

Modern Foreign Language Learning: The impact of parental orientations on student motivation

Christopher Martin, University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This study investigates the possible relationships between parental orientations towards language learning and their child's motivation to learn a foreign language at school. Data were collected from 495 students and 107 parents in four secondary schools in the wider West Midlands conurbation of England. A mixed-methods research design encompassing both quantitative and qualitative data collection was adopted with the aim of gaining a multi-dimensional view. Questionnaires were given to both parents and students, measuring six motivational constructs: general motivation; sense of achievement in modern foreign language (MFL) learning, internal/external attribution of performance in MFL learning, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The mean values for parents and students for each construct were correlated to see if there was a relationship between them. The findings indicate that, for four of the five constructs, there are moderate to strong positive relationships that were statistically significant. Furthermore, the data suggest that parents are less motivated when it comes to MFL learning than their children. This study is part of a wider doctoral research project, the next stage of which involves the collection of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews in order to explore the nature of the relationships found in the quantitative analysis.

Keywords: Parental involvement, secondary education, modern foreign language learning, motivation

Introduction

The issue of the decline in foreign language learning in the United Kingdom has received considerable critical attention. Recent developments in foreign language learning have heightened the need for further practitioner research in order to better understand the situation and what could be done to improve it. This research was conceived from interactions with parents over twelve years of teaching modern foreign languages in secondary schools.

During discussions at parents' evenings and open days, some parents openly voice their opinion on learning a language and the fact that their experience of language learning at school was generally negative. They have also expressed their inability to support their child with homework or examination revision due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of a foreign language. To date, there has been little agreement between policymakers and other stakeholders on the importance of modern foreign languages in the school curriculum and this has resulted in the status of MFL being in a state of flux over the past 15 years. Furthermore, whilst some research has been carried out on foreign language learning motivation, there have been few empirical investigations into the impact of parents' orientations towards language learning.

This paper will examine the role that parents play in shaping their child's experience of foreign language learning in secondary school. It will focus on three key areas: motivation in second and foreign language learning, parental involvement and cultural capital in education. Data will be presented from a sequential mixed-methods study of parent and student orientations towards language learning which will be followed by a discussion of the findings with reference to the relevant literature. Finally, I will conclude by offering recommendations to practitioners on how to approach future discussions with parents and other stakeholders on the importance and benefits to their child(ren) of learning a foreign language.

Motivation in Foreign Language Learning

Much research has taken place, beginning in the 1970s, on motivation in second and foreign language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972) arrived at a theory for approaching language learning from a psychological viewpoint. The socio-psychological methodology aimed to ground research into motivation in a scientific framework through positivist methods and the

use of standardised assessment instruments. This ground-breaking theory remained the main theoretical framework for motivation researchers for several years. Other theorists were critical of this (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991), stating that other approaches to researching motivation had not been considered.

As research continued into the motivation of school children to learn a modern foreign language, it quickly became apparent that the same findings were being reported; English school children were not motivated to learn a foreign language and the uptake of language study to GCSE level (at age 14-16) and beyond was rapidly declining (Stables & Wikeley, 1999; Wright, 1999; Williams et al., 2002; Coleman et al., 2007; Lanvers et al., 2016). It was also noted that there was discernible gender difference insofar that girls are much more motivated than boys to learn a modern foreign language (Jones, 2009).

At the start of the 1990s and into the new millennium, Dörnyei (2001; 2003) conducted extensive research into motivation and foreign language education adopting the 'process-oriented approach'. His preliminary work builds on the socio-psychological approach developed by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and he has conducted numerous studies in foreign language learner motivation as sole researcher (Dörnyei, 1990; 2001; 2003; 2008) and in collaboration with others such as Csizer (1998; 2002) and more recently Ushioda (2011).

There is a significant theoretical gap between Gardner and Lambert's seminal work and that of Dörnyei and his associates. A resurgence in motivation studies appeared in the late 1990s due to scholars recognising possible insufficiencies in the socio-psychological approach pioneered by Gardner and Lambert (1972). They were of the opinion that this approach did not offer enough understanding into classroom practices and the perceptions of others such as teachers. Researchers called for a more classroom-based, practical approach to researching motivation in second language classrooms which is where Dörnyei's process-oriented approach (Dörnyei, 2000) made a significant impact.

The scholars who recognised the shortfalls of Gardner and Lambert's (1972) theory realised that motivation was much more complex and that a greater number of factors needed to be taken into consideration; motivation can change not only according to the task at hand but also due to the time of day or whether the student has eaten correctly throughout the day. Students'

motivation can also change *within* the lesson with shifting levels of commitment being shown throughout this time.

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the early 1980s, it became apparent that the motivation of young native speakers of English to learn a foreign language was a real concern. Throughout the latter part of the 1990s and into the 2000s, various 'National Strategies' were introduced by the government to try to boost the declining number of students taking a language qualification and to persuade people of the importance of learning a foreign language. This involved changing the status of foreign language learning, making it compulsory for students studying GCSEs in Key Stage 4, aged 14-16 (Languages for all, Languages for life, 2007). This decision was taken after the Dearing Languages Review (2006). In 2010, the National Curriculum was reformed again but with languages being made optional; however, they would form the basis of the award of the new 'English Baccalaureate' which became a key indicator in league tables of the effectiveness of a school (The Importance of Teaching, Department for Education, 2010).

It is interesting to note that there were several motivation studies which were conducted during this period of transition and the introduction of language strategies (Williams et al., 2002; Coleman et al., 2007; Coleman, 2009; Jones, 2009; Coleman, 2011). All of the studies confirmed that modern foreign language learning was continuing to decrease beyond Key Stage 3, and Coleman et al. (2007) were able to pinpoint that the decrease happened between the ages of 11 and 13, Years 7 to 9 in the UK education system.

Parental Involvement in Education

Parental involvement has been defined in several ways in the literature; however, for the purpose of this study, the definition chosen was that of Jeynes (2007, p. 83) who defines it as "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children". Frameworks for studying parental involvement have included sub-sections such as 'parenting', 'communicating', 'volunteering' and 'learning at home' (Epstein, 1995, p. 85). As research in the field continued and due to the lack of consensus on the definition of parental involvement, Johnson and Hull (2014, p. 407) proposed three core areas: home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and parents' educational aspirations.

The level of parental involvement is dependent on a number of factors including parents' perceived abilities to support their children with homework. A further factor affecting the level of parental involvement is that of the perception of parents towards invitations from schools to participate in school-related activities such as parent-teacher associations. Research suggests that parents who display a positive attitude to learning and have high expectations of schools to provide a safe learning environment for their children, have children who tend to obtain favourable outcomes compared to those whose parents display negative views towards school (Bubić & Tošić, 2016).

Home-based parental involvement could have a positive impact in many aspects such as improved teacher/parent relationships, better school attendance and better attitudes in general to learning and education. Cabus and Ariës (2017) suggest that homework supervision and listening to children read are considered 'active' forms of parental involvement which could be considered a sign that parents are investing time and effort into their child's education by creating a home environment that is conducive to learning and promotes good learning habits.

Several lines of evidence suggest that effective parental involvement (PI) could be impeded by certain barriers which Hornby and Lafaele (2011) categorise as 'individual parent and family factors', 'child factors', 'parent-teacher factors' and 'societal factors' (Figure 1).

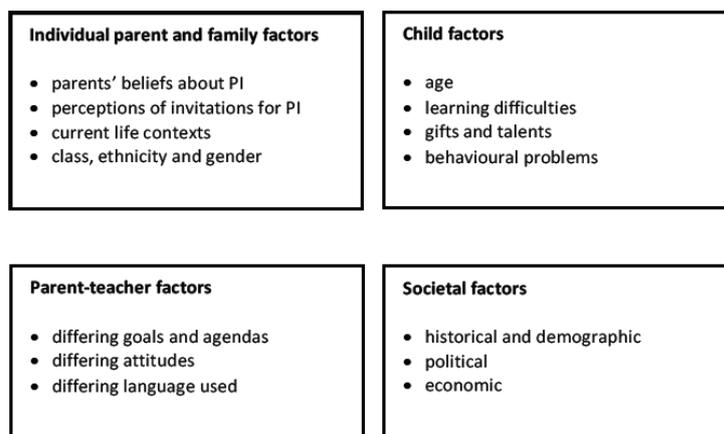


Figure 1. Factors affecting effective parental involvement in education.

(Hornby & Lafaele, 2011)

Jeynes (2007) and, later, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) support the view that parents' ability to participate in their child's learning and education could be impeded by factors such as being a

single parent, family dissolution (divorce/separation) and coming from a low socio-economic status (Jones, 2009; Gayton, 2010). The impact of socio-economic status on education outcomes has been widely researched and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that pressures such as being a single-parent family and working could be potential barriers to effective parental involvement due to the necessity to work and to earn enough to provide the family with financial stability. Tam (2009) identifies parents in low socio-economic and disadvantaged communities as those with less motivation to become involved in their child's learning and education.

The evidence reviewed here seems to suggest a pertinent role for parents to become involved in their child's learning, be it home-based or school-based involvement. The extent to which parents become involved is dependent upon a number of factors which could support or impede effective parental involvement in education.

Cultural Capital in Education

The construct of 'cultural capital' was first articulated by Bourdieu (1986) and was popularised in his seminal work on the 'Capitals'. The first discussions and investigations of cultural capital emerged during the 1980s (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lareau, 1989), the majority of which adopted quantitative methodologies in order to identify a causal relationship between cultural capital and educational outcomes. It is difficult to define the term 'cultural capital' since Bourdieu's definition (1986) was particularly vague. Due to this lack of standard definition, the notion of cultural capital has been operationalised in many different ways; none of which are considered to be the exact definition.

The aim of the quantitative studies was to operationalise cultural capital in a way that could be easily quantified such as the number of times someone attended a 'high-cultural' event (theatre, music recital), engaging in reading literature and attendance at art classes (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Sullivan, 2001). As the field expanded, more research began to adopt qualitative methodologies in order to examine in greater detail the extent to which parental cultural capital is transmitted to their children (McDonough, 1997; Reay, 1998).

Bourdieu (1977) claimed that parents with a high level of education would instinctively have a high level of cultural capital which could later on be transferred to their children. This would

put children from higher social strata at an advantage in the education system as they would be seen as already equipped with the essential mindset and principles in order to fulfil their academic and intellectual development. Children from families with a high socio-economic status are exposed to knowledge and understanding of social and cultural norms and this is instilled through the language and actions of their parents (Jæger, 2011).

It could be argued, therefore, that children from low income families who are not exposed to the same level of cultural activities as their counterparts are placed at an immediate disadvantage, particularly in the UK education system which favours those from higher social strata. There is a clear inequality in the classroom where schools and teachers assume that students have a certain level of cultural capital in order to negotiate the challenges of education and learning. Students from high income families who are already exposed to social and cultural norms will be at an advantage compared to those who come from low income families who do not possess the same knowledge and values.

Methodology

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How can the orientations of Year 8 students in selected urban regional secondary schools towards modern foreign languages be characterised?
2. How can these children's parents' orientations be characterised?
3. What is the nature of any relationship between parent-child orientations?

In order to explore parent and child orientations towards language learning, a sequential mixed-methods approach was adopted within an exploratory methodology. This study was based on the recommendations of Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) who called for more mixed-methods research in the field of foreign language learning and motivation. For this reason, a sequential mixed-methods approach was adopted, firstly to address this call by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) and secondly to provide a multi-layered analysis of the data and offer greater levels of clarity.

Four schools within the wider West Midlands conurbation participated; one independent school in Birmingham and three state secondary schools in Birmingham and Telford. Existing contacts in these schools facilitated the request to participants. In each case permission from the school's

headteacher and chair of the board of trustees was sought before a full ethics submission was completed. School visits were arranged to establish clear lines of communication and to get a clearer picture of the context for each school. Access was negotiated with headteachers and an enhanced DBS clearance, which is a requirement for working with children and vulnerable adults, was shown.

A questionnaire was constructed in order to gather quantitative data on parent and student motivational orientations towards foreign language learning. The questionnaire consisted of 36 statements on a 5-point Likert scale which measured six motivational constructs:

1. General motivation
2. Sense of achievement in modern foreign language learning
3. Internal attribution of success/failure in modern foreign language learning
4. External attribution of success/failure in modern foreign language learning
5. Intrinsic Motivation
6. Extrinsic Motivation

The second phase of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews which were conducted with parents *and* students together in order to add richer descriptions to the findings from the questionnaire. The rationale for interviewing both parents and students together was to try and observe any possible power dynamic between the two participants which could otherwise be overlooked by other means.

The questionnaires were analysed using a two-stage quantitative analysis; correlation and linear regression. Correlation analysis was used to establish if there was a relationship between the parent and student questionnaire data. The mean values for each of the motivation constructs were subjected to correlation analysis to establish the strength of any possible relationship. In order to further exploit the quantitative data, linear regression was conducted to explore the extent to which the parental independent variables such as age, gender and level of education can account for variance in the mean scores for the student dependent variables (motivational constructs).

For the second phase of data collection and analysis, semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed to see if there were any recurring experiences and ideas from both

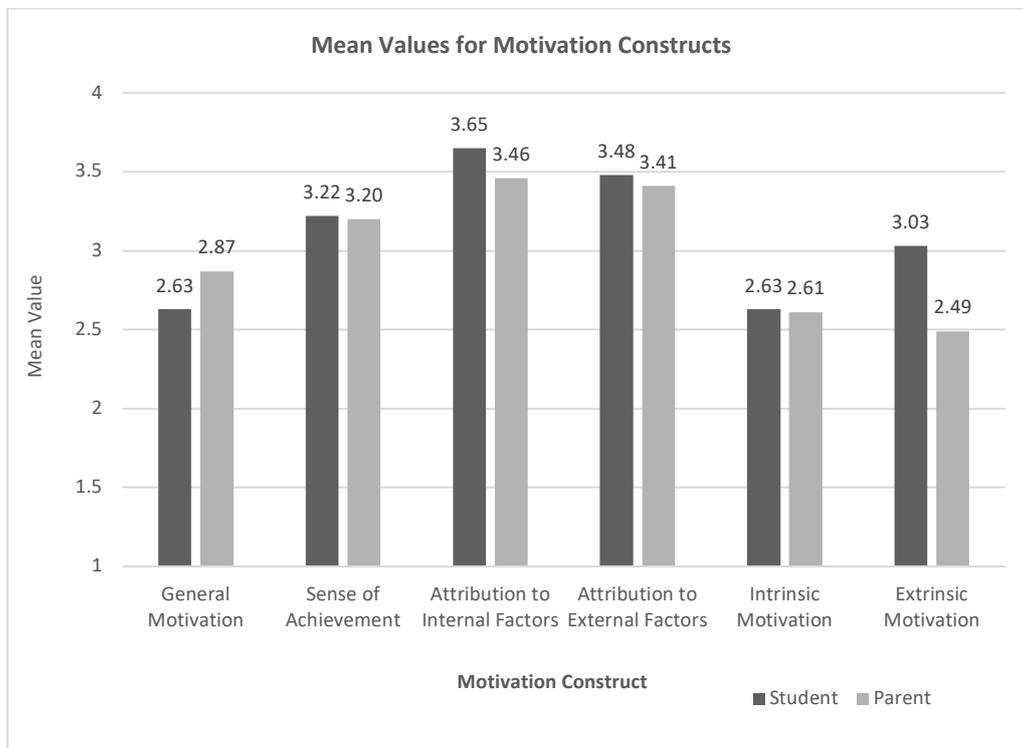
parents and students. These were coded using the qualitative computer package NVIVO which allowed for easier management of coding and selecting quotes from participant transcripts.

Initial Findings from Quantitative Analysis

This paper will present the initial quantitative analysis of the investigation, namely the outcomes of the correlation analysis and linear regression. This will be followed by a short discussion of the findings, drawing on key points from the literature.

The final purposive sample consisted of Year 8 students (n=495) and their parents (n=107). There is a clear difference in the number of parent participants which could be accounted for by an overall lack of engagement with the participant schools. This was mentioned by the schools when they were approached to participate in this study.

Graph 1 provides an overview of the mean scores for each of the six motivation constructs for parents and students.



Graph 1. Mean values for motivational constructs (parents and students).

Closer inspection of this graph shows that, apart from 'General Motivation', students appear marginally more motivated when it comes to learning a foreign language compared to their parents. That said, when looking at the overall mean motivation scores, the whole sample does not appear to be hugely motivated to learn a foreign language with mean scores being no higher than 3.65.

Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson's *R* which is a measure of the strength of a relationship between two sets of data, in this case the student and parent mean scores. It is important to highlight that only 107 pairs of questionnaires were included as the remainder consisted only of students whose parents chose not to participate in the questionnaire.

Extrinsic Motivation yielded the strongest positive correlation ($r=0.890$, $p<0.01$) closely followed by General Motivation ($r=0.824$, $p<0.01$) and Intrinsic Motivation ($r=0.730$, $p<0.01$). These findings indicate that there are strong positive relationships between the mean scores for these motivation constructs for parents and students. The results are statistically significant which means that there is a 1 in 100 chance of wrongly rejecting the null hypothesis of no relationship. It is important to note that correlation is not an indication of causality; it is simply a measure of the strength of the relationship and does not account for the causes of this relationship, which could be multi-faceted.

Several of the remaining motivation constructs also yielded statistically significant results; however, the strength of the relationships was weak to moderate. The internal attribution of success/failure in MFL had a moderate positive relationship ($r=0.533$, $p<0.01$) with the external attribution of success/failure in MFL yielding no statistically significant result. Sense of achievement in MFL yielded a weak to moderate positive relationship ($r=0.444$, $p<0.01$) which was also statistically significant.

In summary, these results show that the correlation of parent and student mean scores for five out of the six motivation constructs yields a generally strong positive relationship that is statistically significant. This can help us to begin to understand the extent to which parents impart their thoughts and experiences of language learning to their children.

Linear Regression

In order to exploit the quantitative data collected from the questionnaires and to add a further layer of analysis, linear regression was conducted to explore how parental independent variables, such as age, level of education and ethnicity, account for the percentage variance in each of the student dependent variables, i.e. the six motivation constructs.

The findings from this analysis show that parental level of education had a statistically significant effect on three motivation constructs: student sense of achievement in MFL ($r^2=0.141$, $p<0.01$), intrinsic motivation ($r^2=0.107$, $p<0.05$) and extrinsic motivation ($r^2=0.108$, $p<0.05$). This means that parental level of education can account for 14.1% of the variance in mean scores for student sense of achievement in MFL, 10.7% of the variance in intrinsic motivation and 10.8% of the variance in extrinsic motivation. Due to the multi-faceted nature of the social sciences, it is rare for a high r^2 value to occur since there would always be more than one independent variable which could account for 100% of the variance in a dependent variable.

A further parental independent variable to yield interesting results was parental level of language learning, which had a statistically significant effect on student intrinsic motivation ($r^2=0.111$, $p<0.01$) and student extrinsic motivation ($r^2=0.158$, $p<0.01$). This indicates that parental level of language learning can explain 11.1% of the variance in mean scores for student intrinsic motivation and 15.8% of the variance in scores for extrinsic motivation.

The final parental independent variable which yielded a result was parental ethnicity. This independent variable yielded the highest result of all of the independent variables analysed. Parental ethnicity had a statistically significant effect on student extrinsic motivation ($r^2=0.296$, $p<0.01$). This means that 29.6% of the variance in mean scores for student extrinsic motivation can be explained by parental ethnicity.

Together with the correlation analysis, these results provide an important insight into the extent to which parents could influence their child's language learning process in a number of different ways.

Discussion

The quantitative data presented provides an interesting insight into the extent to which parental orientations towards language learning impact on their child's modern foreign language learning at school. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that parents play a pivotal role in *shaping* their child's language learning experience and transmitting its perceived importance.

The data suggest that relationships between parent and student orientations towards language learning are strong: highly motivated parents have highly motivated children and vice versa. Demotivated parents are those who may not engage with their child's language learning or had negative experiences of language learning at school, or their demotivation may be due to other barriers which Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) suggest could include domestic violence, substance abuse and alcoholism, and inappropriate beliefs and values placed on education by some parents.

For teachers who teach in schools in areas of high social deprivation, their job is made more challenging as they have to convince both students *and* parents of the value and importance of learning a language in light of the current political climate and the impact of Brexit as suggested by Lanvers, Doughty and Thompson (2018).

Parental level of education, which is often taken to be an indication of socio-economic status, accounted for 10-14% of the total variance in mean scores for Student Sense of Achievement in MFL, Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation. Referring to Ausubel (1968) and Gayton (2010), parents from lower socio-economic strata tend to give less time and resources to their child's education in comparison with those who are in a more comfortable position. This outcome aligns closely with this statement insofar as parental level of education has a statistically significant effect on the three dependent variables highlighted.

Parental level of language learning also had a statistically significant effect on student intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, accounting for between 11-16% of the variance in mean scores. Costa and Faria (2017) state that parental involvement in education decreases as a child progresses through school as many parents lack the knowledge and confidence to support their children with more academically challenging work. Languages appear near the bottom of the list of

subjects in which parents feel equipped to support their children. However, parents who take their children abroad often or are qualified in languages aim to instil a love for language learning and encourage their children to take their language learning to a higher level.

Finally, the parental independent variable which showed the greatest percentage of variance in student scores was Parental Ethnicity which accounted for 29.6% of variance in student extrinsic motivation. Hill et al. (2018) discuss strategies that some families from diverse ethnic backgrounds use to encourage their children to do well in education. Some ethnic minority families use stories about sacrificing their education to bring up a family. Hill's study also mentions families even exposing their children to manual labour in order to highlight the importance and value of education. This strategy of involvement has an almost reverse-psychological effect with children wishing to achieve well in order to give something back to their parents for their sacrifice.

Conclusion

The decline in modern foreign language learning has come about due to a perfect storm of changes to educational policy, the impact of Brexit and the perceived importance of MFL in schools. Much work needs to be done to rebuild the status of MFL in secondary schools by raising the profile through themed events, offering school excursions to countries where the target language is spoken and possibly making the subject compulsory on the school curriculum. For students who do not feel able to fulfil the requirements of the GCSE, alternative routes to gaining a language qualification do exist and these should be made available to students who may benefit from a more differentiated approach to language learning.

More importantly, schools should begin to look at improving communication with parents on the importance of language learning in terms of future employment opportunities for their children and the call for more employees to have competence in other languages. With the possibility of Brexit ever-present, as a country we will be looking to make trade deals with countries outside of Europe, therefore the need for foreign language skills will be more prevalent than ever before.

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Author Contact Details:

Mr Christopher Martin

Doctoral Researcher, Faculty of Education, Health & Wellbeing, University of
Wolverhampton.

Email: C.Martin@wlv.ac.uk