ABSTRACT

This chapter refers to a very complex factor that is of primary importance in language learning theories: motivation. It aims—through a brief analysis of existing theories and research findings on motivation, its impact on foreign language learning, and second language acquisition—to provide a definition of this complicated term, to explain how motivation can affect foreign language learners, and how young foreign language learners can be motivated to learn a foreign or additional language effectively and become competent users of it. To manage to provide a clear description of how motivation affects young language learners, it is necessary to refer to the theories that analyze foreign language learning or language acquisition and then relate them to the theories on motivation. Different types of motivation are described, including intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, and instrumental, as well as motivation in the language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

“Language is the centre of human life” (Cook, 1996, p. 1). It is one of the most important ways of communication; we use it to express ourselves, to plan our lives, to remember the past, to exchange ideas and preferences. “Being able to do so in more than one language multiplies the opportunities for people to master all these language functions” (Rodiki, 2004, p. 25). Bilingualism or multilingualism is not a trend of the 21st century. “Both from a contemporary and a historical perspective, bilingualism or multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception” (Richards & Rodgers, 1998, p. 1). Throughout history it has been politically and socially expedient to learn a foreign language. “Throughout much of the world, being able to speak at least two languages, and sometimes three or four, is necessary to function in society” (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982, p. 9). The obvious choice in foreign language learning in today’s world is to learn English as a foreign language; English is nowadays the language used all over the world. Five to six hundred years ago the choice was Latin, which was the dominant language in the Western world.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3123-4.ch004
In addition to this tendency, we should now consider the necessity of language learning in order to be properly educated. Education, internationally, is constantly moving away from the monolingual perspective. Foreign language learning is part of school curriculums simply because being able to communicate in more than one language is now a necessity, a basic need.

This need has increased in the last decades, and the phenomenon of foreign language learners at schools is now universal. Foreign language learning is a vital requirement in the modern, competitive, and continuously changing society all over the world. According to the Council of Europe (2001):

*Only through a better knowledge of European modern languages will it be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and cooperation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination.*

The 21st century is on the peak of the era of population mobility, migration, and globalization. These are international phenomena; according to the International Labor Organization, (MacPherson et al. 2009) in 2004 the number of international immigrants reached 174 million. However, one-third of these immigrants live in just 20 countries and the United States hosts the largest number of this population. “What once was a country considered to be a microcosm of Europe is fast becoming a microcosm of the world” (Diaz, 1992, p. 11).

Consequently, the population of English language learners (ELLs) in schools in the United States is increasing. These learners face a number of challenges and difficulties and need to cope with a variety of issues that arise because of their moving to an unknown country and enrolling in a school where most people do not speak their language, the medium is not their L1, and where all subjects are taught in English. These issues are related to the learners ability to catch up with the rest of the students, the quality of their learning and their competence and proficiency in the target language in order to be able to use it as a medium for other subjects. What is more, they are related to the way learners learn and the factors that should be taken onto consideration when teaching them. All these concerns highlight the need to have a school system that offers proper support to these learners.

Based on concerns about the increasing numbers of English Language Learners in U.S. schools and the documented academic underperformance of this group, particularly in the domain of literacy, the federal government provided funding for a panel of experts to synthesize the knowledge base in the field and provide recommendations for future research. In 2006, the long awaited and much heralded Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth was published in a book entitled Developing Literacy in Second Language Learners (August & Shanahan, 2006). (August, Shanhan, & Escamilla, 2009)

Foreign language learners all over the world need a system that will provide the support and guidance they need in order to learn the target language. This is certainly a huge issue that involves a wide variety of factors. What follows is an overview of the general theories on foreign language learning, theories on the learner variables involved in language learning, and an analysis of one of these variables: motivation. There will be no distinction between foreign language learners and English language learners as when investigating how young learners learn a language other than their mother tongue, the target language is not truly an issue.

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