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WHAT MOTIVATES LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ONLINE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT: A COVID-19-AFFECTED CLASSROOM TESTIMONY

Abstract: In the unprecedented era education systems around the world are witnessing, where our daily decisions are influenced by the COVID-19-related measures, this paper aims to cast some additional light on the phenomena of motivation in a (virtual) language classroom. Relying on corpora comprising the answers provided by a group of primary-school graduates, this paper, in both quantitative and qualitative manner, reports on the students' attitudes towards various motivational factors affecting the process of learning English in an online environment. Though it can be said that present-day language learners show interest for learning English, being aware of the surrounding contemporary needs, the results of analysing the answers they gave in the study point to the need to incorporate interaction and synchronous communication in teaching-learning practices in order to increase their motivation to participate and study.

Keywords: COVID-19, online environment, motivation, interaction, synchronous, asynchronous.

1. INTRODUCTION

A body of conducted research (Oxford, Shearin 1994; Dörnyei, Csizér 1998; Doiz, Lasagabaster 2018; Bailey, Lamb, Arisandy 2020; Lin, Zhang, Zheng 2017; Almusharraf, Hatcher 2021) over the previous decades shows that motivation strongly influences a number of factors which are part of L2 learning process, including, but not limited to – how often students use L2, how often they interact with native speakers, what kind of input they want to get, how successful they are on different tests, i.e. what proficiency level they achieve, etc. Thus, given the importance of motivation in the sphere of language teaching and learning, questions related to what motivates our students have never ceased to exist.

The COVID-19 outbreak strongly affected our teaching-learning practices and what came as the most obvious change was a sudden switch to a blended, or exclusively online teaching and learning environment. Such context imposed vari-

ous challenges for both teachers and learners – students' participation being one of the most difficult to cope with. The issue of motivation, as the main driving force for learning, whether external or internal, came to the foreground and gained more prominence and relevance than ever before.

This study focuses on the context wherein a group of 236 eighth-graders from 66 schools from the Republic of Serbia learned between December 2020 and February 2021, when all schools in Serbia organised exclusively online classes and the factors which motivated the students to learn English in such an environment. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the respondents assessed what motivated them to study, to what degree, and what hindered them from learning and participating. The results obtained from the survey are analysed and discussed to a better insight into the context in which the students learned, and describing which factors proved to be motivating for the students on the one hand, and which came as obstacles, on the other.

2. MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXT

During the 20th century, the issue addressing motivation was mostly affected by a social-psychological approach inspired by the work of Gardner and Lambert (e.g. 1985), who primarily regarded L2s (dominantly, but not restricted to second languages) as mediating factors between different ethnicities in multicultural contexts. For this reason, they saw motivation to adapt to the other culture as a strong force enabling intercultural communication.

In this regard, two dimensions of the phenomenon of motivation were dominant for years, them being – integrative and instrumental. The former is associated with affection towards the L2 representatives and willingness to interact with them (or even assimilate with/among them), while the latter is related to possible pragmatic achievements of L2 proficiency, such as finding a better position, or getting a higher salary, i.e. promotion.

Apart from Gardner's widely spread social-educational model mentioned above, the process could be seen from a cognitive perspective as well. Namely, Noels et al. (2000) introduced Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory into the sphere of language learning. It was the application of self-determination theory to language-learning research which distinguished two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic (Deci, Ryan 1985). While the former refers to doing something because it is satisfying per se, the latter refers to doing something to obtain external rewards.

Another general distinction was introduced by Heckhausen (1991), who made difference between striving for success on one hand and avoiding failure on the other hand – the poles which could strongly affect one's decisions and deeds, including those related to language learning.

Be that as it may, it was even at the end of the 20th century when the evidence started suggesting that the available theories might not encompass all the possible kinds of L2 learning motivation (Oxford, Shearin 1994: 13), primarily due to the fact that there is no consensus with regard to exact L2 learning motivation, and the fact that reasons for language learning, just like learning setting is constantly experiencing changes.

In a similar vein, it was back in 1998 when Dörnyei and Csizér, aware of a "shift in thought of L2 motivation", highlighted the importance of motivation, stating that "Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals" (1998: 203–204).

Moreover, Dörnyei believes that, compared to other school subjects, i.e. course, languages engage both personal and social aspects along the learning path, as this process includes our attitudes towards the target language culture, people, potential stereotypes, prejudices, etc. (which follows Gardner's stands).

2.1. MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Although a number of research examining motivation in language learning practices has undoubtedly increased over the previous decades (Lin, Zhang, Zheng 2017; Doiz, Lasagabaster 2018; Kang, Zhang 2020; Pozón-López et al. 2020; Bailey, Almusharraf, Hatcher 2021), it is a worthy note that motivation plays one of the central roles, if not the leading one specifically in EMI (English Medium Instruction, i.e. the setting where English, as a foreign language, is being taught in English) contexts, where, up to this moment, this phenomenon has not been exploited enough (Doiz, Lasagabaster 2018: 659).

It is believed that inner values, related to intrinsic motivation hugely influence students' decisions to initiate and complete their learning tasks, i.e. "when learners feel satisfied, they yield improved self-motivation" and thus "intrinsic value is the motivation that uplifts learners' interest in the tasks offered to them" (Bailey, Almusharraf, Hatcher 2021: 2563).

The unstoppable spread of digital technologies and the Internet have definitely enabled language teachers and learners to facilitate their greater exposure to the wanted target language/-s. We are witnessing a spectrum of opportunities for self-initiated, intrinsically motivated use of English, via e.g. search-engine information-seeking, digital gaming, YouTube, Netflix content, social media or participation, online forums / chat rooms, language study apps, etc.

Prior to the COVID-19 imposed era, blended and flipped courses were generally supported by course learning management systems (LMS), and were mostly of asynchronous character, conducted via email, online discussion boards, or direct messages. Anyhow, the new era has suddenly changed it all – and institutions

around the world started applying a number of platforms enabling synchronous interaction (e.g. Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, MS Teams, etc.)

Even though online education has been increasingly adopted globally during 2020 and 2021, whether this teaching mode is effective for students' learning engagement and motivation is still an open question.

2.2. MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING – EVIDENCE UNDER THE NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

Even prior to the pandemic-imposed online learning era, student's attitudes and motivation were regarded as one of the most important factors for success in CALL (computer-assisted language learning) contexts. Web-based assignments, just like MOO (multi-user, object oriented) environment, applied in the process of language, were reported to have positive effects on learners' motivation (Ushida 2005).

Lin, Zhang and Zheng (2017) found that students' "satisfaction is believed to be critical to evaluation of their online-learning success" (2017: 77) and concluded that "online learning outcomes were not predicted by motivation" (2017: 85) but SRL (self-regulated learning) strategies, which proved to be the only relevant predictor of the examined respondents' online language-learning success.

Kang and Zhang (2020) analysed students' engagement and motivation exhibited in online context in higher education and, apart from emphasising the fact that "the factors and dynamics influencing students' learning engagement and motivation are multifaceted and complex" (2020: 2), they came to conclusion that "transforming faculty-centered teaching modes into student-centered ones is also an essential approach of promoting students' learning engagement and motivation" (2020: 2).

Pozón-López et al. (2020) analysed learners' satisfaction and intention to use online courses in the future. They proved the relationship between their satisfaction and autonomous motivation with the use of technology, but also that satisfaction is affected by the course's quality, its production value, and effectiveness.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The research reports on the results obtained from the survey conducted among 236 students and it focuses on the issue of the students' motivation to study and participate in English language classes organised in the online environment. It aims to investigate what motivated the respondents to learn and what the nature of this motivation was.

The survey was given to the first-year students of a vocational school in Belgrade at the very beginning of the school year 2021/2022 – 236 students participated in the survey, 35 boys and 201 girls, aged 15, and they came from 66 different primary schools, mainly from Belgrade and the surrounding municipalities. The survey was distributed to the respondents in English language classes in person so that the teacher could provide necessary clarifications related to certain survey questions if the students needed them.

The survey, created by the authors of the paper, consisted of three sections. The first set of the questionnaire contains statements and questions whose aim was to gather information related to the context the students were involved in during the exclusively online-organised and conducted English language classes between December 2020 and February 2021. It was the period when all schools in the Republic of Serbia were organised in the online environment due to the unfavourable COVID-19 situation. The second part of the questionnaire consists of 14 five-point scale questions that measure various aspects of students' both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The two open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire aimed at gauging students' opinions reflecting their own experience related to the online learning context and what motivated or hindered them from learning. Via the illustrated form of the study, we wanted to test some of the impressions we regularly get in direct contact with students during this hybrid teaching-learning period. At the same time, the choice in relation to the form was strongly influenced by our wish to expose the respondents to a student-friendly design, resembling, to a great, natural interaction they have with the teacher during the EFL lessons. In this way, we believe, the conducted survey yielded as spontaneous responses as possible.

The analysis of the first part of the questionnaire provides data that help us describe and better understand the online contexts wherein the students worked and learned. The results obtained from a five-point Likert scale set of questions are collected and statistically presented in a table. In the statistical representation, the mean value is calculated for each statement because the sample was heterogeneous, the numbers of the respondents and statements were final and a more precise average value was aimed at. The results are also represented with standard deviation values and subsequently analysed in qualitative terms. The answers to the last two open-ended questions are classified into several categories sharing some common denominator.

3.1. RESEARCH RESULTS ANALYSIS

The analysis of the first section of the questionnaire provides a better insight into the context wherein the students had their online English language classes between December 2020 and February 2021, when all schools from the Republic of Serbia organised the teaching process exclusively online.

Table 1 shows which learning platforms the students used in their English online classes and the numbers in columns represent the frequency of their occurrence. The percentage for each category is calculated and given in the last column.

Table 1. Learning Platforms Used in English Online Classes

Learning Platform	Number of answers	Percentage
Google Classroom	191	80.93%
Microsoft Teams	28	11.86%
Zoom	7	2.97%
Viber	8	3.89%
Edmodo	2	0.85%

The answers show that the commonest learning platforms the students used was Google Classroom; Microsoft Teams, although a comprehensive learning platform offering many options for distance learning, was used almost eight times less. A small percentage of students used other platforms such as Zoom, Edmodo, and even Viber, a calling and messaging app.

Another question aimed at getting a better insight into the organisation of the teaching and learning process during the above-mentioned period contained information relating to the way lessons were organised – whether, and how often lessons were conducted in a real-time, live-streaming classroom. The results show that 49% of the students had all or the majority of the English classes held in a live-streaming classroom, with a teacher present all the time, as in a real, in-person classroom. Another 51% of the students rarely or never had classes in a live-streaming classroom, and they added that their online classes implied receiving the material, PPT presentations, and tasks from the teacher, sometimes even delivered randomly, not when English class was scheduled.

When asked to list the learning apps used during online classes (during the survey, the students were explained what these apps could include), only 24 students replied that they used interactive quizzes.

The last question belonging to the first section of the questionnaire aimed at finding whether the students had experienced pair or group work during online lessons, and only 12 of them answered affirmatively. Interestingly, none of the students who used either Zoom or Microsoft Teams – platforms that have the option of breakout rooms, answered that they had experienced such organisation in their online English classes.

The research questions (Q1–Q14) from the second part of the questionnaire are listed in Table 2, and the numbers in columns 1 to 5 indicate the frequency of their occurrence, whereby 1 is the value for 'I strongly disagree', 2 the value for 'I disagree', 3 is for 'neither agree nor disagree', 4 for 'I agree', and 5 denotes 'I strongly agree'. The abbreviation NA stands for 'not answered' and the number

denotes how many students missed to provide the answer for the marked questions. The final column represents the mean value calculated for each research question.

Table 2. Questions from the questionnaire, the number of answers and the mean value

Question		1	2	3	4	5	NA	Mean	SD
Q1	I enjoyed English language online classes.	32	48	71	52	33	0	3.03	1.23
Q2	I received support and encouragement from the teacher.	24	27	56	77	52	0	3.45	1.23
Q3	The teacher gave his/her best to include me in the activities during online classes.	31	20	58	48	79	0	3.53	1.36
Q4	The teacher gave me feedback on my learning and progress.	31	21	49	63	69	3	3.51	1.34
Q5	English language classes were organised in an interesting and motivating way.	54	51	66	40	23	2	2.69	1.26
Q6	Topics, materials and tasks used in English language classes were interesting and engaging.	37	70	46	54	26	3	2.84	1.26
Q7	To study English in online environment, the biggest motivation factor was a good grade.	22	32	35	71	72	4	3.6	1.30
Q8	One of the reasons why I learned was to please my parents.	82	47	26	39	38	4	2.59	1.50
Q9	I am motivated to learn when I am surrounded by my friends and when I am involved in pair/group work.	53	28	52	48	51	4	3.07	1.45
Q10	I was motivated to study during online English language classes.	54	43	69	41	25	4	2.74	1.29
Q11	I am motivated to learn English because I would like to communicate with the foreigners.	7	8	11	63	143	4	4.41	0.95
Q12	I am motivated to learn English because I would like to listen to music / watch movies / play video games / read.	17	23	34	46	113	3	3.92	1.30
Q13	I am motivated to learn English because I know I need it for my future job/schooling.	20	6	33	59	115	3	4.04	1.24
Q14	Regardless of the circumstances, I gave my best to study and learn.	14	11	33	101	74	3	3.9	1.09

As pertains to the quantitative analysis of the last two open-ended questions, it is based on the answers to the questions allowing the respondents to reflect on their own online learning experience and comment on it. The answers to the first question that investigated what motivated students the most to learn English in the online environment could be categorised into two groups – those belonging to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors.

a. Several extrinsic factors were identified by the students as motivating to learn English, and these are as follows (the numbers in brackets indicate how many students mentioned them): grade (72), career, success, and further education prospects (34), the way the teacher organised and conducted classes (45), parents (6), friends (3).

b. The commonest answer the students provided for this question relates to the need to communicate in English, and even 67 students wrote that communica-

tion was the main driving force to learn English. 30 students wrote that they love English and it is their main motivation factor, while 14 of them stated that knowledge is what they aim at.

15 students explicitly wrote that nothing had motivated them to learn and participate in online English classes, and 14 students did not provide any answer to this question and left the space empty.

Some students even wrote sentences to explain what motivated them, and the commonest answers related to their teachers – from rather positive comments, such as "My teacher was brilliant, she really did her best and motivated us all with her energy and enthusiasm", or "Every teacher's nice word, even the slightest praise, motivated me a lot", to those expressing dissatisfaction, such as "I motivated myself because the teacher did not".

The second open-ended question investigates the obstacles the students encountered in the online learning environment and what hindered them from learning. The analysis reveals several types of obstacles and demotivational factors and these are as follows:

a. The lack of communication. Many students wrote that what hindered them the most from learning was the lack of communication with the teacher and some students even wrote that they did not get any support on the part of the teacher during online classes. There were 14 comments which stated that they could not communicate because they did not have online classes and that the only communication with the teacher included posting materials on some platforms and sending homework without even getting feedback. Another type of communication that the students missed was the one between and among their classmates.

b. Various distractions. The commonest types of distractions the students stated in their answers include noise and uncontrollable interference, such as turning on microphones at the same time or interrupting each other; abusing phones and other digital devices, and not paying attention during classes; technical issues and problems with the internet connection.

c. Various personal issues, such as being too shy to speak in front of everybody or turn on their cameras; laziness, the lack of concentration/motivation/interest/self-control, and other obligations. One student wrote that being at home, she had to take care of her sick mother and could not focus on the classes all the time.

d. Material overload. Students wrote that they had been overloaded with information and material, and they could not manage everything successfully.

26 students wrote "online environment" and 34 of them put "nothing" as the answer to the question. There were 5 comments indicating that some students believe that the classes were created in such a way that only high achievers could benefit from them. Two students wrote that their teachers used most of the class time to prepare some students for the English language competition. 34 students wrote that they had not encountered any problems during online classes and that they were highly motivated to learn and participate.

4. DISCUSSION

The results show that all students used some type of online tool or platform in their English language classes, and the vast majority used either Google Classroom (80.93%) or Microsoft Teams (11.86%). If we compare these results with one of the first research paper results (Tomović, Aleksić 2020) conducted in our country investigating the context wherein the online learning and teaching took place in the spring of 2020, we can conclude that since then, much progress has been made in terms of introducing professional learning platforms in schools. According to the previously mentioned research, in the study conducted among 119 English language teachers, only 3.4% used Google Meet and 1.68% used Microsoft Teams (Tomović, Aleksić 2020: 244).

On the other hand, although almost all the respondents had access to some kind of educational platform that allowed for a real-time, live-streaming lesson organisation, 51% of the students rarely or never had such classes. In their cases, online teaching was organised through posting various materials for learning and assessing. These results open the important question as pertains the reasons why these platforms and their possibilities were not used with the aim to organise lessons more effectively wherein communication between the teacher and students could be more like in a real, in-person classroom.

Another result that indicates the lack of communication relates to the absence of communication and collaboration among students since only 12 students answered that they had experienced pair or group work during online classes. Interestingly, none of the students who used either Zoom or Microsoft Teams platforms, which have excellent options for collaboration offered by breakout rooms, were among these 12 students. If these results are measured against communicative approach principles and tenets, the leading benchmarks in modern foreign language teaching that prioritise interaction and communication, we can conclude that the way the online teaching was organised considerably failed to meet these standards.

Within such a context in which the respondents learned, we can analyse their answers relating to motivational factors and how motivated they were to learn English. The average score which reflects how motivated the students were to participate and learn in the online classes amounts to 2.74. On the one hand, the highest score from the questionnaire was obtained from the statements which assessed the pragmatic side of learning the language – the respondents are aware of the importance of learning English for the purpose of communication (average score 4.41), job prospects, and career (4.04) or being able to understand various sources of leisure activities (3.92). These results show that the students are highly motivated to learn English for pragmatic purposes and that they are to a high degree driven by the extrinsic drive to learn the language. The pragmatic nature of 15-year-old students' motivation is also supported by the low average score of 2.59 obtained

from the statement which assessed to what extent the students are motivated to learn to satisfy their parents.

On the other hand, when asked to assess the online environment wherein they learned and how it affected their motivation to study, the results are not that favourable. Namely, the average score obtained for the statements which assessed how the overall organisation of the online lessons influenced students' motivation amounts to 2.69. A rather similar result – 2.84 – was obtained from the statement which reflects students' opinions about the activities, tasks, and materials used in the online classes, and whether and to what extent they were motivating for the students. This result corresponds to the context described by the respondents because only 24 students wrote that they used some interactive games and applications in their classes, which can be one of the reasons for such a low average score. Adding to this result, the last open-ended question reveals that many students (36) wrote that the material overload posted on the platforms was rather demotivating for the students.

The results also point to the crucial role the teacher has in motivation. The analysis shows that there were many polarised answers – students either highly evaluated their teacher's role in motivation or stated that little support and effort was invested on the part of the teacher. This could tell us that the quality of English language teaching varies a lot and that it higly depends on teachers and their individual effort rather than a systematic control of the quality of language teaching in general. Three statements from the questionnaire assessed the role of the teacher in motivation – the level of support they provided, the level of feedback they provided, and how much effort and will they invested in including everybody in the process of learning and the average scores are rather similar – 3.45, 3.51 and 3.53, respectively. These results are in compliance with the comments made by the students in the open-ended questions.

According to the students' answers, a strong external motivation factor was grade, with the average score of 3.6 obtained. Nonetheless, there were 44 students whose comments written in the open-ended questions indicate the presence of inner motivation, since they wrote that knowledge or love for the English language motivated them to learn the language.

5. CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study focused on one of the key factors influencing the effective learning process – students' motivation to learn. Relying on the analysis of the answers provided by a group of primary-school graduates, this paper reported on the students' attitudes towards various motivational factors assessing what motivated them and to what degree to learn the English language in the online environment.

The respondents clearly emphasised the importance of being able to communicate in the English language for various purposes – whether to talk to foreigners, to travel, or work, for career, or success, and stated that this factor motivated them the most to learn the language. This result shows that the students are well aware of the purpose of foreign language learning, they have pragmatic reasons to progress and learn. On the other hand, the results show that almost half of the students did not experience much interaction and communication not only with their peers in the online teaching and learning environment but also with the teachers. What came as a worrying result was the context wherein many of the respondents learned – despite having online learning platforms, many students experienced exclusively asynchronous mode of lesson delivery, with materials posted on these platforms. Additionally, when asked to state hindering and demotivating aspects of online language learning, the students clearly wrote in their answers that it was material overload. The relevant result obtained from the study relates to the polarisation of the students' answers and emphasising their teachers' role either in a very positive or somehow negative context. The main obstacle the students recognised was the lack of communication and interaction with their teachers. There is a clear connection between the teacher's active engagement, availability during the whole learning process, activities, and organisation with the students' motivation and positive attitude towards language learning. These positive learning experiences created stronger inner motivation to learn, and over 20% of the respondents wrote that they learn English because they love it or have a desire to learn.

The results obtained from this study imply that interaction and synchronous communication need to be incorporated in online classes to motivate students to participate and learn. The emphasis on the future teacher training programmes should be on cooperative learning, as one of the most conspicuous elements that was missing in the respondents' online learning experience. What the results also point to is the fact that in an online learning environment students' motivation depends on the teacher's role and endeavours to engage students in the learning process to a high degree. The way the lessons are prepared, organised and conducted strongly influences how motivated students will be, which provides us with some valuable food for thought vis-a-vis our future language teaching-learning practices in virtual environment and could also give rise to a number of issues on how next generations of EFL teachers should be educated.

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ШТА МОТИВИШЕ УЧЕНИКЕ У ОНЛАЈН-НАСТАВИ СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА: СВЕДОЧЕЊЕ ИЗ ВИРТУЕЛНЕ УЧИОНИЦЕ

Резиме: Чини се да пандемија изазвана вирусом ковид 19 интензивно утиче на нашу свакодневницу већ више од годину дана. Неупитно је да су разнолике области живота и рада измениле своје традиционалне облике, у настојању да, најпре, опстану, али, исто тако, да се прилагоде наметнутим потребама. Међу њима се свакако налази и област образовања – у чијим су се оквирима како наставници, ученици, тако и сви други учесници образовних активности – које се дешавају од најранијих дана, преко основног, средњошколског, до високог, као и целоживотног образовања – готово у тренутку – нашли пред задатком потпуне промене свих модела наставних активности на које су до тада навикли. Образовне институције широм света реаговале су промптно на све нове захтеве, у настојању да се образовање, као карика чији значај се не сме умањити ни под каквим околностима, не зауставља.

Овај рад тежи да осветли феномен мотивације ученика који су, попут многих вршњака широм света, били изложени онлајн-моделу наставе страног језика. Осла- њајући се на одговоре ученика који су управо комплетирали свој основни циклус образовања, рад, уз употребу квантитативне, али и квалитативне анализе, указује на њихове ставове у вези са факторима који утичу на степен мотивације у виртуелној учионици у којој се учи страни језик.

И поред тога што, на основу добијених резултата, можемо да закључимо да су испитаници и даље свесни важности познавања енглеског језика у савременом свету, те да наведено представља један од мотива за учење овог језика, уз љубав према самом језику уопште, вреди указати на то да резултати посебно наглашавају њихов став којим се наглашава потреба за већим степеном интеракције у виртуелним учи- оницама, односно онлајн-окружењу, а када је у питању учење страног језика – што, несумњиво, може бити водиља свим учесницима образовних процеса који настоје да исте унапреде и, на том путу, утичу на степен мотивације.

Кључне речи: ковид 19, онлајн-окружење, настава страног језика, мотивација.