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Anikó Mátyás: Hungarian EFL learners' motivation during language exam preparation courses through the eyes of Hungarian EFL teachers. A qualitative study
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Hungarian EFL learners' motivation during language exam preparation courses through the eyes of Hungarian EFL teachers

A qualitative study

This exploratory study, based on self-determination and washback theory, identifies teachers' perceptions of learners' motivations during exam preparation and the exam's washback effect on teachers' methods and learners' motivation. Six teachers from two examination centres in Hungary were interviewed in this study. The results show that the teachers' potential to facilitate motivation is focused on relatedness, the language exam's role, and its positive washback effect. Based on the interview data, teachers recognise the beneficial effects of relatedness with the learners, and their teaching practices primarily reflect these assumptions. Based on the results, it can be concluded that in meaningful teacher-student relationships and specific teaching techniques are needed to facilitate and maintain learners' motivation during exam preparation. The study's findings may help teachers foster motivation while minimising the adverse washback effects of the exam.

Keywords: language exam, motivation, relatedness, teaching practices, washback

1. Introduction

High-stakes language exams used to determine educational decisions in language learning carry potential consequences, particularly for higher education in Hungary, where the lack of the exam certificate may result in students being denied a diploma (Fekete & Csépes, 2019). This learning target has become not only a predictor of the learners' prospective success but also of the efficiency of the teachers. Therefore, the language exam itself significantly impacts beliefs about learning and teaching, affects the teachers' attitude towards teaching during exam preparation, as well as the learners' views on motivation (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

The motivation to learn a foreign language becomes vital under conditions when the source of motivation is extrinsic and is in response to expectations such as education or work opportunities. Teachers, the primary representatives of these extrinsic sources, play an important role in making extrinsically motivated learners experience intrinsic motivation, the enjoyment of doing the activity, which is also maintainable (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consequently, teachers' perceptions are important for understanding processes during exam

preparation since their practices are related to strategies for overcoming challenges, which may shape learners' learning backgrounds and influence their motivation. Furthermore, teachers can be expected to mediate the impacts of exams on the learning process because, as it is also highlighted by Csizér and Öveges (2019), teachers in Hungary find language exams a strong motivational force. Additionally, teachers' motivational practices direct link learners' attitudes towards the learning process. Along these lines, educational consequences of the language exam and exam-related factors regarding learners' motivations perceived through the eyes of teachers need to be examined to understand the extent of influence such tests have on teaching and learning and what teachers could do to maximise the probability that these factors have beneficial rather than detrimental effects on the learning process. Among factors that influence the extent to which tests impact the learning process, the beliefs and perceptions of teachers regarding tests are crucial, as teachers are the stakeholders who act as mediators of test impact and may help to further maintain motivation in the learners.

The effects of high-stakes tests on teachers and learners are widely researched in language testing (Cheng, 2004; Vidákovich & Vígh, 2009; Watanabe, 1996); however, the literature lacks empirical works examining motivation specifically within the context of high-stakes tests. Several research projects investigated the impacts of language exams from teachers' perspectives, but these studies focused more on the effects of the contents of tests and teaching methods (Cheng, 2004) rather than on teachers' perceptions of learners' motivation during exam preparation.

Nevertheless, as one of the primary foreign language learning targets in Hungary and a strong motivational tool (Csizér & Kormos, 2006), the language exam merits particular attention on behalf of the profession and, as Vidákovich and Vígh (2009) indicated, the investigation of whether the effects of tests can possibly lead to beneficial innovations in language teaching.

For this reason, this study has two major foci: first, to explore Hungarian teachers' beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions on learners' motivation during the completion of the language exam. Second, it investigates the educational consequences of language exams on learners' motivation, as perceived by teachers, and teaching techniques in exam preparation courses that can increase motivation, thereby enhancing the quality of teaching. Therefore, the study follows the qualitative research paradigm to investigate these aspects thoroughly.

2. Literature review

2.1 Motivation

Motivation is one of the most important language learning factors (Csizér, 2007) as it can affect students' learning behaviour, and reciprocally, why and what they learn can also affect their motivation. As the importance of motivation is seldom understated, research on motivation in educational psychology and foreign language teaching enjoys a complex history and has been conceptualised in many ways. Dörnyei (1994) referred to early theories of motivation as studies on "drive, arousal, need, and on personality traits like anxiety and need for achievement" (p. 274), while current theories, such as self-determination, primarily study cognitive and social factors that have an impact on motivation. According to Dörnyei (2001), foreign language learning is markedly influenced by several personal and social factors. This diversity of the variables involved in foreign language learning motivation resulted in various theoretical models: Dörnyei's (1994) process model, Deci and Ryan's (1985), and Ryan and Deci's (n.d., 2000, 2020) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), that was later remodelled by Noels (2001) and Noels et al. (2019).

Based on how learners reach their goals, Ryan and Deci (2000) describe extrinsic motivation to be triggered by "a separable outcome" and intrinsic motivation to arise from the individual as an "inherent satisfaction" by doing the activity (p. 71). Intrinsically motivated individuals participate in the activity voluntarily because they find it interesting, while extrinsic motivation is an orientation controlled by external factors such as obtaining a diploma or receiving promotions at work. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), external factors tend to decrease intrinsic motivation as they regulate behaviour. However, they also leave the possibility open for an extrinsically motivated person to demonstrate more intrinsic behaviour during the learning process.

2.2 Motivation during language exam preparation

Language teachers specialised in language exam preparation would claim that intrinsic motivation is relatively scarce among their learners: "In a language course, extrinsic pressures are most often manifested in foreign language requirements set by the institution and in established standardized test scores that must be achieved" (Brown, 2007, p. 181). However, teaching practices and results from studies suggest that intrinsically motivated students are more successful and autonomous in learning than learners with only extrinsic motivation (Walker et al., 2006). Yet, exam preparation practice in Hungary shows that in most cases, learners professedly attend class to pass a certain exam, and focused exam preparation courses trigger a high degree of extrinsic motivation. Still, similarly to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation also proves advantageous, and rewards achieved by learning may activate interest.

2.3 Self-determination and relatedness with the teacher

Ryan and Deci (2000) appoint different forms of extrinsically-driven behaviours based on the "self-determination continuum" (p. 72) that covers a process between amotivation and intrinsic motivation. During an activity driven by an external force, the self-appreciation and ego of the individual are gradually increased and "internalised," as the three needs, relatedness, autonomy, and competence, appear (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). A key factor of internalisation is one of the needs of SDT, the relatedness to an individual or a community (Noels et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, n.d., 2000, 2020).

During exam preparation courses, the need for relatedness is satisfied not only by learning in a group but, more importantly, by working with the teacher. Akbari et al. (2015) find relatedness the strongest predictor of learning efficiency. Similarly, Klassen et al. (2012) emphasise that teachers' feelings of relatedness with learners plays a vital role in motivation, and learners with increased relatedness with teachers are more engaged in learning.

However, unintended consequences of teaching to the test can also affect learners' motivation. If exam-driven teaching dominates, it may adversely influence how the language is taught and consequently decrease learning inclination after taking the test (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). The question of how to keep up learners' motivation and the inclination to study after taking the exam is an issue that exam preparation course teachers regularly face but may ignore. However, the language learner plateau, when the students' learning activity comes to a halt after passing a certain exam level, is a common phenomenon. Richards (2008) characterizes this period as a transition in which the learners are unable to visualise onward advance.

In order to avoid this transition and help create sustainable motivation in learners, support and stimulation from the teacher, among other factors, are indispensable. Dörnyei (1994), when detailing teacher-specific motivational components, emphasises that teachers should attempt to be "emphatic, congruent, and accepting," namely, being open to students' needs, promoting autonomous learning, applying positive feedback, and using specific methods to trigger intrinsic motivation and help internalisation of extrinsic motivation (p. 282). Thus, as Harmer (2007) argues, teachers have a "dramatic effect" (p. 100) on the sustainability of learners' motivation since learners presumably remain motivated if they feel that their advancement is important to the teacher. To summarise, the authors suggest that internalisation and sustainability of the motivational continuum strongly depend on the consequences of the exam that the teachers mediate.

2.4 Washback mediated by the teachers

Consequences of the exam are referred to as the washback effect in testing literature, indicating the impact of testing on the curriculum, teaching practices, and learning behaviours (Alderson & Wall 1993; Hughes 1989; Hughes, 2002; Messick, 1996). The following definition of washback captures its meaning as used in the present study: "the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do" (Messick, 1996, p. 243). According to Alderson and Wall (1993), the higher the stakes of a test, the stronger this washback effect is on learning and teaching, and a test will influence not only the content and ways of learning and teaching but also the beliefs about learning and teaching.

As washback impacts learners' and teachers' decisions, washback serves as a strong link between testing, learning, and teaching, which deserves profound attention. Bachman and Palmer (1996) distinguished two aspects of test use; macro, which has a social impact, and micro, which concerns the level of the participants, namely, learners and teachers, the latter of which falls within the scope of this study.

As for the direction, the washback effect can be both positive and negative (Shohamy et al., 1996). In the last twenty years, research has regarded washback as a mediator to achieving positive changes in teaching, as positive washback effect is manifested in enhanced motivation and autonomous learning (Brown, 2004). However, if the washback effect is negative, it may result in the loss of motivation in the learner. As noted earlier, exam-oriented teaching can cause reduced motivation and language learning inclination (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). Alderson and Wall (1993) found that teaching specifically for the exam resulted in a narrowed curriculum focusing on areas to be tested. Similarly, Lam (1994) revealed that those parts of the test that were in the centre of teaching achieved the highest scores. However, Watanabe (1996) identified differences in teaching methods with the same exam preparation processes; some teachers insisted on teaching specifically to the test, while others were ready to use creative ideas and methods in the learners' interest.

The researchers of the above studies emphasise that it is not the exam that impacts teaching but the teachers themselves. Therefore, the teacher's attitude towards the exam may be essential in selecting methods for the exam preparation course. As mentioned earlier, it seems that teacher-related factors such as methods and attitude, in addition to the exam itself, influence the nature of the washback. Watanabe (2001) found that a relaxed atmosphere in the exam preparation course is due to the teacher's attitude towards the exam. Read and Hayes (2003) also referred to positive feelings between teachers and learners and increased motivation among learners triggered by the exam.

Considering the above, the washback effect of the language exam, operating in different ways in certain situations, definitely affects teachers' attitudes

towards tests, learning methods, and thus, learners' motivation. Consequently, as mediators of washback, teachers are responsible for creating a supportive environment that may increase students' motivation. The teachers' role in creating positive washback effects of exams is perceived through their support for developing relatedness and the methods they use.

3. The study

3.1 Method

As mentioned in the beginning, the aims of the study were twofold: to understand what motivational patterns are observable in EFL language learners' exam preparation courses and to investigate which teaching techniques increase language learning motivation and learning inclination of EFL language exam takers. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, and as the researcher was interested in uncovering information on teachers' perceptions and experiences, a qualitative technique was chosen.

3.2 Participants

Eight EFL teachers who specialised in language exam preparation were invited to participate in the study. According to Dávid (2014), these teachers have had a wide range of experience and form the core part of the stakeholders of examination procedures with access to a fair amount of information on exam preparation. Due to time constraints and incompatibility of schedules, six of the invitees accepted the invitation to participate in the present study resulting in (five females and one male, aged 35-55) participating in the semi-structured interviews.

Convenience sampling was used (Dörnyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005) as convenience reflects ease in access to informants: four of whom teach at the researcher's examination centre in Miskolc (Northeast Hungary), while two teachers are from Nyíregyháza (Northeast Hungary), all employed by the local examination centres that belong to the regional examination headquarters. The researcher maintains close and distant working relationships with the participants, so teachers' willingness to participate and attend all research sessions was also taken into account during the selection of the participants.

3.3 The instrument

The semi-structured interview guide was used to obtain in-depth information from teachers who were given the freedom to respond in their mother tongue (Hungarian) to express their ideas easily. The interview questions were designed after a careful review of the literature and based on a previous study involving learners' interviews investigating their test-taking motivation, conducted by the researcher (Mátyás, 2021). The questions were refined after two pilot interviews. The interview guide consisted of twenty open-ended questions

asking respondents to briefly describe their test preparation methods and experience in teaching for the test, comments on learners' test-taking motivation, and their beliefs on their relationship with the learners.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The interview data were collected over three weeks, in 2021 April, and conducted online via Skype, firstly because many participants were working and thus were not able to attend face-to-face interviews during their working hours; secondly, online data collection was considered a safer way of conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The average interview duration was 35 minutes (min = 21; max =46). All the interviews were audio-recorded with verbal consent from the participants to ensure that the whole interview session was captured and would provide data for analysis and then transcribed verbatim. Additionally, the transcriptions were returned to the interviewees for their approval and clarification, if needed. The constructs, motivation, washback, and relatedness served as the overarching categories that guided the analysis. Prior to coding, the researcher rechecked the accuracy of the transcripts. Qualitative data collected through individual interviews were coded and analysed by content analysis and manual open coding (Seidman, 2006) through coding to identify recurrent themes and emergent categories (Saldaña, 2012). Three categories were found: willingness and proof of knowledge, flexible exam-centeredness, and positive feedback and cooperation.

4. Findings

In what follows, an overall discussion of the findings will be provided from the gathered data. The information will be described in terms of the motivational aspects of learners, teachers' teaching methodology and relationship with the learners contemplated in this research. The numbers assigned to the teacher participants – in order to maintain their anonymity – are presented before their quotes.

4.1 Motivation during exam preparation – Willingness and proof of knowledge

In line with the findings of Csizér and Kormos (2006) and Csizér and Öveges (2019), the interviewed teachers unequivocally stated that obtaining the language exam is a strong motivational force that increases learners' motivation. In addition, the data shows that based on teachers' perceptions, learners find it essential to achieve educational goals with the help of the language exam; therefore, their motivation influences their attitude towards learning. The teachers used the terms "plus scores for the entrance exam", "expectations", and "prestige" to exemplify this powerful stimulation:

(T1) "Most of them are learning because they need the exam for additional scores for the entrance exam. It is a basic expectation."

(T2) "The exam certificate is an entrance ticket to university, so they are ready to work a lot for it."

However, they also indicated some drawbacks of this intense outer force. Half of the teachers said it might later adversely impact motivation and substantially reduce it. To counterbalance this undesirable effect, they emphasise the importance of the knowledge of the language during the exam preparation:

(T4) "I always tell them it is nice to have a goal, but after all, we learn for the knowledge, not for a document, don't we?"

(T6) "You never know what life brings, you may need the acquired language knowledge at any time, and nobody can take this knowledge from you."

Of note, five out of the six teachers reported that in addition to the "educational expectations", the learners find the language exam "a challenging competition", with which they can "give evidence of their language knowledge" and "prove to themselves." These opinions conclude that the language exam is considered not only a solid motivational force among learners but also a proper tool to receive feedback and proof of the learners' language competence.

4.2 Washback effect of the exam on teaching – Flexible exam-centeredness

When the teachers were asked about their methods explicitly used in exam preparation, all of them reported that they mainly focused on exam strategies and tasks to be practiced due to external exam constraints. The teachers (except for two of them) identified successful teaching with a high number of successful exam-takers:

(T4) "To be honest, I often find it boring to make learners practice certain exam tasks, but what can I do? My task is to help them pass the exam."

(T3) "I try to mix the language skill practice with exam tasks; for example, I transform texts I have found into exam reading tasks. I want my learners to acquire routine."

Some teachers (T3, T4) also indicated, though, boredom and frustration in the learners, deriving from the "cliché-like" and "framed" teaching. According to one of the teachers (T5), another reason for this frustration is the "incorrectly chosen language level" and the "too difficult tasks that can discourage the learners and cause demotivation." This teacher also argued that:

(T5) "Sometimes I recognise the signs of burn-out on them. They are about to give up and say, 'I will never pass the exam'. Then it is pretty hard to guide them back onto the way."

In order to make learners overcome frustration, the loss of motivation and also to bring success and satisfaction in the learning process, they all strive to find "various interesting tasks" and "topics that match the learners' interests":

(T4) "I don't let them lose their enthusiasm, and I try to engage them into the learning process and ask them to recommend topics for the speaking tasks."

All the teachers agreed on the importance of urging learners to create their own learning methods with the help of the teachers' "guidance". Moreover, they stated that learners of exam preparation courses are more autonomous in learning than those who are not planning to take an exam in the near future. The reason for this phenomenon, as they said, is that teachers raise awareness of the benefits of practicing for the exam outside the class, creating a routine and frequently seizing any opportunity to learn. This idea is supported by two participants as well:

(T3) "My learners know that passing the exam is not a piece of cake; they are ready to put effort in it and learn at home. They watch series, listen to music, and talk in English with others. They know that English is important."

(T1) "In the lessons, a boy showed to the others a special technique with which he could study more words; he was happy to see that his learning tip was considered by the others."

Error correction through positive feedback "lesson by lesson" is also pivotal in their teaching practice, as most learners in exam preparation demand their errors be frequently corrected and provided with comments. Correcting mistakes constructive feedback helps learners develop, and "the more they know about how to avoid a certain mistake, the more motivated they become". Highlighting mistakes using constructive feedback is also important as learners "tend to underestimate their knowledge."

4.3 Relatedness – Positive feedback and cooperation

The above-mentioned positive feedback, as well as cooperation between teachers and learners, emerged as the major themes in teaching for the exam. All the interviewed teachers regard relatedness as a vital aspect in facilitating motivation and thus learning inclination. They claimed that relatedness lies in respect towards learners. Promoting positive communication between learners and the teacher and creating an encouraging atmosphere to avoid or at least reduce stress play a decisive role in achieving relatedness, as suggested by Noels et al. (2019).

(T1) "I try to be empathetic and respectful towards my learners, a threatening atmosphere when teaching is out of question. They worry enough about the exam; why would I increase the stress?"

All participating teachers agreed that the sense of relatedness in learners could be enhanced by praise, which the teachers find necessary to express verbally. The majority of the teachers mentioned positive feedback as a key facilitator of relatedness and, as a result, an important aspect in increasing motivation. Teachers reported being open to learners' needs and feelings, two of whom

referred to themselves as a "friend" and a "psychologist" during the learning process.

(T2) "During the exam preparation, we live in a symbiosis, they become better learners, and I become a better teacher. Their failure is my failure, and their success is my success."

(T3) "It is good to see how far they can go under our wings, and I can be part of this development, it leads to success, and preparation leaves good taste in our mouths."

Striving for the common goal, the successful language exam, and "hardships" of learning and teaching result in learners' intensified engagement in learning, which is directly proportional to strengthening relationships between the teacher and the learners. The extent of relatedness and "infectious" enthusiasm of teachers play a role in the language learning inclination of the learners. Interestingly, three teachers indicated differences in the learners' learning inclination between learners under 18 and adult students. As they mentioned, learners under 18, in most cases, only continue learning after the exam if they set another goal, mainly another language exam at a higher level, whereas many adult learners study further because they use the language for work or often because it means prestige.

5. Discussion

In this study, learners' motivation through teachers' perspectives during learning for the exam and the washback effect of exams on teaching methodologies were investigated. Besides this, EFL teachers' experiences and beliefs were explored with a qualitative data collection method to examine the relationship between teachers and learners during exam preparation. In line with Alderson and Wall's (1993) idea, teachers admitted that they act based on the exam requirements and adjust their methods to the exam tasks. In general, teachers consider washback as a tool for achieving positive teaching changes, enhancing motivation and autonomous learning. However, the negative washback effect, loss of motivation, and learning inclination (Brown, 2007; Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011) were also evidenced in some of their practices, which might be associated with exam-focused learning.

Although teachers acknowledge the importance of interesting activities, their lessons mainly involve specific exam tasks. It is possible that using more interesting tasks and relevant topics requires more time and contact with students, and teachers might have neither the time nor the opportunity to disregard exam tasks. As a result, it might be easier for them to apply methods focused on specific exam strategies and tasks to reach success.

The study demonstrated that exam preparation courses trigger a high degree of extrinsic motivation, but in line with previous literature (Ryan & Deci, 2000),

this extrinsic motivation is more likely to become intrinsic motivation if the necessary circumstances are provided. It was evident in the teachers' perceptions that relatedness plays a vital role in reaching and maintaining motivation. Teachers indicated the need to make students feel comfortable, relaxed, and respected to achieve relatedness. As Walker et al. (2016) found, relatedness combined with support for autonomy and adoption of new practices for teaching may result in extrinsically motivated learners turning to intrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Learners with a higher sense of relatedness with teachers are more engaged in learning, while support and inspiration from the teacher help build continuing motivation in the learners (Dörnyei, 2001).

6. Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study show that teachers' potential to promote intrinsic motivation mostly depends on the good rapport they form with learners. This aspect seems to make up for the possible negative washback effect of the language exam, loss of motivation or reduced learning inclination while facilitating learning autonomy. Obviously, this is only possible if the teacher does not only make decisions based exclusively on exam requirements but rather on what would be more suitable and enjoyable for the learners. If it happens, it will be in accordance with Dörnyei's (2001) view on teacher-specific motivational components that exhibit that teachers must be assertive and sensitive to students' needs with a positive attitude.

Correspondingly, teachers' roles include encouraging learner autonomy, evoking interest in the learners towards foreign language learning by motivating feedback and applying tasks in a way in order to trigger intrinsic motivation and support the internalisation of extrinsic motivation. In order to trigger and maintain intrinsic motivation, it is crucial to create appropriate circumstances for this to happen. The meaningful relationships teachers establish with students might facilitate the promotion of relatedness that would eventually lead learners to internalise motivation and maintain learning inclination fully.

Based on the study's outcomes, it may be proposed and predictable that high-stakes language exams have a definite facilitating force on learners' motivation. Along this line of thinking, the study also yields some pedagogical implications. Dörnyei (2001) suggested that a pleasant learning environment and enthusiastic teacher support should not only be goals for enhanced exam preparation but also to improve the quality of language learning. This requires teachers' awareness of techniques above exam-focused strategies to promote meaningful relationships and achieve maintained motivation during exam preparation courses.

7. Limitations

Further research on the area is much needed. For instance, meticulous investigation of certain mechanisms of the washback effect on teaching methodologies perceived by teachers and learners could be a valuable means in the hands of the teachers. Additionally, the investigation of other washback factors that may have an impact on learners' motivation, such as teachers' perceptions towards the test itself, teachers' motivation, classroom atmosphere and teaching content, all indicated in the study by Cheng (2004) However, this research has not fully covered, which would also add to a more significant comprehension of motivation during exam preparation. Moreover, as highlighted in the Findings section, the reasons for the difference found between the learning inclination of learners under 18 and adult learners in exam preparation must be investigated separately.

Regarding the gap in testing research on teachers' perceptions of learners' motivation during exam preparation, it is hoped that the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of increased language learning inclination in Hungary and also to exploiting an essential educational tool, the language exam itself. More importantly, further investigation of the question of language exam-related motivation ideas would support practical approaches to teaching for exams from a different point of view.

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