

Impact of learning context on motivation for primary languages (English)

What this research was about and why it is important

The quality of delivery of primary languages is believed to be very important for children's motivation to learn. This study set out to explore the impact on motivation of three factors: class size, lesson frequency, and quality of instruction. Two groups of 6-7 year old children with different experiences of primary English as a foreign language were interviewed about their attitudes to learning English. The study showed that children in both groups were well motivated to learn English. However the children who were taught using a play-based methodology, in small groups, and with more frequent lessons, enjoyed their lessons more, had greater intercultural knowledge, and were more confident about their own proficiency in English.

What the researcher did

- The researcher interviewed two groups of Croatian children learning English in Grade 1 of primary school, using the same interview questions. The study did not include teacher interviews, classroom observations, or language tests, so that the only evidence of the pedagogy provided and the level of proficiency achieved, came from the children's comments.
- The first group of 100 children were interviewed in 1991, in schools in the capital city (Zagreb), which were participating in an experimental pilot programme for primary English. This group received 5 English lessons per week, taught using play-based methods to half-size classes.
- The second group were interviewed in 2006, in schools in different cities, following the introduction of compulsory primary English in 2003. This group received 2 English lessons per week, and were taught in their normal class.

What the researcher found

- In both groups, nearly all children agreed that it was "good to know English", mostly giving reasons to do with communication and travel. However, around a quarter of the 2006 group answered "don't know", when asked why English was useful.
- In both groups, a large majority agreed that their parents wanted them to learn English (though again, 20 per cent of the 2006 group answered "don't know" to this question).
- All children reported experiencing both "playing" and "learning" in their lessons, but the 1991 group much preferred their play activities, while the 2006 group preferred "both".
- The 1991 group had considerable knowledge of who the "native speakers" of English are, and could provide descriptions of them, but a majority of the 2006 group replied "don't know" to the "what are they like?" question.

Things to consider

- This study sets out to investigate young children's responses to English as a foreign language in different learning conditions, and identifies some interesting differences.
- Evidence regarding instructional quality was limited by the nature of the dataset (children's interviews only).
- However, factors other than immediate learning conditions also influenced children's attitudes, as the researcher acknowledges. Thus, the 1991 group were taking part voluntarily in a pilot project, in the capital city, while the 2006 group were receiving compulsory instruction as part of the normal school curriculum, in different cities. It is likely these differences were responsible e.g. for the higher incidence of "don't know" responses in 2006.
- The study also shows the robustness of favourable attitudes toward learning English, even when classroom conditions may be very different. There was no strong evidence that small classes and intensive teaching are essential to secure positive attitudes, where the target language is strongly valued by society.
- The researcher also speculated that children's apparent declining awareness of "native speakers" over time may be attributed to the rise of English as an international language, where English is widely available through digital media, and communication is increasingly likely to involve multilingual users of English as a *lingua franca*.
- Learning conditions may have much greater importance in developing and sustaining positive attitudes and language learning motivation, in the case of languages other than English.
- Compared to the 2006 group, learners, in 1991 reported a more positive self-concept as language learners.