

Title: The (a)motivation to study a language at the university level

Summary:

A multi-year project investigating student amotivation towards L2 learning indicates that a lack of time, poor prior experiences, and perceived futility in learning a language are the leading causes of amotivation. Discussion will include findings from two additional phases of data collection and suggestions for improving recruitment into L2 classrooms.

Proposal:

Motivation research has a long history in the field of SLA and is often considered by many to be a key component of successful language acquisition (see Gardner, 1996; Dörnyei, 1994 for early research into the topic). While the importance of motivation appears to be clear, one gap in the literature is that motivation studies tend to focus on students already in the classroom (Cheon & Reeve, 2015) or who are already attempting to study a language (Cigan, 2014). This focus on students who are already studying a language biases our knowledge of learner motivation and potentially impacts the ways in which language programs attempt to attract students. The current trend for many college campuses in the USA is a reduction in students studying a second language (Inside Higher ED, 2015). This trend forces many programs to make difficult decisions on course offerings and instruction in attempts to stay viable and relevant within the university. Many language programs must now consider how to intrigue students to join their courses and degree programs when they do not arrive on campus with the motivation to do so.

In this presentation, we will discuss the results from the first two phases of a multi-year project investigating students' (a)motivation towards studying a foreign language. In this study, we surveyed undergraduate students at a medium-sized Mid-Western University who were not seriously studying a foreign language through open-ended personal interviews. We defined not seriously studying as students who had no plans to take courses beyond the required university minimum. Preliminary results from the first two phases of data collection found that students largely indicated a lack of time as the primary cause for not attempting to learn a new language. Other factors include poor prior experiences in the classroom, usually at the high school level, or a perceived futility or conceiving of language learning as being too difficult as causes towards amotivation. Interestingly, many participants seemed to parrot back several of the talking points used in first year language classes for the importance of learning a new language. Topics such as earning increased wages, an increased ability to interact with non-native English speakers, and travel. However, while most of these same participants indicated an understanding of the importance of learning a new language, they still displayed a lack of desire to attempt to learn a new language. Our results show that even amotivated learners understand the benefits of learning a new language but still have roadblocks preventing them from doing so. We will discuss the first two rounds of data collection looking into college student amotivation towards learning a language and provide suggestions for methods of recruiting uninterested students into language programs.