

“Great expectations”: The motivational profile of Hungarian English majors

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate what characterizes the language learning motivation of Hungarian English majors in terms of Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of motivation. We used a mixed-method design, in which qualitative interviews conducted with twenty students were supplemented with questionnaire data gained from 100 participants in order to have a better understanding of the apparent discrepancy between students' and societies' expectations towards teaching English at tertiary level and the present educational system in Hungary. The ambivalent nature of English major's motivational profile was found to reflect this situation. The interview data revealed that the respondents had very favourable motivational characteristics, but they did not invest sufficient energy into maintaining and improving their language competence, which we explained with reference to a low level of learner autonomy primarily caused by teacher-centered instruction.

Introduction

It is almost a common-place in the field of language pedagogy that motivation is the driving force of language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). It is all too natural that once a teacher enters a classroom full of students not yet known to her, one of her first questions is why students have enrolled in the course and what their goals with language learning are; in other words, she inquires into the language learning motives of the students. As Dörnyei's (2001) book on motivational strategies highlights, being informed about the motivational profile of language learners is highly relevant in almost every aspect of language teaching from curriculum design to the actual implementation of language learning tasks. No wonder that studies on the language learning motivation of various types of learners in different settings are abundant (see for example, Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001;

Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). While we have large amounts of data on the motivational characteristics of primary and secondary school students (colleague, co-author, colleague, 2006; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003), we know considerably less about university students in this respect (co-author & co-author, 2006; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Ushioda, 2001) and almost nothing about our own students, that is English majors that we as researchers in the field of applied linguistics and language pedagogy have classes with on a daily basis. This group of language learners might not be large compared to the size of the primary school population for example, but in many countries in Europe such as in Hungary, English majors constitute one of the largest groups of students in the humanities. Graduates with a BA or an MA in English are expected to have a high level of language competence in order to fill a variety of jobs ranging from language teachers to interpreters, educational and business managers. Therefore it is important for university lecturers to be familiar with these learners' motivational characteristics so that their language learning process could be effectively tailored to their needs.

One of the greatest expectations of society towards universities is to enable students to transfer their skills to a wide variety of settings and situations and to be capable of life-long learning (Light, 2000). The traditional way of teaching where teachers provide students with loads of information to memorize and remember cannot meet these demands. Therefore student-centered approaches, which see the role of university instructors to be a facilitator, whose responsibility is to help students to develop and change their own conceptions of the subject they study (Kember, 1997) seem to be one of the possible answers to these challenges. In order to fulfill the role of facilitator, teachers need to know their students not only in terms of their intellectual capacities, personality characteristics but also their motivation for learning the subject.

The Bologna agreement, which introduced the two-level BA and MA system in Hungarian higher education, was implemented in Hungary in September 2006. Although the introduction of this new system was preceded by a long preparatory phase, no significant research was done into the needs and motivational factors of English majors in Hungary. Therefore the new curricula

merely contains subjects that university instructors conceive to be important in the education of students who will hold a degree in English. This is problematic for several reasons. The range of subjects the students study reflects the assumption that students majoring in English will become either teachers of English or researchers in linguistics, literature or pedagogy. From an earlier study conducted by Author, colleague & colleague (2002), however, it becomes evident that students mostly use the English major as a springboard, and they frequently go on study economics, law, catering, tourism and trade after graduation, or they start working as translators, interpreters, journalists or educational managers. The most frequently used teaching methods are teacher-centered, which provide students with little opportunity to become independent learners and acquire transferable skills. As members of the department responsible for improving students' English language competence, we experienced the tension between students' and societies' demands and the current teaching situation, therefore as a first step we set out to investigate what characterizes our learners in terms of language learning motivation. The exploration of motivation helps us understand English majors' goals and attitudes, the characteristics of their language learning process and their views about their learning experiences. Our framework for the study of motivation was Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of motivation, which regards motivation as a dynamic construct changing over time. In this research we used a mixed-method design and involved students as researchers and co-authors. Although our study provides an insight into the particular context of English majors in Hungary, we believe that the results might be relevant for other countries where teacher-centered methods prevail in the teaching of university students of modern foreign languages.

Review of literature

In the 1990s researchers' attention was directed to a previously neglected aspect of motivation: its dynamic nature and temporal dimension. Rather than considering motivation a stable emotional and mental state, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) argued that motivation processes should be examined as they happen in real time. They recognized that in the case of L2 learning, which may take several years,

there was a need to develop a construct that accounts for the changes of motivation and includes a temporal dimension. As Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) maintain, through investigating the time dimension of L2 motivation one can gain an insight into how motivation is generated and how it fluctuates and further develops during the learning process. Drawing on Heckhausen and Kuhl's Action Control Theory (e.g., Heckhausen, 1991; Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985), Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) divided the motivational process into several discrete temporal phases: the preactional, actional and postactional stages and specified what motivational influences and action sequences characterize each phase. In the preactional phase, which is also called choice motivation, first motivation is triggered, which is then followed by the selection of the goals and activities the individual wants to perform. This stage is assumed to consist of three sub-phases: goal setting, intention formation and the initiation of intention enactment. At the actional stage, which is also referred to as executive motivation in the model, the existing level of motivation needs to be upheld. This phase is characterized by three important sub-processes: subtask generation, appraisal process and the application of different action control mechanisms. The third phase, so-called post-actional phase begins after either the language learning goal has been achieved or when the action has been completed. This stage is called motivational retrospection which expresses that the main process here involves the individuals' assessment of the results such as the evaluating the accomplished action outcome and drawing possible conclusions for future actions.

To our knowledge, the language learning motivation of language majors has only been investigated in Ushioda's (2001) qualitative study. Ushioda interviewed 20 Irish university learners of French and analyzed the aspects of motivational change from a process-oriented paradigm. Her results reveal that the motivational thinking of her participants was influenced by causal and teleological factors. The former derives from L2-related experiences in the past, while latter involves short-term and long-term goals and future perspectives. Ushioda also found that effective motivational thinking entails filtering experience, meaning that students are more likely to focus on different positive elements or on positive incentives while they de-emphasise negative ones. The

emerging attributional patterns of her study support the importance of positive learning history and language-related enjoyment. “The process of affirming a sense of motivational autonomy becomes the process of self-motivation” in which learners reflect on their reasons for learning, remind themselves of their goals, set targets, rediscover enjoyment and renew personal involvement in the learning process” (p.121).

In the Hungarian context, co-author and author (in preparation) investigated the language learning motivation of 230 Hungarian university and college students. They found that the participants were willing to put considerable effort into language learning and were highly motivated to become competent speakers of English. Parental encouragement turned out to be an important motivating factor even in young adulthood. Instrumental motives, integrativeness and international posture also emerged as key variables that play a crucial role in determining students’ attitudes towards the learning process. Participants studying economics and law in tertiary education displayed the best motivational characteristics among students of various other disciplines.

As regards English majors in Hungary, author, colleague & colleague (2002) explored the language wants of English majors at six universities in Hungary. 279 English major undergraduate students (in the last two years of their studies) and 80 students who graduated in the previous five years had to fill in the same needs-analysis questionnaire. Five main domains of language use were investigated: private, public, academic and professional domains and teaching English to foreign language learners. The results indicated that English majors’ current language learning needs are related to study skills. On the other hand, graduates used production skills in English such as conversation, letter- and email writing as well as translation. The study called attention to the discrepancy between English majors’ present and future needs.

Since in the previous study about Hungarian English majors, we only gained a limited amount of information about students’ goals, and we did not inquire into the attitudes, learning processes and experiences of English majors, we regarded it important to investigate our students’

motivation as well. Moreover so, because as the graduates in our previous study report, one of the greatest expectations towards them regardless of what kind of job they take is high level of English competence (author, colleague & colleague, 2002). In succeeding to attain the necessary level of language skills, one of the most crucial factors is motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). In our study we addressed the question what characterizes the choice, executive and retrospective motivation of English majors in Hungary. Although in our interview we covered every aspect of Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of motivation, in the context of language pedagogy in higher education, we decided to concentrate in particular on students' goals, attitudes, language learning experiences, language learning strategies, effort invested into learning and successes and failures.

Method

In this study we used a mixed-method design, in which the quantitative phase of the investigation was primarily used as a means for gaining additional and generalizable information about the language learning motivation of English majors. In the first, qualitative stage of the research we conducted interviews with 20 English majors in the last years of their study at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. In the second phase, 100 first and second year students majoring in English were asked to fill in a motivation questionnaire. This study was conducted in the setting where the authors either work as instructors or have studied as students, which allows us to present an insider's view. Due to the fact that both students and teachers were involved as researchers, helps to "show both sides of the coin" and increases the credibility of our research.

Participants

The participants of the in-depth interviews were fourth- and fifth- grade English majors at the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest. ELTE is

one of the most prestigious and oldest universities of Hungary. The interviews were conducted in January 2006 by the third author as part of her MA thesis. The choice of fourth- and fifth- year students was motivated by the assumption that these students spent enough time at university to be able to evaluate their language learning experiences. On the other hand, as they were to graduate soon, they were likely to have specific goals concerning their future. The sampling was purposive and aimed to ensure maximum variation in terms of other majors the students had and the location where students finished their high-school studies. In order to reach saturation, that is, to gain sufficient data, a sample size of 20 (14 fourth- grade and 6 fifth-grade) students was decided on. The students were all between the ages of 22 and 25, each studying for their first degrees, and all of them were of Hungarian nationality. The students' permanent addresses varied from Budapest (N = 4) to big cities (N = 9) and small towns in the provinces (N =7). The twenty participants included fifteen female and five male students. The preliminary interview questions revealed that most of the participants (N = 16) majored in another subject besides English.

The participants of the quantitative phase were 61 first and 39 second year English majors also studying at ELTE. The choice of this population was motivated by the fact that these students consider themselves 'learners of English' in the strict sense of the word as they are required to take language classes at university in these years, and they also have to pass a proficiency exam. 77 female and 23 male students responded to the questionnaire. The students were between the ages of 18 and 37. The native language of the majority of the participants was Hungarian, and although two students reported that their mother tongue was not Hungarian (Dutch and Mongolian), they could speak Hungarian at a near native level of competence, which was a selection criteria, as the questionnaire was in Hungarian. The sample comprised 41 informants who completed their secondary school studies in Budapest and 59 participants who took their final exam elsewhere. 66 students had only one major: English, and 34 students also had a second major.

Instruments

The interviews were conducted by the third author, who at that time was also a student herself. The equal status of the interviewees and interviewers made it possible that students revealed their feelings openly and discussed their views in depth. Each informant was interviewed in their L1 (Hungarian). The interviews lasted for 30-45 minutes, were transcribed and sent back to the participants for corrections and comments. A semi-structured interview schedule was used with pre-established questions, but students were also encouraged to elaborate on particular topics and introduce relevant issues. The interview sessions began with a brief explanation of the general context and the purpose of the research. Then a few preliminary questions were asked referring to personal data such as age, gender and other majors. The questions were compiled on the basis of the process model of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). The interview guide consisted of three sections. In the first part, the questions focused on issues such as reasons for choosing English as a foreign language, language learning strategies, attitudes towards the language and its native speakers, expectancy of success, and goal properties, that is, issues in connection with *choice motivation*. The next part involved questions referring to the quality of the learning experience, teachers' motivational influences, appraisal, group dynamics, successes and failures as well as various self-regulatory strategies (*executive motivation*). The last set of questions dealt with the evaluation of the period spent with L2 learning, attributional factors and future plans (*retrospective motivation*).

The questionnaire used for the quantitative phase of the study is a version of the *Language Disposition Questionnaire* (see colleague, co-author, and colleague, 2006) adapted for university students. The instrument includes 75 items that can be divided into two subsections. The first part involves 8 open-ended and 2 multiple-choice background questions in connection with the participants' *personal variables* (gender, age, native language, year of study, other major, secondary school and highest academic qualifications of parents) and *language choice* (languages being learnt, language exams and time spent abroad). The second section aims to collect information about the language learning motivation, motivational profile and self-motivating techniques of students; it

consists of two open-ended questions and 63 five-point Likert-scale items. In the present paper not all the dimensions of this questionnaire are discussed.

1. *Integrative motivation*: how much students like and identify with the English language and the culture of the English-speaking people (based on Gardner, 1985) (3 items, $\alpha = .53$) Example: How much would you like to become similar to the people who speak English?

2. *Instrumental motivation*: to what extent participants consider English an important language in connection to obtaining utilitarian benefits like good job, travelling abroad, being educated (based on Gardner, 1985) (4 items, $\alpha = .66$) Example: How much do you think knowing English would help your future career?

3. *Motivated language learning behavior*: the amount of effort students are willing to invest into learning (based on colleague, co-author and colleague, 2006) (4 items, $\alpha = .68$) Example: I am willing to work hard at learning English.

4 *Language learning at university*: to what extent students think that their level of English will improve during their studies at the university (2 items, $\alpha = .72$) Example: I would like to improve my language skills at the university.

5 *Attain a near native level*: to what extent students express their wish to obtain a near native level of English during their studies at the university (3 items, $\alpha = .65$) Example: I would like to become a person who can speak and write in English at a near native level.

Open-ended questions:

1. How do students want to achieve a good command of English outside the university context?
2. What personal techniques do they use to achieve good English language knowledge?

Before collecting the data, the instrument was compiled in English on the basis of the *Language Disposition Questionnaire* (2006). The questionnaire was piloted using the think-aloud

method, which involved asking two students to fill in the instrument while thinking aloud. Data collection was started by asking for the co-operation of five teachers at the university. Students were asked to fill in the questionnaires either at the beginning or at the end of a class, which took approximately fifteen minutes on average.

Analyses

The interview data were analyzed in several steps following the principles of the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). First the data were analyzed by the first and third researcher for emerging themes. Once the themes found relevant were agreed on, definitions of the categories of analysis were worded. The authors then coded the transcripts separately then checked consistency. In case of disagreement, categories were refined and common standards were established. The categories that emerged in the coding process and that are discussed in this article are shown in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 around here

The data obtained with the help of the questionnaire were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 13.0 for Windows for analysis. First, the database was assessed by descriptive statistics so as to calculate mean and standard deviation values of the scales as well as information on the reliability of the scales were gained. Reliability of the questionnaire was examined with Cronbach alpha, and principal component analysis was used to identify possible latent dimensions.

Results and discussion

In this section we present and discuss our results based on the categories of the qualitative data analyses, which are divided into three major themes following Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of motivation: choice, executive and retrospective motivation.

Choice motivation

In the interviews one of the most important language learning goals during the university years mentioned by English majors was attaining a near-native level of proficiency in English. 75% of the participants noted that their main “was to speak English at the highest possible level” (R7)¹. The same latent concept also emerged as an independent factor in the quantitative phase of the study. The mean value of the scale named *Attain near native level of English* is 4.41 (on a five-point scale; Std. dev.=.60) indicated that it is highly important for English majors to reach the highest possible level of proficiency; in addition, most of them feel that this is within their reach, as the item measuring how confident they are about being able to achieve a near native command of English received a mean value of 4.05 on a five-point scale (Std. dev. = .88). 12 interviewees mentioned that for them oral skills are the most important. As one of the students noted, “I want to speak naturally and with good pronunciation” (R9). Only three of the participants find writing skills relevant in the future. These findings are in line with the results of author et al.’s (2002) survey, where former English majors reported that they use English mainly in oral communication in the jobs they fill after graduation.

The interviews also confirmed the findings of Author et al.’s questionnaire study as they revealed that a considerable proportion of English majors even in their fifth year of study have no idea what kind of job they would like to take after graduation. Among the interview participants, four students could not envisage what they would do in the future, and two students listed several alternative jobs such as teacher, translator and interpreter. 40% of the respondents would like to work as teachers, 15% as journalists and psychologist, historian and translator was also named as a selected future occupation by one student respectively. The students who already have future plans all mentioned that a high level of competence in English is going to be important in their jobs. It

¹ The quotes were translated from Hungarian by the first author. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of the interview respondents.

was similar in all the participants' learning history that specific goals were developed relatively late and often accidentally in the language learning process:

The idea that I want to be an English teacher came to my mind last year when I had to teach private students to earn money. I started to enjoy being listened to and I think it is a good thing to transfer knowledge. (#16)

On the basis of the answers in the interview, it appears that most of the informants decided to be English majors because they wanted to gain a high level of proficiency in English. In the beginning of their university studies the majority did not have any other specific goals. Although most of the students had various sub-goals throughout their language learning process (mainly instrumental ones such as passing the language exam and the entrance exam or getting good grades), in the course of their university career there were several years when they did not have any long-term goals except for developing proficiency. When they had to realise they could not achieve a good command of English at university (see below), they developed other goals, mainly in connection with their other majors. In the questionnaire we also collected data concerning instrumental orientation, that is about students' perceptions of the pragmatic benefits of high level of L2 proficiency (e.g. better jobs, higher salary). The mean value of 3.66 (Std. dev=.85) on the five-point scale indicates that first year students do not have stable views concerning how the knowledge of English is going to be useful in their future career, which is probably related to the fact they do not yet know what jobs they might take after graduation.

As regards attitudes to the language itself, all the interview participants reported that they had very positive attitude to English. "I have always been in love with the English language," (R14) said one of the students. They mentioned that their "love of English" is due to the beauty and the logical structure of the language. As already described above, this highly positive attitude to English has characterized the participants since their elementary school years.

The quantitative questionnaire data suggest that the interviewed English majors do not have strong integrative orientation in the Gardnerian sense (Gardner, 1985; 2001), which is indicated by

the low mean value of the scale measuring to what extent identify with the English language and the culture of the English-speaking people (Mean=2.81, Std. dev=.89). In another study conducted with Hungarian university students (author & co-author, in preparation), we also found that in this age group integrativeness plays a diminishing role in language learning motivation. Still, it is noteworthy to point out that despite the fact that undergraduates like the language itself and many English majors consider knowledge of English important because with its help a wealth of information becomes available (on the Internet, on English TV channels), the construct of *Integrativeness* is still problematic (see the low reliability values of this scale above). Among many, McClelland (2000) called for a new definition that focuses on “integration with the global community rather than assimilation with native speakers” (p.109). Colleague and co-author’s Hungarian data (2002) did not confirm the existence of the traditional integrative motive, either. A shift in focus is required to fit a perception of English as an international language in the process of language globalisation. This need is also reflected in our interview data, where international posture emerged as a significant motivating factor. Fourteen English majors explicitly stated that they would like to acquire English because English is a world-language, which they can make use of in any part of the world. As one of the respondents told us, “being able to speak English, gives me self-confidence. I know that I can speak to anyone in English anywhere in the world, I will be able to make myself understood and I can feel safe.” (R6). Two of the interviewees worded the essence of the construct of international posture perfectly: “I want to be an international man, who knows his way in the world, and English helps in this (R11)” and “English opens a window to cultures other than my own” (R5). Co-author and author (in preparation) obtained similar results in their investigation of the language learning motivation of Hungarian university and college students. Undergraduates studying a variety of subjects (sciences, medicine, law, humanities) all attached great importance to the international role of English.

Executive motivation at university

As regards language learning effort informants in the questionnaire survey expressed their commitment to put energy into the learning process. This is indicated by the very high mean value of ??? the motivated learning behavior scale (Std. dev=.62), which measured the amount of effort students are willing to invest into learning. In contrast with the participants of the quantitative phase of the study who were first and second year students, the interviewees who were just about to graduate reported that they only invested considerable effort into language learning in the first years of their university studies. As one of the participants confessed, “at the university, I studied the language intensively mainly in the first two years when I prepared for the language proficiency exams.” (R1) From the discussion of choice motivation above, it is apparent that the students have very favorable attitudes to English, have strong instrumental motives, and are well aware of the role of English as an international language. Still, at the end of their university studies they claim that their “knowledge of English developed only when there was an external pressure [i.e. the language proficiency exam]. I would not sit down and study the language just by myself.” (R1). We asked students both in the interviews and in the questionnaire survey what language learning strategies they use to improve their language competence. To our surprise, nine out of the 20 interview participants could not name any strategies, and those who said they applied strategies, were usually able to list only one strategy. These strategies were mainly sufficient for maintaining their level of competence and not for improving it (e.g. reading newspapers and watching films in English). Only two of the respondents told us that they look up unknown words they encounter and note them down. In the quantitative phase of the study to the open-ended question “I use my own techniques to achieve good English language knowledge”, informants gave the following answers (figures in parentheses indicate the number of students who mentioned a certain technique): “reading much in English” (31), “watching movies in English” (30), “looking up words in a (monolingual) dictionary” (21) “listening to pieces of music and translating the lyrics” (11) and “watching the news on CNN or BBC” (9). These strategies are rather passive; making friends and productive skills

are not even mentioned, and it is again a mere 20% of the students who make an effort to learn new words from the foreign language input.

In the questionnaire study, the scale of *Language learning at university*, which inquired into to what extent students think that their level of English will improve during their studies at the university, also showed very high mean values (Mean = 4.35; SD = 0.83). This indicates that learners have very high expectations towards the university: not only do they hope that their skills will develop during the university years, but they also wish to gain that knowledge from the school in a direct way (that is, in seminars and lectures). From these figures, it is apparent that our students have not learnt how to become autonomous language learners, that is, neither education in secondary school nor courses at the tertiary level have equipped students with skills for improving their own language competence. This is unfortunately reinforced by the teacher-centered education, where teachers are held responsible for providing students with knowledge. Both from the interview and the questionnaire data, it is apparent that students shift the responsibility for learning to the university: “The university does nothing to develop our proficiency,” (R20) says one of the respondents.

As the participants admitted, sometimes it was very hard to maintain their motivation at university and two of them even considered giving up:

It was last year when I failed two exams and I got a 2 for the 299 [a language proficiency exam], which I had failed the previous year. I had to ask myself: What am I doing here? But then I thought over how much I liked English, how many positive feedback I got in secondary school and if I invested so much energy into my studies so far, I should stay and continue. (R10)

As the quote illustrates, at times of difficulty it was mainly the positive learning history at secondary school and students' affection to English that help them maintain motivation. This finding is similar to the results of Ushioda's (2001) study, in which she observed that one of the primary motivational factors for language majors is positive learning history.

The interview participants had rather negative views about language learning at university. They were mainly dissatisfied with the low number of language practice classes and the efficiency

of teaching in these classes. Although students noted that the language practice classes in the first year of their studies were fairly useful, they also criticized them because they felt that “half of the words we learnt there were completely useless in real life” (R10). In addition, students complained that despite the fact that English is the language of instruction of subjects related to their major, they have few opportunities to use the language outside the language classroom. The following two quotes illustrate students’ views about their language learning experiences.

We don’t have opportunities to speak in seminars. It is as if they were lectures. The teacher is standing in front of us, is talking and talking and we take notes. Then the class is over. We don’t even know each others’ names. (R20)

Retrospective motivation

External incentives such as good marks and good exam results were emphasised by all the students when they were asked about their successes. Getting good marks, especially for a difficult exam at university, was regarded as a great success by many interviewees. Applause and acknowledgement from teachers, friends and native speakers were mentioned by a lot of students as giving them a sense of accomplishment. Especially native speakers’ acknowledgements seemed to help students gain confidence. Intrinsic pleasures involved such every-day successes as the ability to understand native speech or solve an assignment:

I am glad when I can translate a text well or when I do any exercise correctly. I am also glad when I’m doing an exercise and feel I can do it. It is a success for me. (R7)

Failures also seemed to be frequent in the participants’ university careers. Three students admitted that the university years had been a constant failure for them. It was generally true of all the participants (with the exception of four students who were very good students at university) that they had much more bad than good experiences in the course of their studies. Generally, it was typical of all the students that they were successful and good at English in secondary school. At university, however, they had to face the situation that unlike in secondary school, they were not the

best students any more. Moreover, it was often the case that their level of competence achieved in secondary school was not sufficient for pursuing their university studies in English.

In secondary school I was the best student in my class. Not only at English but at the majority of the subjects. When I came to university, first I could not even understand the lectures, and I failed a lot of exams later as well. (R2)

In the first year it was very difficult to accept that I was not the best any more. I saw that everybody spoke better English than me. Actually it was a shock for me. Finally, I did not dare to say a word and that was the time when I decided to move to England for a year as an au-pair to improve my English and catch up with the others. (R14)

Exam failure especially at the university was frequently mentioned. Another difficulty seemed to be oral performance. The analysis of the interview text shows that most of the students' weak point is spoken communication:

I sometimes do not dare to talk in seminars because I am afraid I say something wrong. To avoid this I usually formulate the sentences in my mind before I utter them. (R9)

I failed a lot of important exams. I failed the oral part. I also experienced failure quite often especially at language practice seminars. I had to realise that I would never speak English well enough to be an interpreter or a teacher. (R8)

As regards fulfilment of language learning goals, those interviewees whose personal goal was to utilize English in their future job have not reached this goal because they are not yet employed. Out of the fifteen students whose main aim was to attain a high level of competence in English, eleven respondents admitted they were not able to realize this aim. One of the interviewees noted that "The university does not really take me anywhere near my goals. Here you only forget what you already knew" (R4). Another student expressed the following view:

When I came to university, I thought I would learn English very well here. I believed that during the five years I spend here I would be learning English words, phrases and linguistic structures. These things would have interested me. For example, learning the vocabulary Business, Medical and Legal English and how to write grant and project proposals and things like this. Instead of these I learnt a lot of useless stuff. (R2)

Moreover, sadly another student remarked that he has given up hope that he would acquire the desired level of competence at university, "I am going to enrol into a language course where I am finally taught how to speak English" (R4). It is interesting to note in this quote that the student expects to be taught rather than taking an active role in learning.

Overall the long period of language learning was judged to be positive, useful and successful by most of the students:

It was an effective period in my life that I spent language learning. I learned a foreign language, I can express myself in English and go to any country without having difficulty in communication. And that is the point. (R11)

Other students expressed that language learning “is part of their lives” (R6), “is a pleasure” (R9) and a “useful pastime activity” (R2). As one of the interviewees noted using the window metaphor, “language learning provides an opportunity in every sphere of life. It is a window that you open and you see a lot of new things.” (R7).

Conclusion and implications

In this paper we reported an investigation of the language learning motivation of English majors at a Hungarian university. As described in the introduction, our research was motivated by the realization of the apparent discrepancy between students’ and societies’ expectations towards teaching English at tertiary level and the present educational system. The ambivalent nature of English major’s motivational profile was found to reflect this situation. The interview data reveal that the respondents had very favourable attitudes to the language itself, have relatively strong instrumental motives and attach significant importance to the role of English in today’s globalized world. Their main goal is to attain a very high level of competence in English and to have good oral skills and a knowledge of the language that can be used in everyday communication. All these characteristics would predict that students invest a lot of energy into language learning and are satisfied with the process of their learning. The questionnaire and interview data, however, reveal that this is not the case. Students acknowledge that if there is no external pressure on them (i.e. having to pass a language proficiency exam), they do almost nothing to maintain or improve their language competence. They do not seem to use a sufficient number of learning strategies, which indicates a low level of learner autonomy. In other words, the English majors participating in this study shift the responsibility for their learning to the university.

The language learning experiences of the students also indicate that students have high expectations towards the university that the institution is not able to meet. Students expect that they would attain a high level English language competence in their tertiary education and gain a usable knowledge of the language. Instead they find that there is a low number of language practice classes and a high number of subjects that are not relevant to their future needs. Moreover, even in language classes the choice of learning materials does not seem to match their interest. Even though the language of instruction is English, due to the fact that most seminars are not interactive and student-centered, our respondents feel that they lack the opportunity to produce sufficient amount of output in L2.

Although the distribution of subjects in the curriculum has been decided on at a national level and little can be done to modify this, there remains a lot of room for change in order to meet students' and societies' demands. The first task is to make language practice classes even more student-centered and ensure that the language learning materials and tasks are relevant for the students. A second related project should involve training students to be autonomous learners who take responsibility for their own acquisition processes since language competence cannot be "taught", it needs to be acquired, in which process teachers should act as facilitators. This is not an easy enterprise since the Hungarian educational system at the primary and secondary-level is highly teacher-centered. As regards subjects other than language development classes, it would be important to organize workshops and training sessions for instructors on teaching in higher education since at the moment not even a general teachers' degree is needed to become a university lecturer. Being familiar with the growing body of research and an increasing number of guidelines on good practice in higher education, would certainly contribute to achieving higher standards in the teaching of Hungarian English majors.

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Table 1. The categories of the qualitative phase of the study

Choice motivation	Executive motivation	Retrospective motivation
Goals	Quality of the learning experience	Fulfillment of goals
Instrumental motives	Strategies	Successes and failures
Integrative motives	Effort	
International posture		
Attitudes to the English language		

