would be an attainable goal.
Also, communication is highly valued by these participants, it would be possible to use
that interest with the students in the classroom.

Conclusion

Through this paper, students’ comments on what is motivating to them were
analyzed. Some of the participants’ comments seemed obvious and were already taken
care of in the literature. It is common sense that fun activities and motivating teachers are
motivating. These aspects were also taken care of in previous research. The importance
of communication for the participants seems related to their current experience in a
second language environment. It would be interesting to see what students in a different
environment would have to say about what is motivating to them. Also, it would be
important to investigate further how comparing oneself to others who are at a higher level of proficiency is motivating for these participants. Understanding better this phenomenon would give new insights into motivation. Finally, it seems that for these participants, their everyday life experiences are very important when their motivation is concerned. This information is valuable for ESL teachers as it could be used to try to motivate the students in their classes.
References


Participant Consent Form

Date

Dear potential participant,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study conducted by a Master degree student at the University of Hawaii. The purpose of the research is to find out more about student’s interests.

The major benefit for you is that the results of the research will be shared with the instructors teaching in the ELI program to give them new tools for teaching.

For this study, you would have to share the prompted free writing that you will do in class. It will be a 15 minutes free writing related to motivation.

If you accept to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions will be answered to your satisfaction. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at anytime. All the information collected will be confidential. At no time will any individual be identified in any reports resulting from this study.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at juliebou@hawaii.edu.

Thank you

Julie Bouchard

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form.

Name of participant: __________________________________
Signature:                 __________________________________
Date:                         ___________________

Name of researcher: __________________________________
Signature:                 __________________________________
Date:                         __________________________________
Teacher Participant Consent Form

Date

Dear potential teacher participant,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study conducted by a Master degree student at the University of Hawaii. The purpose of the research is to find out more about students motivation in their ESL learning.

The major benefit for you is that the results of the research will be shared with you and it will give you information about your students’ motivation.

For this study, your students would have to share with the researcher their free writing that will be prompted so that they will write about their motivation. This activity will be fifteen minutes long and the free writing will be collected right after the actual writing.

If you accept to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions will be answered to your satisfaction. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at anytime. All the information collected will be confidential. At no time will any individual teachers or students be identified in any reports resulting from this study.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at juliebou@hawaii.edu.

Thank you

Julie Bouchard

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form.

Name of participant: __________________________________
Signature: __________________________________________
Date: ______________________________________________

Name of researcher: _________________________________
Signature: _________________________________________
Date: _____________________________________________