

The Influence of the Classroom Climate on Students' Motivation

Judit Heitzmann

Béla III High School, Baja, Hungary

hjudit@bajabela.sulinet.hu

Introduction

The paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study into secondary-school students' motivation to learn English as a foreign language (EFL). It aims to explore the atmosphere of the classroom through the eyes of the participants and thus gain an emic perspective on the interaction between various motivational factors. Participants were 16 students at a secondary grammar school and data was gathered from a variety of sources including students' self-report diaries, the teacher's diary, focus group interviews, and reports given by external observers. My investigations found that the students had a clear understanding of the learning process and effective classroom management. The findings carry important pedagogical implications, as they highlight the responsibility of the teacher in creating a learning environment where students can attain their goals.

Learning motivation and especially students' motivation to learn a foreign language (L2) appears to be an area of general interest among educational researchers as well as practising teachers. Despite the fact that there is an extensive literature on the subject, no clear consensus exists over a comprehensive definition of the construct (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Although there are overlaps and recurring characteristics, different researchers suggest different frameworks, the most elaborate of which was probably proposed by Dörnyei (1994). He attempted to integrate the multitude of existing motivational variables into a multilevel model, which distinguishes three levels of motivation: the language level, the learner level and the learning situation level. Each of these reflects different dimensions of language learning: the social, the personal and the educational aspect respectively.

The new frameworks also inspired studies carried out in EFL settings and thus the classroom milieu got in the limelight. A new approach, the process-oriented view has gained ground, and researchers investigate the ways in which the different mental processes that affect L2 learning and achievement operate (Dörnyei, 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Motivation is now seen as a dynamic concept, in which time is considered to be a determining factor (Dörnyei, 2000, 2001; Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998; Ushioda, 1996; Volet, 2001). Consequently, attention is directed towards attitudes and motivation concerning the learning environment, more specifically the course, and the role that peers and teachers play (see, for example,

Burnett, 2002; Nikolov, 2000, 2001; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999). Despite this shift in interest towards L2 learning settings, the number of empirical studies examining the classroom climate is relatively small.

Research on motivation in the classroom

Research focusing on the impact that experiences of an EFL class exert on learners' motivation and development has shown that the dynamics of the language classroom is a motivational factor as important as integrative orientation (see Brown, 1990; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Crooks & Schmidt, 1991; Ramage, 1990). This finding is supported by Kormos and Lukóczy (2004), who suggest that a negative classroom atmosphere might lead to a decrease in motivation. In a case study of Hungarian secondary school students, they identify the following classroom-related factors causing de-motivation: lack of group norms, peers' attitude, lack of discipline, and the teacher's incoherent explanations.

The role of classroom climate is emphasised by several other researchers (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Ghaith, 2003; Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996); moreover, research has shown that the climate of the whole school influences the motivation of both teachers and students (Maehr & Midgley, 1991). In interpreting the findings of their research, Inbar, Donitsa-Schmidt and Shohamy (2001) assume that factors such as the school's educational policy and teachers' beliefs and actions play a decisive role in forming students' motivation. A negative example is given by Williams and Burden (1999), who argue that in an achievement-oriented school, students will most probably set performance goals for themselves rather than learning goals, and their self-perceptions will be based on external rewards, such as marks and examination results. This practice, however, will not foster their ability to become effective and successful learners.

Closely related to the issue of classroom climate is another, equally important social influence on motivation and the role that peers play in the learning process. Aspects that have been researched include, among others, friendship, co-operative learning, and help seeking. While Goodenow (1993) argues that a supportive peer group facilitates learning, Ladd (1990) emphasises the benefits of good social skills, saying that students who are accepted by their peers also become more successful learners. Slavin (1990), on the other hand, approaches the issue from the perspective of co-operative learning. He assumes that the mere enjoyment that derives from collaborative activities may enhance students' motivation. Moreover, since peers help each other to understand and master the subject matter by discussing it, their achievement will also improve. A similar idea, help seeking from peers is discussed by Newman (1994), who has found that in a classroom where learning goals are emphasised, children are more ready to seek help when they face difficulties, in order to keep engaged in an activity.

Throughout the studies on classroom motivation, great emphasis is put on the role of teachers and, more specifically, on the effects of their teaching and communicative styles. Burnett's (2002) study, investigating the relationship between teacher praise and feedback and elementary school students' perceptions of the

atmosphere in the classroom, yielded a rather surprising result. On the one hand, he found no significant correlations between general teacher praise and students' perceptions of the classroom climate. On the other hand, feedback on ability exerted a direct influence on how students felt about their classes, while negative feedback and feedback on effort showed a direct impact on their relationship with teachers. On the whole, frequent feedback on ability and effort seemed to result in their satisfaction with the learning environment.

The importance of the teacher's communicative style is also highlighted by Piniel (2004). Exploring the possible sources of learners' anxiety in the foreign language classroom, she arrives at the conclusion that teachers' unclear explanations, unfair assessment, unpredictable classroom management, and instructions that are difficult to understand do not only cause feelings of apprehension but might lead to students' demotivation in the long run.

The focus in Noels, Clément and Pelletier's (1999) study is on the impact that teachers' instructional styles have on students' motivational goals. The authors assess the relationship between motivational orientations and various language learning outcomes within the self-determination paradigm, with specific regard to the way in which teachers interact with their students. The results of their investigations reveal that teachers who are supportive of learner autonomy and who also provide useful feedback about their students' progress may foster internally regulated motivation, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of achievement. These findings support the self-determination theory suggested by Deci and Ryan (1985) and are also in line with Guay and Vallerand's (1997) claim that teaching styles and learners' perceptions of these styles impact motivational orientations.

An intriguing question, 'What kind of classroom milieu is likely to facilitate learning and achievement?' is asked by Meece (1994). Drawing on the findings emerging from a series of observations of elementary science classes (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988), she identifies high versus low mastery oriented classes, and explains the reasons for students adopting either type of goal by their teachers' instructional strategies. She has found that in the high mastery classes, the teachers monitored their students' understanding of the material and gave support to their efforts to solve problems independently. They encouraged learners to actively participate in the lesson by leaving room for peer collaboration. However, extrinsic rewards like grades were rarely used as a means of motivating students. On the other hand, low mastery classes turned out to be dominated by rote learning and the recitation of the material. Students were rarely involved in the construction of meaning and they had little opportunity to co-operate with peers. Despite the fact that the teachers did not tailor the lessons to the learners' needs or abilities, assessment played a major role in the teaching process.

Similar findings surface from Syed's (2001) study, the aim of which is to identify the factors that help students to maintain their interest in learning an L2. The results suggest that the way in which the language is taught may act as an important motivational factor. Apparently, by making an effort to meet learners' needs and personalising the teaching material, teachers can enhance their students' motivation greatly.

The quality of the teaching programme was found to be accountable for students' wishing to continue their language studies in Inbar, Donitsa-Schmidt and Shohamy's (2001) research. What makes their findings remarkable is the context of the study: the authors investigated the teaching of Arabic to Hebrew-speaking students in Israel. It seems that good quality teaching methods are always appreciated by the students, moreover, devoted teachers' efforts to promote motivation can even rise above political conflict.

The teacher's responsibility is also emphasised from another perspective. Apparently, teaching methods and evaluation practices may debilitate motivation if they make the differences in students' abilities clearly visible in the classroom (Ames, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1991). Whole class activities, group formation according to ability, and the public display of feedback convey the salience of achievement or competition; therefore, they direct students towards ego-involved performance goals. On the other hand, in classes where learner autonomy is supported and students' improvement is valued, learners are more positively motivated.

Nikolov (2001) takes an interesting approach to the issue when she interviews young adults who consider themselves unsuccessful language learners. Again, classroom experience, teaching methods and assessment practices seem to be salient factors accountable for student motivation and long-term learning outcomes.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relevance of theory in the classroom context, that is, to explore how different affective variables that are emphasised in the literature relate to everyday teaching practices. It investigates actual classroom practices in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What motivational factors trigger students' choice of action?
2. What role does the teacher play in enhancing motivation in the classroom?
3. How do peers contribute to a supportive atmosphere?

Methods

Participants and setting

The participants were 16 students from my own secondary grammar school, Béla III High School Gimnázium in Baja. The school has a good reputation for its high standard of teaching and is very popular in the region, which is indicated by the number of applications every year. In the past decade, there have always been twice as many applicants as there were places. Apart from the usual four years, the school also offers five years' tuition, which includes a year of intensive language learning, and a six-year programme starting with year 7 (age 12).

At the beginning of the data gathering procedure, the participants were in year 9, starting their third year at the school. Compared to the average Hungarian secondary school student, their general academic motivation could be described as fairly high: they all came to the school with the aim of continuing their studies in tertiary education and were working hard towards that goal.

Instruments

Data collection lasted for four years and included a wide range of sources. To address the issue of classroom atmosphere, verbal data was collected from the following sources: students' diaries, the teacher's diary, focus group interview, and external observers' reports. The majority of the information was provided by the focus group interview, during which the participants discussed the following questions:

- What should an English class be like?
- To what extent do lessons meet students' expectations?
- What are the good points of the lessons? What activities do they find useful?
- What would they do differently?
- Do they get enough help from the teacher to reach their goals?
- In what fields do they feel that they are making progress?
- How are English lessons different from other classes?

This data was supplemented by students' diary entries, in which they were asked to compare English classes with science lessons like Physics and Chemistry, and by the comments that were made by external observers after visiting English classes. In this paper, students are quoted under pseudonyms.

Data analysis

All the verbal data was analysed qualitatively using the constant comparative method, as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), in order to find emerging patterns.

Results and discussion

What factors trigger students' choice of action?

A clear pattern seems to emerge from the data, which is consistent with Dörnyei's (1994) definition of the learning situation level. The findings uncover similar factors influencing the climate of the classroom and, consequently, students' motivational behaviour to the ones clustering around the teacher and the learning group in the multilevel model of L2 motivation proposed by Dörnyei (1994). As shown in Table 1, teacher specific variables are inclusive of the teacher's style, teaching methods, and her experience and personality, while group specific factors comprise group cohesion, goal setting and members' willingness to participate in the learning process. The only external factor that surfaced is the influence of the timetable.

Table 1: Factors influencing classroom climate

classification	Factor	frequency*
Teacher-specific factors	teaching style	
	- pace of lesson	13
	- arousing interest	6
	- discipline in class	6
	teaching methods	
	- explanation/rote learning	13
	- variety	11
	- student involvement	9
Group-specific factors	teacher's experience and personality	8
	group cohesion	7
	members' participation	7
	group goals	5
External factors	Timetable	11

*Note: Frequency indicates how often students mentioned the given category

As can be seen from the list classified as teacher specific components (see Table 1), the most important criterion perceived by students is their ability to follow the material. In terms of teaching style, this is determined by the pace of the lesson. The next element on the list is students' expectation of interesting lessons; however, it is remarkable that students seem to attach equal importance to discipline in the classroom. As for teaching methods, the quality of the teacher's explanation and her requirement of rote learning are given priority. Apparently, almost equally important is the use of a wide variety of tasks during the lesson and students' involvement in classroom processes. The third teacher-related factor, including experience and personality, refers to effective classroom management.

As regards motivational factors on the group level, three components emerge from the data: group cohesion, members' willingness to participate in different activities, and goal-setting. Group cohesion means the relationship of group members to one another, their willingness to co-operate and help each other, while group goals refer to the existence of a common goal pursued by the members. As will be seen later, these components are in close interaction with each other, as group cohesion and the existence of group goals greatly influence students' participation in the learning process and their contribution to the desired outcome.

The third factor that surfaced as contributing to the climate of the L2 class is the school timetable, an external factor, which is beyond the control of the participants, either learners' or the teacher's. Nevertheless, students seem to find it important to mention it for two reasons. As a negative effect, an unfavourable arrangement of classes might result in students feeling tired and hungry, which is likely to undermine their motivation. On the other hand, the number of classes allocated for the study of different subjects might account for their success or failure, which in turn enhances or decreases their motivation. In what follows, I will

examine these factors one by one and explore how their interaction exerts its influence on students' motivation in the classroom.

What role does the teacher play in enhancing motivation in the classroom?

Data collection involved open questions asking students to compare English classes with others. Interestingly, some subjects were not mentioned, while with others there were recurring themes. One of the central issues that surfaced was that students pursue specific goals, and they expect the teacher to create an atmosphere where they can attain their goals. In classes where the tasks are pitched at their level they can perceive their progress, as there is a harmony between their goals, the task types and their development.

The first teacher-related factor influencing motivation is concerned with the management of the class. According to the students, it is the teacher's responsibility to set the right pace that is appropriate for the group. They also expect the teacher to maintain discipline in the classroom as well as arouse and sustain learners' interest in the subject.

Timing seems to be important for several reasons. On the one hand, students need enough time to understand the material in order to be able to follow the lesson. If they are overwhelmed by information, they may not be able to cope. As evidenced by Excerpts 1 and 2, such a situation is considered unsatisfactory, as they would rather set a lower standard and reach it than remember nothing.

Excerpt 1 (Focus group interview, pp. 9-10, 16)

The problem [with Italian] is that we went too fast at the beginning. We should have done that slowly and in more detail. ... We shouldn't run ... but aim at learning this language at a certain level. ... Because this way rather than achieving a level, no matter how low, we won't know anything.

Excerpt 2 (Kitti, p. 10)

I don't like it when I don't understand something, when we go on and I or somebody else lags behind.

On the other hand, students also voiced their criticism when they felt that a task "dragged on", or when "we spent too much time" on a given assignment even if they considered it useful. What makes this finding even more interesting is the fact that such critical comments sometimes coincided with my own concern about the pace of the lessons. This is how I wrote about it in my diary:

Excerpt 3 (Teacher's diary, p. 13)

I don't know what it is, but I'm slow. I don't actually feel it in class, but when the bell rings I have the feeling these days that we have hardly done anything.

Closely related to this is the question of discipline. The findings reveal that students are highly motivated by consistent work in the classroom, which seems to be dependent on both the teacher's instructional strategies and their peers' attitude. They hold the teacher responsible for maintaining discipline either by conducting a well-paced class and implementing strict measures or, more preferably, by stimulating and sustaining learners' interest. It seems that the presentation of the learning material is often more important than the material itself; moreover, students are extremely motivated if they perceive their teacher's enthusiasm and interest in the subject. To quote a few opinions:

Excerpt 4 (Klára, p. 27)

I think it is very important for a student to know that there is 'order' in a given class so he can learn properly and respect the subject, and, undoubtedly, it depends on the group (the teacher and students).

Excerpt 5 (Focus group interview, p. 20)

[Discipline depends on] the teacher's personality. She should be sturdy, firm and strict in order to keep the discipline. ... It would be important to have discipline, that the teacher could keep the discipline. ... She could allocate seats for those who keep talking, or make them write tests but this may not be a good idea.

Excerpt 6 (Focus group interview, p. 21)

The [Physics] teacher introduced this new thing that at the beginning of the lesson a few students sit in the front desks and write a test. This is because there was a lot of disruptive behaviour and they didn't learn for the lessons. But I don't think that it solves the problem because they keep talking in class. ... I would try to make the lessons more interesting. ... Students usually like watching or doing experiments, we could do more and then perhaps they would be more interested.

This idea of stimulating and sustaining learners' interest is a recurring issue. It seems that students are willing to listen to the teacher and actively participate in the lesson if they are sufficiently interested. When asked how they would make classes more interesting for students, they listed those activities that they missed: for example, experiments in small groups in the physics lesson and project work, stories, and the use of atlases in history classes. Moreover, it seems that the

teacher's enthusiasm and instructional style are better stimulants than the material itself. This can be concluded from the following quote:

Excerpt 7 (Focus group interview, p. 13)

I think any passage could be presented so that you say it is very good, interesting and you read it again at home. I think it depends very much on what plate that pasta is served on. ... It is very important how it is presented.

English seems to be a positive example. If students can see that the teacher is interested in her own subject and she is also an active participant in the class, it can also act as a motivating factor. Apparently, students appreciate the teacher's favourable attitude, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

Excerpt 8 (Focus group interview, p. 19)

It shows that the [English] teacher is interested ... and looks things up if we ask her. We can see that she is interested in the language and so she can teach it much better.

The second teacher-related factor accountable for the atmosphere of the classroom refers to the methods that teachers employ and their concept of knowledge. What appears as a result of particular interest is that there is often a difference between students' and teachers' conceptualisations of knowledge and what learning and development involves, which offers a plausible explanation of why learners' attitudes and motivation differ in various classes. While students state explicitly that understanding is the key to development, in classes such as Physics and Chemistry they often fail to understand the material. Given the fact that in these classes the main emphasis is put on declarative knowledge and rote learning, students see a basic conflict. Furthermore, they are perfectly aware of what they will need in the long run and they question the usefulness of such knowledge. In their own words:

Excerpt 9 (Focus group interview, p.20)

I lost the thread at some point and since then I haven't been interested. ... My problem with physics and with other subjects, chemistry, for example, is that I don't understand the 'why' of many things. ... The way these subjects are taught, I mean that we are not supposed to understand the rules, only know them. ... And I don't like things that I don't understand. Rote learning is no use.

Excerpt 10 (Franciska, p. 16)

English is also a subject but everybody has a different attitude to it. Physics, for example, is a compulsion, and I don't like going to those classes, I never understand the material properly. But I can follow the English classes all right.

Excerpt 11 (Focus group interview, p.13)

When we are asked in [the Italian] class ... we got a sheet of paper and if somebody recited what was on that paper they got a 5, but that is swotting, I just retell it and that's it. Somehow I don't think it is useful.

By contrast, they report feeling more confident in the English class, where procedural knowledge is given priority. Obviously, such perception increases their motivation:

Excerpt 12 (Erika, p. 17)

We can usually cover more in English because we understand it better. Unlike physics, which is difficult to digest even after a week. [English] is one of the best lessons.

Closely linked to the above standpoints is students' apparent desire to become involved in the learning process. One obvious reason that they give is that they find a lesson far more interesting if they are not only passive recipients but can actually participate in the work. Another point that they raise is the fact that taking part in the classroom processes helps them understand the material and later recall it. The following remarks suggest that they are willing to use their cognitive skills and engage in intensive work:

Excerpt 13 (Focus group interview, p. 21) about the Physics class:

Dictating the outline of the new material is boring. ... besides solving tasks we could be involved. There aren't many opportunities to think and to talk about it. ... I would try to find the answer to the whys, even if superficially.

Excerpt 14 (Karcsi, p. 5)

The [English] lesson was good, not the type where you just sit bored, it was lively and it made us use our brains.

An equally important feature, variety, also emerges as an inevitable characteristic of a good English class. Obviously, completing various tasks and activities makes

a lesson more attractive for students. What is interesting, however, is that students also express their wish to develop different language skills. Sample comments are:

Excerpt 15 (Focus group interview, p. 1)

I think [a good English lesson] should be varied. There should be all kinds of tasks ... reading, writing, comprehension, speaking. Different things like those extras that we did, passages, for example, or a game or an interesting task that hypes up the lesson and makes one lesson different from the other ... so that they distinguish Monday lesson from Tuesday.

Excerpt 16 (Focus group interview, p. 2)

Everybody should have the possibility to develop and in order to do that we should speak and write, I mean we should do different kinds of tasks.

Finally, the third teacher-related component that was found to influence the atmosphere of the classroom is the teacher's experience and personality. Again, different subject teachers are compared and the findings seem to suggest that a helpful, attentive and reassuring teacher has better chances to motivate her students effectively. This is expressed in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 17 (Focus group interview, p. 19)

I often turn to you [the teacher] with a problem in English and I always get an answer. As I see it, due attention is paid. And when I ask something the teacher listens ... I can feel that I am not just one of many people, but she pays attention to me personally.

Excerpt 18 (Focus group interview, p. 20)

When somebody doesn't understand something we can always ask [the physics teacher].

At the same time, although they are critical about any professional inadequacy, they are inclined to attribute it to the teacher's lack of experience. Example:

Excerpt 19 (Focus group interview, p. 14)

It is bad for me when I ask something and she cannot give a clear answer. It makes me feel insecure. ... Our teacher of Italian has just started [her job] so she hasn't got as much experience. I think this is also part of it.

It is apparent from these findings that students have a clear picture of how classes should be taught. Furthermore, they are aware of teacher's responsibilities for creating a learner-friendly atmosphere in the classroom that facilitates their development. However, apart from emphasising the role of the teacher in creating an inspiring climate in the classroom, students also seem to be aware of the motivational power of the group itself.

How do peers contribute to a supportive atmosphere?

The findings reveal three group specific elements that are thought to affect the atmosphere, which include group cohesion, common goals within the group, and active participation in classroom processes. In students' opinion, a cohesive group is characterised by members who know and accept each other and are also ready to offer help. A perfect description of such a group can be seen in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 20 (Focus group interview, p. 2)

I think it is very important what the group is like ... we need tasks through which we can get to know each other. ... The group can work together much better if they know each other. We know what the other is better or less good at, what they like or don't like, and so we can adapt to each other and we can make headway by helping the other and those at the top can pull those who need it.

The last remark referring to the necessity of a leading personality in the group is also supported by the next quote, where *help* seems to be the key for improvement.

Excerpt 21 (Beáta, p. 20)

I like the group in which I am learning the language. The best thing is that there is always somebody to look up to, there is a leading person who helps others.

Concomitant of a co-operative classroom atmosphere, learners' active participation in the learning process, is a recurring issue in the present study. The findings suggest that students are rather critical of themselves and their peers in this respect. When comparing English with other subjects, they explain their peers' reluctance to get engaged in classroom activities with their obvious lack of intrinsic goals. With regard to the English class, however, they attribute their motivated behaviour to a common group goal and to the fact that all the members are willing to contribute to the successful completion of a given task. Apparently, their wish to master the English language enhances their cognitive engagement, which ultimately leads to a positive learning outcome. A sample comment written in English by the student:

Excerpt 22 (Kitti, p. 24)

I think English lesson is more “familier”. Because there are 16 person who learn English and I think we like English. We talk for anything with each other and the teacher and it is very good. The other lessons there are 36 person who don’t like the lesson, the Chemistry or Physics or History. Not everybody has a future with the studies. But in the English lesson everybody has a plan with English. A little or a big, but there is. And I think it’s the biggest different for the other lessons and the English lesson. 16 person have a “same” plan. I think it’s important.

This seems to be in line with Meece (1994), who examined goal orientation in relation to self-regulated learning and found that students pursuing mastery goals become more successful learners, as they engage in activities more actively and use highly regulated learning strategies. The lack of a common goal makes it impossible to establish group norms, which obviously hinders efficient work in the classroom and, consequently, students’ development. On the other hand, engagement in the activities may have a positive effect on the whole atmosphere of the classroom and can greatly influence the learning outcome. A positive example is given of the English class and it seems that the fact that all the members contribute to the successful completion of tasks evokes a ‘we’ feeling and strengthens cohesive ties:

Excerpt 23 (Beáta, p. 21)

Learning was facilitated by the fact that the group was active, everybody is ready to work when there is a role-play.

Excerpt 24 (Klára, p. 25)

I think the atmosphere of the classroom greatly contributes to my enjoying doing English, as do the happy moments and the fact that everybody works together intensively.

Students’ views are supported by an external observer’s following comments:

Excerpt 25 (Observer 1)

All seem to enjoy this activity, and there is little hesitation among students to volunteer and go in front of class. ... Students busily work on this...

As regards students’ engagement in the lesson, another interesting finding surfaced from the data: co-operative atmosphere may also hold the attention of the quieter students. Although they do not play such an active part as some of their

peers, they may still feel involved and thus enjoy the lesson. To quote the shyest student:

Excerpt 26 (Noémi, p. 30)

It was good that I understood almost everything. ... I had a feeling of success. ... I think everybody liked [the lesson] because we laughed a lot, the atmosphere was good. It felt good that I was able to laugh so much in an English lesson, since I don't usually get the point, but now I did and it was a good lesson.

Finally, mention should be made of the school timetable, the only external factor that students seem to hold responsible for their motivated behaviour in the classroom. On the one hand, they voice their complaints about being tired and hungry in the 6th and 7th periods after a hard day. On the other hand, they attribute their successes and failures to the frequency with which they have different classes. With this respect, English has an advantage over the other subjects, as it is taught in five lessons a week. As they put it:

Excerpt 27 (Beáta, p. 21)

What is good in this subject is that we have classes every day and so you pick things up in every lesson.

Excerpt 28 (Focus group interview, p. 12)

I think another problem with the second foreign language is that we learn it in three classes a week and it is very little.

As can be seen from these discussions, the findings are indicative of a considerable level of learner autonomy. On the one hand, students are capable of deciding whether the teacher can explain the material so that they understand it; on the other hand, they can give an opinion about the way they acquire knowledge, they are able to assess and exercise control over their learning.

Another point worthy of mention is that motivational characteristics prove to interact with each other. The findings reveal that co-operative teaching methods make it possible for students to get involved in the learning process. By discovering knowledge for themselves and by scaffolding one another's learning, they have better chances to understand the material. This in turn motivates them to participate in classroom activities, which eventually fosters their development. In line with Dörnyei (2007), these results underline the motivational influence of the classroom environment and shed light on the importance of motivating instructional strategies.

Conclusion

This paper reported on the findings of a qualitative study, the aim of which was to explore the interaction between the various elements that contribute to a motivating classroom climate. Several motivational factors were identified that cluster around the teacher and the learning group, similarly to Dörnyei's (1994) proposition of teacher and group specific components on the learning situation level. The teacher-related elements emerging from the study I have conducted include the teacher's style and teaching methods as well as her experience and personality, while group-related characteristics comprise group cohesion, members' engagement in classroom activities, and the importance of a common group goal. In addition, the school timetable surfaced as exerting external influence on learners' motivation.

The students were found to display a high degree of maturity and developing autonomy and self-awareness as language learners. Besides voicing their need of a co-operative atmosphere and effective classroom management, they also appeared to recognise their own responsibility for developing their skills and knowledge.

The findings provide the teacher-researcher with invaluable feedback. On the one hand, they confirm my conceptualisation of knowledge and educational philosophy. Like my students, I also firmly believe that 'knowing how' is equally or even more useful than 'knowing what' and it seems that by conveying procedural knowledge my teaching practice meets their expectations. On the other hand, as data on other classes were also analysed to triangulate the findings related to English classes, students' criticism of certain teaching styles has given me inspiration to create a motivating learning environment. This is even more important as I cannot but agree with Dörnyei (2007, p. 735), who claims that "the motivational character of the classroom is largely a function of the teacher's motivational teaching practice, and is therefore within our explicit control."

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