Motivational Strategies in the English Classroom: The Case of Arab Learners in Israel

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Abstract: Decline in students' motivation to learn languages remains a vexing issue for teachers and educators. Among a myriad of factors that affect student motivation, teachers' practices appear to play a very dominant role. This has been reflected in the rising number of studies that examine teachers' motivational strategies. This study aims to determine the specific teacher strategies which are most likely to positively affect the motivation of Arab learners of English from the perspective of learners. Some 400 teenage learners of English responded to an open-ended question in which they were asked to freely describe the strategies their teachers used that motivated them to learn. The results of the study suggest that the majority of students prefer strategies that promote communicative uses of the language to ones that focus on grammar or emphasize learning through texts. Many students also reported that they had more interest in studying English when their teachers integrated technology. It is therefore recommended that teachers give more weight to these motivating strategies by incorporating more communicative use of English and more technology into their lessons.

Keywords: *Language learning motivation, motivational strategies, student motivation, teaching strategies, English language teaching.*

Introduction

One of the rapidly developing fields of applied linguistics is language learning motivation (LLM), which has undergone various phases of development since the 1970s. Some of the important earlier attempts to elucidate LLM include Gardner's socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985), Dornyei's motivational framework (Dornyei, 1994), and Noels et al.'s (2001) approach that is based on Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The increasing significance of LLM can be seen by the sharp increase in publications in the field, with Boo et al. (2015) estimating that between 2005 and 2014, there were more than 400 publications on LLM, either as articles in well-established journals or as book chapters. In addition, several books have been solely dedicated to tracing the concept's origins, developments and directions, such as the works of Dornyei and Kubanyiova (2014), Dornyei et al. (2015), and Ushioda (2020). However, despite the plethora of LLM research, the concept has proven to be amorphous, with little agreement among researchers as to its definition and dimensions or how it relates to similar psychological concepts like attitudes and beliefs (Keblawi, 2009). This is likely due to the complexity and dynamicity of LLM (Dornyei et al., 2015) and the many contextual factors that might affect it (Papi & Hiver, 2020).

Despite this discordance, researchers have consistently agreed that there are many factors that might affect LLM (see Dornyei, 2005; Dornyei et al., 2015). These factors include, but are not limited to, the statuses of the first and target languages, learners' attitudes towards the target language, learners' beliefs about themselves, the learning strategies used by learners, teachers' motivation, and the learning materials used. One factor that is widely accepted as influencing learners' motivation is the crucial role that teachers play (see, e.g., Csizer, 2017; Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Ruesch et al., 2012). As will be demonstrated below, the importance of the teachers' role might be best exemplified by the motivational strategies they use in the classroom.

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Literature Review

Despite the abundance of LLM research, there appears to be a lack of clarity as to what, exactly, motivational strategies are. Dornyei suggests a very general definition of motivational strategies referring to them as "techniques that promote the individual's goal-related behaviour" (Dornyei, 2001, p.28), a definition that clearly relates to goal theories of motivation (see a review in Keblawi, 2009). In other words, they are strategies used by teachers to help learners steer their efforts towards achieving the relevant learning goals. Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008) attempted another general definition by referring to teacher motivational strategies as "instructional interventions applied by the teacher to elicit and stimulate student motivation" (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008, p. 57), although they used the term interchangeably with motivational practices and motivational techniques. The attempts to define motivational strategies have not led to agreement in the field, and different researchers continue to treat the concept differently, with many not even attempting to define what they mean by motivational strategy. This lack of clarity about what should be counted as a motivational strategy can partially explain the differences in the results of some studies in the field.

Dornyei (1994) suggested a number of motivational strategies that were based on his own experience as well as on the findings from other educational studies that examined students' motivation. He grouped his list of 30 motivational strategies into three levels: the language level, the learner's level and the learning situation level. Later he expanded the list to include 102 motivational strategies drawn from experience and studies conducted on LLM (Dornyei, 2001). This long list was organized to reflect the stages of the learning process and included creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive self-evaluation.

More recent studies have focused on the relationship between teachers' motivational strategies and students' motivation, though the number of such studies is still modest. In fact, research on instructed second language acquisition in general is quite scarce (Csizer, 2017). Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008) conducted a large-scale study of Korean learners (25 teachers and more than 1300 students) to investigate definable and observable motivational teaching strategies. The strategies included establishing relevance, promoting integrative values, promoting instrumental values, arousing curiosity, scaffolding, promoting cooperation, and promoting autonomy. They grouped the strategies into four categories: teacher discourse, participation structure, encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation, and activity design. The study found that teachers' motivational strategies were linked to an increase in students' motivation and motivational state.

Bernaus and Gardner (2008) looked at motivational strategies from another perspective, differentiating between what they referred to as innovative strategies and traditional strategies. The first emphasize a focus on language structure and are more teacher centered (e.g., having students do grammar exercises and laying down the norms to be followed in the class). The second are more student centered and emphasize the communicative aspects of the language by using, in particular, audio-visual and new technologies. The study, which involved 31 teachers and their 694 students in Catalonia, Spain, compared student and teacher perceptions of the use of 26 motivational strategies and their effect on students' motivation and English achievement. The researchers measured the students' levels of anxiety and motivation intensity as well as the students' English language proficiency. It was found that the students' perceptions of the frequency of use of the different strategies did not always correlate with the teachers' perceptions. In other words, the students and teachers agreed on the relative frequency of some strategies but not on others. The teacher-reported use of traditional and innovative motivational strategies was not linked to students' motivation, anxiety, or achievement. However, the students' perception of these strategies tended to be linked to their motivation and language anxiety at both the class and the individual levels.

Building on Bernaus and Gardner's (2008) study and the data obtained from it, Bernaus et al. (2009) found that students had more favorable attitudes towards the learning situation and had higher levels of motivation in classes where they felt that teachers' use of both traditional and innovative motivational strategies was frequent. Despite this finding that both techniques increased student motivation, innovative strategies appeared to be more effective, as they were found to be linked to a decrease in learning anxiety, while the use of traditional strategies was linked to lower achievement.

Maeng and Lee (2015) observed classes of 12 in-service English teachers in Korea to identify the motivational strategies that they used. They followed Killer's (1987) Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction (ARCS) model of motivation to qualitatively and quantitatively analyze teachers' strategies (see Maeng & Lee, 2015, p. 27). They found, among other things, that teachers only used strategies aimed at gaining students' attention and largely underused the strategies linked to creating relevance, increasing confidence or providing satisfaction when progress was made. The strategy employed most by teachers to draw students' attention was the use of audio-visual resources.

Applying a quasi-experimental approach to the study of the relationship between motivational teaching strategies and students' motivation, Moskovsky et al.'s (2013) study involved 14 Arab teachers in Saudi Arabia and their 297 students. The students were assigned to experimental and control groups and received eight weeks of study. The teachers in the experimental groups were asked to use 10 motivational strategies with their groups, whereas teachers in the control groups used traditional teaching methods. The motivational strategies applied included showing care for students'

progress, caring for students, recognizing students' efforts, being physically and mentally immediate, increasing the use of English, using humor, reminding students of the importance of leaning English, making the topics relevant to everyday experiences, and believing in students' abilities. Multivariate analysis of the results showed there was a substantial increase over time in students' motivation in the experimental groups.

Chang et al. (2016) also applied the ARCS model of motivation in a study similar to that of Maeng and Lee (2015). However, the Chang et al. study focused on how applying ARCS strategies in a mobile inquiry-based learning (M-IBL) context might affect students' LLM. Two classes, one experimental and one control, participated in a six-week study program. The experimental class undertook M-IBL with teachers embedding motivational strategies from the ARCS model, while the control class undertook M-IBL without any ARCS strategies. Participants in the experimental class showed significantly higher levels of confidence and satisfaction than those in the control group, although their achievements were not significantly higher.

You et al. (2016) examined teachers' motivational strategies in reading, English, and mathematics, and found that students' intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy increased when teachers' motivational strategies were positively perceived by their students. However, the relationship between motivational strategies and language motivation can be complex and could be affected by different mediating factors. For example, Sugita and Takeuci (2010) found that not all motivational strategies correlated positively with students' motivation despite some being frequently used. Such strategies included focusing on motivation flow in lesson, varying the learning tasks, bringing and encouraging humor in the classroom, keeping the class goals achievable, and creating a pleasant classroom atmosphere. In addition, it was found that the usefulness of such strategies was partly affected by students' language proficiency. The only strategy that was similarly effective for both low- and high-achieving students was assessing them in a variety of ways, excluding written tests.

In another recent study that focused on teachers' motivating and demotivating practices, Keblawi (2016) interviewed 20 teenage Arab learners of English, asking them to report the ways in which their teachers' practices negatively or positively affected their motivation to study English. Three ways in which teachers can positively affect learners' motivation were revealed: teachers can trigger learners' motivation to learn the language, they can help them sustain their motivation, and they can help those who lost their motivation and became demotivated to regain their motivation. The top teacher strategies that contributed to these positive outcomes included showing enthusiasm and motivation to teach the language and to help learners, being close to learners (teacher immediacy), giving supportive feedback, being competent, creating a sense of autonomy, and reducing learners' anxiety. As to the negative roles that teachers can play, the study found that teachers might either fail to trigger learners' motivation in the first place, or they might cause motivated students to lose their motivation. The demotivating teacher practices that students reported included showing little enthusiasm for teaching, giving negative feedback, and showing little or no immediacy—practices that were the opposite of those reported by the students as being motivating.

These studies strongly indicate that teachers' use of motivational strategies can likely increase students' language learning motivation in different ways, and that some motivational strategies, such as innovative strategies, have a more profound effect on student motivation than others. However, the number of such studies is quite small, so their findings cannot be confidently generalized across the full range of language learning contexts and populations. The current study, therefore, attempts to add to the understanding of motivational strategies by investigating the effectiveness of teachers' use of motivation strategies as perceived by their students.

The study also expands the context of such studies by looking at Arab language learners in Israel, as this student population represents a very special yet disadvantaged minority. The physical and educational conditions in many Arab schools in Israel are far from satisfactory. There are deficits in budgets, shortages of buildings and a lack of much-needed counselling and psychological services. The educational policies of the successive Israeli governments have led to and largely perpetuated this state of affairs (Arar, 2012; Jabareen & Agbaria, 2011).

Arab students in Israel start their formal learning of English in the third or fourth grade and continue until the twelfth grade. However, because of the many constraints, English teaching in the Arab schools is less effective when compared to the Jewish schools, and Arab students' achievements in the different standardized tests are far below those of Jewish students (Amara, 2014). For Arab students English is a fourth language after spoken Arabic, formal Arabic and Hebrew, with Hebrew being the most important for formal communication. Arab students have less contact with native English speakers and there are very few Arab teachers of English who are native or near-native speakers of English (Amara, 2014). Despite the improvement in Arab students' achievements in the Bagrut (matriculation) tests in recent years, the disparities between their achievements and those of their Jewish counterparts are still high (Resh & Blass, 2019). It could therefore be the case that teachers' motivational strategies work differently in this context, which is quite different from the contexts of many of the previous studies on the issue.

Methodology

Research Goal

The current study aims to find out which teacher motivational strategies are perceived to be most effective by Arab learners of English. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following question:

What motivating strategies do Arab students perceive to be most motivating in the English classroom?

Sample and Data Collection

To elicit data relevant to the issues examined here, an open-ended questionnaire was used. The students were asked to reflect on their current and previous classes and to report their teachers' practices which they believed were motivating to them. The instructions read as follows:

'Reflect on your English classes and the teachers who taught you English or still teach you and answer the question that follows.'

It was decided to include previous teachers as well as current ones in order to allow participants to choose from a wider range of strategies; it was also feared that some participants may not like their current teacher's strategies and thus would not have the chance to report any positively perceived strategies. In addition, including previous teachers is likely to contribute to the study without affecting the results and conclusions, as this study did not seek to further examine the relationship between students' achievements and the strategies employed by their teachers.

The open-ended question presented to the students asked,

'What methods have your English teachers used that make you more motivated to study English?'

The question was formulated in Arabic so the students could clearly understand and respond with confidence. The first version of the question was presented to three teachers (two teachers of English and one teacher of Arabic), and it was modified following their advice to ensure it would be as clear as possible to students.

The participants in the study were enrolled in a regional English program in the Arab sector that serves hundreds of junior school learners of English. The consent of the participants' parents was secured at the beginning of the program, and participants were guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality. Before filling in the questionnaire, it was explained to the students that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw at any time. The participants were explicitly told not to write their names.

The questionnaire was presented to 412 participants aged 14-15 from schools situated in different Arab localities in the south, center, and north of the country, providing a good representation of the study population. To allow students to freely write their thoughts, the questionnaires were presented by the researcher or by an employee in the program and not by their teachers.

Analyzing of Data

Students' answers on the questionnaires were analyzed by the researcher and two English teachers who did not take part in the program. The total number of reported strategies from all questionnaires was 1107. A flexible thematic analysis was performed following the steps of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clark (2006, 2012). Initially, 40 questionnaires were randomly selected, copied and handed out to the teachers. The researcher and the teachers each received a copy and independently read and analyzed the students' answers to identify possible categories in which to place the student-reported strategies. Where possible, the categories for this study used motivational categories that had been previously identified in the research. The elicited categories where then compared and discussed, and a list of 17 agreed strategies was initially compiled. Next, the responses for the remaining questionnaires were codified and placed under the relevant categories. Each response was analyzed by the three independently and the analyses were later compared. Any discrepancies were resolved by discussion. Two more motivational strategy categories emerged as the reading of the students' responses proceeded, providing a total of 19 categories.

Findings / Results

Just under 91% of the 412 questionnaires were filled in and returned by the participants (n=374). Most students referred to at least one motivating strategy used by their teachers, with each student referring to an average of three strategies.

Table 1. Teachers' motivating strategies as identified by students

Strategy Category	Frequency	Percent (%)	Rank
using technology in teaching	219	58.6	1
having students do activities, projects, and extracurricular programs	192	51.3	2
using listening activities	96	25.7	3
using fun and humor	72	19.3	4
requiring students to memorize vocabulary	68	18.2	5
creating a pleasant atmosphere	64	17.1	6
explaining grammar topics	56	15	7
having students work in groups	52	13.9	8
requiring the use of English only in the classroom	40	10.7	9
using games	32	8.6	10
using writing activities	30	8	11
caring for/encouraging students	26	7	12
assigning homework	24	6.4	13
assigning tests	20	5.3	14
requiring students to read books	14	3.7	15
allowing students to speak to native English speakers	12	3.2	16
using competitive activities	10	2.7	17
showing seriousness	6	2	18
using Arabic (to explain content)	2	.5	19

As shown in Table 1, the top two strategies were identified by more than half of the respondents. The strategy most preferred was the use of technology in teaching, which more than 58% of students identified as motivating, while activities, projects, and extracurricular programs were seen as motivating by 51.3% of the students surveyed.

The next preferred motivating strategy was listening activities, identified by far fewer students (25.7%) as motivating. Students mentioned that they enjoyed listening to dialogues between native speakers, and many of them referred to English songs in particular. The next preferred strategy was using fun and humor, which 19.3% of students considered motivating. Fifth was requiring students to memorize vocabulary (18.2%), followed by creating a pleasant atmosphere (17.1%). The seventh-ranked strategy was explaining grammar topics, identified by 15% of students as motivating. Almost 14% of the students felt working in groups was motivating. The last strategy to be mentioned by more than 10 percent of the respondents was the ninth-ranked strategy of requiring the use of English only in the classroom, which 10.7% found to be motivating.

The remaining 10 strategies were each reported as motivating by fewer than 10 percent of the students surveyed, with using games being identified by 8.6%, using writing activities mentioned by 8%, caring for/encouraging students considered motivating by 7%, and assigning homework mentioned by 6.4%. Other less preferred strategies were assigning tests (5.3%), requiring students to read books (3.7%), allowing students to speak to native English speakers (3.2%), using competitive activities (2.7%), showing seriousness (1.6%), and using Arabic to explain content (.5%).

Discussion

While some of the strategies reported by the students in this study had been identified by previous studies, others had not or had been found to be less salient. This could be due to the earlier observation that different researchers may conceive motivational strategies differently. Most of the strategies reported by the participants in this study fell under the category of innovative strategies (Bernaus et al., 2009), which are strategies that give more weight to the communicative aspects of the language.

The finding that most students preferred the use of technology as a motivating strategy is similar to what was found by Maeng and Lee (2015), Bernaus and Gardner (2008), and Chang et al. (2016). Students are now continuously exposed to a wide variety of technological devices and platforms and use them not only to communicate but also to learn more about the topics they find interesting; therefore, the use of technology as a motivating factor should be an essential category to include in current and future studies. Indeed, the current study found that students want the classroom to 'upgrade' to match the advancement they experience online:

'I like it when our teacher shows us a YouTube video and asks us to discuss it. This is what we do most of the day outside the classroom and we are used to it. Most of my classmates enjoy it.' (S12)

However, many Arab schools in Israel lack the technological devices and online services needed to use technology in lessons. The frustration of teachers and students because of the lack of technology was evident in some of the students'

responses. One student, for example, explains how they became enthusiastic when their teacher decided to take them to the computer lab, but soon found out that it was not as expected:

'The teacher took us to the computer lab where we were supposed to watch a short video and have some online activities on it. The lab was crowded as there was no space for all of us and we had to share the computers. The internet connection was very slow and intermittent and there was no technician to fix it.' (S122)

With other students, using technology was only a wish:

'I took a private English course last year and our teacher explained the grammar topics using slideshows. This was easier, colorful and more interesting. Our teacher at school can't do that because we do not have a computer lab.' (S213)

The second-ranked motivating strategy in this study was activities, projects, and extracurricular programs, also identified as motivating by more than half of the students surveyed. These results could reflect what has been referred to as establishing relevance by previous studies (see, e.g., Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008), as these students felt that these kinds of teaching methods involved them in learning activities that they liked and that were relevant to them. They reported that such activities helped them to hone their different language skills, especially their oral skills, in addition to developing their personalities One student put it as follows:

'Our teacher asked us to do a project on a challenge that our community faces. We chose to talk about the challenges that disabled people face on everyday basis. We learned a lot about this group of people, especially that my friend's brother had special needs. It changed the way we thought about them and we were excited when we presented the results in front of our classmates.' (S272)

As was the case with the use of technology, for some students the desire to have activities and projects relevant to them was more of a wish than a reality:

'When I was in the eighth grade, my teacher asked us to write a dialogue and act it out in pairs. We enjoyed it so much and we learned a lot from it. But this was almost the only time in which we had such activities in class.' (S157)

It was also not surprising that using fun and humor was another top strategy preferred by students, as this strategy has been reported as one of the top ten motivational strategies in Moskovsky et al. (2013). Humorous teachers are often seen as adding life to the classroom and making it less tense:

'...and no class goes without the teacher telling us a joke or two. The class is less formal and more enjoyable. Sometimes my classmates are noisy after a joke is told but it is not that bad.' (S213)

It is extremely interesting that the two most preferred strategies (using technology in teaching and having students do activities, projects, and extracurricular programs) were identified by more than half of the respondents, while the next preferred strategy, using listening activities, was only identified by a quarter of respondents—a striking drop. Despite this drop, it was still the third-preferred strategy, and many students found it particularly motivating for them. For example, some students expressed their delight when they their lessons included listening to English songs, as it was something they enjoyed outside of class:

'Listing to English songs is my favorite hobby. It is the best way for me to learn new words. I search the Internet to find the lyrics and learn the words.' (S172)

'When I was young, Mum used to play songs to me over YouTube. She wanted me to get used to how English sounds and to learn the language with much fun. I never felt I was learning another language. It was just part of the normal things I used to do. I used to sing to other people in my big [extended] family and they encouraged me a lot. It was huge fun!' (S49)

One unexpected finding was that requiring students to memorize vocabulary was identified as motivating by many more students than might be expected, putting this strategy as the fifth preferred. This was not referred to as a motivating strategy by previous studies that had examined the preferred motivational strategies for learners. It could be assumed that this strategy would be far less popular with students as it might prove boring to them. However, memorizing vocabulary may give students a sense of control over what they learn, and it could be motivating for some if it is an activity they are accustomed to. This might be particularly true in schools where traditional teaching methods are more common. As one student commented:

'After each unit, the teacher administers a vocabulary quiz. She asks us to memorize all the items we have learned in the unit. It is easy for me to do because I'm a good student and I like learning vocabulary; however, some of my classmates find it boring.' (S19)

Another surprise was to find that creating a pleasant atmosphere, which could reasonably be assumed to be motivating, ranked sixth. It is possible that this assumption could explain the frequent use of this strategy by the teachers in Sugita and Takeuci's (2010) study, which also found this strategy not to be highly motivating. For this study, it is possible that

the wording of the question had students thinking only of the strategies, actions or behaviors that are unique to teaching English and not to those that can be used when teaching other subjects as well.

Finally, some of the 10 strategies that were least reported as motivational by students could be expected to be more popular. For example, caring for/encouraging students could be expected to rank highly, as did the similar category of teachers' immediacy as reported in Keblawi (2016) and Moskovsky et al. (2013). However, in this study it was only reported by a relatively small number of students. It could be the case that the participants did not think of it as a strategy but rather as a teacher's personality trait (e.g., being caring or thoughtful).

Conclusion

The results found here, along with evidence from previous studies, provide strong support that language learners tend to favor teaching strategies that emphasize the communicative aspects of language and are seen as relevant. In addition, this study strongly suggests that students are highly motivated by the integration of adequate educational technological tools. It can also be noted that certain motivational strategies appear to be context specific, as some of the strategies perceived as effective in this study (e.g. memorizing vocabulary lists) were not considered to be effective in studies carried out in other contexts, while other strategies found to be motivating elsewhere were not determined to be as highly motivating by the students in this study.

Suggestions

Based on the results of this study, teachers are encouraged to incorporate more technological tools into their classes as this tends to increase students' motivation and willingness to engage in learning a second language. Communicative aspects of language teaching should also be given more weight as they also seem to have a positive impact on students' motivation.

More comparative research is needed to see how much these findings can be generalized to other learning contexts. Additional research is also needed to find out whether students' preferences of motivational strategies can differ as a function of background, age, gender, and proficiency.

Limitations

The population of this study is unique, so the results cannot be confidently generalized to other contexts. In addition, the question was open to elicit the *students'* perceptions of how their teachers motivated them, rather than presenting pre-determined motivational strategies for participants to select from. This meant that the student participants had to identify the motivating strategies their teachers used, and they may not have recognized some of the ways their teachers have motivated them as *motivational strategies*. The wording of the question may have also affected the way students answered. The categorizing of the motivational strategies identified by students also presents limitations, as the classification of categories is inherently arbitrary, despite the fact that three professionals were used to critically consider the final categorizations.

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