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The relationship between language learning experience, motivation and some other individual variables of mature foreign language learners

ABSTRACT. The present paper investigates the issue of motivation of foreign language learners. The main research question, concerning a possible link between the amount of language learning experience and learner motivation, remains unanswered. However, it turns out that a few learner characteristics which some researchers believe to correlate with language learning experience can probably serve as good predictors of foreign language learners' motivation.

Keywords: learner motivation, third (or further) language acquisition (L3+), foreign language learning, language learning experience, adult FL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Research into third or additional language (L3+) acquisition indicates that learners of third or further languages are in some ways different from second language (L2) learners. These differences are not only quantitative, but also qualitative. Firstly, there is a vast body of research indicating that L3+ learners regularly draw on their complex linguistic knowledge during the acquisition, production and perception of a new language. Cross-linguistic phenomena have been investigated mainly at the level of lexis (e.g. Cenoz 2001; De Angelis 2005; De Angelis / Selinker 2001; Dentler 2000; Ringbom 1987; Williams / Hammarberg 1998), but also syntax (e.g. Dentler 2000; Leung 2005; Vinnitskaya / Flynn / Foley 2003), phonetics and phonology (e.g. Chamot 1973; Hammarberg / Hammarberg 2005), orthography (e.g. Dentler 2000) and morphology (e.g. De Angelis / Selinker 2001; Jarvis / Odlin 2000). Moreover, it turns out that, in comparison with L2 learners,

those with at least two (inter)languages often have higher metalinguistic awareness (e.g. Bialystok 2001; Ianco-Worrall 1972; Jessner 1999; Thomas 1988). Also, their metacognitive awareness is usually high (e.g. Kallenbach 1998; Rivers 2001), which often means that they know and effectively apply various learning strategies (Kallenbach 1998; Mißler 1999, 2000; Nayak *et al.* 1990), that they have reached a high level of autonomy (Aronin i Ó Laoire 2003; Rivers 2001) and that they have concrete expectations of the role of their language teacher (Aronin / Ó Laoire 2003).

There is a possibility that the complex linguistic knowledge and rich language learning experience of L3+ learners influence both their cognition and affect, and translate somehow into their motivation. Many researchers (e.g. Dörnyei 2001; Schumann 1997; Ushioda 2001) agree that motivation involves both the affective and the cognitive domains. On the other hand, as Paradis (2004: 24–25) points out, motivation is problematic in second (or further) language learning: whereas the acquisition of the mother tongue takes place with the active participation of the limbic system (responsible for drives, emotions and motivation), this factor is hardly present in formal, institutionalized learning conditions. Thus, it may seem doubtful whether a larger amount of language learning experience may reduce somehow the motivational gap between native and foreign language acquisition.

1. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In spite of the recently growing interest in L3+ acquisition, production and reception, relatively few research studies have investigated multilingual foreign language (FL) learners' affective domain and motivation. Mißler (1999: 88) states that monolingual and bi-/multilingual people usually express different attitudes to learning new languages, depending on the kind of previous experiences in language learning. Compared to monolinguals, bilinguals estimate higher the importance of learning languages and lower the importance of linguistic correctness. As students gain language learning experience, the perceived difficulty of learning a new language seems to decrease. König (2006) notices that Turkish university students with L2 English are highly motivated to learn any further language; however, she does not make a comparison between their motivation and the motivation of some comparable group of L2 learners.

Working with multilingual adult FL learners, Mißler (2000) discovered that the amount of language learning experience was a good predictor of the

frequency of strategy use (measured by means of SILL¹), and also of personality and affective variables such as a positive self-concept, readiness to take risks or tolerance of ambiguity. She also noticed that risk-taking and motivation correlated positively with the frequency of strategy use. Mißler discovered important differences between the subjects who scored high on SILL and those who scored low: the frequent strategy users were at the same time more motivated to learn a new language, had a more positive self-concept, were more willing to take risks and were more tolerant of ambiguity. These results allow to draw the following conclusion: since 'experienced' language learners use learning strategies more often and the frequency of strategy use correlates positively with the level of their motivation to learn a new language, there may be a positive relationship between the amount of learning experience and the level of motivation.

A study by Dewaele (2007) shows a relationship between the number of languages known and one kind of affective variable – the language users' anxiety. Dewaele investigated a possible impact of several sociobiographical and situational factors on levels of communicative anxiety and FL anxiety of mature learners and users of L2, L3 and L4. One outcome was that speaking in an L2 is more anxiety-provoking for bilinguals than for trilinguals and quadrilinguals (however, this pattern did not extend to speaking in an L3). Dewaele explains this finding by multilinguals' better communicative skills and resultant self-confidence and self-perceived competence.

The results of my own study on motivation of mature FL learners (Chłopek 2008a) indicate that, compared to students with two or three FLs, those with many FLs better understand the importance of knowing many languages and display more motivated behaviours and persistence in learning. The importance of intrinsic and extrinsic long-term motivators rises along with the number of languages known. Additionally, the multilingual students seem to possess more 'L3+ learner characteristics' (e.g. reliance on languages known, strategy use, autonomy). There is also a positive correlation between the construct 'L3+ learner characteristics' and the general level of motivation, the amount of motivated behaviours and the importance of both extrinsic long-term and intrinsic motivators.

Summing up, there is some indication that FL learning motivation and related affective variables may be linked to the amount of FL learning experience. On the other hand, the small number of studies dealing with this

¹ Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), designed by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990), allows to recognize the frequency of strategy use and the kind of strategies used by language learners. In her research study, Mißler used a German version of this test.

issue, as well as the differences between them in terms of methodology, participant characteristics and objectives, do not allow to draw any decisive conclusions.

2. METHOD

Participants. The participants included 415 high-school, university and college students (320 female and 95 male). The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 37 ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 2.34$). All the participants' L1 was Polish. It must be kept in mind that in Poland students and teachers typically share one mother tongue and one culture. The L1 is the language of daily communication. At school, Polish learners hardly use their FLs in authentic communicative situations and they hardly ever engage in deep intercultural contacts.

3 students had 1 FL, 229 students – 2 FLs, 155 students – 3 FLs, 26 students – 4 FLs and 2 students – 5 FLs. The most common languages were English (99.5%) and German (92%); the former was predominantly the students' L2 and the latter was predominantly their L3. The students also knew French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Lithuanian, Czech, Turkish, Greek, Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Croatian, Japanese, Hebrew, Finnish, Bulgarian and Latvian.²

The participants had been studying their FLs for a total of 17.6 years on average ($SD = 5.48$), ranging from 8 to 48 years³. 91 students had not travelled to the FL countries, 170 students had been to one, 115 students – to two, 35 students – to three and 4 students – to four FL countries.

Measures. A questionnaire in Polish was administered during one of the students' classes. The first part of the questionnaire aimed at obtaining some background information about participants, i.e. their age and gender, the languages known to them, the number of countries visited where the studied languages are L1s and the period of FL study. The second section of the

² 58 students had also been studying Latin. However, it being a dead language, many motivators are absent during the study of Latin. Moreover, this language is usually taught using the Grammar-Translation Method, which can be demotivating for many. For these reasons I excluded Latin from the analysis. It should be also mentioned that English was the *last* language of only 22% of students. This number is important because some of the questionnaire statements referred to the students' last FL. As my other research study shows (Chłopek 2008b), Polish students are mainly motivated to learn English. The relatively low percentage of students having English as their last FL ensures that the results of the present study are not biased towards this language.

³ These are summed up periods of study.

questionnaire contained a number of statements, out of which 35 were used for the present purposes. Their aim was to assess participants' motivation and the intensity of some above-mentioned 'L3+ characteristics' which have been identified by researchers as possibly developing with language learning experience. In particular, the statements aimed at recognizing the following variables:

1. Motivation-related factors: (a) perception of the importance of knowing many FLs, (b) amount and intensity of motivated behaviours, (c) extrinsic short-term motivators (immediate goals), (d) extrinsic long-term motivators (future targets), (e) intrinsic motivators, (f) integrative orientation towards Europe and towards the target-language society.

2. 'L3+ learner characteristics': (a) reliance on other languages known, (b) strategy use, (c) self-reliance and autonomy, (d) expectations of the role of the FL teacher, (e) self-concept, (f) risk-taking.

Participants indicated the extent to which the statements were true of them on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'not true of me', 5 = 'true of me').

As can be seen, the questionnaire draws upon the well-known distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci 1975; Deci / Ryan 1985). This distinction is especially important in the context of FL teaching and learning, because it helps to contrast the usual external rewards (e.g. good marks, praise or lack of rebuke) with internal gratification (e.g. pleasure or satisfaction derived from working on a task, gaining knowledge and satisfying curiosity). Intrinsic motivation is usually considered as more powerful. However, as Ushioda (2008: 22) cautions, 'while its self-sustaining dynamic may make intrinsic motivation an optimal form of learning motivation, we should not lightly dismiss extrinsic motivation as inherently less effective and less desirable'.

For the purposes of the present study I have also 'borrowed' the first type of orientation from the well-known integrative-instrumental dichotomy (Gardner / Lambert 1972). Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that in real life the instrumental and integrative orientation and the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are not easily separable.

3. HYPOTHESES

It was hypothesized that there is some relationship between (1) the amount of FL learning experience, (2) the above-mentioned 'L3+ learner characteristics' and (3) FL learning motivation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The obtained results show that the students understand the importance of knowing many languages ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.93$). However, the amount of actual motivated behaviors somehow lags behind this awareness ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.69$). Whereas direct extrinsic goals are not important for mature learners ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.79$), both extrinsic future goals and intrinsic drives do play a significant role for them ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.60$ and $M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.75$, respectively), which is in line with Ushioda's (2008) comment on the importance of both. The students are much more willing to learn FLs in order to integrate within Europe ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.96$) than in order to integrate with the target language community ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.13$). This latter finding is an indication that a FL is perceived more as a tool for international communication than as part of a culture, a probable reason being the above-mentioned scarcity of deep cultural contacts.

A Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted in order to find out any relationships between (1) the amount of language learning experience (measured by the number of FLs, the number of FL countries visited and the period of FL study), (2) 'L3+ learner characteristics' and (3) motivation-related variables. Only these correlations will be reported which are statistically significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed probabilities, $n = 415$).

The present results contrast sharply with these obtained by some of the above-mentioned researchers. Firstly, no significant relationship exists between FL learning experience and 'L3+ characteristics'; there is only some positive correlation between the period of learning and strategy use ($r = .210$), and between the number of FLs and the period of learning on the one hand and reliance on other languages on the other ($r = .186$ and $r = .181$, respectively). Affective learner traits such as risk-taking and self-concept are probably much more stable than cognitive characteristics such as strategy use and self-direction, thus they may change less with language learning experience; however, the low coefficients for the cognitive variables are difficult to account for. No doubt, in the case of the present sample, other psychological and social variables have shaped these learner characteristics more than language learning experience. It is also possible that other forms of learning experience (e.g. authentic use of FLs) influence these characteristics more.

FL learning experience does not correlate significantly with any motivational variable but intrinsic motivation – there is some positive relationship between this type of motivation and both the number of FL countries visited ($r = .209$) and the period of learning ($r = .217$). However, not many students travelled really a lot; if they had, some correlations might be different.

Moreover, it is quite possible that there is a limit to the language learning experience as far as its effect on motivation and other variables is concerned. Thus, a comparison between L2 and L3+ learners might disclose more vivid differences in this respect.

In line with some results of Mißler's (2000) study as well as my previous study (Chłopek 2008a), there are some significant correlations between a few 'L3+ learner characteristics' and some motivational variables. Firstly, a good predictor of a learner's motivation turns out to be his/her self-concept. This variable correlates significantly with motivated behaviours ($r = .419$), intrinsic motivators ($r = .439$) and extrinsic long-term motivators ($r = .363$), and to some degree with the perceived importance of knowing many FLs ($r = .225$) and the integrative orientation towards Europe ($r = .298$). This finding is not surprising, since positive self-concept and related variables (self-confidence, self-esteem, perceived language proficiency) have been shown to be linked to motivation (e.g. Clément / Dörnyei / Noels 1994; Gardner / Tremblay / Masgoret 1997; Ushioda 2001).

Secondly, the variable 'self-reliance and autonomy' correlates quite highly with motivated behaviours ($r = .454$), intrinsic motivators ($r = .403$) and extrinsic long-term motivators ($r = .347$), and to some extent with the perceived importance of knowing FLs ($r = .226$) and the integrative orientation towards Europe ($r = .207$). Also strategy use is linked to motivated behaviours ($r = .419$), intrinsic motivators ($r = .364$), extrinsic long-term motivators ($r = .259$) and the integrative orientation towards Europe ($r = .233$). The similarity of the results obtained for autonomy and strategy use is not surprising. The close relationship between successful use of strategies and learner autonomy has been often pointed out (e.g. Michońska-Stadnik 1996; Oxford 1990; Wenden 1991). Moreover, several researchers stress the close relationship between motivation and both autonomy (e.g. Deci / Ryan 1985; Dickinson 1995; Ushioda, 2001) and strategy use (e.g. Chamot *et al.* 1996; Gardner / Tremblay / Masgoret 1997; Oxford 1990).

Finally, reliance on other languages correlates to some degree with motivated behaviours ($r = .241$), intrinsic motivators ($r = .243$) and the perceived importance of knowing FLs ($r = .205$). However, the correlations are not really high. Besides, the overall score for this variable is relatively low ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.22$) - the students do not make full use of the linguistic knowledge available to them, which is hard to explain. Maybe if the students had been encouraged to rely on their languages (e.g. through comparative activities), these results would be different.

The remaining 'L3+ learner characteristics', risk-taking and expectations of teachers, do not seem related to FL motivation. This result is not very surprising. Risk-taking is a personality trait usually associated with extravert-

sion (Furnham / Heaven 1998: 325), a global personality dimension whose relationship with language-related affective dimensions, such as attitudes, FL anxiety, perceived competence or motivation, is not straightforward (Lalonde / Gardner 1984; MacIntyre / Charos 1996). As for expectations of teachers, this is a metacognitive characteristic involving a certain degree of 'knowing what language learning should be like'. As such, it probably need not correlate with motivation to learn a new language.

Significant interaction effects exist among some 'L3+ learner characteristics'. There is a logical (above-mentioned) relationship between strategy use and autonomy ($r = .459$). Both of these variables correlate positively with self-concept ($r = .435$ and $r = .400$, respectively) and risk-taking ($r = .204$ and $r = .212$, respectively), the causation being probably bidirectional in each case. Self-concept correlates with risk-taking at $r = .279$; it may be that a positive view of oneself makes one more willing to take risks, though third factors (e.g. confidence, teacher encouragement) may influence both. Moreover, there is a correlation of $.200$ between strategy use and reliance on other languages; since the latter is a useful learning strategy itself, this relationship is not surprising.

CONCLUSION

The present research study shows that there is no straightforward relationship between the amount of FL learning experience and learner motivation. Still, there is some indication that intrinsic motivation may be enhanced by visits to foreign countries and may increase with years of study. It also turns out that language learning experience may not always directly influence such learner characteristics as reliance on other languages known, strategy use, self-reliance and autonomy, expectations of teachers, self-concept and risk-taking. However, some positive relationship has been discovered between the period of learning and strategy use, as well as between both the number of FLs and the period of learning them, and reliance on linguistic knowledge. Most probably, other forms of FL learning experience as well as some other factors have a cumulative effect on FL learning motivation and other learner characteristics. There may also be a limit to the amount of FL experiences in respect of their influence on these variables.

The present study confirms that those learners who have a positive self-concept, who have reached high levels of autonomy and who have learned to apply learning strategies successfully are at the same time motivated learners. The same holds true for those who make use of their complex lin-

guistic knowledge. Moreover, the results point to a high degree of interdependence between various cognitive and affective characteristics, which means that a change in one trait may cause an alteration of another (e.g. strategy training may boost self-concept, which in turn may enhance learners' motivation).

Certain obvious limitations of the present study must be pointed out. As with any correlational research, a researcher needs to be wary of several variables, possibly hidden 'in the background', which may affect the observed relationships. Language learners' motivation is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, which often defy neat categorizations (see e.g. Dörnyei 2001; Williams / Burden 1997: 138–139). The limitations of a questionnaire study are well known, too. To use Dörnyei's (2001: 193) words, statistical research is not able to 'do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life'. Thus, results of a questionnaire on motivation can at best point to some general direction. Nevertheless, even generalizations of this sort can be useful to language teachers who have to make sense of the immense variety of individual differences which they face in their daily work.

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