

# The motivation of adolescent pupils to learn English as a foreign language

## A case study

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**Abstract** An investigation was carried out on pupils who attend classes in rural secondary middle schools in the north of the province of Pordenone in order to determine their motivation in language learning. It was a mixed-method research, since quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews have been adopted in order to collect the data. The research is interpretative in nature because the data have been interpreted only through the use of descriptive statistical methods. Four aspects have emerged from the study. First, lack of interest in the English course seems to be the main problem regarding the pupils' language learning motivation. Second, pupils are not exposed to English sufficiently in their everyday lives. Third, the position of Second Year pupils, who represent a sort of grey area, would appear to be the most critical of the Middle School pupils. Lastly, the position of the female pupils who, in general, tend to be more demanding than the male pupils.

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## 1 Theories on language learning motivation

According to Brown, motivation is «an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action» (as quoted in Zhu, Zhou 2012, p. 34). Balboni claims that motivation is «the energy that activates the brain and the mind» (Balboni 2006, p. 52). Keller provides a simple definition of what motivation is in current psychology: «Motivation refers to the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect» (Keller 1983, in Crookes, Schmidt 1991, p. 481). Similarly, Carroll (as quoted in Spolsky 2000), a behavioural psychologist and statistician, gives a definition of motivation which is strictly behavioural in

terms: motivation represents the amount of time that a learner is willing to dedicate to learning tasks.

Psychologists (Snow, Corno, Jackson, as quoted in Dörnyei 2001) claim that the human mind is divided into *cognition*, *affect* and *conation*: the first is related to what one rationally *thinks* (cognitive functions), the second refers to what one *feels* (affective functions) and the latter represents what one *wants* or *desires* (conative functions), and this third aspect is the closest in meaning to motivation.

The transformation of emotions into conscious feelings and motivational drives is explained by Schumann in his Stimulus Appraisal Theory (as quoted in Daloiso 2009). According to this perspective, the human brain constantly receives stimuli from the outside. Then, more or less consciously, the person relates each stimulus to his/her expectations, needs and wishes (Daloiso 2009). The evaluation of the information from the outside is regulated by five criteria: 1. novelty, 2. pleasantness, 3. goal/need significance, 4. coping ability, 5. self and social compatibility.

From the information that has just been summarized, we understand that motivation is related to one of the most basic aspects of the human mind (Dörnyei 2001) and teachers agree that the motivation of their pupils is one of the most crucial factors influencing their success or failure in the process of learning any school subject (McDonough 1986). We should consider Schumann's claim that motivation is crucial in language learning because it encourages learners to seek contact and interaction with target language speakers: from the negotiation of appropriate input, immediate acquisition of the target language results (as quoted in Crookes, Schmidt 1991).

Dörnyei (2003) claims that learning a second language is different in many ways from learning other school subjects. An L2 is, on the one hand, similar to other 'learnable' subjects because it has elements – grammar and lexicon, for example – that can be taught explicitly; on the other hand, it is socially and culturally bound, which makes the language a social product. Therefore learning a language is a social event that demands the inclusion of many elements of the L2 culture (Gardner as quoted in Dörnyei 2003; Williams as quoted in Dörnyei 2003). The central importance of the social dimension explains the fact that the first studies on L2 motivation were initially produced by social psychologists.

In order to provide theoretical background to the research described in this paper, five major theories on language learning motivation have been selected and summarized in the following pages. The research produced in this field is very extensive and rich (for a complete review, see Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011) so only those theories which underpin the research study being presented have been selected and summarized.

## 1.1 Gardner and Lambert and the Socio-educational Model

Research on L2 motivation was initiated in bilingual Canada by Gardner and Lambert in the 1950s. The two psychologists made the distinction between two types of motivation: *integrative* and *instrumental* (Gardner, Lambert 1972). In order to ‘measure’ the strength of language learners’ motivation, Gardner developed a testing instrument, the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery, AMTB (Gardner et al. as quoted in Crookes, Schmidt 1991), which has encouraged numerous empirical studies. The results of these studies were synthesized into a model that Gardner named the Socio-educational model (Gardner as quoted in Crookes, Schmidt 1991).

Gardner’s model has inspired a great amount of research but the results have been inconsistent (Au as quoted in Crookes, Schmidt 1991, and in Noels et al. 2000). In particular, according to Dörnyei, the major criticism concerns the integrative aspect. It appears in Gardner’s theory in three different forms – *integrative orientation*, *integrativeness* and *integrative motive* – but still its notion «has remained an enigma» (Dörnyei 2003, p. 5).

In the past years, researchers have been attempting to integrate the two aspects of motivation, *integrative* and *instrumental*, in order to avoid the rigid dichotomy between the two (Deckers as quoted in Ricci Garotti 2009) and to underline the causality between extrinsic stimuli and internal reactions (Ricci Garotti, 2009).

## 1.2 Self-determination theory

One of the most well-known theories which deals with the different orientations in motivation is Self-determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (as quoted in Noels 2001, and in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011). According to SDT, there are three categories of orientations:<sup>1</sup> *intrinsic* orientation, which is based on a genuine interest in the activity that is undertaken because of the natural satisfaction coming from pursuing it; *extrinsic* orientation, which is based on instrumental ends which are external to the activity itself; *amotivation*, which occurs when the subject perceives no relation between his/her actions and the results; this consequently gives rise to a lack of any kind of motivation. In Deci and Ryan’s theory, extrinsic orientation does not imply a lack of intrinsic regulation (self-determination) in the activities carried out. On the contrary, extrinsic orientation is characterized by different ‘shades’ which are placed on

1 Ryan’s discussion about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation suggests that it is plausible to think of these two constructs as *orientations*. The author claims that the two types of motivation reflect the motivational ‘orientation’ but not automatically the amount of motivation (Ryan as quoted in Noels 2001).

a continuum representing various degrees of external control or internal regulation, depending on how internalized these extrinsic ends are (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011). Vallerand distinguishes four subtypes of extrinsic orientation (Fig. 1): *external regulation*, which refers to those activities that are fully determined by sources external to the subject, such as rewards or punishments; *introjected regulation*, which comes from external rules that the subject has incorporated into the self and accepts them; *identified regulation*, which occurs when the subject invests effort in a task because he/she has chosen to do it for personally relevant reasons; *integrated regulation*, which involves behaviours that are fully assimilated into the subject’s values, identity and needs. It is the most internalized type of motivation (as quoted in Noels et al. 2000; in Noels 2001; and in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011).

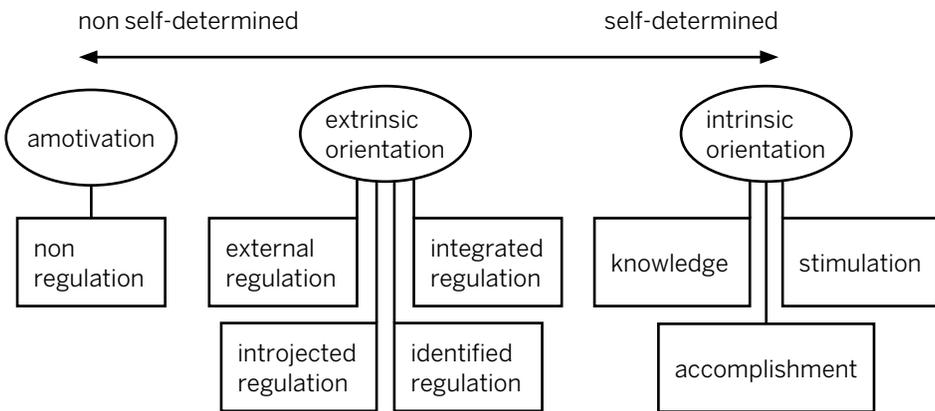


Figure 1. Orientation subtypes along the self determination continuum (adapted from Ryan, Deci as quoted in Noels 2001, p. 49).

### 1.3 Attribution theory and Self-efficacy theory

Attribution theory is based on the work of Weiner and it is concerned with the ways in which subjects make sense of their own successes and failures (Weiner as quoted in Williams, Burden 1999). The main tenet of his theory is that individuals try to understand the causes of their past successes and failures and that different types of causal attributions influence behaviour differently, which means that they will produce different consequences on future achievement (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011). Weiner identified four major causes to which subjects attribute their outcomes in those situations aiming at some sort of achievement: *ability*, *effort*, *task difficulty* and *luck*. However, numerous studies (see Williams, Burden 1999) have

demonstrated that there are more than four perceived causes of success/failure and, among the four causes identified by Wiener, *ability* and *effort* were found to be predominant in western cultures (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011). These two causal attributions produce very different results. If a failure is explained through a ‘maladaptive’ or negative attribution like low-ability – a factor which the individual cannot control – future achievement behaviour is thwarted because the person feels he/she has no means to improve it; on the other hand, if a failure is explained by means of a positive or ‘adaptive’ attribution such as effort – which is a factor that the individual can control – future successful behaviour is highly encouraged because the person feels he/she is in position to take control of the learning process with the possibility of improving achievement (Erler, Macaro 2011).

Attributions can be linked to the theory of self-efficacy, developed by Bandura (as quoted in Erler, Macaro 2011). Bandura claims that «efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency» (as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011, p. 16). The concept of self-efficacy refers to the learner’s judgement of his/her competence or ability to fulfil a specific task and, as a consequence, his/her perceived sense of efficacy will not only guide the selection of activities attempted, but also regulate the effort and persistence devoted in proportion to the results he/she is expecting from the enterprise (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011; Erler, Macaro 2011).

#### 1.4 The L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei (2005) and Csizér and Dörnyei (2005a, 2005b) introduced the new construct of the L2 Motivational Self System as a reconceptualization of Gardner’s integrative motive. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Gardnerian concept of integrativeness, especially in the case of English – an international language employed as a lingua franca in almost all kinds of communication (as quoted in Kormos, Csizér 2008; Phillipson 2009) – has no longer reason to exist in that the language is now separated from its native speakers and cultures. Warschauer notes that globalization has led to the formation of «a new society, in which English is shared among many groups of nonnative speakers rather than dominated by the British or Americans» (2000, p. 512). Therefore, English is mainly associated with a spreading international culture which comprises technology, business, world travel, consumerism, fashion, sport and music (Lamb 2004). In accordance with Yashima, rather than referring to integrativeness, it seems more correct to refer to a sort of ‘international posture’ – an inclination the individual has towards other languages and cultures and which includes an «interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners

and, one hopes, openness or a non-ethnocentric<sup>2</sup> attitude towards different cultures» (2002, p. 57).

Dörnyei's construct is in line with the findings in social psychology research which point out the existence of possible and ideal selves (Markus and Nurius as quoted in Dörnyei 2003). Possible selves are important in that they work as incentives of future action (Markus and Nurius as quoted in MacIntyre et al. 2009). One of the most important possible selves is the 'ideal self', which represents the characteristics that an individual would like to be endowed with.

The concept of the ideal self appears also in Titone's *egodynamic model* of language learning motivation. According to the Italian scholar, the motivation to learn a language is a product of three connected factors: 1. ego; 2. strategy; 3. tactic. If the tactic produces positive outcomes, this results in a strengthening of the ego plan, which continues to energize the process *ego-strategy-tactic* and to motivate the individual's endeavour. According to Titone, this type of motivation is extremely powerful because it involves the whole individual in the effort to transform the present self in the desired self, or 'planned' self (Titone as quoted in Balboni 2006).

Dörnyei's Motivational Self System is partially based on Higgins's Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins as quoted in Kormos, Csizér 2008; and in MacIntyre et al. 2009), according to which motivation comes from the individuals' desire to reduce the discrepancy between their *ideal* self and their *actual* self. Therefore, in line with Titone's model, future ideal selves have the power to be strong motivational influences on behaviour (MacIntyre et al. 2009).

The Motivational Self System consists of three elements: 1. *ideal L2 self*, which subsumes integrativeness in that it represents the individual's view of himself/herself as a capable L2 speaker; 2. *ought-to L2 self*, which contains those «attributes that one believes one ought to possess» (i.e. various duties, obligations or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes (Dörnyei 2005, p. 106); 3. *L2 learning experience*, which regards «situation specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience» (Dörnyei 2005, p. 106).

In 2008, Kormos and Csizér conducted a research in Hungary with the aim of investigating the motivation for learning English as a foreign language (Kormos, Csizér 2008). In their study, they submitted Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System - which had not yet been tested - to empirical testing but, as the results showed, it obtained only partial support because the dimension of the Ought-to L2 Self could not be ascertained. However, the existence of the Ideal L2 Self was verified and the results demonstrate

2 According to Gudykunst, ethnocentrism is «a bias toward the ingroup that causes us to evaluate different patterns of behaviour negatively, rather than try to understand them» (as quoted in Yashima 2002, p. 58).

that it is more closely related to Yashima's international posture than to attitudes towards native speakers.

## 2 The study

The present study inquires about the motivation of pupils in a foreign language learning situation.

### 2.1 Motivation in foreign language learning

Foreign language learning (FLL) means learning a target language in an institutional setting without regular interaction with the community of the language native speakers (Dörnyei 1990). Instead, second language acquisition (SLA) involves learning a target language «where the target language is mastered either through direct exposure to it or through formal instruction accompanied by frequent interaction with the target-language community in the host environment or in a multicultural setting» (Dörnyei 1990, p. 48). After having conducted a research project involving learners of English in Hungary, in 1990 Dörnyei claimed that the findings of SLA research cannot be directly applicable to FLL situations. The main reason for this is that foreign language learners do not have enough experience of the target language community to have positive or negative attitudes towards it (Dörnyei 1990). Littlewood affirms that this is typical of learning a global language - like English - where the reason for learning is not that of getting into contact with a culturally defined target language community, but to communicate with other people who have also studied it as a foreign language (Littlewood as quoted in Dörnyei 1990).

In their 1991 position paper, Crookes and Schmidt proposed a new approach for analysing foreign language learning motivation, which was based on the distinction between different conceptual levels (Crookes, Schmidt 1991). This approach, the Framework of Language Learning Motivation, was adopted by Dörnyei, who conceptualised motivation at three different levels (Dörnyei as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011):

- *Language Level*, which comprises the two subsystems - Integrative and Instrumental - related to the various aspects of the foreign language;
- *Learner Level*, which concerns the personal characteristics with which the individual copes with the learning process, such as need for achievement (typical of the FLL context, in contrast to SLA context) and self-confidence. Self-confidence is influenced by such factors as language-use anxiety, perceived competence in the foreign language, attributions about past failures and self-efficacy;

- *Learning Situation Level*, which is connected with motives which are typical of language learning in a classroom setting. They comprise: *course-specific motivational components* concerned with the course materials and well described by Keller’s four motivational conditions – interest, relevance, expectancy, satisfaction (Keller as quoted in Crokes, Schmidt 1991); *teacher-specific motivational components* related to the teacher’s personality, behaviour and teaching style; *group-specific motivational components* concerning the dynamics of the group (Table 1).

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Language level                           | Integrative motivational subsystem<br>Instrumental motivational subsystem   |
| Learner level                            | Need for achievement<br>Self-confidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language use anxiety</li> <li>• Perceived competence in the foreign language</li> <li>• Attributions about past failures</li> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> </ul> |
| Learner situation level                  |   |
| Course-specific motivational components  | Interest in the course<br>Relevance to personal needs<br>Expectancy of success<br>Satisfaction in the results   |
| Teacher-specific motivational components | Authority type (controlling VS autonomy supporting)<br>Direct socialisation of motivation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task presentation</li> <li>• Feedback</li> </ul>   |
| Group-specific motivational components   | Norm and reward system<br>Group cohesiveness<br>Classroom goal structure (cooperative, competitive, individualistic)  |

Table 1. Dörnyei’s three-level framework of language learning motivation (adapted from Dörnyei as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011, p. 52).

## 2.2 Research hypothesis

The general hypothesis of this study is that pupils of rural secondary middle schools in the north of Pordenone are *not* motivated to learn English as a foreign language. Due to the lack of literature in this field (most studies regard high school or university students and the majority of them has

been conducted in countries other than Italy), this research is rooted in the writer's personal contacts and experience.

### 2.3 Research questions

In order to investigate the research hypothesis in depth, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Are pupils sufficiently exposed to English? It is hypothesized that pupils are not exposed enough to the language.<sup>3</sup>
2. How do pupils perceive themselves as foreign language learners? Is their language learning orientation more intrinsic or extrinsic? It is hypothesized that the pupils' perception of themselves as language learners does not encourage motivation and that their orientation is more extrinsic than intrinsic.
3. How do pupils regard their learning situation (with reference to the course, the teacher, the group)? It is hypothesized that pupils regard their learning situation as not conducive to motivating their language learning.

### 2.4 Subjects of the study

The subjects of this study are 100 middle school pupils, aged between 11 and 14 years old, living in a rural area in the north of the province of Pordenone, in Friuli Venezia Giulia.

The sample is composed of 45 males and 55 females; 42 pupils in the First Year (11-12 years old), 35 pupils in the Second Year (12-13 years old) and 23 pupils in the Third Year (13-14 years old).

The schools where these pupils attend classes are four 'istituti comprensivi':<sup>4</sup> 'istituto A' (60 pupils), 'istituto B' (16 pupils), 'istituto C' (16 pupils) and 'istituto D' (8 pupils).

In these schools, children are required to study two foreign languages, the first being English. In 'istituto A' and 'istituto C', pupils can choose between Spanish and German as their second foreign language; in 'istituto B' they can choose between French, Spanish and German; in 'istituto D' the second foreign language is French. Every week in all the four schools,

3 Exposure to the target language is fundamental for improving language attainment; if learners perceive their improvement, their self-efficacy is encouraged (Bandura as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011) and this encourages motivation.

4 Reference is made to the schools by using letters of the alphabet in compliance with the privacy law.

three school hours are dedicated to English. The subjects of the study were contacted personally.

### 3 Method

In order to increase the accuracy of the data collected and to provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon studied, a mixed methodology was adopted. Quantitative and qualitative methods were integrated because methodological pluralism allows richer data to be collected; it lets errors in single approaches to be identified and corrected; it also allows corroboration and triangulation of data (Cohen et al. 2011), assuring greater confidence in the final results. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, triangulation allows a deeper explanation of a social phenomenon by studying it from more than one standpoint (Cohen et al. 2011).

In addition, mixed-methods research is premised on pragmatism. Pragmatism is practical, it is a «matter-of-fact approach to life» (Cohen et al. 2011, p. 23), utilized to solve practical problems in the practical everyday life. Mixed-methods research recognizes the fact that «the world is not exclusively quantitative or qualitative» (p. 22), but can be accurately searched with both methods. In Spolsky's words: «I was afraid that direct questionnaires somehow permitted subjects to disguise their 'real' attitudes and hoped that an indirect approach would get closer to the 'true' attitudes» (2000, p. 161). Sharing the same thought, two types of data were gathered: some hard, behavioural data on the one hand (through the questionnaire), and some soft data on the other (through the interviews and the focus group), in order to capture a clearer expression of the subjects' hidden or underlying attitudes.

#### 3.1 Data collection procedures

The questionnaire was administered over a period of two months (July-August 2012) and was filled in by the pupils under the supervision of the researcher. They answered the questionnaire with reference to the school year just ended.

The interviews and the focus group were conducted over a period of a month, two months afterwards (October 2012). The nine interviewees belong to the sample who had filled in the questionnaire two months previously. The pupils interviewed answered my questions with reference to the previous school year (the same year they referred to when filling in the questionnaire).

### 3.1.1 The questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) is composed of 17 questions (in Italian), plus a few initial questions regarding gender, school and year attended. It was anonymous.

The questionnaire was developed with reference to Dörnyei's three-level framework of language learning motivation (cfr. 2.1). This model was adopted because it was considered to be the most complete in all its parts, comprising all the elements involved in a foreign language learning situation. In this way, the questionnaire questions could provide answers to the second and third research questions. In particular, the questions regarding the *language level* and the *learner level* answer the second research question (2a. How do pupils perceive themselves as foreign language learners? 2b. Is their language learning orientation more intrinsic or extrinsic?), whilst the questions on the *learning situation level* provide answers to the third research question (How do pupils regard their learning situation, with reference to the course, the teacher, the group?).

The questionnaire is subdivided into four parts:

- the first part (questions 1, 2, 3) investigates a. the *exposure* the pupils have to English both at home (q. 1) and at school (q. 2) and b. favourite activities in the foreign language (q. 3), thus answering the first research question (Are pupils sufficiently exposed to English?);
- the second part (questions 4, 5) is related to the first level of Dörnyei's framework, the *language level*, and investigates the pupils' pleasure in studying English (q. 4) and their integrative and instrumental motivation (q. 5);
- the third part (questions 6, 7, 8, 9) is related to the second level of Dörnyei's framework, the *learner level*, and investigates the importance given to marks<sup>5</sup> (q. 6), the attributions given to past failures (q. 7), language use anxiety (q. 8), and perceived competence in the language (q. 9);
- the fourth part is related to Dörnyei's third level, the *learning situation level*, and comprises questions that inquire about the English course (questions 10, 11, 12), the English teacher (questions 13, 14, 15, 16) and the English class (question 17), thus answering the third research question.

The questions concerning the course ask about interest in the course (q. 10), relevance of the course for future needs (q. 11), satisfaction with the outcomes (q. 12).

The questions concerning the teacher inquire about the students' perceptions of their teacher's attitude and authority type (q. 13), the moments

<sup>5</sup> I considered here the importance given to marks as an indicator of need for achievement.

of the lesson during which the teacher uses English (q. 14), the teacher's speech, whether it is understandable or not (q. 15), and the teacher's willingness to repeat or clarify things previously explained (q. 16).

The question concerning the English class (q. 17) asks about the class during the English lessons: whether it is close-knit, disciplined, and whether the pupils work individually or in groups.

The 17 questions are of four types:

- questions 3 and 14 are open-ended questions;
- questions 1, 2, 5, 7 and 8 are multiple choice questions where the respondents can choose more than one answer;
- questions 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15 and 16 are multiple choice questions where the respondents can choose only one answer;
- questions 13 and 17 are Likert scales with four degrees of answer.

### 3.1.2 The interviews and the focus group

Both the interviews and the focus group were conducted in Italian. The pupils, who were interviewed either individually (4 pupils) or participated in the focus group (5 pupils), were randomly selected in order to form a balanced group of males/females from the first, second and third year of the middle school.

The initial purpose was to conduct a focus group with ten pupils (10% of the whole sample) but, unfortunately, this was not possible because a common date could not be found for all of them. Therefore, there was a change of plan and those who could not come to the focus group were interviewed individually. Moreover, one of the pupils who had to take part in the focus group could not be present in that occasion and, unluckily, a suitable date for an individual interview could not be arranged.

In addition, there was a certain dissatisfaction with the focus group. In the opinion of the researcher, it was not a 'real' focus group in that the participants did not interact with each other but merely expressed their ideas in response to the prompts in a sequence, one after the other. It would have been more interesting if there had been a discussion between the participants but unfortunately this did not happen. This may have been because they did not feel at ease with the topic of the conversation, although a lot of effort was taken to make them feel comfortable. They gave the impression they were afraid of being judged for what they were saying, even though they were assured that this was not the case.

Although not fully content with the focus group procedure, the information gathered was satisfactory. The questions posed, both in the interviews and in the focus group, were the following:

1. Quali attività in inglese svolgi a casa?
  2. Perché ti piace fare queste attività in inglese?
  3. Rispetto a ciò che fai a casa, cosa c'è di diverso nell'inglese che fai a scuola?
  4. Come cambieresti il modo di fare inglese a scuola?
  5. Hai amici o parenti stranieri con cui sei costretto a parlare in inglese? Se sì, come comunichi con loro?
  6. Ti piacerebbe sapere parlare inglese perfettamente? Perché?
  7. Quanto saresti disposto a sforzarti per raggiungere l'obiettivo della perfetta conoscenza dell'inglese? Ad esempio in ore di studio, in lezioni private, in viaggi, in stage all'estero, ecc.
- Question 1 aims to find out whether there is a correspondence between the answers given in the questionnaire or whether there are some other activities that pupils do at home but were not mentioned in the questionnaire.
  - Question 2 aims at understanding the reasons, intrinsic or extrinsic, for the pleasure found in doing activities in English.
  - Questions 3 and 4 aim to understand how pupils perceive the difference between how they do English at school and how they do it at home and whether they wish to make any changes to the English lessons at school.
  - Questions 5 and 6 inquire about the pupils' desire to be able to speak the foreign language well and especially about the reasons for wishing to do so (intrinsic-extrinsic motivation).
  - Question 7 aims to find out what type of effort pupils are willing to devote to the cause of learning the language well.

These questions contribute to the study by providing answers to the three research questions. In particular, question 1 answers the first research question concerning exposure; questions 2, 5, 6 and 7 answer the second research question concerning the *language level* and the *learner level*; questions 3 and 4 answer the third research question concerning the *learning situation level*.

### 3.2 Method of data analysis

The quantitative data collected via questionnaire were put in an Excel worksheet and then elaborated using mean values and percentages. Then, pie charts and bar charts were drawn in order to visualize the results in a comprehensive graph.

The qualitative oral data derived from the interviews and the focus group were interpreted through content analysis: the aim was to confirm (or not) the results obtained via the questionnaires.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Research question 1

The first research question asks whether the pupils are exposed sufficiently to English. The results from the questionnaires, interviews and focus group confirm the hypothesis that they are not sufficiently exposed to the language.

In the light of the data gathered through the questionnaire (Chart 1), it is possible to say that pupils are not exposed to English very much in that their main source of exposure to the language are English songs (89%). It is to be noted that pupils do not read: they prefer to attempt to watch TV or movies (20%) rather than read a book or magazine (7%). An interesting finding concerns the pupils who attempt to engage in conversations in English (15%): it represents a productive endeavour to seek contact with the language and shows a genuine interest in being able to speak it but, unfortunately, this regards a low number of pupils, mostly First Year male pupils.

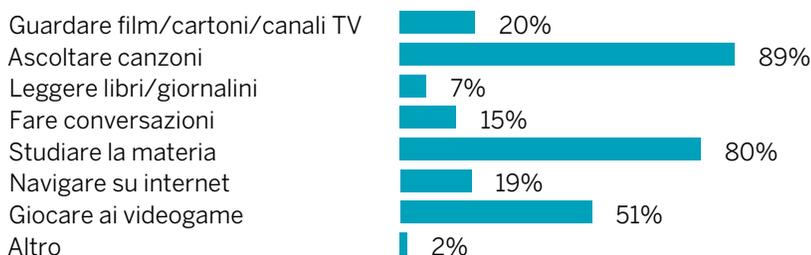


Chart 1. *Quali di queste attività in inglese fai a casa?* (questionnaire: whole sample).

As concerns the interviews and focus group, the answers obtained fully confirm the quantitative data: 8 pupils (out of 9) answered that they listen to English songs, that they like playing videogames (5 out of 9) and that sometimes they watch English films with subtitles in Italian.

### 4.2 Research question 2

The second research question investigates a. how pupils perceive themselves as foreign language learners, and b. whether their language learning orientation is more intrinsic or extrinsic. The hypothesis that the pupils' perception of themselves does not encourage motivation has *not* been confirmed by the data because nearly all the aspects analysed play a

positive role in the pupils' language learning motivation. The results are briefly summarized.



Chart 2. *Per te quanto è importante il voto nella verifica/interrogazione di inglese?* (questionnaire: whole sample).

It would appear pupils are spurred towards achievement because the importance they give to marks is very high (Chart 2). Positive answers, *molto* and *moltissimo*, reach 85%.



Chart 3. *Hai preso un brutto voto nella verifica/interrogazione di inglese. Qual è il motivo?* (questionnaire: whole sample).

With regard to attribution to failure (Chart 3), the highest value was given to the answer «Non ho studiato abbastanza» (72%), which represents a positive attribution in that it is directly controllable by the individual. Those who explain failure in terms of lack of effort – as can be seen in the table above – have higher possibilities to achieve success in the future because they can control the amount of effort spent on the activity (Introduction, § c).

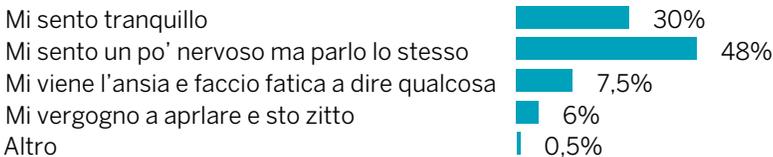


Chart 4. *Quando devi parlare inglese in classe come ti senti?* (questionnaire: whole sample).

Chart 4 regards language-use anxiety. It is evident that the great majority of respondents answered «Mi sento un po' nervoso ma parlo lo stesso»

(48%), which means that they feel a little anxious while speaking English in class. However, this feeling does not prevent them from doing so. It is interesting to observe that a good 30% claim that they feel at ease while speaking.

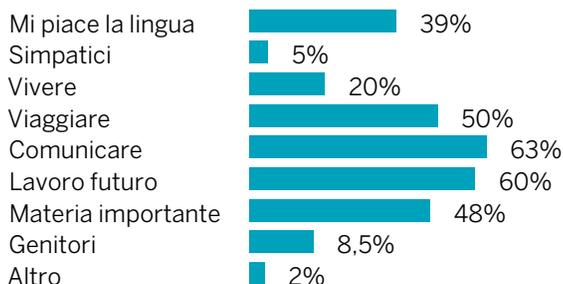


Chart 5. *Studio l'inglese perché*  
(questionnaire: whole sample).

Another positive aspect regards the pupils' language learning orientations (Chart 5). They show high levels of *integrated* and *identified regulation* (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011). As previously stated (Introduction, §b), the first occurs when the individual's behaviour is fully assimilated into his/her values, identity and needs and in our case it is represented by the answer «per comunicare con chi non parla italiano» (63%). The second involves efforts in tasks that the subject chooses to do for personally relevant reasons and in this case it is represented by the answers «per viaggiare» (50%) and «ne avrò bisogno nel futuro per il mio lavoro» (60%). These two types of orientation are the most internalized types of motivation, the closest to intrinsic motivation.

The interviews and focus group data confirm these results: the majority of the pupils (6 out of 9) answered that they would like to speak English perfectly because this would allow them to travel all over the world. In addition, four pupils said that English is also important for their future job. Two girls answered that if they were able to speak English they could communicate with English people through Facebook. A boy and a girl said that they could boast about being proficient in the language. These findings are in line with those of the questionnaires.

In addition to the aforementioned positive traits found about the learner level, three less positive aspects have been identified as well.

The first aspect concerns pleasure in studying the language: it is generally high but it decreases constantly over the three years of the Middle School. In the First Year the answers *molto* and *moltissimo* reach 64,3% overall, while *poco* and *per niente* arrive at 35,7%. In the Second

Year the positive answers are overall 60%, while the negative reach 40%. In the Third Year the positive answers reach 52,2% and the negative ones 47,8%. It is evident that while the positive answers decrease (from 64,3% to 60% to 52,2%), the negative ones increase (from 35,7% to 40% to 47,8%).

The second aspect concerns the pupils' perceived competence in the language. It increases from the First Year (*molto plus moltissimo* reach 54,8%) to the Second Year (*molto plus moltissimo* get 57,1%), but decreases dramatically in the Third Year (*molto plus moltissimo* reach only 30,4%) when 69,6% of pupils choose the answer *poco*. In addition, male pupils perceive a higher competence in the language (the answers *molto plus moltissimo* reach 53,3%) while female pupils feel less competent (*molto plus moltissimo* got 47,2% only).

The third aspect that should be pointed out concerns the position of the female pupils: they tend to be more negative than the male pupils in almost all of their answers. The only positive difference is that the female pupils are more integratively oriented (Chart 6).

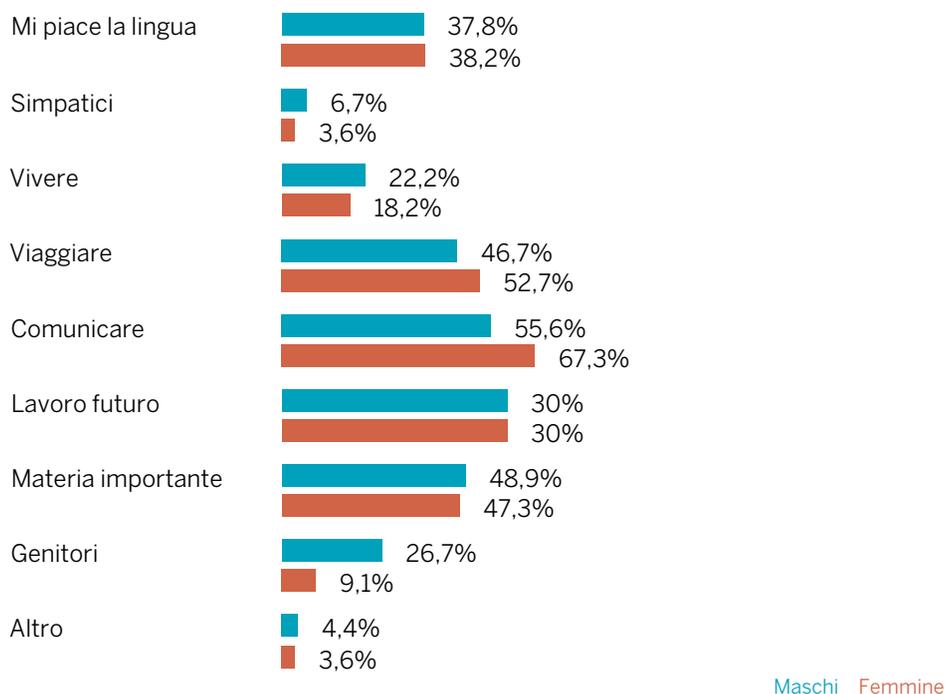


Chart 6. *Studio l'inglese perché*  
(questionnaire: male pupils, female pupils).

This is positive because the nature of their aim – desire to be able to speak with members of the language community or with people who do not speak Italian – is fitter to support the long-term effort needed to master the foreign language (Gardner, Lambert 1972).



Chart 7. *Quando devi parlare inglese in classe come ti senti?*  
(questionnaire: male pupils, female pupils).

As regards language use anxiety (Chart 7), the female pupils feel much more anxious than their male counterparts when speaking English in class.

### 4.3 Research question 3

The third research question investigates how the pupils regard their learning situation (course, teacher, group). The hypothesis that they perceive the learning situation to be not conducive to motivating their language learning has been confirmed by the data. In particular, there are several aspects concerning the course and the classroom that do not play a positive role in the pupils language learning motivation.

First, interest in the English course is low for all the three years. It is quite high in the First Year (*molto plus moltissimo* reach 59,5%), then it decreases dramatically in the Second Year (*molto plus moltissimo* get 43% only), and finally it increases again in the Third Year (*molto plus moltissimo* reach 60,8%).

The second aspect to mention regards the classroom: pupils perceive it as not being cohesive (Chart 8).

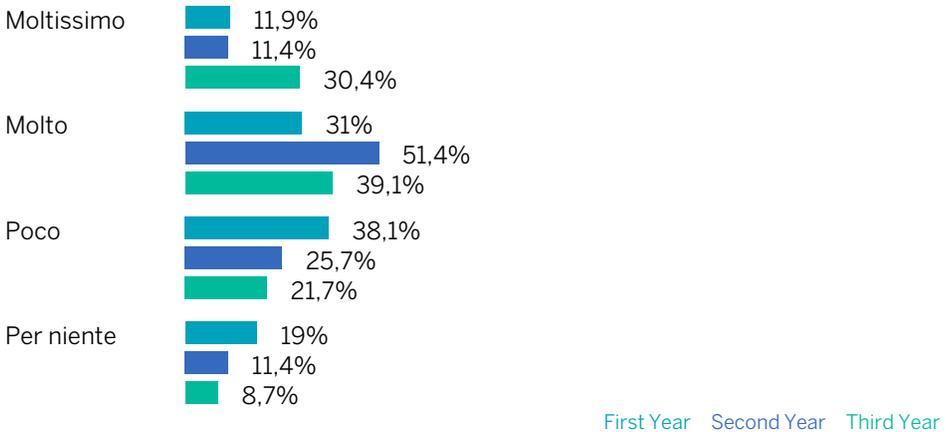


Chart 8. *Com'era la tua classe (durante le ore di inglese)? Unita* (questionnaire: 1st, 2nd and 3rd year).

The Second Year pupils are those who have the highest percentage of *molto* (51,4%) while Third Year pupils have the highest percentage of *moltissimo* (30,4%). On the contrary, First Year pupils have the highest negative answers (38,1% of *poco* and 19% of *per niente*). This finding is understandable: Second and Third Year pupils know their classmates better than First Year pupils because they have been together for a longer time. Therefore, it is natural that Second and Third Year pupils perceive their classroom as more close-knit than the First Year pupils. It is however a pity that group activities are not very popular in the First Year, when pupils really need to get to know each other and make friends (Chart 9).

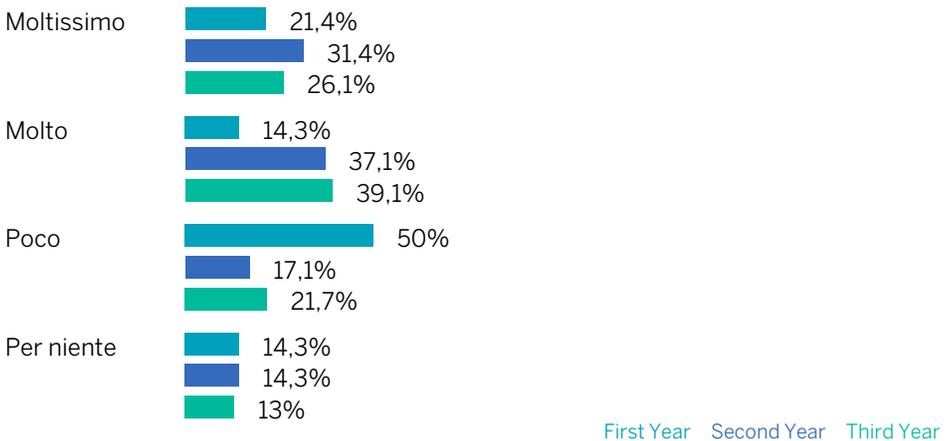


Chart 9. *Com'era la tua classe (durante le ore di inglese)? Si lavorava a gruppetti* (questionnaire: 1st, 2nd and 3rd year).

50% of First Year pupils answered that they do little groupwork. This depicts a negative situation because such activities promote class cohesiveness and encourage collaborative learning. This finding is confirmed by the interviews and the focus group, where 4 First Year pupils answered that they usually do individual work in class.

The third aspect to mention is the fact that Second Year pupils seem to be the most difficult ones. With reference to the English course in particular, they are those who feel less interested (*molto plus moltissimo* reach 43% only, in contrast to 59,5% of the First Year and 60,8% of the Third Year), who think less of their English lessons in terms of their importance for future needs (positive answers get only to 68,7%, in contrast to 90,5% of the First Year and 78,3% of the Third Year), who are less satisfied with the outcomes (*molto plus moltissimo* reach 62,7% only, in contrast to 78,6% of the First Year and 65,2% of the Third Year). On the other hand, as far as regards their English teacher, they are those who appreciate him/her the most (80% of positive answers, in contrast to 71,5% of the First Year and 65,2% of the Third Year) and consider him/her more tolerant and open-minded than First and Third Year pupils (65,8% of positive answers, in contrast to 42,8% of the First Year and 52,2% of the Third Year).

The final aspect to consider is the position of the female pupils. The female pupils give higher negative answers to almost all the questions. They are less interested in the course than males (49% of positive answers, in contrast to 60,3% of male pupils), they think that their English lessons will not be so useful in the future (*molto plus moltissimo* reach 72,9% only, in contrast to 88,7% of males), they are less satisfied with the course outcomes (60% of positive answers, in contrast to 81,9% of male pupils) and they do not like their teacher as much as the male counterparts do (70,9% of positive answers, in contrast to 75,5% of male pupils).

## 5 Discussion

Four critical aspects have emerged from this study.

First, the main problem regarding the pupils' language learning motivation concerns the learning situation. The major problem is the low level of interest in the course. This result appears both in the questionnaires and in the interviews and focus group, where several interviewees made suggestions as to how to make the English lessons more interesting: two boys and two girls (out of 9 interviewees) suggested listening to English songs and watching movies; another boy and another girl proposed doing more entertaining activities (without specifying what type of activities).

According to Keller's studies (Keller as quoted in Crookes, Schmidt 1991), interest is one of the four major components of motivation.<sup>6</sup> Ushioda claims that to promote intrinsic motivation, learning should be pushed by the learner's «personal needs, goals, and interests» (2008, p. 27). Therefore, it is evident that interest in an activity is a powerful force that makes individuals take pleasure in the activity itself and thus continue to do that activity. If there is no interest, either the task is dropped or, if it is compulsory as in this case, it is done listlessly and the individual who is doing the task does not benefit from it. As low interest affects motivation negatively, it is fundamental that the pupils' interest in the course be constantly nurtured with activities that meet their tastes and are close to their everyday life and experience. This does not mean that studying the grammar or the lexicon is not important. It means that grammar and lexicon could be presented and explained in different ways, such as through songs, the use of English magazines or comics, the showing of movies, communicating with English friends through Facebook... These are only a few of the types of activities that could be done with these pupils, who do not like reading the dialogues in their English textbook and doing grammar exercises all the time but need to be stimulated by being engaged in those same types of activities that they love doing in their free time.

The second aspect concerns the pupils' exposure to the language. In their everyday lives they are not exposed to English a lot, the main source of exposure being English songs. Yet, exposure is fundamental for learning a second/foreign language. Corder claims that «it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data» (as quoted in Ushioda 2008, p. 19). Several studies show that there is a relationship between the amount of exposure to the target language and achievement (for review, see Krashen 2009). Naiman et al. suggested that language learning is a mental process that starts with the *perception* of the target language (as quoted in Norton, Toohey 2001). Norton and Toohey claim that *access* to the target language can explain the success in mastering it (2001). In his studies on the social nature of language, Bakhtin affirms that individuals learn to speak by taking statements from «other people's mouths» (as quoted in Norton, Toohey 2001, p. 311) which could later be useful for their personal needs. Exposure to the target language is thus fundamental for improving language attainment and if learners are sufficiently exposed this will promote their feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011). The result will be an increased motivation to continue to study the language.

6 The four components of motivation according to Keller are: interest, relevance, expectancy, satisfaction (Keller as quoted in Crookes, Schmidt 1991, and in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011).

To be noted however, as emerged from the interviews, pupils listen to English songs either because they prefer them to Italian songs or because they like their rhythm but they do not understand them, they just listen. This kind of activity does not encourage language learning because, in accordance with Krashen's theory, new input must be comprehensible (and comprehended), otherwise the subject will learn nothing. The input will be just mere «noise» (Krashen 2009, p. 63).

In the light of the data gathered, it is noteworthy that pupils do not read. Krashen offers important evidence of studies from all over the world which prove that the activity of reading – free and voluntary – is one of the most effective ways for pupils to learn a language in context (for a review, see Krashen 2004).

To summarize what has just been said about comprehensible input, a sentence by Krashen will be offered: «Language acquisition comes from input, not output; from comprehension, not production» (Krashen 2004, p. 136).

The third aspect that has emerged from the study is the position of Second Year pupils. They represent a sort of grey area: they are adolescents who need to be constantly encouraged by the teacher and stimulated with activities that meet their tastes, make them enjoy the course and improve their attitude towards the English lessons. In this way, the conditions are created for them to benefit more from the course.

The fourth and final aspect concerns the female pupils. They are generally much more critical than males. It is therefore important that the teacher be aware of this difference and regularly monitor the female pupils' attitudes towards the language and the course through constant personal contact.

Notwithstanding the above negative aspects, it must be pointed out that the pupils' perception of themselves as foreign language learners is generally positive and this plays a positive role in their language learning motivation. They are spurred towards achievement – a positive fact, as a disposition towards achievement can affect learning significantly with a positive impact on motivation (Dörnyei 1990). According to Bandura's studies on self-efficacy (as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011), if the learner succeeds in a task, his/her self-efficacy is encouraged and this can play an important role on motivation too. The pupils in the study mainly attribute their possible school failure to lack of effort: low effort represents a positive or 'adaptive' attribution because it is directly controllable by the individual. As Erler and Macaro (2011) point out in their study, when a failure is explained by insufficient effort, future successful behaviour is encouraged because the individual feels that he/she can take control of

the learning process and thus improve achievement (cf. Introduction, § c). As regards language-use anxiety, we have seen that pupils generally feel quite at ease while speaking English in class. This could undoubtedly improve their performance in the foreign language. Studies by MacIntyre and Gardner (as quoted in Ohata 2005) have found that achievement in the language is negatively correlated with language anxiety. If language anxiety is low, achievement is promoted, self-efficacy grows and language learning motivation is encouraged.

Another positive aspect regards the pupils' language learning orientations. They show high levels of *integrated* and *identified regulation* (Introduction, § b). These two types of orientation are the most internalized types of motivation, the closest to intrinsic motivation. A considerable body of research (for review, see Ushioda 2008) shows that intrinsically oriented learners are much more involved in learning by comparison with the extrinsically oriented. Research says that intrinsic motivation has its roots in deep personal interests which lead the subject to learn the language and it is more likely to sustain the long-term effort needed to master it. On the contrary, externally regulated motivation, which is entirely determined by sources external to the individual, might only have short-term benefits (Deci and Flaste as quoted in Ushioda 2008).

The negative aspects concerning the pupils' perception of themselves as foreign language learners are their perceived competence in the language and their pleasure in studying it. The first declines in the Third Year and it is lower in females. Perceived competence relates to self-efficacy and according to Bandura «Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency. [...] Whatever other factors may operate as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to produce effects by one's actions» (as quoted in Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011, p. 16). In agreement with Bandura's findings, we can conclude by saying that a low perceived confidence affects motivation negatively. As regards the teacher's duty, it is important that he/she provide regular encouragement to pupils to promote their self-esteem and thus self-efficacy. In Raffini's words: «Self-esteem grows from the beliefs of others. When teachers believe in students, students believe in themselves» (as quoted in Dörnyei 2001, p. 91).

Their pleasure in studying the language is generally high at the beginning but it decreases constantly during the three years. Research demonstrates that *pleasantness* is a fundamental vehicle for transforming information from the outside into conscious feelings and motivational drives (Schumann as quoted in Daloiso 2009). *Pleasure* is an important component of Balboni's (2006) model of motivation, which also comprises *need* and *duty*. Balboni affirms that pleasure is the most powerful component of learning motivation in that *need* must be perceived by the learner and it works until he/she has satisfied it; *duty* derives from the relationship with the teacher; *pleasure* comes from emotions and thus it is the most instinc-

tive and powerful of the three aspects. The present study shows that the pupils' pleasure in studying English decreases constantly over the years and, in accordance with the scholars just cited, we could say that this circumstance affects motivation negatively. From this research, it is not possible to understand exactly whether this fact is due to personal, inner reasons or whether it is due to the learning situation level itself. However, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the pupils' interest in the English course is characterized by the same trend as that found with reference to pleasure in studying English: it decreases constantly during the years. In my view, there could be a relationship between pleasure in studying the language and interest in the course.

## 6 Implications

In this final section some possible implications of this study are briefly considered.

A few suggestions for further research are proposed.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that the selected sample – pupils in four rural schools in the province of Pordenone – is not so large as to be representative of the entire category of adolescent foreign language learners. Furthermore, although I made use of a questionnaire with closed answers that provide hard quantitative data, this research should be considered more qualitative than quantitative because the aim was to explore in depth the motivation of these pupils. This means that the results are not generalizable and that with all probability if this research were done elsewhere, maybe in city schools or in other countries, the results might be different.

Secondly, only English was taken into consideration as the foreign language. We could assume that there may be some differences if other foreign languages such as German or French were considered.

Thirdly, as regards the data collection procedures, this research is entirely based on the pupils' voice. However, to ensure higher scientific accuracy, some classroom observation procedures could be added to the study, in order to confirm (or not) the data gathered through the questionnaires, interviews and focus group. In addition to this, the teacher's voice could also be considered, in order to explore the phenomenon in more depth.

Finally, as we have seen in this study, adolescent pupils' pleasure in studying English decreases constantly during the years. Furthermore, their interest in the lessons is subject to the same trend and is generally low. As already mentioned, there could be a relationship between pleasure and interest and an interesting topic of research would be to investigate the relationship between these two variables.

As far as teaching practice is concerned, we have seen that two important findings of this study were the low interest in the course and the fact

that pupils do not read. In our opinion, pupils should be stimulated with activities that are close to their life experience and, above all, they need to be encouraged to read. «Reading for meaning, reading about things that matter to us, is the cause of literate language development» (Krashen 2004, p. 150). This sentence summarizes the two points – importance of reading and role of interest – which are fundamental to arise one’s desire to enhance one’s knowledge.

To conclude, in the light of the data gathered it could be said that the pupils’ motivation to learn English as a foreign language is not encouraged during the middle school, quite the contrary: we have seen that motivation is almost dejected from the First to the Third Year. This negative tendency is to be changed because low motivation has a detrimental effect on learning.

## 7 The questionnaire

**Questionario sulla propria esperienza con la lingua inglese** data: ..... luglio 2012

Sono:            MASCHIO            FEMMINA

Scuola:        MEDIA

Classe:        1   2   3   (indicare la classe frequentata quest'anno)

Vado a scuola a: .....

### 1. Quali di queste attività in inglese svolgi a casa?

(Puoi indicare più di una opzione)

- guardare film / cartoni animati / canali televisivi in inglese
  - ascoltare canzoni in inglese
  - leggere libri o giornalini in inglese
  - fare conversazione in inglese
  - studiare la materia (ad esempio, fare i compiti)
  - navigare su siti internet in inglese
  - giocare ai videogame (Wii, PlayStation, X-Box, ecc.) in inglese
  - altre attività (aggiungile tu nelle righe qui sotto):
- .....
- .....

### 2. Quali di queste attività in inglese svolgi a scuola?

(Puoi indicare più di una opzione)

- guardare film / cartoni animati / canali televisivi in inglese
- ascoltare canzoni in inglese

- leggere libri o giornalini in inglese
  - fare conversazione in inglese
  - fare esercizi scritti per imparare le regole della grammatica e le parole nuove
  - fare giochi in classe per imparare le regole della grammatica e le parole nuove
  - dettato di testi in inglese
  - altre attività (aggiungile tu nelle righe qui sotto):
- .....
- .....

### **3. Tra tutte le attività che fai in inglese, sia a casa che a scuola, quali sono le tue preferite?**

(Ne puoi indicare al massimo 3)

.....

.....

### **4. Ti piace fare inglese?**

(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

### **5. Studio l'inglese perché:<sup>7</sup>**

(Puoi indicare più di una opzione)

- Mi piace la lingua
- Quelli che parlano inglese mi stanno simpatici
- Vorrei andare a vivere nel Regno Unito / America / Australia
- Per viaggiare
- Per comunicare con chi non parla italiano
- Ne avrò bisogno nel futuro per il mio lavoro
- È una materia importante che si deve studiare
- Lo vogliono i miei genitori
- Altro: .....

7 English is a compulsory subject in secondary Middle School so pupils are required to study it, either they like it or not. However, the aim was to investigate into the pupils' personal orientations for studying the language. Furthermore, no respondent made the objection that «English is compulsory so I have to study it», they spontaneously answered to the questions, expressing their point of view.

**6. Per te quanto è importante il voto nella verifica/interrogazione di inglese?**

(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**7. Hai preso un brutto voto nella verifica di inglese. Qual è il motivo?**

(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Non ho studiato abbastanza
- La verifica era troppo difficile
- L'insegnante non aveva spiegato bene l'argomento
- Non sono portato per l'inglese
- Altro: .....

**8. Quando devi parlare inglese in classe come ti senti?**

(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Mi sento tranquillo
- Mi sento un po' nervoso ma parlo lo stesso
- Mi viene l'ansia e faccio fatica a dire qualcosa
- Mi vergogno a parlare e sto zitto
- Altro: .....

**9. Secondo te, per la tua età e classe, quanto sai l'inglese?**

(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**10. Le lezioni di inglese (a scuola) erano interessanti?**

(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**11. Pensi che ciò che hai imparato in classe durante le lezioni di inglese ti sarà utile in futuro?**(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**12. Sei soddisfatto di ciò che hai imparato in classe (di inglese)?**(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**13. Com'era la tua/il tuo insegnante di inglese?**

1=Per niente 2=Poco 3=Molto 4=Moltissimo

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Simpatica/o                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Autoritaria/o e ci teneva sotto controllo | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Democratica/o e ci lasciava autonomia     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Altro: .....                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Altro: .....                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

**14. Quando usava l'inglese l'insegnante? (indicare in quali momenti della lezione)**

.....

.....

.....

.....

**15. L'insegnante parlava inglese in modo comprensibile?**(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**16. L'insegnante di inglese era disponibile a ripetere/dare chiarimenti quando non capivate?**(Puoi indicare solo una opzione)

- Per niente
- Poco
- Molto
- Moltissimo

**17. Com'era la tua classe (durante le ore di inglese)?**

1=Per niente 2=Poco 3=Molto 4=Moltissimo

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Era unita: tutti erano amici                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Era disciplinata: rispettava le regole                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Si lavorava individualmente: ognuno era per conto suo | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Si lavorava a gruppetti: ci si aiutava a vicenda      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

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