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# Motivation and Second Language Acquisition

## Summary

A feature of Italian universities is the high student drop-out rate in nearly all degree courses. It is likely that among the causes of this phenomenon a significant factor is loss of motivation. This study represents the first stage of a longitudinal research project aimed at monitoring students' motivation levels over a three-year period. At the beginning of the academic year 2008-2009 a questionnaire was administered to 150 newly enrolled students of English at the University of Cagliari in Italy. The closed-response items were designed to measure the respondents' instrumental and intrinsic motivation. The responses were then considered in the light of the following variables: age, gender, level of competence in English and choice of degree course. The major finding was that a clear majority of respondents reported a considerably higher level of intrinsic than instrumental motivation, while the most significant variables were shown to be competence level and choice of degree.

**Key words:** instrumental motivation, intrinsic motivation

# Motivacija in usvajanje drugega jezika

## Povzetek

Značilno za universe v Italije je visok osip študentov. Eden izmed razlogov je verjetno tudi izguba motivacije. Članek predstavlja prvo stopnjo v dolgoročnem raziskovalnem projektu, katerega cilj je spremljati motivacijo študentov v obdobju treh let. V začetku tujiskega leta 2008/2009 je 150 novo vpisanih študentov angleščine na Univerzi Cagliari v Italiji prejelo vprašalnik, katerega cilj je bil izmeriti instrumentalno in notranjo motivacijo. Odgovore smo analizirali ob upoštevanju starosti, spola, nivoja znanja angleščine in izbire študija. Glavna ugotovitev je ta, da je velika večina študentov izkazala večjo notranjo motivacijo, medtem ko sta bili najbolj pomembni spremenljivki nivo znanja angleščine in izbor študija.

**Ključne besede:** instrumentalna motivacija, notranja motivacija

# Motivation and Second Language Acquisition

## 1. Introduction: the high student drop-out rate in Italian universities

On the web site of ISTAT (*Istituto centrale di statistica*), Italy's official agency for the compilation of statistics, the most recent figures for university drop-out rates refer to the percentages of students who had enrolled in the academic year 2001-2002 and managed to graduate by 2006. At national level, and considering all degree courses, only 40.5% of the 2001-2002 intake had graduated by 2006. The figures vary considerably according to the discipline studied: medicine had the highest graduation rate at 66.2%, chemistry and pharmacology the lowest at 18.5%, while modern languages was in line with the overall average at 40.9%.

It should be noted that in these statistics there is no differentiation between degree courses of three years (83.9% of the total), five years or, in the case of the degree in medicine and surgery, six years. This means that students of the five-year degrees who graduated in 2006 had done so within the official course duration, but students of the three-year degrees, who might have been expected to graduate at the end of the academic year 2003-2004, had already gone two years over the official duration if they did not graduate till 2006. Students of medicine and surgery could not possibly graduate in 2006 because they had not yet completed the course, so the 66.2% graduation rate indicated in the previous paragraph must refer to other degree courses offered by the faculties of medicine.

It is a feature of the Italian university system that “full-time” students are allowed to go *fuori corso*, i.e. take longer than the official course duration to complete their studies. Indeed, the ISTAT figures show that 66% of the 2006 graduates had required more than three years to get their degrees, a percentage that rises to 75.5% in the case of students of modern languages. It is not always clear, therefore, whether a student has genuinely dropped out or has merely failed to stand the pace. In extreme cases a student assumed to have dropped out years ago may suddenly re-appear and demand to be examined on syllabi that are no longer operative. With this difficulty in mind, the ISTAT investigators sought an unequivocal drop-out figure by checking how many of the 2001-2002 intake subsequently re-enrolled for 2002-2003: it was found that approximately 20% abandoned their university studies after just one year.

The picture that emerges is a somewhat desolate one in which a fifth of university students drop out after one year, and of those who persevere, a high percentage fall behind and do not graduate within the official duration of the course (if they graduate at all). As a consequence, Italy has significantly fewer graduates compared with most other countries in the developed world: Benedetti (2008, 2) refers to the 2008 report on education in the developed countries published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCDE), which reveals that only 17% of Italians aged between 25 and 34 are graduates, against an average of 33% for the same age range in the countries investigated. Indeed, Italy is not only behind her EU partners in training graduates, but has also been overtaken by countries such as Chile and Mexico. The same

report also highlights the failure to invest in higher education: Italy spends the equivalent of 8,026 US dollars per university student compared with an OCDE average of 11,512 dollars.

It is not difficult to identify one of the reasons for the high drop-out rate: for most degree courses there is not a rigorous selection procedure for university applicants – the minimum pass mark in the secondary school diploma may well be sufficient – which means that some school leavers who give university a try are far from gifted and possibly not particularly motivated from the beginning (a notable exception concerns the schools of medicine, which set far more stringent entry requirements, and it is no coincidence that graduation rates are highest for this discipline). That may not be the full story, however; if as many as 20% drop out after the first year, it is possible that something occurs during that year to trigger a process of demotivation. For this reason, the research project outlined here was initiated in the hope of gaining some insight into the motivation levels of undergraduates studying English as one of the two or three modern languages in their degree course.

## 1.1 The purpose and design of the questionnaire

The subjects of the survey were 150 newly enrolled students at the School of Modern Languages of the University of Cagliari in Sardinia, Italy. All had signed up to do one of the following degree courses: *Lingue e Comunicazione* (Languages and Media Studies), *Lingue e Culture Europee ed Extraeuropee* (Languages and European and Non-European Cultures) and *Lingue per la Mediazione linguistica* (Languages for Linguistic Mediation). For the sake of brevity, in this work the three degree courses will henceforth be referred to as Lcom, Lcult and Lmed.

All 150 students had opted to study English plus at least one other language from the choice of French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Russian and Japanese. 80.5% were female, which is typical for faculties of modern languages in Italy. 69.33% were in the age range 18-20, and since in Italy there is no tradition of taking a gap-year, most had left school in the summer of 2008. A further 26.66% were aged between 21 and 25 and had presumably had some experience of working, or at least seeking work. Only 4%, six individuals, were 26 or older.

Although the School of Modern Languages and Literature in Cagliari has a selection test for prospective students, it is an examination of general educational achievement rather than communicative competence in the relevant target languages. For this reason, there was considerable heterogeneity in the subjects' level of English. Asked to indicate their current level, 12.08% described their English as elementary, 63.76% opted for pre-intermediate and 24.16% rated their level as intermediate or higher. Given the presence of so many subjects with limited English language skills, it was decided that the questionnaire should be in Italian.

In addition to the variables of age, gender, level of English and choice of degree course, it had originally been planned to consider the responses of those whose native language was not Italian. However, the idea was dropped when it became clear that this variable involved very few people, and to have asked them to identify themselves would have compromised their right to anonymity.

The questionnaire was designed to measure the subjects' intrinsic motivation and instrumental motivation with regard to the learning of English. Instrumental motivation is present when the learner has a specific functional goal that depends on acquiring a certain level of competence in the target language: to win a place at university, to get a job or a promotion, to be able to consult scientific papers, and so on. Powerful instrumental motivation may be strong enough to overcome a lack of *integrative motivation* – the desire to 'to learn a language because of positive feelings toward the community that speaks that language' (Gardner 1985, 82–3) – and will thus allow a person to acquire the target language despite negative attitudes towards the TL community; millions of users of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) can express their distaste for American or British culture and people with impressive fluency. Much depends on the degree of communicative competence required; those whose motivation is entirely instrumental, and who only need to use a specific variety of the TL in a limited range of situations, may find that their L2 fossilizes, or to use Schumann's (1978) preferred term, pidginizes, once those circumscribed skills have been acquired.

Intrinsic motivation is essentially the opposite of instrumental motivation since an individual engages in an activity – in this case the learning of a second language – for no utilitarian purpose whatsoever, but merely because s/he gains pleasure and satisfaction from it. It is doing something for its own sake without expectation of tangible reward. Some investigators prefer the term *task motivation*; indeed, in his Intrinsic Hypothesis, Skehan (1989), cited by Ellis (1994, 509), sees intrinsic motivation as deriving from an inherent interest in the learning tasks he or she is asked to perform rather than an overriding concern with the outcome of task completion.

It was decided to use closed- rather than open-ended response items in the questionnaire. Although the latter may yield qualitatively richer data, Brown (2001, 37) lists no fewer than nine disadvantages to their employment, particularly relevant drawbacks being that they are more difficult and time-consuming to answer, which often encourages respondents to skip items, while the data generated are difficult for researchers to interpret and analyze. In contrast:

The major advantage of closed-ended questions is that their coding and tabulation is straightforward and leaves no room for rater subjectivity. Accordingly, these questions are sometimes referred to as 'objective' items. They are particularly suitable for quantitative, statistical analyses because the response options can easily be numerically coded and entered into a computer database.

(Dörnyei 2003, 35)

Two item banks – one to measure intrinsic motivation and one for instrumental motivation – were created, both of which involved Likert scale items offering six possible responses, the Italian equivalents of: (A) strongly agree; (B) agree; (C) partially agree; (D) partially disagree; (E) disagree; (F) strongly disagree. An even number of response options was chosen to avoid the phenomenon of 'sitting on the fence', i.e. when respondents consistently choose the non-committal middle option from an odd number of possibilities.

A potential difficulty with this research is that I conducted it in the institution where I work, with the consequent risk that respondents would seek to provide the ‘right’ answers – i.e. the ones they imagined I wanted to see – rather than sincere responses. In an endeavour to counteract this danger, the questionnaire began with a signed statement affirming that the research was an entirely personal initiative, was not commissioned or even encouraged by the university administration, and that the respondents’ answers would not have the slightest bearing on the grades they would receive during their degree course. It was stressed that the questionnaires would remain entirely anonymous unless individuals elected to provide the optional datum of their student enrolment number (which would later permit comparison between reported motivation and re-enrolment for the second year of the course). Unsurprisingly, the majority chose not to give this piece of information and thus preserved their anonymity.

An English version of the questionnaire is shown in the Appendix to this work.

## 1.2 Piloting and administering the questionnaire

Questionnaires do not emerge fully-fledged; they have to be created or adapted, fashioned and developed to maturity after many abortive test flights. In fact, every aspect of a survey has to be tried out beforehand to make sure that it works as intended.

(Oppenheim 1992, 47)

However much care is taken in the writing of items, ambiguous wording, loaded questions and otherwise dubious elements will occur and will only be detected during pre-testing. Before administering the questionnaire to the target subjects at the University of Cagliari, it was piloted on similar respondents – fifty newly enrolled students of modern languages at the University of Sassari in the north of Sardinia. Analysis of the data produced revealed that responses to one of the items intended to measure intrinsic motivation were in the extremely limited range of two, rather than in the desirable range of five or six. Since all 50 students gave such similar responses, it was clear that the item was practically useless for differentiation purposes and would have to be eliminated from the definitive version of the survey. Similarly, an item was unceremoniously excluded from the instrumental motivation section after the pilot version showed that it had generated answers that bore little correlation with the other items in the section. It was clearly measuring something other than instrumental motivation, and retaining it would have compromised the internal-consistency reliability of that part of the survey. Thus the questionnaire was pared down to the twelve items shown in the Appendix, six each for intrinsic and instrumental motivation.

The target subjects in Cagliari filled in the questionnaire on October 24, 2008 while they were attending colleagues’ General English lessons (in classes that ran concurrently). The brevity and closed-ended nature of the survey meant that it could be completed in a few minutes, so within half an hour all 150 questionnaires had been filled in and collected. I administered the questionnaire personally, which ensured that each class was given precisely the same instructions. Furthermore, in addition to the written statement concerning the ‘unofficial’ status of the

research, I was also able to reassure those enrolled on the Lcom and Lcult courses that they would not have to attend my classes or sit my exams during their three years (or probably more) in the faculty. In the case of Lmed students, who were already attending my lessons, I underlined their possibility of retaining total anonymity if they so wished.

### 1.3 Results

Intrinsic motivation considerably stronger than instrumental motivation	57.33%
Intrinsic motivation moderately stronger than instrumental motivation	24.66%
Similar values for intrinsic and instrumental motivation	14.66%
Instrumental motivation moderately stronger than intrinsic motivation	2.66%
Instrumental motivation considerably stronger than intrinsic motivation	0.66%

*Table 1: Comparison of intrinsic and instrumental motivation (all 150 respondents)*

That most respondents reported generally high motivation was entirely to be expected given that the survey was carried out less than a month into the new academic year when the initial enthusiasm for a new venture had not yet started to fade. Moreover, a degree of self-selection had already occurred in that the students who filled in the questionnaire were those who had shown up for English lessons early in the morning even though attendance on their courses is not obligatory. It might be supposed that even in the first month of the course those with flimsier motivation had found the option of a lie-in more attractive.

What could not be expected was the remarkable imbalance in favour of intrinsic over instrumental motivation. As Tables 2-5 demonstrate, that imbalance is present to a greater or lesser extent when all the variables are taken into account.

	Age 18-20	Age 21-25	Age 26+
Considerably stronger intrinsic motivation	58.65%	52.50%	66.66%
Moderately stronger intrinsic motivation	23.08%	30.00%	16.66%
Similar intrinsic and instrumental motivation	14.42%	15.00%	16.66%
Moderately stronger instrumental motivation	3.85%	0%	0%
Considerably stronger instrumental motivation	0%	2.50%	0%

*Table 2: Intrinsic and instrumental motivation according to age (150 respondents)*

It is clear from Table 2 that age is not a major distinguishing factor. The percentage of respondents with a relatively equal balance between intrinsic and instrumental is very similar for all three age groups, while the only variation of note is the strikingly high percentage of over 26s with considerably higher intrinsic motivation and the 30% of those in the 21-25 age range with only moderately higher intrinsic motivation. Without conducting qualitative research, such as interviewing a sample of respondents, we can only speculate as to the reasons for this relatively minor difference. It is possible that those aged between 21 and 25 have already encountered

difficulties in the job market and have therefore acquired greater appreciation of the utilitarian benefits of becoming proficient in the English language. Similarly, it is possible that people aged 26+ have already secured employment and therefore have no pressing practical need to acquire competence in English. Once again, this cannot be demonstrated without contacting the respondents personally, not least because the admissions office of the University of Cagliari does not distinguish between full-time students and part-timers who combine study with work.

	Male	Female
Considerably stronger intrinsic motivation	51.72%	59.17%
Moderately stronger intrinsic motivation	17.24%	26.67%
Similar intrinsic and instrumental motivation	20.69%	13.33%
Moderately stronger instrumental motivation	6.90%	1.67%
Considerably stronger instrumental motivation	3.45%	0%

Table 3: Intrinsic and instrumental motivation according to gender (149 respondents)

Although none of the 150 respondents skipped any of the twelve items, there were a few cases of omitted personal details, including one person who preferred not to indicate his/her gender.

Gender appears not to be a significant factor: although more male than female respondents have strong instrumental motivation, the overall picture remains very much in favour of intrinsic motivation.

	Elementary	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate+
Considerably stronger intrinsic motivation	55.56%	53.69%	69.44%
Moderately stronger intrinsic motivation	16.67%	27.37%	22.22%
Similar intrinsic and instrumental motivation	22.22%	16.84%	5.55%
Moderately stronger instrumental motivation	0%	2.10%	2.78%
Considerably stronger instrumental motivation	5.56%	0%	0%

Table 4: Intrinsic and instrumental motivation according to level of competence (146 respondents)

Four respondents neglected to indicate their level of competence in English. Of the 146 who did indicate their level of English, the most striking figure is the extraordinary imbalance in favour of intrinsic motivation among those who rate their level of competence as intermediate or higher (24.16% of the respondents). It is hardly surprising that those who have already reached important language-learning goals should be motivated to aim for still higher achievements, for the old adage that success breeds success is often borne out by experience. Indeed, Ellis (1994, 515) cites a series of studies into *resultative motivation* that suggest a strong causal link between goal-attainment and willingness to strive for further success.

It is significant that at this early stage in their degree course, those with only an elementary level of English – i.e. those most likely to struggle – also report high intrinsic motivation.

	Lcom	Lcult	Lmed
Considerably stronger intrinsic motivation	48.57%	47.62%	80.00%
Moderately stronger intrinsic motivation	30.00%	33.33%	14.29%
Similar intrinsic and instrumental motivation	15.71%	16.67%	5.71%
Moderately stronger instrumental motivation	4.29%	2.38%	0%
Considerably stronger instrumental motivation	1.43%	0%	0%

*Table 5: Intrinsic and instrumental motivation according to degree course (146 respondents)*

It emerges that the choice of degree course is by far the most significant variable in differentiating between the respondents' levels and types of motivation. Those who signed up for the course in Languages for Linguistic Mediation have much higher intrinsic motivation and remarkably low instrumental motivation. Possible reasons for this imbalance will be discussed in the next section of this work but it should be pointed out that of the three degree courses, Lmed is the one that is most demanding in purely linguistic terms. In addition to the examinations in general English language skills plus more specialized areas of English grammar, phonology and pragmatics that are broadly similar for all three courses, the Lmed syllabus also involves examinations in translation and interpreting.

Cross-referencing the two variables of degree course and level of competence in English reveals that of the 36 people who rated their skills as intermediate or above, 16 (44.44%) had enrolled on the Lmed course. In contrast, of those who admitted to having only an elementary level of English, just three had decided to do the Lmed degree. The overall picture, therefore, shows that while the vast majority of the people surveyed have high intrinsic motivation, the highest levels of all are reported by those with the greatest linguistic competence, many of whom opt for the most linguistically challenging course available to them.

## 2 Conclusions

The respondents' levels of instrumental motivation are in most cases low in relative rather than absolute terms. Each of items 7-12, those intended to measure instrumental motivation, generated the maximum range of responses (six), while the adoption of Brown's procedure (2001, 173-5) to calculate the internal-consistency reliability produced a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.66. While this value is not good – for Dörnyei (2001, 204) 'we should aim at reliability coefficients in excess of 0.70' – it is nevertheless within the range of what is acceptable. Consequently, the imbalance between the subjects' intrinsic and instrumental motivations appears to be genuine rather than the result of skewed values produced by serious procedural flaws, so the task is to discover why this situation emerges.

The results reported above should be considered in the light of the economic and political context. Although Sardinia is associated in many people's minds with middle- and up-market seaside resorts, the island does not have a thriving economy and employment prospects for

young people – graduates included – are bleak. It is possible that the Cagliari students' relatively low levels of instrumental motivation are the product of a brutally realistic assessment of what a degree in modern languages could do for them in practical terms. In addition to the fact that the Sardinian economy has seen little growth for many years, the timing of the administration of the questionnaire – late October 2008 – also coincided with the worldwide credit crunch and the first indicators of global recession, hardly a moment for humanities undergraduates to feel optimistic about their short-term future. Of the three degree courses, Lmed is the one that ought to have the most direct link with the world of work because of its orientation toward the practical skills of translating and interpreting, yet the students enrolled on this course were those with the strongest imbalance in favour of intrinsic motivation. Finally, domestic politics played a part since the respondents completed the questionnaire at a time of open conflict between the state universities and a government ideologically committed to the privatization of higher education.

Ideally a language learner would have both intrinsic and instrumental motivation since the specific and clearly defined goals of the latter would complement the enthusiasm generated by the former. However, if the prevailing economic conditions are such that instrumental motivation struggles in barren soil, there is little that a university or its lecturers in modern languages can do to alter the situation. Of course, there is no reason why intrinsic motivation alone should not lead to success in second language acquisition. It is, after all, a multidimensional construct that can determine why an individual chooses to engage in an activity, and how long and how hard s/he pursues it. Vallerand (1997), cited by Dörnyei (2001, 27-8) identifies three subtypes of intrinsic motivation: motivation to learn (engaging in an activity for the pleasure and satisfaction of understanding something new); motivation towards achievement (engaging in an activity for the satisfaction of surpassing oneself, coping with challenges and accomplishing or creating something); motivation to experience stimulation (engaging in an activity to experience pleasant sensations). There would appear to be enough in those three categories to keep an individual focused on the learning task. Indeed, it can also be argued that strong instrumental motivation may sometimes conflict with and eventually undermine intrinsic motivation (i.e. when something that begins as a pleasure mutates first into a duty, then into a chore).

The awkward fact remains, however, that if past trends are maintained, 20% of those who reported such high intrinsic motivation in October 2008 will have dropped out by October 2009 and many more will fall by the wayside in subsequent years. Whether loss of motivation is the major, or at least a significant, factor in the drop-out rate remains to be seen. Quantitative investigations like the one reported here can answer questions such as *what* and *how much* but are not particularly suitable for discovering *why*. For this reason, the follow-up questionnaire planned for October 2009 needs to be complemented by qualitative research based on interviews along the lines of Ushioda's (2001) study of Irish students of French at Trinity College Dublin. It is to be hoped that those who sign up for the second year of their degree course will, in reporting on their own feelings and attitudes, also shed some light on why others chose to abandon their studies.

To come full circle, this work finishes where it began with ISTAT figures relating to university students in Italy. The statistical study cited above did more than investigate high drop-out rates

and the very high incidence of students going beyond the official duration of the course before graduating; it also asked successful graduates to report on their feelings about their experience of attending university. People who had graduated in 2004 were contacted three years later and invited to say whether they would repeat the experience: 76.5% said they would re-enrol on the same degree course, 21.6% said they would go to university but to study for a different degree, and only 1.9% said they would not go to university at all. Unfortunately, specific figures are not available for degrees in modern languages. The paradox exists, however, of a university system that loses a high percentage of its students but, for those who literally stay the course, is then viewed as a positive experience. This research project cannot explain that paradox at national level for all degrees, but it does have the more modest aim of shedding some light on the shifting motivation of students of English language at one particular institution.

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# APPENDIX

English version of the questionnaire used at the University of Cagliari in October 2008

I would like to ask you to dedicate a few minutes to the completion of this questionnaire. This is a research project on the motivation of new students enrolling at the School of Modern Languages and Literature of the University of Cagliari in 2008-09. The investigation is a personal initiative and has nothing to do with any official research requested by the administration of the university or of the faculty. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers but only honest answers, and your responses will not have any influence whatsoever on your grades over the next three years. Thank you for your help.

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*Please indicate your reaction to the following statements.*

*Option A = I strongly agree*

*Option B = I agree*

*Option C = I partially agree*

*Option D = I partially disagree*

*Option E = I disagree*

*Option F = I strongly disagree*

1. For me studying English is an enjoyable intellectual activity.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
2. I like the sound of the English language.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
3. Studying English grammar is boring.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
4. Even if I were not studying at university, I would try to improve my English.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
5. Sometimes I get fed up with studying English.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
6. For me it is more important to be able to communicate effectively in English than to get good grades in the exams.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
7. My main reason for choosing to study English is to improve my chances of finding a good job.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
8. In an ideal situation, I would study another language rather than English.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F
9. When I study English I focus only on what I need to pass the exam.  
 A       B       C       D       E       F

10. I am obliged to study English because nowadays you can't do without this language.

A  B  C  D  E  F

11. I will have more chance of earning a good salary if I manage to reach a high level of competence in English.

A  B  C  D  E  F

12. For me passing the exams of English is more important than my real communicative ability in the language.

A  B  C  D  E  F

#### PERSONAL DETAILS

Age 18-20  21-25  26+

Sex Male  Female

Current level of English Elementary  Pre-intermediate  Intermediate or above

Degree course Lcom  Lcult  Lmed

Enrolment number (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your cooperation.