'Great Expectations': The motivational profile of Hungarian English language students
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In this article we investigate what characterizes the language learning motivation of Hungarian English language students in terms of Dörnyei and Ottó’s process model of motivation (Motivation in Action, 1998). We used a mixed-method research design, in which qualitative interviews conducted with 20 students were supplemented with questionnaire data gained from 100 participants in order to have a better understanding of the apparent discrepancy between students’ and society’s expectations of teaching English Language at tertiary level and the present educational system in Hungary. The ambivalent nature of English language students’ 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 in maintaining and improving their language competence. This is explained with reference to a low level of learner autonomy primarily caused by teacher-centered instruction.

**Keywords** English Language, English language students, language attitudes, learner autonomy, motivation

**Introduction**

It is almost a commonplace 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 him or her, one of the first questions is why students have enrolled in the course and what their language learning goals are; in other words, the
teacher 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 learner in different settings are abundant (see for example, Dörnyei and Schmidt, 2001; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). While we have large amounts of data on the motivational characteristics of primary and secondary school students (Dörnyei et al., 2006; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003), we know considerably less about university students in this respect (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003; Menyhárt and Kormos, 2006; Ushioda, 2001) and almost nothing about our own students: that is, English language students with whom we as researchers in the field of applied linguistics and language pedagogy have classes 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 Hungary, English language students 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 the language learning process may be tailored to their needs.

One of the greatest expectations society has of universities is that they 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, in which teachers provide students with loads of information to memorize, cannot meet these demands. Student-centered approaches, however, in which the role of the university instructor is that of a facilitator whose responsibility is to help students develop and change their conceptions of the subject they study (Kember, 1997), seem to be one of the possible answers to these challenges. In order to fulfil the role of facilitator, teachers need to know their students not only in terms of their intellectual capacities and 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 language students in Hungary. Therefore the new curricula merely contain 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 those majoring in English will become either teachers of English or researchers in linguistics, literature or pedagogy. From an earlier study conducted by Kormos et al. (2002), however, it becomes evident that students mostly use the English major as a springboard, and after graduation they frequently go on study economics, law, catering, tourism and trade, or they start working as translators, interpreters, journalists or educational managers. But 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 experience the tension between students’ and society’s 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 to understand English language students’ 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 language students in Hungary, we believe that the results may 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 temporality. Rather than considering motivation a stable emotional and mental state, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) argued that motivational processes should be examined as they happen in real time. They recognized that in the case of second language (L2) learning, which may take several years, there was a need to develop a construct that accounts for changes in motivation and includes a temporal dimension. They maintain that 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 throughout the learning process. Drawing on Heckhausen and Kuhl’s Action Control Theory (e.g. Heckhausen, 1991; Heckhausen and 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 subphases: goal setting, intention formation and the initiation of intention enactment. At the actional stage, 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, so-called postactional, phase begins after either the language learning goal has been achieved or when the action has been completed. This stage is called ‘motivational retrospection’, in which the main process involves the individual’s assessment of the results, such as evaluating the accomplished action outcome and drawing possible conclusions for future actions.

To our knowledge, the language learning motivation of foreign language students has been investigated only in Ushioda’s (2001) qualitative study. Ushioda interviewed 20 Irish university learners of French and analysed 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 causal factors derive from L2-related experiences in the past, while the teleological factors involve short-term and long-term goals and future perspectives. Ushioda also found that effective motivational thinking entails the filtering of experience, such that students are more likely to focus on different positive elements or on positive incentives while they de-emphasize 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’ (Ushioda, 2001: 121).

In the Hungarian context, Csizér and Kormos (in press) 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 (for a comparison of the motivation of secondary school learners, university students
and adult language learners see Kormos and Csizér, in press). Participants studying economics and law in tertiary education displayed the best motivational characteristics among students of a variety of disciplines.

As regards English language students in Hungary, Kormos et al. (2002) explored the language needs of English language students at six universities: 279 English major undergraduate students (in the last two years of their studies) and 80 students who had graduated in the previous five years were asked 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 language students’ current language learning needs were related to study skills. On the other hand, the 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 language students’ present and future needs.

Since in that study of Hungarian English language students we gained only a limited amount of information about students’ goals, and we did not inquire into their attitudes, learning processes and experiences, we regarded it important to go on to investigate our students’ motivation too. This is especially important because, as the graduates in our study had reported, one of the greatest expectations of them, regardless of what kind of job they had taken, was a high level of English competence (Kormos et al., 2002). And in succeeding to attain the necessary level of language skills, one of the most crucial factors is motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). In the study reported here, we addressed the question of what characterizes the choice, executive and retrospective motivation of English language students in Hungary. Although in the interviews with students 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 in 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 of gaining additional and generalizable information about the language learning motivation of English language students. In the first, qualitative, stage of the research we conducted interviews with 20 English language students in the last years of their study at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), 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 allowed us to present an insider’s view. 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 in the in-depth interviews were fourth- and fifth-year English language students at the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. This is one of the most prestigious and oldest universities in Hungary. The interviews were conducted in January 2006 by Adrienn Menyhárt as part of her MA thesis. The choice of fourth- and fifth-year students was made on the assumption that these students had spent enough time at university to be able to evaluate their language learning experiences. Also, 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 the students’ other major subjects and the location where they had 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 selected. The students were all between the ages of 22 and 25, each studying for their first degree, 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 20 participants included 15 female and 5 male students. The preliminary interview questions revealed that most of the participants (N = 16) majored in another subject besides English.

The participants in the quantitative phase of the study were 61 first- and 39 second-year English language students also studying at ELTE. This population was chosen because these students consider themselves ‘learners of English’ in the strict sense of the term, since they are required to take language classes at university during 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 – a selection criterion because 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.
The interviews were conducted by the third author, who at that time was also a student herself. The equal status of the interviewees and interviewer encouraged students to reveal their feelings openly and discuss 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 and 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 second 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 in 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 (Kormos and Csizér, in press) adapted for university students. The instrument includes 75 items that can be divided into two subsections. The first part involves eight open-ended and two 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 article not all the dimensions of this questionnaire are discussed. Those that are discussed include the following.

1. **Integrative motivation**: how much students like and identify with the English language and the culture of English-speaking people (based on Gardner, 1985, 3 items, $\alpha = 0.53$). 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 such as a good job, travelling abroad, being educated (based on Gardner, 1985, 4 items, $\alpha = 0.66$). 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 in learning (based on Dörnyei et al., 2006, 4 items, $\alpha = 0.68$). 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, $\alpha = 0.72$). Example: I would like to improve my language skills at the university.

5. **Attain a near-native level**: to what extent students express the wish to obtain a near-native level of English during their studies at the university (3 items, $\alpha = 0.65$). 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 much 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* (Kormos and Csizér, in press). The questionnaire was piloted using the think-aloud method, which involved asking two students to fill in the instrument while thinking out loud. Data collection was begun by asking for the co-operation of five teachers at the university, whose students were asked to fill in the questionnaire either at the beginning or the end of a class. This took approximately 15 minutes on average.

**Analysis**

The interview data were analysed in several steps following the principles of the constant comparative method (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Initially, the data were analysed by the first and third author for emerging themes. Once the themes found relevant were agreed upon, definitions of the categories of analysis were worded. The authors then coded the transcripts separately, subsequently checking for 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.

The data obtained from the questionnaires 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 (SD) values of the scales as well as gain information about the reliability of the scales. The 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 of the article 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 was to attain a near-native level of proficiency in English; 75 per cent of the participants noted that their main aim ‘was to speak English at the highest possible level’ (R7). 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 was 4.41 on a five-point scale (SD = 0.60), indicating that it is very important for English language students to reach the highest possible level of proficiency; in addition, most of them felt that this was within their reach, as the item

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[73]
measuring how confident they are about being able to achieve it received a mean value of 4.05 on a five-point scale (SD = 0.88). 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 said they would find writing skills relevant in the future. These findings are in line with the results of a previous survey (Kormos et al., 2002), in which former English language students reported that they use English mainly in oral communication in the jobs they fill after graduation.

The interviews also confirmed the findings of Kormos et al.'s (2002) questionnaire study as they revealed that a considerable proportion of English language students, 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 possibilities such as teacher, translator and interpreter. Forty per cent of the respondents said they would like to work as teachers, 15 per cent as journalists, while psychologist, historian and translator were also named as future occupations by one student in each case. The students who already have future plans all mentioned that a high level of competence in English would be important in their jobs. It was similar in all the participants’ learning histories that specific goals were developed relatively late in the language learning process, and often accidentally:

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. (R16)

On the basis of the answers given in interviews, it appears that most of the informants decided to be English language students because they wanted to gain a high level of proficiency in English. At the beginning of their university studies, the majority had no other specific goals. Although most of the students had various sub-goals throughout the 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 realized that they could not achieve a good command of English at university (see later in the article), they developed other goals mainly in connection with their other majors. The questionnaire also collected data concerning instrumental orientations – that is, about students’ perceptions of the pragmatic benefits of a high level of L2 proficiency (e.g. better job, higher salary). The mean value of 3.66 (SD = 0.85) on the five-point scale indicates that first-year students do not have stable
views concerning how knowledge of English is going to be useful in their future careers, 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 a very positive attitude to English: ‘I have always been in love with the English language’ (R14), said one of the students. They reported that their ‘love of English’ is due to the beauty and the logical structure of the language. This highly positive attitude to English had characterized the participants since their elementary school years.

The quantitative questionnaire data suggest that the English language students do not have a 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 they identify with the English language and the culture of English-speaking people (Mean = 2.81, SD = 0.89). Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) did not confirm the existence of the traditional integrative motive either. A more recent study conducted with Hungarian university students (Csizér and Kormos (in press) confirms this); in this age group integrativeness plays an insignificant role in language learning motivation. Despite the fact that undergraduates like the language itself, and many English language students consider knowledge of English important because, with its help, a wealth of information becomes available (on the internet, on English TV channels), clearly the construct of integrativeness is problematic. Among many, McClelland (2000: 109) has called for a new definition that focuses on ‘integration with the global community rather than assimilation with native speakers’. A shift in focus is required to fit the perception of English as an international language, in the process of language globalization. This need is also reflected in our interview data, where ‘international posture’ emerged as a significant motivating factor. There were 14 English language students who 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 if 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 expressed 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). Csizér and Kormos (in press) 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 attach great importance to the international role of English.
As regards language learning effort, informants in the questionnaire survey expressed their commitment to putting energy into the learning process. This is indicated by the very high mean value of the motivated learning behaviour scale (Mean = 4.35; SD = 0.62), which measured the amount of effort students are willing to invest in learning. In contrast to the participants in the quantitative phase of the study who were first- and second-year students, the interviewees who were just about to graduate reported that they had only invested considerable effort in language learning in the first years of their university studies. As one of them 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 earlier, it is apparent that the students have very favourable 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).

In both the interviews and the questionnaire survey, students were asked 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 could were usually able to list only one. Mainly, these strategies were sufficient for maintaining the students’ level of competence but 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 referred to 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 per cent 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 asked to what extent students think that their level of English will improve during their studies at the university, showed very high mean values (Mean = 4.35; SD = 0.83). This indicates that learners have very high
expectations of the university: not only do they hope that their skills will develop during their university years, but they also wish to gain that knowledge in a direct way (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 teacher-centered education, in which 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. The participants admitted that 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 [much] 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 this quotation illustrates, at times of difficulty it was mainly the positive learning history at secondary school and students’ affection for English that helped 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 students 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, they complained that despite the fact that English is the language of instruction in subjects related to their major, they have few opportunities to use the language outside the language classroom. The following quotation illustrates these 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 emphasized 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 many 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 many more bad experiences than good ones 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 they were not the best students any more. Moreover, it was often the case that the 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 at the university was especially frequently mentioned. Another difficulty seemed to be oral performance. The analysis of the interview text shows that the weak point for most of the students 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 15 students whose main aim was to attain a high level of competence in English, 11 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’ (R.4). 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 of 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. (R.2)

Moreover, another student remarked sadly 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’ (R.4). It is interesting to note that this 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. (R.11)

Other students said that language learning ‘is part of their lives’ (R.6), ‘is a pleasure’ (R.9) and a ‘useful pastime activity’ (R.2). 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’ (R.7).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this article we have reported an investigation of the language learning motivation of English language students at a Hungarian university. As described in the introduction, our research was motivated by the realization of an apparent discrepancy between students’ and society’s expectations of English language teaching at tertiary level and the present educational system. The ambivalent nature of English language students’ motivational profile was found to reflect this situation. The interview data reveal that the respondents have 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, to have good oral skills and a knowledge of the language that can be used in everyday communication. All these characteristics suggest that students would invest a lot of energy in language learning and be 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 (such as having to pass a language proficiency exam) they do almost nothing to maintain or improve their language competence. They do not appear to use a sufficient number of learning strategies, which indicates a low level of learner autonomy. In other words, the English language students participating in this study see the university as responsible for their learning.

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

While the distribution of subjects in the curriculum has been decided at national level and little can be done to modify this, there remains a lot of room for change in order to meet students’ and society’s demands. The first task is to make language practice classes even more student centred 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 levels is highly teacher centred. As regards subjects other than language development classes, it will be important to organize workshops and training sessions for instructors on methods of teaching in higher education because at the moment not even a general teachers’ degree is needed to become a university lecturer. Familiarity 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 language students.

NOTE

1. The quotations from students were translated from Hungarian by the third author. The letter and number in brackets indicate the code assigned to the interview respondent.


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

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