

5 Towards a dynamic approach to analysing student motivation in ESP courses

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand student attitudes towards English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Such courses were conceived, in part, under the belief that they would be inherently more motivating as they, ideally, correspond directly to students' interests and needs. Rather than accepting this notion at face value, this paper posits that a thorough analysis of student behaviours and attitudes in ESP courses is required to fully understand their effectiveness in terms of their capacity to motivate students. To do so, this paper suggests studying motivation through the lens of the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST). This theory allows for the analysis of motivation as a dynamic phenomenon, strongly dependent on all the factors present in a given system, namely, a language classroom. Questionnaires, interviews, and observation data were used to analyse student motivation in English for Arts and General English (GE) courses at a large, public university in France. Results indicate that students were mostly indifferent to the specialised elements of their language courses and that their motivation was more dependent on the structure of different activities.

Keywords: complex dynamic systems, L2 learning environment, motivation, English for specific purposes, L2 motivational self-system.

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1. Introduction

Courses of ESP were conceived, in part, as the result of an interest in student learning motivation: these courses were thought to be inherently more motivating as they, ideally, correspond directly to students' interests and needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Despite some findings supporting this claim, Brown (2007) tells us that it has largely been accepted at face value with little evidence to back it up. Brunton (2009) reinforces this point with his argument that, when given a choice, students often prefer GE courses to ESP ones.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine precisely what elements affect student motivation in ESP courses. This paper relies principally on CDST; this theory, combined with other theoretical constructs, allows for a thorough analysis of a learner's attitudes at a given moment and an understanding of how they are influenced by numerous factors in and out of the learning environment (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). After summarising some major developments in motivation research, we examine a small sampling of studies conducted under the CDST and how their findings apply to the ESP context. Research methods are presented with data from a study conducted in ESP courses at a French university; the results are compared with GE courses to determine how student attitudes differ.

2. Review of literature

Gardner's (1960) Socio-educational Model (SM) has long dominated studies in L2 learning motivation in various contexts, including ESP (Ushioda, 1996). Its main tenet is integrativeness; a strong integrative orientation comes from a desire to identify with people of the L2 community and often leads to a strong learning motivation. The model also includes an instrumental orientation, occurring when one studies a language for professional gain or due to another external force (Gardner, 1960).

Applying the SM to ESP courses at a Yemeni university, Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009) used questionnaires and interviews to classify student motivation.

Participants reported strong instrumental orientations, such as learning English for their future jobs, with many reporting negative feelings towards the L2 community. While this study provides useful insights on the general attitudes of these students, researchers have called for more thorough analyses of the learning environment, given its capacity to cause frequent motivational changes during a lesson (Bier, 2013; Lavinal, Décuré, & Blois, 2006).

Responding to this call, Dörnyei (2009) devised the L2 Motivational Self-System (L2MSS) to focus more directly on a learner's attitudes towards the classroom environment. The model contains several constructs, but this study will focus on how motivation is affected by the L2 Learning Environment (L2LE): this construct includes relationships with one's peers and teachers, the layout of the classroom, the nature of the learning activities, and innumerable other factors that can affect students' attitudes towards learning. To understand how L2LE elements work with other factors and translate into classroom behaviours, this study draws from past research using the CDST; this theory represents an effective framework for analysing the motivating elements present in ESP courses, given its insistence on classroom experiences and real-time observations (Henry, 2015; Waninge, 2015).

While studying high school students in a foreign language classroom, Waninge (2015) asked students about the emotions they felt during their lessons. Among the most cited emotional states were interest (leading to active participation in the classroom), boredom (leading to disengagement), and neutral attention (leading to passive listening). With many participants, Waninge found that interest was the result of contextual factors, such as learning activities, the teacher, and peers. Interest was also sparked when activities related to students' personal interests and pre-existing non-language goals. While this latter finding may point to the potential for ESP to stimulate student interest, the former most definitely shows the need to consider all factors in the classroom when studying student engagement.

Other CDST studies reinforce the need to analyse all elements in a classroom and point to the fact that course content and activities are only part of the

countless factors affecting motivation. Such conclusions indicate that future research should depend more on class observations to have a more detailed view of participant behaviours (Henry, 2015).

Building on the findings of these CDST experiments, the present study includes classroom observations that focus directly on student participants, in addition to interviews and questionnaires, in both ESP and GE courses, to answer the following research questions:

- What elements do students find motivating in their language courses?
- How do these elements differ between ESP and GE courses (using English for Arts as a case study)?

3. Methods

This study was conducted at Paris 8 University in France during the 2016/2017 academic year, with students in English for Arts courses at A2 and B1 levels. These courses are designed based on the teacher's area of expertise and experience, sometimes in consultation with the Arts department. The levels are based on the Council of Europe's (2001) framework for language proficiency. To provide a basis for comparison, motivation data from students in GE courses were also included.

In order to increase the validity of our results (Dörnyei, 2011), we used a mixed methods approach – via questionnaires, interviews, and observation schemes – for collecting data on student motivation and attitudes in their English classes.

3.1. Questionnaire

The motivation questionnaire we used was adapted from previous L2MSS studies (Brander, 2013; Tort Calvo, 2015; You & Dörnyei, 2016) to create a tool for studying learner attitudes towards the learning environment. The final

version of the questionnaire contained 27 items. As this data is part of a larger study, only answers from the six questions measuring the L2LE are reported here³. A seventh item was eliminated from consideration due to an anomaly in the printed version. The questionnaire was given to students in French and was distributed to some via email and to others in paper format. In total, it was sent to 42 GE A2 students, 64 GE B1 students, 55 ESP A2 students, and 61 ESP B1 students. Their participation was optional.

It was deemed necessary to provide a shorter questionnaire than was used in past studies, given a low response rate of about 50% from the pilot session. Nonetheless, special care was given to assure a fair representation of the different constructs.

3.2. Class observations

All class observations were conducted by the first author of this paper, in courses of ESP and GE at the A2 and B1 levels. An adapted version of the observation scheme used by [Guilloteaux and Dörnyei \(2008\)](#) was used to track motivation during the language courses, operationalised as visible student engagement⁴. Observing learning engagement is a common approach to studying classroom or task-based motivation, as student participation in learning tasks is indicative of the willingness and persistence often associated with motivated students ([Guilloteaux, 2007](#)).

In each class, one student was chosen as the focus of the observations to understand behaviours in a more in-depth way ([Henry, 2015](#)). A convenience sampling strategy was deemed most appropriate for identifying participants, given the importance of interviewing students immediately following a lesson ([Henry, 2015](#)). First, students had an opportunity to say they did not wish to participate in interviews or observations. Next, the researcher asked students who would not be available for an interview directly after the lesson; these students

3. See 'The questionnaire': <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/w2tk0e7royle3qw90ceoueu0c9nswer>

4. See 'The observation scheme': <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/w2tk0e7royle3qw90ceoueu0c9nswer>

were immediately eliminated from consideration. Finally, as the researcher needed to be in a discreet position within the classroom, only students who were easily visible from such a position could be considered. Ultimately, these criteria generally left only two or three possible participants in each group, from which one was chosen randomly.

The student was observed throughout six three-hour lessons, which is the typical duration of non-specialist language courses at this university. Behaviours were then coded into three categories: passive engagement (A), active oral or written participation (P), and disengagement (D). Category A was noted when students reacted to stimuli, kept their eyes on the speaker, or copied information without adding anything original. P was noted when students participated in group tasks, actively completed individual work, and raised their hands, adding to class discussion. Finally, D was noted when the student was not paying attention, evidenced by checking their phone, sleeping, chatting with classmates about personal matters, or staring away from the class. A last category (N) was also created for non-academic time, to account for late starts or early endings to the lesson.

3.3. Interviews

Each observation participant completed two interviews with the first author, one in the first half of the semester, and another towards the end; semi-structured interviews were used to assure that certain points were addressed while still allowing students to express unexpected opinions (Drever, 2003). Questions asked students to comment on the emotions they felt during their language lessons and how their motivation fluctuated over the course of the three hours and over the whole semester; students were asked to illustrate these fluctuations with line graphs. Additional questions gathered information about students' past experiences learning English and how they planned to use the language in the future (Henry, 2015). An indicative list of the principal guiding questions can be found in supplement materials⁵.

5. <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/w2tk0oe7royle3qw90ceoueu0e9nswer>

As several participants expressed discomfort with the interviews being recorded, notes were taken by the researcher, then interview data were emailed to participants. Students verified the accuracy of their answers and could modify them as necessary; this was done within twenty-four hours of the interview.

4. Results

The following tables contain a summary of the results of this study, focussing on class behaviours. As stated, the interview and observation data come from one student from each of the courses observed (one ESP Arts A2, one ESP Arts B1, one GE A2, one GE B1). [Table 1](#) below represents the number of respondents for each questionnaire.

Table 1. Number of questionnaire respondents per group

Course	ESP Arts A2	ESP Arts B1	GE A2	GE B1
Number of Questionnaires Distributed	55	61	42	64
Number of Respondents	38	45	30	46
Response Rate (rounded to the nearest percent)	69%	74%	71%	72%

4.1. Questionnaire data

[Table 2](#) shows the proportion of students' positive reactions to different aspects of the classroom environment. For example, the figure regarding teacher/student relationship comes from the number of respondents marking 4 or 5 on the Likert scale for that item. For True/False questions, the figure is based on the number of respondents answering True. These results tend to show that students in all groups have similar attitudes towards their courses, with most being positive. Still, a majority do not feel a sense of excitement when going to class, and large numbers admit to giving into distractions. Aside from these measures, it seems many students feel their class is useful, practical, and that the teacher creates a good classroom atmosphere.

Table 2. Students' positive reactions to the learning environment

Course	ESP A2	ESP B1	GE A2	GE B1
The teacher/student have a good dynamic	92.1%	100%	93.3%	91.3%
I'm excited about going to class every week	34.2%	15.5%	16.6%	26.1%
I can ignore other distractions during lessons	52.6%	40%	66.7%	60.9%
The course is useful and practical	92.1%	82.2%	96.7%	89%
The course corresponds to my level	84.2%	71.1%	93.3%	84.8%

The questionnaire also contained one open-ended question related to the learning environment, asking students to comment on an activity they found particularly useful. This item was the only one without a 100% response rate. The answers to this question are as follows.

In ESP A2, the response rate was 78.9%, (30 answers out of 38 participants). Three respondents (=10%) referenced specialised materials. All other responses described activities that helped develop general language skills; 16 students appreciated oral activities, four mentioned listening comprehension, and others covered skills such as pronunciation and grammar.

In ESP B1, the response rate was 51.1% (23 answers out of 45 participants). Of these responses, three (=13%) contained references to specialised materials. All other responses described activities related to general language skills; 13 talked about oral skills, two talked about general cultural knowledge, and three referenced listening comprehension.

Of the responses in GE A2 (63.3% response rate, i.e. 19/30), most students talked about general language skills; five focused on oral skills, five talked about grammar, six referenced listening and reading comprehension. The remaining responses discussed expanded cultural knowledge.

Finally, in GE B1 (76% response rate, i.e. 35 answers out of 46 participants) most students talked about general language skills; 18 students talked about

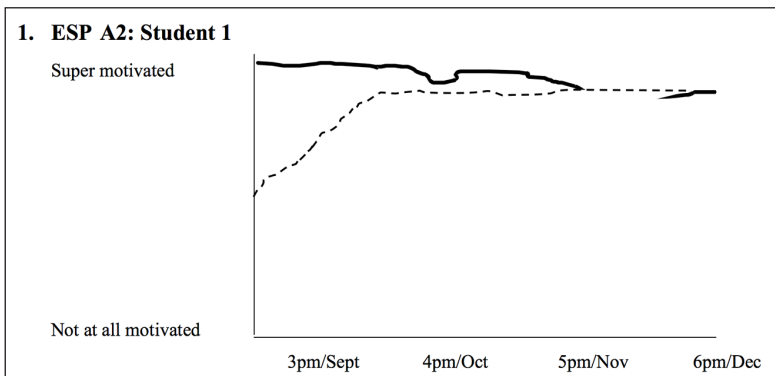
oral activities and presentations, six talked about listening and reading comprehension, and five referenced grammar activities. A variety of other responses were present, including general compliments of the teacher as well as increased cultural awareness.

Overall, very little difference can be seen between groups: students from all four groups reported their appreciation of similar activities (based on the development of general language skills and on cultural knowledge) as well as the benefits of such activities. Very few students (11.5% in total) in the ESP groups considered specialised materials useful and, therefore, potentially motivating.

4.2. Interview data

The following figures present interview data, with students' line graph representations of motivational changes over the course of one lesson, in either Week 3 or 4 of the course, and over the course of the semester.

Figure 1. ESP A2 Student 1's motivational change over the course of a three-hour lesson (3pm-6pm, solid line) and the semester (September-December, dotted line)

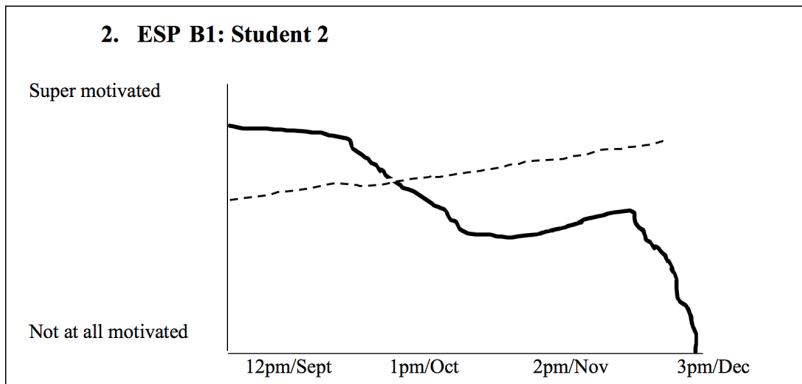


In Figure 1, Student 1 reported entering the lesson with a high level of motivation, as is her habit in most of her courses. This motivation fell slightly, however,

when the teacher had them review an activity they had done the previous week, as she felt frustrated at spending more time on an already completed task. This resulted in a small motivation decrease throughout the three-hour lesson, as the student reported the same complaint about other activities that day. Still, her attitude remained relatively positive and she reported feelings of “joy” and interest throughout the lesson, originating from her relationship with her peers and all the new information she was learning. She described only rare moments of disengagement, characterised by doodling in her notebook or checking her phone; these were more out of habit than a problem with the lesson.

Regarding her semester-long motivation, she indicated starting the semester with a relatively negative outlook for the course, as she had never liked English classes and only took this one out of obligation. This attitude changed, however, as illustrated by the steady increase in her reported motivation between September and October, because the activities sparked an interest for her and she appreciated that the course was specialised for art students.

Figure 2. ESP B1 Student 2’s motivational change over the course of a three-hour lesson (12pm-3pm, solid line) and the semester (September-December, dotted line)

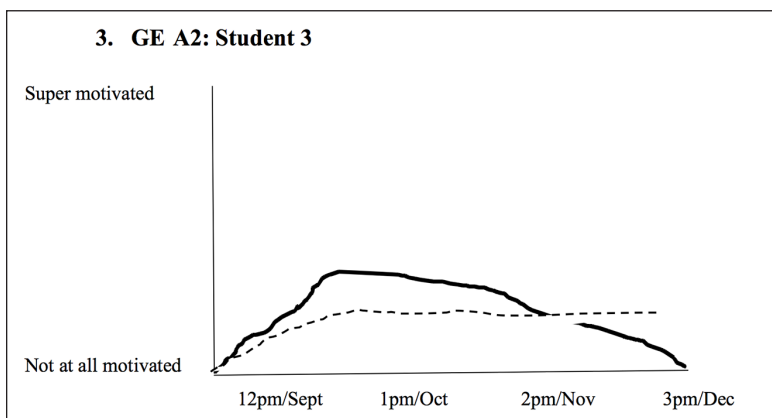


As shown in [Figure 2](#), Student 2 reported being very motivated at the beginning of the lesson, because she always loved English and because the cultural lesson

in the beginning was very interesting. The motivation fell, however, largely because of the duration of the course; the student reported being too tired and too hungry to pay attention. Moreover, she claimed a reading activity in the second portion of the lesson was too easy to be motivating. The initial interest was therefore replaced by fatigue and lassitude. Regarding moments of complete disengagement, in which the student was on her phone or chatting, the student said that it happens in all her classes when she must listen to a long speech or do the same activity over a long period.

Figure 2 also shows that Student 2 started the semester with a medium level of motivation. Though she did appreciate being in an ESP course, she claimed the determining factor in her steadily increasing motivation over the semester was her classmates; as the semester went on, they got to know each other better and enjoyed doing group work together.

Figure 3. GE A2 Student 3's motivational change over the course of a three-hour lesson (12pm-3pm, solid line) and the semester (September-December, dotted line)

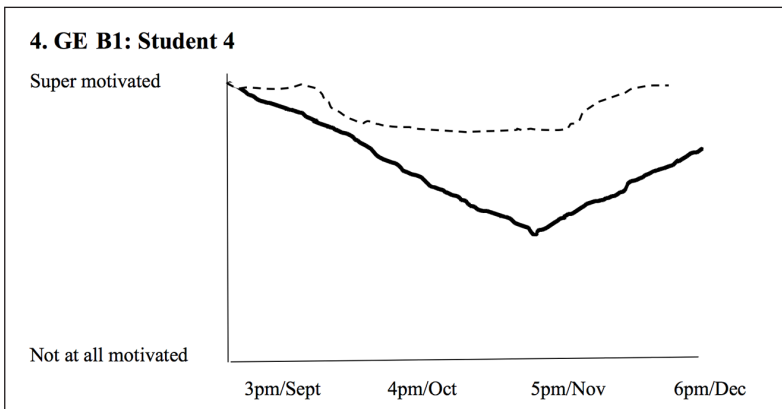


Regarding Figure 3 and Student 3's attitudes over the three-hour lesson, this student reported always entering all her courses with low motivation. When class starts and she has a task to complete, motivation increases. The increase was only temporary, however, because she struggled to stay engaged over three hours.

The high point was the result of group work, which she enjoys; this was the only time she reported a positive emotion of interest. During the rest of the lesson, she reported fatigue, from having to work for three hours, boredom from spending too much time on difficult tasks, and indifference, for grammar and vocabulary activities. Still, she does her best to never fully disengage; she uses her phone or chats with friends only when activities become too difficult or too dull.

Figure 3 also indicates that Student 3 started the semester with a negative attitude; she described never liking her English courses in the past and having teachers that failed to spark her interest. This course, however, did motivate her a little, because the professor gave students a very active role and presented materials that were necessary for general, cultural knowledge. Her motivation will never be very high, she explained, as she feels she will never use English in her daily or professional life.

Figure 4. GE B1 Student 4’s motivational change over the course of a three-hour lesson (3pm-6pm, solid line) and the semester (September-December, dotted line)



As can be seen in Figure 4, Student 4 entered the classroom highly motivated, because he has always loved his English courses; he is also particularly engaged whenever he can participate in a discussion. He initially lost motivation on this

day, even to the point that he stopped working, because he was sick and tired. Ultimately, he regained motivation at the end to complete a translation activity, as he knew it would be important for an exam. He described that this day was rather exceptional, given his illness; he described feeling ill during the lesson and unable to concentrate. He still referenced interest, however, because he was fascinated by the gender studies activities presented in this lesson. Otherwise, moments of complete disengagement were normally out of habit, rather than an actual problem with the course.

Student 4 also indicated being highly motivated all semester, but claimed that it was difficult in October because he was busy with other courses and obligations and could not focus on English work. In November, after failing the midterm, he reported anger and discouragement. Moving forward, however, his interest in class activities was enough to re-motivate him through December.

4.3. Observation data

Table 3 below contains percentages showing how often each student exhibited each type of motivation over the course of 18 hours of observation, made up of six three-hour observation sessions. It also shows how often students changed between active and passive engagement and disengagement, and the average number of changes per hour.

In ESP A2, Student 1's interview answers (reported in the previous section) reinforce her observed behaviours shown in **Table 3**. Six instances of disengagement were observed, of which four corresponded to moments in which students spent extended periods on one activity; in each of these cases, the activity was a specialised activity, relating to art. The other two instances occurred at the beginning of the class, as the teacher presented the day's lesson; these instances are likely explained by her comment about sometimes texting out of habit. Instances of passive engagement occurred with highest regularity; these seemed to correspond to the teacher's instructions. When the students were asked to participate in a small group discussion, Student 1 exhibited active engagement; when they were asked to read, follow a video or participate in

whole-class discussions, she was passive. These observations appear to be true regardless of the activity, whether specialised to art students, general cultural presentations, or grammar activities.

Table 3. Students’ observed motivational distribution over the semester. Note that figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentage, meaning some students’ data may add up to slightly more than 100%

Student	Active Engagement (P)	Passive Engagement (A)	Disengagement (D)	Non-Academic Time (N)	Number of observed motivational changes	Average number of changes per hour
Student 1 (ESP A2)	31%	50%	2%	17%	81	3.7
Student 2 (ESP B1)	18%	54%	11%	18%	99	4.6
Student 3 (GE A2)	24%	45%	14%	18%	89	3.6
Student 4 (GE B1)	33%	37%	9%	21%	90	4.7

In ESP B1, the observations presented in Table 3 also echo what Student 2 said in her interview. She had 34 observed instances of disengagement, accounting for more than 10% of the 18 hours of observation; of these cases, 29 seemed to have been triggered by completing an activity she deemed too passive, such as reading or listening followed by answering questions, or by spending too much time on an activity. Of these 29 instances, 20 occurred during ESP activities, such as discussing a work of art or reading about an art movement. The interest she expressed in cultural lessons carried over to other lessons as well, resulting in long periods of passive attention, some lasting up to 30 minutes, when the professor presented the cultural background of works of art to be studied. Instances of active engagement, though numerous, were often short-lived. While they did get increasingly longer later in the semester (some periods of active attention lasting nearly 25 minutes in December, as opposed to short ones around nine minutes on average in September), no instances of volunteering information were observed; Student 2 only seemed to participate when in groups or specifically asked by the professor.

Student 3 (from the GE A2 group) exhibited the highest levels of observed disengagement of the four participants, as illustrated in [Table 3](#). The fatigue she mentioned in the interviews seemed to be a major factor in her lessons, as her disengagement was often marked by sleeping in class. The difficulty of the task also seems to play a role; ten of the 15 observed instances of disengagement occurred during speaking or listening activities. These numbers are in stark contrast with the high levels of uninterrupted passive engagement, with some instances as long as 45 minutes, relating to correcting pre-prepared work in class, suggesting Student 3's interest in less spontaneous tasks.

Finally, in GE B1, Student 4's motivation fluctuated considerably in the classroom throughout the semester. His self-reported motivation illustrated in [Figure 4](#) appears to be an accurate representation of his attitudes during the course, as only two instances of disengagement were observed in September; one in December, and the remaining 17 during the lessons observed in October and November. Student 4's comment about being excited when participating in discussions also rang true; his 35 instances of active engagement almost exclusively happened during moments of class discussion and group work. Indeed, the only times he was passive in class was when someone else was talking.

5. Discussion

The present study seeks to shed light on motivating elements in specialised language courses to better understand their motivational value in relation to GE courses. A combination of questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations helped to identify some elements of a course that students found motivating. Considered together, the above results support [Henry's \(2015\)](#) insistence on considering numerous factors when analysing student motivation and validates the use of CDST. Students reacted to the duration of the class, work with their peers, the timing of class activities, and the structure of different tasks.

As mentioned previously, questionnaire data showed that students in all four groups had mostly positive attitudes towards their courses (considering them

useful and practical), even though most admitted not being excited about going to class, as well as being easily distracted during a lesson. In the open-ended question, students in all groups seemed to appreciate similar activities, focusing on general language skills and cultural knowledge. Aside from the six ESP students who mentioned specialised materials (11.5% of responses in the ESP groups), all respondents described benefitting from essentially the same type of activities. Such a finding fits in with past research comparing students in ESP and GE courses, where students report a preference for GE work, as it allows them to develop L2 skills that they could use in a wider range of contexts (Brunton, 2009).

Students' responses in the interviews seem to reinforce what was found in the questionnaire; ESP only received minimal attention in the interviews, and only from the ESP A2 student: she appreciated the change ESP offered from her past learning experiences. Such a point perhaps ties in to the students' attitudes against repeating or dwelling on tasks. As Terrier and Maury (2015) describe, most students in France should finish high school with a minimum English level of B2, as this is the target level of the language classes offered at this level of education (and in the *Baccalauréat* exam): thus, having to go over the same A2 grammar points in a GE course at university could be viewed as a demotivating factor. Therefore, the novelty of ESP courses perhaps provided a welcome change.

Moreover, similar learning activities, such as oral activities, comprehension activities, and activities that expand their cultural knowledge, were found to be motivating in all groups, eliciting both active and passive engagement. Passive engagement was strong in all groups, as in Waning's (2015) study, often occurring during lectures, classmate presentations, or listening activities. Instances of active engagement were most often the result of group work, reinforcing Henry's (2015) point regarding the influence peers could have on motivation. These findings suggest that learning activities have a strong influence on the type of engagement students exhibit; their responses and behaviours show that they associate certain behaviours with certain learning activities. For example, classmate presentations could only stimulate passive engagement, while group

work provides an atmosphere more conducive to active participation. Further studies may wish to analyse this relationship in greater detail.

Also, similar to Henry's (2015) study, students in both ESP and GE courses reported being demotivated by difficult tasks and by spending too much time on one activity. While the tasks that are considered difficult vary from student to student, the maximum amount of time participants seem able to spend on an activity is around fifteen minutes, after which they tend to disengage.

6. Conclusions

This study lends some support to Brown's (2007) claim that ESP's alleged motivating element is a "folk assumption". Aside from the Student 1's claim that ESP presented a welcome change, and the fact that only 11.5% of respondents in the ESP groups mentioned ESP materials as being interesting and useful (and therefore potentially motivating), all participants in GE and ESP groups seemed to appreciate the same elements of their courses; this finding indicates that students are at least partly indifferent to specialised activities. Oral and group tasks, for example, seemed to be motivating, regardless of whether the task was specialised. While further work is needed in this domain, this study suggests that the classroom environment and learning activities may have a stronger importance than specialised course content, at least with regard to Arts students.

Some of the potential limitations of this study relate to the sample of four observed students. Aside from being a very small sample, the convenience sampling strategy used here could not ensure the representativeness of the participants. While this method was chosen following Henry's (2015) advice to focus more on individual students and conducting interviews directly after the lesson, additional studies should be performed using larger and more representative samples. Additionally, while the 12-week semester is typical of French universities, it would be interesting to spend time in a context in which students stay in the same learning environment for a longer period to have a

better idea of how minute-to-minute fluctuations provoke long-term changes. Similarly, fluctuations in motivation could also be investigated in shorter ESP classes (1.5 to 2 hour classes) in order to consider the impact of class duration on student motivation. Finally, it might be worthwhile to conduct a similar study in a context where ESP courses are designed following systematic student needs' analyses, so that results align more closely with standard ESP research.

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