An Achievement Motivation Analysis of Students' Academic and Career Choices at the University: Expectancy-value in Foreign Languages

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Abstract:

The present study investigated students' motivational profiles from their first experiences with foreign languages up to the decision to study English at the university. Subjects were thirty-eight (n 38) master's students at the department of English at the University of Bejaia. The students completed a qualitative interview that asked them to explain the reasons of their choice of studying English at the university rather than other disciplines starting their justifications from the middle school up to the secondary school. The theoretical and methodological framework is the theory of achievement motivation from which we focused on expectancy-value theory. The results indicate that pupils' achievement motivational profiles evolve as a function of their age, relation with teachers as well as their beliefs towards their abilities and the target language itself.

Keywords: *achievement motivation, expectancy-value theory, career choice, foreign languages*

1. INTRODUCTION

Engagement and success in second language learning (SLL) or foreign language learning (FLL), and actually in all sorts of learning, depends on many factors, be they internal or external to the learner. These factors, in the case of internal ones, are studied under the concept of "individual differences" or "learner variables". Some of the individual differences, that can number up to twenty-two in FLL empirical research (Oxford and Ehrman, 1993), have been shown to be more important than others in achieving FLL success. This is typically true of motivation and aptitude (Skehan, 1991) and anxiety (Horwitz, 2001).

Motivation is probably one of the most studied, most complex and most eagerly debated concepts and research topics in psychology, educational psychology and applied linguistics (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2011). Debates started in the second half of the last century with the seminal work by the Canadian researchers about integrative and instrumental motivation along with Caroll's research about language aptitude. As a reminder, we decided to envisage the present discussion from an applied linguistic perspective (which is a problem-based perspective) because we are dealing with ELT and EFL which implies practitioners' difficulties in teaching foreign languages, linguistics, and educational psychology (since the process of teaching and learning are primarily psychological: psychology books include lengthy chapters about learning, and about language). Therefore, the present work is at the juncture of three classic lines in English didactics: motivation, language and linguistics and assessment.

2. Academic Motivation: A Brief Overview

When looking at how motivation is probed and used in FLL research, we notice that researchers belong to different theoretical backgrounds as for their definitions of motivation. Although some overlap in terms of defining the concept and construct of motivation may exist (Bong, 2001b), boundaries are, nonetheless, somehow clear to distinguish four general approaches to academic motivation research that are usually applied in research in academic settings, including foreign language learning ones. Woolfolk (2004) says that educational motivation theories and models which use empirical or rationalistic research can fall into four broad approaches: the *Behaviourist approach* which stresses the role of stimuli and responses; the *Humanistic approach* which explains motivation in terms needs to satisfy (*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*); the *Socio-cultural approach* which sees society and culture as caterers for motivating their members (integrative and instrumental

motivation have long dominated motivation research in the second half of the last century); and, finally, the *Cognitive approach* which is our topic and framework of research with the profusion of theories and models it contains (see below).

For space limitation reasons and to serve the purposes of the present study, we only present brief overviews about the cognitive approach to motivation, focusing on achievement motivation-related theories and models. This presentation is provided below since it serves as our theoretical background to investigate the research questions.

3. Achievement Motivation

In the present study, we use the achievement motivation framework (Wigfield and Eccles, 1983; 2000) which states that seeking success is a powerful drive in human behaviour. In other terms, a fundamental question is why people strive to accomplish difficult things when easy ones are easily affordable? From an achievement motivation perspective, we took expectancy-value theory (EVT) and self-efficacy theory (EVT's closely related theory). Motivation is defined as people's striving to reach successful outcomes and avoid failure. Motivation is an internal state which energises and gives direction to it (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Stating it differently, motivation is an energiser of and a goal-oriented behaviour. Without it, there is no will to be active in doing something. The degree of success in an active academic behaviour depends on the type of motivation, its degree/intensity and its direction.

There is a mosaic of achievement motivation theories and models ranging from attribution theory (Weiner, 1972), goal theory (Ames, 1992), interest theories (Ainly and Hidi, 2002), and other self theories which all claim membership to the larger achievement motivation. Expectancy-value theory (EVT) has probably the merit of synthesising various theories and models in one workable model. This is why we have decided to use it in the present work.

4. Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) of Achievement Motivation

Three basic questions characterise the Wigfield and Eccles's modern EVT: *Can I do this activity? Do I want to do it? Why at all doing it?* These three questions can decline in a profusion of possible answers and motivators depending on the person's characteristics (individual differences), environmental factors as well as the characteristics of the activity (English learning in our case).

The modern EVT model designed by Eccles and Wigfield (2002) and their colleagues is inspired from the work of Atkinson's achievement motivation theorising in the sixties and seventies of the last century. Atkinson postulated that expectancies and values are not separable, contrarily to the modern EVT. It is a complex theory integrating a host of demographic variables, learner variables and organisational and institutional variables, among others. In terms of motivational career choices, EVT evolves around three main questions: Can I do this task/activity? Do I want to do it? Why at all doing it?

(Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; Eccles and Wigfield, 2002) formulated four components from which we took *utility value as a research variable* since students generally think that writing in English is useful for diverse immediate and future utility reasons. In this theory of achievement motivation, the motivated decision to engage in a task rather than another is determined by the interplay between one's expectancies, on the one hand, and by one's value for the task to perform, on the other. Below are more detailed explanations.

4.1 *Expectancies*

They concern beliefs about how well a person could organise courses of events and expect positive or negative outcomes of their actions (Flake et al, 2015). Before engaging in a task, learners generally evaluate the task and their own competence and, therefore, generate judgements and decision cognitively motivated. These judgements are based on subjective beliefs about competence which are also called ability beliefs (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002).

Ability beliefs, which are subjective representations of the likelihood of success or failure in a given performance, can be either calibrated or misbalanced in terms of the relation real competence and task requirements: some learners can erroneously have an overestimation of their competence vis-à-vis the task, whereas others could overestimate the task. Empirical studies have shown that expecting success increases performance and leads to positive outcomes, whereas forecasting failure leads to negative outcomes and to underachievement.

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4.2 Values

In addition to expectancies for success or failure, motivation for engagement is also determined by *values* which are subdivided into attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost value. They are explained below:

Attainment value refers to the importance of doing well in the task. Attainment value also refers to the importance of the task as it expresses one's sense of identity and one's sense of self. For example, reading and doing research in English can be seen as highly praised achievement among students (the self is flattered).

Intrinsic value refers to the subject's interest and enjoyment of the activity. It is similar to the concept of intrinsic motivation. That is, being motivated to engage in an education-related subject stem from the sheer love and enjoyment and fun of doing it.

Utility value refers to how well an activity fits into the person's future goals and plans. For example, learning English might be perceived differently by individuals, depending on whether learning English can help them to easily find a job compared to other languages/subjects, use English for promotion, trade, research, humanitarianism, etc. Utility value is similar to both extrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and to instrumental motivation. Utility can be displayed by students in so many different ways by engaging in learning something even if it is not enjoyable per se. In other terms, and to redirect the theory to the present research, utility value addresses the pragmatic and the hands-on dimension of the desire to do something.

Cost value refers to the negative aspects of engaging in doing something such as time effort, psychological investment, and also to what a person has to give up or to lose when choosing some task at the expense of others. According to Eccles and Wigfield, the cost value component in EVT is the least researched and understood (Flake et al, 2015).

EVT works closely with other achievement motivational theories and models often within the general Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) which is pioneered by Bandura (1997). SCT is considered as a manifesto against the well-known and long-established behaviourists' conceptualisation of human motivation, which includes academic and educational motivation (Bandura, 1997).

5. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

SCT (Bandura, 2001) conceives of motivation and learning by a triadic interaction between the person's sense of internalisation and agency

(being in thoughtful control of one's actions and an actor rather than a rector), behaviour and environment. Self-efficacy is one of the pillars in SCT as it people demonstrate agency and a capacity to influence both their environment and behaviour.

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) is defined as *peoples' judgements to successfully accomplish a task in the future perspective*. Self-efficacy is different from self-confidence and self-concept because the sense of efficacy is not global/general, and it is not a stable and fixed trait; it is rather task-specific and context dependent which makes it fluctuating (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003). Researchers who advocate a social cognitive perspective to motivation and learning (in academic settings) refer to four sources of self-efficacy—i.e. how one builds a sense of self-efficacy judgement to do something. The sources of self-efficacy are *past experiences* (and here, self-efficacy meets attribution theory). Past experiences encoded in grades in schools can inform efficacy judgements. *Vicarious learning* (judging one's chances of success according to and through others' performances) is another source. *Persuasion* or feedback from more competent others (instructors, teachers, tutors, parents, etc.), and finally *psycho-physiological symptoms* such as stress, sweating, anxiety and the forth which can inform whether or not one feels efficacious.

Self-efficacy, as a research variable, has been found to be related to and influencing hundreds of different human actions and behaviours in different cultures and developmental stages, and in different settings. In educational settings, the term academic self-efficacy is generally used. Academic self-efficacy is even specifically applied into learning aspects of language or SLL and FLL (Pajares, 1997).

6. Field Research Methods, Design and Procedures in the Present Study
6.1. Research Problem and Questions

The general rationale behind the observed problems is to evaluate the dynamic motivational forces that guide and dictate learners' decisions to engage in English courses or not. Students' motivations can be as varied as there are students. We reduced down our investigation about students' academic motivation to aptitude (or ability) beliefs and the desire (or sheer love and motivation and interest) to learn English, and we set out to probe the following questions:

What components of the general achievement motivation determine students' choice to study English at the university?

6.2. Methodological Design and Population

This study is exploratory-descriptive insofar as we have sought to know about the motivational components of EFL students' reasons to study English at the university of Bejaia using the EVT framework.

It is also a mixed approach involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches. We set out to explore students' explanations of their motives and determinants to choose to study foreign languages at the university rather than other possible pathways.

In the present study, we have opted for the use of open interviews with a mixed approach to the analysis of the yielded data. Before completing the interviews, a group of first year Master's students attended to a full semester seminar about human motivation and academic motivation and achievement behaviours (this is a technical module in their fundamental unit). The aim is to ensure that the students understand some eight models and theories about academic motivation so as they could respond knowledgeably to the present interview.

Because of the limited number of the research sample, the tendency in the present research is more qualitative. The population includes eight males (n 8) and thirty females (n 30) whose mean age is about 23 years. We opted for qualitative research because of the various calls emanating from researchers to use qualitative methodologies for detailed, in depth and more valid outcomes in motivation research, specifically. To back up the qualitative study, a quantitative and statistical stratification of students' responses is also processed, with the use of descriptive statistics, mainly.

6.3. Data Collection Tools

We have used open interviews to collect students' responses about their motivational components in deciding to study English at the university. The interview is simplified and reproduces the three central questions on which EVT rests: "*Can I do this? Do I want to do this? And why at all doing this?*"

The first question addresses the etiology (origins) of language aptitude, ability beliefs and interest in EFL. It goes back to the learners' first experience with English as a foreign language in the middle school (age 11 to 12) and up to the secondary school (age 14 to 15) where learners discover other foreign languages such as German, Spanish, etc. The first question is expressed variously by the expectancies in the EVT model.

7. Results

Below in the table are the major findings. The results are categorized in terms of the EVT motivational types and are explained by some typical answers provided by the participants in the research.

Table N^0(01) :Major EVT types of motivation for academic choice

| EVT elements	Students' Typical Exemplar Motivations
Expectancy about success	Good marks, best marks, Teachers' testimony about competence,
Intrinsic value	Love English, Love of pronunciation, Interesting subject, funny teachers,
Attainment value	Importance of doing well in English, improve one's English more Pride and self-concept (femininity)
Utility value	Jobs, international language, business, study abroad, travel to English speaking countries,
Cost value	English is easy, Other subjects are difficult

Table N0(02): Major EVT types of motivation for academic choice

	Middle school			Secondary school		
	Can do	Want	Why do	Can do	Want	Why do
Teachers		7		1	5	
Family	1	2		1		1
Grades	5	1		3		
Interest	1	6		1	7	7
Attainment			1		2	7
Utility			1			11
Cost	1					3

When we qualitatively analyzed the students' responses as for their reasons to study English, we have sorted out three major motivational profiles. The pupils' academic motivation was triggered because students: 1-thought they had the capacity/ability (can do in the table above), 2- felt the sheer love and interest in the language (love, in the table above) and finally 3- understood the future outcomes of studying languages (why do), especially at a later advanced age in the secondary school.

A much detailed and thorough discussion is provided in the section below. We also draw the readers' attention that the motivational profiles evolve from the middle school through the secondary school

Fig N0(01): a qualitative sequencing of students motives from middle school through the secondary school
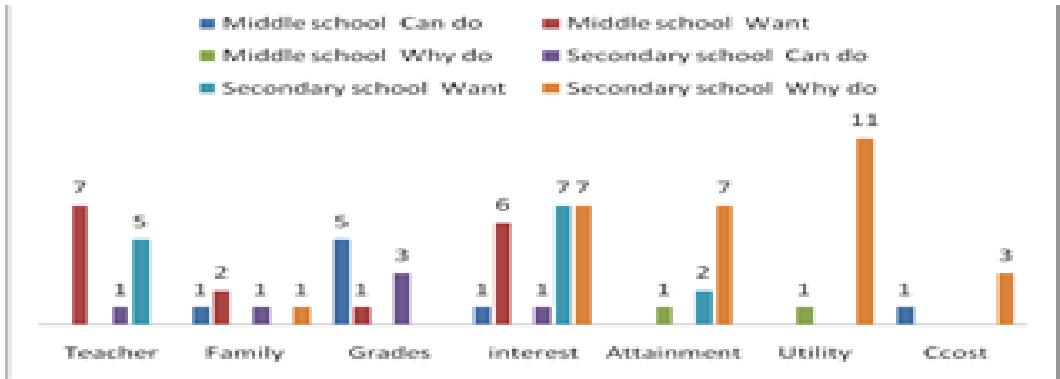
The motivational profiles of the surveyed sample students are diverse. They represent the EVT framework in different types and degrees in terms of motivated choices. Starting from the middle school, teachers seem to play a decisive and long-lasting effect in persuading learners to love English. The analysis of students' explanations and terms has revealed 7 declarations about teachers who made students be interested in English. How teachers do this is mainly through their "*funny*" behaviour, through encouraging students, as well as through their "*pronunciation*".

In six cases, students declared to be intrinsically motivated in the middle school by themselves just because English was a new language. Some reported explanations include the foreign and original aspect of the language, its pronunciation and even liking English through movies.

Intrinsic value is immediately followed by grades (in 5 cases) which may inform and indicate to learners that they are competent and, therefore, make them love their outcomes even more. In other words, the first years are crucial in building ability beliefs, especially when the children have no previous experience in English in the primary school or outside school. Grades are therefore of great importance. This tendency is less expressed in the secondary school stage.

At the secondary school level, learners (with four years of English instruction) seem to develop rather a new type of motivation through utility value which almost unheard about during the middle school (only one case). Utility value is expressed eleven (11) times with reference to the secondary school. Secondary school learners seem to be more aware of the pragmatic usefulness of learning English and how it could serve them in the future. We picked up some testimonies such as study abroad, migrate, business and trade, get a job with multinationals, etc.

8. CONCLUSION

We conclude the present article by providing some instructional and teaching recommendations which might help in defining a planned policy for academic counselling, especially in terms of language education, which starts from the middle school to the end of the secondary school.

We also conclude by suggesting some other research directions applying achievement motivational research in the field of ELT.

To investigate students' beliefs and motivations and to predict future academic behaviours, EVT provides an interesting research framework (Schmidt, Boraie, and Kassabgy, 1996). Future research can use more complex and powerful quantitative and qualitative methods in mixed research design such as using structural equation modelling and learners' diaries and/or narratives.

In this way, researchers can integrate as many variables as hypothesised in conformation with EVT. This study is limited both in terms of the number of variables and the methodological tools used.

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