

## Researching attitudes and motivation of young foreign language learners

### What this overview was about and why it is important

This overview looks into the key issues in researching attitudes and motivation of young learners (YL) of foreign languages (FL) as well as their impact on early learning and teaching of FLs in schools. It describes existing and emerging new approaches to investigating these important individual learner characteristics, discusses the findings in terms of their contribution to a new understanding of the role of motivation in early FL learning and considers possible future paths to new insights.

### Which studies the researchers chose and why

The author examined cross-sectional and longitudinal studies carried out in the European context. The two types of studies are presented and discussed in separate subsections. The selection of the reviewed publications is based on how well they reflect the main trends in investigating YLs' motivation in terms of focus, research methodology and implications for classroom teaching.

Much attention is devoted to analysis of longitudinal studies because, as stressed in the chapter, they offer a more elaborate picture of young FL learners' attitudes and motivation. Three large-scale longitudinal projects are focused on: The Pécs project (1977-1995), the Zagreb project (1991-2001), and the Early Language Learning in Europe project (2006-2010). They were selected because of innovative research approaches (e.g., teachers as researchers or teachers working jointly with researchers) and because they offer particularly comprehensive insights into attitudinal and motivational changes reflecting the FL(s) being learned, the socio-educational context of learning, and YLs' age.

### What the researchers found

- Mixed-methods approaches, which involve both quantitative (e.g., smiley questionnaires) and qualitative methods (e.g. classroom observation, case studies), lead to broader and deeper insights into YLs' attitudes and motivation. YLs themselves are valuable sources of information. Triangulation plays an important role in reaching valid and reliable results.
- Recent research suggests that attitudes and motivation are not necessarily causes of language achievement but need to be considered also as outcome of early learning. This new understanding of their role is increasingly stressed in policy documents at the European level and integrated into curricular documents in many country contexts.
- Attitudes and motivation are not independent phenomena but interact with other individual variables (e.g., language anxiety, self-concept) as well as contextual factors (e.g., FL learning policy, immediate learning conditions). These interactions change with learners' age.
- Findings of longitudinal studies offer evidence of changes in attitudes and motivation connected with the FL being learned (its status and proximity of native speakers), the YLs' developmental stage (the changing points emerging around ages 8 and 11) as well as curricular aspects (e.g. introduction of new school subjects in subsequent grades).
- In order for teachers to be able to apply appropriate motivational teaching strategies they need to understand why and how YLs' attitudes and motivation change over time.
- Structured teaching, proper guidance, enough space for concentration and an appropriate amount of teacher attention to the YL emerge as key to positive attitudes and motivation during the early years of FL learning.

Overall, research-based insights suggest that the nature of attitudes and motivation of young FL learners is distinct from that of more mature learners, and calls for different research methods and elicitation instruments which need to be age-appropriate.

### Things to consider

- A need for a reconceptualization of YLs' motivation seems to be called for.
- We still lack a comprehensive understanding of YLs' motivation, which makes it impossible to construct an adequate theoretical model.
- New, more sophisticated instruments need to be developed to capture the variability of motivation during early FL learning.
- More work needs to be done to secure ecological validity of studies of YLs attitudes and motivation.
- Much work still needs to be done for research findings to make a more substantial impact on educational policies.

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