

University of Jyväskylä

IT'S NICE TO LEARN ENGLISH WHEN ONE HAS A  
TEACHER LIKE MINE:

Learner perceptions of English teachers as motivators

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# HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA KIELTEN LAITOS

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Motivaatio on yksi tärkeistä oppimisen edellytyksistä ja sen vaikutus myös kielten oppimiseen on havaittu alan tutkimuksissa. Opettajan roolia oppijoiden motivoijana ja motivoinnin mahdollisuuksia on niin ikään tutkittu niin meillä Suomessa kuin maailmallakin. Suurin osa tästä tutkimuksesta, myös vieraiden kielten oppimisen osalta, on keskittynyt iältään vanhempiin oppijoihin (esim. nuoret, nuoret aikuiset, aikuiset) eikä tarvetta tutkia pienempien lasten motivaatiota ole nähty kovin suurena. Suomessa vieraita kieliä aletaan opettaa jo peruskoulun alkuvaiheessa ja näin ollen tarve nuorempia kielenoppijoita koskevalle tutkimustiedolle on suurempi. Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää alakouluikäisten, aloittelevien vieraan kielen oppijoiden kokemuksia opettajansa/opettajiensa vaikutuksesta heidän englannin kielen opiskelumotivaatioonsa. Tutkimus keskittyi oppijoiden näkökulmaan ja heidän ajatuksiinsa oppimiseen motivoivista ja motivaatiota heikentävistä tekijöistä. Myös opettajan roolia ja vastuuta motivoijana pohdittiin.

Tutkielman pohjalla oleva tutkimus toteutettiin tapaustutkimuksena ja tutkimukseen osallistui oppilaita kahdelta eri luokalta ja englanninopettajalta. Aineisto kerättiin teettämällä oppilailla apukysymyksillä tuettu, avoin kirjoitustehtävä otsikolla "Enkku koulussa, minä ja ope". Kerätty aineisto tulkittiin aineistolähtöisen sisällönanalyysin pohjalta, jolloin esiin nostettiin toistuvia teemoja tarkempaa tulkintaa ja analyysia varten. Analyysissa käytettiin siis pääosin kvalitatiivisia menetelmiä. Keskeisimpiä teemoista olivat suoraan opettajaan liitettävissä olevat tekijät, mutta myös koulu laajempina oppimisympäristönä otettiin huomioon sen noustessa esiin oppilaiden vastauksissa. Tutkimuksen tuloksista kävi selkeästi ilmi, että lapset kokivat useiden ulkopuolisten tekijöiden, myös opettajan, vaikuttavan opiskelumotivaatioonsa. Positiivisesti opettaja vaikutti motivaatioon muun muassa luomalla myönteisen oppimisympäristön ja vastaamalla oppijoiden oppimistarpeisiin. Negatiivisesti motivaatioon vaikuttivat esimerkiksi epäsovivat työtavat ja -tahti sekä oppimiseen liittyvät paineita lisäävät tekijät.

**Avainsanat:** englannin kieli, motivaatio, motivoiminen, nuoret oppijat, oppijoiden näkemykset

**Keywords:** the English language, motivation, motivating, learner perceptions, young learners

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As a topic of research and source of useful knowledge, motivation is much used in the field of education. As Dörnyei (2001a:2) points out, the knowledge gained from the numerous research projects and motivation theories has mainly concentrated on describing the relations between motivation and learning. How this knowledge can be applied to concrete classroom practices, however, has for long remained much of a mystery. Only recently has this practical approach of motivating learners become more popular and more books and articles that give concrete advice have been published (Dörnyei 2001a:24). Also in the field of language learning and teaching, the practical approach to motivating learners is relatively new and lacks attention (Dörnyei 2001b:116).

A relatively large amount of the research on motivating young learners and motivation to learn languages has been conducted in countries where the status of foreign languages in schools is very different from that in Finnish schools. The need for knowing languages other than Finnish is strong since hardly anybody outside the borders of Finland speaks our native language. Therefore, children start to learn a foreign language already during the first years of school. For this reason, it is very important to study the conditions of learning motivation of young language learners, in this case learners of English, in Finnish schools in particular. The matter is not exclusively without attention of researchers but lacks up-to-date knowledge.

In his or her work at school, a teacher spends vast amounts of time with learners in both formal and informal learning situations. Furthermore, this contact enables the teacher both directly and indirectly to affect learner motivation. The present study aims to find out how the young English learners in Finnish primary school experience the role of their English teacher as a motivator. The main focus is on the negative and positive factors

that influence the participants' motivation to learn English. The present study uses essay type of writings of fifth-graders as the data and source of information. The data is analyzed qualitatively and according to the guidelines of inductive data analysis. The role of quantitative analysis in the present study is insignificant. The hypothesis of the present study is that a teacher has a significant influence on the learning motivation of the young students in many ways related to the language classroom and what happens in it.

## **2 THE ENGLISH CLASS AS A CONTEXT OF MOTIVATION AND THE MOTIVATING ROLE OF AN ENGLISH TEACHER**

There are few studies on how to motivate and motivation of primary-grade students, the age group of the participants in the present study. Pressley et al. (2003:4) state that the lack of research and useful information on primary-grade students can be explained by the unquestioned expectation that young children are naturally motivated. In other words, since children are considered to have natural curiosity and motivation to feed it, researchers have not felt the need to study them and their reasons for learning. For this reason, the findings presented here are partly outcomes of studies that have focused on a different target group and should, therefore, be taken with reservation.

Against this background, the present study is well justified. Both fields, language learning and teaching as well as motivation in general, lack knowledge on learning motivation of young learners. Also the role of a teacher as a motivator is acknowledged, but has been relatively little studied.

## 2.1 Motivation and motivating in a school context

A class, as well as school in general, provides a specific motivational context for learning due to its multidimensionality: school environment as such is formal and restrictive by nature, the social context includes peers as well as superior actors and the subject of learning brings its own characteristics and motivational influences to the learning situation. Therefore, it is worth considering what previous research says about the characteristics, restrictions and possibilities of motivation at school.

### 2.1.1 Motivation to learn and motivating learners

Dörnyei (2001a:6) defines *motivation* at its broadest sense as “a general way of referring to the antecedents (i.e. the causes and origins) of action”. More precisely, motivation as a theoretical construct includes not only the reasons why we choose to do something but also how much time and energy we want to put in this action (Dörnyei 2001a:7; Maehr and Meyer 1997, as cited in Brophy 2010:3). Thus, *motivation to learn*, in general, refers to the antecedents that affect a learner’s engagement in and persistence with learning activities. Since motivation has such a great influence on people’s behavior, learning included, a considerable amount of research has been done over the years to learn more about it.

On the basis of the knowledge on motivation, motivating learners can be reasoned to include all the actions and factors that increase their learning motivation. Unfortunately, as Dörnyei (2001a:25) states, there are no “magic motivational buttons” that automatically and instantly make learners motivated and, furthermore, there is probably no single person who could be motivated to learn everything. Pressley et al. (2003:27), however, believe that by using a variation of different motivational mechanisms, it is possible to increase engagement in classrooms. This way we can face the noticed challenge that “what one pupil likes, the next pupil detests” (Dörnyei

2001b:148). Brophy (2010:11-12) also suggests that learners can be motivated by affecting their feelings about schoolwork and increase their respect towards it at a general rather than in subject specific sense to increase motivation to learn.

Before a learner can be motivated to learn, there are some basic conditions that need to be met. Dörnyei (2001a:31) lists three basic, in his opinion the most important and “indispensable”, conditions in terms of learner motivation:

- appropriate teacher behaviours and a good relationship with the students;
- a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere;
- a cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms.

These conditions are essential especially when working with small children since their need for safety and caring relationships is even stronger than for example that of teenagers. As Howes and Hamilton (1992, cited in Birch and Ladd 1996:208) point out, teachers of young children also work as caregivers and need to be concerned with both the physical and emotional well-being of the children.

### **2.1.2 Social context**

School as a social environment creates an interesting motivational context for learning since although learning itself is an individual process, at school it happens in straight contact with and under influence of other people. Moreover, as noted above, social relationships play a major role in developing basic conditions for learning motivation. A person with the most influence on motivation development is probably the teacher. As Dörnyei (2001a:32) implies, teachers have a substantial influence on learners' motivation through they do in class. The role that teachers have as motivators or demotivators will be discussed more in depth in section 2.3.

In addition to the teacher, also other learners are continuously present in individual learning situations and experiences. In terms of motivation, for some learners, school might even be more important as a place where they meet their friends than it is as a place for learning (Dörnyei 2001b:33). Thus, as Dörnyei (2001b:99) reports, it has been noticed by many researchers that peers have an important influence on an individual and his or her motivation at school.

As mentioned above, there are certain basic conditions for motivation development (Dörnyei 2001a:31). All of them are fairly closely related to the social context of learning. In other words, teacher and peer learners are the ones who have the greatest influence on the motivational conditions that are required for learning motivation to develop. Therefore, the social context and its influence on student motivation have to be taken into consideration when discussing learning motivation.

### **2.1.3 Demotivation**

*Demotivation* can be regarded as a counter force of motivation. Dörnyei (2001b:143) defines demotivation as “*specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action*”. That is to say, all the specific, identifiable factors that have a negative effect on one’s motivation can be considered to be demotivation.

Pressley et al. (2003:3) report an interesting observation that there are consistently positive results whenever academic motivation and enthusiasm have been researched in early primary school level. According to them, the intrinsic will to learn exists naturally in children when they start going to school. Pressley et al. (2003:4) also report, however, that there is evidence that during the first years of school children’s motivation seems to start fading. Therefore, in discussing learning motivation, it is important to



consider the role of school as an institution that promotes learning motivation rather than undermining it.

Demotivation is clearly present in contemporary schools. Dörnyei (2001b:141) states that student demotivation in language classes is “not at all infrequent”. The observations of Pressley et al (2003:1) are supportive to that of Dörnyei’s and further imply that the situation is also similar with other school subjects. Academic motivation and demotivation should be carefully considered by teachers since, according to Dörnyei’s report (2001b:145), the vast majority of demotivation sources discovered in separate investigations have been attributed to teachers’ actions and responsibilities. Also Jalkanen and Ruuska (2007) found similar results in their study of primary-grade English learners in Finland.

## **2.2 Motivation to learn languages**

There are extensively used theories on learning motivation in the field of second language learning and language acquisition. Especially attitude related theories have received much attention. In his social psychological approach to language learning motivation, Gardner relates language learning motivation strongly to attitudes towards the speakers of the target language (Dörnyei 2001a:16). He divides the goals of the learners’ language learning into two broad categories of *integrative orientation* and *instrumental orientation*. In the first case the learner has positive feelings about the language and its speaker group and at some level he or she wishes to become part of this group, whereas in the second one the learner wants to learn languages mainly because of the possible pragmatic advantages of language skills, e.g. when applying for a job (Dörnyei 2001a:16). Although it would seem unlikely that a young child would have clear plans for his or her future or study English because of them, Julkunen (1985a:55) found out in his study of young English learners in Finnish primary-school that even

young language learners often perceive the possible future benefits of knowing languages.

Another attitude-related theory frequently discussed in association to language learning is the *affective filter theory*. This theory originally proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977:95-126) and later much used and developed by Krashen (e.g. 1982:31), suggests that negative learner attitudes towards the target language and language learning might create a filter that keeps provided input from reaching the parts of brain that are active in language learning processes and therefore hinder learning. Because of their apparently strong influence in language learning motivation, language related attitudes and their role in a language classroom should not be left unnoticed.

An approach even more closely related to the present study is the broader educational point of view on language learning motivation proposed in the 1990s (Dörnyei 2001a:17). Dörnyei's framework, for example, acknowledges the learner's needs and characteristics as well as the learning situation in addition to the language related attitudes and goals that were the main focus of the attitude related theories (Dörnyei 2001a:18). In other words, also school as a language learning environment is taken into consideration. Dörnyei (1994:278) also mentions "teacher-specific motivational components" as one of the subdivisions of the learning situation level factors affecting learner motivation. Thus, teachers' influence on learning motivation is recognized also in the field of language learning.

In addition to the teacher, Dörnyei's framework includes some other factors noteworthy when discussing the present study. Especially the learner level factor of self-confidence (Dörnyei 1994:277) is worth further consideration since learning and teaching practices in a modern language class are often based on active participation and oral performance that both require self-confidence. Good and Brophy (1994, cited in Dörnyei 2001b:130) talk about classroom as a face-threatening environment since especially at the

beginning of language studies the learner has to operate at a lower communication level than he or she is used to and therefore the learner might experience feelings of embarrassment or increased anxiety.

### **2.3 English teacher as a motivator**

Since the main focus of the present study is on the role of an English teacher as a motivator or demotivator in class, taking a closer look at previous research on this role is highly relevant. A teacher can affect the learner motivation for example “by providing mentoring, guidance nurturance, support and limit setting” (Dörnyei 2001b:35) so the role he or she has is reasonably complex. In this section I will further report findings on the different possibilities and ways an English teacher can affect learners in his or her classroom.

The importance of a teacher in the social context of learning was already acknowledged above. Indeed, Dörnyei (2001b:35) defines teachers as “powerful *motivational socialisers*”. For example, a teacher’s own characteristics and immediacy, e.g. enthusiasm, level of caring and physical and/or psychological distance to learners are influential factors (Dörnyei 2001b:35-36). In other words, the ways in which a teacher relates to and socializes with the learners and shows personal interest in them and the subject he or she teaches, are highly influential in learner motivation. Warm and caring learning environment has been reported to encourage young learners to take risks and engage deeply in learning (Pressley et al. 2003:65). Further, teachers with an unenthusiastic relation to their subject have been noticed to have an undermining influence on learner motivation on primary-grade learners (Pressley et al. 2003:131).

In addition to the teacher’s personal characteristics, also his or her active motivating actions, such as ways of giving feedback and using metalanguage to increase learner understanding of the value and purpose of class activities,

affect learners motivation (Dörnyei 2001b:36). The used feedback system, for example, can play a significant role in defining the general learning atmosphere in class; a highly engaging teacher in the study reported in the book by Pressley et al. (2003:66) “used every opportunity to give positive feedback, encouragement, and praise to her students” and this way communicated to her students that they should not be afraid of making mistakes in class since it was “all right”. This takes away a lot of the anxiety and pressure of succeeding in classroom and, thus, increases motivation to learn. Also high teacher expectations of learner achievement have been noticed to have a significant influence on learner motivation, since when a teacher believes that learners can learn, he or she will put more effort to helping him or her to do so (Pressley et al. 2003:11).

Teachers can also strongly influence learners and their learning motivation through classroom management. Effective classroom management includes both planning learning activities and their realization, and creating and reinforcing group norms (Dörnyei 2001b:36). Pressley et al. (2003: 65, 70) report that lessons where the learners were highly engaged in learning activities were “extremely well organized”, well planned and executed. In short, promoting structure and order seem to be conducive to learning motivation. According to Dörnyei (2001b:121), learners will be most engaged in learning activities when the surrounding environment is psychologically safe and there is no need for them to fear ridicule or getting embarrassed. By creating norms and enforcing them, the teacher affects both, his or her relationship with the learners as well as the group dynamics. The way a teacher interacts with the learners when managing the classroom can have a great influence on learners’ feelings about him or her. Furthermore, group norms influence peer relationships, which, as mentioned, above are very influential in terms of learner motivation, so by leading the group and enforcing norms a teacher indirectly affects learner motivation also through peer relationships.

The traditional authoritarian way of managing a classroom is, however, questioned for example by Jones and Jones (2007:321-322). They imply that since the way children experience authority has changed, children in today's classrooms tend to react to authoritarian class management with fear, anger or rebellion, rather than obedience. Thus, the authoritarian classroom managing style might fail at the intended purpose and endanger positive and safe classroom environment and that way decrease learning motivation. Instead, favoring learner autonomy in classroom management, in other words teaching and letting learners take responsibility for their own behavior, is suggested by many researchers in order to increase student motivation (Deci et al. 1991, cited in Dörnyei 2001b:37; Pressley et al. 2003:147; Jones and Jones 2007:321-442).

Teachers affect learner motivation indirectly by choosing appropriate tasks and activities and evaluating appropriately how learners accomplish them. A clear message sent by Pressley et al. (2003: 137) is that tasks that are at an appropriate level of difficulty, not too challenging or too easy, increase learning motivation. Another important task-related point that should be acknowledged is that learners should find them interesting. In his study of young Finnish English learners, Julkunen (1985b:24) found out that curiosity driven motivation is one of the most influential with this target group. It is teachers' responsibility, then, to provide material that arouses children's curiosity. Evaluation of learner achievements is also critical regarding learner motivation and a teacher can affect the way that learners experience it. In their study of primary-grade learners, Pressley et al. (2003:135) found support for the idea that learner evaluation should not be threatening if high learner engagement is desired.

There are teacher related factors that affect learners' motivation to learn languages in particular. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, a teacher's own enthusiasm towards the subject is influential to young learners' motivation. Thus, by promoting an attitude that values language

learning and sharing his or her personal interest in it, teachers can well model student interest (Dörnyei 1994:282). Teachers can, for example, tell students what they have achieved by the help of languages, tell about its role in working life as well as increase and broaden the learners' view of cultures and other language related issues. In a way, teacher works as a promoter of his or her subject. What is quite evident, however, is that in Finland English has a good position in children's ranking of school subjects according to their liking (Julkunen 1985b:23). This might save some trouble of motivating from English teachers, since, as mentioned above, positive attitudes towards languages and their learning have been noticed to increase motivation to learn.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 The research question**

The present study focuses on finding out what kinds of effects a teacher may have on the learning motivation of young learners of English in the Finnish primary school. The focus will be on learner experiences on the role of teachers as motivators or demotivators. In addition to this, there will be discussion on the possibilities and responsibilities that teachers have as motivators.

Research questions for the study are:

1. What kinds of acts and ways of instruction do learners find encouraging, e.g. how do teachers motivate learners?
2. What kinds of acts and ways of instruction do learners find discouraging, e.g. how do teachers undermine the motivation of learners?
3. What kinds of possibilities and responsibilities does a teacher have as a motivator in language learning?

In language learning, as well as in all learning, motivation is one very important factor affecting learner success. In fact, there is also a significant amount of research on the connection between the role of a teacher and learner motivation. There is a contradiction, however, that only a minor part of this research focuses on the motivation of young children, since it is particularly young learners who are very attached to their teachers and often see them as role models and unquestioned authorities. Thus, it could be assumed that the influence teachers have on young learners is significant. A recommendation of further research of the matter in Finland is also given by Jalkanen and Ruuska (2007:85), in their Pro Gradu thesis on affective factors in foreign language learning in Finnish primary school English lessons.

### **3.2 The data**

As I wanted to do research on young learners of English in Finnish primary school, the possible target group consisted of pupils from grades 2 or 3 to 6 (age of 8 or 9 to 12). From this group I decided to choose fifth-graders since they are reasonably close to the average age of English learners in Finnish primary school and also possess adequate writing skills for expressing their ideas. This was important since the task I wanted to give to the target group was an essay-writing task. Taking the language skills of the participants into consideration, the natural choice for the language of the task was Finnish instead of English.

The reason why I chose this type of task for collecting my data was the intention to focus on learners and find out what they find relevant for and associate with their language learning motivation. Furthermore, the choice of the broad setting of the present study that tried to map the motivational factors in a language classroom instead of focusing on more specific details also supports this choice (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009:71). A structured questionnaire was not chosen, since the very limited form of it could have restricted the thinking of the participants and thus unnecessarily limited the

answers. Such a structured data collection method is used in more detailed and limited research settings (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009:71). Another possible way of collecting data from the young learners and maintaining the learner point of view would have been interviewing the participants. This data collection method was not chosen because of the intention to gather a reasonably large amount of data to increase reliability and transcribing larger numbers of interviews would have taken relatively much time considering the purpose of the study.

The original plan was to give the target group only the heading of the essay "English at School: Me and My Teacher" ("Enkku koulussa: Minä ja Ope"). I carried out a small pilot study with three participants and found out that more guidance for the task would be needed to get information that is relevant to the present study. Clearly, the age and the level of expressing one's thoughts in writing have to be taken into consideration when deciding on this kind of fairly open type of data collecting task that also requires text production (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009:84). After consideration and discussion with my pro seminar tutor I decided to add some optional supporting questions in the instructions of the task (see Appendix). This would help the young participants to direct their thoughts and reduce pressure and excitement of the situation, but maintain the focus on learners and their own experiences.

The data collection was carried out in a school in Northern Finland. In this school there were two classes of pupils in the fifth grade. A factor that increases the reliability of my study was that the two classes were taught by two different English teachers. The final number of pupils participating was 11 in one class and 12 in the other, 23 altogether. This was approximately half of the total of fifth-graders in this school (the rest of the pupils did not have the permission of their parents to participate). Before their performance, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the instructions were clarified. The task was conducted during one lesson



(approximately 45 minutes). The participants were also allowed to leave when they had finished their essay. The time participants spent on the task varied greatly: some of them spent the whole 45 minutes and others handed their papers in after just a short period of time. In this case it has to be taken into consideration that the participants' writing skills and attitudes towards writing tasks in general might have had an influence on the quality of produced data.

### **3.3 Methods of analysis**

The data was mainly analyzed qualitatively, since the aim of the present study was to find out *what kinds of factors* learners would find important. In qualitative research, the focus is on reporting and understanding a certain phenomenon (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009:85-96) and this was also the case with the present study. Also the data collection method supported this kind of approach.

Since the given data collection task was very openly structured in a sense that there were no separate questions or sections that would divide the contents of the answers into themes, the collected data as such did not provide a clear frame for analysis. The analysis was therefore strongly influenced by the content of the data. More precisely, using the guidelines of inductive data analysis the data was explicated and then classified and further analyzed according to the themes and patterns that came forward in the interpretation of the essays (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009:112-113).

The only frame that was set before going through the answers was that of negative and positive experiences. This was set to find answers to the first and second research question (see 3.1.). The final frame that was used for analysis was constructed on the basis of the repeated themes derived from the data through inductive analysis and the research questions.

Quantitative analysis was used at times to figure out and express differences in importance between the discussed themes. Its role in the analysis, however, was insignificant.

#### **4 LEARNER EXPERIENCES ON THE TEACHER'S ROLE AS A MOTIVATOR**

In the present chapter, I will discuss the results of my study. Firstly, in section 4.1, I will briefly introduce the different themes that emerged from the answers of the participants. In other words, I will describe to what factors in their English class the learners responded as promoters or reducers of their willingness to learn and participate. No beforehand fixed categories were used, since the purpose of the study was to find out what the learners consider relevant.

Secondly, in section 4.2, I will examine these established theme categories one by one for more detailed analysis. In this section I will also focus on to what extent these categories and named factors are teacher related and discuss how the teacher can affect these factors. In this section I will also provide examples from the answers of the participants, who were given a code number, e.g. L (=learner) 1, L2, L3 and so forth. The sex of the learners was not marked in the essays and thus they will all be addressed with the masculine pronoun *he* when addressed as individuals. Although the target group consists of two different learner groups from two different teachers, in this analysis it is treated as one group. This decision was made because there is no intention to compare the two groups and the only reason for choosing the two groups and the two teachers was to gain reliability through greater variety of learning experiences and a larger number of participants.

Summary of the conclusions and further development of the ideas derived from the results will be presented in chapter 5.

#### **4.1 Factors relevant to willingness to learn English**

The task that was given to the participants was very open and allowed many kinds of answers. The role of teacher related factors was emphasized when going through the instructions but participants were allowed to include whatever they felt relevant. Consequently, not only the teachers were covered in the answers. Overall, the descriptions varied greatly both in length and in depth. Some learners were able to give very detailed descriptions of their feelings and ideas and addressed many different areas of schoolwork. Some, however, looked at the task from a narrower point of view by concentrating on some areas and disregarding others. This, of course, gave me more ideas of how children see their English learning. It has to be taken into consideration, however, that the answers the participants gave did not necessarily include all of their ideas and thoughts. Instead, they reported the ideas they had in mind at the specific time of the data collection.

Many learners described their overall feelings about English. These overall feelings were mostly related to English as a school subject, in other words, as something to learn at school. This was expected since the given instructions directed their thinking towards it. Furthermore, some comments were made on the use of English also outside school and on the importance of the subject. Learners also commented on their own willingness to learn English and some even provided more detailed reasons for it. Since the correlation between language learning motivation and attitudes towards the language in question has been acknowledged (e.g. Dörnyei 2001a:16), this theme deserves some attention also in the present study.

There were, of course, also comments that referred directly to the teachers and their characteristics. Teachers were described both with defining adjectives as well as through their actions. Most commonly featured teacher-

related comments considered their way of giving feedback, providing support, strictness and teaching abilities such as the use of voice or clarity.

The most common theme in the answers of the young English learners was that of classroom activities and testing. Learners shared their feelings about different task types, classroom routines, as well as the pace of teaching. This theme seemed to evoke fairly strong feelings and the learners had firm opinions on what they found good and what not so good.

The fourth theme derived from the answers of the participants was the learning environment and peer learners. This theme was probably the narrowest of all four and concentrated mainly on notions about peer learners. Since the meaning of social context has been found significant for learning and learning motivation (Dörnyei 2001a:32, 2001b:33-34), I find it relevant to discuss also the peer influence acknowledged in the data. In addition to peer influence, also some other significant factors related to learning environment will be brought up.

## **4.2 Theme categories discussed in depth**

### **4.2.1 Opinions about English**

As already Julkunen (1985b:23) found out in his study in 1984, the status of English in the eyes of young learners can be considered very good. Similarly, the majority of the participants in the present study reported positive feelings about learning English. The most common ways of expressing that they were fond of the subject included telling that they *like English*, they *want to learn English* or that learning English is *nice* or *fun/amusing*. It is worth mentioning, however, that not everybody stated his or her opinions this directly. In these cases, my analysis was based on their other comments and the overall feeling reflected by their essays.

Many of the learners who expressed positive feelings about English and learning it at school also mentioned motives that related to the life outside the language classroom. A couple of learners, for example, stated that they wanted to learn English so that they could use it abroad, for example on a vacation trip. My findings therefore support those of Julkunen (1985a:55) that already young learners of English see its value for their every day life at the present moment and in the future. In addition to this, one learner wrote that the teacher's "lectures" about the usefulness of English have increased his eagerness to learn. This shows that the teacher in question has actively tried to motivate learners by giving reasons for language learning, which, as mentioned above, is one way for teachers to influence the learning motivation in their classroom (Dörnyei 2001b:36). Some learners also acknowledged the importance of the language for the future, but did not specify their answers.

What I found interesting was that some of the learners who understood the value of language competence and said that it is important to learn English had a relatively negative attitude towards the ways of learning it at school. The following answer (1) is a good example of the contradictory view:

- (1) L17: Minua innostaa englannin oppiminen, mutta ei tälleen vaan kuuntelemalla.  
(I'm eager to learn English, just not this way but by listening.)

Few learners also expressed negative overall feelings about English. Among these, there was one learner whose feelings and opinions were extremely negative. It is understandable that not everybody likes and is motivated to learn all subjects (see also Dörnyei 2001a:25) and of this, the learner with no good feelings about English (L12) is a good reminder.

- (2) L12: Minä vihaan englantia koko sydämestäni. Minulla ei ole hyviä tunteitakaan englantia kohtaan. Englanti haisee ja pahasti.  
(I hate English with all my heart. I have no good feelings about English. English sucks bad.)

This extreme reaction of a single learner was one of a kind in the data but it is likely that there are other learners who share his opinion in our schools. In addition to this overall hate, difficulty and boringness of the subject were mentioned as reasons for not liking English.

Also teachers were mentioned in relation to the overall feelings about English. Some learners attributed their feelings about English directly to their English teacher. For the learner in example (3) the teacher influence was positive:

- (3) L14: Englannin opiskelu on mukavaa kun on samanlainen opettaja mikä minulla on.  
(It is nice to learn English when there is a teacher like mine.)

Interestingly, one learner reported decreased eagerness to learn English due to the change of their English teacher. Thus, it is possible that the teacher has direct effects on the learners' attitudes towards a school subject. If a learner likes the teacher, he is understandably more likely to enjoy the time spent in class and therefore think more positively also about the whole subject. In contrast, if the feelings about the English teacher are negative, it is quite likely to have a negative influence on the learner's experiences of the language lessons. Few learners stated that their teacher does not inspire them or increase their eagerness to learn English. Some remarks were made too, that the teacher does not affect their feelings at all. From the writings of the participants, however, it was often difficult or impossible to interpret what the cause of the feelings was and what the effects, for instance whether it was the teacher who caused not liking the subject or the dislike towards the subject that caused the negative feelings about other factors such as the teacher.

As the previous research results on learner attitudes in the field of language learning and teaching imply, learner attitudes are a significant factor in

language learning motivation (e.g. Dörnyei 2001). Among the target group of the present study the general attitude seems to be relatively good and the teachers seem to make attempts to actively motivate their learners. Still, they should not forget and give up on the ones who are not as eager to learn. As mentioned above, when discussing the role of teachers as motivators, teachers can influence the attitudes of their learners for example by sharing their enthusiasm and otherwise modeling a positive attitude (Dörnyei 2001b:35-36).

#### **4.2.2 Teachers through the eyes of the learners**

Learners in the target group of the present study gave their teachers both praise and critique. Most of the opinions and comments on teachers directly, however, were positive in tone. The adjectives the learners used to describe their teachers included for example (*very, really*) *nice, strict, good, (quite) funny, boring, social, competent* and *helpful*, of which the first three were the most commonly used. All of these have a positive meaning, except for *boring* with clear negative connotations and *strict* that was used in relation to both positive and negative feelings. The adjective *nice* as such provides relatively little information other than the implication that the child seems, at least at some level, to like his teacher. Whether this liking was due to teachers' personal characteristics or used activities and ways of teaching, could not be said for certain. Many learners also stated that their teacher encourages them to learn, but no further specification was provided. Perhaps this is the learners' way to express that they feel encouraged by their teachers, although they were not able to give more detailed descriptions on how they do it.

There were also further comments related to the strictness of the teacher. In some cases it was not possible to tell if the learner found the strictness a positive or negative feature in the teacher. Some learners, however, clearly thought that their teacher was too strict, for example with their forgetting of

their homework. These comments were relatively common and, in my opinion, signaled pressure and anxiety; learners were somehow afraid of their teacher getting upset in case they forgot their homework. Learner in example (4) pleaded to the fact that everybody makes mistakes by saying:

- (4) L23: Toivoisin ettei läksyjen unohtamisesta suututtais hirveesti koska kyllähän opettajatkin unohtelevat joskus.  
(I wish that the teacher wouldn't get very angry because of forgetting homework since also teachers forget sometimes.)

In contrast to the majority of comments on strictness, two learners reported that in their opinion, the strictness and appropriate requirements of their teacher made her a good teacher. This shows how differently learners can experience the ways their teachers operate in class.

The learners seemed to find teacher praise, encouragement and support most inspiring. Many learners reported positive teacher feedback specifically to positively affect their eagerness to learn. Even one learner whose overall experience of English lessons seemed mainly negative mentioned positive feedback from the teacher to be something that encourages him a little bit. Furthermore, a few learners considered providing remedial instruction to be a significant positive teacher characteristic. Learners also described many situations where their teacher had supported them: helping with translation, encouragement in a situation when the learner had to answer a question in class, as well as emboldening those whose achievements were not so high. The learner in example (5) describes a positive experience of teacher support:

- (5) L3: ...viime kerralla [kun suomennettiin] jäin miettii "took" sanaa avian kauheen kauan onneks meiän ope on niin mukava, että se sano sen mitä se tarkotti.  
(... last time [when we translated] I stopped to think of the word "took" for a very long time, luckily our teacher is so nice that she told me what it meant.)

I noticed that some of the descriptions of teacher support were written in more detail compared to many other comments. This, in my opinion, shows how well the young learners remember and how highly they appreciate



these situations when the teacher is on their side and helps them. Pressley et al. (2003:66) reported that the use of praise, encouragement and positive feedback are conducive to learning motivation, and the findings of the present study seem to strongly support this view.

Comments on the teachers' teaching abilities concentrated mainly on very concrete classroom actions such as clarity and appropriateness of the volume when speaking. One learner considered his teacher simply "competent". Like this example, the majority of the comments on teacher abilities were positive. In more detail, the learners thought that their teacher used her voice well, she was nice to listen to, and she was teaching well. The only single thing that aroused more negative feelings was the pace of instruction. I will discuss the reactions to pace of instruction in more detail in the next theme section concentrating on classroom activities and testing.

#### **4.2.3 Feelings about classroom activities and testing**

The majority of the comments related to this theme expressed the learners' opinions on certain task and activity types used in their class. The tasks and activities that arouse most positive feelings were learning games and tasks done together with a peer partner. Activities and tasks that got most negative attention were translating and listening exercises as well as homework. As a whole, the preferences among the task and activity types varied greatly, which of course sets a teacher as a motivator in a difficult position; what works for one might not work for others.

All in all, the learners reported that working with tasks that were to their liking and seemed accomplishable increased their eagerness and motivation to learn. As an example, one learner (L20) stated that if their teacher used less task types that he does not like, he would like her more. Similarly, learning something new and succeeding were mentioned as positive motivational factors in the writings. Difficulty, boringness and too much

work, on the other hand, were the most commonly mentioned reasons for not feeling good about tasks and activities used in classroom or as homework.

There was one negative factor related to this theme that seemed to draw an exceptional amount of negative attention. Regardless of their preferred activity types, a significant number of the learners reported too rapid a pace of instruction to cause decrease of motivation and hinder their learning. Their comments, as in (6), to me at least, signaled distress.

- (6) L13: Englannin opiskelua huomattavasti helpottaisi se, että opeteltaisiin asiat kunnolla ja sitten vasta uusiin asioihin. Hätköity ja kiireellinen opiskelu ei minusta ole kivaa.  
(It would make the learning of English much easier if we learned properly the things there are to learn before moving on to something new. In my opinion, hurried learning is not fun.)

These comments came from both learners who liked English and wanted to learn it as well as from those who were not equally enthusiastic about the subject or even hated it. Regarding tasks, an appropriate level of difficulty has been stated to increase learner motivation (Pressley et al. 2003:137) and the pace of instruction can have an influence on learner perceptions on this level: in a hurry, even an easy task might seem impossible to accomplish.

For some reason, some learners in the target group felt the need to bring forth how well they are doing in English. Some reported that they are doing well and have managed to learn what they were supposed to learn. A couple of learners also seemed confident that they are not so good at English, for instance the learner in example (7). In fact, one learner seemed to have given up all of his hope to learn it (8).

- (7) L15: Saan sanakokeesta yleensä kymppin. Suullinen menee huonosti. Kirjallinen menee ihan "OK".  
(I get usually tens [full points] in word tests. Oral skills are not so good. Writing goes "OK".)
- (8) L12: Minä olen myös huono englannissa.  
(I'm bad at English, too.)

These comments together with a significant number of expressions of negative feelings about tests, both word tests and bigger exams during the school year, seem to imply that the learners pay attention to their evaluation and also take it very seriously; those who were doing well expressed happiness and joy and those who wrote about bad results in tests communicated disappointment.

The frequency of this theme of activities in the answers made me contemplate the reasons behind it. Perhaps it is partly because of the very concrete nature of tasks and classroom activities: they are easy for young learners to describe. Furthermore, a careful interpretation can be proposed that school learning for many young learners means mostly tasks and how they are performed. Thus, teachers seem to significantly affect their learners through the choice of tasks and classroom activities. Numerous comments on tests, learners' personal achievements and strong feelings about testing also reflect their meaningfulness to the learners. Thus, since learners seem to take testing and evaluation quite seriously, so should the teachers. At least the pressure and threat that some young learners might feel towards testing should be minimized to increase engaged learning (Pressley et al. 2003: 135).

#### **4.2.4 Comments on the learning environment and peers**

When researching motivation in the school context, peer learners have been noticed to have an influence on an individual's learning motivation and its development (Dörnyei 2001b:99). In the present study, although the focus in the writing task was directed towards the learner as an individual and his or her teacher, learners also made comments on the peer learners present in their English learning situations and the learning environment in general.

The majority of the comments made on peer learners were related to classroom management and peer interaction during classroom activities.

Learners reported that sometimes the actions of their peers were distracting and made the learning situation uncomfortable. More precisely, these learner comments on negative peer influence involved mainly disturbing chatting of peers that made it more difficult for them to follow the instruction (9) and becoming the object of ridicule after speaking in class (10).

- (9) L14: Joskus muiden levottomuus vaikuttaa inhottavasti tuntityöskentelyyn.  
(Sometimes the restlessness of others has negative influence on working in class.)
- (10) L10: Enkku on mielestäni kivaa koska on hyvä opettaja ja hyvä luokka. Mutta joskus kun vastaa väärin, joku saattaa tirskaa.  
(I think English is nice because we have a good teacher and a good class. But sometimes when people give wrong answers somebody might giggle.)

What also caught my attention was that learners made interesting remarks on their eagerness to actively participate classroom activities. A couple of learners wrote that they only like to answer their teacher's questions if they have a good answer and that they feel disappointed if their answers are incorrect. This caution with participation could be, at least partly, related to and caused by the reported negative reactions of the peers. In this case, the learners' efforts to avoid public failure could be seen as attempts to maintain their status in the group. The nature of the subject might also have an effect on the matter since in the English lessons learners are often required to communicate in a language they are still learning and feel uncomfortable with and thus, they might fear the possibility of sounding stupid or ridiculous. Not all of the learners, however, felt the pressure in situations when their participation and answers were required. In fact, happiness about the fact that it was okay to make mistakes in class was also expressed.

There were also comments on the positive effects that peers can have on learning. One learner (L5) reported that a friend in English class was a factor that increased his willingness to learn. Furthermore, good team spirit and

pair work as well as peer support were mentioned to have a positive influence on individual learners' willingness to learn English.

The learners also expressed their opinions on the responsibility of teachers as classroom managers:

- (11) L16: Meidän enkun ope sanoo pari kolme kertaa pojille, että hiljaa, mutta pojat on vähän aikaa hiljaa ja jatkaa - - Minusta sen pitäisi niin pitkään huutaa, että tulee hiljaista (Our English teacher asks two or three times the boys to be quiet but they are quiet for a while and then they continue - - In my opinion, she should shout until it is quiet.)
- (12) L19: Ilman opea luokassa olisi varmaan kaaos.  
(Without the teacher, there would probably be chaos in our class.)

The examples (11) and (12) above show that at least some of the learners seem to rely on their teacher as the controller of the classroom situation. They expect their teacher to maintain the order and that way provide a safe and good learning environment. As acknowledged above, classroom management is an influential motivating tool teachers can use in their class since it has a major influence on the social context of learning and learning motivation (see sections 2.1.3 and 2.3).

## 5 CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion and summary of the findings

The general purpose of the present study was to understand how the young learners of the target group see the role of their teachers as motivators. The first two research questions were set to survey the positive and the negative teacher related factors that learners find influential to their learning of the English language. In addition to this, the general role of a teacher in class, as well as the possibilities and responsibilities of a teacher as a motivator were studied.

According to the findings of the present study, young English learners feel that their teachers increase their motivation the most by **being encouraging and supportive in class**. They reported that positive feedback and help that teachers give in class increase their motivation, regardless of their skills and feelings about English as a school subject. In addition to this kind of direct support, learners also seemed to appreciate teacher support in the form of classroom management: they expected teachers to provide them with a safe learning environment where they can concentrate on learning. Furthermore, in addition to encouraging and actively supporting the learners, the data provided evidence that teachers can increase the learners' willingness to learn by monitoring and listening to their needs. In the present study, the participants reported very positive feelings for example about a possibility of participating in remedial instruction. This shows that the learners appreciate the teacher's efforts and willingness to help and provide them with the learning conditions they need.

The findings of the study further indicate that in order to increase learner motivation, **the learners' needs** should be taken into consideration also when planning and executing classroom instruction and tasks. Many of the learners reported instruction and choice of tasks that did not meet their needs and preferences and therefore had a negative influence on their willingness to learn. For example, too rapid a pace of instruction as well as difficulty or dullness of the tasks were reported to undermine learner motivation. Thus, although it is impossible to please everybody all the time and the teacher is responsible for teaching the whole class, paying attention to the needs of individual learners and using a variety of instructional methods to meet as many needs as possible is worth trying.

Another significant factor that caused learner demotivation among the target group of the present study seemed to be **pressure**. Learners reported negative feelings about different situations and aspects of language classroom and the learning environment that can be expected to cause

distress and anxiety. For example, strict requirements of the teacher, testing, peer pressure as well as too high amount of work and too rapid a pace of instruction were mentioned. All these factors cause the learner pressure to perform well and if this pressure is too high, it might have negative influence on the learner's willingness to learn and participate. All of these factors mentioned above are somehow in control of the teachers and by monitoring and adjusting their effects it is possible for teachers to reduce the pressure on learners. Naturally, in manageable amounts pressure can function as an enforcer of high performance but too much of it can have the opposite effect.

In the following, I will further discuss what kind of picture the data and these comments on the positive and negative motivational factors create of the role and possibilities of teachers as motivators of young English learners.

*The teacher* that was presented in the writings of the learners was pictured interesting. The learners seemed to picture him or her in two separate ways: there was the teacher as a person who is present in the lessons, *the human teacher*, and then there was the teacher who assigns all the tasks and teaches, *the professional teacher*. These two seemed to be somehow separate, since many of the learners stated that they like their teacher but then strongly criticized his or her ways of teaching and/or managing the class. This contradiction could be interpreted so that the learners are able to separate the person and personality from his or her actions and look at these two separately. Thus, although the majority of the learner comments on motivational influences considered *the professional teacher*, the possibilities of *the human teacher* as a successful motivational factor should not be undervalued. The human teacher was mostly liked by the learners and therefore can also have power as a motivational influencer.

As stated above, teachers are in a very powerful motivational position in their classroom (e.g. Dörnyei 2001a:32, Dörnyei 2001b:35,120). Also the

findings of the present study imply that learners monitor the opinions and actions of their teacher very carefully. Children spend so much time at school that teachers inevitably become important adults in their lives. Therefore, it can be expected that learners also appraise the opinions and values of their teachers. Consequently, teachers have plenty of possibilities to influence learner motivation. What has to be taken into consideration, however, is that teachers have influence on learners also during the times when they do not actively and consciously try to do so. Therefore, this influential position of a teacher should be taken with great responsibility: also negative influence, conscious or unconscious, is influence. Thus, self-reflection and self-knowledge as well as the ability to monitor one's own actions are important for teachers.

## **5.2 Evaluation of the findings and methodology**

Due to the abstract nature of motivation, the main subject of the present study, and the age and level of understanding of the participants, the findings presented in the paper must be taken with reservation. Since the concept of motivation is relatively difficult to define and understand, it cannot be expected that the young participants of the present study would have fully understood it when writing their answers. Thus, their answers were relatively superficial and considered very concrete and evident matters. Motivation was described and examined through expressions of *willingness to do something* as well as through *likes* and *dislikes*. Because of this, the analysis of the present study relies heavily on the interpretation of the researcher.

To gain more specific and detailed information on motivation of young English learners, more versatile methods of research and data collection should be used. For example interviews and observing class situations could provide very useful information that could be used together with learner products to add validity and reduce the risks of subjective self-evaluations



that might lead the researchers astray. In the situations where the data for the present study was gathered, the participants were encouraged to express their honest opinions. Still, with self-evaluation and subjective analysis there is always the possibility that the participant does not want to tell the truth or tries to please the researcher by embellishing the story. The risks and restrictions of the methods chosen for the present study, however, were acknowledged and accepted. This was done so that the chosen point of view, that of the learners, would remain as clear as possible and the voice of the learners would be strong.

Finally, the open writing task that was chosen for gathering the data also brought its own challenges and risks with it. In this case, when the participants were young and still quite inexperienced writers, also the task type might have affected the amount and the quality of the data. A participant who has poor writing skills or a negative attitude towards writing in general, might have had more to say than he or she wrote on the paper. For participants this young, a more structured questionnaire or some other data collection method could enable gathering more detailed and fruitful data.

### **5.3 Suggestions for further study**

Motivation is essential to learning. It is very unlikely that a person would learn something if he or she did not see the point of doing so. What is unfortunate in today's school world is that teaching of the curriculum is often more appreciated than motivating learners, although without motivation also the learning of the subject contents is rather impossible (Dörnyei 2001a:27). Thus, gathering more information on the possibilities of teachers as motivators could inspire teachers also to use this information in their every day work. The present study is only a small-scale study and therefore could only collect a limited amount of information on the teacher influence on learner motivation and, as mentioned above, with more specific

research settings and versatile methods much more useful information could be discovered. In other words, the topic is very far from being exhaustively examined.

Furthermore, the assumption presented above (Pressley 2003:4) that there is no need for research on learning motivation of young learners because they are naturally curious and therefore automatically motivated is challenged by the present study. Indeed, already in the relatively superficial analysis of the present study, evidence was found that young learners are influenced by different motivational factors. If this versatility is ignored and left without the attention of researchers, a significant amount of useful information that could be used for education development remains unutilized. Thus, there is a need for further research on motivation of young learners.

Also the fact that in the field of language learning and teaching motivation research has mainly focused on older students provides a fruitful setting for future research: Do these established theories on language learning motivation apply to young language learners, and if so to what extent? Especially in a country like Finland, where children learn foreign languages from a relatively young age on, there is need for further research and knowledge also on young language learners.

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**Pyydän palauttamaan oheisen osallistumisluvan täytettynä lapsenne omalle opettajalle viimeistään ke 25.11..**

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