Teachers' Perceptions of Secondary Students' Motivation to Learn English in Lebanese Public Schools: Two Case Studies

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Abstract:
Motivation plays an important role in improving English language learners' achievement and performance. In the Lebanese context, there is a scarcity of information regarding secondary students' motivation to learn English as a foreign language (EFL) in public schools. An exploratory study investigated the factors that affected 135 secondary students' motivation in EFL learning from the perspectives of their teachers, and explored the instructional strategies that were actually implemented. The sample included two secondary public schools in the Southern Suburb of Beirut. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six grade eleven English teachers and two coordinators. Six one-period class observations followed the interviews. A content analysis led to the themes that affected students' motivation, which were mainly: learning content, integration of technology, learners' level of English, and teachers' instructional strategies and practices. The study recommended exploring the factors that affected motivation from the students' perspective, which could lead to interventions about the influence of implementing new active learning strategies on students' achievement.

Keywords: Motivation, Language learning Motivation, Learning Content, Instructional strategies, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

1. Introduction:

"Never before in the history of the world have foreign languages learning been prized more than they are today" (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008, p.14). Becoming a universal language, the English language has crossed most borders. Due to globalization, it has become important as a means of communication in the nowadays technological society. In Lebanon, English is taught in many private and public schools as a foreign language (EFL). Official exams at the end of grades nine and twelve are mandatory as per the Lebanese curriculum. However, according to studies from the Center of Research and Development (CRDP) in Lebanon, students in the secondary classes demonstrate a lack of motivation when studying English. This is evident due to low grades in the official Lebanese exams called Brevet or Baccalaureate (CRDP, 2015). According to Crookes and Schmidt (1991), language learning motivation is identified primarily with the "learner's orientation

toward the goal of learning a second language" (p.475). The lack of motivation is therefore manifested in students' homework, attitudes, classroom participation, and performance (Haywood et al, 2008).

2. Literature Review

In their focus on motivation, language theorists are influenced by teachers' instructional strategies and practices. Thus, motivation becomes a key factor in language learning and the major reason for success (Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Ehrman and Oxford, 1995, Brown, 2000; Dornyei; 2005; Gardner, 2010).

In a study done in 2005, Dornyei states that "although motivation is a term frequently used in both educational and research contexts, it is rather surprising how little agreement there is in the literature with respect to the exact meaning of the concept" (p.117). Researchers identify its components and its roles differently such as individual or situational differences, social and cultural factors, and cognition (Renchler, 1992; Belmechri and Hummel, 1998). McDonough (1981, 143) refers to the term ironically, calling it "a dustbin that is used to include a number of possibly distinct components, each of which may have different origins and different effects, and require different classroom treatment". Many definitions are used for motivation: Pintrich & Schunk (1996, 4) defined it as "the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained" while Snowman et al. (2009) described it as the forces that account for the arousal, selection, direction, and continuation of behavior. Later, Dornyei and Otto (1998) explained motivation as "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out" (p.65). For Ryan and Deci (2000), the level of motivation is mostly related to the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to an action. Robert Gardner (2010) spoke about the difficulty of covering all the aspects of motivation in its definition. He mentioned that motivation is related to having a goal, doing all the steps that let a person reach it, having the persistence to continue, enjoying the process of working towards reaching that goal, and having prediction of failing or succeeding in reaching it. For our current research, Ryan and Deci (2000), and Snowman et al. (2009) definitions were adopted.

2.1 Language Learning Motivation Theories

Deci et al. (1991) recommended what they called the integration or adaptive process. This is well expressed in the self-determination theory (SDT) which states that motivation is coordinated by the satisfaction of three fundamental needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence needs are related to the feeling of being capable to do a certain task. The theory suggests that motivation increases when a feeling of competence exists. While autonomy needs are satisfied when a learner has the right to choose and shape his/her learning process. Despite the fact that this is an internal process, it is also affected by the social environment. This takes us to the relatedness needs, meaning a sense of belonging to the learning context such as to the teacher, to the class, or to the school. Hence, learners need to have a sense of belonging to the "domain of action", the class. Later, Howard Gardner introduced the Multiple Intelligence Theory (1995) that explains students' different learning styles depending on the dominant type of intelligence they have. He mentioned eight styles: verbal linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Accordingly, he proposed that teachers design lesson plans with respect to learning content, instructional strategies, classroom activities, and assignments

taking into consideration different styles of learning. For Gardner, this is important to motivate students and engage them as active learners.

In 1998, Covington introduced the self-worth theory and proposed three main elements: ability, effort, and performance. The latter is a result of ability and effort while self-worth, is a result of ability, effort, and performance. Therefore, self-worth is a consequence of a combination of the way learners perform, their perception about their ability, and the effort they exert to improve. To preserve self-worth, low achievers tend to withdraw effort so that their poor performance would not reflect their low ability, so they stop trying. Covington noted that a feeling of incompetence leads to a feeling of worthlessness, which lasts and accompanies a student in future situations if nothing is done to help him/her for improvement. Thompson (1993) recommended that teachers should support students in such situations by using praise and constructive feedback to enhance their self-esteem, which takes us back to Skinner (1961) and his recommendations to give immediate feedback to reinforce a desired behavior. It also takes us back to Bandura (1997) who distinguished between people who have a strong sense of efficacy and those who have a weak one. Those with a strong sense of efficacy try to accomplish difficult and challenging tasks because they think that they have the ability to face any difficult situation and achieve their goals. Even if they face obstacles, they persevere and exert more effort to succeed. While those with a weak sense of efficacy may not even give it a try because they do not have any hope to succeed. They consider those challenging tasks as threats and they try to avoid them.

2.2 Factors that affect students' motivation in EFL learning:

Three factors were repeatedly found throughout literature: learning content, instructional strategies, and school facilities, which were important to our study.

Learning Content:

Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that planning the learning content in a way that aligns with students' interests, levels, and needs increased students' motivation to learn English and reduced boredom in English classrooms. Failing to do so could cause demotivation in learning EFL. In a qualitative study conducted by Dornyei (2005), nine sources of demotivation were found; one of them was the course book. Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) found out that secondary students in Japan were discouraged to learn English because of the content they had to abide by. Another study by Hirvonen (2010) showed that ineffective learning content was a factor of demotivation for immigrant students in Finland. In 2011, Kikuchi conducted a study where he found out that Japanese high school students considered uninteresting learning content more demotivating than teachers' behavior and teaching styles. Furthermore, in a study that was conducted by Devi Krishan & Zahid Hussain Pathan (2013) in Pakistan, learning content was found to be the fourth demotivating factor in a sample of 116 undergraduate students in the University of Balochistan. Students complained from the lengthy reading selections, uninteresting material, unrelated topics to their majors, and many outdated teaching materials that were taught in a traditional way.

Instructional Strategies:

Many studies considered teachers as potential motivators (Hasegawa, 2004; Maruyama, 2004; Dornyei, 2005; Zhang, 2007; Kikutchi, 2011, Zhao, 2012; Dincer, 2014). It was found that a teacher's personality, commitment, competence, and teaching method were important to motivate or demotivate students. In a study on undergraduate EFL Pakistani students', Krishan and Pathan (2013) found out that students complained about the difficult explanations and the teacher-centered classrooms. They also mentioned that their teachers did not give them a vital role in the learning

process, which discouraged them to have any type of interaction. Twenty years earlier, Chambers (1993) found out that classrooms with a large number of students was an obstacle for teaching EFL students who could not receive proper feedback from their teachers due to lack of time, which led to demotivation. This makes motivation and instructional strategies somehow linked to class logistics, which is still a problem nowadays.

School Facilities:

The above indicates that school facilities may lead to demotivation in terms of the lack of proper premises, equipment, and organization (Chamber, 1993; Dornyei, 2005; Sakai and Kikutchi, 2009). In a study by Jomairi in 2011, recommendations were made to equip English language classes with audio and visual aids such as computers, projectors, and internet access to encourage students and facilitate their learning. The factors elicited from several studies were interesting as lenses to the Lebanese context.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand how EFL teachers and coordinators perceived the factors that affected students' motivation, and to explore the instructional strategies used in grade eleven EFL classes.

4. Research Questions

    a- What were the teachers' and coordinators' perceptions of their students' motivation in EFL learning in grade eleven classes in public schools in Lebanon?
    b- How did teachers' instructional strategies affect students' participation in EFL classes?

5. Context of the Study

The study took place in Lebanon, a country of 10,452 square meters located in Western Asia. The first language is Arabic, while English and French are considered as foreign languages. There are three types of schools in Lebanon, public, private, and semi- private. Public schools are free, while the private and semi-private are fee-paying but at different degrees. To complete their education from K to 12, students should go through four different levels: three years for the kindergarten level, six years for the elementary level, three years for the intermediate level, and three years for the secondary level. Students at the end of their intermediate and secondary levels have to pass governmental official exams in order to be accepted at the upper level or at the university level.

6. Method

The study followed the qualitative research design taking two schools as case studies. A case study research "focuses on a unit of study known as a bounded system, which means looking deeply in the characteristics of a certain phenomenon" Gay (2012, p.444). In our research, we focused on students' motivation to learn English in two Lebanese public schools from the perspective of their teachers.

6.1 Sample and Instruments

Lebanon has 591 secondary public schools distributed in the Lebanese regions. The southern suburb of Beirut region includes five secondary public schools. In our exploratory research, we studied two schools out of the five in the southern suburb region. Therefore, the sample was purposefully chosen. School A had six grade eleven sections with 20 to 22 students. School B had

five grade eleven sections ranging from 20 to 25 students in each class. The total number of students in the study was 135 students taught by six teachers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six English teachers of grade eleven classes and two English coordinators in the two schools (A and B). The interview had 11 semi-structured questions about their perception and observations of their students' motivation, and the instructional strategies they use in their classes. Six class observations followed the teachers' interviews; the observation was an open-ended tool with the focus on five items: organization, presentation, interaction, content knowledge, and general comments from observers.

6.2 Data Collection and Analysis

After receiving the Ministry of Education's permission to proceed with the study in public schools, appointments were taken with the school principals to get their approval to meet with the teachers and coordinators. Interviews were each around fifteen minutes with the six teachers and the two coordinators. At the end of the interviews, we agreed with the teachers about the observation date and time. They provided us with their lesson plans at the beginning of the sessions. During the class observations, descriptive notes were taken about the whole teaching and learning process.

By the end of the data collection process, interviews and observation notes were transcribed and analyzed following the qualitative process of coding and categorization.

7. Results and Discussion

Using three sources of information allowed us to triangulate information in order to "obtain a more complete picture and to cross check information" (Gay, 2012, p.393). The content analysis of the three instruments used allowed us to answer our research questions:

7.1 Research question one: What are the teachers' and coordinators' perceptions of the factors that affected students' motivation in EFL learning in grade eleven classes in public schools in Lebanon?

Based on the interviews and class observations, various factors seemed to have contributed in shaping grade eleven students' motivation in the two public schools. These factors were categorized in four themes: learning content, the use of technology, the learner's level in English, and the teachers' instructional strategies.

7.1.1 Theme One: Learning Content

The theme of learning content was repeated over and over with teachers and coordinators as a factor of students' motivation in both schools. The six teachers mentioned that they witnessed a high level of motivation when the topic was interesting and relevant to real life. Teacher 2 in school A believed that the topic plays a major role in students' motivation: "*when the topic is related to their real life, they get motivated to speak about their personal experience and share the information with their classmates*". Teacher 2 in school B also pointed out that whatever the topic was, she would always try to "*find a way to relate it to their everyday life*." On the other hand, teacher 3 in school B spoke about using technology in launching an interesting topic saying "*students eagerly participate especially when I introduce an interesting topic using power point presentations*". Coordinators, as well, insisted on this point; in school A, the English coordinator pointed out that "*Students' motivation depends on the topic, if it is real life topic. For example, boys are much more interested in sports topic than girls*". In school B, when asked about ways participants use to increase students' participation, the English coordinator mentioned that teachers should know what topics attract their students and "*don't let uninteresting topics ruin the English period*".

Referring to Dornyie (2005) and Sakai and Kikuchi (2009), a student may be motivated to learn but gets demotivated because of the learning content and curriculum. The same learning content may be motivating for certain students and not motivating for others. When the topic was related to real life, grade eleven students found it interesting and were eager to participate and discuss it to a great extent to show the amount of information they knew about it. But since grade eleven English curriculum in public schools is based on a fixed set of topics from the Ministry of Education, teachers were seldom free to choose "*interesting and relevant topics for their students*" as mentioned by the Coordinator in school B.

Thus, another critical factor found out was time; teachers' priority was to cover the topics required in their books as indicated by Teacher 1 in school A and Teacher 3 in school B. Thus, 25 years after Chambers' study, one can still see that time constitutes a demotivating factor that teacher may not always be able to influence.

7.1.2 Theme Two: The use of technology

English teachers and coordinators perceived technology as a tool that helped them increase students' motivation. Integrating technology especially by using visual and audio materials in class would keep students alert and attract their attention as they mentioned. Answering a question related to the reasons for the low level of motivation, Teacher 2 in School A and Teacher 3 in School B attributed it to the lack of technology. They said that some students needed visuals to get engaged which takes us back to Gardner's multiple intelligence theory (1995): students who get more engaged when using visuals may have a high level of spatial intelligence; that is why they enjoy visual presentations. However, Teacher 3 in school A blamed herself for not using technology very often, "*I believe I have a gap in this issue*." On the other hand, the coordinator in school A mentioned that teachers in her school integrated technology in their teaching, but sometimes faced logistical obstacles, "*teachers plan to use technology in different ways, yet the lack of equipment and internet access sometimes would restrain them*". It is interesting to find a connection with Jomairi (2011) on the need of adequate facilities.

On the other hand, the coordinator in School B said that "*technology can be our gate to sustain students' attention and encourage them to participate*". She added that the school is well-equipped for using technology, "s*ome classes have smart boards and others have projectors. We also have a trolley that has an LCD projector and a laptop and can be moved from one class to another*". We could see the difference between the two schools' facilities although both were public ones. Moreover, six out of the eight participants believed that using technology was a good way to overcome students' demotivation. "*Preparing up-to-date topics that are interesting for students, using varied strategies and activities, sitting in groups, using technology, watching videos, etc. all these can help students overcome demotivation and improve their EFL level*" said the coordinator in School A.

7.1.3 The learner's level of English

The learner's level of English was repeated in most of the participants' answers regarding students' motivation. The two coordinators mentioned that the learners' level is a detriment in their motivation, "*some students do not give it a try because of their weakness, I try to help them but they think they will never succeed in the English course*", said the coordinator in School A. Teacher 1 in School B mentioned that students' weakness is a major cause of their low level of motivation, "*not all students are the same. Some are highly motivated; others really don't care because of their weakness*". Teacher 1 in school A mentioned that weak students show frustration and as a result they stop trying. Teacher 2 in School B said, "*I promise them that I will help them overcome their weakness, they improve with time*". Teacher 3 in School A mentioned the importance of one to one

communication between a student and a teacher to boost his/her self-confidence and help him/her cope and overcome any weakness in EFL. Teachers' answers are in line with Bandura's self-efficacy concept (1997) and Skinner's immediate feedback requirement (1961) which were elaborated on by Ryan and Deci (2000).

7.1.4 Theme Four: Instructional Strategies and Practices
The fourth theme that emerged in our study was the instructional strategies and practices used in class. Teachers and coordinators in both schools agreed that the teacher's instructional strategies and personality have a major role in letting students like the English session or not. The coordinator in School A pointed out that "*the teacher may be highly professional, but because she is over serious, students may feel discouraged to participate*". Teacher 1 in School A commented, "*I try to be as friendly as possible because I can get the best of my students when I show friendliness, I tried being very strict and serious, but I faced rejection and had to change my strategy*". On the other hand, teachers mentioned the necessity of having group work and pair work, enhancing listening skills, using technology, introducing argumentative topics and debates, and presenting activities that boost students' self-confidence. The findings of this theme were closely related to our second research question mainly based on class observations.

7.2 Research question two: How do teachers' instructional strategies affect students' participation in EFL classes?
Each participant in the study linked the students' level of motivation whether low or high to the teachers' practices. When observing Teacher 1's class in School A, we noticed that students enjoyed her session, the atmosphere was relaxing and different students were participating and interacting with each other, which were in line with her friendliness concept during the interview. On the other hand, Teacher 1 in school B was very serious and strict in asking questions; we felt that students were not at ease during her session looking at their watch every now and then, and whispering to each other whenever they could do so, which is a situation that Teacher 1 in school A had already faced and commented on as a hindering one for students' motivation to learn.

Moreover, two elements were important for this theme, the lesson plans received and the class observation done. In all lesson plans, we could read the topic, strategies to be used, and the assignments. However, through all class observations, we could see that the majority of students did not seem to be really motivated and teachers' practices were somehow traditional. This contradicts what teachers previously asserted during interviews as the need to use group work, debates and other activities to boost students' motivation.

We asked the teachers what they thought about setting their goals at the beginning of each session, they all considered it of high importance because students should know what to expect. Five teachers said that they do it on regular basis but one teacher mentioned that she does not inform students with the goals at all because there was no need for it. While observing the six classes, we noticed that only two teachers out of the six informed students with the goals of the session and the others did not. Regarding group work, the three teachers of School B mentioned that they implemented it all the time. While two teachers in School A mentioned that they rarely used it. "*I haven't used group work this year*" said Teacher 2 in School A. Teacher 1 said she often used it especially when launching a new theme, previewing it, and writing about it.

Another active learning strategy that we asked teachers about was the think-pair-share strategy (TPS). The coordinator in School A said that "*TPS is one of the active learning strategies that teachers usually include in their lesson plan. Despite the noise it causes, it is very effective because it encourages students of all levels to participate*". However, Teacher 1 said she was not

familiar with it, and teacher 2 seldom used it in school A. As for school B, Teacher 3 said, "*I use it sometimes with students who have a weak level. It is somehow effective for those who want to learn not for those who want to have fun*". While the two other teachers from School B said it was time consuming.

Basing ourselves on the six classroom observations, it is worth noting the following: (1) all teachers included some discussions and debates during one period of instruction, and gave constructive feedback to students, (b) only two of the teachers used group work; students were active and engaged in these classes where the topic tackled their everyday life as in class 1 in school B where the topic discussed was "what makes a real friend?" However, motivation was not at its peak for students of class 3 in school B since they showed a low level of participation when they had to discuss "the art of sculpturing" which did not seem an interesting topic for them due to the low participation they showed; this takes us back to Dornyei (2001) and Sakai and Kikuchi (2009); (c) Combining some group work with a Power Point presentation, Teacher 1 in school A introduced a lesson about "Fine Arts" displaying different types of pictures. Students seemed enthusiastic to know more about the topic and showed a high level of participation.

In general, it was also obvious that high- achievers showed a higher level of participation, becoming more fluent than others without considering the language as an obstacle to express their ideas. While some weak students were hesitant to participate, they paused a lot while talking because they could not express themselves as smoothly as high-achievers which reminded us of Bandura' self-efficacy theory (1997) and the necessity to strengthen EFL students' self-confidence.

After analyzing the findings, we can say, with many researchers, that teachers' instructional strategies, personality, behavior, and style have a major influence on students' motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Dornyei, 2005; Sakai and Kikutchi, 2009; Zhao, 2012). Based on our observations, two classes out of the six in the two schools showed higher level of participation than the others. Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 in School A grasped their students' attention with the following: they encouraged participation and urged students to be involved by using class discussions, interactive lecturing methods with Power Point presentations, think-pair-share strategy, and content analysis of visual materials. They allowed students to be autonomous by working in groups and being responsible for their own learning. Enhancing autonomy led to enhancing motivation according to Ryan and Deci (2000). Moreover, both teachers used praise and constructive feedback to enhance students' self-esteem as what Thompson (1993) suggested. Conversely, other classes did not show the same level of motivation in School A and School B. For example, the students of Teacher 2 in School B seemed to be bored in class and the majority was passive. The teacher was doing the work by herself, talking, explaining, writing, asking questions, and answering her own questions. She did not use any cooperative learning strategy, any technology, and she was very authoritarian during the whole period. Dincer (2014) described how students would feel with a teacher whom he calls "highly controlling"; they would feel that they are obliged to attend the session with no will to improve in the language.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our study investigated students' motivation in learning English as a foreign language in Lebanese public schools. Adding to the three major themes from the literature, which are the learning content, the integration of technology, and the teachers' instructional strategies and practices, we found out that taking care of students' level of English was important to enhance their participation as active learners. These themes affected students' motivation in their everyday sessions: for example, when the teacher was using group work, students showed a high level of participation; when the teacher integrated technology in explanation, students were highly engaged;

when the topic was matching with students' interests, they were highly engaged, giving them the ability to initiate and then sustain learning. Whereas when the teacher was not using any active learning technique, introducing a dull topic, or not using any visual or integrating technology, students were bored. This boredom was manifested in the low participation level or the behavioral problems they caused such as talking or getting distracted away from the lesson.

Hence, it is recommended to explore the students' perspectives regarding the four themes that affect their motivation taking into consideration their interests and opinions. This could enhance their motivation in EFL classes. We could also investigate the effect of an intervention where active learning strategies would be implemented using an experimental research design on students' achievement and motivation.

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