

The Impact Of "Global English" On Foreign Language Learner Motivation

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Abstract

This quantitative and qualitative study examines the relationship between language learner motivation and language-related learner attitudes. Motivation has been a prominent research topic in second-language acquisition for several decades, beginning with the work of Wallace Lambert and Robert Gardner,⁷ who were the first to determine that motivation plays a significant role in language learning success, beyond cognitive and environmental factors⁵ (p. 40). Their research paved the way for other researchers such as Zoltán Dörnyei, a prominent researcher in the field of motivation and second language acquisition. My research question is inspired by Dörnyei's work, particularly his research on how Hungarian students perceive various languages including English, where he found that they view English as "the 'must-have' language, diminishing their interest in and motivation for learning other foreign languages, including the traditional regional language, German."^{3, 5} The research uses questionnaires based closely on those used by Dörnyei and Taguchi⁴ and Dörnyei³ to investigate whether and how foreign/second language learner motivation is related to the attitudes of foreign/second language learners towards the languages they are learning, their native language, and other languages, including such factors as the languages' perceived prestige, the perception of their associated cultures and nations, students' attitudes towards learning, and the perceived omnipresence of English in the world. While both native and learner groups of both English and Spanish ranked their languages highly on the prestige scale, the rankings differed according to language: both native and second language speakers of English ranked English as significantly more prestigious than either native or second language speakers of Spanish ranked Spanish. However, no significant differences were found in the perception of cultures or in attitudes towards learning. There was also no significant difference between English and Spanish native and second language (henceforth L2) speakers in terms of their perception of the omnipresence of English in the world.

Keywords: Attitude, Motivation, Global English

1. Background

Gardner and Lambert's 1972 work was the first to determine that motivation is a determiner of foreign language success, beyond cognitive aspects (e.g. ability or aptitude; cf. Dörnyei, 2013). Gardner and Lambert divided the motivations for language learning into two main types of motivation: integrative, and instrumental. Integrative motivation is when the learner wants to become a member of the target language community, and learns the language to join the community and learn about the culture. Instrumental motivation is where learners are motivated to learn foreign languages for practical purposes such as to gain better employment opportunities.

These studies and many others have shown that attitudes towards languages and their cultures affect students' motivation to learn them. One such study by Dörnyei, which began in 1993, looked at Hungarian students' perceptions of various languages, their motivation to study them, and attitudes towards them. In particular, Dörnyei³ examined how Hungarian students' perceptions of various foreign languages change over time, especially following the end of

Soviet influence in the country. By the time the last phase of the study was conducted, in terms of students' perceptions Russian was ranked at the bottom and English at the top, indicating changing attitudes towards different languages. A similar conclusion was independently reached by Swedish researchers Henry and Apelgren,⁸ whose research led them to conclude that "global English is detrimental to the creation of a climate of multilingualism" (p. 608) and that while a great amount of importance is placed on learning English, this is not the case for other foreign languages. A main focus of this study will therefore concern the question of whether English affects the motivation of non-native speakers of English to learn languages other than English.

Also, since English has a special status in more than seventy countries, and is the language which is most commonly taught as a foreign language in more than 100 countries,² this study will seek to address the seemingly unique nature of motivation in English learning, as well as the effects of attitudes towards English in students' motivation in learning English and other languages. Finally, since "Many Anglo-American native speakers tend to be complacent and believe that English is sufficient for most purposes"¹ (p. 357), the present study will also seek to address the question of whether the motivation of native English speakers is affected by the status and expansive reach of their native tongue in the world.

The previous studies mentioned above highlight the impact of the rising influence of English on those whose first language is not English. To date, there has not been any research on how the influence of English worldwide might impact English native speakers with respect to their motivation to learn foreign languages. The purpose of the present study is therefore both to replicate previous findings from Dörnyei related to the influence of English on learners of English and of other languages, and to extend those studies to ask the same questions to native speakers of English in order to analyze the impact of English on their second language learning motivation.

1.1. Research Questions

This study will investigate whether and how language learner motivation is related to the attitudes of language learners towards the languages they are learning, their native language, and other languages, including such factors as:

- the languages' perceived prestige
- the perception of their associated cultures and nations
- students' attitudes towards learning languages
- the perceived omnipresence of English in the world.

2. Method

This research project involved administration of a questionnaire to participants in the US and in Europe. The questionnaire measured participants' attitudes and motivation for language learning along with various factors related to their language learning experience.

2.1. Participants

Participants included 64 individuals aged 18 to 57 who were either Texas State University students, or acquaintances of the researcher in Europe.

2.2. Questionnaire

Participants completed a single questionnaire online through Qualtrics. First, participants answered several personal information questions including their age, gender, nationality, country of residence, age of beginning language learning, proficiency in their languages, and whether they were currently enrolled in a language course or had been in the past. The next part of the questionnaire consisted of scalar questions addressing their language motivations and attitudes, including questions related to the prestige of their native and any foreign languages, attitudes towards the language(s) and culture(s), attitudes towards language learning in general, and other factors. The questionnaire was designed to take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire used in this research is based largely off of the questionnaire used by Dörnyei in his Hungarian study,³ and was modified for Qualtrics, with several questions added which specifically related to English learning.

3. Results

3.1. Participant Characteristics

Of the 67 respondents to this project's recruitment efforts, the majority were either native or second language speakers of English or Spanish. 22 were male, 42 female, with the majority between the ages of 20 and 30 and ranging in age from 18 to 57. Three respondents' responses were left out of the final analysis, due to their not providing personal background information such as gender or to their incorrectly filling out the section indicating their native language. This resulted in a total of 64 participants whose data were analyzed for this study.

Most respondents were residents of the U.S., five were residents of Austria and four were residents of France, while four respondents were from four other countries. 45 of the respondents ranked their native language as nativelike on a 5-point scale, while 17 ranked it at a varying range of responses which were lower on the scale (1 = poorly, 3 = passably, 5 = nativelike). On the scale for their non-native language (L2), participants rated their proficiency at an average of 3 on the scale, which corresponded to speaking the language "passably." Participants spoke a range of 10 different native languages (L1s), including 39 English speakers and 12 Spanish speakers. There were 13 L2s represented, with 20 L2 Spanish speakers and 12 L2 English speakers. As these two latter language groups were the most populous and as most other language groups were represented by relatively few respondents, all following analyses will concern the responses of native speakers and L2 learners of Spanish and English.

3.2. Analysis

All Likert scales used in the survey were converted from the original phrases to rank-ordered numbers from 1-5 or 1-6. The numbers were then analyzed using Wilcoxon tests for paired samples to see whether there was a statistical difference between the rankings by English and Spanish L1 and L2 speakers on the different questions.

3.2.1. *attitudes towards learning languages*

Native speakers of English and Spanish did not significantly differ in their attitudes towards learning languages. The Wilcoxon test between the ranking of native speakers of English and Spanish in their answers to "I am sure I will be able to learn a foreign language well," "I think I am the type that would feel anxious and ill at ease if I had to speak to someone in a foreign language," "I don't think that foreign languages are important to learn," "My parents do not consider foreign languages to be important school subjects," and "Learning a foreign language is a difficult task," showed that their rankings did not significantly differ (all p -values $> .3$), based on whether they were a native speaker of English or Spanish.

3.2.2. *perceptions of cultures*

Numerically, native speakers of English tended to perceive English-speaking cultures as very important, as did native speakers of Spanish to Spanish-speaking cultures. A Wilcoxon test on "How important do you think the cultures of this language are?" (where 1 = very much 2 = quite a lot 3 = so-so 4 = not really 5 = not at all 6 = don't know) did not show a statistically significant difference ($p > .3$) between L1 speakers of English ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.09$) and Spanish ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .64$).

There was, on the other hand, a difference between L2 learner responses for each language on this same question, as L2 learners of Spanish more consistently rated Spanish-language cultures as "very much" on the scale of importance ($M = 1.13$, $SD = .35$) than L2 learners of English rated English-speaking cultures ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .9$). This difference was in fact statistically significant ($Z = -2.98$, $p = .003$). This means that the ranking of importance of Spanish cultures by Spanish L2 learners was significantly greater than the ranking of importance of English cultures by English L2 learners.

3.2.3. *prestige*

On questions concerning the importance of the language, native speakers of both English and Spanish numerically differed somewhat in their mean ratings. However, Wilcoxon tests showed that any numerical differences in ratings

between English and Spanish L1 speakers were not statistically significant (all p -values $> .3$). Questions related to this factor (where possible answers included 1 = very much 2 = quite a lot 3 = so-so 4 = not really 5 = not at all) included “How important do you think this language is in the world these days?” (English L1 speakers: $M = 1.36$, $SD = .76$; Spanish L1 speakers: $M = 1.09$, $SD = .3$); “How rich and developed do you think the countries where this language is spoken are?” (English L1 speakers: $M = 1.58$, $SD = .69$; Spanish L1 speakers: $M = 2$, $SD = 1$); and “How prestigious do you believe countries where this language is spoken are in the world?” (English L1 speakers: $M = 1.83$, $SD = .74$; Spanish L1 speakers: $M = 2.18$, $SD = .98$). Overall, L1 speakers of both English and Spanish rated those languages as being similarly important in the world.

As for L2 perceptions of importance of the languages, L2 learners of English rated English as significantly more important than L2 learners of Spanish rated Spanish, though both groups rated the languages they were learning on the higher end of the scale. More specifically, Wilcoxon tests revealed significant differences between answers to the questions of “How important do you think this language is in the world these days?” (English L2 learners: $M = 1.08$, $SD = .29$; Spanish L2 learners: $M = 1.47$, $SD = .52$; $Z = 2.1$, $p = .04$); “How rich and developed do you think the countries where this language is spoken are?” (English L2 learners: $M = 1.42$, $SD = .67$; Spanish L2 learners: $M = 2.73$, $SD = .88$; $Z = 3.3$, $p = .0009$); and “How prestigious do you believe countries where this language is spoken are in the world?” (English L2 learners: $M = 1.33$, $SD = .65$; Spanish L2 learners: $M = 2.47$, $SD = .74$; $Z = 3.4$, $p = .0008$).

In short, English native speakers consistently rated English-speaking countries as more prestigious and developed than native speakers of Spanish rated Spanish-speaking countries. The trend continued for L2 learners, where learners of English rated English-speaking countries as far more developed and prestigious than learners of Spanish rated Spanish-speaking countries: in fact, L2 Spanish learners tended to rate Spanish-speaking countries towards the middle of the scale (3, or “so-so” in terms of prestige/development) while English learners mostly rated English-speaking countries as “very much” and “quite a lot” prestigious and developed.

3.2.4. omnipresence of English

Across all respondents among the questions pertaining to the omnipresence of English, previous expectations were not supported: most respondents did not rate English as being the “most important foreign language to learn” or as making learning other languages of no use. Contrary to the initial expectations of the study, there were no statistically significant differences between native and L2 speakers of English and Spanish in their perceptions of the omnipresence of English (all p -values $> .3$). Questions (where possible answers included 1 = not at all true 2 = not really true 3 = partly true partly untrue 4 = mostly true 5 = absolutely true) included “If someone speaks English, they don’t need to learn a foreign language” (English L1 speakers: $M = 1.42$, $SD = .87$; Spanish L1 speakers: $M = 1.33$, $SD = .5$; English L2 learners: $M = 1.45$, $SD = .82$; Spanish L2 learners: $M = 1.64$, $SD = .93$); “English is the most important foreign language to learn” (English L1 speakers: $M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.26$; Spanish L1 speakers: $M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.32$; English L2 learners: $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.57$; Spanish L2 learners: $M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.33$); and “If someone speaks English, learning other foreign languages is a waste of time” (English L1 speakers: $M = 1.3$, $SD = .73$; Spanish L1 speakers: $M = 1.33$, $SD = .7$; English L2 learners: $M = 1.18$, $SD = .4$; Spanish L2 learners: $M = 1.5$, $SD = .76$).

3.2.5. instrumental motivation

Participants overall were very motivated by instrumental factors, as shown by the results of the questions “Learning foreign languages is important to be able to gain better job opportunities” ($M = 4.26$, $SD = .94$) and “Learning foreign languages is important to help me to gain better economic opportunities” ($M = 4.3$, $SD = .94$; where possible answers included 1 = not at all true 2 = not really true 3 = partly true partly untrue 4 = mostly true 5 = absolutely true).

3.2.6. integrative motivation

L2 learners of Spanish were significantly more integratively motivated than were learners of English, though English learners also had a high degree of integrative motivation. Wilcoxon tests on “How important do you think learning this language is in order to learn more about the culture and art of its speakers?” showed L2 learners of Spanish ($M = 1.2$, $SD = .56$) rating this factor as significantly more important than did L2 learners of English ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .75$; $Z = 2.26$, $p = .02$; with 1 = very much 2 = quite a lot 3 = so-so 4 = not really 5 = not at all).

4. Conclusions

4.1. Findings

While the overall findings of the research were different than expected, some original expectations were supported. For the perceptions of prestige, both the English language and English speaking countries were seen as more prestigious among English L2 learners than were the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking countries. English L1 speakers also saw English-speaking countries as more prestigious than Spanish L1 speakers perceived Spanish-speaking countries. Learners of Spanish and of English did not differ in their perceptions of their associated cultures and nations. Finally, the different learner groups did not differ in their attitudes towards language learning.

As for the perception of the omnipresence of English in the world, there were differences in perceptions of prestige, as English speakers more uniformly ranked their languages as prestigious, but beyond the prestige factors there was no significant difference between the perceptions of the omnipresence of English in the world between English and Spanish L1 and L2 speakers. As this finding is different from the original expectations of the study, it will be further discussed below.

4.2. Potential Limitations

The survey was taken strictly on a voluntary basis. This may have led to the results coming from participants who were already interested in language learning, and thus predisposed to having a higher level of proficiency in additional languages and positive attitudes towards language learning in general. If the same survey were given to a group of participants drawn not predominately from language learners at a university but from the general population, a different set of results would possibly have been observed. While larger numbers of participants are always desirable in survey research in that researchers can have more confidence in results which come from relatively larger *n*-sizes, it is still the case that most respondents in the present research were recruited from among the undergraduate population of a large public US university. Any future follow-up work for this study will nonetheless endeavor to find ways of recruiting more participants.

The status of Texas State University as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) may also mean that the results collected in this study are specific to Texas State, or to other HSIs, rather than the U.S. population as a whole. This may particularly relate to the high status afforded to Spanish, and to the questions concerning the omnipresence of English.

4.3. Future Research

Future research should address whether the present findings were influenced by the fact that Texas State is an HSI, by surveying at different, non-HSI institutions. Future research should also include questions about additional factors which are known to influence second language learning and which were not addressed in this study, such as socioeconomic status. Another aspect to be looked at in the future is how the terms “prestigious” and “omnipresent” were treated differently by respondents in this study. Participants did seem to feel that English was prestigious, but did not rate it as uniformly “omnipresent,” as initially expected. Overall, prestige did not seem to equate to the idea of omnipresence among the respondents, and more work in the future would be needed to understand how these terms work with one another. Another factor to address is the lack of a clear language policy in the U.S., and how this affects language learning. No one second language is officially/federally promoted in the U.S., as opposed to many countries where English is the first foreign language that is learned, with other languages being introduced later. Language teaching in the U.S. has also traditionally served academic goals rather than practical or economic goals.⁹ How this latter tradition might affect integrative and/or instrumental forms of motivation is something to be looked at in more detail in the future.

4.4. Relevance

While this research addresses the impact of English in our present world, its findings could have implications for fields such as language education and language policy. Language teachers could for instance find this research important when thinking about how students’ attitudes impact their motivation to learn in class. The research might also provide insight into how students’ attitudes impact their choice of language to study to begin with. With the prevalence of

Spanish and English in the US today, the findings on attitudes towards Spanish could prove to be interesting for language teachers and for anyone working with Spanish-speaking populations. This research may also have relevance for people working with matters of language policy, especially in terms of the intersection of Spanish and English in the US, as well as in matters of policies toward English worldwide.

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