

# SEARCHING FOR THE PARALLELS BETWEEN MOTIVATION AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN ELT

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**Abstract:** My contribution aims to present research, the goal of which is to find the relationship between the methods of foreign language teaching and the motivation to learn a foreign language. The nature of the tasks, which students usually solve, is crucially important. The increase of motivation can be promoted by the tasks in which pupils need to make independent decisions, e.g. project work, learning by problem solving, language portfolio etc. By finding out more about the influence of autonomous learning on pupils' motivation, we can uncover a number of new possibilities for improvement in this field.

**Key words:** intrinsic motivation, autonomous learning, teaching methods, the English language, foreign language competence

## Introduction

Motivation and autonomous learning may not appear connected when you look at them in isolation. However, once placed in the context of ELT (English language teaching), they may evoke some correlation. This paper deals with research the objective of which is to find out the relationship between autonomous teaching methods and motivation in English language learning. In this research, motivation and autonomous learning of second language learners become our key terms. Motivation has been the subject of research of many theoreticians, teachers and psychologists. Through their work, the concept of motivation could be easily defined. For example Dornye claims that students who really want to learn the English language can cope with its studying without difficulties despite not having a special talent or an aptitude in foreign language acquisition. (2001, s. 2). Autonomous learning may be closely related to the degree of motivation in learning English. That is why it is important to get familiar with the principles of autonomous learning, such as taking responsibility for your own learning. Of course, to solve the problem of relatively low foreign language competence is not easy, therefore the application of autonomous learning principles may meet a number of difficulties. The root of the problem lies in the fact that graduates from secondary schools do not meet the expected standards of English language competence. Nowadays, it is not necessary to defend the importance of English language competence among students of secondary schools. Its support at elementary and secondary schools is quite remarkable; the number of foreign language lessons has risen and so the presence of the English language has become a common element of the contemporary educational environment.

The primary goal of my research is to search for a solid connection between methods of autonomous learning and motivation in learning foreign languages. Secondly, I presume that these methods lead towards the development of intrinsic motivation. So far, I have not found any research referring to the influence of autonomous learning methods on motivation, which would consequently improve the level of students' foreign language competence.

## 1 Motivation

If you were asked which factors influence the learning process, you would probably put motivation on the top of your list. Undoubtedly, one of the most important aims of psychology and pedagogy has been the explanation of human behaviour in particular situations. Why do people behave the way they behave? Nakonečný explains that this “why” includes two basic aspects. The first one is related to the manner of human behaviour, i.e.; why does an individual behave friendly in a particular situation? The other one is related to the aim of this behaviour, i.e.; what is the reason? (1996, p. 5). But let us get back to the basic concept of motivation. The term is derived from a Latin word “movare” which means “to move”. Homola says that motivation is a general term for all the conditions which determine any human activity. (1969, p. 7). So when we say that the individual is motivated, we point to the fact that he/ she does something with a certain goal and puts a lot of effort into it. Moreover, this effort is associated with a desire and willingness to reach the goal and also with a positive attitude towards the activity the individual intends to do.

Gardner, a specialist in the psychology of foreign language learning, creates a broader perspective with regard to motivation. He claims that motivation includes four elements – goal, willing behaviour, desire to reach the goal and positive approach towards the activity. (1985, p. 50). In the description of foreign language learning Dunkel (1948, p. 12) outlines a similar division of motivation aspects as well as a description of the relationship between the goal of learning a foreign language and the behaviour in the process of reaching this goal. He pointed out the differences between the types of motivation and the intensity of motivation. He also specifies that the type of motivation is directly bonded to the goal and that the intensity is related to the degree of effort which the individual puts into achieving this goal. In connection to the topic, the type of motivation answers the question why the individual studies a foreign language. The observation is that there are many reasons for learning the English language, e.g.:

- to be able to communicate with the members of the target community
- to be able to apply for certain jobs
- to broaden one’s knowledge
- to make one’s parents happy
- to follow the needs of society

Gardner claims that if we want to describe the motivation to learn the English language, it is necessary to know the specific reasons that are connected to learning goals. If we ask a student “Why do you study the English language?” and the answer was “Because I have to”, it would be considered the reason why the student is in the classroom, however it would not be considered as any kind of motivation for learning the English language. (1985, p. 51). On the contrary, this would indicate the lack of motivation to learn English. If we want to specify the goals in learning, we need to relate them directly to learning the English language.

## 2 Types of motivation

Important ideas in this field are discussed by Gardner and Lambert (1959) in their work *Motivation Variables and Second Language Acquisition*. In their article they focus on two types of motivation – integrative and instrumental. Here, on the one hand, motivation is built by the students’ desire to identify with or to integrate with the target culture, and on the other hand, it is connected to the prospects of their school or career growth. Another division of motivation types is commonly known by teachers - intrinsic (inner) and extrinsic (outer) motivation. Fontana claims that sufficient learning at school would not take place without motivation (2003, p. 127). Behavioural psychologists emphasize the role of reward and punishment. (Brown, 2001, p. 73). Homola upgrades their theory by describing operational behavioural principles – the individual is active in his/ her environment (operates in it). It is based on so called “positive strengthening” by positive stimuli exposure. If the positive stimuli are present, the response based on the strengthening is very probable to re-occur (even in the future cases). (1969, p. 47). The theory of positive and negative strengthening is still common in our educational environment. However, there are several other views brought by cognitive psychologists. Even though they agree that the concept of reward/ punishment is important, their

theory is based on different sources of motivation and on self-evaluation. For example, Ausubel (1978, p. 58) declares that human needs, which are fundamental to our behaviour, come out from our inner desires, e.g. a desire to explore, manipulate, to be active, to strengthen our ego etc.

Since the principles of autonomous learning are based on the fact that the desire to learn should arise from students' themselves, they should be based on inner or intrinsic motivation. That is why I decided to pay attention to intrinsic motivation in the next chapter.

### 3 Intrinsic motivation

If we think about the reason why people sometimes choose a particular kind of behaviour, it is obvious that the motives for their actions are different. Sometimes we do something because the action indeed evokes happiness in ourselves. Sometimes we join the activity not because we are interested in it, but its doing helps us in gaining something we need. Cognitive psychologists divided motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1989, p. 32) defined these two concepts in a very plain way. Simply, if the only reason for doing something is getting something, not just the activity itself, e.g. passing an exam, being paid etc., we speak about extrinsic motivation. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is related to motivation that comes from oneself internally. It is accompanied by enjoyment of the activity itself or by the satisfaction resulting from the activity produced when working on a certain duty. An intrinsically motivated student will be working on a particular duty, because it looks fun or interesting. Or the student will be working on solving a certain problem because the challenge of searching for the solution brings the student pleasure. In both examples the student does not work for any kind of reward (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 67).

Fontana defines intrinsic motivation through a commonly accepted hypothesis that people have a natural instinct for curiosity which is not directed towards any particular result; it initiates spontaneous research and exploration. (2003, p. 129). Brown says that intrinsically motivated activities are those which are not compensated by anything visible, just by the activity itself. Pupils take parts in them spontaneously without outer influences (2001, 16).

Naturally, it is not difficult to motivate students by activities which are popular and joyful. The problem arises in situations when we need to integrate spontaneous motivation of students into less popular duties, such as learning grammar. Penny Ur defines intrinsic motivation as a common desire to learn for oneself. She also claims that it is tied to pupils' previous attitudes, i.e. they consider learning useful, or they have positive respect towards the target language and to its cultural, political and ethnic components. (1991, p. 280). I agree with her opinion; however, not only previous experience, but also the quality of the lessons, during which pupils may analyze the attraction of given tasks, is crucial for the arousal of intrinsic motivation.

### 4 Autonomous learning

The term autonomy encompasses a very broad application. In the Cambridge Dictionary it is defined as *"the right of a group of people to govern itself, or to organize its own activities."* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2010). In relation to society, it is understood as the ability of an individual to live independently and to govern his/ her own decision-making process. In the theory of teaching foreign languages this term came to existence at the end of 1960s. (Straková, 2003, p. 5). Sometimes it is also called "self-directed learning", in which the student takes the initiative and responsibility for what happens in a lesson. This way the student selects, decides about, and evaluates his/ her own learning activities, which take place at any time, at any place, by means of any instruments and at any age. (Gibbons, 2008, p. 45). Mareš (1998, p. 171) defines the autonomous learning process as one in which students take joint liability for their decisions. He refers to this process as "the self-regulating course of action". Mareš states the definition of self-regulating learning as follows - *"It is the level of learning, in which students become active agents of their own learning in the fields of action, motivation and meta-cognitive strategies. They attempt to reach certain goals (knowledge, credits, social appreciation, professional application), they initiate and regulate their own effort and use their*

*own learning strategies.*” (ibid). Foreign literature in this field often contains the terms self-regulated or self-directed learning, which are lexical equivalents of the term autonomous learning.

The development of autonomous learning is gradually becoming a crucial part of many language courses. Its achievement depends on teachers who need to be able to create an environment in which students feel autonomy; hence they have a chance of becoming independent. There are many scientists in the field of foreign language competence development who agree with the positive effects of autonomous learning. (Hurd et al, 2001, s. 344). The overall success of language courses, which are often based on distance learning, depends on the ability of students to be autonomous. (Murphy, 2008, p. 83). Nevertheless, I presume that also full time students may find a number of positive effects in the principles of the autonomous learning. Many teachers, theoreticians and researchers examine autonomous learning mostly in the education of adults. We may often ask: What is autonomous learning? Who is involved in it? What are the roles of teachers and institutions that facilitate it? Even though it is presumed that mostly the education of adults is based on its principles, the methods of autonomous teaching/ learning can be used in lessons at elementary or secondary schools too. Autonomous learning is defined as a process in which individuals initiate actions with or without help of others, to diagnose their needs associated with learning, to formulate their goals, identify sources of information, select their learning strategies and evaluate their own results. (Knowles, 1975, p. 5). In the research, I do not want to give pupils all the responsibility for the entire learning practice. However, pupils should take part in making decisions of what and when something should be done. The teacher makes sure that the decisions and opinions of pupils are relevant. Perhaps the problem joining traditional lesson with the principles of autonomous learning may arise. Some teachers, who follow the principles of autonomy development, declare that the traditional school environment does not have to fuse with autonomous learning – it should be an ordinary part of any schooling. *“Here, the teacher is a very important inter-stage. He/ she must realize his/ her own level of autonomy and work on its development. At a very first place, the teacher should not be afraid of his/ her loss of authority.”*(Straková, 2003, p. 84).

Since foreign language learning is a complex process, it involves a lot of approaches and methods on the side of the teacher and also on the side of students. Recent researches in this field area persuade us that pupils can benefit a lot from such learning situation in which they are actively involved and have a chance to decide about what it is going to be done in the lesson. The improvement of the cooperation between the teacher and students in such an environment indicates a relatively high degree of motivation to learn the English language. The presence of highly motivated students may be the solution to our problem. The problem lies in the fact that, despite the increased number of English language lessons in the curricula of the elementary and secondary schools, the level of their English language competence is not sufficient. Foreign language competences are the key competences of any individual and their presence decides about one’s successful performance in competition with other people. In the documents of European language framework committees, foreign language competences have a very important place and their absence is considered a handicap. My research attempts to find out whether it is possible to do more than just to increase the number of English language lessons.

## 5 Principles of autonomous learning

There are some approaches in ELT (English language teaching) that emphasize the assistance of students into taking control of their learning by the development of their meta-cognitive learning strategies. They are usually based on critical self-reflection, taking part in the topic selection, evaluation of their learning possibilities etc. These strategies have a very important role in students’ learning. (Murphy, 2008, p. 85). Moreover, autonomous pupils can apparently use the affective side of their learning experience to enhance their motivation. They gradually become autonomous as well as being more independent in the usage of English language. (Little, 2009, p. 223).

Many scientists and teachers are attempting to characterize the process of the development of student’s personality. Zelina and Kosová (2000, p. 53) describe the following ways of this development:

- to teach students according to their own choice

- to teach students to plan their own progression, divide their duties and time
- to teach students ways to motivate themselves
- to teach students how to relax
- to teach students how to self-evaluate etc.

The autonomous pupil should be able to identify the relation between the things he/ she needs to learn, how to learn them and what sources to use (Breen and Mann, 1997, p. 134). Dickinson (1987, p. 11) explains that there are many contexts and situations in which students need to take at least partial control of their learning. He also states that self-direction in learning is different from other contexts of self-direction. In the context of learning, we usually focus on the techniques of giving instructions rather than on students' attitudes. In his work he describes the following terms:

- self-instruction is a neutral term for situations in which students work without the direct control of the teacher
- self-direction is a particular approach towards the task in which students accept the responsibility for all their decisions related to their learning
- autonomy is a situation in which a student is entirely responsible for all the decisions related to his/ her learning
- semi-autonomy describes the stage at which students are getting ready for autonomy (ibid, p. 12)

Certainly, in the work of Dickinson, there are also other terms which define autonomous learning and teaching. Based on the above mentioned facts, a basic characteristic of the autonomous learner is the ability to give himself instructions, to be able to direct his own learning in case the teacher is not around and steadily get through the stage of semi-autonomy to the stage of full autonomy.

## 6 Motivation as a result of autonomous learning

Motivation may be commonly regarded as something abstract and not measurable. We cannot touch it, we cannot see it, yet we can say whether it is present among our students. Some people may say that motivation is a matter of our own subjective judgment. I was once given a question whether motivation was measurable. At first sight, I thought it was not. However, its presence at English language lessons could be seen through the enthusiastic work of our students. This has created a challenge for the attempt to measure motivation. Apparently, there are some parallels between motivation and autonomous learning. As mentioned in the previous chapters, autonomous learning contributes to students' enhanced level of motivation. In this chapter I would like to draw an outline for an experiment which can possibly measure the connection between motivation and autonomous learning in ELT.

The experimental challenge is to find out the following: what is the relationship between the intentional use of autonomous learning (AL) strategies and the level of students' motivation? Thus, the experimental challenge expresses the interactional dependence between two variables – AL strategies (dependent variable) and motivation (independent variable). The hypothesis then is – the use of AL strategies in ELT enhances the level of students' motivation. For the hypothesis confirmation it is necessary to carry out so called “natural experiment” in which two similar groups of students are tested at the beginning (before manipulation) and after the experimental interference. The following scheme expresses the plan of the experiment:

V	Ya	X	Yp	Experimental group
	Ya	(-X)	Yp	Check (control) group

- V: label for the language equality of groups based on City and Guilds examination
- Ya: entry measurement results
- Yp: output measurement results
- X: experimental interference
- (-X): no experimental interference

The experimental interference is a programme of the intentional use of AL methods in ELT. To see some effects, I suggest that the members of the experimental group taught by a competent teacher at least twice a week for a three month period.

The control group is not exposed to experimental interference of the same teacher. They are to be taught in a traditional way for the same period of time.

For the entry measurement I suggest using Gardner’s test of motivation for learning foreign languages. The test evaluates the following indicators of motivation:

- so called “informative index” for the detection of reason for learning the language
- desire to learn the language
- the intensity of motivation for learning the language

Figure 1 is a sample item of Gardner’s Test of Motivation. (Gardner, 2004). The complete test contains 104 questions.

1.	I wish I could speak many foreign languages perfectly.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
2.	My parents try to help me to learn English.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
3.	I don’t pay much attention to the feedback I receive in my English class.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
4.	I don’t get anxious when I have to answer a question in my English class.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
5.	I look forward to going to class because my English teacher is so good.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
6.	Learning English is really great.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
7.	If Japan had no contact with English-speaking countries, it would be a great loss.	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

Figure 1 Gardner’s Test of Motivation

## Conclusion

Without doubt, learning foreign languages is different from learning other subjects. This is because of the social aspects that learning languages involves. Language as such includes the entire social human being; it is a part of our identity and it is used to transfer this identity towards other people. Gardner embellishes this fact by introducing his socio-educational model of the learning English language. (1985, p. 65). In this model, students’ attitudes to the target culture, their positions in the educational situation, their ability to integrate into the target culture and their motivation are connected. However, he emphasizes that the primary factor in this model is motivation. To solve the question of possible parallels between motivation and autonomous learning on an empiric basis it would be necessary to carry out the experiment described in the above chapter. Yet, it can now be stated, that autonomous learning has already shown quite a few positive results at our English language lessons.

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