Aptitude or motivation: which is the better predictor of successful language learning?

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Aptitude or motivation

Which is the better predictor of successful language learning?

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Introduction

Variation across learners in terms of how successful they are at learning a second or foreign language is a familiar phenomenon for most teachers. That variation can be associated with what we call individual differences – for example, learners' age or their gender (Dörnyei, 2005). Two key areas in which individuals can vary are language aptitude and motivation for language learning. They have long been considered to be the strongest predictors of success (Skehan, 1991). However, the relative importance of each remains a subject of debate. This chapter considers how language learning aptitude and motivation have been defined and investigated over the last few decades; more importantly, it reviews the research evidence regarding their respective contributions to language learning outcomes and what implications that might have for the classroom.

How teachers teach, whatever their subject area, is in many ways influenced by beliefs they bring to the classroom (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 1999). In an early session in the language teacher education course I run, I usually ask trainee teachers, preparing to teach high school learners of French, German or Spanish in England, to reflect on some of the beliefs they have about learning. I do that as a way of prompting them to consider whether those beliefs could be challenged and questioned. One resource I often draw on is the questionnaire from Spada and Lightbown's (2006) *How languages are learned,* that presents popular beliefs about language learning. Two items in that questionnaire, in particular, have always provoked a lot of discussions:

> *Highly intelligent people are good language learners*
> *The best predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation*

The first of these statements implies that learners are either good at languages or they aren't – that they have some kind of inborn talent, one that we tend to call 'aptitude'. Of course, aptitude is not really the same as 'intelligence', although for some people, the two may amount to much the same thing, and high levels of intelligence, as measured by such instruments as Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests, can and often do go hand in hand with language aptitude (Li, 2016). Language aptitude is something that for lay people is an evident reality, in the same way that being good at music and sport, or maths, is often seen as some sort of innate ability, rather than something that can be developed. As Horwitz (1988) argues, in regard to language learning, there is a "widespread belief […] that acquiring another language is a special 'gift' that some people have and that most people do not have" (Simon, 1980, in Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). Such views are also reflected in Ortega's (2010) keynote talk on language acquisition research for language teachers, who, she suggests (although without citing evidence to back up her claim), have "intuitive notions" about aptitude. These include the view that "Language aptitude is genetic (we're born with it)", that it "has to do with intelligence, good memory, or a musical ear", and that it is "fixed […] 'either or': Either one has it, or one doesn't. So… there is little teachers can do about it…!"

Key questions

The terminology often used for high ability in areas such as music, maths, sport, and languages also strongly implies that it is innate or inborn. For example, in England, learners who are very good at 'academic' subjects like maths or languages are described as 'gifted', those who are very good at sport or performing arts, 'talented'. Both terms suggest ability handed down at birth, that is immutable, with the added implication that such ability is a prerequisite for success. While the definition of language aptitude given by two prominent researchers in the field does not specifically mention 'innateness', the use of the term talent implies it: "there is a specific talent for learning foreign languages which exhibits considerable variation between individual learners" (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003: 590).

Language learning motivation, by contrast, is something that is potentially more amenable to development, to nurturing, more readily created from scratch rather than inborn, but also therefore less stable and unpredictable. Does that make it more or less important than language aptitude? Is successful language learning possible with *either* motivation *or* aptitude, or are both necessary? The answer to those questions depends in part on answers to some other key questions. The first is: what do we mean by 'successful' language learning? Do we mean the highest level of attainment, as measured by some sort of proficiency test or examination? And does that mean attainment at a specific point in time, or ultimate attainment – that is, the end-point of learners' language study? And what kind of proficiency are we talking about – is attainment perceived as doing well on tests of, say, grammatical knowledge, written accuracy, or communicative language use? Or does 'successful' mean something else, less easily measured – for example, enjoyable, rewarding, leading to changed attitudes about other cultures, and so on. Success might also mean achieving one's personal goals for language learning, perhaps helped by a teacher who is able to nurture learners so that they achieve a level of attainment that is meaningful for them. How we define 'success' is therefore likely to influence how important aptitude and motivation might be as predictors.

Another question relates to the kind of learners we are talking about, and the context in which they are learning. An adult learner studying English as a required part of their undergraduate degree, in a country where English proficiency is vital for gaining a good job, may well be influenced by different factors than a 12-year-old learner of German in England, where language learning is only compulsory until the age of 14 and is seen as less vital for future prospects.

These are some of the issues this chapter will seek to explore, taking each of aptitude and motivation in turn.

Aptitude

What is language aptitude? One of the most influential scholars in the field, Carroll (1981), identified it as the "initial state of readiness" (p. 86) for learning a foreign language. Importantly, Carroll argued that aptitude influences how **easily** and **quickly** people learn another language, rather than the level of proficiency they reach at the end of their learning. In other words, aptitude is not the same thing as language achievement. Carroll did, however, develop a battery of tests designed to predict how successful people would be in language learning in the areas of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Those tests formed the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), which was first published in 1959 by Carroll and Sapon and which remains the most widely used tool for measuring language aptitude. Over the years, other tests such as the LLAMA (Meara, 2005) have emerged, although often focusing on the same areas of testing as the MLAT. As Li (2019) reports, while Carroll saw aptitude as having four main components (grammatical sensitivity, inductive learning ability, phonemic coding ability, and associative memory or rote-learning ability), he also believed it

to be 'unitary'. That is, aptitude depends on all of these four components together; individuals are either high or low in aptitude, rather than having a mixture of different strengths. Not all aptitude researchers agree with that view, however. Skehan (2002), for example, views aptitude as made up of different components that come into play in different stages of L2 learning, namely noticing different linguistic forms, identifying rules and patterns in language, and applying that knowledge in actual language use (Skehan, 2002, 2012).

Within the MLAT, grammatical sensitivity and inductive learning reflect the ability "to recognize the grammatical functions of words (or other linguistic entities) in sentence structures" (Carroll, 1981: 105) and the ability "to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials' (p. 105) respectively. Phonemic coding ability is defined as "the ability to identify distinct sounds, to form association between those sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations" (p. 105). Finally, associative memory or rote-learning ability reflects "the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently, and to retain these associations" (p. 105).

It is worth pointing out, as Li (2015, 2019) does, that the areas of learning the MLAT were designed to predict are ones that underpinned language teaching as it was in the 1950s, namely the audiolingual, behaviourist and grammar-translation approaches, rather than the communicative approach that developed in the 1970s and 1980s. The areas are also noticeably concerned primarily with language comprehension rather than language production, and seem to have little to do with the ability to use language communicatively (Li, 2019). That suggests that aptitude is especially important in classroom contexts, where the focus is more on explicit, conscious learning of grammar and linguistic features than would be the case for learning a language in a naturalistic setting. Indeed, Ranta (2002) found that language aptitude was not strongly related to success in communicative settings. By contrast, Wen and Skehan (2011) argue that the MLAT also predicts learning in such settings, and Harley and Hart (1997) found that aptitude predicted success in L2 learning through immersive, content-based teaching. It is fair to say, however, that many of the aptitude studies to date have been conducted in America, in audiolingual rather than communicative classrooms, so we know relatively little about how important it is for high school, mixed-attainment communicative classrooms in other countries.

That may be in part because research into language aptitude fell out of favour in the last decades of the 20th century, also reflecting a view that it may be unhelpful, even elitist, to seek to identify those who might be likely to be more or less successful at language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). More recently, however, aptitude has attracted greater interest. Important insights come from Li (2015, 2016, 2017, 2019), who undertook three meta-analyses of research into aptitude. In a meta-analysis, the author takes the findings of a number of related studies and pools them to come up with an overall conclusion. Li's work continues to show that aptitude is an important predictor of successful language learning but that its impact varies.

One area where aptitude seems to be especially important is the development of grammatical knowledge. Li (2015) found that across 53 studies, aptitude emerged as moderately related to grammar acquisition, especially for high-school learners, when grammar teaching was explicit. Language analytic ability was particularly important for that kind of learning, as might be expected. Li comments, however, that the relationship his analysis established between aptitude and learning success is weaker than some researchers have claimed, concluding that aptitude "is predictive of initial L2 grammatical competence and less so of later stages of learning, and that it is a conscious construct that affects learning outcome in explicit conditions" (p. 407).

In a second meta-analysis, Li (2016) looked at whether language aptitude predicted other aspects of language proficiency than grammar, and whether different aspects of aptitude are more important for some language skills than for others. Overall aptitude was a strong predictor for L2 learning in

general. By contrast, it was related only fairly moderately to the skills of reading, listening, and speaking. Its relationship with writing was not statistically significant, and there was only a weak, if statistically significant relationship with vocabulary learning. Phonetic coding ability appeared to be the strongest predictor when the individual aspects of aptitude were examined (except for listening, interestingly, where it was the weakest predictor).

Language aptitude, then, appears to most strongly predict the ability to learn from explicit grammar teaching. That might also suggest that aptitude is closely related to general academic ability, or even intelligence, given that grammar knowledge is often an important focus in traditional academic contexts. While intelligence is a broad capacity, influencing "how well a student will understand directions and explanations, or will make inferences about them from the content of any given learning experience" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992: 216), language aptitude is much more specific. But they are strongly related on a statistical level (Li, 2016), and we might say they are very similar, if not identical.

How useful is the notion of aptitude for the languages classroom?

It could be argued that by saying language aptitude 'predicts' successful L2 learning, we are implying that it is 'useful' for that learning. But is that really true? Does knowing that a student has high or low language aptitude help or hinder a teacher's work?

One use to which such information might be put could be to place learners in teaching groups according to their aptitude levels. There is a lot of debate about the merits or otherwise of such an approach, which space does not permit me to consider here. Perhaps of greater relevance is a small body of research that suggests that good use can be made of language aptitude information by matching teaching methods and materials to learners' different aptitude profiles. For example, Wesche (1981) grouped learners by their memory or analytic abilities: one group had high analytic ability, one high memory ability, and one had high ability for both areas. Different types of instruction, to match those profiles, was then given to an intervention group. A comparison group received unmatched instruction (that is, all learners were taught in the same way). Greater learning gains were made by learners in the 'matched' condition.

More recent studies have looked at how aptitude interacts with different types of instruction, as reviewed by Li (2017) in a further meta-analysis investigating three main areas. First, corrective feedback. Li found that there was a stronger link between high aptitude and benefiting from explicit corrective feedback than was the case for implicit feedback. Second, explicit or implicit grammar instruction, where again the link between benefits and high aptitude was stronger for the explicit form. Third, deductive or inductive instruction. In the former, learners are explicitly given a grammar rule and then practise it; in the latter, they work with language materials (e.g. written or spoken texts) and have to draw out the grammatical rules themselves (but there is still an explicit focus on such rules). The evidence reviewed by Li (2017) points to higher aptitude learners benefiting more from inductive instruction (presumably because their aptitude enables them to identify rules and patterns easily themselves) and lower aptitude learners doing better with deductive approaches. Li concludes that teachers might make use of all of these research findings either by taking a varied approach (using, for example, both explicit and implicit types of feedback during the course of a lesson) or by providing extra support for lower aptitude learners in areas such as grammar learning. They might, for example, provide an explicit statement of a grammatical rule on a handout during more inductive activities, he argues.

By contrast, less helpful consequences can occur from paying attention to the notion of aptitude, especially if teachers adhere to the commonly held view (supported by some, but not all, research – see, for example, Sáfár and Kormos, 2008) that language aptitude is a fixed trait, not influenced by

instruction. Viewing aptitude in that way implies, on the one hand, that there is in fact no need to offer different types of instruction to learners of differing levels of aptitude, as aptitude is deterministic. On the other hand, it implies that some students can achieve in a second language and others cannot. Clearly, such a view may have a negative impact on both learners and teachers.

Impact on learners

If learners have strong beliefs about the link between language aptitude and success in L2 learning, even if these are at a fairly unconscious level, then potentially they may see little point in continuing with language study if they feel their own level of aptitude is low. Such an issue is particularly problematic in Anglophone contexts such as England and Australia, where language study is not compulsory across all years of schooling and where there are decreasing numbers of secondary school pupils choosing to study a foreign language beyond the optional stage. Research suggests that learners in England see foreign languages as very difficult to achieve in, especially when compared with other areas of the curriculum (Graham, 2004; QCA, 2006). But there has been surprisingly little research conducted into pupils' conceptions of language learning ability or aptitude, what it is and how amenable it is to development. This is surprising because there is evidence from other curriculum areas (e.g. mathematics, Blackwell et al., 2007) to suggest that pupils' conceptions of ability, their so-called 'implicit theories of ability' (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), are relevant to their levels of engagement, performance, and achievement. In such a framework, 'ability' appears as similar to 'aptitude', something which learners with a 'fixed' view of it perceive as immutable and inborn. We know very little about the extent to which such different implicit theories of ability regarding foreign language study are held by secondary school learners, although there is evidence (Graham, 2004; Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002) that those in England tend to attribute any lack of success they experience to ability factors, and that perceived proficiency declines over time (Williams et al., 2004). Whether ability is perceived by such learners as fixed or mutable is not, however, clear and is worthy of further investigation, as it may shed further light on the issue of low motivation for language learning, a question considered in more depth later in this chapter.

Furthermore, we know very little about teachers' implicit theories of language learning ability or language aptitude. Research does suggest that teachers' beliefs about the nature of ability influence the goals they set for students (Lynott & Woolfolk, 1994), and may also contribute to pupils' experiences in the languages classroom. Evidence of this appears in a study by Mitchell and Lee (2003), where they explored language teaching in classrooms in the UK and Korea. Teacher 'E' in England in particular talked about some learners reaching their "linguistic ceiling" or being "very willing but not terribly able", while others were referred to as "linguists" (p. 51). The authors conclude that such views led Teacher E to lower her expectations, to be "inwardly pessimistic about the ultimate progress of at least some of her students" and to adjust her teaching accordingly (p. 58). Research also suggests similar attitudes among school leaders, who can, furthermore, associate lower socio-economic status (SES) with lower aptitude or suitability for language study. Across geographically diverse contexts such as Mexico (Sayer, 2018) and Australia (Black, Wright, & Cruickshank, 2018), foreign language education for lower SES students tends to take a non-communicative, "back to basics" (Sayer, 2018: 66) approach which, according to the teacher in Sayer's study, is supposedly made necessary by "their general lack of academic knowledge and skills through which to learn an additional language" (p. 66). In other words, views about the importance of aptitude and its influence on success in language learning can have negative implications for who gets to study a language at school and the form that instruction takes.

Motivation

We have therefore seen that, one way or another, language aptitude is an important predictor of how far students succeed in language learning, but not always in straightforward ways, in so far as beliefs about language aptitude may be as important as the thing itself. That is particularly the case if such beliefs lead students to give up language study, taking us to the role of motivation in language learning success.

Just as for language aptitude, several studies have explored statistically how far motivation predicts language learning outcomes, generally by taking scores on a questionnaire assessing such motivation and looking at their relationship with scores on language tests. In other words, does having 'more' motivation lead to higher levels of language attainment? While the majority of studies show that motivation is a very important predictor of learning outcomes, the relationship is almost always weaker than is the case for language aptitude. For example, Ehrman and Oxford (1995) administered aptitude tests (MLAT) together with questionnaires and other tests that elicited scores for motivation, anxiety, language learning strategies, learning styles, self-esteem, and personality traits. They found that aptitude measures most strongly correlated with proficiency, more strongly than was the case for motivation. The same was true of a study by Kiss and Nikolov (2005), investigating 12-year-old learners of English in 10 schools in Hungary, and one by Sparks et al. (2009) studying young secondary school learners in the USA.

As Li (2016) points out, however, most studies exploring the relative importance of motivation and aptitude have assessed the former with a questionnaire that does not necessarily reflect current thinking about what motivation is and how it should be measured. That is, most have used the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) by Robert Gardner (1985). Gardner's model of motivation tended to present motivation as a largely stable characteristic, largely made up of attitudes towards the L2 and its speakers, as well as attitudes towards the L2 learning situation. If we consider motivation to be why people select a particular activity, how long they are willing to persist in it and what effort they invest in it (Dörnyei, 2001), then the AMTB, focusing as it does on attitudes, is arguably more a measure of factors that influence choices about the *initiation* of language learning, rather than a measure of degrees of persistence or effort. AMTB scores thus represent something relatively fixed, which may explain why researchers have then tried to explore direct relationships between such scores and attainment (Dörnyei, 2001). We return to this issue later.

Are aptitude and motivation related to each other at all? Li (2016), looking at a number of studies, found that aptitude and motivation were only weakly related on a statistical level. Yet, another well-known measure of language aptitude, the Pimsleur battery, suggests that they may be. The Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB; Pimsleur et al., 2004) includes assessments of attitudes and motivation as part of aptitude (Snow, 1991). Or language aptitude and motivation might be indirectly related, in so far as motivation might r**esult** from language learning success, itself arising from aptitude, rather than motivation being the **cause** of language learning success. Such a view is, in part, shared by Sparks and Ganschow (1991), who argue that low motivation could stem from learners having "underlying native language problems" (p. 6), including difficulties relating to L1 reading which in turn one might relate to language aptitude.

So, the evidence suggests, fairly convincingly, that aptitude predicts language proficiency more strongly than motivation does, generally speaking, when the two variables are compared across statistical tests that compare their ability to foretell language attainment levels. Nevertheless, as Dörnyei (2005: 43) points out with reference to Carroll himself, language aptitude "does not predict whether an individual can learn a foreign language or not", but instead suggests how quickly a learner is likely to make progress "under optimal conditions of motivation, opportunity to learn, and quality of instruction" (Carroll, 1973, p. 6). This suggests that aptitude alone cannot bring about 'successful' language learning; to be successful in an L2, ultimately you have to study an L2. Again, this argument is very relevant in many contexts, where learning another language is not compulsory

for more than a relatively short period of time. As Larson-Hall and Dewey (2012) also argue, an adult in the USA is not compelled to learn German; if they decide not to, then no amount of aptitude will result in any learning at all. Learners' ultimate level of attainment also depends to a large degree on how long they continue learning a language for. No matter how much aptitude they have, if they stop learning a language after, say, a year, then they are unlikely to get much beyond the beginner stage. Therefore, in contexts where learners have a choice about whether they persist with language study or not, motivation is likely to be as important as aptitude, if not more so.

The impact of motivation on learning outcomes is therefore what we might call an indirect one. As argued by Dörnyei and Csizér (2005), "motivation is only indirectly related to learning outcomes/achievement because it is, by definition, **an antecedent of behavior rather than of achievement**. In other words, motivation is a concept that explains why people behave as they do rather than how successful their behavior will be" [emphasis added] (p. 20). Previous research makes the mistake, in their view, of implying a "false linear relationship between motivation and learning outcomes" (p. 20). Thus, they suggest that rather than looking at the relationship between language achievement measures and motivation itself, as measured by surveys of factors such as attitudes towards the target language community, it would be more sensible to look at what they call "the mediating link, motivated behaviour" (p. 20). There is also an argument that, as motivated behaviour and persistence are likely to fluctuate over the course of language learning, longitudinal rather than cross-sectional studies are needed if we are to understand fully the relationship between motivation and learning outcomes. How valid is it to measure motivation at one point in time and then to examine whether it predicts attainment? Papi and Hiver (2020), in a study using interviews to trace six learners' motivation 'stories', show convincingly how motivation can fluctuate over time and depending on the learning context, such as the phase of education (middle or secondary school, university). It therefore seems rather futile to try to establish a linear relationship between motivation and outcomes.

What factors, then, affect motivated behaviour? One of the most influential theories of L2 learning in recent years, The Ideal L2 Self (Dörnyei, 2005), suggests that a key driving force is learners' future self-image of themselves as a competent speaker of the L2. Studying secondary school and university learners of English in Chile, Kormos, Kiddle, and Csizér (2011) found a strong link between motivated behaviour and the Ideal L2 self. Likewise, in a large-sample study of Iranian adult learners of English, Papi and Teimouri (2014) found that motivated behaviour was most strongly influenced by the Ideal L2 self and instrumentality (learning a language for specific rewards, such as getting a good job). By contrast, in Lamb (2012), a study of younger learners of English in junior high school in Indonesia, classroom experiences emerged as a stronger predictor of motivated behaviour than the Ideal L2 self (which was also not a significant predictor of language learning outcomes). Learning contexts (school or university, for example) and age of learners may therefore influence the relevance of the Ideal L2 self, as well as other factors such as the status of the language being learnt.

The Ideal L2 self suggests that learners exert motivated behaviour to try to reduce any discrepancy between their current position as a language learner and that 'ideal' future self, influencing in turn how much effort and time they spend on language learning. The link between motivated behaviour and outcomes is illustrated in an interesting study by Larson-Hall and Dewey (2012). Based on a sample of English-speaking missionaries learning L2 Japanese, they investigated the relationship between a measure of speaking and grammatical development (through an elicited imitation or 'EI' task) and sections of the LLAMA aptitude test, as well as measures of motivation via a questionnaire that aimed to tap into features of the ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005). They also included the amount of time learners had spent in the country where the target language was spoken, namely Japan. They found that aptitude and motivation had similar levels of importance for predicting how well the missionaries did in the EI task; but what was much more important was the amount of input they had

had, in terms of how long they had spent in studying the language. Arguably, the quantity of input is related to how motivated one is to learn the language.

That idea is also suggested in a study by Saito et al. (2018). Like Dörnyei (2005) and colleagues, they argue that L2 learning behaviour (such as practising using the language) is influenced by learners' visions of themselves as an L2 user, which in turn influences how highly they achieve. The amount and quality of practice learners have with the language is important for how well they acquire it, as is the extent to which they engage deeply with the language itself. This is arguably especially true for speaking skills (Saito et al., 2018), who looked at the relationship between measures of motivation and speaking outcomes over a period of time. They found that for 108 Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) students, greater enjoyment in L2 learning and a stronger sense of Ideal L2 self-predicted how much they practised speaking and how much their speaking skills developed over three months.

There are, however, other perspectives that have been taken on what influences motivated behaviour or persistence for language learning. A growing body of work argues that learners' expectations of success, the degree of confidence they have in their ability to succeed at specific tasks – their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) – is a very important factor that forms a sub-component of language learning motivation and influences motivated behaviour (Dörnyei, 1994; Yun, Hiver, & Al-Hoorie, 2018). Self-efficacy is then in turn related to the kinds of explanations learners give for their success or failure on different tasks, known as 'attributions'. Learners who attribute failure to factors that are uncontrollable – such as low ability or innate aptitude – are more likely to give up when tasks are challenging. In a study of learners of French in England, Graham (2004) found that learners who made ability-related attributions were less likely to continue with language study when it was no longer compulsory and hence were less likely to go on to achieve higher levels of attainment. In a number of studies, furthermore, self-efficacy has been found to be an important predictor of learning outcomes – in subjects such as mathematics (Pajares & Schunk, 2001), but increasingly for language study. Reviewing studies that have specifically explored the role of self-efficacy in language learning, Raoofi, Tan, and Chan (2012) identified 12 studies that established a strong relationship between self-efficacy and learning outcomes, either in general terms or for specific skills. A notable study is by Hsieh and Schallert (2008). They investigated how far self-efficacy predicted attainment for 500 undergraduates in Spanish, German, and French, along with the explanations students gave for how well they did in those languages (their attributions). They found that self-efficacy and attributions together were strong predictors of course grades, explaining around 45% of the variation in learners' course grades.

Self-efficacy, or how competent learners feel they are in respect of a given area of learning, is hence a strong predictor of learning outcomes. But it is important not to view it in isolation. It forms only one-half of the expectancy-value equation (Eccles, 1983), which is one of the dominant theories of achievement motivation. The expectancy-value equation considers that individuals' level of motivation is influenced by (a) their expectations of success in a given area and (b) the value they place on such success. Value includes interest, enjoyment, and sense of importance of the activity. Both halves of the equation are believed to be essential for motivation and indeed are related to one another, as several large-scale studies across different curriculum areas have found. For example, in a study across 57 countries of motivated behaviour for science (i.e. wanting to continue studying it), Nagengast et al. (2011) point out emphatically: "The essence of the noncompensatory, multiplicative relation between expectancy and value is that both have to be high. It is not sufficient to either enhance academic self-concept or to enhance value; teachers must be sufficiently skilled to simultaneously enhance both constructs. If teachers focus on one to the exclusion of the other, then the influence of each is undermined" (p. 1064). Such research also indicates that while expectancy beliefs (self-efficacy) have a strong influence on achievement, value beliefs have a stronger influence on choice, effort, and persistence.

Both self-efficacy and value are, arguably, things that a teacher can do something about. By contrast, it is relatively difficult – if not, in the view of some, impossible – to influence a learner's level of aptitude. That arguably makes motivation a more important classroom variable than aptitude, especially if we consider 'successful' language learning to be more than mere attainment in the form of course grades. As Dörnyei and Muir (2019: 720) argue, "boring but systematic teaching can be effective in producing, for example, good test results, but rarely does it inspire a lifelong commitment to the subject matter".

What factors might influence the development of that lifelong commitment? For school-age learners, the classroom experience is very important, and is something over which the teacher has some control. For example, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) explored teachers' use of motivational teaching strategies with 1,300 learners of English in South Korea, who were between 12 and 15 years of age. The strategies included setting tangible tasks not linked to language outcomes, bringing in an element of creativity and fantasy linked with students' interests, giving opportunities for personal and emotional expression, and giving feedback free from personal criticism. Their use was strongly related to student motivated behaviour and explained a large proportion of the variation in it (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

Dörnyei and Muir (2019) provide further insights into many teaching strategies that might promote motivation, including how to ensure healthy and productive group dynamics and student-teacher relationships. They additionally highlight three motivation phases that teachers would do well to consider: "(a) generating initial motivation, (b) maintaining and protecting motivation, and (c) encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation" (p. 729). The first of these can be enhanced by addressing the two aspects of the expectancy-value equation we discussed earlier. Teachers can raise learners' awareness of different forms of value in language learning. That can include making the teaching materials relevant for the learners, not only linked to the world outside the classroom but also to what learners themselves see as the purpose of language learning. Such purpose may relate to achieving linguistic competence to get a job or similar (instrumental value), or to a desire to learn about other cultures in the broadest sense, for the enjoyment and interest that it generates (integrative and intrinsic value). In Papi and Hiver (2020), the authors argue convincingly that motivation is influenced by a complex interaction of factors, relating not only to the sense of competence but also to what they call 'truth', in which is included the desire to learn about the target language and its related culture. The role of cultural contact has also been explored extensively in a number of publications by Csizér and Kormos (2008), which highlight that for 13/14-year-old learners of English and German in Hungary, motivated behaviour was determined not only by language-related attitudes but also by the views that the students held about the perceived importance of contact with those from other cultures (Csizér & Kormos, 2008). The latter, in turn, was influenced by exposure to L2 cultural artefacts, such as films, videos, books, magazines, and music, not only for English but also for German. Such contact is arguably something that teachers can influence.

Returning to the first half of the expectancy-value equation, maintaining motivation is linked to improving learners' expectation of success, achievable firstly by helping learners set realistic goals based on a shared understanding of what is possible to achieve in a given amount of time (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). Second, the expectation of success can come through the encouragement of 'Positive Retrospective Self-Evaluation' – whereby the teacher encourages positive attributions and sense of control, through feedback that is informative and shows learners how to improve through strategies over which they have some control, rather than through rewards and merits (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). This aligns with an approach that emphasises the link between enhanced motivation and giving learners concrete strategies by which they can become more successful. As Macaro (2003, p. 115) claims: "Demotivated learners have to be given the tools with which to find the subject [language learning] easier and make more rapid progress".

Some studies that have investigated how to improve language learning motivation have had considerable success by giving learners such 'tools'. For example, working with Year 7 and 8 learners of French, Macaro and Erler (2008) not only helped improve learners' ability to read in French by teaching them how to apply learner strategies to solve reading 'challenges' (through a structured programme of reading strategy instruction over 14 months) but also they saw an improvement in the learners' level of motivation for reading and for French overall. Feedback played an important role, on the extent to which learners had used the strategies they had been taught, and how this had led the learners to solve the particular language challenges that they faced.

Conclusion

What can we conclude from the above discussions about the relative importance of aptitude and motivation for successful language learning? As for many things in education, the answer has to be 'it depends': not only on how we are defining 'successful' but also on how we are defining 'importance', along with a whole host of other issues such as the kind of learner, learning, and context we are talking about. While it is fairly clear that, on a statistical level, measures of language aptitude predict higher learning outcomes more strongly than measures of motivation do – especially for learning of a fairly explicit, grammar-focused kind – it is also clear that without motivation, language learning is likely to come to a halt or perhaps not even start in the first place. Perhaps more essentially, if we consider 'importance' to mean how much weight teachers should attach to each factor, then for me, motivation wins hands-down, as something that is amenable to change, and hence something worth paying particular attention to.

Relating the issues raised in this chapter to your own context:

1. In your own second language education context, are there national or institutional policies or recommendations for grouping learners by language aptitude?
2. To what extent are you aware of practitioners, in your own context, believing language aptitude to be an inborn quality that is fixed and not amenable to change?

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