L2 motivation of Greek young learners and adolescents

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Abstract
Research into learners’ development of motivation has been a challenging endeavour. The present study explores EFL learners’ course of motivation and motivational orientations as their age advances from primary to secondary education and seeks possible relations between those learners’ motivation, gender, and their self-perceived language proficiency. The participants were 3,356 elementary (10-12 years of age) and lower secondary school (13-15 years of age) learners from all over Greece. The results portray the dynamics of motivation over time and the transition of interest in preferred reasons for learning English. They also confirm previous studies with regard to differences in education level, gender, and self-perceived proficiency level.

Keywords: L2 motivation, motivational orientations, education level, gender, language proficiency, young learners, adolescents

1. Introduction
Theories of motivation in psychology have set out to explain why human beings think and behave as they do (Weiner 1985). In second (L2) or foreign language (FL) education, the concept is fundamentally important since it provides the initial impetus for engaging in L2 learning and constitutes the primary influence on sustaining the long and arduous learning process (Dörnyei 2005).

Extensive research evidence on the benefits of L2 learning (Stewart 2005) has led to great interest in implementation of foreign language instruction in primary education, starting in the early years (Tinsley & Comfort 2012). However, when learners of English make the transition from primary to secondary level, they are

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In the Greek educational system transition from primary to secondary level seems to create problems which frustrate and demotivate the majority of learners, thus challenging their attainment (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2013).

The present study, therefore, sought to investigate the motivation and motivational orientations of EFL learners of the three upper grades of primary and the three grades of lower secondary education, taking into consideration their education level, gender, and self-perceived language proficiency.

2. Research background

2.1 L2 motivation and education level

Young learners are generally well-disposed towards learning FLs across a large number of contexts (Lamb 2004; Nikolov & Curtain 2000). This motivational disposition can be attributed to the interactive way of teaching and the wide range of classroom activities at primary level (Cable et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, learners’ motivation evolves in the course of time. In school settings, diminution of various motivational variables has been recorded within primary education, within secondary education, and from primary to secondary education level.

At primary level, learners in the sixth grade displayed more negative attitudes towards the curriculum, interaction with the teacher, as well as discipline than learners in the second grade (Davies & Brember 2001). In a three year longitudinal project of qualitative case studies in forty primary schools in England, there was a fall in enjoyment of learning FLs from the third through to the sixth year despite the learners’ general enthusiasm about the experience (Cable et al. 2010).

In secondary schooling, seventh-grade Japanese EFL learners’ attitudes and motivation were studied longitudinally over one year and were found to diminish after the beginning of the school year (Koizumi & Matsuo 1993). In England, year 9 learners had significantly lower motivation than those in year 7 in a study by Williams, Burden, and Lanvers (2002). Moreover, in a French late immersion programme in Canada (MacIntyre et al. 2002), motivation waned from the seventh to
the eighth year. Additionally, ninth- and tenth-year upper secondary school learners of Arabic as a L2 had significantly lower motivation than their junior high school counterparts being in the seventh and eight years (Ghenghesh 2010). Likewise, Tachibana, Matsuoka, and Zhong (1996) tracked down diminution of motivation from lower to higher secondary school for EFL learners both in China and Japan despite the higher interest in English that the Chinese learners displayed as compared to their Japanese peers.

A comparison of primary (Alabau 2002, as cited in Tragant 2006) and secondary schoolers (González García 2004, as also reported in Tragant 2006) in national surveys in Spain clearly shows more positive attitudes held by younger learners. In Hungary, prominent motivational decrease was observed in learning FLs among over 13,000 13-14 year-old-learners in the last year of primary school over time between 1993 and 2004 (Dörnyei, Csizér & Németh 2006). In the Greek context, motivation significantly diminished from the sixth year of primary school to the third year of lower secondary school (Hovhannisyan 2014; Vrettou 2015).

Contrary to the above, Tragant (2006) found rise of the learners’ “liking of English” when they reached secondary education, which remained quite stable until the final year of high school. These results may emanate from likely reference of the participants’ responses to the importance of the English language rather than the immediate learning situation, as suggested by the predominant extrinsic types of orientation among the secondary school learners in the study.

Overall, the general drop of motivation from younger learners to teenagers may be attributed to psychological and educational reasons. Older learners tend to harbour negative attitudes towards the school system. On the other hand, lack of continuity and more teacher-centred traditional methodology at secondary level seem to further frustrate learners in their attempts to master a FL (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2013; Lasagabaster 2011; Nikolov & Curtain 2000).

2.2 L2 motivation and achievement

The investigation of L2 motivation and achievement started dynamically with R. Gardner and Lambert’s main study in 1959. R. Gardner’s subsequent research showed the strong relationship between these two variables (R. Gardner 1985, 2001). Masgoret and Gardner’s (2003) major meta-analysis of Gardner and associates’ research revealed that motivation is the strongest correlate of achievement, whereas
attitudes towards the learning situation, integrativeness, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation also displayed a positive, though lower, interaction. The strong interaction between motivation and achievement is corroborated in more recent research outside of the Canadian context in four European countries (Croatia, Poland, Romania, and Spain), in Brazil and in Japan, yielding similar consistent findings (Bernaus & Gardner 2008; Bernaus, Wilson, & Gardner 2009; R. Gardner 2005, 2007).

Many other researchers have shown the positive interplay between attitudes and motivation and L2 learning outcomes. In Dewaele’s (2005) research in Belgium, self-perceived competence in French and English was significantly related to attitudes towards the two foreign languages. L2 learning test results were also correlated with motivation scores in Ushida’s (2005) study in the USA and in Lasagabaster’s (2011) research in the Basque country of Spain. Adding to those results, in the Greek context, higher achievement in a standardised test was positively and significantly linked to higher motivation as well (Hovhannisyan 2014; Vrettou, 2011).

2.3 Motivational orientations
An influential factor that might be implicated in an individual’s multi-faceted motivational behaviour is orientations, that is, reasons for learning an L2, which is a line of research on its own. R. Gardner’s (1985, 2001) socio-educational model in L2 learning identifies two types of orientations: integrative and instrumental. The former refers to reasons related to meeting, conversing with, and understanding the people who speak the L2 and their way of life (R. Gardner 1985). The latter refers to practical and utilitarian reasons for learning the language such as getting a job or better education (R. Gardner 1985, 2005). One of Gardner’s leading contributions in the field has been the demonstration of positive correlations between both types of orientations (especially integrative orientation measures) with achievement in a large number of studies (Masgoret & Gardner 2003), establishing their role in SLA.

Gardner’s original distinction between the concepts of integrative and instrumental orientations (Gardner & Lambert 1959) was considered in a number of factor analytical studies. In 1983, Clément and Kruidenier identified four orientations three of which appear to be associated with R. Gardner’s integrative orientation, namely, “travel,” “friendship,” and “knowledge”; as for the instrumental orientations of both constructs, they seem to refer to similar behavioural types (Noels et al. 2000).
According to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 1985; McIntosh & Noels 2004), a person’s reason for learning a language can be understood in terms of the degree to which it is perceived as freely chosen and endorsed by the self. This theory places a variety of orientations along a continuum from the most self-determined ones, being kinds of intrinsic motivation, to the least self-determined ones, being external regulation and amotivation.

On the whole, researchers have identified various orientations in relation to FL learning over the years through factor analytical means (Cid, Grañena & Tragant 2009; Köseoğlu 2013; Kyriacou & Zhu 2008). For example, Bradford (2007), in Indonesia, found 11 factors with “employment”, “societal advancement” and “success” taking the lead.


Research evidence suggests that learners’ orientations vary by factors such as age, gender, education, income, linguistic background, the target language, and heritage learner status (Lin 2011; Yang 2003).

2.4 Motivational orientations, gender, and education level

Gender differences have been reported in learners’ various attitudinal and motivational variables in favour of females in a great number of studies (Dönyei et al. 2006; Kissau 2006; Koizumi & Matsuо 1993; Mori & Gobel 2006; Williams et al. 2002). Similar results were yielded in the Greek context (Hovhannisyan 2014; Vrettou 2015).

On the other hand, research on the effects of gender on motivational orientations seems to be inconclusive. Some studies have indicated female superiority in integrative orientation (Kissau 2006; Köseoglu 2013; Mori & Gobel 2006) or in instrumental orientation (Bacon & Finneman 1992) or in both orientations (Nikolaou
2004). Other studies have shown males to be more inclined towards instrumental orientation (Köseoglu 2013), adding to the diversity of the findings.

Fewer studies have explored the effect of education level or age on motivational orientations. Kormos and Csizér (2008) compared secondary school learners, university learners and adults and did not find any age-related differences in integrative motivation to learn English. On the contrary, Williams et al. (2002) found that seventh-grade learners reported higher enthusiasm about language learning and a higher integrative orientation than that of learners in the ninth grade. According to the researchers, that might be due to a “general switching off from school based learning” (p. 509).

Apparently, more research is necessary in order to delve into learners’ reasons for L2 learning as well as the influential factors upon them in a variety of contexts.

3. The present study

3.1 Objectives and research questions
The present study sought to investigate learners’ motivation and motivational orientations towards English as a FL while progressing through the two levels of the Greek educational system. The variables of self-perceived proficiency and gender were deemed valuable in fathoming the influence of the various motivational aspects on the learners. The research questions posed were the following:

1. What is the motivation towards English as a FL of upper primary and lower secondary learners overall?
2. Do the learners’ education level, self-perceived proficiency, and gender affect their motivation towards English as a FL?
3. What are the motivational orientations towards English as a FL of upper primary and lower secondary learners overall?
4. Do the learners’ education level, self-perceived proficiency, and gender affect their motivational orientations towards English as a FL?

3.2 Participants
The participants were 3,356 learners in primary and secondary education level throughout Greece. More specifically, there were 1676 fourth, fifth and sixth graders in primary school and 1680 first, second, and third graders in lower secondary school.
The two genders were represented by 1584 boys and 1751 girls in the two education levels. The method used for the collection of the data was *stratified sampling*. This method is particularly useful when there is dispersion in targeted population, especially when schools are to be selected (Ζαφειρόποσλος 2005). The first stage of sampling referred to the selection of a number of schools within each of the chosen districts according to urbanity (schools from metropolitan, urban, semi-urban and rural areas). The second stage of selection regarded classes in each grade within each school. All the learners in each of the selected classes were invited to participate, after a consent form was signed by their parents. This result may reduce error and means that a smaller sample can be chosen (McMillan 1996).

### 3.3 Instrumentation

The instrument used for the selection of data was an English language learners’ questionnaire on language learning strategies written in Greek. It constituted the main instrument of the THALES project for the investigation of language learning strategies in the Greek educational context, and was based on Oxford’s (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)* translated into Greek, adapted for the purposes of the project, and piloted before it took its final form and content. The final instrument consisted of three parts:

A. 29 items on language learning strategies (5-point Likert scale from 1 “Never or almost never true of me” to 5 “Always or almost always true of me”) which followed Oxford’s (1990) taxonomy.

B. 8 items on demographic information about the participants.

C. 6 items on issues about learning English. Among these there were questions about the learners’ self-perceived language proficiency level (5-point, from “low” to “very good”), their motivation in terms of perceived importance of learning English (3-point, from “not so important” to “very important”) and their motivational orientations (16 items which had to be ticked in a box if they constituted the learners’ reasons for learning English, and an open question) the answers to which were used as data of the present study.
3.4 Analysis plan
To answer the aforementioned research questions we followed a specific plan of analysis. To start with, we reported the frequencies of the learners’ answers in the three categories of the motivation question (not important, important, very important) to examine their motivation towards learning English as a FL. Regarding the second question that focused on the effect of education level, gender, and self-perceived proficiency level on learners’ motivation we ran independent samples t-test for the first two variables and one-way ANOVA analyses for the perceived proficiency level.

To examine learners’ motivational orientations, two procedures were followed. Firstly, the 16 items were taken into consideration as an inclusive variable, named total motivational orientation. Secondly, the 16 corresponding questions were grouped into 5 theory-driven categories (see Table 2): i. interest in L2/culture (2 items), ii. travel/communication (4 items), iii. instrumental/career (3 items), iv. personal interest (4 items) and v. external pressure (3 items). All items and categories are included in the Appendix. As for the open question, there were few responses (below 5%) so they were excluded from the statistical analysis.

Learners’ frequency responses, means on motivational orientation categories, and total motivational orientation were reported to answer the third research question. Finally, the effect of education level, gender, and perceived proficiency level on learners’ motivational orientation was examined running independent samples t-test for the first two variables and one-way ANOVA analyses for the self-perceived proficiency level.

3.5 Procedure
Before the administration of the questionnaire, written approval had been given by the Institute of Education Policy of the Hellenic Ministry of Education. Written consent was also obtained from the legal guardians when required (i.e. for primary school learners). The instrument was administered by the English language teacher during regular instruction time in spring 2014. Learners were first informed about how to fill in the questionnaire and were told that there were no correct or wrong answers. They were assured that their anonymity would be preserved and that the collected questionnaires would not be evaluated by their teacher. They were also encouraged to ask questions if certain items were unclear to them.
4. Results
The majority of the total learner population seemed motivated towards English (Table 1) as they reported that learning English was “very important” (70.2% and 64.8% respectively) or “important” (25.7% and 28.5%) to them. Only 4.1% of the primary and 6.7% of the secondary learners found learning English as “not important”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important is it for you to learn English?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not important</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very important</td>
<td>1168</td>
<td>1081</td>
<td>2249</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1664</td>
<td>1667</td>
<td>3331</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Importance of learning English

Regarding the learners’ motivation towards English, the results showed that the variables of education level, gender, and perceived proficiency level do affect their motivation. Specifically:

The level of education seemed to influence the learners’ answers on motivation \([t(3329)= 3.91, p< .001]\) with primary learners scoring higher \((M = 2.66, SD = 0.55)\) than secondary learners \((M = 2.58, SD = 0.61)\).

The learners’ motivation was also influenced by their gender \([t(3309)= 7.71, p< .001]\) with girls being more motivated \((M = 2.70, SD = 0.53)\) than boys \((M = 2.54, SD = 0.63)\).

Analysis of variance showed a main effect of self-perceived proficiency level on the learners’ motivation \([F(4, 3322) = 148.10, p = .000]\). Post hoc analyses using Tukey’s HSD indicated that the more learners regarded themselves as proficient in English the more they scored in motivation.

The level of education (primary vs secondary) did actually influence learners’ total motivational orientation \([t(2593)= 3.81, p< .001]\), their interest in L2/culture \([t(2776)= 10.59, p< .001]\) as well as their view of external pressure \([t(2615)= 5.31, p< .001]\). More specifically, primary learners seemed to score higher in total motivational...
orientation \((M = 8.85, SD = 2.69)\), in interest in L2/culture \((M = 1.19, SD = 0.72)\), and in external pressure \((M = 0.79, SD = 0.87)\) than secondary learners \([M = 8.44, SD = 2.70], (M = 0.91, SD = 0.70)\) and \((M = 0.61, SD = 0.82)\) respectively.

Learners’ gender showed a somehow different pattern of influence on motivational orientation than education level, by affecting four of the five theory-driven motivational categories, but not their total motivational orientation. Girls seemed to be more interested in L2/culture \([t(2762)= 4.31, p< .001, (M = 1.11, SD = 0.71)]\), have greater interest in instrumental/career issues \([t(3035)= 2.27, p< .05, (M = 2.49, SD = 0.72)]\), and score higher in the personal interest category \([t(2685)= 2.68, p< .005, (M = 2.49, SD = 1.11)]\) than boys \([M = 0.99, SD = 0.72], (M = 2.42, SD = 0.81),\) and \((M = 2.37, SD = 1.15)\) respectively. On the other hand, boys scored higher in external pressure \([t(2602)= 7.98, p< .001, (M = 0.84, SD = 0.91)]\) than girls \((M = 0.58, SD = 0.76)\).

Analysis of variance showed a main effect of self-perceived proficiency level on learners’ total motivational orientation \([F(4, 2584) =31.73, p = .000]\), interest in L2/culture \([F(4, 2767) = 43.11, p = .000]\), travel/communication \([F(4, 2668) = 13.13, p = .000]\), instrumental/career \([F(4, 3039) = 69.05, p = .000]\), personal interest \([F(4, 2689) = 17.16, p = .000]\) and external pressure \([F(4, 2606) = 13.79, p = .000]\).

Posthoc analyses using Tukey’s HSD indicated that the more learners regarded themselves as proficient in English the more they scored in total motivation orientation and all the 5 motivational orientation sub-categories.

Table 2 presents response frequencies and means of both primary and secondary learners’ answers regarding the 5 motivational orientation categories and total motivational orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational orientations</th>
<th>interest in L2/culture</th>
<th>travel/communication</th>
<th>instrumental/career</th>
<th>personal interest</th>
<th>external pressure</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>response frequencies</td>
<td>2778</td>
<td>2680</td>
<td>3051</td>
<td>2700</td>
<td>2617</td>
<td>2595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>1.05 (0.72)</td>
<td>2.27 (1.02)</td>
<td>2.47 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.44 (1.13)</td>
<td>0.71 (0.85)</td>
<td>8.65 (2.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Motivational orientations
5. Discussion

Agreeing with previous research in Greece (Hovhannisyan 2014; Vrettou 2011), our results showed that the majority of the learners viewed learning of English as a very important task.

As for the variables, education level was identified as a significant factor in observed differences in the learners’ motivation reports as primary learners appeared to be more motivated than lower secondary learners. That agrees with most research which shows a decline of primary school learners’ motivation when they reach lower secondary level (Alabau 2002 and González García 2002, both cited in Tragant 2006; Dörnyei et al. 2006; Hovhannisyan 2014; Vrettou 2015). Adolescents’ negativity towards the school subjects on the one hand and methodological issues on the other seem to reduce their zeal for learning an L2 (Lasagabaster 2011; Nikolov & Curtain 2000). Within the Greek context, in particular, attendance of foreign language centres and a heavier school programme seem to further aggravate older learners’ disposition towards the L2 (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2013).

Also, the impact of gender appears to be powerful with girls being more positively motivated than boys at primary and lower secondary education levels (Vrettou 2015; Williams et al 2002).

Moreover, the positive relation between the learners’ self-perceived proficiency and their motivation towards the L2 has been confirmed in other research as well (Dewaele 2005). Correlations between reportedly high motivation and high achievement have also been attested in a large number of studies (Bernaus & Gardner 2008; Bernaus et al. 2009; R. Gardner, 2005, 2007; Lasagabaster 2011; Masgoret & Gardner 2003; Ushida 2005). The fact that the learners’ total motivation and all of the motivational orientations were positively and significantly linked to their self-perceived proficiency corroborates the above findings.

As for the learners’ motivational orientations, the students’ total mean score showed that it is an important and influential factor, as they indicated almost half of the proposed reasons each, for their engagement in learning English. To be more specific, instrumental/career issues prevail, denoting the great utility of the English language nowadays, followed by personal interest and travel/communication responses, which also display great need for practical use of the language. It seems that interest in L2/culture and external pressure issues are not strong reasons for learning English (but see differences according to education level and gender below).
Primary learners surpassed their lower secondary counterparts with regard to total motivational orientation, interest in L2/culture, and external pressure. A primary source of young learners’ positive disposition towards learning of foreign languages seems to be the interactive way of teaching as well as the wide variety of activities such as storytelling, role play, drama, songs, and puppets, which can create a pleasurable atmosphere. This multimodal procedure probably contributed to young learners’ overall reasons for learning the language as well as high evaluation of the interest in L2/culture items on the questionnaire showing their enjoyment of English and their interest in the English culture. However, their higher scores on external pressure are indicative of the influence exerted on them by their parents and their effort to get good marks at school. As they grow older, this influence might weaken when other factors may take precedence.

Girls surpassed boys also in the interest in the L2/culture category as the former are generally more language learning orientated while there is evidence of dominance of socially constructed gender practices (Ehrlich 1997; Sunderland 2000). Moreover, being biologically and psychologically more mature in this age span, girls seem to be more personally involved in language learning (through books, songs, games etc) and concerned about and their future career opportunities, hence their higher scores in the personal interest and instrumental/career categories. Finally, boys’ higher scores in external pressure may have to do with their view of language learning as externally forced upon them due to sociolinguistic reasons (perhaps they are “channeled” away to other subjects and probably “better” career paths: Sunderland 2000: 204).

6. Conclusion

Our data confirm the robust effect of motivation and motivational orientations upon the learners’ language proficiency. The implication of education level and gender on the learners’ disposition regarding the L2 has also been affirmed.

In terms of pedagogy, implications can only refer to both genders since there cannot be any sex-segregated classes. Thus, course materials could be enriched with tasks offering more choices according to preferences regarding male and female topics, while activities applying to different learning styles and multiple intelligences (H. Gardner 1983, 2006) could cater to a larger number of learners invigorating learning. Besides, motivation decrease at school level could be moderated by enhancing teaching with age-related topics and promoting teaching methodologies
pertaining to the age and interests of the learners. In point of fact, positive emotions in the language learning process could be increased through the use of activities that can be intellectually stimulating (such as debates), evoke creativity (such as film-making or role-plays), involve group work, and draw on learners’ imagination (Dewaele & MacIntyre 2014). In addition, since foreign language certificates are highly valued in the Greek society (Angouri, Mattheoudakis & Zigrika 2010), offering the challenge of a national certificate of language proficiency within the state education system might be stimulating to the learners. Lastly, external pressure on learners might be alleviated by extensive talking to parents and offering of after-lessons tuition, which could benefit learning.

Suggestions for future study could include exploration of more attitudinal and motivational variables in order to fathom their impact on educational processes. To that end, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data could prove to be elucidating together with conduct of longitudinal research. Furthermore, extending the age range of research subjects involved from primary and lower secondary to upper secondary and adulthood could allow for a fuller picture of motivation over the course of time. Moreover, investigation of the influence of various motivational variables and orientations upon types and frequency of strategy use could vitally add to our knowledge of learners’ acquisition of an L2.

References


Appendix

Types of motivational orientations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational orientations categories</th>
<th>Items (responding to the question: What are your reasons for learning English?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “Interest in L2/Culture”            | 1. because I like the language  
                                      | 2. because I am interested in the English culture                               |
| “Travel/Communication”              | 1. because I have friends who speak English  
                                      | 2. because I have some relatives who speak English  
                                      | 3. so that I can travel  
                                      | 4. because English is an international language                                  |
| “Instrumental/Career”               | 1. because I will need it to get a job when I grow up  
                                      | 2. to get a language certificate or degree (e.g. B2, C2)  
                                      | 3. to study abroad                                                               |
| “Personal Interest”                 | 1. because I would like to live in another country when I grow up  
                                      | 2. to play games or chat, use face book etc on the Internet  
                                      | 3. to listen to and sing songs  
                                      | 4. to read books                                                                 |
| “External Pressure”                 | 1. because it is compulsory at school  
                                      | 2. because my parents force me to learn  
                                      | 3. in order to help with my parents’ business                                     |