

## Response to 'The motivational dimension of language teaching' (Lamb, 2017)

Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Martin, Christopher
Citation	Martin, C. (2020) Response to 'The motivational dimension of language teaching' (Lamb, 2017), <i>Language Teaching</i> , 53(2), pp. 233-236. DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000508">https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000508</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000508">10.1017/S0261444819000508</a>
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Journal	<i>Language Teaching</i>
Download date	2026-05-21 18:07:35
License	<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623178">http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623178</a>

## **Response to ‘The Motivational Dimension of Language Teaching’ (Lamb, 2017)**

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Chris Martin is Subject Leader of French in an independent school in Birmingham and a doctoral researcher in Education at the University of Wolverhampton. He has taught modern foreign languages for eleven years in four schools in the West Midlands as well as recently contributing to the teaching of English for Academic Purposes at the University of Birmingham. His doctoral thesis investigates the possible relationship between parent and child attitudes towards foreign language learning in the context of a UK secondary school. He is also interested in the wider field of Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Acquisition.

Lamb’s article outlines several teaching methodologies which aim to address the well-documented issues with motivation in foreign language learning. Whilst the article focuses predominantly on the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, many of the points raised resonate with my own position as a teacher and Head of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in secondary education in the UK.

I have taught in four schools with students from various socio-economic backgrounds; however, there is one commonality between these students, which is their questionable motivation to learn a modern foreign language. The schools in which I have taught have languages as an option for students to choose at the age of 12-13 (Key Stage 3). The number of students choosing to take a language beyond Key Stage 3 has been very low in French and this has been the case in all of the schools where I have taught. The reasons for low uptake are multi-faceted with many students typically stating that it is too challenging and not directly related to their future career plans. Such comments resonate with the reflections of Davies (2004) who states that for some students, MFL ‘lacks relevance and usefulness, and is also more difficult than most subjects to get to grips with’ (p.53).

In 2014 the UK government carried out a reform of the qualifications system which saw the withdrawal of the coursework component of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) language qualifications taken at the age of 16. It was also the government’s wish for GCSE foreign language courses to be more rigorous in terms of the vocabulary and grammar

that is required to fulfil the assessment objectives for listening, speaking, reading and writing. There is growing emphasis placed on teachers to ensure that all of the new course content is covered and that students are more spontaneous in their language production, hence the withdrawal of the coursework component where students were allowed six hours of preparation time as opposed to twelve minutes under the new qualification reform. The increased amount of course content and the perceived harsh grading of the GCSE all contribute to the negative perceptions. These factors have the potential to influence teacher motivation, something which is pivotal in ensuring students remain motivated and engaged. Lamb offers a list of symptoms of demotivation among foreign language teachers, including 'monotonous methodology, low enthusiasm for the subject, unfriendly demeanour, and lack of attention to individual needs (p.329). Lamb struck a further chord with me as I have personally experienced challenging periods in my career which have stemmed from increased pressure and workload. I therefore agree with Lamb's statement about the inter-relationship of student demotivation and teacher motivation.

Lamb presents a convincing account of the impact of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and digital technology in the language classroom and how it imparts a sense of learner autonomy and personalises the learning experience. It is important to note, however, that the extent to which learners engage with CALL is dependent on a number of factors which Lamb states as 'their familiarity with IT at home, the teacher's enthusiasm for and skills in IT and the nature of the learners' pre-existing motivation for learning a particular language' (p.322).

Similarly, there has been an increase in the availability of online learning platforms which accompany traditional printed textbooks. These platforms allow students to access a variety of online activities which are often self-assessed and provide immediate feedback. My personal experience of these online platforms has been positive and students respond well to using them, particularly when immediate feedback is provided. The students are motivated to use the platform as it is used in the class as a teaching tool and students observe me engaging with the online material whilst teaching. The gamification of the learning process, overlooked by Lamb, is a clear motivational factor which is appreciated by many students and plays to an individual's extrinsic motivation to receive recognition and reward. Students respond well to aspects of gaming such as experience points, rankings and levelling as proposed by Buck (2017) which are used in online vocabulary learning games which also include a social media

element, allowing students to see how other users are doing and to propose competitions. Introducing gaming into the classroom has had a positive impact in my own teaching setting, particularly when motivating boys who thrive on competitiveness and have high extrinsic motivation. Therefore, CALL and digital technology in the language classroom is undeniably valuable given the level of digital literacy in young people today. However, while Lamb's discussion of CALL and digital technology offers a positive overview of the potential benefits, many of which resonate with my own practice using digital technology, the cost implications of such resources for schools with limited funding could possibly outweigh the benefits to learning. Taking into account the research that has been done on CALL and its potential benefits, it would be unjustified to ignore the use of some aspects of digital technology in classroom practice and this can be done without expending large sums of money on expensive equipment. The increasing availability of online learning platforms and programs means that there are affordable alternatives to fit different budgets; however it is important to assess first the quality and suitability of the product before investing in it.

The gender imbalance within MFL classrooms has been well-documented (Williams et al 2002; Coleman et al 2007), but the specific problem of motivating boys to learn a foreign language remains in secondary schools in the UK (Barton 1997). Lamb suggests that a factor that contributes to this lack of motivation is the perception of languages as a 'feminine subject taught only by female language teachers' (p.327) despite efforts to fill the shortfall of male language teachers in the classroom. Having taught MFL for eleven years, during this time I have never taught in a school with a greater male to female ratio of language teachers. This shortfall is still prevalent in the profession eleven years on and there has been no initiative offered by the UK government to specifically support the recruitment of male MFL teachers.

For me, students require a considerable level of intrinsic motivation and self-awareness to effectively apply metacognitive practices to their learning and for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to be effective. Lamb is right to claim that CLIL is considered elitist and is often offered to students in private education and those with a certain level of cognitive and linguistic ability. Given the complexity of the CLIL methodology, specialist training is required which is typically not focused upon in many UK university courses learning to the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) or the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PgDipEd). In light of the current decline in students choosing a foreign language

beyond the ages of 12-13 and the negative perceptions of the GCSE in foreign languages, implementing the CLIL methodology in a UK secondary school would certainly pose significant problems both in terms of the cost of training existing staff and encouraging students and the senior leadership team to buy-in to its benefits.

I would question the suitability of CLIL within certain secondary schools in the UK as it assumes that students have a level of cultural capital that will allow them to access the ideas and concepts taught using the CLIL methodology. According to Bourdieu (1977), children inherit their parents' cultural capital until such an age that they are able to begin to accrue their own through engagement with cultural activities and overseas travel. Students from low income families with very little or no exposure to cultural activities or overseas travel would struggle to see the relevance to their educational needs and possible future career paths. Furthermore, Brexit has the potential to make our job as language teachers more difficult in motivating young people to learn a foreign language as the UK is seen to be distancing itself from the European Union. This could pose a significant problem for us when encouraging our young people to learn a European language.

I suggest a teacher's main undertaking is to ensure that their students do not become demotivated to learn a foreign language. Students might arrive at UK secondary schools in Year 7 (aged 11) with high levels of intrinsic motivation to learn a language as for some, this is a novel experience – having never studied the language at primary school. Students are eager to impress and enjoy taking part in the lessons and it is our job as teachers to ensure that this eagerness for the subject remains with the student throughout their time in secondary school. Demotivation typically occurs when students are presented with increasingly complex language as they progress through a course and the level of difficulty increases. It could also be caused by other factors such as teachers having poor subject knowledge or as Lamb suggests, teachers providing monotonous learning activities such as copying out which he considers as 'frustrating classroom experiences' (p.329). One key aspect of effective teaching is 'Differentiation' - providing students with other approaches to grasp the more challenging concepts that are presented to them. Differentiation is key in these circumstances as it gives targeted support to students and scaffolded approaches allow them to access the tasks. Lamb outlines research that states that the neglect of learners' methodological preferences is a key demotivating factor, a point with which I agree wholeheartedly. As a teacher, I am responsible for having a detailed understanding of my students' abilities and preferred

learning styles which should be exploited to achieve the best possible outcomes for them. In fact, the Teacher Standards outlined by the UK Department for Education (2018) stipulate that ALL teachers should ‘adapt teaching and respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils’ (Section 5, 2018) as well as ‘demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge’ (Section 3, 2018).

Sadly, I do not see the current issues with gender imbalance in MFL, motivating boys and demotivation improving in the immediate future given the current decline in numbers of students studying languages at GCSE level and beyond. Furthermore, many UK universities are considering the closure of foreign languages departments which has gathered much recent British media attention, a demotivating factor suggested by Lamb. This is a further indication of the poor uptake of foreign language study at degree level. This, coupled with recent qualification reform makes for a perfect storm in teaching and learning modern foreign languages in the UK.

One word kept coming into my mind while reading Lamb’s paper – ‘cost’. Many schools in the UK face budgetary hurdles which are often placed by changes in government spending. With this in mind, school leaders are reticent to expend considerable amounts of money to retrain staff in different teaching methodologies or purchase costly digital technology, particularly for a subject with low uptake and/or poor student motivation. A further cost is that of time and effort that would be required to implement the methodologies discussed.

Finally, Lamb overlooked parental engagement in the language learning process. Parents play a pivotal role in motivating their children by sharing their own language learning experiences and greater effort is required by schools to improve the dialogue with parents on the importance of their child’s language learning by better promoting the cognitive, developmental and cultural benefits associated with knowing another language. Costa & Faria (2017) highlight the issue with parental engagement in learning when students progress through the education system as parental involvement decreases due to the increase in academic complexity of the work expected of older students. Parental support with foreign languages is considered as one of the most difficult unless a parent has studied a language to a sufficient level to be able to support their child. Establishing an effective dialogue with parents on the importance of learning a language would hopefully narrow the gap in parental

involvement in the foreign language learning process and perhaps thereby improve motivational goals of their children.

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