

# Motivation to foreign language learning at primary school

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**Abstract** Motivation to foreign language learning at primary schools is still a current and topical issue. The school age is the ideal period for creating a positive attitude to a foreign language and thus creating good foundations for foreign language learning. Nevertheless, at this age also a negative attitude can be created very easily, which is difficult to eliminate as the children grow older. The aim of the paper is to present the results of part of the research into learner's motivation, specifically results of learner questioners on their attitude towards foreign language classes and learning. The results can be used in the selection of appropriate motivation strategies in teaching English language at primary schools and thus increase the learners' motivation to learn a foreign language and increase the efficiency of education.

**Keywords** Motivation, primary education, foreign languages, school age children

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In nowadays European space there is ever increasing need to master at least two foreign languages at a communicative level. At the meeting of the European Council, the representatives of the EU members states agreed that it is important to undertake certain steps in order to improve mastering the essential language skills by teaching at least two foreign languages from an early age.

Foreign language teaching at the primary level should be based on psychological features of the given age group. Therefore, it is inevitable to bear in mind that the aim of introducing foreign language teaching to lower grades is the quality, not the quantity of the knowledge (Lojová, 2008). Janík (2010, p. 24) defines the quality education as education carried out in favourable psychological and social climate and at the same time such education is focused on high achievements of pupils. Quality education, as a professional term, has certain characteristics including also motivation, which, as a factor affecting the education quality, is mentioned in several education models (Helmke, 2003, Mayer, 2004). In order to reach the communicative level, being the aim of foreign language teaching, the foreign language teaching has been introduced to the primary schools in the Slovak Republic. This step has been legislatively anchored since the school year 2008/2009.

However, this step has caused also several issues at various levels. From the motivation and effectivity point of view, the most serious problem seems to be the lack of teachers qualified for teaching the foreign language at the primary schools. This can eventually cause a decrease in the efficiency of education, worse results and a decrease in the pupils' interest in the foreign language classes.

Primary school teachers are not automatically qualified for teaching a foreign language at the primary level, although they are qualified to teach other courses taking into consideration the methodology. Pupils at primary schools are extremely sensitive to provided information and if they learn an incorrect fact, it is very possible that they will remember it incorrectly causing problems in further education. Therefore, each foreign language teacher should be qualified in mastering the foreign language, as well as in the methods suitable for foreign language teaching at primary schools. The reason, why decided to deal with this issue is, among others, also the statement that the literature provides only few empirical studies have proven or studied the effect of motivation strategies on learners' motivation (Gilloteaux, Dörnyei, 2008). Motivation is the condition and basis for successful learning and for many teachers it is the biggest challenge to make their learners to want to learn (Petty, 2008). Therefore, the issue of motivation and the use of appropriate teacher motivation strategies is still a current and important topic to tackle.

## 2. RESERACH

Due to the still current nature of the issue of motivation, as well as the efficiency of education, we decided to deal with this issue in a research study. The research proposal, as well as partial results will be introduced in this paper. Considering the age group of the sample, the research will study motivation strategies used by the teacher. While considering and proposing the research design we used the research studies of the authors Gilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008), who have been studying motivation strategies and their influence on learners' motivation for a long time. Their system of motivation strategy dimensions include:

- Creating basic motivational strategies
- Generating initial motivation
- Maintaining and protecting motivation
- Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation

The whole research consists of several steps. The first level includes studying the learners' motivation and their attitude towards learning English. This stage covers also structured observation of motivation strategies used by the teachers, as well as teachers' attitudes and opinions on the importance and frequency of using selected motivation strategies. After evaluating the results, the second stage of the research includes creating an intervention programme containing the selected strategies aimed at improving the learners' motivation. The last stage will then monitor the changes in the learners' attitudes towards learning the English language and EL classes.

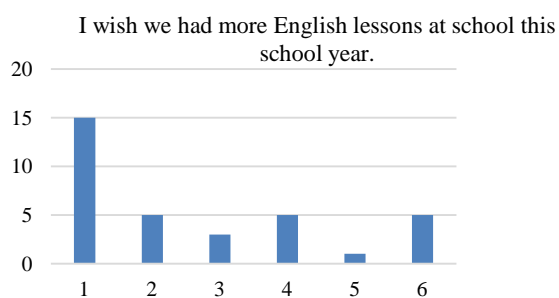
## 2.1 Research Sample and Tools

In the first part of the research, presented in this paper, we have studied the attitudes of pupils towards the English lessons. As the research sample we selected pupils of the fourth grade of primary education in Slovakia. For studying the motivation and attitudes towards the English language classes, we have selected one questionnaire in the form of a scale by the authors Gilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008). The questionnaire was translated into Slovak language; subsequently it underwent language revision and pilot testing, in order to find out the reliability of the research tool and understanding from the perspective of the learners.

## 2.2 Research Results

In this subchapter an example of the assessment of the first short questionnaire for the pupils is presented. As we have already mentioned, the aim of the questionnaire was to find out and define the pupils' attitudes towards English language and English lessons at school. The rate of their language confidence, as well as of their worries was determined. The questionnaire was filled in by 34 pupils from primary schools in Zvolen, Slovakia, who study English as their first foreign language.

The first statement (*"I wish we had more English lessons at school this school year"*) was predominantly answered in a negative way – the majority of pupils did not want to have more or extra English classes. Currently they have 3 lessons per week on average and there is just a small number of the pupils who are not satisfied with it.



Graph 1 Attitudes of pupils to the increase of English lessons number.

Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 2.62

The second statement (*"I like English lessons this school year"*) was intended to measure their personal attitude to English classes as a whole. It is very important for the pupils, as well as for their teacher to have a positive atmosphere at the lessons. Therefore, the pupils' opinions and feelings about English as a school subject are crucial. If they like the subject, they look forward to the lessons, their internal motivation to learn is higher and they definitely achieve good results and make greater progress. The results of our questionnaire showed that, on average, pupils have positive feelings about learning English, as we can see from the Graph 2.



Graph 2 Personal attitudes of the pupils to English lessons in general.

Legend:

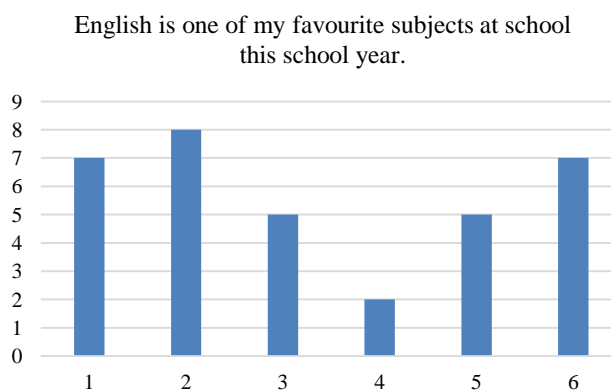
Scale 1 ↔ 6

(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 3.97

The third statement in our questionnaire was related to the previous one: *"English is one of my favourite subjects at school this school year"*. Surprisingly, the preference of the subject was not confirmed in most cases, as we expected due to the results from the previous question, where they declared that they liked English lessons. They like largely the subject, but it does not belong among their most favourite ones in most cases. In further research, it would be useful to find out what their favourite subjects are, or to study this particular issue in more detail.



Graph 3 The results showed that English does not belong among the pupils' favourite subjects at school.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

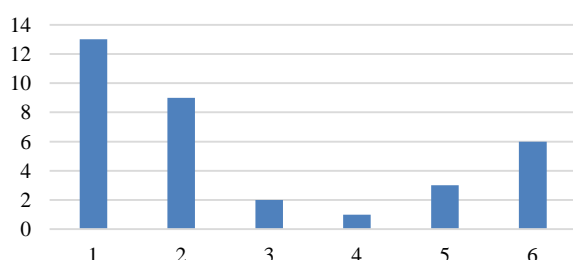
(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 3.23

"When the English lesson ends, I often wish it could continue" was the fourth statement in the questionnaire to which the pupils marked their attitude. When observing the results, we saw that in most cases our respondents were satisfied with the length of the lesson and 45 minutes are sufficient for them. At first sight it seems that 45 minutes is not a long period of time. However, if the teacher uses its time effectively, it can be ample period for the pupils, when considering their age and time they are able to fully concentrate.

When the English lesson ends, I often wish it could continue.



Graph 4 Satisfaction of the pupils with the length of English lessons.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

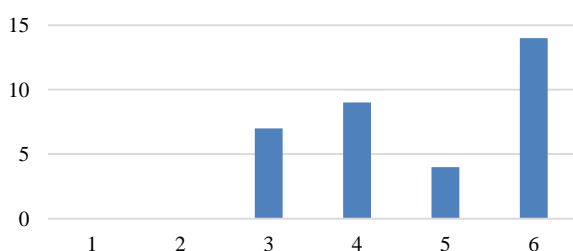
(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 2.71

When teaching children and young learners, we observe very often the phenomenon that they want to impress their teachers and want to make them happy. This reality was absolutely confirmed by our research, as the majority of the pupils expressed their wish to satisfy their English teachers with their results. Nearly all of our 34 respondents wanted to study well, so their teachers would be content (the pupils positively reacted to the statement: "I want to work hard in English lessons to make my teacher happy."). This statement have or more specifically, the results have shown that the teacher has affect learners' motivation to a great extent, therefore it will be interesting to continue in this research and find out the effect of teacher's motivation strategies on learners' motivation.

I want to work hard in English lessons to make my teacher happy.



Graph 5 Pupils' effort to make their teachers satisfied with their study results.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

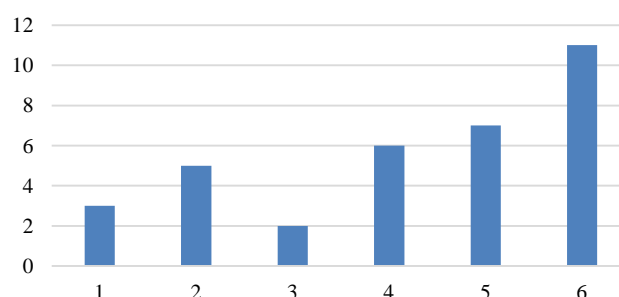
(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 4.74

The next statement ("I enjoy my English lessons this school year because what we do is neither too hard nor too easy") was aimed at finding out how they perceive the demands of the school curriculum (in the school subject English language) and of their teacher. The majority of the respondents agreed with this statement, what reflects again their positive attitude towards English as the school subject.

I enjoy my English lessons this school year because what we do is neither too hard nor too easy.



Graph 6 Attitude of the pupils towards the demands of English lessons.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

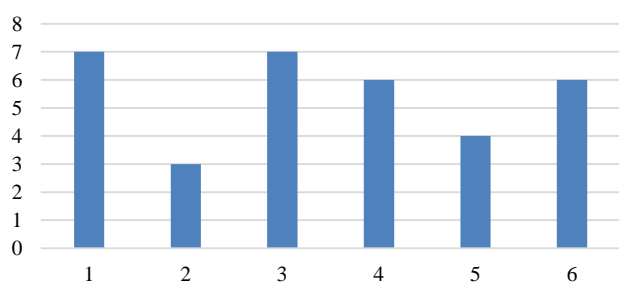
(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 4.24

By the statement "I would rather spend time on other subjects than English" we wanted to know if the pupils prefer other school subjects to English lessons and to what extent if yes. The results showed that the number of pupils who would rather spend time on other subjects than English is similar to the number of the ones who would not change the English lessons for other subjects.

I would rather spend time on other subjects than English.



Graph 7 The pupils' preference of other school subjects to English.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

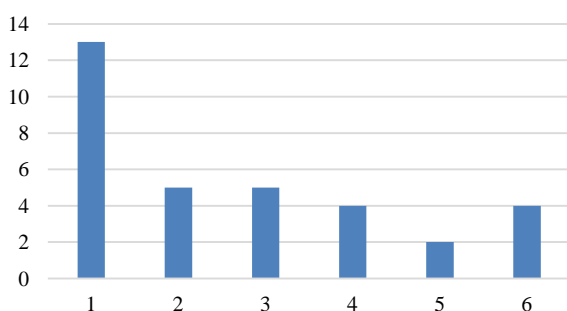
(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 3.45

The eighth statement of the questionnaire “*Learning English at school is a burden for me this school year*” was used to see if there are pupils who consider English lessons too difficult. The majority of them expressed that studying English is not a burden for them. It can be related to their positive attitude towards English lessons in general, as well as to their opinion that school curriculum for English is not too difficult for them (we have already proved this when evaluating the results of the sixth statement above).

Learning English at school is a burden for me  
this school year.



Graph 8 The pupils do not consider English lessons as a burden.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

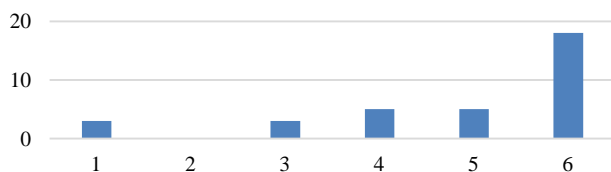
(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 2.67

By the last (ninth) statement of the questionnaire (“*In English lessons this school year, we are learning things that will be useful in the future*”) we wanted to know if the pupils already understand the importance of mastering English for their future life. They definitely do – more than half of them declared decidedly their agreement with this statement. This presents a great advantage to the teacher of English, because if the students know the necessity of learning foreign language, they will be more motivated to learn it and have more positive attitude towards the lessons and language itself.

In English lessons this school year, we are  
learning things that will be useful in the future.



Graph 9 The pupils' awareness of the importance of English in their future life.

## Legend:

Scale 1 ↔ 6

(1) = Min. - I do not agree at all.

(6) = Max. - I do agree.

Mean for this statement: 4.85

## 3. CONCLUSION

The research and its results have shown that the learners in the selected group were in general happy to attend the English language classes. Nevertheless, some questions (2, 3, 4, and 5) indicate that there is space for improvement and increasing the learners' interests in English classes. The next step of the research will include selecting specific teacher's motivation strategies and compiling an intervention programme. Subsequently, we will introduce this programme and study its effects on learners' motivation.

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