



# Motivational strategies in foreign language learning: Students' vs. teachers' perspectives

## Estrategias Motivacionales en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras: Perspectivas de maestros y estudiantes

HIDALGO, Cynthia S. <sup>1</sup> & VILLACIS, Wilma G. <sup>2</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT:

Due to the importance given to motivation in foreign language learning processes, this study aimed to analyze and compare the perceptions that students and teachers have regarding the impact of motivational strategies on the learners' desire to study a target language, as well as the effect that those strategies have on their academic performance at university level. The necessity to offer students motivational strategies in order to foster a more effective learning was visible.

**Keywords:** Academic failure; motivational strategies; foreign language learning

#### RESUMEN:

Debido a la importancia que tiene la motivación en el proceso de aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, este estudio se enfocó a analizar y comparar las percepciones que estudiantes y maestros tienen acerca del impacto de las estrategias motivacionales en el deseo de estudiar una lengua meta, así como también el efecto que tienen esas estrategias en los resultados académicos a nivel universitario. Se hizo visible la necesidad de ofrecer a los estudiantes estrategias motivacionales para obtener un aprendizaje más efectivo.

**Palabras clave:** Fracaso académico; estrategias motivacionales; aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras

## 1. Introduction

Our changing world demands foreign languages learning, as everything and everybody is closer and connected. People have realized the importance of learning languages and it is not only because this process involves important cognitive benefits, or because it opens up better job opportunities or allows us to learn about other cultures. Foreign languages learning foster positive attitudes towards others that might be different and it encourages the appreciation of diversity.

English has particularly become a dominant language. Several countries have adopted the instruction of English as a foreign or second language (EFL or ESL), and additionally, many proficiency training programs have been developed to help people communicate with others in English (Abdulhafidh, E. 2015). Ecuador for example, is a country where currently, the study of a foreign language is a mandatory part of the curriculum in primary school and high schools. Likewise, learning a foreign language is considered an academic requirement for graduation in

universities, as stipulated in the official regulations set by the National Higher Education Council. Every semester, foreign languages teachers see how several undergraduates abandon their studies, maybe due to the administrative demand that somehow must affect students' attitude towards the target language.

Although the importance of foreign language learning and how motivation influences any learning process are widely known, teachers all over the world keep trying to explore better ways to help students enhance their EFL and ESL achievement. For instance, Afzal et al. (2010) studied the relationship between motivation and academic performance of students from different universities in Pakistan, finding that motivation affects academic performance positively. Likewise, a study was locally carried out by some authors who also confirmed that in Ecuador, there is a meaningful relationship between teachers' motivation and their learners' attitudes towards English language learning (Bravo et al., 2017).

The ongoing process of interconnecting events, activities and relationships is what we know as globalization. This also involves homogenization of language, which is particularly relevant to English since it is the preferred choice of foreign languages to study in many Latin-American countries, such as Ecuador (Acosta, H. & Cajas, D. 2018). In the same tenor, Haboud (2009) did a research work, which contrasted the points of view of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Ecuador towards learning foreign languages. In this study, the author mentioned that a need to use a foreign language instrumentally, forces these individuals to learn it. In fact, in this study it is also noticed that English is highly demanded among indigenous populations, so much so that some of them have started to integrate the study of this foreign language in their intercultural bilingual curriculum.

As it was stated earlier, many studies have focused on the importance of motivation in foreign language learning; however, not many authors have focused on the different perspectives that individuals involved in the teaching-learning process have. For this reason, the present research seeks to analyze those different perspectives and the impact of the use of motivational strategies in the EFL teaching-learning process.

Dembo and Seli (2016) defined successful students as individuals who efficiently use learning strategies and can motivate themselves to change their behavior in order to achieve learning. Likewise, Hashim, Yunus, and Hashim (2018) have mentioned the importance of making use of language learning strategies to become good language learners. According to these authors, it is important for learners to find out their learning styles and preferences to ensure the language learning strategies they are using are the ones that will suit them better. They have also emphasized that proficiency and achievement are connected with learning strategies at a certain level; therefore, teachers should encourage the autonomous use of strategies for students to improve their FL learning skills.

Undoubtedly, cultural and educational contexts are also taken into consideration when motivation to learn a second language (L2) is discussed. Educational contexts involve the system and the experiences the learner has had. This shapes the individual's attitudes towards the learning situation and their motivation (Gardner, 2007). In the same way, a key role is given to teachers and how they influence their students' L2 learning, as mentioned by Macaro (1997), for whom the teacher is one of the most important factors in the teaching/learning process in the EFL classroom. Similarly, Brophy (1986) stated that motivation is crucial for the behavior needed to fulfill specific goals, highlighting that challenging students with tasks that demand a little more effort from them, than what their level encompasses, is actually motivating and stimulating (Brophy, 2013). For this author, as for others, the quality of the learning environment influences the learning process; therefore, if students feel valued and respected, they get involved in it.

Additionally, it has been found that both: the nature of activities and the social goals encountered in the classroom, influence motivation (Sample, 2015). What is done in class is as important as what is observed in it. That means that tools and strategies need to be utilized; however, data obtained about actual practice needs to be taken into consideration when planning a class, as well (Burgin & Daniel, 2017). Therefore, teachers are expected to observe their students' behavior in order to determine what actually motivates them. In the same way, it is essential to understand that the use of strategies aims to improve the quality of conditions during which learning occurs. They are used to motivate and help students focus attention on their tasks, handle anxiety and manage time effectively. It is decisive to realize that strategies are to be developed systematically, in order to be used as tools for independent learning (Wegner, Minnaert, & Strehlke, 2013).

Given the importance of motivation in the process of learning any foreign language, we found it essential to examine motivational strategies and their impact on students' performance, analyzed from the teacher's, as well as from the students' perspective.

## **1.1. Motivation and motivational strategies**

Gardner and Lambert (1959) were two of the first researchers who focused on the importance of motivation in L2 acquisition. In spite of the fact that there are many different concepts for motivation and that various authors have approached motivation and ways to trigger it in students, it can generally be seen as the force that controls behavior, taking into account perceptions, desires, and beliefs, among others. This force definitely generates more effective learning because it defines the attitude one has towards that process. This might be the reason why it has also been thought of as something abstract and hypothetical that influences, and somehow, explains how we behave and do certain things (Dörnyei, Z., 2001). This goes in line with statements that claim motivation is stronger when the task actually awakens the expectations of individuals who work on it, making them aware of the value of such tasks (Woolfolk 2013).

Over the years, many authors have continued to explore the impact of motivation on L2 learning, proposing different notions about what really activates the desire to learn a new language. Deci and Ryan (1985) suggested that stimuli, such as the motivational strategies used by the teacher, are also important when engaging the learners in the journey of acquiring a new language. Concordantly, Williams and Burden (1997) agreed that while motivation does play an important role in any learning process, special skills and strategies are also needed to achieve a learning goal. Fortunately, there are numerous motivational strategies that can be adopted in educational contexts, which means they can be used as tools to provoke effective learning.

Undoubtedly, several research works, in which motivation and L2 are studied as correlated variables have helped to find information to conclude that successful teachers manage to engage students in the learning/teaching process when providing their learners with strategies for effective learning (Tavakoli, M., Yaghoubinejad, H. & Zarrinabadi, N., 2018). In fact, (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) determined that motivational strategies can be defined as interventions used by the teacher to stimulate students' motivation. It is essential to remember that, just as any other type of strategy, motivational strategies need to be developed. These strategies are actions that aim for a goal, which in some cases is learning something or getting a good result in a given task. They mainly attempt to improve quality of learning by keeping motivation fresh, focusing attention, managing anxiety and effectively making use of time.

## **1.2. Types of motivation**

Important contributions to research on motivation and foreign language acquisition have been made from different perspectives. The behaviorist approach focuses on the external drive that an individual has to fulfill a task, or the stimuli one has to do something. According to this approach, the learning environment, as well as the teacher, is among others, main elements in any learning process. On the other hand, cognitivism focuses on the internal desire individuals have and the satisfactions they are constantly seeking. Obviously, every individual is motivated in a different way to do something and this was understood a long time ago, as explained in the conceptual paper proposed by Locke, E. and Schattke K. (2018) where it is mentioned that in the year 1918, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were terms already used to differentiate types of motivation. Years later, Deci and Ryan (1985) focused on stimuli, which also led to identify these two types of motivation. On the whole, authors have concluded that it is important to remember that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are related and interlap each other at some point (Heidari-Soureshjani and Naseri 2011).

Specifically speaking about foreign language learning, teachers should pay close attention to the motives that students have to learn. Learners probably study a foreign language because they enjoy it, or maybe they do it because they are pursuing rewards such as a prize or a good grade; but not necessarily because of an interest to learn. In the first case, the motivation students have is different from the situation experienced by those students who are studying a foreign language because of an external pressure, as to comply with graduation requirements. Anywhere, it can be seen that motivation and EFL learning are closely related; for instances, Filipino's success learning English is also related to intrinsic motivation because the learners tried to accomplish their individual goals, for example: to communicate with English speaking people, or to use that target language for career purposes (Ditua, 2012).

Sixty years ago, Gardner & Lambert (1959) also made their contribution to L2 acquisition research in several occasions. They pointed out that the learner's attitude towards the target language and its culture is crucial for their motivation (1972). In this way, they introduced two new notions for it: instrumental and integrative motivation. The first type of motivation features a desire to learn a language for utilitarian purposes, whereas the second one features the wish of the learner to integrate into the community who uses the target language they are learning. Both notions belong to the socio-educational model. Based on this focus, Mahreez (1994) carried out a research in Malaysia to find out students' attitudes towards English language in 130 Universities. This study focused on identifying the most common motivational factors found in those higher education institutions. The findings showed that their students are instrumentally oriented, which in fact mean there is awareness of how useful English has become.

Subsequently, due to the importance given to motivation in the foreign language classroom, scholars have continued to come up with ways to enhance it. Dörnyei Z. & Csizér K. (1998), for instances, studied a group of teachers in Hungary whose answers about the use of motivational strategies were the basis of ten commandments proposed to be used in the language classroom, so as to promote motivation in students. The commandments they proposed were the following:

- Make your behavior an example for your students
- Create a relaxed learning environment
- Make sure the tasks are well presented
- Build rapport with your students
- Increase learners' confidence
- Make your classes fun and interesting
- Personalize learning making the tasks relevant to students
- Include the teaching of target language culture in the classroom
- Encourage learners' autonomy
- Help students design their individual study plans, helping them to set their language goals

This list originated from teachers' personal experience. Nonetheless, it is important to find out the relevant motives students describe from their perspective when discussing motivation to learn a foreign language. Undoubtedly, it has been noticed that motivated students are more proficient and are also able to experience effective learning. Consequently, it is imperative to work on maintaining motivation inside and outside the classroom.

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## **2. Methodology**

Quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used in this work. In order to carry it out, the subjects studied in each of the A2 groups of the different languages offered at the Languages Center were observed, a hypothesis was formulated and finally a possible solution to the problem was proposed.

### **2.1. Subjects**

The population and sample for the study were calculated from the total number of A2 level teachers at the Languages Center - Universidad Técnica de Ambato, and their learners. The resulting sample was 317 students and 30 foreign languages teachers.

### **2.2. Data Analysis**

This investigation implemented the survey as a research technique, and the questionnaire as the instrument. Two different questionnaires were designed: one for the students and the other for their teachers. Both examined the individuals' perspectives on the use of motivational strategies in the FL classroom, academic failure, and the reasons why students enroll in these courses.

Once the information was gathered, it was tabulated and the hypothesis was verified using the Chi-squared test, confirming that motivational strategies do have a significant impact on students' learning.

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## **3. Results**

In this section, the data gathered in the questionnaire and the survey was interpreted.

### 3.1. Questions made to students

The following table shows the answers given by students when asked about the quality of the motivational strategies used by their teacher, academic failure and what reasons they have to enroll in foreign language classes.

**Table 1**  
Students' opinions about the motivational strategies used by their teacher.

Rating scale	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	45	14.19
Good	115	36.48
Acceptable	156	49.21
Bad	1	0.32
TOTAL	317	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

A number equivalent to almost half of the students (49.21%) showed that they think their teacher uses acceptable motivational strategies. This result is followed by 115 students (36.48%) who think those strategies are good; while 45 of them (24.29%) think the teacher uses excellent motivational strategies. Fortunately, only one student considers that the strategies used are bad. This represents 0.32% of the population

**Table 2**  
Students' opinions on what determines academic failure.

Rating scale	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of motivation	195	61.51
Absence from class	43	13.57
Priorities set in the subject degrees studied	64	20.19
Others	15	4.73
TOTAL	317	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

The majority of students (61.51%) think that their academic failure is a result of lack of motivation. For 64 students (20.19%), their problems learning a foreign language arise because they have other obligations and priorities set in their faculties. Not many, but 43 students (13.57%) consider that their academic failure is somehow related to their absences from class. Only 15 surveyed students (4.73%) showed to have other unspecified reasons why they might fail foreign languages classes.

**Table 3**  
Students' perceptions on what reasons they and their peers have to enroll in the languages courses offered in their university

Rating scale	Frequency	Percentage
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Because it is a requirement for graduation	161	50.79
Because I like it	37	11.67
Because I think learning languages is very important	119	37.54
TOTAL	317	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

A little more than half of the students (50.79%) mentioned that the motive they have to enroll in the courses offered at the Languages - Center in Universidad Técnica de Ambato is to complete their graduation requirements; whereas only 11.67% enroll in the courses because they like foreign languages. A number equivalent to 37.54% answered that learning a new language is important for them. These numbers, as seen in figure 3, suggest that students' motivation is to graduate; therefore, they take the mandatory foreign languages credits without being really interested in learning.

### 3.2. Questions made to teachers

Secondly, the same questions were analyzed, from the teacher's perspective. For this part of the research, a sample of 30 languages teachers were surveyed.

**Table 4**  
Teachers' perceptions on the motivational strategies used by them

Rating scale	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	3	10
Good	18	60
Acceptable	9	30
Bad	0	0
TOTAL	30	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

The question formulated for the teachers was: "What is your opinion about the motivational strategies you use in class?" Only 10% of them believe their strategies are excellent. The majority, 18 out of 30 teachers (60%), answered that the strategies they use are good. Finally, although none of the teachers surveyed thought that the strategies used in their classes are bad and 30% of them thought the strategies were only acceptable. This clearly shows lack of confidence when teachers use motivational strategies.

**Table 5**  
Teachers' perceptions on the motivational strategies used by them

Rating scale	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of motivation	16	53.33
Absence from class	3	10
Priorities set in the subject in their	8	26.67

majors		
Others	3	10
TOTAL	30	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

A high number (53.33%) of teachers surveyed agreed that academic failure is determined by lack of motivation in students. For 8 teachers (26,67%), having other priorities related to their academic performance inside the university, as for example getting good grades in the subjects, they are studying in their majors is one of the reasons for academic failure. The rest of the teachers in this study believe that students' academic failure is related to absences from class and other reasons.

**Table 6**  
Teachers' perceptions on why students actually enroll in the languages courses offered in their university.

Rating scale	Frequency	Percentage
Because it is a graduation requirement	28	93.33
Because students like it	2	6.67
Because students think learning languages is very important	0	0
TOTAL	30	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

Generally speaking, the teachers' idea of why students enroll in the languages courses offered is very clear. More than 90% of them think students only want to complete graduation requirements; therefore, they take foreign languages. Only 2 teachers (6.67%) think students learn a new language because they like it or are interested in them.

### 3.3. Students' and teachers' perspectives

Finally, both points of view are compared in the following tables.

**Table 7**  
According to you, the motivational strategies used in your classes are:

Rating scale	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	45	14.19	3	10
Good	115	36.28	18	60
Acceptable	156	49.21	9	30
Bad	1	0.32	0	0
TOTAL	317	100	30	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

The inquiry about the quality of motivational strategies showed that teachers think the motivational strategies they use in class are good; however numbers showed that students think they are only acceptable, which means those strategies could be better or different. On the whole, it can be said that there is a need for better or new motivational strategies that can engage students in the learning process.

**Table 8**  
Perceptions on what determines academic failure

Rating scale	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of motivation	195	61.51	16	53.33
Absence from class	43	13.57	3	10
Priorities set in the subject degrees studied	64	20.19	8	26.67
Others	15	4.73	3	10
TOTAL	317	100	30	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

Table 8 demonstrates that students and teachers as well, agreed that there is a lack of motivation in foreign languages learning. A lower number of students and teachers suggested that there are other priorities for university students, which along with absences from class, might explain the tendency some of them have to experience academic failure in foreign languages learning.

**Table 9**  
Why do you think students enroll in the language courses offered in their university?

Rating scale	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Because it is a requirement for graduation	161	50.79	28	93.33
Because students like it	37	11.67	2	6.67
Because students know learning languages is important	119	37.54	0	0
TOTAL	317	100	30	100

Source: Survey conducted by researchers

As it can be seen in table 9, for both: teachers and students, the main reason why learners enroll in foreign languages courses is that they need to do it in order to graduate from university. While 37.54% of students stated that, they believe new languages are learned because students like them or are interested in them, only 6.67% of teachers agreed with the idea. Although none of the teachers thought students take languages courses because they know how important they are, 37.54% of students answered they actually have this motive.

## 4. Conclusions



Motivation in class can truly be considered a representation of what is needed there. If teaching methods and materials are modified, but the motivational environment remains the same, very little effective learning takes place. A positive motivational environment is reached when students are provided with motivational strategies. They, just as any other type of strategies, need to be developed; therefore, it is encouraged to use them on an everyday basis. This goes in line with the answers provided by almost half of the students who qualified their teacher's motivational strategies just as acceptable. Undoubtedly, the figures obtained in this study suggest that there is a need for better strategies.

The results collected about students' perceptions on the reasons for academic failure display a 64% of individuals who blame it on lack of motivation. Educators need to keep in mind that what is attractive, therefore motivating for students, is everything that belongs to their area of interest (Riasati, 2012). This thought is supported by Sample (2015), who affirms that authentic material and activities of real use inspire students because they give them a taste of legitimate target language. These findings in previous studies are in concordance with the ones obtained in this research work in which students expressed that their interest in learning a foreign language needs to be refreshed; otherwise, students will only learn a foreign language, because they are forced to do it in order to graduate.

Undoubtedly, the students observed have demonstrated that they possess instrumental reasons to take the courses offered at the Languages Center – UTA, as it was similarly found in the research done with Chinese university students, who also showed to be more instrumentally than integratively motivated to learn English. The reason for this may be, according to Lui (2007) that the demand for university graduates with good proficiency in English has increased in China, just as it has here in Ecuador. In fact, very few Ecuadorian students seem to learn English only for fun. However, many aspects need to be observed, as recommended by Hovhannisyan, (2014) in her doctoral thesis that proposes to keep observing changes in learners' attitude and motives since motivation is not static, but always changing. Rahman (2005) also suggests further research in his study carried out in Bangladesh, where it was observed that students learn English primarily for instrumental reasons. He mentions that in that country, students do not have the chance to interact with native speakers; therefore, the author advises to do further research to define what integrative motivation means in a monolingual country like Bangladesh, because nowadays, in that context, integrative orientation may be harder to foster. Overall, enhancing intrinsic motivation in order to guide students to become autonomous learners of the target language should always be encouraged, providing them with strategies and a safe environment where their potential can develop fully.

After the analysis of the results gathered in this research work, it seemed adequate to make a proposal of motivational strategies to be used in EFL classrooms, which has not only been done in our educational context, but in different ones. Sugita and Takeuchi (2014) observed the effectiveness of motivational strategies in an EFL classroom in a Japanese university. The researchers in that study questioned if the results were actually related to the use of specific strategies or they were better yet, related to the students' fondness for the teacher. At the end, it was confirmed that those two components of the learning process: motivational strategies and the teacher are correlated. Moreover, Sugita and Takeuchi's study concluded that languages teachers need to become proficient in the use of motivational strategies so that students are inspired and learning objectives are achieved in the classroom, which in fact, is similar to the recommendation made after the analysis of the present research work. To that end, the use of motivational strategies to enhance students' performance in the EFL classroom was proposed.

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1. Universidad Técnica de Ambato – Ambato, Ecuador. [cs.hidalgo@uta.edu.ec](mailto:cs.hidalgo@uta.edu.ec)

2. Universidad Técnica de Ambato – Ambato, Ecuador. [wilmagvillacisv@uta.edu.ec](mailto:wilmagvillacisv@uta.edu.ec)

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