



# Motivation and Attitudes Towards Learning a Foreign Language: A Psycho-Sociolinguistic Study on the Undergraduate Students

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## Abstract

*This study focuses on the psycho-sociolinguistic aspects of Foreign Language Learning. The main questions discussed and analyzed in this study are firstly, what attitudes students actually have towards learning a foreign language and secondly, the motivating factors behind that attitude. This study has been conducted on the students of the Department of English, University of Dhaka and on the students of the Department of English University of Information Technology and Sciences (UITS). This paper has benefited from the quantitative method. The study examines the impact of students' motivation and attitudes while learning a foreign language. This study also shed light on the question whether it is true that social factors have roles to play in language learning or not. It has been demonstrated that motivation has a major role to play while learning a second language. The findings of this study are analyzed in the light of previous research published in this field.*

**Keywords: Individual Differences, Attitude, Motivation, Foreign Language Learning**

## Introduction

Learning a foreign language can be difficult because when learning a foreign language, students must take something that is initially unknown and make it a part of themselves. It requires a lot of time and one needs to pay serious attention in order to develop a new language. Studies have claimed that learners who are too concerned about how well they are doing or learning it, are less successful and feel less competent than those who focus on the task itself. Some psychologists say, it's a conflict between ego-orientation, or extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. However, in all cases, importance is given on whether the attention of the learner is turned away from the task and focused on the self and its future rewards or the learner focused on the task itself. There are many reasons to learn a foreign language, for instance some people learn a language only for the sake of learning, some learn for the purpose of communication, some to read their literature and traditions, some of them learn because it's mandatory. However, the main focus is to get more working opportunities depending on one's language proficiency because knowing any additional language adds an extra credit for the candidates in terms of getting a better job or scholarship. Though it could be argued that people who study a foreign language often learn it because they are bound to do it for educational institutions but people can also learn a language for other reasons too, for example, simply because they have a passion for that particular language.

Students differ in terms of their motivation that results in a different attitude towards learning a new language. The attitudes can be positive or negative. It is assumed that this motivation and attitude depends on various social factors such as age, gender, social class and ethnic identity or on the extent of exposure to a learning environment. When the light has been shed from a teachers/instructor's perspective, "how can I motivate my students to work harder?" is a question posed by most teachers at most teaching levels. Educators accept that students have individual learning styles and vary in their attitudes toward learning in general.[15] [33] [19] Attitude affects the levels of motivation and can make a difference in a student's academic career. For example, compulsory readings and memorization of terms versus classroom involvement and social interaction can influence a learner's attitude. Students experience diverse emotions, as well as various levels of success, while learning a foreign language. The difference could be a matter of motivation. Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret (1997) have researched numerous variables concerning success in foreign language learning. Some researchers (Skehan, 1989) consider aptitude as the number one indicator of success in foreign language learning.[33] Other researchers see self-efficacy as the true indicator.[19]

### **Research questions**

1. What attitudes do students have towards learning a foreign language?
2. What are the motivating factors for learning a foreign language?
3. What is the most popular foreign language?

### **Literature Review**

The term foreign is typically used about languages that one learns in a formal environment. There are two different types of factors that matter while learning a foreign language, external factors and internal factors. Ellis (1997) argues that external factors may be the social milieu in which the learning takes place, for example, the opportunities learners may have to hear and speak the specific language they are trying to adopt [2]. Furthermore, internal factors include the attitudes learners develop towards the language they are trying to learn. Yule (2006)

presents the idea that there is a difference between acquisition and learning [4]. Acquisition refers to the process of acquiring the language naturally while communicating with native speakers in a natural environment, but learning refers to the study of the grammar, vocabulary, morphology, phonetics, etc. of a language. Saville-Troike (2006) claims that motivation is also an important factor [3]. The level of effort that learners expend at various stages in their development depends on how motivated they are to learn. The more motivated students are, the easier they will learn a new language. The last three decades have seen a considerable amount of research that investigates the nature and role of motivation in the learning process. Much of this research has been initiated and inspired by two Canadian psychologists, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1994), who, together with their colleagues and students, grounded motivation research in a social psychological framework [25]. Gardner and his associates also established scientific research procedures and introduced standardized assessment techniques and instruments, thus setting high research standards and bringing motivation research to maturity. Although Gardner's motivation construct did not go unchallenged over the years. The main problem with Gardner's social psychological approach appeared to be, ironically, that it was too influential. In Crookes and Schmidt's words, it was "so dominant that alternative concepts have not been seriously considered". While acknowledging unanimously the fundamental importance of the Gardnerian social psychological model, researchers were also calling for a more pragmatic, education-centered approach to motivation. It must be noted that Gardner's motivation theory does include an educational dimension. However, the main emphasis in Gardner's model and the way it has been typically understood is on general motivational components grounded in the social milieu rather than in the foreign language classroom. Although 'motivation' is a term frequently used in both educational and research contexts, it is rather surprising how little agreement there is in the literature with regard to the exact meaning of this concept. Researchers seem to agree that motivation is responsible for determining human behavior by energizing it and

giving it direction, but the great variety of accounts put forward in the literature of how this happens may surprise even the seasoned researcher. This diversity is, of course, no accident; as Dornyei (1996) points out, motivation theories in general seek to explain the fundamental question of why humans behave as they do, and therefore it would be naive to assume any simple and straightforward answer [18]. Every different psychological perspective on human behavior is associated with a different theory of motivation and, thus, in general psychology it is not the lack but rather the abundance of motivation theories which confuses the scene. Ellis (1997) argues that motivation is not something that a learner has, or does not have, but rather something that varies from one moment to the next, depending on the learning context or task [2]. Ellis (1994) claims that learners' attitudes have been identified as one set of variables of major importance [1]. The attitudes are shaped by the social factors mentioned, which, in turn, influence learner outcomes. There are both negative and positive attitudes towards the foreign language being learnt. The positive attitudes are typically connected to the speakers of the language in question and the culture represented by its speakers. Such positive attitudes can be expected to enhance learning, since learners can be expected to want to be able to communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning. In other words, if students are interested in the countries where the languages are spoken; they may be more motivated to learn the language [29] [28]. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, can impede language learning, since you usually get those attitudes when you are not interested or have difficulties with the teacher [1]. Those attitudes usually have a negative effect on learners, but this is not always the case. Negative attitudes may also have a positive effect on foreign language learning, if the learners have a strong will to learn a language. Sometimes students who are struggling with their attitudes are true fighters. They work so hard in the end because they want a good grade and they have a strong will to learn. Furthermore, students' attitudes can change. They may have negative attitudes at the beginning of learning a language but then they realize what a good advantage it is to know this language and their attitudes change.

### **Aptitude and Language Learning**

Language aptitude has been suggested as "one of the central individual differences in language learning" [33]. It has also been declared to be the most consistent predictor of one's success in learning a foreign language [33][19]. Due to the conceptual issues involved, the matter of differentiating among ability, aptitude, and intelligence must be considered. These terms are commonly used interchangeably in everyday language, and the scientific definition is lost because of the popular use [19]. Ability typically applies in psychology to various traits which involve thinking, reasoning and the processing of information. Scholars have distinguished a difference between ability and aptitude but in practical terms, and for the purpose of language learning, these terms are synonymous in meaning and pedagogical application [19] [33]. The research on language learning aptitude has primarily focused on the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), but researchers are now considering other factors; therefore, the emphasis has lessened, especially since the early 1990's [19] [26] [22]. Very few specialists in language learning can discard a tool that is distinctively designed for the purpose of measuring one's aptitude, or ability, to learn a second language [21] [22]. Research reveals that though aptitude is well established as a general measure, its equivalent determiner in language learning ability is motivation. This body of emerging research continues to strengthen as more scholars take this into consideration [19] [26]. The controversy of aptitude versus attitude continues even when scholars are proclaiming motivation to be at least equivalent, instead of superior, to aptitude as a predictor of success in foreign language learning [22]

### **Self-Efficacy and Motivation**

Self-efficacy is a performance-based measure of one's perceived ability and therefore, differs theoretically from motivational constructs such as outcome expectations or self-concept [36]. Frequently, the terms self-efficacy and self-concept are misunderstood to have the same meaning. According to Alderman (1999), motivation can be influenced by self-perception [36]. Self-perception can destroy one's motivation to accomplish a given

task based on the belief that the ability to do the task is lacking; or the motivation is suppressed because of the belief that the task lacks challenging components [11] [19]. Research indicates that students perceive themselves as more, the more challenging the goals they pursue will be [19] [36]. According to Zimmerman (2000), research during the past two decades has revealed that self-efficacy is a highly successful predictor of a student's motivation and ultimately produces the types of student behavior desired by instructors. Motivation is referred to by Dörnyei (2005) as "an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do" [33]. The meaning of the term, motivation, is vague but we use it because it is the best way known to describe the abstract concept. Motivation theory started with Sigmund Freud, well known within psychoanalytic psychology. In 1914 and 1915 he postulated that behavior can be reduced to a number of drives; otherwise known by Freud as instinct theory. In empirical psychology it is suggested that motivation theory started with Hull's drive theory in 1943 [17]. The drives on which Hull based his theory were hunger, thirst, sex and avoidance of pain. Today we have a much more complex world and, therefore, a more complex understanding of motivation and motivational behavior. The motivation seen in people, as presently practiced, appears to be primarily to avoid punishment or receive rewards [13] [15] [19] [34] have suggested that human needs are quite different. They remark that the needs are relatedness to others, competence, and autonomy.

Frequently, a distinction is made between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The understanding of extrinsic motivation is that the goal providing satisfaction is independent of the activity, whereas intrinsic motivation finds the satisfaction within the activity itself [11][12][13][15][24][28]. The assumption commonly accepted is that extrinsic rewards such as money fulfill a basic human need. Obviously, this societal based motivation system is effective in accomplishing the set goals of bringing about desired behaviors [13][16]. Many researchers are considering not only behaviors based on external rewards, but also behaviors that are acted out based on the activity or behavior itself [15][13][31].

One of the more prominent paradigms in motivational psychology has been presented by self-determination theory [15]. Self-determination theory places the types of regulations on a continuum between self-determined (intrinsic) and controlled (extrinsic) forms [20].

Where one is placed on this continuum is dependent on how 'internalized' the form of motivation is and "how much the regulation has been transferred from outside to inside the individual" [18]. According to Dörnyei (2001) there are five categories which have been identified on this continuum. They are identified as: (a) external regulation, meaning that the motivation comes strictly from outside sources, (b) introjected regulation, which is following imposed rules, (c) identified regulation; an example of this would be where one engages in an activity because of a perceived usefulness, (e) integrated regulation which involves choices based on the individual's values, needs and identity, (f) intrinsic motivation where the individual is involved in the activity for the sake of the activity and nothing more.

Motivation by itself appears to be understood, but language learning is quite different compared to other areas of study, in the matter that learners will potentially face anxiety and social distress [32]. According to Saito, Horwitz and Garza (1999), the learner's experience of anxiety can have a debilitating impact on their ability to learn to communicate in the second language. Moreover, the anxiety experienced in the classroom environment has been suggested to have a negative impact on the motivation [13]. Because anxiety is an unpleasant experience, behaviors associated with anxiety reduction would be reinforced since the avoidance of pain or unpleasantness is one of the primary drives according to drive theory [16]. The problem Deci & Ryan (1985) note in this theory is that typically, exploratory behaviors are associated with excitement not fear and anxiety. The avoidance of anxiety does not appear to be a motivator for exploration or curiosity driven behaviors [16]. Collectively, there are at least two factors that can either eliminate or diminish motivation. These are anxiety and self-efficacy. Interestingly, anxiety is not as commonly found in learners that have a high self-efficacy as in those who do not [19]. When a learner experiences

diminished motivation, academic success is impacted. The thought of past failures brings about anxiety and, in turn, the self-efficacy is affected [7][8][9][21].

Attitudes and motivation in language learning materialized as an area of research in the late 1950's, and continues to be a topic of research into the 21st century. Gardner & Lambert (1972) began research on the topic during his doctoral studies in 1957. Aptitude had been accepted as the answer for why some individuals seemed to be better at language learning than others. Yet, when a culture wants to keep an original language alive, they learn it and pass it on to the children to know it as well as the spoken language [18][25]. The question Gardner and Lambert approached was that of attitude toward a culture and if it had an impact on the learner's motivation to learn the new culture's language. He later termed this motivation construct as integrative motivation [24][25][14]. Gardner has continued research in this direction as other researchers strongly suggest the motivational framework to be expanded [23][26][28][30]. Dörnyei (1994) remarks that Gardner's works are of great value to linguists and instructors of language; yet, there is a need to go beyond the social psychology of motivation and language learning. Gardner saw that there was more than aptitude involved in the success of learning a foreign language; therefore, he positioned most of his research in the direction of discovering other factors [18]. "To say that one has to have 'an ear for languages' is to give an excuse rather than an answer, since it is too easy to transfer mysteries to biology, either as the source of one's linguistic difficulties or as the source of one's linguistic genius" [24]. Based on the years of research, Gardner was accurate on this matter; yet, there still appears to be more questions than answers as to the source of one's abilities, or the lack of it, in learning a foreign language [20][30][27]. Dörnyei (1994) notes that Gardner & Lambert's works (1972) are a necessary contribution to the academy, yet the motivational construct of Gardner's excludes cognitive aspects of motivation to learn. From the time of Gardner's founding of the Gardnerian motivational theory for second-language learning till now, focus has changed from behaviorist to more cognitive concepts [18][19][20].

exam will be in drama. If there is more time left, the teacher may revise and go back to those vague and unclear points the class has passed through and experienced.

### **Motivation, Attitude and Aptitude in Foreign Language Learning**

The theories specific to motivation and language learning and/or motivation for learning a foreign language are plentiful. There is one that is of interest for this particular study and that is attitude and motivation for language learning [25]. The situation Gardner's theory is based on is quite unique in the sense that the community observed spoke, and continues to speak, two different languages. Some community members speak French, some speak English, and some speak both; therefore, his study was on the social aspects of how people were motivated, or not motivated, to learn French if they were native English speakers [23].

In the foreign language learning context, learner's motivation and attitude have been suggested to have an influence on the student's success in a foreign language learning [11][31][32]. Self-efficacy is a belief that one has about one's capabilities to complete a task and at what level of success in doing so. It has been suggested that a learner's self-efficacy influences his or her learning motivation [21][22][32].

### **Rationale of the Study**

Although many studies have looked into the students' attitude and there have been studies conducted evaluating the position of motivation in language learning, and even studies into language learning and self-efficacy. There has not been enough study that makes the connections between the three. These various aspects are important to success in language learning, understanding students' various perceptions, motivations and attitudes can offer a path to understanding the reasoning of their successes and failures. By studying and further elucidating the attitudes, perceptions and motivations of the learners, the hope is that this study will contribute to the research in language learning as well as educational psychology in a significant manner; therefore, helping instructors identify destructive beliefs and



attitudes that students may have. This recognition would make it possible for instructors of language to help sustain the learners' motivation.

### Methodology

It is a case study on the students of Department of English, University of Dhaka and UITS who are already learning a foreign language or are interested in learning a foreign language. The undergraduate students usually learn a foreign language as they have enough time to learn it. Therefore 200 students were conveniently sampled for this study. A detailed discussion on the instruments, participants, and the process of analysis has been included here.

### Instrument

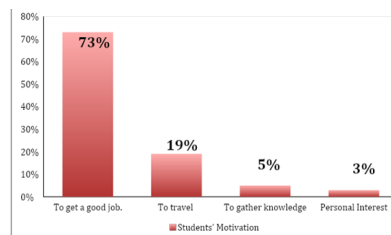
This study has benefited from a quantitative research approach. Data has been collected through a questionnaire containing 13 questions and it has been distributed among 200 students. Among them 12 are close ended and one is open ended. Data has been collected from the undergraduate students of the Department of English, University of Dhaka and the Department of English, UITS.

### Data analysis

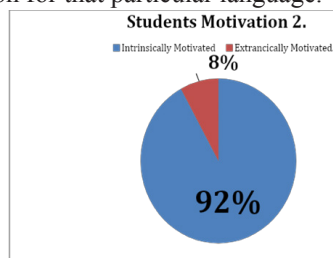
The data generated from the questionnaire were analyzed using Microsoft office Excel 2007. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze and represent data.

### Result

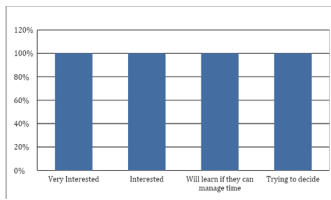
The aim of this study is to find out students' attitude and motivation towards learning a foreign language. First the study will investigate students' motivation towards learning a foreign language. It will mainly focus on why students learn a foreign language when they already know two languages, the first one is their mother tongue and the second one is English. So, the main focus here is to find out the motivating factors behind learning a new language. The descriptive analysis in the following chart shows that most of the students are extrinsically motivated.



This chart shows that most of the students are extrinsically motivated. 73% of students think that knowing an extra language will help them to get a good job. And another 19% of the students think that it will help them to travel around the world. Here the difference is very clear. 92% of students are extrinsically motivated. They believe that it will help them to build a better career and also help them to travel that particular country. 5% of students are learning a new language to enrich their knowledge. They want to read the literature or local history of that particular nation. And only 3% of students are learning a language or want to learn a language out of their fascination for that language or for that country. So according to this chart the students are more extrinsically motivated. The key to their motivation is the materialistic gain. Only 8% of students are intrinsically motivated. They are learning or interested in learning because they have a passion for that particular language.



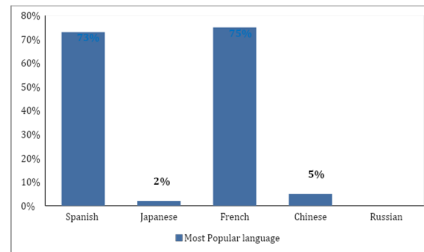
Secondly the study will discuss students' attitude towards learning a language. The main aim is to find out if they are really interested or they are just learning because they have to learn or because they think they will get a good job. Here motivation is related to a student's attitude. Those who are intrinsically motivated show a more positive attitude towards learning a foreign language. The following chart will describe students' attitude towards learning a foreign language.



The study finds that only 17% students are ‘very interested’ and passionate about learning a language. They are learning a language because of their long-cherished passion about that language and they want to gather knowledge of that language. These students are self-motivated students who are actually passionate about learning that language. They spend almost 15 to 18 hours and learn faster.

Apart from this 70% students are ‘interested’ in learning a language. They are not either too serious or too careless about learning a language. They are just learning a language because they think it will add some extra value to their CV. Another 13% students show a casual attitude towards learning a language. 9% of students wish to learn a language. Their view is that they will learn a language if they get a chance, which means they have other important things to do. Learning a foreign language is not their top priority. They want to learn but they will learn only if they can manage time. And another 3% shows a confused attitude, they said that they are still trying to set goals or figure things out. If they can set something and that requires learning foreign languages, they will learn several languages. But still they are trying to find out a way to start.

Besides these two major questions this study also tried to find out the most popular Foreign language. This study also asked the students what is their favorite foreign language with an option that they can choose more than one. According to them Spanish and French is the most popular language. It is because they have fascination for Parish and they watched a lot of Spanish Dramas. The study found out that students’ academic or familial background influences their decision of learning a foreign language. Some students want to learn a language, especially Japanese so that they can watch anime without subtitles. The following chart describes the percentage of the popularity of language among students.



This study focused on the motivation and students’ attitude and found out that these two terms are interconnected. They are influenced by each other.

### Discussion on Results

Learning a language is not new. But nowadays it is easier and there are lots of opportunities. But the number of people who are learning a language is not increasing. The aim of the research is to see why the number is not increasing. To find out the answer we have to find the difference between people who are learning or interested in learning and those who are not interested in learning. This study focused on the motivation behind learning a language. It asked the question what motivates you to learn? Why are you learning a language? It found out that students are learning a second language because they are motivated by the material world. This study would like to shed light on the fact that students who are not showing interest in learning lack this motivation. This may due to their lack of knowledge of the perspective of learning a language. This issue calls for further study. Motivation and attitude are interconnected. They influence each other. The classical theorist defines motivation as some specific thing but as something that is certain but the contemporary theorist like Dornyea stricken that notion with the thought that motivation is nothing certain, it can’t be measured and defined. People are motivated nowadays by their needs. It is nothing certain and measurable. The study found out that students of the Department of English are more aware and more willing to learn a new language. As most of the syllabus they study consists of the writings of foreign writers, they become acquainted with many writers and many foreign texts. The Department of English helps them to adopt a different culture and a different language. Students should be made aware of the prospects of learning a foreign language. If they know more about this issue, they will surely get

motivation and will learn at least a language.

### Limitations

The study is based on a small number of participants from the Department of English in two different institutions which are University of Dhaka and UITS. If more participants could be included the validity and the reliability of this research could be increased. Yet it can be concluded that these results will remain consistent if we conduct this research again. Another limitation is that the instrument that has been used here to collect data could be misunderstood or subjectively interpreted. Due to time constraints a lot of things have been overlooked. Further research on a larger participant may increase the validity and reliability of these research.

### Conclusion

The main topic of this study is students' motivation and attitudes towards learning a foreign language. The study found out that students have shown all kinds of attitudes. Some students are interested in the language and some are not. Furthermore, some students come to class and are focusing on what they are supposed to do and some are not, since they are not motivated. All the students agreed that it is vital to be motivated and have good attitudes towards the language you are trying to learn in order to develop. Saville-Troike (2006) informs us that individual motivation is a factor that is used to explain why some L2 learners are more successful than others. The level of effort that learners expend at various stages in their L2 development depends on how motivated they are to learn. The more motivated students are, the easier they will learn a new language. Studies have shown that motivation is crucial in the process of learning a foreign language.

This paper has examined a group of students from the department of English, University of Dhaka and UITS. They all had in common that they already knew other languages and they all agreed that knowing more than one language makes it easier to learn another one. They all agreed that it is sometimes hard, but definitely rewarding, to learn a foreign language. Motivation and the will to learn a foreign language are factors that were considered much more important than the social ones. Moreover, how fast they learn a new language depends on the individual learner's motivation (Ellis 1994). Once

again, we come to the motivation factor.

A possible further research topic could be to interview immigrants learning a second language and to find out more about their opinions about 'having' to learn a new language. It would be interesting to know whether or not they have reached the same conclusion as this study has about the importance of motivation.

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