

Language learning motivation at the transition from primary to secondary school

What this research was about and why it is important

Motivation is an important factor in language learning. This study tracked the motivational development of learners as they moved from primary (ages 5-11) to secondary school (ages 11-18). It also looked at whether the type of teaching had an influence on learners' motivation. The researchers found that generally learners showed high levels of motivation across transition. The type of teaching had little impact on learners' motivation. It was more important to learners that they felt they were making good progress and that the teaching met their learning needs. There was a contrast between learners highly valuing French as a tool for communicating when travelling, and their low levels of confidence in being able to communicate with French speakers. By the end of the first year of secondary school, learners reported less positive attitudes toward language learning.

What the researchers did

- 223 learners completed questionnaires about their motivation at the end of primary school (age 11) and during the first and last term of their first year in secondary school (age 12). The questionnaire contained 18 questions in total.
- Schools were divided into schools that focused more on speaking/listening and those that focused more on reading/writing activities.
- Learners had been learning French since they were 7 years old. French teaching time varied considerably among the primary schools. All learners received around 2 hours of French a week in secondary school.
- Learners answered questions about their general attitudes to learning French. They also answered questions about how confident they felt about their French language level at the time of data collection and the near future.
- Learners were also asked whether they preferred how they were learning French in primary or in secondary school and if they wanted to change anything about their French lessons.

What the researchers found

- Learners generally reported high levels of motivation and a positive attitude toward learning French at the end of primary school (aged 11). 95% of learners wanted to learn French to travel abroad. However, only 41% of learners believed that they would do quite well or very well in French in their first year of secondary school (aged 12).
- At the beginning of secondary school, learners' motivation and attitude to language learning continued to increase and so did their confidence in their current and future language skills. 78% of learners believed that they would do quite or very well in French the following year.
- By the end of their first year in secondary school, motivation levels and attitudes to language learning had decreased but they stayed higher than at the end of primary school. Learners' perception of their current language skills continued to increase. Learners' confidence in their future language skills stalled. Travelling abroad continued to be the most important reason for learners to learn French and most preferred their language lessons in secondary school, although they desired more communication-based activities.
- The type of teaching had little influence on learners' levels of motivation or their perception of their language skills.
- Across all ages, learners wanted to learn French to use it abroad. Yet they felt least confident about their ability to speak with a real French person.

Things to consider

- The mismatch between learners' desire to use French abroad and their confidence about their ability to communicate with a native French speaker might have a negative influence on their motivation and should be addressed in language classrooms and curricula.
- While motivation among learners was generally high, there were large differences between individual learners. This shows that among a generally motivated group of learners, there were also some learners with very low levels of motivation.

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