

## EFL Learning Motivation of Tertiary Level Turkish Vocational School Students

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### Abstract

This study aims to find out the motivational levels of tertiary-level Turkish vocational school students to learn English at school, and possible factors that may motivate them to learn English in the instructional context. With this purpose, 116 students were given a motivation questionnaire (MQ) which was accompanied by an open-ended section to explore the overall motivation level of the students and the participants' thoughts about the possible motivators towards learning English. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data revealed that there was a low level of motivation towards learning English at school and this resulted from several factors such as student/teacher-related factors, curriculum issues, administrative issues, and institutional concerns.

### Keywords

Language learning  
Motivation  
Vocational schools  
Motivators

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### Introduction

Motivation is one of the key factors affecting the teaching and learning process. According to Chomsky (1988), ninety-nine per cent of teaching is whether you can make your students motivated to learn the content using the materials. In this respect, it can be concluded that motivation is an indispensable component of any teaching action. Such an important component of the teaching and learning process has doubtlessly attracted the attention of researchers. There has been research in the literature discussing the effects of motivation on learning (Genç & Aydın, 2017; Harmer, 2001; Liu, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000), on language learning in specific (Dörnyei, 2001), and more specifically on teaching English to Turkish EFL students (Kocabaş, 2009).

Research on motivation in education focuses more on the importance of motivating students, the effects of motivation on students' achievement and the correlation between motivation and learner attitudes (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005). In addition to these, researchers have so far investigated the factors that motivate and demotivate the teachers and students to teach and to learn English as a foreign language (Dörnyei, 1994), the relationship between motivation and certain concepts like self-esteem, attitudes, classroom management, and burn-out (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

However, there is still a need for research examining the EFL learning motivation of tertiary-level Vocational School students, and the factors that may motivate them to learn English as a foreign language. Additionally, there are also some practical concerns of English language instructors teaching at Vocational Schools all around Türkiye about the motivational levels of their students at these schools. Most of these instructors complain about the students' attitudes towards them or the courses. They find the students both unsuccessful in EFL and unwilling to learn a foreign language. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a need for investigating English learning de/motivation of vocational school students and uncovering the possible motivators to increase their interest in learning English as a foreign language. Hence, this study aims to identify the current motivational level of vocational school students to learn English as a foreign language, and to find out possible motivating factors for the students to learn English at school.

### Motivation

Harmer (2001) defines motivation as "any kind of internal drive that urges a person to do something" (pp. 5). Ryan and Deci (2000) also make a similar definition and explain being motivated as being "moved". In other words, motivation is a factor that makes the person take action towards a goal or the desired end.

Though it is frequently used in education and will be dealt with in the context of language education in this paper, motivation is not merely an educational term. One of the earliest definitions of motivation was made by Maslow (1954) as "a basic drive towards needs". Since then, many definitions have been made to explain the phenomena. Dörnyei (1998), for example, defines motivation as "any goal-directed action". For Bandura (1997), on the other hand, only actions are not enough to show the existence or the level of motivation. Commitment, efficacy, and effort are other factors determining the level of motivation.

## Types of Motivation

Motivation is a broad concept and should be dealt with under several headings to identify different types and facets of motivation. First of all, according to Deci and Ryan (1985), motivation results from either intrinsic or extrinsic factors and thus, motivation can be examined under two names related to the source of the drives: Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation. As their names also suggest, intrinsic motivation is more related to the “self”, whereas extrinsic motivation is about others, context, and external conditions.

Another distinction between the types of motivation is made by Gardner and Lambert (1972). They state that motivation may be integrative or instrumental according to the purpose of the drives. For example, a language learner may desire to be part of the target culture and community while learning a foreign language and in this context integrative motivation is the driving force for learning. If the primary concern for learning a foreign language is to get a promotion in the workplace, then instrumental motivation is in action.

Though rarely mentioned in the literature there are several other types of motivation proposed such as achievement motivation (Atkinson, 2000), and effectiveness motivation (Harter, 1978). In short, it can be seen that the classification of motivation types has been done either according to the source or the aim of the drives that lead a person to act in a certain way.

## Motivation in Language Learning

Motivation, according to Gardner (1985), is an indispensable part of learning, and he believes that when motivated, the learner longs for having something, realizing an aim, or accomplishing a desire. When we consider the foreign language learning context in this study, this motivation will be towards learning English as a foreign language.

In language classrooms, some students learn earlier, easier and better than some others. Likewise, some students are more positive towards learning than others. According to Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), those differences mostly stem from the level of motivation towards learning the language. He also proposes that motivation is among the main factors affecting performance in second/foreign language learning along with age and personality.

Research also shows that this type of motivation is also effective in language learning (Liu, 2007). Lightbrown and Spada (2006) focus on the purpose of motivation and state that the students' communication needs and attitudes towards the target language culture determine the ultimate success of language learning. In this context, the learners have two types of motivation: instrumental and integrative.

Context is one of the key determinants of any phenomenon to occur or disappear. For this reason, in order to have better insight into the motivation of Turkish EFL learners in a specific context, research related to such learners and context should also be covered. Though few in number, research in Turkish university settings show that university-level EFL learners in Türkiye are not very motivated to learn a foreign language. For instance, in a recent case study by Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013), it was found that tertiary-level preparatory class EFL learners were mostly extrinsically and instrumentally motivated. In other words, they did not have intrinsic motives to learn English.

Research has so far provided us with various definitions of motivation, the importance of motivation in language learning, and motivation studies in Turkish tertiary-level foreign language education. However, there is no research investigating the specific context of Vocational Schools with their unique student profile and educational atmosphere. So, this study attempts to have a deeper insight into EFL learning motivation in the Turkish Vocational School context by answering the following research questions:

- 1)What is the motivation level of the students at Vocational Schools to learn English as a foreign language?
- 2)What are the possible motivators for the students at Vocational Schools to learn English as a foreign language?

### **Methodology**

#### **Context and participants**

The study was conducted at a Vocational School at MCBU. There are three vocational programs and evening classes in these programs. According to the regulations of the Council of Turkish Higher Education, all first-year students at Turkish universities have to take obligatory Foreign Language 1 and Foreign Language 2 courses in the fall and spring terms respectively. These courses are 2-hour weekly courses in which elementary-level basic grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and writing skills are covered. Due to some technical restrictions, time constraints, and crowded classes, some of these skills such as listening, speaking, and writing are not focused on much. Thus, these courses primarily consist of elementary-level grammar and vocabulary topics accompanied, to some extent, by other skills. Of all the 438 students enrolled in the compulsory English courses at the School, 120 volunteered to take part in the study and respond to the questionnaires. Four of these participants did not respond to the questionnaire although they were willing to participate at the beginning of the study. Thus, a total of 116 students actually took in this exploratory study.

The reason for choosing this specific setting to collect data for the current study was not only convenience but also the existence of motivational problems observed by the instructors of the vocational programs and the language instructors who have worked in this institution. So, difficulty in motivating the students and the learning atmosphere were the factors directing the researcher to choose a Vocational School of a state university as the research setting.

Participants of this study were selected through convenience sampling and 120 first-year vocational program students at a Vocational School of a state university in Türkiye participated in the study. All the participants took Foreign Language 1 course during the fall term of the 2013-2014 academic year. Foreign Language 1 and 2 are offered as obligatory English language courses in the fall and spring terms of the first year at all the universities in Türkiye. Among the participants, there are students from all over the country, and from all high school types. There is also gender balance among the participants. Due to ethical issues, all the participants and the administrators of the School were informed about the study and the participants were those who volunteered to take part in the study.

## **Instruments**

The instrument used in this study was the Motivation Questionnaire (MQ) which included 35 Likert-scale (5 points) items. Each item in the MQ had five choices to be marked by the participants: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neither Disagree nor Agree (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). The MQ was originally produced by Gardner (1985) and used to define the attitudes towards the target language, target culture and learning the target language. In this sense, the MQ is a useful tool for identifying the motivation level and underlying factors of motivation or demotivation towards learning a language. In this study, an adaptation of the same questionnaire by Colak (2008) which was also used in a similar research setting at a Turkish university was employed. All the reliability checks of the questionnaire were made by the researcher in the aforementioned study. Finally, with the purpose of identifying any motivating factors that the participants of the study could find useful for their language learning, an open-ended question was added to the end of the questionnaire.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The Motivation Questionnaire (MQ) was delivered to the students who volunteered to take part in the study before their regular class hours. They were first informed about the study, the purpose, and the ethical concerns, and then asked to respond to the items in the questionnaire. Since their proficiency in English was not high enough to understand the items in the original version, a translated version of the MQ was employed in this study. The MQ was translated into Turkish by the researcher and, in order to check for any inconveniences and detect any critical changes in the meaning of the items, it was back-translated by a professional interpreter who was also employed at a School of Foreign Languages of a state university.

In order to answer the second research question, the participants were asked to answer an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire. However, a relatively low numbers of participants answered this part properly (n=32). This open-ended part investigated the possible motivators for the students' language learning. The participants were asked to list and explain the factors that would motivate them (or motivate them more if already motivated) to learn English at school.

The data collected through the questionnaires were quantitatively analyzed using SPSS for Mac 2013. For the analysis, in order to find the frequencies of the responses to the items in the questionnaire, descriptive calculations were run on the SPSS by the researcher. The results were also descriptively presented and a motivational profile of the students was demonstrated in this study. The responses to the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively in order to identify possible motivators for students to learn English as a foreign language which also shaped the second research question of this study.

**Results**

**Participants' Motivation to Learn English at School**

The first research question aimed at finding out the motivation levels of the 120 students who participated in the study. They were asked to answer a total of thirty-six items on a five-point Likert scale and 4 of the 120 questionnaires returned were eliminated during data analysis due to missing answers. The scores obtained were between 36 and 180. The participants whose total scores were between 36 and 107 were labelled as having low motivation to learn English. If the scores were between 108 and 143, they were accepted as students with a moderate level of motivation. Those who scored above 144 were considered highly motivated students.

In order to determine the motivation levels of the participants to learn English, descriptive statistics were used and the mean scores were calculated. As seen in Table 1, the analysis of their scores indicated that the students had low levels of motivation to learn English (M=99.35).

**Table 1.** Participants' Level of Motivation

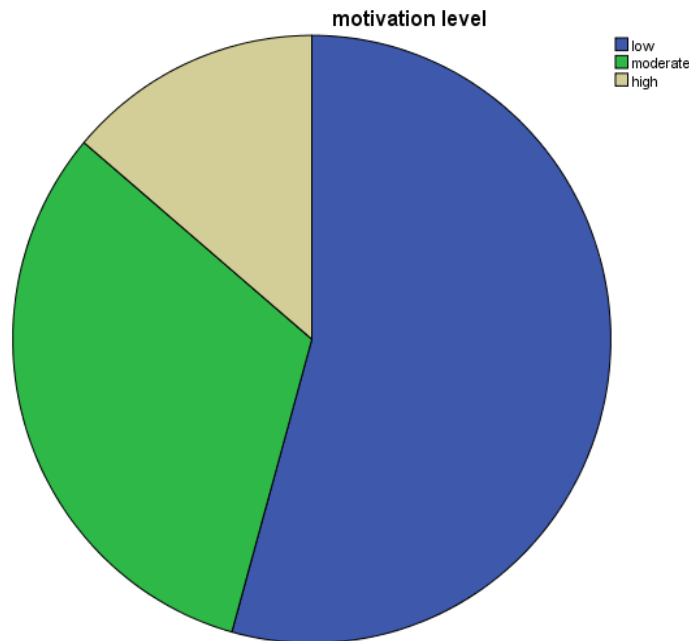
	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Learning motivation</b>	116	99.35	15.12

Apart from the general motivation of the whole group, counts and percentages of students with low, moderate and high levels of motivation were computed through descriptive statistics. The analysis of the data revealed that 63 of the 116 participants had a low level of motivation while only 16 of them were found highly motivated. The remaining 37 participants' motivation levels were moderate (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Motivation Level Distribution within the Sample

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Low</b>	63	54.3
<b>Moderate</b>	37	31.9
<b>High</b>	16	13.8
	116	100

Moreover, Figure 1 below demonstrates that a majority of the participants in the present study had low motivation levels (54.3%). Only 13.8% were found to be highly motivated and 31.9% had moderate levels of motivation to learn English. That is a clear indicator of the fact that the overall motivation level of the students learning English at a Vocational School of a state university was relatively low.



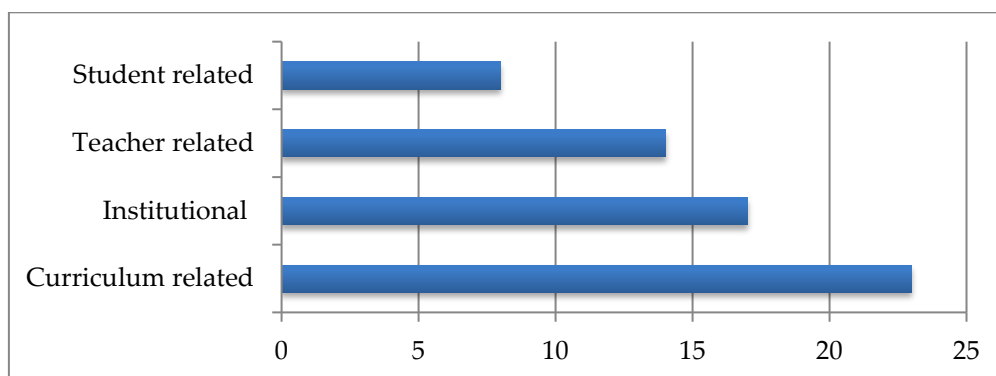
**Figure 1.** Motivation Level Distribution within the Sample

### Motivating Factors to Learn English at School

As to the second research question, the respondents of the MQ were also given an open-ended question in order to find out what they thought the possible motivators for the students at Vocational Schools to learn English as a foreign language were.

In this section, the participants were expected to make a list of the factors that would motivate them to learn English at school, and briefly explain the importance of these factors. Out of 116 students who responded to the questionnaire items properly, only 32 students responded to this item which provided valuable insight into their views of motivating factors that would promote English learning at school.

Qualitative analysis of these 32 responses revealed that the factors mentioned by the students could be classified under several headings such as “teacher-related factors”, “institutional factors”, “curriculum-related factors”, “student-related factors”, and “other factors” (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Frequency of motivating factors in all the responses

As shown in Figure 2 above, the most frequently mentioned motivators are curriculum-related ones with a frequency of 23 responses in a total of 32. In other words, 23 of 32 students mentioned curriculum-related factors as possibly motivating ones. For instance, the students found the “2 hours of weekly classes” too less to teach any subject. That is why some of the students perceive English classes as kind of a “passtime” at school and they believe that there should more hours of English classes if they are to be given a better language education. On the other hand, one of the participants says:

“The curriculum itself is the most demotivating factor now. But it can be made motivating by making some changes. For example, books can be changed. They do not let us talk, communicate... They always ask us to fill in the blanks or complete something. That does not happen in real life in Çeşme or Didim. I know that.” (P9)

In this response, it can be understood that most of the students are not satisfied with the textbooks used in Vocational Schools. They find communicative skills more motivating than grammar and vocabulary exercises that dominate the current instructional materials. Along with class hours and teaching materials, there are some other curriculum-related concerns listed by the participants such as “national language teaching policies, assessment criteria for language learning, being forced to memorize by the system itself etc.”

The second most frequently mentioned factors can be summarized under the heading of institutional factors which were included in 17 of the responses. Most of these factors are related to administrative and physical issues in the research setting. The following response of a student is a clear example of such concerns:

“I sometimes feel really disappointed by the conditions at this school. Imagine, English classes are full of students. We are 68 students in our class. They don’t divide the classes. They say that there aren’t enough teachers and there is no space for all of us. But why do you accept more students every year? I cannot practise what I learn in such a class. We cannot concentrate to learn in this class. The teacher wants to use a computer and projection tool but he cannot. Because in my class, they are all broken! We talked to the vice-director of the school but he said that there is not enough money in the budget to replace the old and broken tools.” (P3)

This comment and some other instances in the student responses point to the physical and technological problems experienced in vocational schools in the Turkish context. Even if the managers of these schools try to fix such problems they occasionally confront with financial or bureaucratic problems. In this response, the student concludes that many of his friends are aware of the importance of English in their academic and professional lives, and if all these matters are fixed, the students will definitely be more motivated to learn English at school.

Among the teacher-related motivating factors which were mentioned in 14 of the responses, “the use of a variety of language teaching techniques, more interaction in the language classrooms, more tolerance to the errors made in classes, and less strict attitudes towards the students” were mentioned by the respondents of the study. The responses under this title also serve as a source of valuable feedback from the students of the researcher who also taught these classes. Two of the quotations from the students’ responses were especially purposive:



“The teacher should recall that it is an English class and let us talk more. We know that he likes discipline but his strictness made us feel uneasy while participating in the activities. A less strict and more tolerant teacher makes his students more motivated.” (P20)

“I am afraid of making mistakes in class. He doesn’t react badly, indeed. But his general discipline makes me nervous. I don’t know, maybe I can be more motivated in a female teacher’s class.” (P14)

In these responses, we can see examples of the motivating factors mentioned under the teacher-related factors heading. Here, it can be inferred that the attitude of the teacher plays a vital role in English language classes. Attempts of the teacher to ensure discipline in language classes may sometimes hinder learning by reducing the motivation of learners. In addition to these answers, the participants also mentioned “a smiling teacher face, rewarding attitudes of the teacher, more positive reinforcement, and more guidance for extensive English learning” as possible motivators to learn English at school.

Student-related concerns were the least mentioned ones among the other factors. One of the participants summarized the student-related motivational factors very well in her critical comment:

“Motivation is something personal. If one really wants to learn, he learns. I know it from my boyfriend. He works in Foça at a hotel and knows English better than me and he doesn’t study at a school. No need to blame anyone else, we, the students are not willing to learn any subject. English is one of them. Personally, I never liked English and nobody can teach me by force...” (P4)

This clear reflection of student-related motivational factors by one of the female students is a good representative of similar ideas in several other responses, as well. Most of the eight responses which commented on student-related factors mentioned that motivation is a personal variable, and one should do much to increase their own motivation before blaming someone else for their demotivation to learn. At this point, the importance of intrinsic motivation, and intrinsic reinforcement to motivate oneself becomes more clear.

Along with all these factors being classified and presented under several different headings, there are some other factors that the students find potentially motivating to learn English at school. For instance, some of the students state that they would be more motivated if they were informed about the advantages of learning English in their field of study (i.e. Public Relations, Finance), and in their future careers. Some others suggest that online language learning which includes natives from all around the world would be quite motivating for them to learn English. Finally, there are also participants who state that being motivated to learn at school is useless, and instead of this, they should be allowed to learn at home or somewhere else outside the school.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study is an investigation into the motivation levels of tertiary-level Turkish Vocational School students, and the factors that can motivate these students to learn English at school. With this perspective, the researcher aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What is the motivation level of the students at Vocational Schools to learn English as a foreign language?

(2) What are the possible motivators for the students at Vocational Schools to learn English as a foreign language?

The first part of the results section presents the descriptive frequencies of the respondents to the items in the questionnaire. The questionnaire results revealed that most of the Vocational School students had a low level of motivation to learn English at school. As mentioned in the introduction section of the present study, it is not a surprising finding since many of the teachers teaching in similar educational contexts frequently complain about the demotivation of students to learn English. More than half of the sample supported the claims of the teachers complaining about such demotivation. However, there were still many students who had moderate levels of motivation towards learning English, and even high levels of motivation to learn English at school. Since motivation is a key concern affecting the quality of education (Gardner, 1985), the number of highly motivated students in the study setting is not satisfactory to ensure a high-quality education. Therefore, it can be inferred that the overall motivation level towards learning English at these schools is relatively low and far from being satisfactory for an educator. In light of these findings, the second research question was intended to find out possible motivators to learn English at school. In order not to cause any bias, this item was designed in such a way that it asked the students to list and explain the motivating factors or 'more' motivating factors depending on their levels of motivation. Because there were also some students whose motivation to learn was already high.

Qualitative analysis of the responses to the open-ended part of the research instrument of the study revealed a long list of factors or concerns that are found to be motivating or demotivating by the students taking part in this study. This finding is in line with the research in the literature which proposes that motivational factors vary a lot from personal motives to external drives (Dörnyei, 1994a). After a detailed analysis of the student responses and comments, it was observed that the students thought curriculum-related and institutional factors were mostly responsible for demotivating the students to learn English at school and changes under these two headings would work well and motivate them. Similarly, though not many in number, there were participants who expressed that teacher-related factors were also important in motivating the students to learn English at school. As Deci and Ryan (1985) also stated in their experimental study, the source of motivational factors varied in our sample and made the type of learner motivation either intrinsic (i.e. student-related factors, attitudes, internal drives...) or extrinsic (i.e. teacher-related factors, reinforcement, curriculum...). Though few, some of the participants of the present study (n=8) also put emphasis on the student's own attitude, willingness and efforts as important determinants of motivation towards learning English at school.

As mentioned several times in this paper, motivation has a profound effect on students' foreign language learning. Although there have been studies conducted about the language learning motivation of Turkish students in various settings and school types, the current research is one of the pioneering studies done in a tertiary-level vocational school setting. For this reason, its results are of valuable sources of information about the motivation levels of students towards learning English at vocational schools, and about the factors that may motivate this specific group of learners.

Descriptive analysis of the data collected from the participants of this study revealed that vocational school students had a relatively low level of English language learning motivation due to various reasons. These reasons are listed and explained by some of the students who responded to the second part of the data collection instrument; the motivation questionnaire. The students criticized some of the current factors such as the physical conditions of the classes, lack of technological tools, inconvenient learning atmosphere, and improper language teaching

curriculum and stated that changes in these variables would motivate them more to learn English as a foreign language at school. They also focused on the role of the teacher and the course materials in motivating the students to learn English. The teacher's positive attitudes towards the students, more freedom in language classes, less strict discipline, more tolerant error corrections, and more guidance from the teacher were among the factors that were listed as possible motivators towards learning English at school. On the other hand, more interactive and more communicatively designed course materials would increase the motivation of the students, as well.

This study does not only fill the gap in the literature by making an investigation of motivation with the specific student profile and in the specific research setting of vocational schools in Türkiye. It also provides the teachers, administrators, and publishers with valuable insight into the issue of language teaching at Turkish vocational schools. Drawing on the findings presented in this study, they may help the students increase their motivation to learn a foreign language in these schools.

Since this study was conducted with a limited number of participants, in a limited time, and at a single institution, it can be further improved and made more comprehensive by employing more participants, by tracking the changes in the students' motivation levels after making changes on aforementioned variables, and by including more institutions to come up with more generalizable findings.

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