Students’ motivation and attitudes towards learning a second language

- British and Swedish students’ points of view

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Abstract

This paper is a study within the general area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), focusing on second language learning in formal (class room) settings. The main questions discussed in this essay are firstly, whether social factors matter while learning a second language, secondly, to what extent attitudes towards the second language matter and thirdly, what attitudes students actually have towards studying a second language.

The paper compares both students and teachers in the UK and Sweden. To be able to make this comparison I travelled to the UK and followed a class at the University of Wolverhampton that study Swedish.

This paper has benefited from both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative part consists of a questionnaire that was handed out to the students in both England and Sweden. For the qualitative part of my research I made use of the structured interview form, which is a method that has a compact nest of questions and where the sequence of questions is decided before the interview. I interviewed two students and one teacher in each of the countries that this paper covers.

The social factors that this paper recognises are age, gender, social class and ethnic identity. Furthermore, the essay examines the impact of students’ motivation and attitudes while studying and learning a new language. It has been demonstrated that motivation has a major role to play while learning a second language. It can be argued that the more motivated students are the more and better they will learn. According the students in question their opinions are that you have to have a good teacher while learning languages, i.e. a teacher that can encourage you and make you develop. On the other hand the teachers in question said that the students must be interested in learning second languages otherwise it is pointless since they will not develop.

The findings of the present paper are analysed in the light of previous research published in this field.

Keywords: Second Language Learning, Social Factors, Motivation, L2, SLA
# Table of contents

1. Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Aim ............................................................................................................... 1  
   1.2 Research questions.................................................................................... 2  
2. Previous work.................................................................................................... 2  
   2.1 Definitions .................................................................................................... 2  
      2.1.1 What is a Second Language?................................................................. 3  
      2.1.2 What is Second Language Acquisition?................................................ 3  
   2.2 Social factors that may affect Second Language Acquisition................. 4  
      2.2.1 Age ........................................................................................................ 4  
      2.2.2 Gender ................................................................................................... 5  
      2.2.3 Social class ............................................................................................ 6  
      2.2.4 Ethnic identity ....................................................................................... 6  
   2.3 Students’ motivation and attitudes ............................................................. 7  
      2.3.1 Motivation ............................................................................................. 7  
      2.3.2 Attitudes while learning a second language.......................................... 7  
3. Method and material.......................................................................................... 8  
   3.1 Problems and limitations ........................................................................... 12  
4. Results ............................................................................................................. 13  
   4.1 Results of the questionnaires and the interviews........................................ 13  
   4.2 Summary of results .................................................................................... 20  
5. Conclusion....................................................................................................... 22  
6. References ....................................................................................................... 24  

Appendix A, The questionnaire for the British students  
Appendix B, The questionnaire for the Swedish students  
Appendix C, Interview guide for students  
Appendix D, Interview guide for teachers
1. Introduction

To learn a second language can be very hard and difficult. It takes time and you really have to study in order to develop. However, there are many reasons to learn a second language, for instance to be able to communicate with foreigners and to understand other languages, but also to be able to get more work opportunities depending on your language knowledge. To know more languages always looks good on your CV when you apply for a job.

It could be argued that people who study a second language (L2) often learn it because they have to do it in school, but people also sometimes need languages for other reasons, for example work opportunities or simply because they want to understand foreigners.

The term L2 is typically used about languages that you learn in a natural environment, either because you want to be able to cope with everything in a new country to which you have moved, or because you think you will do better if you learn the language of, say, the most powerful minority in the country or region in which you happen to live (Saville-Troike 2006:4).

Students differ in their motivation towards learning a second language and they display many different attitudes towards learning a second language. A student that has negative attitudes towards learning a language could be changed and turn those negative attitudes into positive ones and get a positive result. This will be further discussed below. The essay will also discuss whether or not it is true that social factors such as age, gender, social class and ethnic identity have roles to play in language learning. According to Ellis (1994:202-204) studies have shown that younger students learn better than older ones and that women are better learners than men. This essay will discuss whether and to what extent any advantages or disadvantages based on these social factors matter while learning second languages.

For future teachers of English it could be interesting to see to what extent different social factors matter while learning a second language. Furthermore, also how much students’ motivation and attitudes differ from student to student while learning second languages.

1.1 Aim

The main aim of this paper is to learn more about some students’ motivation and attitudes towards learning a second language. A subordinate aim is to investigate and discuss whether they think social factors matter while learning an L2.

This essay is primarily based on questionnaires that have been handed out to students in both Sweden and England. The students who have completed these questionnaires all study a
second language. In addition to these questionnaires, the essay has also benefited from interviews with second language students and teachers in both England and Sweden. In this essay, the results from the questionnaires and the interviews are related to, and compared with, previous work that has been done within the same area.

1.2 Research questions

A. Why do students have different motivation to learning a second language?
B. What are their attitudes towards learning a second language?
C. What social factors do the students and the teachers believe matter while learning a second language?

Those are some of the questions that have been asked in the questionnaires and at the interviews. It is commonly known that some students struggle with language learning, while others do not, and therefore they have different attitudes and are differently motivated to learn the specific language. On Question C I think that different factors do matter while learning a second language. Furthermore, those different social factors have different impact on the learners.

2. Previous work

This section will discuss previous work that has been done within the same area. Further on in this paper (in the Summary of results section) connections will be made between previous work and the results from the questionnaires and the interviews that constitute the empirical basis for this study.

2.1 Definitions

This first part (i.e. Section 2.1) will go through the definitions of Second Language and Second Language Acquisition. The different ways in which scholars have made use of the term Second Language Acquisition (to include or exclude Second Language Learning) will be discussed.
2.1.1 What is a Second Language?
When you were young you learnt your first language, L1, that is, your mother tongue. When you learn an additional language, this language is called L2, i.e. your second language.¹ A second language can also be called a target language (TL), the language you aim to learn, and once you have learnt it, it is no longer a target language (Saville-Troike 2006:3-4).

The term L2 is typically used about languages that you learn in a natural environment, either because you want to be able to cope with everything in a new country to which you have moved, or because you think you will do better if you learn the language of, say, the most powerful minority in the country or region in which you happen to live. To learn these languages in a formal setting is less typical, and to learn languages for fun or because it is part of the curriculum is even less typical. However, they are still second languages. In other words, a second language is typically an official or societally dominant language needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes. It is often acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another language natively. However, it is not always that a second language is acquired by immigrants. An obvious counter-example is the case of students learning various languages in school, languages that may not be particularly usable in the countries in which they live (Saville-Troike 2006:4).

2.1.2 What is Second Language Acquisition?
Seville-Troike (2006:2-3) states that SLA, i.e. Second Language Acquisition, refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language.

Ellis (1997:3) argues that “whether you are learning a language naturally as a result of living in a country where it is spoken, or learning it in a classroom through instruction; it is customary to speak generically of second language acquisition” (see the definition of L2 above).

According to Ellis (1997:4-5) SLA (i.e. the academic discipline) has two main goals, namely description of L2 acquisition and explanation of L2 acquisition. Description refers to the ability to identify the external and internal factors that show how the students are learning and progressing in the way they do. By description linguists working in the field of SLA refer to the ability to see how and what the students produce when they are using a second language.

¹ According to Saville-Troike (2006:2) the term L2 is used for all additional languages that you might learn, so it does not matter if it is the third or the fifth language that you learn. Other scholars talk about L3, L4, etc. This essay follows Saville-Troike in this respect.
and to be able to follow how learners’ knowledge develops. For instance, one may observe how the learners’ pronunciation develops or how they become more fluent in the language they are learning (Ellis 1997:4-5).

There are two different types of factors that matter while learning an L2, external factors and internal factors. Ellis (1997:4-5) argues that external factors may be the social milieu in which the learning takes place, for example, the opportunities learners may have to hear and speak the specific language they are trying to adopt. Furthermore, internal factors include the attitudes learners develop towards the language they are trying to learn (ibid 4-5). Yule (2006:163) presents the idea that there is a difference between (second language) acquisition and (second language) learning. Acquisition refers to the process of acquiring the language naturally while communicating with native speakers in a natural environment, while learning refers to the study of the grammar, vocabulary, morphology, phonetics, etc. of a language. Activities associated with learning typically take place in schools, while activities associated with acquisition occur when students interact with native speakers (ibid 163). In this paper SLA is used in a broader sense (following, among others, Saville-Troike 2006) also including what Yule (2006) calls second language learning.

2.2 Social factors that may affect Second Language Acquisition

Saville-Troike (2006:94) claims that the question of why some learners are more successful than others leads to the examination of differences in the learners themselves, such as social factors. According to Ellis (1994:201) there are four specific social factors that tend to be of importance for the degree of success in learning/acquiring a second language, namely age, gender, social class and ethnic identity. These four social factors interact with each other in many ways, but they will still be discussed separately in the following four subsections.

2.2.1 Age

Ellis (1994:201-202) argues that most people and most linguists/experts think that children are more successful L2 learners. For instance, children are much better than adults at ‘natural second language acquisition’, i.e. to learn the language used in the environment that they find themselves in (ibid 201-202). Many linguists claim that children learn/acquire more up to a certain age (i.e. young children acquire L2 much like L1, but they lose this ability later on (ibid 201-202)). Saville-Troike (2006:82) claims that younger learners and older learners have different advantages. For example, children are not as analytical, while older learners have the ability to be analytical. Older learners have a greater (meta) knowledge of their L1 compared
to young children (ibid 84). Saville-Troike (2006:82-84) argues that older learners normally have greater analytic ability than children, since they tend to understand grammatical rules better. A benefit children can have is that they are more likely to get input from others, for example that immigrant children tend to interact more than their parents with the people in the country to which they have moved (ibid 82-84). Statistically and empirically it will seem as if immigrant children are better language learners than their parents, even though what they are really better at is facilitating language acquisition by creating and placing themselves in good language acquisition contexts (ibid 82-84).

Towell & Hawkins (1994:14-15) claim that people are able to learn second languages throughout their lives and that they can use those second languages for effective communication. However, it seems that beyond the age of around seven, learners are not going to be as successful as pre-seven-year-olds at acquiring all grammatical properties of their L2. Furthermore, once children have learnt how to speak the language there are so much more to learn. “For example, the child needs to learn what nouns and verbs are and what synonyms and antonyms are. Such activities require the child to separate language from the context of actual experience and to learn to deal with abstract meanings” (McLaughlin 1992).

2.2.2 Gender
Ellis (1994:202-204) states that women almost always surpass men in their (standardness of speech and) use of prestige forms. Prestige forms are the high standard forms of a language, i.e. the forms that are typically used by television and radio news broadcasters and at universities. This tendency to use prestige forms concerns not only female L2 learners, but also native speakers of the language in question. The reason that women use more prestige forms than men do could be that women are more open to different forms and likely to use them in their speech. However, when women have noticed the use of new forms, they are more likely to reject them (ibid 202-204). Men are less recipient to different forms, but when they have started to use them, they barely ever reject them (ibid 202-204).

Edlund et al. (2007:56-60) state that women and men tend to use their linguistic knowledge differently. They communicate differently and make use of different language styles. According to Edlund et al. (2007:56) women and men use different languages depending on the situation. Furthermore, Edlund et al. (2007:56) argues that even though women and men make use of the same phrases and vocabulary, the exact meanings (including
connotations and expected interpretations) of the phrases/vocabulary are sometimes different depending on the sex of the speaker.

Edlund et al. (2007:56-60) also argue that while talking about differences among men and women there are a lot of stereotypes. For example, women talk more than men and men are more humoristic. These stereotypes could be one of the reasons that the expectations on men and women are different (ibid 59). According to Ellis (1994:202-204), it has been shown that female learners do better than men because they are more open to new linguistic forms. However, there are also studies that argue that men do better, or simply that there are no – or just few – differences between women and men. Ellis states that women usually have a more positive attitude towards learning a second language, which has a huge impact on their way of learning (ibid 202-204).

2.2.3 Social class
Ellis (1994:204-206) claims that social classes are usually based on level of education, income and occupation. It has been shown that there are interesting connections between social class and L2 achievement. Students from middle-class homes regularly outperform those from lower- and working-class homes. Ellis (1994:204-206) argues that L2 learning is connected to different attitudes based on the learners’ will to learn. Working-class students usually drop their language earlier than middle class students, for instance more middle-class students tend to continue studying it at the university (ibid 204-206).

2.2.4 Ethnic identity
Ellis (1994:207-210) states that ethnic identity is the factor that has attracted his attention the most. An ethnic group is a group of people that has the same native language, the same nationality and in most cases the same religion. Learners who are ethnically close to the target-language culture are likely to outperform those who are more distant (ibid 207-210).

How fast someone learns a new language depends on the learners’ motivation. If the learners are motivated to learn the new language and feel that it is usable they will learn it better than those who do not think that they need it. For example, how quickly immigrants that are new in a country learn and develop depends on their motivation (Ellis 1994:207-210). Immigrants are expected to be highly motivated to learn the language of their new country. However, some are not, for obvious reasons. Some may think that they do not need the new language, since they are living in an area where a great many other immigrants are also living, which means that they can use their native language in most everyday situations. Another
reason for some immigrants not to learn the language of the country to which they have moved could also be that since their children learn the new language in school and elsewhere, the parents may think that they do not need to learn it.

2.3 Students’ motivation and attitudes
This section discusses whether students’ attitudes and varying degrees of motivation matter while learning a second language. The following part will go through previous work that has been written within the same area.

2.3.1 Motivation
Saville-Troike (2006:85-86) claims that individual motivation is another factor that is used to explain why some L2 learners are more successful than others. The level of effort that learners expend at various stages in their L2 development depends on how motivated they are to learn. The more motivated students are, the easier they will learn a new language. Motivation is often one of the keys to the ultimate level of proficiency (ibid 85-86). Saville-Troike (2006:86) states that motivation is usually recognized as being of two types. One of them is integrative motivation, which is based on learner interest, i.e. to what extent the learner is interested in the country or the culture represented by the target language group. To be interested in learning an L2 and to have the desire to learn about, or associate with, the people who use the language you are learning could be an example of integrative motivation (ibid 87). The other motivation type is instrumental motivation, which is connected to the desire to learn a language to increase occupational or business opportunities, but also to get prestige or power (ibid 87). The potential power of motivation can be seen in some cases where even older learners may overcome the ‘odds’ of not acquiring native-like pronunciation, if it is important enough to sound native (ibid 87). Ellis (1997:76) claims that motivation is not something that a learner has, or does not have, but rather something that varies from one moment to the next, depending on the learning context or task. The above-mentioned types of motivation should be seen as complementary to each other, rather than oppositional or distinct, since learners can be both instrumentally and integratively motivated at one and the same time (ibid 76).

2.3.2 Attitudes while learning a second language
Ellis (1994:197-201) claims that learners’ attitudes have been identified as one set of variables of major importance. The attitudes are shaped by the social factors mentioned, which, in turn,
influence learner outcome. There are both negative and positive attitudes towards the L2 being learnt. The positive attitudes are typically connected to the speakers of the language in question and the culture represented by its speakers. Such positive attitudes can be expected to enhance learning, since learners can be expected to want to be able to communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning. In other words, if students are interested in the countries where the languages are spoken, they may be more motivated to learn the language (Noels et al. 2003:36).

Negative attitudes, on the other hand, can impede language learning, since you usually get those attitudes when you are not interested or have difficulties with the teacher (Ellis 1994:197-201). Those attitudes usually have a negative effect on learners, but this is not always the case. Negative attitudes may also have a positive effect on L2 learning, if the learners have a strong will to learn a language (ibid 200). Sometimes students who are struggling with their attitudes are true fighters. They work so hard in the end because they want a good grade and they have a strong will to learn.

Furthermore, students’ attitudes can change. They may have negative attitudes at the beginning of learning a language but then they realise what a good advantage it is to know this language and their attitudes change.

3. Method and material

I have had the opportunity to attend Swedish classes at The University of Wolverhampton in the UK. During my stay in the UK (the spring term of 2008) I was able to observe and teach (together with their teacher) a group of students. The group consisted of almost 20 students, both native English speakers and students from other countries. The students were of varying age and spoke different mother-tongue languages. The student group in question started taking Swedish classes in January 2008, and has met every Friday between two and six. This means that they have received some, but not very much, teaching.

Since I had the opportunity to observe that class I immediately thought it would be very interesting to know why they had chosen to study Swedish. I was rather surprised that they actually had Swedish classes at a University in England and that there were so many students taking them. Furthermore, a good opportunity could be to hand out some questionnaires (Appendix A) to the students to get some personal information about their attitudes towards language learning. I chose this method (questionnaires) since it is a good method of getting access to many people’s thoughts about specific questions. Furthermore, since I only met them on Fridays it seemed to be the easiest way of dealing with those questions. I prepared
some handouts (Appendix A) and then, during a break, I handed them out, and almost all of them were handed back before the class started again. Out of 16 I got 13 back and the other three did not hand it back. When I came back to Sweden I handed out 20 questionnaires (Appendix B) to Swedish students in Upper Secondary School (Swedish Gymnasieskolan) where I got 15 back.

The first two questions concern the students’ sex and age. Figure 1 shows the British answers for the first two questions and Figure 2 shows the Swedish ones.

**Figure: 1 British students (age)**

![Bar chart showing age distribution of British students: Male Students and Female Students.]

**Figure: 2 Swedish students (age)**

![Bar chart showing age distribution of Swedish students: Male Students and Female Students.]

As shown in the charts above the questionnaire that was handed out will cover opinions from students in different ages, but mostly opinions from female students. One of the reasons that there were more women could be that there were some male students absent on the day that the questionnaire was handed out, but also that women usually have a more positive attitude towards learning a second language, which has a huge impact on their way of learning (Ellis 1994:202-204) and, consequently, female students tend to study languages more often than male ones. As can be see in the first two charts the Swedish students are considerably younger than the ones in the UK.
Most of the British students are studying languages, by which I mean other languages such as Spanish and German. Furthermore, some students are studying Media and communication, popular music, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), information systems and sociology. This shows again that a great advantage is that languages can be used in different areas and that it does not necessarily need to be made explicit in what ways you intend to make use of the languages you study.

My Swedish subjects mainly belong to the IT Media programme at the Swedish Gymnasieskolan, and ten of the students are even from the same class. However, two of the students in the Swedish part of my investigation belong to the social sciences programme, one student to the natural sciences programme and two belong to the individual programme. The students thus constitute a mix from different programmes at Gymnasieskolan. This mix is an advantage for this study. To have students from different programmes makes the results of this part of my investigation slightly more interesting since the students have different experiences which differ from class to class.

I also asked the students how many hours they spent studying languages outside of school. This means how many hours they spend studying the language in question without a teacher. The British students’ answers varied between one hour and five hours. However, most of them claim that they study Swedish for two or four hours per week outside of school. Furthermore, The Swedish students’ answers varied between zero hour and six hours. Four students answered zero hours, six students answered three hours, one student answered 5 hours and then four students answered six hours. The differences we may observe here (provided that the answers reflect the true state of affairs) are that the British students generally devote more hours to their language studies than the Swedish ones, and that several of the Swedish students never study English outside of school. The reason that the students in Britain spend more time studying on their own could be that university studies are full time, even though only some of that time is scheduled. However, they do not study Swedish full time since they are taking four different modules per term.

At upper Secondary school in Sweden they do not study full time. Of course you are expected to do your homework, but there is nothing that says that you should study more than that on your own.

One thing to remember is that these Swedish students have compulsory school attendance, i.e. once you choose to attend a programme, there are certain subjects you just need to study, and English is one of the compulsory subjects (Skolverket [www.skolverket.se]). Swedish is not a compulsory subject in England, which means that the
students who study Swedish in England have all chosen to do so themselves. This means that the students in England studying Swedish should be expected to be more motivated and genuinely interested than their Swedish counterparts, at least on average, but this is just an hypothesis, since other factors than compulsoriness may be of equal importance.

My questionnaire consists of 11 questions that are mostly open ones. The questionnaire mainly has open questions, since the students in fact are all so different from each other, and by using open questions I would be able to receive more personal information from them. The questionnaire that was handed out in Sweden was in Swedish. It consisted of one fewer question, but almost the same ones that were used in the UK, since I wanted to be able to compare the answers. The question that was not asked to the Swedish students was why they are studying Swedish since the most of them are studying English since it is compulsory in school.

Since learning a language consists of many parts, especially learning vocabulary which is a skill many Upper Secondary Schools focus on. Therefore, I thought it could be interesting to know how those specific students are learning new words. (The question is asked in the questionnaires).

I have also carried out some interviews. I have interviewed (Appendix C) two students and one teacher (Appendix D) in England, as well as two students and one teacher in Sweden. The students were chosen because of their age, since I wanted students from almost the same age group to make my results more comparable. All the questionnaires and interviews were made by people who had volunteered to participate and it was anonymous.

As mentioned above, 6 interviews were performed, (three in each country). The teacher that was interviewed in England works at a University as a language teacher. She mostly teaches English as a foreign language which she has done for 8 years. The Swedish teacher that was interviewed works at a mainly vocational Upper Secondary School where she teaches English and Swedish. The students from England are both students at a University where one is studying history and languages and the other one is studying to become an English teacher. The male student is 22 years old and the female student is 23 years old and they are both native English speakers. The two Swedish students that were interviewed are both studying at Upper Secondary School. The female student is 18 years old and she is studying at a theoretical programme. The male student that was interviewed is 17 years old and he is studying at a vocational programme.

The interviews that were made were the same for the students but with different questions for the teachers, however, the follow up questions and suchlike were of course
different. The interviews in Sweden were conducted in Swedish and I used a video-recorder to record their voices. The British interviews were conducted on the Internet, using a chat program (Windows Live Messenger).

3.1 Problems and limitations

All in all, everything went surprisingly well. The questionnaires used in England went smoothly and the students all provided interesting answers. I was able to be there in their classroom while they wrote their answers, and some students asked me more about the questions. It was really good to be there in person to explain and help them with the questionnaires. As a matter of fact, I do not think everybody would have handed them in if I had not been present.

Unfortunately, the questionnaire in Sweden did not go as well. I was not able to be there when the students answered it, which had the unfortunate effect that I was not able to clarify one of the questions that many students misunderstood or misinterpreted. The purpose of the question *What are your thoughts about learning a second language?* was to learn more about what their thoughts about learning a second language really are. It appeared that this question was not clear enough, since many of the students answered it by telling me that they wanted to study Spanish or German, while some wrote that knowing/studying English is enough. The interviews in Sweden were done very quickly and smoothly. However, the interviews I did with the British students and the British teacher did not go that fast since I did not do the interviews while I was still in Britain. Instead, I had to use a chat programme. Suddenly the teacher never had time to do it and I ended up waiting for a long time for her to take her time for the interview. I do not think it would have been the same if I had done the interviews in England. Moreover, I prefer to do interviews face to face, since I like it when it is more personal and not through a computer.

I did not have that many questions prepared for the interviews, since I thought that I would come up with more questions during the interviews. However, when I did my interviews online, it turned out to be hard for me to come up with new questions and follow-up questions, since there was no ‘small’ talk, only questions and answers. Now afterwards, I regret that more and different questions had not been asked on the interviews with the students. The questions that were asked were almost the same ones as on the questionnaires. However, the reason for that was that I thought that I could get more out from the same questions since the students were not the same. Unfortunately, I did not get that much ‘new’ information and I think it would have been better with other or more questions. The
interviewees’ opinions were sometimes the same and therefore have this essay not gone through all the answers on all questions.

Furthermore, I think that the answers I received are enough for this study, especially since I have a large number of answers from the questionnaires. However, the investigation that has been made is a small study and the results cannot be generalized.

4. Results

This section outlines and examines the results of both the questionnaires and the interviews. Connections with the information found in the previous work section will be made explicit. In the Summary of result subsection (4.2) the results are compared and discussed.

4.1 Results of the questionnaires and the interviews

**Why do you study Swedish?**

This question was of course only asked to the students in England. They all answered it in much the same way. Most of the students answered that it was because the module looked interesting and the tutor is brilliant. Most of them had had the teacher in other classes before or had heard about her reputation as a great teacher. However, some students answered that it could be good in general to know another language, and that it is a new experience to study Swedish.

One ‘older’ woman wrote that: “I’m encouraged by my tutor to prove to myself I’m not as hopeless with languages as I think I am”. She really thought that since she is around fifty years old, she would be too old to learn a foreign language. She thought that she would not cope with the language studies at all and just fail the classes. As a matter of fact, she does cope very well and she is very happy that her tutor helped her to realize that in her case, age does not matter, and she can do it!

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2 The questionnaire questions appear as headings like this throughout the remainder of Section 4.1.
Which other languages do you study? or do you already know?

Figure: 3 British students

![Bar chart showing language preferences of British students.](image)

(BSL = British Sign Language)

Figure: 4 Swedish Students

![Bar chart showing language preferences of Swedish students.](image)

Figures 3 and 4 do not show that all the students in England speak English or that all the Swedish students speak Swedish, since this should be obvious. What is not obvious from the charts above, however, is the L1s of the students. It would have been interesting to know which of the languages, especially in Figure 3, are L1s and which are L2s. I do know that not all of my UK subjects have English as their mother tongue. For example, there are some students from Poland. The answers to this question also show that everyone in the group studies or already knows other languages, mostly German, Spanish and Polish. Some of the students in this Swedish class in Wolverhampton could list as many as five languages that
they knew or studied. In conclusion, the students in this particular Swedish class have a great interest in languages.

Figure 4 shows that almost all of the Swedish students study English, because it is a compulsory school subject. It would be interesting to know if they would study it if it were not compulsory. Two of the Swedish students in my material also take German and one student study Spanish. The reasons that they do not study more languages could be that they do not realize what an advantage it is to know more languages. The school may not provide the opportunity, they may be too lazy to study languages, or it could be that if their friends do not study languages, they do not want to do it themselves, since they would be on their own.

The British students, however, take four modules every term at University, that is, four modules they have chosen themselves. The Swedish students have to study a great number of different subjects, which means that they may feel that they simply do not have the time to study yet another language.

What are your general thoughts about learning a second language?
Since the British students all know more languages than English, they were all able to answer the next question and write down their general thoughts about learning a second language. They all agreed that learning an L2 is hard sometimes, but definitely rewarding. To study languages is enjoyable and people who know more languages than one have many advantages. The students in the group are all interested in languages and one student wrote that “As a European. I think it is vital to at least attempt to learn a second European language”. Moreover, as mentioned by some of the students in their answers to the questionnaire, knowledge of languages is good to include in your CV. But also, since our world is getting more multicultural, it is good to learn more languages, since it helps us understand new cultures.

The same question was on the questionnaire sheet handed out to the Swedish students. However, all Swedish students except two answered what languages they want to study, or that English is enough. This means that they did not quite understand the question. I did not want to know what languages (if any) they wanted to study in the future, but what they thought about learning a second language.

The two students who did answer this question in the intended way answered that it is very good to know more languages. It will help you later in life when you apply for jobs, or when you travel to other countries and want to be able to communicate with people who do not speak the same language.
The answers above show that the students almost have the same opinion about studying languages, that it is good for your future career and that it is a great advantage to know more languages.

**How motivated are you to learn a second language?**

(I only asked this question in the interviews). One student said that in her case the most important thing is that she feels that she needs it for a purpose. Another student answered that he finds it fascinating and enjoyable to learn new languages and that it is also a great way to discover another culture and people.

According to the students that I have been in contact with, said that while you are learning a second language you have to have a good tutor that can encourage you in your development. One teacher said that the students must be interested in learning, because otherwise it is pointless.

**What are your attitudes towards learning a second language?**

One student said that she usually have positive attitudes to learning a foreign language. She finds it fascinating to learn a new language. She also finds people very friendly when you approach them in their own language. In the interviews I also asked if the students have had any negative attitudes towards learning a language. One student said that he just could not learn German, he could not remember the words and it was not his thing. At first he thought he would not be able to speak Swedish either, but luckily that was not the case. Another student said that there have been times when she has felt that she has lost her motivation for learning a foreign language. For example, when she was studying the German language at university and they were asked to carry out certain tasks, she just thought it was pointless.

Another student said that she has had a great deal of negative attitudes while learning a second language. When she was in 7th, 8th and 9th grade she had the most horrible teacher. The teacher did not plan anything and the students had a great deal of choices of doing what they wanted to do. This meant that they did not have any specific lessons and this student in question said that she did not learn anything and that it was not motivating to come to the lessons.

The teachers that were interviewed both said that they have seen all kinds of attitudes. Some students come to class with a goal of learning and some students come to class and are disappointed that they have to be there.
Do you think that negative attitudes sometimes can give a positive result?

One student said in the interview that the reason that he could not learn German depended on him since he did not have a strong will to learn it neither a strong need to learn it. In that case he cannot see how negative attitudes can give a positive result. Furthermore, another student said that she thinks that if you have had negative attitudes for a while (see example above) it is easy to change those into positive attitudes. In her case, she got a ‘new’ teacher who really wanted his/her students to develop and that gave positive result for this student. This student in question said that since she had been very unmotivated in learning English depended on the teacher but when she got a ‘new’ teacher she thought that since she had a great deal of negative attitudes, she now wanted to learn the language and get a good grade.

As a follow-up question I asked the teachers: When a student shows negative attitudes while learning a second language, what do you do? They both said that they try to find out what the problem is and find a solution if possible. Furthermore, the teacher that are working at the university said that when she sees students that do not really want to be there she talks to them and sometimes asks what they are doing their since it is their own choice.

Do you think social factors such as age, gender, social class and social identity matter? If yes, how?

The British students’ answers to this question varied a great deal. Some students answered that such social factors do not matter, and others that of course they do. For example, several students wrote that it is easier for children to learn a second language than for older people. As mentioned earlier in this essay, studies have shown that there are different advantages for younger learners as well as older learners. It could perhaps be argued that older learners only believe that they have many more difficulties than younger learners, and for this reason they do not really focus on actually learning the language. Whether your language study is successful or not really depends on the student herself, and on the particular student’s motivation and attitudes towards the new language (Ellis 1994:197-201). Sometimes students’ thoughts could be an obstacle if they believe that they cannot learn the new language successfully.

Here are some quotes from students to give you a picture of what they think about the idea of social factors mattering while learning a second language:

“Research shows they can all have an impact but I think motivation plays a big part in long way learning. Age- Children pick up a language quickly and their pronunciation can
be near native. But adults can be better at grammar. More women tend to study languages than men but I don’t think this means that women are better.”

“Genders matter when learning language, because I feel more females learn languages”.

“The younger you start learning. The easier it is. In the UK, foreign languages are rarely perfected by men. I think that middle-class parents are more likely to encourage their kids to learn foreign languages”.

Above are some quotes from the answers to the questionnaire that was handed out in England. Once again it could be argued that people’s motivation has a great impact while learning a second language. Please note, however, that those quotes are all personal and their claims are not to be regarded as scientific facts or suchlike, partly because they do not provide any sources.

The same question was given to the Swedish students. Most of them wrote that it does not matter who you are, your age, gender or your nationality. However, one wrote that “of course it matter [sic], some people want more and some do not and we all have different opportunities in life which means that we are not coequal”. Another student wrote that “age can have one sort of impact while learning a second language. Younger students tend to learn faster and better”. Now this answer must be taken as being about younger learners in the sense of small children, and not the younger ones that the questionnaire was distributed to, since the youngest ones in my study are teenagers.

Furthermore, I asked the teachers in the interviews which social factors they believe matter while learning a second language (that is, e.g. age, gender, social class and ethnic identity). One teacher said that the language background matters, i.e. it is important what the first language is and what other languages the students already know. Speakers of languages that are very unlike English have more difficulties, e.g. speakers of Chinese and other oriental languages. Most European students have more similarities in their languages (common roots, etc.). This specific teacher does not think that the other factors matter neither does the other teacher. Furthermore, one student said that he does not think that gender matters, but when it comes to age he thinks that the younger you are the easier you find learning a new language. Another student believes the same, i.e. that she does not have any advantages since she is a girl but the fact that she is young helps her.
How do you think you are coping with the Swedish / Second Language? What is difficult and which parts are less difficult?

All the British students wrote that they are struggling with pronunciation. However, they tend to see connections between Swedish and the other languages that they know and they make use of these similarities to help them in their Swedish studies. Swedish pronunciation appears to be difficult for the learners observed, and the only way to learn proper pronunciation is through practicing. During the classes they were listening to a great number of tapes to hear how ‘correct’ Swedish should be pronounced and when I was there I read texts aloud, and helped them with their pronunciation in other ways. It is vital while you are learning a language to be able to hear a native-like voice. The students in England also wrote that to begin with, learning Swedish was very hard, but now it starts to be clearer and most of the students are strongly motivated to learn the language, which helps them in the process.

The Swedish students answered that they experience difficulties with the grammar part. They wrote that grammar is very hard and that it takes time to learn. Furthermore, some students also thought that English pronunciation was difficult and mentioned that they had struggle with it. The less difficult parts, at least according to the students in this study, are to learn new vocabulary and phrases. However, some students also wrote that it is very interesting to study new languages and that they are developing quite well.

How do you learn the best? Through which methods?

The British students in my study wrote that repetition of certain words and phrases and visual aids are the key ways to learning a second language. Most of the students repeat new Swedish words over and over again until they know them. They also listen to video clips, radio and so on, in order to be able to practice their pronunciation. One student wrote that by “using all the senses i.e. listening, speaking, talking and reading. I feel they should all be included”.

The Swedish students wrote that they learn by using the four main skills, reading, writing, talking and listening. Furthermore, they also learn through tests, exercises and by listening to the teacher.

How do you learn new vocabulary?

The answers show that these students of Swedish believe that through the ability to connect words with words from other languages, they are able to learn new Swedish words more easily. The students observed also point out that they tend to go over certain words over and over again until they know them by heart. But they also learn a great deal of new vocabulary
through visual aids and through the use of a dictionary. According to the British students there are no simple ways to learn new vocabulary. Learning vocabulary involves a great deal of practicing, but it is definitely rewarding when you understand and know the words. Some Swedish students wrote that they learn new vocabulary by practising words such as doing different tasks and through having vocabulary tests. Another student wrote that she learns vocabulary by translating texts and repeating new words until she knows them by heart. Another interesting comment was that she has learnt a great deal of vocabulary by playing English computer games. In conclusion, the British and the Swedish students use almost the same techniques for learning new vocabulary.

Furthermore, one student said, in one of the interviews, that when he was in Sweden he was walking in a forest and was watching a bird which he knew is called a woodpecker in English. Suddenly an old man joined him and asked what he was looking at. The student did not know how to say it in Swedish, but the man explained to him that it was Hackspett, and the student remembers this fairly uncommon word ever since. Moreover, a great way to learn new vocabulary is when you are able to associate new words with the words in your native language. This specific student said that for him it was a great advantage to be in the country of the language he was studying. In addition he said that he has never learnt a language as well as he has learnt Swedish, probably because he has never been abroad before while taking other language classes.

4.2 Summary of results

According to Ellis (1994: 201) there are four specific social factors that can matter when you learn a second language, namely age, gender, social class and ethnic identity. This is a quotation from one questionnaire (this quotation was also included above in the result section):

“Research shows they can all have an impact but I think motivation plays a big part in long way learning. Age- Children pick up a language quickly and their pronunciation can be near native. But adults can be better at grammar. More women tend to study languages than men but I don’t think this means that women are better.”

In both the interviews and the questionnaires a great number of students said/wrote that social factors matter, but that motivation is the key factor, i.e. the factor that has the biggest role to play in language learning. If you are interested and motivated, there is nothing preventing you
from learning a second language. Through my questionnaires and interviews it has been suggested that it is very important that you are interested in the language you are learning. If you are interested, you learn much more quickly and it might be more fun. Saville-Troike (2006:85-86) claims that the more motivated students are, the better they will learn a new language.

Furthermore, the factor motivation also includes the attitudes that the learners have towards the new language (Saville-Troike 2006:85-86). As one student said in an interview he needs to feel that he needs the new language for a purpose or else it does not feel that tempting to learn it. If the learners are motivated to learn the new language and feel that it is useful they will learn it better than those who do not think that they need it. For example, how quickly immigrants that are new in a country learn and develop depends on their motivation (Ellis 1994:207-210). Immigrants are expected to be highly motivated; however, some are not since they might think they do not need to learn the language. Ellis (1997:76) claims that motivation is not something that a learner has or does not have, but rather something that varies from one moment to the next, depending on the learning context or task. For example, as one student mentioned in an interview, if the lectures are interesting, you will go to the next class, but if you have a horrible teacher you do not care to be there. While learning a language the lessons have to be motivating and that should be the aim for the teacher. Furthermore, negative attitudes can impede language learning, and you usually get negative attitudes when you are not interested or have difficulties with the teacher (Ellis 1994:197-201).

All the students I interviewed and most of the students that answered the questionnaire mentioned that you get your reward when you are able to communicate with and understand people who speak the language that you are studying. To get the opportunity to communicate with native speakers of the target language is thus one of the keys to successful L2 studies for a majority of the students in my study.

Sutarso (1996:3-4) shows that over the years different ways of understanding other cultures have been promoted, such as cross-cultural training programmes and student exchange programmes. However, a less expensive way is to study languages in one’s home country. Sutarso (1996:3-4) further holds that a language is a ‘mirror’ of the culture and by studying the language, students learn about the situations in which the language is used and furthermore learn about the customs and the culture of its society (ibid 3-4). As a student said in one of my interviews, to learn languages is a great way of learning new cultures and discovering new people. As our world is getting more multicultural, it is good to learn more languages, since it helps us understand new cultures.
Finally, as mentioned by some of the students in their answers to the questionnaire, knowledge of languages are good to include in your CV, and will give you advantages in your future career.

5. Conclusion

The main topic of this paper is students’ motivation and attitudes towards learning a second language. A subordinate-topic is whether students and teachers believe that social factors matter while learning an L2. I have studied secondary sources on these topics, and the results of my literature studies are presented in Section 2 (Previous Work). Furthermore I used interviews and questionnaires to get some personal information from students and teachers and to get their opinions on those subjects.

The teachers that were interviewed both said that they have seen all kinds of attitudes among students. Some students are interested in the language and some are not. Furthermore, some students come to class and are focusing on what they are supposed to do and some are not, since they are not motivated. Furthermore, all the students I interviewed were motivated and had good attitudes to the language they are learning. They all agreed that it is vital to be motivated and have good attitudes towards the language you are trying to learn in order to develop.

Saville-Troike (2006:85-86) informs us that individual motivation is a factor that is used to explain why some L2 learners are more successful than others. The level of effort that learners expend at various stages in their L2 development depends on how motivated they are to learn. The more motivated students are, the easier they will learn a new language (ibid 85-86). Studies have shown that motivation is crucial in the process of learning a second language. How well the learners develop and what kind of progress they make usually depend on their motivation, i.e. how motivated they are to learn a second language and how much time they are willing to spend on learning it.

This paper has examined a group of students in the UK studying Swedish. They all had in common that they already knew other languages and they all agreed that knowing more than one language makes it easier to learn yet another one. Through a questionnaire that was handed out to them, I received many interesting answers. They all agreed that it is sometimes hard, but definitely rewarding, to learn a second language. A similar questionnaire was handed out to students in Sweden studying English as a second language. Through the questionnaires and interviews that this study is based on, I have reached the conclusion that the students in my study believed that social factors matter less than it is sometimes assumed
in the literature while learning a second language. Motivation and the will to learn a second language are factors that were considered much more important than the social ones. According to the students that I have been in contact with, while you are learning a second language, you have to have a good tutor that can encourage you in your development. Furthermore, having a reason for learning that specific language is also crucial. For example, immigrants that are new in a country are supposed to learn the new language quickly. With quickly I mean that they should start to study it as soon as possible when they have moved to their new country. Moreover, how fast they learn a new language depends on the individual learner’s motivation (Ellis 1994:207-210). Once again we come to the motivation factor.

A possible further research topic could be to interview immigrants learning a second language and to find out more about their opinions about ‘having’ to learn a new language. It would be interesting to know whether or not they have reached the same conclusion as I have about the importance of motivation.
6. References

**Primary Sources:**
Questionnaires with students and interviews with students and teachers. (In the UK and in Sweden).

**Secondary Sources:**
The Swedish curriculum for Upper Secondary School.
Appendix A, The questionnaire for the British students

Växjö University

- Male (Man)
- Female (Kvinna)

Age (ålder): ___

What do you study at the University? (Vad studerar du ?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Why do you study Swedish? (Varför studerar du svenska?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Which other languages do you study? Or do you already know? (Vilka andra språk studerar du eller kan du redan?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are your general thoughts about learning a second language? (Vad är dina allmänna funderingar om att lära sig ett andra språk?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Do you think social factors such as age, gender, social class and social identity matter? If yes, how? (Tycker du att ålder, kön, samhällsklass och etnicitet har någon inverkan? om ja, hur?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you think you are coping with the Swedish language? What is difficult and which parts are less difficult? (Hur går det med att lära dig svenska? Vad är svårt och vad är lättare?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How many hours do you study Swedish per week? (the 4 hour session should not be included) (Hur många timmar i veckan studerar du svenska, förutom de 4 timmarna om fredagarna?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you learn the best? Through which methods? (Hur lär du dig bäst? Genom vilka metoder?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you learn new vocabulary? (Hur lär du dig nya ord?)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your co-operation! And good luck with your language learning! (Tack för din tid och lycka till med din språkinlärning!)

Frida Lennartsson
Hej!

- Kille
- Tjej

Ålder:___

Vilket program går du på gymnasiet?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Vilka språk studerar du?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Vad är dina funderingar om att lära sig ett andra språk?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Tycker du att ålder, kön, samhällsklass och etnicitet har någon inverkan? om ja, hur?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Hur går det med att lära dig ett annat språk? Vad är svårt och vad är lättare?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Hur många timmar i veckan studerar du språk?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Hur lär du dig bäst? Genom vilka metoder?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Hur lär du dig nya ord?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Tack för din tid och lycka till med din språkinlärning!

Frida Lennartsson
Appendix B, The questionnaire for the Swedish students

Växjö University

Hello!
My name is Frida Lennartsson and I’m studying to become an Upper Secondary school teacher in English. For the moment I’m writing my C paper at Växjö University where I compare students’ attitudes towards language learning. I will later on compare British students’ opinions with Swedish students’ opinions. The aim is to see the similarities and differences while learning a second language.

- Male
- Female

Age: ___

Which programme are you attending in school?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Do you study any languages? If yes, which?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are your general thoughts about learning a second language?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Do you think social factors such as age, gender, social class and social identity matter? If yes, how?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you think you are coping with the Second Language Learning? What is difficult and which parts are less difficult?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How many hours do you study languages per week?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you learn the best? Through which methods?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How do you learn new vocabulary?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your co-operation! And good luck with your language learning!

Frida Lennartsson
Appendix C, Interview guide for students

1. How important do you think it is to be interested in the language you are learning?
   - Very important,
   - quite important,
   - Not so important,
   - not important at all
   Why?

2. What are your attitudes towards learning a second language?

3. Have you had any negative attitudes while learning a language? Why? When?

4. Do you think that negative attitudes sometimes can give positive results?

5. Do you learn a new language the best in a classroom milieu or in other places? why?

6. Do you think you have any advantages while learning languages since you are a man/woman and young?

7. Have you had any bad / good experiences while learning a foreign language?
Appendix D, Interview guide for teachers

1. What do you teach?
2. How important do you think it is that the students are interested in the language they are learning?
   - Very important    - quite important
   - Not so important   - not important at all

   Why?

3. Which social factors matter while learning a second language? (age, gender, social class and ethnic identity).
4. Can you give any examples, when you have seen differences with social factors?
5. What kind of attitudes have you seen among the students who are learning a second language?
6. When a student shows negative attitudes while learning a second language, what do you do?
7. How can you turn negative attitudes into positive ones?
8. Do you think that negative attitudes sometimes can give positive results?
9. Have you had any bad / good experiences while teaching a foreign language?