

THE CONCEPT OF MOTIVATION  
AND THE PROBLEM OF MOTIVATIONAL BARRIERS  
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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**1. The concept of motivation**

The term *motivation* was originally derived from the Latin word *movere*, which means “to move”. However, this one word is an inadequate definition for psycholinguistic research. What is needed is a description which sufficiently covers the various components and processes associated with how human behavior is activated. A brief selection of representative definitions beneath indicates how the term has been used:

(...) how behavior gets started, is energized, is sustained, is directed, is stopped, and what kind of subjective reaction is present in the organism while all this is going on (Jones 1955).

(...) the contemporary (immediate) influence on the direction, vigor, and persistence of action (Atkinson 1964).

(...) tendency to expand effort to achieve goals (Johnson 1979)

(...) the proportion of total attentional effort directed to the task (intensity), and the extent to which attentional effort toward the task is maintained over time (persistence) (Kanfer & Ackerman 1989).

(...) motivation can be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out (Dornyei & Otto 1998).

These definitions appear generally to have three common denominators that may be said to characterize the phenomenon of motivation in terms of:

- (1) factors energizing human behavior,
- (2) factors directing or channeling such behavior, and
- (3) ways of maintaining or sustaining this behavior.

Each of these three components represents an important factor in the understanding of human behavior. First, this conceptualization points to energetic forces within individuals that drive them to behave in certain ways and to environmental forces that often trigger these drives. Second, there is the notion of goal orientation on the part of individuals since their behavior is directed *toward* something. Third, this way of viewing motivation contains a *systems orientation*, that is, it considers those forces in individuals and in their surrounding environments that feed back to the individuals either to reinforce the intensity of their drive and the direction of their energy or to dissuade them from their course of action and redirect their efforts. These three components of motivation appear repeatedly in the theories and research presented in this article.

### 1.1. The rise of the theories of motivation in psychology

Most psychological theories of motivation, both early and contemporary, have their roots, at least to some extent, in the principle of hedonism. This principle, briefly defined, states that individuals tend to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Hedonism assumes a certain degree of conscious behavior on the part of individuals while they make intentional decisions or choices concerning future action. In theory, people rationally consider the behavioral alternatives available to them and act to maximize positive results and to minimize negative results. The concept of hedonism dates back to the early Greek philosophers. It later reemerged as a popular explanation of behavior in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as seen in the works of philosophers such as Locke or Bentham. Bentham even went so far as to coin the term "hedonic calculus" to describe the process by which individuals calculate the pros and cons of various acts of behavior (Steers et al. 1996).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, motivation theory began to move from the realm of philosophy toward the more empirically based science of psychology. As consideration of this important topic grew, it became apparent to those who attempted to use the philosophically based concept of hedonism that several serious problems existed. Vroom explained this dilemma as follows:

There was in the doctrine no clear-cut specification of the type of events which were pleasurable or painful, or even how these events could be determined for a particular individual; nor did it make clear how persons acquired their conceptions of ways attaining pleasure and pain, or how the source of pleasure and pain might be modified by experience. In short the hedonistic assumption has no empirical content and was untestable. Any form of behavior could be explained, after the fact, by postulating particular sources of pleasure or pain, but no form of behavior could be predicted in advance (1964:10).

The beginning of the concept of motivation as a basic psychological process is difficult to trace. Bindra and Stewart discussed the early definitions of motives as used in the writings of "functionally minded psychologists in England and America in the 1880s" (1968: 9), claiming that those definitions indicated that motivation was considered to be a force impelling one to an action of a particular type. Thus, the idea of motivation or impulsion-to-action, which had been implicit in the idea of instinct, was extended then to voluntary action as well.

The earliest theories of motivation were *instinct theories* brought into prominence by Charles Darwin towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-1920s over eight hundred human instincts had been proposed for almost all kinds of human behavior. When the instinct theories fell into disfavor, many psychologists adopted the idea that human behavior is learned with negligible genetic influence.

Sigmund Freud tried to clarify the situation by greatly reducing the number of instincts, and assigning those remaining to one of two major categories: *Eros*, which included life-perpetuating and life-sustaining instincts or *Thanatos*, which included the death wish. However, faced with the difficulty of testing Freud's ideas experimentally, many psychologists followed the lead of John B. Watson, who rejected the ideas that instincts and the unconscious should be considered part of psychology. They proposed that human behavior could be explained entirely by conditioning and learning, and that these phenomena were best understood as overt responses to external stimuli. According to Watson, it was unnecessary, even unscientific, to suggest that internal conditions motivated organisms.

Still, not all psychologists who supported the major tenets of learning theory subscribed to Watson's extreme position, and some attempted to formulate theories to account for the role of motivation in learning and behavior, without resorting to instinctual explanations. Woodworth (1918) coined the term *drive* to describe the motivating force for satisfying needs. In the 1930s, Young in his *Motivation of Behavior* provided the first systematic account of human action and learning. Later, Hull (1943) proposed that drives are aroused by stimuli that disrupt *homeostasis*, the tendency of an organism to maintain a relatively stable internal environment, including stable temperature, heart rate,

water level, and blood sugar. According to Hull, drives can be unlearned – *primary drives* – or learned – *secondary drives*. Primary drives are based on various biological needs, such as the need for food and water. Secondary drives are based on acquired needs, such as the need for status, achievement, security and power. By the beginning of the twentieth century the term ‘motivation’ had become soundly rooted in psychology and became more and more often used and researched by educators; yet the research into the concept itself is in constant progress as Eccles, Wigfield and Schiefele state:

The view of motivation has changed dramatically over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, going from a biologically based drive perspective to a behavioral-mechanistic perspective, and then to a cognitive-mediational/constructivist perspective. The conception of the individual as a purposeful, goal-directed actor, who must coordinate multiple goals and desires across multiple contexts within both short- and long-range time frames, currently is prominent. As we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of affect and less conscious processes is reemerging as a central theme. Complementing this more complex view of the psychology of motivation, researchers interested in the contextual influences on motivation are also adopting more complex and multicontextual frameworks. (In: Dornyei 2001:19)

## 1.2. The concept of motivation in education

Although the term ‘motivation’ is frequently used in educational contexts, there is little agreement among experts as to its exact meaning. According to Freud roughly two-thirds of all human motivation lies below the threshold of conscious awareness. That is, he estimated that most human behavior is motivated by reasons of which people are totally unaware and which are therefore largely irrational. In his theory of motivation called *functional autonomy* Allport (1967) attempts to account for the myriad of human motives for which no biological needs seem present. According to him the route chosen to search out a goal for satisfying a more primitive need may itself become a goal. Maslow (1970) suggested that there is a definite order in which individuals attempt to satisfy their needs. He saw the order of importance as universal among human beings. Furthermore, he maintained that a person would remain at a given need level until those needs were satisfied, then move on to the next level.

Until early in the twentieth century the link between learning and motivation was not experimentally validated. Thorndike accomplished this task in his famous *law of effect*. He was immediately challenged but nevertheless, by 1920 motivation was a firmly established concept in education. In his *theory of instruction* Bruner (1966) differentiated four main principles:

- reinforcement
- sequence
- structure
- motivation.

Implicit in his principles is the belief that almost all people have a built-in *will to learn*. Bruner believes that everybody comes into the world equipped with a curiosity drive as well as with the drive to achieve competence. The two can be easily observed in the process of foreign language learning, where students not only discover new information through the foreign language but also have a chance to become competent users of the language.

### 1.2.1. The role of motivation in learning

Motivating factors play a three-fold role in human behavior. First of all, they activate the organism, strengthening its readiness for action. Under the influence of factors such as emotions the level of general readiness of the individual is changed. The second effect of motivating factors is the selection of stimuli. Perception is a process in which motivation plays a very significant role (Bruner 1960). Thus the third function of motivating factors is directing the action.

While analyzing the process of learning, the three functions mentioned above may easily be traced. Under the influence of specific stimuli the level of general readiness is changing and the learning individual becomes either more or less active. The individual’s perception also changes according to various kinds of drives. It is also clear that motivating factors influence the effects of learning. This relationship has been researched frequently and is well-documented (cf. Maslow 1970, Gardner and Lambert 1972, Maehr and Archer 1987, Oxford and Shearin 1994, Dornyei 2001). Individuals who are successful learners are usually characterized by very strong motivation.

### 1.2.2. Motivation in foreign language learning

There has been a great deal of research on the role of motivation in second or foreign language learning (e.g. Lambert 1980, Gardner 1985, Deci & Ryan 1985, Brown 1994, Tremblay and Gardner 1995, Dickinson 1995, Oxford 1996, Dornyei 2001). The findings show that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in language learning. However, motivation in language learning is a very complex phenomenon, which can be defined in terms of two factors: learners’ communicative needs and their attitudes towards the second language community. If learners need to speak the language in a wide range of

social situations or to fulfill professional ambitions, they will perceive the communicative value of the second language and will therefore be motivated to acquire proficiency in it. Likewise, if learners have favorable attitudes towards the speakers of the language, they will desire more contact with them. Gardner and Lambert (1972) coined the terms *integrative motivation* to refer to language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment, and *instrumental motivation* for language learning for more immediate or practical goals. Research has shown that these types of motivation are related to success in second language learning.

While recent years have seen the development of many instruments for the assessment of learning styles, very little research has examined the interaction between different learning styles and success in second language acquisition. At present, the only learning style that has been extensively investigated is the distinction between field dependence and field independence, which refers to whether an individual tends to separate details from the general background or to see things more holistically. The results of this research have shown that while field independence is related to some degree to performance in certain kinds of tasks, it is not a good predictor of performance in others.

Foreign language learners are not always conscious of their individual learning styles, but virtually all learners, particularly older learners, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered. These beliefs are usually based on previous learning experiences and the assumption (whether right or wrong) that a particular type of instruction is the best way for them to learn.

Learners' preferences for learning, whether due to their learning style or to their beliefs about how languages are learned, influence the kinds of strategies they choose in order to learn new material. Teachers can use this information to help learners expand their learning strategies and thus develop greater flexibility in their ways of approaching language learning.

Research studies have shown that language acquisition is the result of interplay between cognitive mechanisms and environmental conditions (Spolsky 1985). The same also constitutes the development of motivation which according to recent studies should be studied as a multi-factorial entity rather than a single one. Basing their research on socio-psychology, cognitive psychology and socio-cultural psychology, Oxford and Shearin (1994) examined twelve motivational theories and identified six factors that impact motivation in language learning:

- attitudes (sentiments toward the learning community and the learned language)
- self-perception (self-efficacy, anxiety and expectancies about possible success)
- goals (perception of the learning goals as reasons for learning)
- involvement (the learner's active and conscious participation in the language learning process)
- environmental support (teacher, family and peer support as well as the integration of cultural support into the learning experience)
- personal attributes (sex, age, aptitude and previous learning experience).

These factors, as pictured below, also play a very crucial role in the studies of motivational barriers, which will be discussed below.

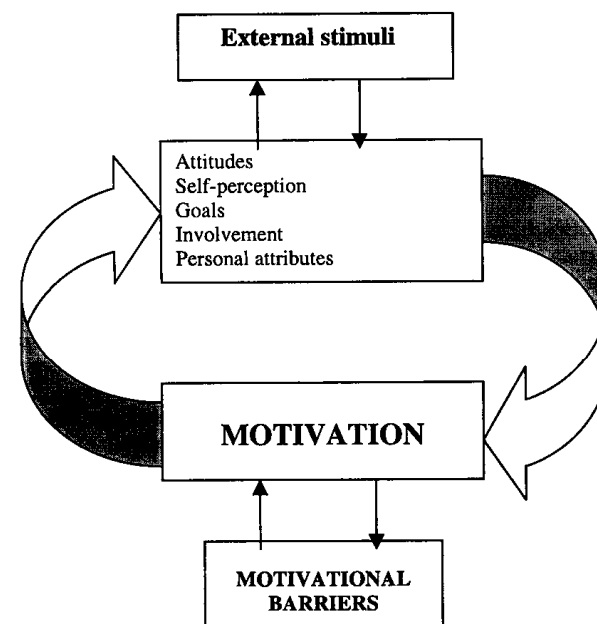


Figure 1. Factors influencing motivation

## 2. The role of motivational barriers in language learning

### 2.1. Definition of motivational barriers

While motivation is a crucial factor in language learning, its effects are often hindered by internal or external factors, which shall be referred to in this article as *motivational barriers*. In his Affective Filter theory, Krashen (1982) mentions anxiety as one of the necessary factors in language learning, but which in excess may have a negative effect on the learner's success. Thus, the process of learning does not happen without obstacles and it is the learners' responsibility to overcome the difficulties that prevent them from learning.

Just as the process of learning itself, motivation in language learning is also inevitably interwoven with obstacles. These motivational barriers play a very important role in the development of learners' autonomy and achievement. Although there are numerous kinds of motivational barriers, in this article they have been narrowed down to the level of higher education, which has been the basis for the research presented here.

Motivational barriers can be divided into 3 categories:

- external
- internal
- compound

The first two are exhibited by the majority of students and seem to be necessary to a certain extent (as the certain level of anxiety mentioned by Krashen), boosting their willpower. The last category, compound motivational barriers, are generally destructive and affect only a very small, specific group of students who most often fail in their attempts to achieve success in language learning.

The categorization of motivational barriers presented below is based on research carried out on students of English during the three years of their college education. The research was based mostly on interviews and observation but it also comprised students' self-evaluation and review of their academic achievements or lack of such.

#### 2.1.1. External motivational barriers

It is important to remember, while studying success and motivation in foreign language acquisition, that it takes place within a certain social interaction framework, which constitutes a basis for the development of motivation. Without an interlocutor, there is no communication. However, both the speaker and his interlocutor have to belong to a certain social group, feel accepted and supported, without which the process of communication is often limited to a minimum.

Every kind of language acquisition takes place in a specific time frame and social context, which directly or indirectly influence the process and the motivation necessary for its development. Pfeiffer (2001:111) describes the above factors as named by Apelt (1992, 1996) as *social* and *socio-historical aspects of motivation*.

External motivational barriers are concerned with what Oxford and Shearin (1994) identified as *environmental support* within which the following can be recognized:

- (1) educational context (e.g. the organization of studies, the system of evaluation, methods of teaching, teachers, student groups, conditions at school)
- (2) social context (e.g. the support of the environment, family or friends, financial sources, perspectives for the future)

In the case of these barriers students are fully aware of their existence, and moreover, they know that it is possible to overcome them (e.g. financial aid) or that the social situation may change at the same time eliminating a certain barrier (e.g. the status of the subject studied). Every learner has at least one external barrier influencing his motivation, but in most cases it does not appear to have a detrimental effect on the learning process. At times, an external barrier might become a problem. However, it seems that due to the initial identification of these barriers, most students consciously adopt a pro-active approach to overcome the obstacles faced.

#### 2.1.2. Internal motivational barriers

According to Pfeiffer (2001:111), since motivating students takes place during the conscious and active process of study, then the process of motivation must be influenced by the conscious and active attitude of the learner. He further quotes Apelt (1992, 1996) that in order to solve problems connected with motivation one also needs two more aspects: *cognitive-affective* and *emotional-affective*. In each process of learning, including foreign language learning, there are a number of conscious and unconscious processes from which motivation can either benefit or by which it can be hindered.

Internal motivational barriers are different from external ones in that the latter (as already mentioned) are obvious to the learners while the former are very often entirely subconscious. Students very often know that their motivation is blocked but they rarely connect it to the fact that the problem lies within themselves.

Internal motivational barriers are concerned with what Oxford and Shearin (1994) identified as: *attitudes, goals, beliefs about oneself, involvement and personal attributes*, and can be grouped into the following categories:

- (1) sense of personal status (e.g. feeling inferior, shyness, competition)
- (2) sense of support and belonging (e.g. dissatisfaction with the choice of career, feeling uncomfortable in the group)

These barriers, like the external barriers, are possible to overcome once they are identified. Students very often need some help, however, with identifying the source and type of their barriers.

It is possible that the same person identifies in themselves two sets of barriers: external and internal. In fact, most people may be characterised by some combinations of each of the major categories of motivational barriers. The student may be introverted, may be unhappy about the choice of school, may lack parental support or may have financial problems. Although detrimental, these factors do not have a terminal influence on the student's motivation, as they are possible to overcome. Students in the researched group possessing external or internal motivational barriers (or both) are those who achieved success, i.e. graduated from college.

### 2.1.3. Compound motivational barriers

External and internal motivational barriers, as has been noted above, can often exist side by side without seriously inhibiting the learner's motivation. A person who is unhappy about the choice of career path available to him, or who has poor financial resources, is often still motivated to achieve success despite these hindrances. As long as they are not interwoven, external and internal barriers can be identified and overcome by the learner. However, when a barrier combines both internal and external factors, it may become impossible for the learner to accurately identify the problem, and by extension, to resolve it.

These compound barriers are illustrated schematically in the diagram below. The detrimental effects of an internal barrier (e.g. a student's dissatisfaction with career path) or external barrier (e.g. parental dissatisfaction with same) may feed further external or internal barriers (poor exam results, low self esteem) which can reinforce the primary barrier. These compound the effect of the barrier and have a terminal impact on the learner's motivation. The vicious circle that results from compound barriers prevents the learner from identifying the source of the barrier, hiding the solution, while magnifying its effect. Students who were exposed to such barriers often did not manage to graduate or even make it to the second year in college.

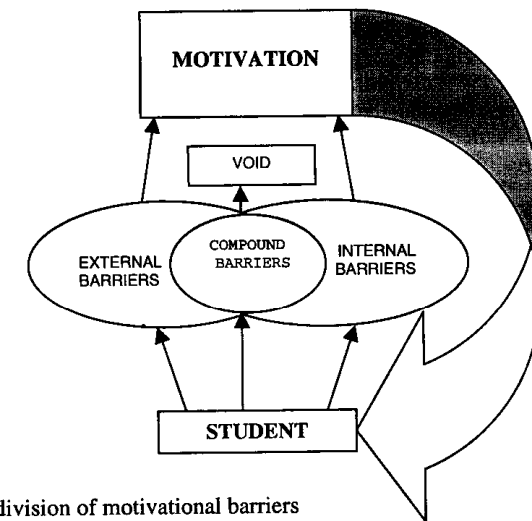


Figure 2. The division of motivational barriers

### 3. Conclusions

As Arends notices (1994) the environment fostering learning is characterised by:

- positive atmosphere in which students have a positive attitude towards each other
- processes which meet the needs of students and make them want to study while co-operating with other learners
- mastering by students the social skills inevitable to deal with cognitive and social demands of the environment.

However, as much as the environment plays a crucial role in language learning, the first and most important factor in achieving success is the student's personality. First of all, it is necessary to consider such features as hearing, memory, character etc. which need to be developed and of which the student's language skills are composed. Language skills are developed throughout the student's educational and extra-educational experiences. Psychological processes and personality factors determine the effectiveness of those skills in foreign language acquisition. Some students easily apply and develop these skills, while others never go beyond the initial stages of their educational development, often making it impossible for them to succeed in language learning in the context of academic education.

There are numerous studies researching motives and situations stimulating students' motivation. A few studies consider negative and positive features in learning a foreign language (cf. Cooley and Leinhardt 1975, Keller 1983, Maehr and Archer 1987, Oxford and Shearin 1994, Crookes and Schmidt 1991, Dörnyei 2001) admitting that the process of language acquisition of every individual learner is varied and due to changing conditions. Little has been done, however, in the area of motivational barriers in language learning. These, being obstacles and always bearing a negative connotation differ in terms of their influence on the language learner. The compound motivational barriers discussed in this article definitely demand some further research and documentation, although their existence in the field of foreign language acquisition is easily observable.

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