
Investigating the impact of learning conditions on young learners' attitudes and motivation to learn English as a foreign language

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Abstract

This paper investigates young learners' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language (EFL) under different learning conditions. It reports on the findings of a quantitative study conducted between two comparable groups of Greek young learners (N=88), following English instruction, while attending Grade 6 in two primary schools with quite distinct approaches to teaching English. The data was collected with the help of a questionnaire, which explored the learners' attitudes towards the English language and learning English as well as their motivation to learn English. The results illustrate clearly that favourable learning conditions can spur learners' positive disposition towards the process of language learning at school.

Keywords: young learners' attitudes and motivation, learning conditions

1. Introduction

Learners' attitudes and motivation are believed to be the main predictors of success or failure in foreign language learning (Gardner 1985). With particular reference to young learners, it should be stressed that these learners are believed to be more motivated language learners and that their positive attitudes towards English and language learning as well as their motivation to learn English decline with age (Nikolov 1999; Masgoret, Bernaus & Gardner 2001). Among the defining factors that affect the formation of learners' attitudes and motivation to learn a foreign language, we could isolate the policy outlined by the educational context, the classroom culture as created within a particular language learning setting and the teaching methods employed; all these factors play an equivocal role in language learning outcomes (Dörnyei 1994).

What is more, studies have shown that the teacher, favourable learning conditions as well as an early start in language learning are among those factors that affect learners', especially young learners', attitudes towards English and increase their

motivation to learn it (Vilke 1993; Nikolov 1999; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). It must be made clear that by learning conditions, we make reference to the teacher, the teaching methods employed by the teacher in the classroom, the syllabus, the teaching materials, the audiovisual materials and aids, the use of technology and multimedia and the classroom environment.

The aim of this paper is to map young learners' attitudes and motivation to learn English and examine to what extent different language teaching settings can affect the attitudes towards English as well as the attitudes and motivation to learn English at school among learners who share the same socio-educational background in the Greek EFL context. Due to scarcity of studies on young learners in general, and on the impact of learning conditions on young learners' attitudes and motivation, in particular, the results of this study will be particularly important to researchers, teachers and policy makers and serve as a guideline to help improve the learning conditions and enhance learners' motivation, thus increasing language learning outcomes.

2. Theoretical background of the study

2.1 L2 attitudes and motivation

Attitudes and motivation alongside with language aptitude are considered to be the best predictors of success in language learning (Gardner 1985). An attitude is composed of three main components: cognition, affect and readiness of action and is generally defined as a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution or event (Ajzen 1988). Traditionally, attitudes towards specific languages, the native speakers of those languages and language learning are mainly examined in relation to gender (McIntyre et al. 2003; Carr & Pauwels 2006), age (Julkunen & Borzova 1997; Cenoz 2003; Tragant 2006), proficiency level (Lukmani 1972; Yamashiro & McLaughlin 2001), and linguistic and socio-educational backgrounds (Masgoret et al. 2001; Nikolov 2002) in second and foreign language contexts.

Research on motivation in second/foreign language learning was initiated by Gardner and Lambert (1972) in Canada. In the ESL context where their studies were conducted, the integrative motive was considered as the most influential predictor of success in second language (L2) acquisition. Gardner (1985: 82-83) defines it as a "motivation to learn a second language because of positive feelings toward the

community that speaks that language". The instrumental motive is another component that affects L2 acquisition and is defined as a desire to learn the second/foreign language for pragmatic needs.

Overall, motivation is characterised as "a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals)" (Williams & Burden 1999: 120).

As the focus of the present study is on the investigation of the impact of learning conditions on young learners' attitudes and motivation, it is considered particularly important to make reference to studies on L2 attitudes and motivation related principally to young learners.

2.2 A look at young learners' L2 attitudes and motivation

Many studies have concluded that young learners have more positive attitudes towards foreign languages (FLs) and foreign language learning (FLL) and that their attitudes become more negative with age (Burstall 1975; Nikolov 1999; Tragant 2006). In the case of early foreign language learning, studies on young learners' attitudes have shown that young learners adopt the attitudes of their significant others, such as parents, siblings, relatives, friends, teachers, etc. (Nikolov 2002; Szpotowicz, Mihaljević Djigunović & Enever 2009). As young learners grow older, the experiences in FLL lead to the formation of their own attitudes, which are created by the FL classroom processes and the important role of the teacher (Nikolov 1999).

In relation to young learners, the central role of the teacher, favourable teaching conditions as well as an early start in FLL are among those crucial factors that affect young learners' L2 attitudes and make them positive towards language learning as well as increase their motivation to learn the FL (Vilke 1993; Nikolov 1999; Cenoz 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009).

Young learners have been reported to be more motivated language learners (Nikolov 1999; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). Initially, their motivation is triggered by intrinsically motivating activities, tasks and materials and, most importantly, the teacher. No traces of integrative or instrumental motivation have been observed (Nikolov 1999); however, at later stages, around the age of 11, instrumental motivation and attainment of knowledge as an aim emerge. What is more, attachment to classroom processes and teacher-related issues decreases with age (Nikolov 1999).

Research has highlighted that various factors are responsible for shaping young learners' motivation. Variables, such as parental influence (Olshtain et al. 1990), positive attitudes towards the learning context and the teacher (Nikolov 1999; Julkunen 2001), the impact of learning conditions (Mihailjević Djigunović 2009) and, of course, the learners' biological age (Tragant 2006), play a crucial role in the formation of positive attitudes and result in a higher level of motivation.

With regard to the impact of learning conditions, it should be pointed out that this aspect is quite underresearched. The results of a study conducted by Mihailjević Djigunović (2009) in the Croatian educational context showed that improved learning conditions affected significantly young learners' attitudes and motivation. The present study will examine the same issue in the Greek educational context and will try to unravel the underlying differences between the learners attending an ordinary primary school and those attending a model experimental primary school, which follows an enhanced English language programme.

3. The study

3.1 English language instruction in the Greek context

English language instruction in state primary ordinary schools (OS) is conducted within the Cross-curricular Unified Framework of Programmes of Study and the Analytical Programmes of Study for Compulsory Education (i.e. the primary and lower secondary school (*Government Gazette* 2003a, 2003b)). Within this framework, a holistic approach to content learning is followed, whereby cross-disciplinary connections and relationships are promoted. The main purpose of English language teaching is to enable learners to use language in real life communication situations in different linguistic and cultural contexts as well as to help learners realize that a foreign language does not only satisfy communicative exchanges but also serves as a tool for acquiring and managing knowledge. English language instruction is based on the three fundamental content guiding principles of: *literacy*, which aims at attaining language forms, structures and functions, developing communication strategies/skills – appropriacy/communication and life-long learning skills; *multilingualism*, which enables learners to become familiar with other languages and diversity, to develop the ability to use communication strategies; and *multiculturalism*, which is seen as a tool for raising learners' awareness on issues, such as linguistic and cultural diversity, formation of multicultural and pluricentric consciousness.

With regard to the hours of instruction and language learning conditions, English is taught for 3 hours a week from Grade 3 onwards up to Grade 6, and the coursebooks are designed by Greek authors to suit the needs of the learners and, in the majority of cases, they serve as the sole teaching material in the classroom. What is more, the classrooms are composed of 20-25 learners and the teaching as well as the learning process could become difficult and unfavorable.

Model experimental primary schools, which follow a diversified and an enhanced learning programme, offer opportunities educational projects and research to be carried out; one of these schools is supervised by the School of English Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, following an enhanced learning programme in relation to English. In this experimental school (ES), English is taught for 5 hours a week in Grades 1 and 2 and for 8 hours a week from Grade 3 onwards. It is noteworthy that the class size limit is 15 learners and, what is more important, learners are carefully streamed into groups according to their proficiency level, which, of course, could make the language learning/teaching process more productive. Teaching materials are to a great extent designed by the English language teachers who are responsible for the group of learners who attend this particular school. Instruction is realized through many innovative methods, such as a differentiated language teaching programme, the adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (i.e. it promotes learning content through a second or foreign language, thus combining learning the subject and the language, as is the case in Grade 6 for the school subject of Geography), abundant use of modern technology (i.e. computers, projectors, interactive blackboards, etc.), authentic use of language, and pleasant and creative activities. The subject of English is taught through English and the whole learning programme aims at the development of the receptive as well as the productive skills. All the aforementioned practices result in favorable and pleasant language learning conditions.

The above brief description of the teaching context in which English is promoted within the school curriculum makes it apparent that differences in learners' attitudes and motivation to learn English could be discerned due to the exposure to particular teaching conditions.

3.2 Participants and the research site

The total number of participants in this study was 88, attending Grade 6 at primary level in two different learning conditions; 45 learners attended the OS and 43 learners attended the ES. In the OS there were two classes instructed by two different teachers, while in the ES there were three classes instructed by three different teachers; in the latter case, the learners were streamed according to their proficiency level (i.e. beginners, intermediate and advanced).

Both schools were situated in the western part of Thessaloniki, a district usually characterized as being inhabited predominantly by low income Greek and immigrant families. In order to gain insightful and worthy results for such a study, it was particularly important to ensure that the participants shared a similar socio-economic background. Therefore, the OS had been carefully chosen to be in the nearest proximity to the ES.

3.3 Instruments, administration and data collection

The questionnaire, which was employed to measure young learners' attitudes and motivation, was devised in Greek and made use of a 5-point Likert scale (1: *strongly agree* and 5: *strongly disagree*). The first subsection of the questionnaire examined the learners' attitudes towards English (11 items) (rendering a reliability coefficient of Chronbach's Alpha for OS: $\alpha=.447$; ES: $\alpha=.686$); the second subscale explored their attitudes towards learning English (15 items) (OS: $\alpha=.647$; ES: $\alpha=.589$); the third subscale examined their attitudes towards the native speakers of English (8 items) (OS: $\alpha=.790$; ES: $\alpha=.864$); and the final subscale looked into their motivation to learn English (15 items) (OS: $\alpha=.802$; ES: $\alpha=.821$). In addition, a concise section asked the participants to provide some personal information.

The Oxford quick placement test was used to measure the learners' proficiency level and to ensure that the results were as objective as possible. The participants were asked to complete Part 1 of the test (items 40 out of 60); nevertheless, those who completed Part 1 in time and wanted to complete Part 2 as well, were encouraged to do so.

The questionnaire and the placement test were administered to the learners of Grade 6 during one academic hour and the participants were asked to fill in and complete both in due time. It should be noted that this study took place in the spring term towards the end of the school year.

3.4 Methods of statistical analysis

The data was processed with the help of SPSS® 21 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics were run to calculate means, standard deviation, and percentages. The Chronbach's Alpha, which is a reliability coefficient, was calculated in order to examine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items of a particular category (Hinton et al. 2005). T-tests for independent samples were run in order to detect any differences in the means of the participants' attitude and motivation items according to the school type that was attended. Chi-square tests, using cross-tabulation, were carried out in order to establish the association between type of school and the attendance of classes at private FL centres, place of EFL onset as well as learners' proficiency level. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

4. Results

4.1 Participants' profile

The mean age of the participants (N=88) was 12 years as the study was conducted among learners of Grade 6 of the primary school (see Table 1) toward the end of the school year. Statistical analysis was performed to establish statistically significant differences between the learners of the two cohorts in relation to certain items of their profile.

		Type of school					
		Ordinary		Experimental		Total	
Gender		N	%	N	%	N	%
	Male	19	42.2	21	48.8	40	45.5
	Female	26	57.8	22	51.2	48	54.5
Total	45	100.0	43	100.0	88	100.0	

Table 1. The distribution of participants in terms of school type and gender

With regard to the learners' proficiency level, the results yielded no statistically significant differences between the two cohorts (see Table 2) (N=88, $\chi^2(3)=.184$, $p > .05$), as the majority were at A2 level (i.e. following the classifications outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning (Council of Europe 2001)).

		Type of school					
		Ordinary		Experimental		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
QPT results	A1	15	33.3	14	32.6	29	33.0
	A2	25	55.6	23	53.5	48	54.5
	B1	4	8.9	5	11.6	9	10.2
	B2	1	2.2	1	2.3	2	2.3
	Total	45	100.0	43	100.0	88	100.0

Table 2. Learners' proficiency level in terms of school type

Moreover, statistically significant differences were observed in learners' current attendance of English at private FL centres ($N=88$, $\chi^2(1)=11.227$, $p<.001$). As depicted in Table 3, the vast majority of the OS learners attended private FL centres, while in the case of the ES, a much lower number of learners sought further tuition in English outside the school setting.

		Type of school					
		Ordinary		Experimental		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you currently attend English at a foreign language centre?	Yes	38	84.4	22	51.2	60	68.2
	No	7	15.6	21	48.8	28	31.8
	Total	45	100.0	43	100.0	88	100

Table 3. Current attendance of English in private FL centres

The two cohorts differed in terms of the place of EFL onset (see Figure 3) ($N=88$, $\chi^2(2)=15.211$, $p<.001$), as the majority of the OS learners had started learning English in private FL centres, while the majority of the ES learners reported having started learning English at school.

		Type of school					
		Ordinary		Experimental		Total	
Place of EFL onset	School	N	%	N	%	N	%
	Private FL centre	15	33.3	32	74.4	47	53.4
	Total	30	66.7	11	25.6	41	46.6
		45	100.0	43	100.0	88	100

Table 4. The place of EFL onset in terms of type of school

No differences were observed in terms of the participants' self-perceived language proficiency ($N=88$, $\chi^2(3)=1.411$, $p>.05$) and self-perceived language learning efficacy ($N=88$, $\chi^2(3)=3.125^a$, $p>.05$) where learners from both cohorts reported that in comparison to their classmates they had high levels of English language proficiency.

4.2 Attitudes towards English

The subscale on attitudes towards English comprised eleven items, which investigated the gains of knowing English, the importance of English in the use of technology, and the importance of English as a language of international communication. Both cohorts displayed similar positive attitudes towards English. Nevertheless, the OS learners seemed to attach greater importance to the role of English for computer use (OS: $M=1.51$; ES: $M=1.81$) and gaming (OS: $M=1.89$; ES: $M=2.19$) as well as to the parental influence and stressed the importance of knowing English for better career prospects (OS: $M=1.49$; ES: $M=1.60$).

4.3 Attitudes towards learning English at school

Significant differences between the two cohorts emerge when looking at the importance of encouragement on the part of the teacher, enjoyment or boredom while learning English, general satisfaction with the coursebooks and the teacher, etc. It becomes obvious that the ES learners' attitudes become much more positive when it comes to learning English at school and the role of the teacher and the teaching materials (see Table 5).

Attitudes towards learning English at school		Type of school	T-test			
			M	SD	Test statistic	p
1	I really try hard to learn English better	ES	1.47	.59	-.586	ns
		OS	1.56	.84		
2	I am sure that I will learn English well	ES	1.95	.81	-.266	ns
		OS	2.00	.82		
3	My parents encourage me to learn English	ES	1.67	1.04	.966	ns
		OS	1.49	.72		
4	I enjoy my English language classes	ES	1.81	.94	-2.569	.011
		OS	2.38	1.24		
5	I try to use English as much as possible out of class	ES	2.21	.94	-.431	ns
		OS	2.31	1.25		
6	My parents help me to prepare for my English lessons at home	ES	2.47	1.16	.167	ns
		OS	1.42	1.25		
7	My teacher encourages me to learn English	ES	1.53	.70	-3.033	.003
		OS	2.27	1.43		
8	I try to dedicate more time to other subjects rather than English	ES	3.42	1.29	.487	ns
		OS	3.24	2.03		
9	Learning English is boring	ES	4.05	1.09	2.290	.024
		OS	3.40	1.51		
10	English must be taught from Grade 1 of the Primary School	ES	2.40	1.38	-3.901	.001
		OS	3.60	1.51		
11	English is one of the most important school subjects	ES	2.35	.99	-.415	ns
		OS	2.44	1.15		
12	I would have learnt English, even if it were not in the school curriculum	ES	1.93	.82	.597	ns
		OS	1.82	1.07		
13	I am satisfied with the English coursebook and other teaching materials at school	ES	1.67	.77	-4.682	.001
		OS	1.87	1.48		
14	I am generally satisfied with the English language teacher and his/her methods	ES	1.35	.57	-4.824	.001
		OS	2.58	1.57		
15	My friends like to learn English	ES	2.67	1.01	-1.101	ns
		OS	2.96	1.34		

Table 5. Learners' attitudes towards learning English at school in terms of school type

What is more, as it becomes apparent in Table 5, the learners' attitudes attending the ES were generally more positive across all the items except for: 'My parents

encourage me to learn English' and *'My parents help me to prepare for my English lessons at home*', which is quite an interesting finding and will be discussed in 5.4.

4.4 Attitudes towards the native speakers of English

Overall, the learners' attitudes towards the native speakers (NSs) and the countries where English is a mother tongue were quite positive; nevertheless, the learners attending the ES had more positive attitudes towards the NSs of English and the NS countries across all the items, which examined the participants' attitudes towards the Americans and the United States of America (4 items) and the British and the United Kingdom (4 items). Statistically significant differences were marked across two items: *'The UK is a destination for many young Greeks for work and studies*' (OS: M=2.11; ES: M=1.67 (N=88, $t(83)=-2.317$, $p=.023$)), and *'English people are polite*' (OS: M=2.44; ES: M=2.0 (N=88, $t(78)=-1.939$, $p=.056$)), which reflects the ES learners' greater attachment to the UK and the British people.

4.5 Motivation to learn English

With respect to the participants' motivation to learn English, it should be pointed out that the mean scores for those attending the ES were much lower across all the items (though statistically not significant), which means that they were more motivated to learn English for a plethora of reasons (i.e. travel, communication, cultural interest, etc.).

Statistically significant differences were found only in the case of one item: *'I want to study abroad*' (OS: M=2.26; ES: M=1.9 (N=88, $t(86)=2.808$, $p=.006$)), which shows that the ES learners are much more motivated to learn English to be able to study abroad and will be further developed in the following section.

5. Discussion

As unravelled in this study, in terms of attitudes towards English and motivation to learn English, the learners within both groups showed quite similar trends, while in the case of attitudes towards learning English at school, the learners displayed quite distinct attitudes that reflect the importance that the learning conditions bear on the perceived preferences.

Despite the expectation that the greater exposure to English along with highly favourable conditions would have affected the learners' language proficiency level, it

seems that tuition in private FL centres compensates for the lack of an enhanced language learning programme at school. Due to this, the OS learners manage to be at the same proficiency level by the end of Grade 6. The same could be said about self-perceived language competence and language learning effectiveness, where both OS and ES learners are equally self-confident about their proficiency and efficacy due to having a feeling of satisfaction of doing well in comparison to their classmates.

With respect to the place of EFL onset, it should be pointed out that in the case of the OS, the vast majority of learners had started learning English in a private FL centre, while the ES learners were introduced to English at school. This finding comes once more to justify the fact that both cohorts were at the same proficiency level as the OS learners had an early EFL onset in private FL centres, which was naturally reflected in their proficiency level.

In terms of the participants' attitudes towards English, both cohorts held similar attitudes; on the whole, the ES learners had more positive attitudes across all the items except for two items which referred to the use of English for computer use and the internet. It could be assumed that the ES learners, having guidance and a greater access to the technologies and the internet in their school, perceive the use of English for computers and the internet as quite natural. However, the OS learners acknowledge the importance of English for computer use and gaming in particular and report that their parents stress the importance of learning English. With regard to English used for computer and internet applications, it is believed that research should shed light to the underlying needs, beliefs and fears of young learners in relation to employing English for computer and internet use. This is particularly important in this modern digitalized and high-tech era (Kvavik 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger 2005).

The most salient results in this study are yielded within the participants' attitudes towards learning English at school. It is striking how the homogeneous attitudes towards English suddenly become drastically different when it comes to their attitudes towards learning English at school. The ES learners' overall satisfaction with the programme followed reflects their pleasure in learning English, the role of the teacher and the satisfaction with his/her teaching methods and styles, the teaching materials and coursebooks. It becomes obvious that highly favourable conditions can have a positive impact on the learners' attitudes towards learning English at school, make the language learning experience quite enjoyable and interesting, increase their confidence in their teacher and appreciate his/her role. Therefore, the ES learners'

attitudes are shaped by classroom practices and the teacher, which is in conformity with the findings of other similar studies (Vilke 1993; Nikolov 1999).

What is more, it becomes apparent that exposure to enriched input and the incorporation of an enhanced learning programme results in greater autonomy and self-confidence, while learners who follow mainstream classes expect and need parental assistance and encouragement. In the latter case, parents feel inclined to seek further language tuition for their children by enrolling their children in private FL centres. Furthermore, learning English at the ES comes naturally and there is no need for further parental encouragement.

A look at the participants' attitudes towards the target language group reveals that the ES learners' attitudes seem to be more pro-British; this may be explained by the fact that the wide range of materials used during the lessons are more UK-produced or oriented, many of their teachers have pursued postgraduate studies in the UK, and many other reasons which are yet unexplored. On the other hand, the courseware implemented in the OS does not solely portray the UK/USA model, but rather conforming to the guidelines of the curriculum promotes multiculturalism and multilingualism.

The participants' motivation to learn English seems unaffected by the differing learning environments as both groups seem to be learning English for similar reasons, which reflect the inner drive to learn English as displayed in similar studies (Nikolov 1999; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). However, the desire to study abroad as expressed by the learners following the enhanced learning programme can be justified by the assumption that while being abundantly exposed to English, becoming familiar with the vast possibilities that the knowledge of English entails and, in general, having a more sophisticated outlook, the ES learners are more keen on studying abroad so as to ensure more and better future career opportunities as well as to widen their mental horizons.

Notwithstanding the fact that the OS learners' attitudes are more negative and their motivation to learn English is much lower, these learners have realised the crucial role that English plays today in the world and are motivated to learn English for international communication. Similar trends were observed in the case of the two cohorts of young learners in the study conducted by Mihaljević Djigunović (2009) in Croatia. In her study, those who studied English under less favourable conditions had a less positive outlook on learning English, lower self-confidence and did not enjoy

learning English; nevertheless, even these learners believed that it was very important to learn English as they perceived English as a language of international communication.

Overall, the findings of our study suggest that the young learners of both cohorts are, in general lines, highly motivated and have positive attitudes towards English and towards learning English. Such results correspond to findings in related literature, where young learners are considered to be more motivated and to have more positive attitudes than older learners (Nikolov 1999; Masgoret et al. 2001; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009). Such findings are also supported by the findings of similar studies conducted with young learners in the Greek context (Vrettou 2011). In terms of motivational orientation, it seems that instrumental motivation was one of the most influential incentives for learning English accompanied by the desire to learn English for travel and communication (Nikolov 1999; Mihaljević Djigunović 2009).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

In synopsis, it can be stated that favourable learning conditions affect the attitudes towards learning English at school, i.e. attitudes towards the teacher, the courseware, the syllabus, etc., while in other cases, the attitudes towards English and its native speakers as well as motivation to learn English remain unaffected.

The enhanced English teaching programme did not affect the learners' motivation, thus showing that learners of this age in the Greek EFL context who share the same socio-economic background are equally motivated to learn English for various reasons irrespective of language learning conditions. This can be attributed to their age, great exposure to English at school and outside school, in private FL tuition, and, after all, due to their perception of the important role of English in the world and in their lives.

Highly favourable language learning conditions enhance the learners' disposition towards learning English at school, their attachment to and respect for the teacher and the satisfaction with the teaching materials, thus creating a positive and favourable atmosphere for language acquisition, which will hopefully lead to more successful learning outcomes.

The results of the present case study lead to the following recommendations:

1. Teacher-generated materials, which meet learners' needs, would prove useful for successful language learning;
2. A positive and productive classroom atmosphere will somehow involve every participant in the teaching/learning process – therefore, the use of differentiated instruction (as employed in the ES) is recommended;
3. As the number of learners in the language classroom influences participation and motivation, the group size should be viewed with caution;
4. Access to resources and modern technologies will enhance language learning.

It is believed that if these recommendations are accounted for, the learners' attitudes and motivation to learn English particularly at school will increase considerably and will subsequently result in successful learning outcomes.

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