

Motivation towards learning a second language (A Case Study-Part 1. Canada)

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In this case study, I will analyse and discuss the results of a survey concerning motivation towards learning a second language conducted in four Canadian schools. This section, part one of the study, was conducted in the Sudbury Region of Ontario, Canada. This region of the world was chosen because bilingualism is quite common there and a large portion of the community has learned a second language. Part two will be conducted in the winter of 2002, in Denmark, a European country that neighbours many countries with different mother tongues. I hope to conclude this case study with part three in the summer of 2002, in Japan, a monolingual island nation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Living in and teaching ESL in Japan, a monolingual country, one may notice many different attitudes that students have towards learning a second language. In the ESL classroom in Japan some students are always eager while others are always uninterested and of course there are many in between these extremes. Whatever the attitude towards learning a new language, Japanese students are usually reserved and quiet. In this monolingual country it is often difficult to know how the students feel about learning a new language and if they are aware of the rewards associated with this skill. In Long's paper (Oct 1997), *Investigating and Responding to Student Attitudes and Suggestions For Course Improvement* he notes that "Reid (1987) found that Japanese students had negative attitudes towards language learning as compared to other language groups, and speculated that culture may play a role in this variance."

However, before conducting a survey in Japan, it is of interest to see how students on other continents and in other cultures deal with learning a new language. Do they embrace the challenge or do they avoid it? Does their immediate environment like friends, family, school, country and culture have an effect on their perception of learning a new language? Or does it simply boil down to individual factors? In this short and simple paper I intend to investigate whether or not culture and geography play a role in students' motivation to learn a second language.

Student perception and attitude are very important in the classroom. "Teachers who do not solicit student attitudes often face three predicaments: (a) they simply receive less feedback and gain fewer insights...(b) they may continue in certain practices that negatively affect the students' self-esteem...(c) they (teachers) do not conduct reviews of previous lessons...relevant to their students' needs. (Resulting in low) language abilities and...self-confidence...poor attendance and (the students) do just enough to pass, or...simply drop out of class." (Long, 1997)

2. THE SURVEY

The questionnaire used in this analysis consists of 37 questions. All the questions are directly or indirectly related to attitudes towards or benefits of learning a second language. However, after further reflection, I chose to analyse only 19 of the original 37 questions due to the fact that the disregarded questions such as, "Do you anticipate using the new language in the future?" serve to push the subjects to think about language and how it relates to their life. All in all, the subjects answered in a constant manner according to their true beliefs. This survey is an integer-based survey using a six-point scale representing a continuum of satisfaction. The points are as follows: 1=no/never, 2=a little/not often, 3=some ability/sometimes, 4=good ability/often, 5=yes/always and 6=no answer. To review the 19 questions with student responses refer to Table 1. A full copy of the questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

3. RATIONALE FOR THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The aim of the questionnaire is to explore the issue of motivation when learning a new language. The questionnaire was designed to pinpoint how the students feel about acquiring second language skills: how do they view the process in

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general? I am trying to determine if the subjects find the experience positive or negative by trying to answer questions such as: Do the students like learning a new language? Does the language learning process excite them to learn? Does their motivation, desire to learn and ability increase or decrease over time? What may be the determining factors in their overall attitude towards learning a new language?

4. PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this survey were Canadian students ranging from the 7th to 10th grade. All the students were approximately 12 to 16 years of age and living in Canada at the time of the survey. Some students are in French immersion programs. To elaborate, they are Native English speakers who are immersed in a French language setting at school for half of the school day and spend the remainder of the day speaking their native tongue. As well as taking French language courses, they may also study other subjects such as Geography or History in French. Canada is a bilingual country and Northern Ontario has a relatively large French and English speaking population.

5. ADMINISTERING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A total of 204 questionnaires were collected from four public schools in the Sudbury region. The surveys were conducted during class time at each school and lasted approximately 30 minutes. As each question was read aloud, the students checked one of five possible answers or left the question unanswered. The students were not required to include their names and anonymity was respected.

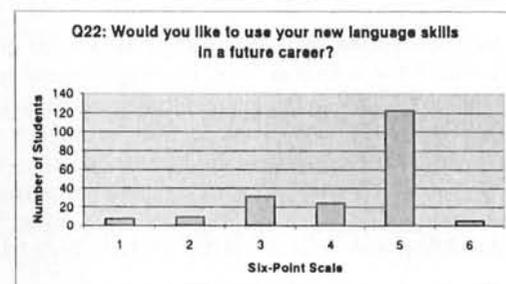
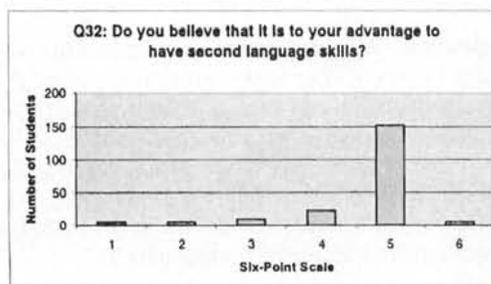
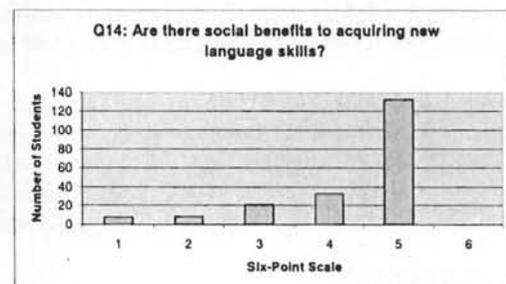
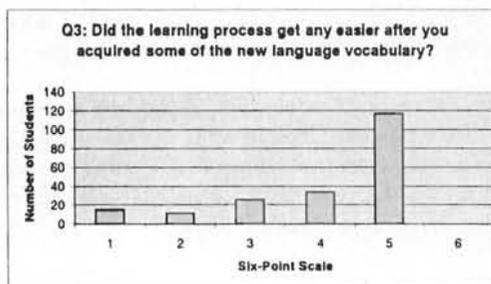
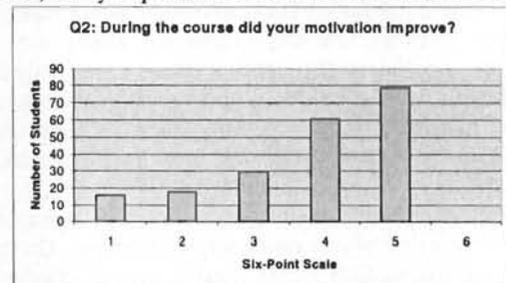
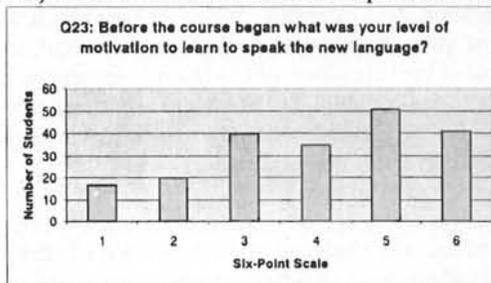
6. THE RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Table 1 shows the students' responses to questions about motivation concerning the acquisition and use of a second language. The results show that these particular students were positive about acquiring or possessing a second language. Although the responses were varied as to their degree of motivation (Q23: 25%), a substantial number of the students felt and had observed that their skills did indeed improve during a course of study. (Q2: 39%) Furthermore, an even greater number felt that the learning process got easier after they had acquired the fundamentals of the new language. (Q3: 57%) Once the students learned to speak at a basic level, many experienced a boost in self-esteem and confidence in speaking the new language. (Q24: 50%)

Although many of the students may not have been

bilingual in the true sense of the term, all but a few considered themselves speakers of more than one tongue. (Q10: 93%) To reinforce these findings many students had felt that their daily environment did cater to the learning and the use of bilingualism.

(Q13: 61%) Furthermore, most students recognised the social benefits (Q14: 65%), and believed it was to their



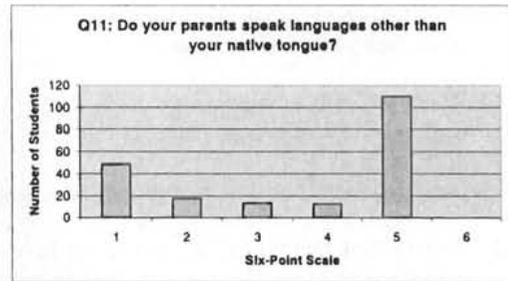
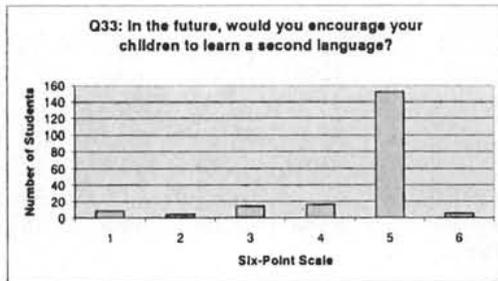
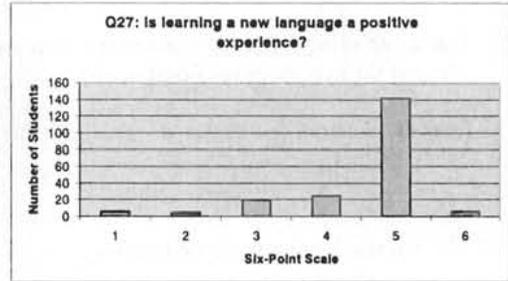
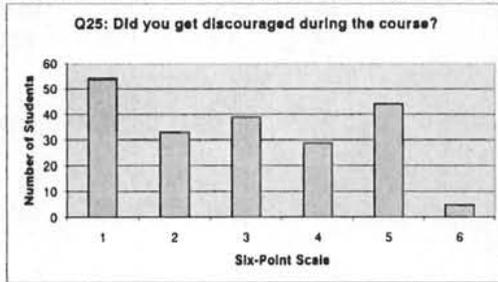
advantage to have multiple language skills. (Q32: 75%) Many anticipated using their knowledge of languages in a future career. (Q22: 60%)

Students do get discouraged during language studies (Q25: 22%), but a large proportion found motivation through their teachers (Q31: 62%), and many found language learning to be a positive experience. (Q27: 60%) In addition to being a

positive experience many enjoyed the process of learning a second language, (Q34: 66%) so much so that many

expressed the belief that anyone who wishes to do so can learn (Q35: 71%), and they would also recommend the process to

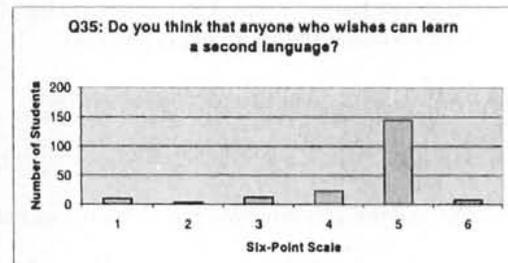
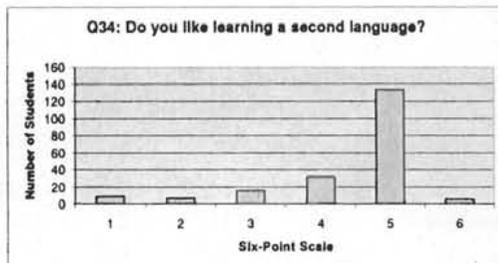
their peers. (Q37: 69%) A considerable number agreed that in the future, they would play an active role in encouraging their children to learn a second tongue. (Q33: 75%) More than half considered at least one parent to be speakers of other languages. (Q11: 54%)



7. CONCLUSION

From the findings in the first part of this study one can deduce that these groups of students are motivated and have positive attitudes toward learning a second language. Many students like learning languages. (Q34: 66%) Many also

believed that anyone who wishes can learn a second language, (Q35: 71%) and they would also recommend that other



people learn as well. (Q37: 69%) The benefits are clear for these students as well as rewarding.

Many of the students took it upon themselves to include comments (see appendix 2.) on the survey sheets which praised the benefits of learning an additional tongue. In many of these written messages the students were thankful for the opportunity afforded to them by the Canadian school system. It was interesting to see that even at such an early age, many of them mentioned that language skills were essential for future resumes, employment, and career opportunities. Canada is a big country with two national languages, in this region at least, its youth really does seem to accept and promote the use and benefits of bilingualism.

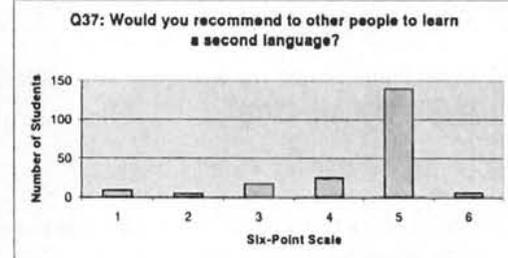


Table 1.

Student Responses	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. During the course did your motivation improve?	16 7.8%	18 8.8%	30 15%	61 30%	79 39%	0 0%
3. Did the learning process get any easier after you acquired some of the new language vocabulary?	15 7%	12 5.9%	26 13%	34 17%	117 57%	0 0%
8. Considering the challenges, do you think that everyone should learn a second language?	15 7.4%	2 1%	28 14%	29 14%	130 64%	0 0%
10. Do you speak more than one language?	3 1.5%	1 0.5%	5 2.5%	6 2.9%	189 93%	0 0%
11. Do your parents speak other languages other than your native tongue?	49 24%	18 8.8%	14 6.9%	13 6.4%	110 54%	0 0%
13. Does your daily environment cater to the learning or use of bilingualism?	8 3.9%	8 3.9%	28 14%	28 14%	124 61%	8 3.9%
14. Are there social benefits to acquiring new language skills?	8 3.9%	9 4.4%	21 10%	33 16%	133 65%	0 0%
20. Do you think that leaders of our country have a better understanding of peoples needs by having second language skills?	7 3.4%	5 2.5%	26 13%	22 11%	141 69%	3 1.5%
22. Would you like to use your new language skills in a future career?	8 3.9%	10 4.9%	32 16%	25 12%	123 60%	6 2.9%
23. Before the course began what was your level of motivation to learn to speak the new language?	17 8.3%	20 9.8%	40 20%	35 17%	51 25%	41 20%
24. After you learned to speak the new language at a basic level, did your self esteem improve?	11 5.4%	19 9.3%	28 14%	38 19%	103 50%	5 2.5%
25. Did you get discouraged during the course?	54 26%	33 16%	39 19%	29 14%	44 22%	5 2.5%
27. Is learning a new language a positive experience?	6 2.9%	5 2.5%	20 9.8%	25 12%	142 70%	6 2.9%
31. Do your teachers motivate you to learn a second language?	13 6.4%	11 5.4%	27 13%	20 9.8%	127 62%	6 2.9%
32. Do you believe that it is to your advantage to have second language skills?	6 2.9%	6 2.9%	10 4.9%	23 11%	153 75%	6 2.9%
33. In the future, would you encourage your children to learn a second language?	9 4.4%	5 2.5%	15 7.4%	17 8.3%	152 75%	6 2.9%
34. Do you like learning a second language?	9 4.4%	7 3.4%	16 7.8%	32 16%	134 66%	6 2.9%
35. Do you think that anyone who wishes can learn a second language?	10 4.9%	4 2%	13 6.4%	24 12%	145 71%	8 3.9%
37. Would you recommend to other people to learn a second language?	9 4.4%	5 2.5%	18 8.8%	26 13%	140 69%	6 2.9%

Total number of students=204

1=no/never 2=a little/not often 3=some ability/sometimes

4=good ability/often 5=yes/always 6=no answer

Appendix 1: (Continued)

23. Before the course began what was your level of motivation to learn to speak the new language?	1 2 3 4 5
24. After you learned to speak the new language at a basic level, did your self-esteem improve?	1 2 3 4 5
25. Did you get discouraged during the course?	1 2 3 4 5
26. Are you eager to use the new language?	1 2 3 4 5
27. Is learning a new language a positive experience?	1 2 3 4 5
28. Do your new language skills help you in your native language skills?	1 2 3 4 5
29. Do your new language skills hinder your native language ability?	1 2 3 4 5
30. Does learning a new language increase your daily workload?	1 2 3 4 5
31. Do your teachers motivate you to learn a second language?	1 2 3 4 5
32. Do you believe that it is to your advantage to have second language skills?	1 2 3 4 5
33. In the future, would you encourage your children to learn a second language?	1 2 3 4 5
34. Do you like learning a second language?	1 2 3 4 5
35. Do you think that anyone who wishes can learn a second language?	1 2 3 4 5
36. Do you believe that learning a second language improves your memory skills?	1 2 3 4 5
37. Would you recommend to other people to learn a second language?	1 2 3 4 5

Appendix 2: (Student comments)

- Learning a new language is a great opportunity, I think everyone should go for it!
- Over all I've enjoyed learning my second language (French), there are some days when I wish I was not in a French immersion program but I know that it will help me in the future with my job or career. I believe that anyone who is a hard worker and doesn't give up easily can learn an additional language.
- Everybody should at least try and learn a second language and see how they like it!
- Learning a second language does have disadvantages; increased homework!
- I think all the world leaders should be trilingual.
- My experience having a second language is awesome cause you have more opportunity to speak French than all the children that only have one language. You learn more things.
- Having a second or third language is a big experience for me.
- I think that French in grade 8 is very hard for me and my mom wants me to leave French because it is too hard for me but I'm staying because I think I would be better off in the future with 2 languages.
- After I started the immersion program, I always wanted to speak French at home.
- Good questions. It made me reflect on why I'm here.
- It gives you such a wider range...I would also like to learn another 5 or 6 languages.
- Learning a new language is an excellent life skill it comes in handy socially and in future jobs. The immersion program helps you think differently and socially with a whole new group of people.
- There are your ups and downs of learning a second language. On one hand you have an extra grammar class, an extra dictation, and extra words to learn. On the other hand, you have the knowledge to speak and understand more people in the world.
- This survey has made me think that my life is good and I am lucky! I will now have better chances at getting a job in the future.

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