



Why and Where Do We Learn a Foreign Language? A Small-scale Investigation of Postgraduate Teacher Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

When deciding to learn a foreign language (FL), personal factors such as motivation in its various types and the reasons that impel somebody to learn this particular FL are of decisive importance regarding the learning process and its efficacy. The context and the institution in which the FL is taught and learned are also important factors in FL learning. This paper presents the findings of a small-scale investigation of these aspects on postgraduate teacher students of a Greek university. In particular, 34 postgraduate students of the Department of Primary Education of the Democritus University of Thrace were asked to freely produce a small written text on the FLs they have learned, the learning institution and the reasons for learning them. The quantitative content analysis of the produced texts revealed the dominance of English regarding the FLs learned and of private centres of FLs regarding the teaching institutions. Improving their professional prospects and increasing their qualifications were revealed as basic reasons for the students' learning of a FL.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Learning, Motivation, Reasons for Foreign Language Learning*

Introduction

The present study is partially connected to second or foreign language motivation research, which has its roots in the Canadian social psychological approach (Dörnyei, 2003) and was initiated by Gardner (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). More specifically, our research concentrated on the recording of the reasons for language learning on the part of the participants, who were postgraduate students of the Department of Primary Education of the Democritus University of Thrace. The second part of the research is related to the institution in which foreign languages

are actually being learned in Greece. Thus, the background for our work is provided to a great extent by the rather extensive research on motivation in second or foreign language learning. Motivation has gained substantial interest within the context of research on language learning both from linguists and from psychologists.

It is generally acknowledged that motivation plays a significant role in academic learning in general, which is particularly accepted in the framework of second or foreign language learning (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005, p. 616). In fact, along with variables like attitude, orientations and anxiety, motivation is a key component for predicting achievement in second language learning, along with language aptitude (Noels, Pelletier, Clément & Vallerand, 2003, p. 35; Gardner, 1985). Moreover, motivation is also accepted as one fundamental factor that distinguishes first language acquisition from the process of foreign language learning (Ushioda, 2016, pp. 564-565). In an attempt to define the term, motivation could be regarded as “the attribute that moves us to do or not to do something” (Broussard & Garrison, 2004, p. 106). Regarded from a cognitive point of view, motivation can be distinguished in *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivation (Noels et al., 2003, p. 38). The former category includes rewards, such as money, prizes, grades or forms of positive feedback, but also punishments and has a basic characteristic the fact that applicators are the others; on the other hand, in the latter category the applicators are the learners themselves and their feelings, such as those of competence and self-determination, are of great significance (Quan, 2014, p. 2; Slavin, 2003). Both of these general types of motivation can be sub-divided into further categories: intrinsic motivation can be divided into intrinsic motivation-knowledge, intrinsic motivation-accomplishment and intrinsic motivation-stimulation; whereas extrinsic motivation can be sub-divided in three levels: external regulation, introjected regulation and identified regulation (Noels et al., 2003, p. 38-39).

Another distinction made, in the framework of the self-determination approach to motivation, is that between *integrative* and *instrumental* motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). Integrative motivation involves positive beliefs for the foreign language community and the willingness to communicate and interact with it and also learning the language for personal growth and for enriching one’s culture; this way it implies a high regard for other cultural communities and it constitutes a kind of emotional identification (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 5; Lightbown & Spada, 2007, p. 64). Instrumental motivation is related with “such pragmatic gains as earning more money, being hired for higher position” (Akçay, Ferzan Bütüner & Arıkan, 2015, p. 57).

Sketching in brief the various theoretical approaches in the framework of second or foreign language motivation research, they could be broadly summarized in: a) the Gardner’s motivation theory (Gardner, 1973, 2000), which appertains to social psychology, b) the self-determination theory (Noels et al., 2003); the attribution theory of Weiner, according to which a person’s past experiences shape his/her motivational disposition; the goal theories – all three fall under the category of cognitive approaches, and c) Schumann’s theory, which stresses the neurobiology of second or foreign language motivation and therefore falls under cognitive neuroscience (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 7).

Regarded under a micro-perspective, motivation is related to components of the classroom environment. These include: course-specific motivational components, teacher-specific motivational components and group-specific motivational components (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 11). Motivation is a rather dynamic concept (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 17), since some aspects of it may alter during the language learning process. However, the reasons for language learning, which were one of the main focus-points of the present study, have proved to remain relatively stable. This was shown in the research of Pawlak (2012), where changes in motivation concerning the goals and intentions of 28 senior high school students were investigated. What seemed to vary was the intensity of motivation, not the reasons for learning.

Hence, one of the purposes of the present study was to trace the reasons for language learning that the graduate students who participated in the research had. In other words, the goals rather than other aspects of motivation were investigated here. The other research element was related to the institution in which the foreign language had been learned by the participants.

Important Aspects of Foreign Language Learning Context in Greece

The Greek educational system follows the recommendations of the European Commission regarding the learning of at least two foreign languages besides the mother tongue (EU Council, 2002). Thus, the teaching and learning of foreign languages plays a significant role, at least during the years of compulsory education, which includes primary and lower secondary education. There are three worldwide high-prestige languages connected with political, cultural and financial power that are promoted within the Greek public school: English, French and German (Kiliari, Agorastos & Perperidis, 2017, p. 64). As is the case in other neighbouring countries, like Turkey, where young learners are introduced to English lessons at the second grade (Akçay et al., 2015, p. 57), great importance is given to the English language. According to the revised school curriculum, English is nowadays taught as a compulsory subject already from the first grade of primary school: there is one hour of English lessons per week for the first and the second grade and three hours per week from the third until the sixth grade of primary school, which includes overall six grades. During lower secondary education (gymnasium), that follows primary school and includes three grades, English continues to be the obligatory foreign language taught with two hours of lessons per week in each of the three grades. Pupils of the fifth and the sixth grade of primary school can choose between French and German as an obligatory subject (as a second foreign language) with two hours of lessons per week. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that it is not an actual “free choice” of the pupils, since the language taught is the one chosen by the majority of the pupils of the class. These two languages continue to be offered as an obligatory by choice second foreign language during the three years of lower secondary education with two hours of lessons per week. During the three years of the upper secondary education (lyceum) pupils can choose one foreign language among English, French and German as an obligatory subject with two hours of lessons per week. However, this is only the case as far as the general high school (general lyceum) is concerned; in the vocational high school (vocational lyceum), English is the only foreign language taught two hours weekly

(Chatziioannou, Kikidou, Papadimitriou & Papadopoulou, 2018, pp. 143-144). It should be noted that in the past, pupils of certain regions of Greece were occasionally given the chance to learn other languages as well as a second foreign language, such as Italian (mainly at the Ionian Islands), Spanish, Russian or Turkish (in Thrace) (Kiliari et al., 2017, p. 65).

There are various discrepancies against which the teaching and learning of foreign languages has to struggle in the Greek state school. For example, until the academic year 2016/2017, pupils were free to change the second foreign language they were taught in the seventh grade (first year of gymnasium), which lead to a certain discontinuity of the foreign language learning. Moreover, the fact that they don't reach a level higher than A2+ after so many years of second foreign language teaching at the state school (Chatziioannou et al., 2018, p. 144) is another demotivating factor. Apart from that, the fact that there hasn't been any recruitment of permanent foreign language teachers in the last decade due to the economic crisis leads to the schools' functioning with substitute teachers. Substitute teachers, however, are often placed at schools only in October (the school year begins in September), or even later. This means that quite a few hours of foreign language teaching are lost every year. Additionally, foreign language teachers are often compelled to teach at various schools, frequently of different educational levels, in order to reach their required teaching load of twenty four hours per week. This means practically that they are charged with extra transportations, costs and time waste (Chatziioannou et al., 2018, p. 145); thus, it can be assumed that this situation does not help ensure a high quality in the teaching and learning of foreign languages at the Greek state school.

The above mentioned points, in combination with other elements (long-year tradition of foreign language centres in Greece, established mentality in Greek society, great importance attached to foreign language skills and their certification, etc.), lead to the fact that a considerable amount of the family spending in Greece is being dedicated to the foreign language learning outside school, i.e. foreign language centres or private lessons. According to data of 2016, for example, foreign languages constitute the largest part of expenditure for families who have children attending primary school (Kathimerini, 20.03.2019).

The Study

In an attempt to investigate at a first stage some personal factors of students of a Greek university as foreign language learners, we undertook to conduct the study presented below. In other words, we intended to use the present research as a preliminary investigation, in order to look into the subject of foreign language motivation more deeply and using a different research tool (questionnaire). Additionally, we were interested to record how many and which foreign languages were spoken by the students and where they had learned them.

Research Questions

The present study intended to address the following questions:

RQ₁: How many foreign languages do the participants speak?

RQ₂: What are the foreign languages they speak?

RQ3: Where have they learned the foreign languages they speak?

RQ4: What reasons did they have for learning these foreign languages?

Participants

Thirty four graduate students of the Department of Primary Education of the Democritus University of Thrace, Greece were involved in this study. Their ages varied, they all knew at least one foreign language and they were all teachers of primary or secondary education. The two authors of the present paper had no relationship with the participants, as they were not involved as teachers of this particular programme of postgraduate studies. Twenty six of the participants were female and eight were male. Seventeen were teachers of primary education, which means that they were qualified to teach either in nursery or in primary schools, and seventeen of secondary education. In the former category, twelve were graduates of Schools of Primary Education, and five were graduates of Schools of Early Childhood Education. In the latter category, the participants were quite dispersed: Five were graduates of Schools of Philology or History and Archaeology; four were graduates of a School of a Foreign Language and Literature; three of Schools of Physical Education and Sports Science, two of Economics and one of Physics, one of Music Studies, and one of Informatics (see, Table 1).

Table 1

Participants

Female	n = 26	
Male	n = 8	
Teachers of primary education	n = 17	12 graduates of Schools of Primary Education 5 graduates of Schools of Early Childhood Education
Teachers of secondary education	n = 17	5 graduates of Schools of Philology or History and Archaeology 4 graduates of a School of a Foreign Language and Literature 3 graduates of Schools of Physical Education and Sports Science 2 graduates of Economics 1 graduate of Music Studies 1 graduate of Informatics 1 graduate of Physics

Instrument, Data Collection and Analysis

In order to receive some answers to the research questions, participants of the research were asked during one of their seminars of the spring semester 2018/2019 to freely produce a small written text on the FLs they have learned, the learning institution and the reasons for learning them. No further explanations were given so as not to influence the participants in the formulation of their views. Hence, the research instrument was the written text from the above mentioned students. The research method that was chosen was content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Number of foreign languages spoken: As expected, the research participants spoke at least one foreign language. Twenty of the students who participated in the research spoke one foreign language and twelve spoke two foreign languages. One of them spoke four and one student spoke five foreign languages (see Table 2). Although the participants of our study most probably weren't taught a second foreign language, it would be interesting to investigate how the introduction of the teaching of the second foreign language as early as in the fifth grade of primary school has affected the number of foreign languages spoken in younger generations.

Foreign languages spoken: The vast majority of the participants spoke English as a foreign language (n=31). The languages that followed were French (n=5), Spanish and Turkish (n=4 for each one of them), German and Italian (n=3 for each one of them) and Serbian (n=2) (see Table 3).

Table 2

Number of foreign languages spoken

Number of foreign languages spoken	N
One	20
Two	12
Four	1
Five	1

Table 3

Foreign languages spoken

Foreign languages spoken	N
English	31
French	5
Spanish	4
Turkish	4
German	3
Italian	3
Serbian	2

Where the foreign language was taught: The findings of the research confirmed the dominant role that foreign language centres play in Greece regarding the acquiring of a foreign language. Namely, foreign language centres were mentioned more often than any other language learning context as an answer to the question “where did you learn the foreign language?” (n=26). The other answers given were private lessons (n=2), a combination of foreign language centres and private lessons, and a combination of foreign language centres and university (n=2 for each) (see Table 4).

Table 4

Where was the foreign language learned?

Place where the foreign language had been learned	N
Foreign language centre	26
Private lessons	2
Foreign language centre and private lessons	2
Foreign language centre and university	2

Reasons for foreign language learning: Informing themselves about issues related to their scientific field seemed to have urged the students of the research the most to learn a foreign language (n=11). The second most mentioned reason was communication (n=10). The participants of the research appeared also to have learned their foreign language in order to improve their professional prospects (n=9) and to increase their qualifications (n=9). Other reasons were mentioned as well, such as the love for foreign languages (n=3), the fact that English is a global language, and therefore has to be learned (n=3), travelling (n=2), migration (n=1) and intellectual growth (n=1) (see Table 5).

Table 5

Reasons for foreign language learning

Reasons	N
Science	11
Communication	10
Professional prospects	9
Increase qualifications	9
Love for foreign languages	3
It's a global language	3
Travelling	2
Migration	1
Intellectual growth	1

The characteristics of the present study (purposeful sampling, small number of participants) do not allow us to make any generalizations from the sample to the population, nor was this our intention. The information provided indicated the students' tendency to turn to the English language as a means to further advance in their scientific field and to be able to communicate more easily in a globalized world. French and Spanish were quite popular in our sample, and this is consistent with what was reported in other studies that mention them as languages which students would like to learn (Akçay et al., 2015). German is becoming an increasingly attractive option for foreign language learning in Greece in recent years (<https://www.pdv.org.gr/tagermanika-simera-w-30408.html>), and it was also mentioned as one of the languages learned by the research participants. Turkish was also mentioned as a foreign language spoken by the students of our study and this is possibly attributed to the characteristics of the participants of the

research, i.e. their university is the closest one to Turkey; the city of Alexandroupolis, situated in Thrace, has close connections to Turkey (education, commerce, tourism etc.).

The reasons for language learning mentioned by the research participants in their written texts could be regarded as indicators of both integrative and of instrumental motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). What seemed to play a major role in their foreign language learning were the benefits they might gain from this in their profession. However, there were also references to facilitation in communication and intrinsic reasons, such as love for foreign languages.

Furthermore, the results of the research seem to pave the way for investigating a rather new field of study, that of the economics of language (Zhang & Grenier, 2012). This new research area uses methods and tools of economics to discover the economic effects of speaking multiple languages both at an individual and social level. As research has shown, the usage of an additional language in the workplace across the European Union contributes to greater earnings (Williams, 2011), thus proving one of the benefits of multilingualism. In countries where tourism plays a significant role, like Greece, the estimated returns are further raised. This also seems to be the case outside the EU: longitudinal studies in the USA have also revealed that bilinguals had better chances in earning more, thus leading to a better future employment status (Agirdag, 2014a, 2014b). The economic value of additional language skills seems to be appreciated in Canada, too, where bilingualism appears to contribute to higher wages (Christofides & Swidinsky, 2010). Bilingual individuals appear more attractive and competitive in the labour market, as research for example between mono- and bilingual nurses has shown (Coomer, 2011). Finally, as the dominance of foreign language centres was evident in our research's results, the need for public schools to provide high quality of foreign language teaching and learning is urgent. In that respect, several ways have been recommended in the relevant literature, for example the direct certification of foreign language proficiency via the state school (Kiliari et al., 2017, p. 78), the hiring of permanent foreign language teachers, the increase of teaching hours from two to three per week (Chatziioannou et al., 2018) etc.

Conclusions

The self-reported reasons for learning English and other foreign languages, as given by the participants of the present descriptive study are indicative of the academic, cognitive, personal, social and economic impact that foreign language proficiency has. Hence, one of the main conclusions of the study is the affirmation of the view that foreign language skills constitute a form of human capital; they are in fact a resource in which people invest their time and money longing for some kind of benefits. In particular, according to the participants' views, speaking one or more foreign languages can lead to larger professional networks and to better professional opportunities, which can subsequently lead to higher income. Foreign language proficiency can indeed provide greater access to local and global markets, whereas potential employers seem to highly value foreign language skills.

Various challenges to several aspects of foreign language education seem to arise, particularly nowadays, since multi- und plurilingualism, in combination with intercultural competence

(Deardorff, 2006) and democratic citizenship (Banks, 2007), are highly valued as abilities of the modern European citizen. Therefore, in today's school, multilingual didactics is to play a more vital than ever role (Karagiannidou, 2006), especially when one takes into consideration the fact that the recommendation to learn two foreign languages alongside the mother tongue is quite old (European Commission, 1995).

In the framework of second and foreign language motivation there are quite a few other important aspects that represent a breeding ground for in-depth investigation, such as the relationship between second language motivation and learner autonomy, as well as the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and motivation (Dörnyei, 2003, pp. 8, 16). In an attempt to combine linguistic and psychological approaches in the framework of second or foreign language acquisition, we have started to gather data from foreign language learners in Greece in order to examine them in the light of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

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