BOYS’ MOTIVATION TOWARDS THE LEARNING OF MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Introduction
This study explores the apparent lack of motivation in boys towards the learning of modern foreign languages (MFL) in Scotland. It seeks to determine the extent of their disaffection, as well as whether specific factors affect this lack of interest. Its authors have drawn on recent literature and research before undertaking a survey of boys’ views and then evaluating the evidence. It is hoped that the research might highlight areas of modern foreign language teaching and learning where further development could be undertaken with a view to enhancing boys’ learning.

A retrospective view of the 1980s and 1990s shows that girls were seen as ‘underachievers’ in maths and science and much effort was devoted to the development of programmes designed to stimulate their interest in these fields. Boys’ underachievement was perhaps overshadowed and their difficulties remained largely unaddressed. As a result of the Munn review of the curriculum, languages were eventually established as one of the core subjects in S3 and S4 with virtually all pupils in these year groups having to study a language. It could be argued that there was little account taken of the learning styles and needs of individual pupils in the languages classroom, especially the increased number of boys many of whom would have previously opted out at the end of S2.

Whether nature, nurture or biology lies at the root of gender differences in learning is not the purpose of this study. Rather, it accepts that there tends to be an unhappy marriage between boys and language learning and seeks data which will lead to a better understanding of the problem.

Background
The co-authors of this work are specialists in modern foreign languages and, as such, have drawn inspiration from their desire to capture the enthusiasm of more pupils towards the learning of their subjects. Both have previously been involved in larger pieces of research, one of which centred on motivation in MFL studies while the other examined how formative assessment can enhance boys’ learning in French. A logical extension of their work was to investigate in greater depth boys’ motivation towards the learning of languages in general.
The authors fully recognise the dangers of stereotyping and acknowledge that, in the words of Geoff Hannan, “there are far more differences within groups than between groups.” According to research done on behalf of Glasgow City Council (2001), 20% of boys are girl-type learners and 10% of girls are boy-type learners. When referring to ‘boys’ they are therefore alluding to a group of learners and not assuming a clear-cut distinction based on gender alone.

This study centres round motivation, which is seen as a central component to successfully acquiring knowledge. Lack of motivation can hinder learning, while being motivated can greatly enhance the same.

One of the competences on which beginning teachers are assessed is their ability to “motivate and sustain the interest of all pupils.” This raises the question of how many experienced teachers can claim to do so consistently. In modern languages the issue of motivation has always been on the agenda. Many pupils fail to appreciate the benefits of learning a foreign language perhaps because of the extent to which English has become a lingua franca. It is little wonder that many pupils retain the perception that languages are not really necessary.

Relevance to Current Climate in Education

This is a timely investigation with particular relevance to a number of current educational initiatives in Scotland.

More specifically:

- ‘A Curriculum for Excellence’ desires, amongst other things, that schools create successful learners. If motivation in pupils is lacking then optimum results cannot be realised. However, the following statement from the Curriculum for Excellence Modern Languages Cover Paper heralds a reassuring opportunity for MFL teachers and language learners:

  The curriculum review offers an opportunity to further develop learning and teaching experiences that are relevant and enjoyable. This will include making effective use of information and communication technology to enhance teaching and learning, and providing real-life contexts that motivate children and young people and help them to see a purpose to their language learning.

(A Curriculum for Excellence 2004)
‘How Good is our School?’ (2002) acknowledges the need for pupils to take on more responsibility for their own motivation. We must therefore look at the reasons for their current lack of motivation if this trend is to be reversed.

‘The Motivated School’ McLean (2003) shows how important students' motivational mindsets can be. He presents a model of motivation involving engagement, feedback, structure, and stimulation in influencing the way they learn. His research has been influential in the Scottish context and has been adopted as a development programme by the Scottish Government ‘www.themotivatedschool.com’, the overarching aim of which is to promote a better understanding of the nature and effect of motivation on learners.

The authors of this study also recognise the need for inclusion in our schools. If current MFL teaching tends to motivate one gender more than the other, we may be failing to offer equitable opportunities to all of our pupils.

Research Questions

Previous research points to a considerable amount of disaffection among boys towards MFL studies, for example publications by HMI (1990) and Jones (2001). This study accepts these findings and investigates five relevant areas:

- What is the extent of boys’ disaffection with MFL learning?
- Does boys’ ability affect their lack of motivation?
- Does boys’ lack of motivation vary with age/adolescence?
- Is boys’ lack of motivation consistent across different languages?
- Does methodology play a part in boys’ lack of motivation?

Literature Review

For the purposes of this study, literature has been reviewed in three relevant sections:

1. Motivation
2. The Current Position of Boys and MFL Learning
3. Boys’ Learning
Motivation


_The study of L2 motivation reached an exciting turning point in the 1990s with a variety of new models and approaches proposed in the literature; resulting in what Gardner and Tremblay (1994) have called a ‘motivational renaissance._ (Dörnyei 2001)

Within the domain of second language acquisition motivation has been a major research topic for some 40 years, largely initiated and inspired by the work of the psychologists Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert in Canada. They located motivation research in a social-psychological framework, establishing scientific research procedures and introducing standardized assessment techniques and instruments. Such approaches predominated through the 1970s and 1980s and it was not until the early 1990s that there occurred a marked shift in perspective. As Dörnyei indicates as he traces this change of focus:

_While acknowledging unanimously the fundamental importance of the Gardnerian social-psychological model, researchers were also calling for a more pragmatic, education-centred approach to motivation research, which would be consistent with the perceptions of practising teachers and which would also be in line with the current results of mainstream educational psychological research._ (Dörnyei 1994: 273)

It is accepted that Gardner’s motivation theory does include an educational dimension and that his motivation test does contain several items which focus on the learner’s evaluation of the classroom learning situation. However, overall this history has been characterized by a shift of focus away from the learner’s motivation to learn, an initial “orientation” which is either “instrumental”, meaning the perceived practical advantages for work, education, travel, or “integrative”, meaning the desire to integrate culturally and socially with speakers of the language. Instead an emphasis was being placed on motivation in and resulting, positively or negatively, from varied changing learning situations.
Particularly welcome is the assumption that motivation can be increased or decreased; that it is not a unitary characteristic of which learners have a lot or a little. In the Scottish context the presence in learners of integrative and/or instrumental orientations is hard to detect. Certainly O’Reilly Cavani & Birks (2001) were able to claim that 89% of pupils surveyed felt that learning French or any foreign language was generally useful. However, almost three quarters of pupils thought that most businesses in Europe use English as their main language, with only just over half of pupils believing that businesses actively recruit people who study a foreign language. This gap between what is considered desirable and the motivation to take appropriate action is reflected in an interesting Eurobarometer survey conducted for the European Year of Languages across all the member states. (King 2001). It was found that with regard to language competence, in the UK only 35% of those surveyed claimed to know more than one language (compared to 50% in France and 87% in the Netherlands) but when asked whether “foreign language skills are useful” 74% said they were and about the same proportion thought that “everyone should speak at least one foreign language”. In both cases this was above the European average. It would seem that while the importance of speaking a foreign language is acknowledged, the motivation to undertake the study required to achieve competence in the use of a foreign language is lacking. The view that motivation can be increased suggests that this depressing picture might be capable of change.

Dörnyei attempted a synthesis of the static and dynamic conceptions of motivation by defining it thus.

“A process whereby a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, or until the planned outcome has been reached’.

(Dörnyei 1998b)

This definition would seem to describe very well the situation in the average modern languages classroom in Scotland where much of the instigation and initiation come from the classroom teacher. Dörnyei points out.

“Every different psychological perspective on human behaviour is associated with a different theory of motivation and, thus, in general psychology it is not the lack but rather the abundance of motivation theories which confuses the scene. (Dörnyei 1998b: 118).
In this respect the general framework conceptualized by (1998a) based on a review of the literature was found to be most helpful. This framework consists of three levels: the Language Level, the Learner Level and the Learning Situation Level.

The Language Level is the most general level and encompasses Gardner’s two broad motivational subsystems, an integrative and an instrumental motivational subsystem.

The second level of the L2 motivation construct is the Learner Level. This relates to the learner’s self-appraisal of strengths and weaknesses. It incorporates two underlying motivational components, need for achievement and self-confidence.

The third level of Dörnyei’s construct is the Learning Situation Level. In recent years, partly because of some equivocal findings regarding the importance of integrative and instrumental orientations, there has been a search for a new paradigm. Several L2 scholars maintain that other reasons for learning an L2, particularly those pertaining to dynamics in the classroom context, may be at least as important as the integrative orientation and hence warrant greater empirical attention.

An interesting investigation by Chambers (1998) compared the perceptions of a group of school learners of German in England with those of a group of school learners of English in Germany. He found that of all the factors which may contribute to a pupil’s positive or negative evaluation of a subject, the teacher came out on top for all cohorts in both countries. This was also found in the OXPROD study by Filmer-Sankey (1993). The teacher was found to be a factor which permeates almost every issue investigated in the survey relating to pupils’ feelings about learning German or English and ‘in-school’ issues. As Chambers puts it:

The teaching methodology, the textbook, the computers available count for little if the teacher-pupil relationship is lacking. The teacher carries an enormous burden. (Chambers 1998: 252).

Diffey et al. (2001) found that Scottish pupils, when asked how important it was to like the French teacher did not seem to perceive this as a major issue. They did not see much difference between French and other school subjects in this respect. In contrast Jones and Jones (2001) found that boys saw modern languages as different from other subjects partly because of the central position of the teacher in the language classroom. In addition, because the pedagogy of modern languages is so teacher-centred boys who are under-performing tend to see the teacher as responsible for the difficulties they are having. Galloway (1998) reports that a consistent finding
in school effectiveness research in the UK is that differences between teachers within
a school exceed the differences between schools.
At Dörnyei’s *Learning Situation Level* the three sets of motivational conditions he
identifies were also found useful for providing a framework for the classroom context:
1. *Course-specific motivational components* which relate to the motivational influence
of the syllabus, teaching materials, teaching methods and learning activities.
2. *Teacher-specific motivational components* which relate to the teacher-pupil
relationship, the teacher’s approach to the management of behaviour, the promotion
of the sharing of ideas between pupils as well as between teacher and pupils and the
provision of motivating feedback.
3. *Group-specific motivational components* which relate to the dynamics of the
learning group, its participation in collaboration, its shared goals and shared norms of
behaviour.

**The Current Position of Boys and MFL Learning**
Whether it is related to attainment or attitude and motivation, there seems to be much
evidence to indicate that boys and modern foreign language learning are often
perceived as incompatible. Among the most concerning facts are the following:
1. An HMI (1990) publication stated that half of the pupils learning French in S2 were
boys but this figure fell to 36% in S4 and only 26% in S5.
2. In Hawick High School there is currently an initiative to raise girls’ attainment
because boys there ‘buck the trend’ by outperforming girls in eleven out of eighteen
Standard Grade subjects. Despite this trend in that school, girls still attain more highly
in French, English and Art – the traditionally more creative and language-based
subjects. (Blane 2006).
3. In the *Times Educational Supplement* (2006, 5 May, p.1) Henderson leads with the
fact that boys are “closing the attainment gap on girls at Higher and Advanced
Higher.” Perhaps astonishingly, 76% of Higher French candidates are girls, although
boys at least match their pass rate – the pertinent question is ‘why do so many boys
discontinue their study of the language before this level?’
The same author in the same publication (2006, 31 March, p.3) wrote of the current
uptake of Higher Modern Languages and noted concern about the “levels of
proficiency and pupils’ motivation, particularly that of boys,” while a university
lecturer is also quoted as saying that her languages students now largely comprise “young women who are privately educated.”

4. Evidence of girls outperforming boys is also available for the junior school. The First Survey of Modern Languages (2001) discovered that girls in S2 attained more highly at Level E in all skills in French. Interestingly, this difference was less marked in German, although still significant.

While these facts and figures refer to statistical evidence, how do boys themselves see their study of languages? The investigation carried out by Jones and Jones (2001) provides us with a clear insight into boys’ views on modern foreign languages. The following are the salient points from their findings:

- boys describe a real lack of content in MFL: it is ‘all words not substance.’
- boys show concern about the lack of independence in MFL classrooms. In Sciences, for example, they can work things out for themselves.
- boys are significantly more likely than girls to find French unimportant and significantly less likely to find it enjoyable.
- boys are “less inclined to concentrate, memorise, listen to others, follow instructions and work constructively with peers (p.20).”
- boys found the teacher’s position is more central to classroom activity than in other subjects.
- boys were concerned about the complex and cumulative nature of competencies.

**Boys’ Learning**

Geoff Hannan (1996) offers an insight into the typical boy learner, as well as strategies to improve boys’ performance. He cites the following characteristics:

- he is a ‘doer’ first and a ‘thinker’ second
- he has a shorter concentration span
- he is more easily bored (therefore more likely to disrupt)
- he has weaker listening, verbal and literacy skills
- he has weaker social and collaborative skills
- he has less ability to reflect
- he has less ability to organise and plan work
• he is highly influenced by his peer group
• he is likely to over-estimate his ability
• he cannot multitask
• he takes more risks
• he seeks immediate gratification
• he is an experiential learner and speculative thinker.

Glasgow City Council (2001, p.24) add that boys enjoy challenge and competition and that they work better if they see a clear purpose, while Sukhnandan et al (2000) claim that boys are more able to memorise unambiguous facts and are willing to “sacrifice deep learning” for correct, speedy answers.

Hannan (1996) refers to reflection as being an inherent component of learning. He describes the prevalent model of conversation as “descriptive, reflective, speculative” with males tending to omit the reflective part. If reflection is difficult for boys, we as teachers surely need to take account of the fact that “in subjects where reflection or analysis is a strong element, the gender imbalance in attainment is greater” (Glasgow City Council, 2001, p.43). Modern Languages undoubtedly belong in this category.

Recent research and literature offer a variety of reasons for boys’ distinctive learning styles. These fall into a number of categories:

**Nature**

Darwinists would explain gender differences in terms of evolution and the traditional rôles held by males and females – women have had the rôle of nurturers/talkers/homemakers, whereas men have had solitary rôles like hunters.

Women have therefore needed to communicate more and have developed superior linguistic skills. Noble et al (2001, p.20) quote research which claims markedly different linguistic ability from an early age. Once again, Hannan (1996) discovered that girls make up stories with a beginning, middle and end which enhances their ability to learn – lots of learning is sequential.

**Biology**

Brain research offers other innate factors. Our brains develop differently according to gender even before we are born, with females having more language centres and males having more visuo-spatial centres. Neall (2002, pp.4-5) sets out the differences between the hemispheres of the brain in males and females. Four functions which are
keys to school performance (mechanics of language, vocabulary, visuo-spatial perception, emotion) are each located in only one hemisphere of the male brain whereas three out of four are found in both hemispheres of that of the female. Female brains have also been found to have more connections between the two hemispheres. It is widely claimed that there are three preferred ways of learning – auditory, visual and kinaesthetic. Visual and kinaesthetic learners process information mainly from the right side of the brain, the dominant side in boys’ learning. Noble et al (2001, p.100) link Howard Gardner’s (1993) eight intelligences to these three styles of learning and, most significantly for language learning, ‘verbal/linguistic’ is linked to auditory learning, the weakest style in boys.

**Nurture**

Reasons for gender differences explained by nurture cover a variety of learned attitudes and behaviours and these seem often to be modelled unconsciously. Minns (1991, p.12) says that “social and cultural attitudes about gender are learnt from birth and are modelled and reinforced, often unconsciously, by parents and other significant adults, including teachers.” Bleach (1998) too maintains that socialisation towards particular rôles takes place based on adult interpretation of appropriate behaviour. He also claims that by secondary age boys want to do everything quickly, prefer short-term targets and identify with macho values which equate studying with being ‘unmanly’ and lead to potential disruption.

**Socio-economic factors**

According to Noble et al (2001, p.20) changes in society have caused a major upheaval in the rôle of the male. These authors point out that traditional industry was a bastion of male values but nowadays it is the service sector which dominates and, unfortunately for males, good communication skills are often required. These jobs are frequently done therefore by women and consequently some boys see it as a ‘female thing’ to work, say Noble et al (2001). Another change in society according to Noble et al (2001) and also Pickering (2001) is the increased number of single-parent families, the vast majority of which are headed by a woman. This has the effect of there being no significant adult male in many boys’ lives. In a study by Kirby (2000, p.3) the effects of home life are examined further and he concludes that even the recent decline in mealtimes (with the accompanying rules of social interaction) has deprived the modern boy of the chance to develop his language centres.
Peer pressure
Pickering (2001, p.37) claims that “for most boys it is more important to be one of the lads than it is to work hard in school.” Also Epstein et al (1999, p.106) alludes to the peer demand that boys do work, are competitive and are “rough, tough and dangerous to know.”

Curricular / school based
Boys’ attributes are not particularly favoured by the requirements of coursework, e.g. sustained effort, process as well as outcome and often a considerable amount of well-presented written work. Exams themselves may suit boys’ sudden bursts of effort but national awards in recent years have incorporated increased amounts of coursework. This is certainly true in modern languages. Fairness to all learners is however advocated by Arnot et al (1998) when they recommend a variety of assessment modes so that “all pupils have opportunities to produce their best performance (p.39).”

Another potential barrier to boys’ learning within schools is the fact that they are faced with an increased proportion of female teachers. Neall (2002, p.7) quotes three possible detrimental effects of this:

- that boys have fewer male rôle models
- that schools have moved towards valuing ‘female’ qualities such as order and conscientiousness, while ‘male’ traits like energy and daring are even perceived as disruptive.
- that boys may see learning as a female activity and therefore irrelevant to them.

The latest government figures show that in Scotland in 2007 there were fourteen times as many female primary school teachers as male and secondary schools were also seeing fewer men entering the profession.

Research Methodology
Having completed a detailed review of recent literature questionnaires were subsequently developed and piloted as a method of gathering the required information. This method of data collection was chosen because of its ability to provide quantitative responses to the research questions and because it would be relatively easy to administer. The anonymity of the respondents could be ensured, thus increasing the likelihood of honest answers from the young people involved.
Boys of all academic abilities and year groups in two secondary schools were targeted, as well as some pupils from two of the associated primaries. Both schools are located in relatively affluent suburbs of Glasgow where attainment in national qualifications is higher than the national average. In both secondary schools the first foreign language is French, which is studied by almost all pupils from S1-4. In one of the schools some pupils have the opportunity to begin German in S2 as a second foreign language. It was also important to note in the questionnaires those boys who studied more than one language. The uptake of a language after S4 drops dramatically, although this too is above the national average in both schools.

**Research Findings**

There were approximately 500 returns of questionnaires issued to boys from P7-S6. In the figures which follow, raw data has been converted to percentages, which have been adjusted to the nearest whole number. ‘Unsure’ answers have not been included in the analysis.

**What is the extent of boys’ disaffection with MFL learning?**

Boys were asked whether they found MFL learning enjoyable, whether they found it easy and whether it mattered to them that they do their best. Their responses were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P7</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5/6</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>enjoyable</td>
<td>+ 55</td>
<td>- 5</td>
<td>+ 44</td>
<td>- 18</td>
<td>+ 32</td>
<td>- 26</td>
<td>+ 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important</td>
<td>+ 93</td>
<td>- 2</td>
<td>+ 79</td>
<td>- 7</td>
<td>+ 64</td>
<td>- 13</td>
<td>+ 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to do their</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>best</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Percentages of boys who agreed (+) / disagreed (-) that language learning was enjoyable, easy and who felt it important to do their best.
Points of note:

- The study of a language is compulsory for the boys who responded until the end of S4. The boys in S5/6 have therefore elected to continue their language studies and would seem correspondingly to find them more enjoyable, although many also acknowledge that language study is not easy.
- In general, high percentages want to do well but have to fight their lack of enjoyment and the perceived difficulty of languages. This supports the findings of King’s survey (2001).
- In every year group the percentage of boys who disagree that language learning is easy is higher than the percentage of those who agree.
- The number of boys who felt it was important to do their best was much higher across all years (except S5/6) than the number who found the subject enjoyable or easy.
- Enjoyment of language learning tails off from P7 towards S3/4.

**Does boys’ ability affect their lack of motivation?**

For the purposes of this study, boys’ ability was determined by examining their levels of attainment in a variety of subject as well as French. Those in S1/2 were classed as ‘less able’ if they were not reaching the expected working levels for their stage. ‘Less able’ in S3/4 were those working at Foundation/ General level. P7 boys have not been included in this analysis as there was insufficient evidence to distinguish between the ‘able’ and ‘less able.’

During the collation of data, it became clear that a significant number of ‘able’ boys indicated that French was their weakest subject. This was most prevalent in S2-S4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S1 able</th>
<th>S1 less able</th>
<th>S2 able</th>
<th>S2 less able</th>
<th>S3 able</th>
<th>S3 less able</th>
<th>S4 able</th>
<th>S4 less able</th>
<th>Total able</th>
<th>Total less able</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>enjoyable</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important to do their best</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Percentages of ‘able’ and ‘less able’ boys who agreed that language learning was enjoyable, easy and who felt it important to do their best.
Points of note:

- Only a small percentage of ‘less able’ boys found language learning easy.
- Although boys did not generally find languages enjoyable, the percentage of the ‘less able’ was even lower than for boys as a whole.
- Amongst the ‘able’ boys enjoyment dropped considerably after S1
- Relatively high percentages of boys in both groups thought it important to do their best but this was much less evident in the ‘less able’ group.

**Does boys’ lack of motivation vary with age/adolescence?**

Figure 3 charts the evidence from figures 1 and 2, showing an apparent downward trend in levels of enjoyment in S2-4. Is it that the novelty value of a new language wears off? Does learning a language actually become more difficult? Does methodology differ as we head towards Standard Grade? Do boys preferences in methodology change in adolescence and these are not being addressed?

![Figure 3. Percentages of boys who found language learning enjoyable, easy and who saw it as important to do their best.](image-url)

Points of note:

- Even although some boys found it enjoyable, language study was perceived as not easy by many. This did not vary significantly across the year groups.
- High percentages of junior and senior school boys want to do their best but this figure is lower in the later year groups.
- Enjoyment of language study dropped in the middle years (S2-4).
Is boys’ lack of motivation consistent across different foreign languages?

This was less easy to evaluate with any level of precision as there were few boys studying a language other than French. Those who did so, were found almost uniquely in S3/4, while the senior pupils had discontinued with these studies. Both schools had junior pupils studying only French, with a few exceptions amongst the more able in S2 of one school. The latter group is not included in this evaluation due to their small number and relative inexperience of the language at the time of issuing questionnaires.

Interestingly, some boys studying German as well as French volunteered orally that they much preferred German and offered reasons which centred round methodology and the systematic way in which they had to master its grammar.

It was possible to compare the experiences of boys’ in S3 and S4 who study French with those who study German as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FR</td>
<td>GER</td>
<td>FR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoyable</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easy</td>
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<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important to do their best</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Percentages of opinions of boys studying different languages who agreed (+) / disagreed (-) that language learning was enjoyable, easy and who felt it important to do their best.

Points of note:

- Boys in these year groups studying German clearly rated it more enjoyable than those studying French.
- More boys who studied German found it easier, although percentages indicate generally that neither is perceived as particularly easy.
- The percentages of German pupils who saw doing their best as important was especially high. This might well reflect the views they expressed orally about preferring German to French but it might also reflect the academic ability of these boys – few, if any, were less able.'
There was no significant difference in other sections of the questionnaire. Boys all preferred the same kinds of methodology and rated the importance of the teacher as central to their views etc.

**Does methodology play a part in boys’ lack of motivation?**

Boys were questioned about the extent to which their opinions of language learning was affected by the atmosphere in class, the materials and activities used and the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P7</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5/6</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>atmosphere</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>methods</td>
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Figure 5. Percentages of boys who agreed (+) / disagreed (-) that these factors influenced their opinions of language learning.

Points of note:

- Percentages acknowledging the importance of all three components are consistently high.
- Boys are apparently more than willing to acknowledge the rôle of the teacher in forming their opinions. Chambers (1998) and Filmer-Sankey (1993) also found that the importance of the teacher permeates all other issues.
- The importance of the atmosphere in class may well link to the importance of peer influence as claimed by Pickering (2001). S3 boys, however, did not see this as of great significance to them.

Further to this, in order to gain insight into opinions on different types of methodology, boys were asked to examine various activities and say how much they felt these helped them to learn their language. They were negative about very little.
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Figure 6. Percentage of boys who felt that each type of methodology helped them to learn the language.

Points of note:

- Learning collaboratively (in groups or pairs) was universally felt to be most helpful.
- Boys in S5/6 favoured activities linked directly to the components of their examinations (reading, speaking, writing), although listening activities was the exception to this. They clearly found favour with collaborative learning too.
- Listening activities were not judged as favourably as the other methods and this would support the findings of the brain researchers that boys are not naturally good listeners.

As a final question, the boys were invited to write down which, if any, of the above activities they actually **liked** to do in class. Most chose to write down two or three and some also added other preferences. Four activities stood out in every year group - games, DVD’s, group work and working in pairs. A significant number of boys also added that they would like to learn using more IT.
CONCLUSION

Motivation is a topic which has long been a key interest of the teaching profession. It is a vital component in the acquisition of knowledge and an effective teacher will see the ability to motivate as a major factor in their contribution to pupil development.

In the learning of modern foreign languages motivation, or, more often the lack of it, has been on the agenda for decades. Its absence has prompted large numbers of pupils to opt out of languages as soon as they are no longer compulsory. This opting-out trend has been stronger in boys. That is not to say that there are no successful male linguists in our schools. Indeed, the opposite is true but their number is comparatively small.

The boys in this study were overwhelmingly convinced of the importance of the teacher and of the atmosphere in class to their opinions of the subject. It might be reasonable to posit that where pupil motivation is lacking there is scope for greater intervention by the teacher to improve pupils’ experiences in and perceptions of language learning.

The draft Language Experiences and Outcomes of Curriculum for Excellence have the potential to have a positive impact on teaching and learning. In particular, they have the potential to revitalise the key principles of communicative methodologies which align so well with features of classroom interaction that are known to have a positive influence on attitudes and motivation.

If MFL teachers do manage to ‘provide real-life contexts that motivate children and young people’ then it would be reasonable to predict a marked improvement in enjoyment and performance. But if MFL teachers assume that all children are the same or learn in the same way, it is destined to fail many of them.

This study reveals some challenging questions which merit careful reflection. Relatively minor modifications to classroom practice can address the particular learning styles of many boys. There is a need to raise the awareness of boys’ learning preferences, principally: to ensure that our lessons are less teacher-centred and allow boys to be involved in more active learning; to provide additional support for boys who are not naturally good at listening; to issue short-term targets and to set challenges; to give clear justification for activities in order to help them to see a purpose to their language learning.
Bibliography


Glasgow City Council (2001). *Gender Issues in Raising the Attainment of Boys and Girls.* Glasgow City Council.


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