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# Moving Towards an Earlier Age of Onset of L2 Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Motivation in Swiss Classrooms

Simone E. Pfenninger

This study was conducted against the backdrop of the recent expansion of L2 teaching at Swiss elementary school level and analyzes the motivational dispositions of 200 students with differing ages of onset of learning and consequently a different amount of L2 instruction. Based on Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System, it is shown that out of 12 motivational areas, the only dimension that yielded significant differences between the two age-groups is the Ideal L2 Self. English is generally appraised with equally positive attitudes and dispositions by early classroom learners and late classroom learners alike, which supports the hypothesis that the amount of instruction received or the age of onset do not have a great influence on the learners' motivation levels in an instructed setting (e.g. Tragant). However, the ideal L2 English selves, which are believed to be pivotal in L2 learning success (see e.g. Csizér and colleagues), are most well developed for the late starters, which possibly accounts for their well-attested head start at the beginning of middle school.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, learning English as a second language (L2) has become the norm in many European countries, and so-called "Early English" programs have been added to many Education Acts. Following this trend, the Swiss Conference of the Education Directors of the Can-

tons (EDC) introduced Early English into the primary school curriculum in 2004. This means that as of 2012 at the latest, the mandatory age of onset is set back from 13-14 to 8, that is, from Year 7 (first year at middle school) to Year 2.<sup>1</sup> According to the official policy directions, one of the main reasons for the introduction of Early English in Switzerland was to provide our students with the possibility to become solid (not native-like!) L2 speakers, as a consequence of globalization, integration and the world-wide network. In the L2 primary school classroom, the focus should be on L2 sensitization, communication and cultural awareness, leaving formal, explicit instruction of grammar to secondary school. The introduction of Early English has given rise to a number of concerns during the phase of transition in the last few years, most of them being related to the teaching approach in primary school and the apparent lack of learning success of the early classroom learners (henceforth ECLs) compared to the late classroom learners (henceforth LCLs), who used to start learning English at the beginning of middle school, that is, at the age of 13-14. For instance, in Pfenninger, it was found that age of onset of learning was not associated with differential accuracy rates for the use of bound and unbound morphology in a large battery of contextualized, offline tasks (oral and written) by 100 ECLs and 100 LCLs in a single context, Zurich, the largest city in Switzerland. Within six months, the ECLs, who profited from an advance in L2 learning of 5 years in primary school, were equalled and in certain fields even surpassed by the LCLs. I suggested there that some of the main reasons seem to be the over-reliance of the Education Directors on (a) the effects of age and (b) the amount of time spent learning an L2 at the expense of the manner of instruction (i.e., type and intensity of language exposure) (cf. also Muñoz, *Age and the Rate of Foreign Language Learning*).

Since a number of researchers have emphasized the role of factors other than a specifically language-focused critical period, notably contextual and individual factors that “may mediate or interrelate with age effects in SLA” (Muñoz and Singleton 11), and because of the social-psychological nature of L2 learning in general, which is intimately tied with the “adoption of a new cultural identity and new ways of communicating” (Williams, Burden and Lanvers 505), it is important to interpret these findings within a motivational framework. This paper reports on an investigation into the L2 learning motivation of 200 middle school students with differing ages of onset of learning and consequently a different amount of L2 instruction. I am particularly interested in analyzing whether the observed discrepancy in their L2 performance

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<sup>1</sup> In certain cantons, the age of onset for English is 11 due to “Early French,” which is taught in Year 2 in those cantons.

and competence can be explained in terms of different motivational dispositions. The main question addressed will be as to whether the ECLs' lack of L2 superiority might have motivational reasons, since the LCLs' head start cannot be explained in terms of superior neurobiological or cognitive development. Or to turn the argument around, are the LCLs able to catch up to and even surpass the ECLs because the former show higher levels of motivation or a different type of motivation? Furthermore, the relation between motivation and course grades as an achievement measure will also be analyzed in order to shed light on the "interaction of motivation and achievement" (Tragant 246).

In the first part of this paper, I will consider the recent literature on the interaction between motivation and (a) age of onset and (b) amount of exposure within an "education-friendly" (Dörnyei, *Teaching and Researching Motivation* 103) motivational framework. Against this backdrop, I will discuss the questionnaire data obtained from the 200 middle school students in the second part.

## 2. Motivation in an instructed setting

As Gardner (*Motivation and Second Language Acquisition* 2) points out, the characteristics of motivation are manifold. In the field of SLA, language learning motivation and L2 attitude have been shown to play important roles: positive attitude, high motivation and low anxiety have been linked both to the desire to study a foreign language and to the ability to do well in that language (Arnold; Dewaele). Thus, in contrast to the L1, differential motivation clearly impacts a child's or adult's success or lack of success in learning the L2 (cf. Gardner *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning; Integrative Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*; Dewaele; Dörnyei *Conceptualizing Motivation; Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom; Teaching and Researching Motivation; The Psychology of the Language Learner; The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*). For reasons of space limitations, I will restrict myself here to an outline of the most influential "motivational dimensions" or "orientations"<sup>2</sup> that have been identified in recent years, with a special emphasis on Gardner's Socio-Educational Model of Language Learning and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Gardner, orientations "represent ultimate goals for achieving the more immediate goal of learning the second language" (*Social Psychology and Second Language Learning* 11).



In his Socio-Educational Model of Language Learning, Gardner established the well-known concepts of integrative and instrumental orientation. “Integrativeness” or “Openness to Cultural Identification” (Gardner, *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning* 7; see also Gardner and Lambert) represents one of the most researched types of motivation – and the one reported to have most influence on L2 learning in a range of studies (e.g. Csizér and Dörnyei; Williams, Burden and Lanvers). Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret describe it as “the individual’s willingness and interest in having social interaction with members of the L2 group” (345). In recent years, this interpretation of the concept of Integrativeness has been significantly broadened; on the one hand, Csizér and Dörnyei point out that besides including the wish to “integrate themselves into the L2 culture and become similar to the L2 speakers” (20), Integrativeness should be looked at within the larger framework of the “Ideal L2 Self” (Higgins; Markus and Nurius), which is the core to many motivational constructs (e.g. Arnold; Csizér and Lukács; Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Language Learner*; Kormos and Csizér), notably Dörnyei’s “L2 Motivational Self-System,” which emphasizes the effect of the ability to image oneself as a successful L2 user in the future and to identify oneself as part of the L2 community on L2 learning success. Ushioda and Chen propose that “motivation for learning another language (as opposed to learning a subject like science or history) becomes intimately bound up with how one sees oneself in relation to the people, culture and values represented by the target language, and in relation to one’s own linguistic community, culture and values” (44). What is especially relevant for this study is that in previous work (e.g. Csizér and Lukács; Kormos and Csizér), it was found that the Ideal L2 Self is the motivational dimension that contributes most to learners’ motivated behavior.

The concept of Integrativeness has also been broadened as new “education-friendly approaches” (Dörnyei, *Teaching and Researching Motivation* 103) to language learner motivation have emerged that take into account the classroom context of learner motivation and that are “in line with the current results of mainstream educational psychological research” (Dörnyei, *Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom* 273; see also Ushioda). For instance, Tragant, who analyzed 2,010 students’ answers to two questions (one yes/no question and one open-ended question) in the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project, suggests that in an instructed setting, where the students do not have prolonged contact with the target culture, it is more realistic to think of Integra-

tiveness within a broader frame of reference.<sup>3</sup> She suggests that Integrativeness includes “learners’ reactions to a world in which English plays a predominant role” (244), such as popular culture, the media, the internet, etc., and refers to this orientation as “Receptive orientation,” which corresponds to Clément, Dörnyei and Noels’ “English media factor,” one of five factors in a socio-educational construct of English L2 acquisition. Skutnabb-Kangas (quoted in Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér 2) argues that, as a consequence of the development of English as a global language, “the English language has become separated from its native speakers and their cultures.” This also explains why Integrativeness is closely linked to other motivational dimensions, most notably (a) what Gardner labelled “Instrumentality,” which refers to the perceived usefulness of L2 proficiency (the practical values and advantages of the L2) and thus concerns pragmatic incentives, and (b) “Attitudes toward the L2 community,” which describes the learners’ desire to meet L2 speakers and travel to their country (Gardner, *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning*; Csizér and Dörnyei; Kormos and Csizér). What is most often pointed out with respect to these two orientations is the status of English as an international lingua franca, i.e. the fact that it has become a necessity to speak English in various European countries, which leads people to develop a “bicultural identity” (Csizér and Lukács 2). Dörnyei (*The Psychology of the Language Learner*) and Csizér and Dörnyei specify that internalized instrumental motives, such as perceived benefits and usefulness of the L2 in a globalized world, can thus be part of the student’s Ideal L2 Self: “Because the ideal language self is a cognitive representation of all the incentives associated with L2 mastery, it is naturally also linked to professional competence. To put it broadly, in our idealized image of ourselves we may want to be not only personally agreeable but also professionally successful” (Csizér and Dörnyei 29). Ideal L2 Self and Attitudes toward the L2 community are linked insofar as our idealized L2 Self becomes more attractive the more positive our disposition toward the L2 speakers (Csizér and Dörnyei 29).

Another important motivational dimension that has been described in the literature is “Cultural interest,” which reflects “the appreciation of cultural products” (Csizér and Dörnyei 21), as for instance transferred by the media. Cultural interest has also been linked with the Ideal L2

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<sup>3</sup> Tragant applied the eight-category taxonomy developed by Tragant and Muñoz, which includes 4 types of orientation (“Instrumental/career orientation,” “Knowledge orientation,” “Communication/travel orientation” and “Receptive orientation”) and 4 components of motivation (“Attitudes towards L2 instruction,” “Interest in L2,” “Determination to learn English” and “Self-confidence in L2”) (for a detailed discussion of these, see Tragant 248 ff.).

Self and is also said to be related to L2 learning success. Already in 1986, Spada found that authentic, informal interactive contact with the L2 (e.g. watching TV programs) leads to greater fluency (cf. also Moyer, *Formal and Informal Experiential Realms*). In recent years, cultural interest has often been mentioned in connection with research on the effect of the different domains of input. For instance, in a longitudinal study testing input effects on 159 students (mean age: 21;2, mean age of onset: 7;7) over the years, Muñoz (*Input in Foreign Language Learning*) finds that while starting age is not significantly correlated with output measures in the long term (not even after 10 years of instruction), measures of input (notably amount of naturalistic exposure to L2, extracurricular exposure, current L2 contact) are. Tragant arrived at a similar conclusion when she found that the only difference between her teenage groups (aged 14;9; 16;9 and 17;9) and (the more successful) adult groups (aged 28;9 and 31;9) lay in the “Receptive orientation” of the learners, since the adults reported a stronger interest in dealing with English books, songs, the media, etc. This was also observed in the data collected from 623 Hungarian students by Kormos and Csizér: for their youngest and most successful group, the adolescent language learners, it was “interest in English-language cultural products that affects their motivated behavior” (346).

“Vitality of the L2 community” is another frequently mentioned motivational dimension and means the “perceived importance and wealth of the L2 communities in question” (Csizér and Dörnyei 21), while “Milieu” refers to “the influence of significant others, such as parents, family, and friends” (Csizér and Dörnyei 22), taking into account that motivation does not just come from within the individual but is created within cultural systems and involves the mediation of others (Rueda and Moll). Finally, “Linguistic self-confidence” is concerned with “L2 learning in general without any specific reference to concrete languages” (Csizér and Dörnyei 22), and “Attitudes toward the learning situation” includes all variables that can be linked directly to the “educational system and the experiences associated with the educational environment” (Gardner, *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition* 7). As Gardner points out, “Attitudes toward the Learning Situation” can have an influence on the individual’s level of Integrativeness, particularly “teacher-specific motivational components,” which refer to the “desire for teacher approval” (Dörnyei, *Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom* 278), which is particularly important for younger learners.

### 3. The interaction of motivation and age of onset

The relationship between L2 learning motivation and age has not been researched extensively. As concerns the interplay between motivation and age, younger learners are said to show significantly better attitudes toward learning English than older learners (Cenoz), which Kanno attributes to psychological and educational factors. For instance, younger learners are known to have a natural tendency to respond enthusiastically to new challenges in contrast with the self-consciousness that afflicts adolescents when performing in an L2 (Driscoll 11). However, one has to be cautious when generalizing the fact that primary school beginners seem to demonstrate more positive attitudes to speaking an L2 than secondary learners. For instance, the quality of instruction might affect the strength of the motivation-outcome relationship negatively, e.g. when the learners are very enthusiastic (as it is often the case in the primary school classroom), yet the approach is not adequate (cf. Csizér and Dörnyei). For instance, in the Zagreb Project 1991, Mihaljevic Djigunovic observed that the 336 7-year-old children who participated in the study did not list learning foreign languages (English, French and German) among their favorite school subjects; she suspects that this might be because games and playing, which constituted a great part of the L2 curriculum, bored them. Another issue is that in many primary schools (also in Switzerland), the students' performance is not graded, which might influence their motivated learning behavior as well: goal-setting is known to be a powerful motivator that might enhance intrinsic interest, and grades and tests have been found to function as "proximal subgoals and markers of progress that provide immediate incentive, self-inducements, and feedback and that help mobilize and maintain effort" (Dörnyei, *Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom* 276). The perceived likelihood of success and reward thus constitutes an important part in the concept of motivation (Moyer, *Age, Accent and Experience in Second Language Acquisition*), or, as Nikolov puts it, "achievements represented by good grades, rewards and language knowledge all serve as motivating forces: children feel successful and this feeling generates the need for further success" (46). In Nikolov's study, grades seemed to be very important for her participants (ages 6-14); extrinsic motives constituted one of four main areas of motivation mentioned most frequently in students' answers to open-ended questions. However, the status of school grades is still highly debated, particularly due to their potential to exercise pressure on the students.

Older learners are traditionally said to have a tendency to reject the school system in general, or they might be less motivated by the use of more traditional and less active methods in high school (see Tragant



239). Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (27) suggest that most adult learners are less successful language learners because they fail to engage in the tasks with sufficient motivation, commitment of time or energy, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect high levels of success. This, however, does not explain the LCLs' well-documented head start mentioned above: many studies (see overview in Singleton and Ryan) have shown that older learners profit from an initial short-term advantage, i.e. they experience a faster rate of learning (e.g. of morphosyntactic development) than younger learners in the initial stages, mainly due to their cognitive advantages at testing. It has also been reported (e.g. Muñoz, *Age and the Rate of Foreign Language Learning*; Pfenninger) that under conditions of unequal exposure (with early starters profiting from an extended learning period), late starters are able to catch up on and even surpass the early starters' L2 performance within a very short period of time. So far it has not been observed in the literature that the early starters were able to retain their superiority within the period of normal schooling. The common impression is that late starters seem to feel the urge to achieve proficiency quickly. Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle hypothesize that the superior initial performance by late starters (and thus older learners) is perhaps due to the greater academic demands placed on these learners by the schools, creating higher levels of motivation in them than in younger learners to learn the language necessary for success in school. On the other hand, children have (extracurricular) contact with the English language from a very early age on in many European countries. In Switzerland, for instance, English enjoys an excellent reputation among Swiss students and it is commonly considered "cool" among adolescents to speak or write in English (as demonstrated on numerous Facebook sites) or to at least include English terms in their native language, which might increase the students' intrinsic motivation. What is more, the extrinsic motivation might be increased due to the public attitude towards English in Switzerland; the importance of English in the national and international job market is generally acknowledged. Thus, late starters usually do not need any so-called "sensitization programs" (Driscoll 15) at the beginning of middle school that aim to develop a basic competence and confident "handling" of simple phrases and vocabulary.

#### 4. The interaction of motivation and amount and distribution of instructional time

When it comes to the question of the distribution of instructional time (e.g. amount of exposure in hours per week), various researchers have analyzed the effects of concentrated vs. non-concentrated time distribution programs on the motivation of the students. The general tenor seems to be that concentrated L2 instruction has a positive impact on the students' acquisition of certain aspects of language, i.e. more condensed exposure to the L2 in the classroom seems to bring about more learning than more spaced lessons (e.g. Netten and Germain; Serrano and Muñoz). Netten and Germain's study of intensive vs. non-intensive L2 French programs in Quebec showed that traditional L2 language programs with limited hours of instruction per week in a non-concentrated time distribution have not been shown particularly effective for L2 learning. The curriculum followed was the same as that for regular core French, but the recommended texts were covered in a shorter space of time, with the teaching strategies not being changed – similar to the situation in Switzerland. Serrano and Muñoz examined the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) of 114 L2 English students distributed in 3 groups (extensive, semi-intensive and intensive) at the language school of the University in Barcelona. Their results show that those L1 Spanish students registered in extensive classes make less progress than those in intensive groups (the hours of instruction being the same in the different language programs). Hinger observed that students in intensive groups have more group cohesion and are more motivated than students in regular classes. Similarly, the intensive group students in the studies by MacFarlane, Peters and Wesche and Peters displayed more self-confidence and positive attitudes towards learning the L2. These findings are insofar important as young learners are known to improve more slowly in primary school, possibly because they do not have enough time and exposure to benefit from their alleged advantages of implicit learning (cf. De Graaff and Housen; Muñoz, *Input in Foreign Language Learning*; Zhang and Widyastuti).

The early primary L2 language course also progresses much more slowly than any high school course because of the scarce amount of time spent learning the L2. For instance, Tragant calls attention to the question of sustainability in contexts where L2 instruction is limited to one or two sessions a week by mentioning “the serious risk that students will have difficulty in seeing any progress over time” (237). Early learners' interest and curiosity to know more might fade over this long period of sporadic language learning, which can negatively impact motivation and perseverance (Moyer, *Age, Accent and Experience in Second Lan-*

*guage Acquisition*; Williams, Burden and Lanvers). Lightbown and Spada hypothesize that this drip-feed approach often leads to frustration as learners feel that they have been studying “for years” without making much progress. The decrease in early enthusiasm over a longer period of instruction has been frequently observed in the literature. Famously, Burstall, who examined attitudes to speaking French of 17,000 children between the ages of 8 and 13, observed that the motivation to learn French as a school subject decreased after the age of 10-11. Likewise, Masgoret, Bernaus and Gardner report a decrease in motivation with age among Spanish students between 10 and 15. Williams, Burden and Lanvers analyzed the L2 learning motivation of 228 English secondary school students at different ages and found a clear decrease in motivation with age, i.e. time of exposure. While the beginners (Year 7) showed high integrative orientation, this motivational dimension waned quickly with the years of instruction.

Despite this rather negative image of the small amount of exposure and large time distribution in educational programs, it is not impossible per se for the students to maintain their high motivation levels over a longer period of time – students simply “need to develop certain skills and strategies to keep themselves on track” (Ushioda 26), e.g. by motivating themselves with incentives and self-awards, by setting concrete short-term targets or by “engaging in an intrinsically motivating activity” (Ushioda 27) during phases of boredom or frustration. Evidence for this has been provided by Tragant, who found that learners of the same age (12; 9) but with different hours of instruction (200 and 416), showed similar levels of motivation and similar types of orientation (“Instrumental” and “Communication/travel” orientations ranked very high). Significant differences were only found later: after 726 hours of instruction, more students had positive attitudes towards learning English among those who had started at the age of 11 (89.7%) than among those who had started at the age of 8 (71.2%). Tragant (257) thus concludes that biological age is a more determinant factor than hours of instruction received. This is also proposed in Gonzales’ study, where the motivation of 150 Filipino university students was assessed: Gonzales credits “biological factors and age” (17) to attribute to the understanding and appreciation of cultures as well as language acquisition, but at the same time he suggests that as students “go on learning the FL, they become more integratively motivated, shifting their motivational orientation from merely understanding a culture to being integrated into the target language community” (17-18). It has to be borne in mind, however, that his students were aged 17-20, which makes it difficult to distinguish between “younger” and “older” learners. Finally, Stevens (684)



also suggests that biological age is strongly linked with motivations and opportunities to speak and to maintain or improve proficiency in an L2.

In sum, what has been shown in an abundance of literature is that in instructional settings, the age at which instruction begins is less important than (a) the biological age of the students at the time of testing, (b) the quality and intensity of the instruction, and (c) the continuation of exposure over a sufficient period of time. In the following, this has to be verified for the situation in Switzerland.

## 5. Subjects

100 ECLs (52 females and 48 males) and 100 LCLs (51 females and 49 males) were asked to fill in a linguistic background questionnaire and a 24-item motivation questionnaire as part of a larger project that analyzes the benefits of Early English in Switzerland (Pfenninger). They have different starting ages (ECLs: 8;4, LCLs: 13;2) and a different amount of classroom exposure (ECLs' mean number of years of learning English: 5;3, LCLs' mean number of years of learning English: 0;7), but the same age at testing (ECLs' mean age: 13;3, LCL's mean age: 13;8). In the Early English program that the ECLs attended, students received on average 90 minutes of Early English per week in two 45-minute classes. As briefly indicated in Section 1, English in Switzerland does not follow a strict protocol. English may be the central focus of the lesson, but the teacher is free to incorporate it into, or combine it with, other subjects or conduct classroom business in the L2.

Due to their same biological age, both groups have the same state of neurological and cognitive development and the same level of L1 proficiency. Thus, no learner group profits from cognitive advantages. None of them had stayed outside of Switzerland for more than 1 month. All of them had had French as a school subject for 2.5 years, with two years in primary school (two 45-minute classes a week) and six months in middle school (three 45-minute classes). This means that for the ECLs, English represents the first foreign language to be learned at school (that is, in primary school), while for the LCLs, it is the second L2. This is important for a study of motivational characteristics as the initial language choice has been found to be an important condition of language learning success in countries like Switzerland where English constitutes the most popular foreign language (cf. e.g. Csizér and Lukács; Dörnyei, *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*). If the students' wish to start with English as their first language is not accommodated (e.g. when they have to learn L2 French first), their motivation will suffer in the long run (Csizér and Lukács 7, 12). Besides (Swiss)German, English and

French, none of the participants had extensive exposure to any other languages.

All of them went to the same state school, a typical middle school in the canton of Zurich, which is also the main limitation of my study: since primary school students have to pass an admission test and a 3-month probation time in order to be admitted to middle school in Switzerland, the participants of this study are representative of many but certainly not all students in Switzerland. Furthermore, the students often come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and thus might have more contact with L2 speakers than students of less “elitist” secondary schools. Direct contact with L2 communities is known to contribute to motivated learning behavior in a positive way (Csizér and Lukács 10). However, owing to the administered linguistic background questionnaire, the learning environment is believed to be fairly homogeneous in terms of social background, former school education, present school education (school system, teachers, curriculum), and L1.

Finally, let me note that no mixed classes were tested in this study, since at the school where the learners were tested, ECLs and LCLs do not come together in the same L2 class. This has the advantage that there is no levelling-down effect on the ECLs.

## 6. Materials and procedure

The problem with social-psychological factors is that it is very difficult, i.e. not very practicable, to measure them. In this study, I used a motivation questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale,<sup>4</sup> which was pilot-tested in 2009 with 50 students who did not participate in the main study in order to ensure sufficient validity and reliability coefficients.<sup>5</sup> This instrument was chosen (a) in order to elicit responses that they would be unlikely to produce spontaneously in answers to an open question (cf. Tragant), (b) to avoid obtaining vague answers that cannot be interpreted afterwards (it is not an easy task for 13-year-olds to evaluate themselves), (c) to avoid misunderstandings and/or misinterpretations on the part of the learners, and (d) to get responses even from learners who might lack confidence and, therefore, are reluctant to describe their attitude towards English.

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<sup>4</sup> 5-point scale Likert-type questionnaire items have been frequently used in motivation studies (e.g. Csizér and Dörnyei; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant and Mihic; Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér; Kormos and Csizér; among many others).

<sup>5</sup> Test-retest reliability was measured and the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.80.

The questionnaire consists of 12 motivational dimensions, with two items per dimension, and integrates language-related as well as learner-internal, learner-external and learning situation factors (Ushioda 23). The questions were partly adopted from Kormos and Csizér (who themselves followed Gardner, *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning*; Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh; and Ryan). Attention was paid that the questions were not beyond the grasp of the 13-14 age groups. Note that for economical reasons, it was not possible to include every aspect of motivational literature in the questionnaire, but endeavors were made to at least account for the key motivational factors that were identified in previous research (cf. above). Furthermore, since these motivational dimensions are closely linked, i.e. influence each other in various ways as described above, the divisions are rather simplistic and overlap to a certain extent (see also Williams, Burden and Lanvers for a discussion of this issue). However, this design is still hoped to shed some light on possible differences between the two groups as regards motivated behavior. Table 1 includes a brief description of each dimension and lists them according to the categories described in the literature outlined above (notably Csizér and Dörnyei; Dörnyei, *Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom*; Gardner, *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning*; Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret; Tragant).

Table 1. Motivational dimensions

Dimension	Description	Gardner's framework <sup>6</sup>	Tragant's framework <sup>7</sup>
1	<i>Desire to improve English for personal reasons (identification with the language and the culture)</i>	Integrativeness/Ideal L2-Self <sup>8</sup>	Receptive orientation
2	<i>Necessity of English for future career plans (work)</i>	Instrumentality	Instrumental/career orientation
3	<i>Importance of English to graduate from high school (school)</i>		
4	<i>Desire to improve English for future studies (university)</i>		

<sup>6</sup> Further elaborated by Csizér and Dörnyei.

<sup>7</sup> Based on Tragant and Muñoz' 4 types of orientation and 4 components of motivation.

<sup>8</sup> According to Kormos and Csizér (347), the correlation of Integrativeness and Ideal L2 Self can be considered moderate for secondary school students.

5	<i>Desire to improve to travel to foreign countries</i>	Attitudes toward the L2 community	Communication/ travel orientation
6	<i>Desire to improve English to initiate contact to English speakers</i>		
7	<i>Importance of English in popular culture</i>	Cultural interests	Receptive orientation
8	<i>Necessity of English to be respected in society</i>	Vitality of the L2 community	Instrumental/ career orientation
9	<i>Intensity of motivation to learn foreign languages in general</i>	Linguistic self-confidence	Knowledge orientation
10	<i>Desire to improve English due to parental support</i>	Milieu	-
11	<i>Satisfaction with the English teacher</i>	Attitudes toward the learning situation	Positive attitudes
12	<i>Intensity of motivation to go to English class</i>		towards L2 instruction

Dimensions 1 and 7, which can be classified as “Receptive orientation” in Tragant’s framework, include the learners’ identification of the target culture and the liking of the L2, as well as the “use of English in non-interactive contexts such as reading books, magazines and newspapers, listening to songs, watching movies, using the internet, and so on” (Tragant 249). Dimensions 2, 3, 4 and 8 refer to the importance of English as a lingua franca and the usefulness of English for one’s career and studies (at present or in the future) and can be classified as “Instrumental/career orientation” (Tragant 248). Dimensions 5 and 6 refer to the “Communication/travel orientation,” i.e. “contexts in which English is used for interaction” (Tragant 249): interest in travelling, meeting people from other countries, spending time or living in an English-speaking country. Dimension 9 can be classified as “Knowledge orientation,” since they deal with “knowing a ‘new’ language other than their first language or acquiring a higher level of education, rather than on the process of learning itself” (Tragant 249). Finally, dimension 10 taps into parental encouragement (which was missing in Tragant’s study), and dimensions 11 and 12 correspond to “Positive attitudes towards L2 instruction,” with a focus on teacher-specific motivational and course-specific components. Note that some of the scales were made up of negatively worded items. Besides these scales, one additional simple question was asked in order to discover the place of English among

other school subjects (see Nikolov 41): “On a priority scale of 1-10 (1 being the highest/the most important school subject), how high would you rank English?”

The questionnaire was administered by the author and was completed by the ECLs and LCLs during class time so that they were able to ask questions where necessary. To identify differences between mean values on scales, independent-sample *t*-tests as well as chi-square tests were run.

## 7. Results

Table 2 shows the comparison of the two learner groups, of which the first (ECLs) started learning English in primary school ( $n=100$ ) and the second group (LCLs) commenced their English studies later in middle school ( $n=100$ ). In the *t*-test, the level of significance was set for  $p < .05$  due to sample size.

Table 2. Types of motivation in both learner groups

Questionnaire dimensions and age groups	Mean value	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
1) <i>Desire to improve English for personal reasons</i>				
ECLs	3.38	.98	1.989	.048
LCLs	3.67	1.08		
2) <i>Necessity of English for future career plans</i>				
ECLs	4.02	.71	-0.356	n.s.
LCLs	4.06	.87		
3) <i>Importance of English to graduate from high school</i>				
ECLs	3.33	.88	0.992	n.s.
LCLs	3.21	.83		
4) <i>Desire to improve English for future studies</i>				
ECLs	3.57	.92	-0.711	n.s.
LCLs	3.66	.87		
5) <i>Desire to improve English to travel to foreign countries</i>				
ECLs	4.31	.72	1.909	n.s.

LCLs	4.09	.90		
6) <i>Desire to improve English to initiate contact to English speakers</i>				
ECLs	3.97	.76	-0.265	
LCLs	4.00	.84		n.s.
7) <i>Importance of English in popular culture</i>				
ECLs	3.59	1.06	-0.559	
LCLs	3.67	.96		n.s.
8) <i>Necessity of English to be respected in society</i>				
ECLs	2.45	1.03	-0.138	
LCLs	2.47	1.02		n.s.
9) <i>Intensity of motivation to learn foreign languages in general</i>				
ECLs	3.62	.97	-0.601	
LCLs	3.71	1.14		n.s.
10) <i>Desire to improve English due to parental support</i>				
ECLs	3.45	1.01	-1.847	
LCLs	3.73	1.13		n.s.
11) <i>Satisfaction with the English teacher</i>				
ECLs	4.31	.95	0.615	
LCLs	4.23	.89		n.s.
12) <i>Intensity of motivation to go to English class</i>				
ECLs	3.96	.75	1.113	
LCLs	3.82	1.01		n.s.

In general, there is a very high correlation between the mean values of the two learners groups (Pearson's correlation  $r=0.95$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Both the ECLs and the LCLs can be considered highly motivated learner groups, with very few learners expressing a low interest in, or desire to learn and improve their L2 English. Dimensions 2 (Instrumentality [work]), 5 (Attitudes toward the L2 community), and 11 (Attitudes toward the Learning Situation [teacher]) are the scales that showed the highest mean values, surpassing the 4-point mark on a 5-point scale. Only one of the scales had a lower mean value than 3, namely dimension 8 (Vitality of the L2 community). All the learners reported an overwhelmingly strong satisfaction with their English teacher (dimension 11): 84% of the ECLs



and 80% of the LCLs are content or highly content with their instructor, which stands in contradiction with other findings; Tragant, for example, found that “Positive instruction” receives low percentages in her groups irrespective of the age of onset, i.e. this reason was rarely mentioned in the answers of the learners with starting ages of 8, 11 and 18 at all testings.

The results from the two-tailed *t*-test revealed that there is one marked difference between the two groups’ motivational dispositions: the Ideal English selves seem to be more developed for the LCLs than for the ECLs (dimension 1), which points to the LCLs’ stronger desire to improve English for personal reasons. An additionally run chi-square contingency test (cf. results in the Appendix) showed that dimension 12 ( $X^2=7.83$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), which represents the students’ motivation to go to English class (“Attitudes toward the Learning Situation”), is also marginally significant, with the ECLs scoring higher values than the LCLs.

Finally, as concerns the additional question (“On a priority scale of 1–10 (1 being the highest/the most important school subject), how high would you rank English?”), the LCLs seem to esteem English as a school subject higher than the ECLs; they placed English between 2-3 (mean=2.79, SD=1.51), while the ECLs placed it between 3-4 (mean=3.42, SD=1.86), which is significant ( $t=2.3$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Interestingly, the students’ responses did not correlate with their course grades<sup>9</sup>: the responses yielded a very weak (and non-significant) negative correlation for ECLs ( $r=-0.18$ ) and a moderate (but significant) negative correlation for LCLs ( $r=-0.42$ ;  $p<.001$ ), which indicates a weak interaction between favorable attitudes toward the course and achievement at school, i.e. it reflects the high status of English as an important life skill in general irrespective of one’s success at L2 learning at school or the classroom experience. The “extrinsic gains of learning English” or “pragmatic orientation” of learners aged 12;9 onwards has also been observed by Tragant’s study, where the young adolescents’ (extrinsic) motivation levels were high, “even though for most of those students the process that learning English entailed (the lessons) may not be particularly motivating (English was not a favorite subject)” (262).

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<sup>9</sup> The mean course grade of the ECLs in English class was 4.5 (SD=0.61), while the mean grade of the LCLs was 4.6 (SD=0.51).



## 8. Discussion

The equally high levels of motivation of the two learner groups refutes several previous findings: neither longer exposure, nor age of onset of learning, nor the order of L2s being learned at school seem to have a significantly positive or negative effect on the students' motivational behavior. Furthermore, instrumental concerns were not the predominant reasons reported by the learners, in contrast to the findings in existing studies (e.g. Lamb). Only instrumental motives concerning future career plans rank high, which is remarkable, considering the fact that in the case of middle school students, career-related goals are quite distant (cf. e.g. Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér). In Nikolov's study, for instance, instrumental motives are highest around puberty. She cautions, however, that "most of the children are aware of the fact that English will be useful in their adult life but not all of them give this as a reason for studying it" (46). This might also be the case in this study; none of the students learn English merely for the sake of high school graduation (dimension 3), i.e. because English is a mandatory school subject, and neither group seems to be aware of the necessity to speak English in the globalized world (for social, educational, professional and material success in the future) and that they can therefore not afford abandoning their English studies: hardly any learners of the two groups expressed an awareness of the increasing stigmatization of people who do not master English in our society (dimension 8), i.e. only 3 ECLs and 3 LCLs say that people who do not speak English might be disrespected for this lack of knowledge. This might be due to their age, as adolescents might not yet perceive the high importance of being able to use English in our society. It is nevertheless a noticeable result for the ECLs, as it is one of the main goals of Early English in Switzerland to make the learners aware of the role English plays in the world and to raise their cultural awareness. Interestingly, on the other hand, both populations realize the importance of English to initiate contact with native speakers of English (dimension 6); 81% of the ECLs and 76% of the LCLs see this as an incentive to improve their English skills.

Another motivational dimension that ranks very high is "Attitudes toward the L2 Speakers/Community," which is in line with the results from Mihaljevic Djigunovic's and Tragant's studies, where the primary school students rank the reason "Communication/travel orientation" (my dimensions 5 and 6) highest at all testings. Csizér and Dörnyei, who analyzed survey data from 8,593 Hungarian students aged 13-14 on two occasions (with an interval of 6 years), found that while Integrativeness was the single most important factor in the generalized motivational disposition of language learners, "Attitudes toward the L2 Speak-

ers/Community” have emerged as one of the main antecedents of Integrativeness, i.e. they feed into Integrativeness as one of its primary contributors.

Neither ECLs nor LCLs seem to bow to parental expectations, i.e. they do not report that their parents have a particularly active, encouraging role in their L2 learning (see the values around 3.5 on a 5-point scale for dimension 10). This is insofar interesting as it is often indicated in the literature (see e.g. the Zagreb Project by Mihajlovic Djigunovic) that parents tend to take an active part and that their support attributes success to motivation. We might speculate that at the beginning of puberty, other members of their close social contexts, e.g. friends and peers, might have more influence on their L2 motivation than parents. Cf., e.g., Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér, who explain the weak effect of parental support on the Ideal L2 Self of teenagers as follows: “Secondary school students are at an age where they start asserting independence from their parents, and thus their parents’ views and encouragement have a somewhat weaker effect on their attitudes” (15).

The one area where a *t*-test yielded significant differences, dimension 1, deals with what Gardner called “Integrativeness” and Dörnyei re-interpreted as the “Ideal L2 Self.” Several aspects of Dörnyei’s Motivational Self System might contribute to a better understanding of the result that the LCLs seem to have more salient Ideal English selves. As described above, the underlying attitude of the L2-Self is described by Gardner as the “emotional identification with another cultural group” (*Integrative Motivation and Second Language Acquisition* 5). English-related products and popular culture with all its role models are known to represent a strong motivator for the Swiss adolescents to learn English: for instance, the students identify themselves with Anglo-Saxon celebrities, who, in their opinion, have the attributes they would ideally like to possess, much in the sense of how Dörnyei (*The Psychology of the Language Learner*) describes it:

Our idealized L2-speaking self can be seen as a member of an imagined L2 community whose mental construction is partly based on our real-life experiences of members of the community/communities speaking the particular L2 in question and partly on our imagination. (102)

In a similar vein, Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér explain the concept of the L2 Ideal Self of teenagers as follows: “Their motif to learn English is in all likelihood associated with the wish to become part of the global community of teenagers interacting in the borderless environment of the Internet and information technology” (16). What is interesting in my study is that the late-starting formal learners showed significantly higher

mean values in this motivational area than the early-starting formal learners. Since this difference cannot be put down to age or learning environment at the moment of testing, the crucial factors must lie in the kind of input the two populations received in the past, i.e. different learning experiences (curricular vs. extracurricular L2 acquisition). It seems to be the LCLs' access to a variety of (extracurricular) conversations and linguistic resources in the L2 (computer games, TV shows, internet platforms, etc.), or, more generally speaking, their "investment" (Ushioda 24) in the L2 prior to middle school, that accounts for their headstart at the beginning of middle school. This does not necessarily imply that the LCLs benefited from more contexts of L2 interaction than the ECLs in general, but rather that the LCLs profited from the purely voluntary L2 interaction in their free time. While the ECLs had more contexts of L2 interaction at school, the LCLs had more engagement in informal personal domains. Thus, this seems to support the hypothesis that it is essentially the "domains in which the language is used" (Muñoz and Singleton 13) that are significant. The main shortcoming in this study is that frequency of use of L2 outside the classroom was not measured, even though some measures of L2 use have been derived from the linguistic background questionnaire described above.

The second dimension that displays (marginally) significant differences, namely dimension 12 ( $X^2=7.83$ ;  $p=0.05$ ; cf. Appendix 1), reveals a difference in the perception of English as a subject in the school curriculum. By stating that they have a "strong" interest in going to English class, the ECLs seem to esteem English as a school subject higher than the LCLs, possibly due to their prolonged experience with English as a school subject. This concurs with Tragant's results, which reveal that "for older students the importance of English might have been more salient than the teaching approach [. . .] and the opposite might have been the case for younger learners" (259). Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér, who analyzed the L2 learning motivation of three different age groups (201 secondary school students, 174 university students, 143 adult learners) in Chile, found that university students derived more enjoyment from language learning than secondary students and that this enjoyment "exerts a significantly more important influence on the Ideal L2 self of university students" (13) than of secondary students or adult learners. They hypothesize that this might be due to the fact that "for secondary school students language-learning attitudes might be strongly influenced by the instructional context, and their attitudes might be related to English being as one of the school subjects" (14). This supports again the importance of context of L2 acquisition/learning: while the LCLs' language-learning attitudes are strongly influenced by their extracurricular

exposure to the L2, the ECLs' language-learning attitudes are strongly influenced by the instructional context.

## 9. Conclusion

The overall results suggest that apart from two dimensions ("Ideal L2 Self" and "Positive attitudes towards L2 instruction") where the values of the two groups differed significantly, younger age of onset and longer time spent in studying L2 English do not influence learners' motivation. The motivation that ECLs reportedly show in primary education seems to be sustained, at least throughout the first 6 months of middle school. The results thus support Tragant's hypothesis that the types of orientation are more dependent on the biological age of the learners than on the amount of instruction received or the age of onset. The levels of motivation also seem to be independent of the L2s previously learned in school; the fact that the LCLs started with French as their first L2 did not have a negative impact on their motivation to learn English – at least compared to the ECLs, who had English as their first L2. By contrast, the contexts of SLA, i.e. the different domains of curricular and extracurricular input, were shown to have a significant influence on language learning motivation. In light of the impact of extracurricular input the idea that late starters are complete beginners when they enter middle school just because they have not received any L2 instruction needs to be refuted. The LCLs have been exposed to English as part of their daily lives, that is through popular culture, computer technology and internet platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and many of them are eager to expand their knowledge at school, despite the fact that they have already had to start learning a slightly less popular L2 (French) at school. This incentive seems to be crucial. Since it is suggested in the literature that the students' future self-image or Ideal English Self is "at the heart of motivated L2 learning behaviors" (Csizér and Dörnyei 30) and "the main driving force of language learning" (Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Language Learner* 3), we can tentatively assume that the LCLs' significantly higher scores in this field might have an influence on their superior performance and impressive head start. Thus, it is not necessarily a question of intensity of motivation that plays the most important role in an educational context, but the type of motivation that is strongest.

Note, however, that it might well be the case that the learners' interest in English will wane in the next few years, as also observed by other researchers. As mentioned above, Tragant found that even though after 200 and 416 instructional hours no significant differences between her

two groups could be observed, after 726 hours the late starters, who started at the age of 11, showed higher levels of motivation than those who started at the age of 8.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that we cannot conclude from the overall high mean values on all motivational scales that, in general, Swiss learners find learning English important and useful. As mentioned above, the populations chosen for this study consist of high-proficiency students who have been admitted to middle school according to the results of an admission test and a probation period. In the future, further research on the motivation of students in other secondary schools is in order so that comparative data can be obtained. Also, attention needs to be paid to the development of the primary students' motivation over time, and classroom observation needs to be integrated into the research procedures, as done, e.g. by Nikolov in Hungary.

## Appendix

## Types of motivation in both learner groups (%)

Questionnaire dimensions and age groups	1 pt.	2 pt.	3 pts.	4 pts.	5 pts.	$\chi^2$
1) <i>Desire to improve English to travel to foreign countries</i>	<i>No desire at all</i>	<i>No strong desire</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Certain amount of desire</i>	<i>Definite desire</i>	
ECLs	0	1	12	42	45	$\chi^2 = 4.50$
LCLs	1	4	18	40	37	df = 3 prob = 0.212
2) <i>Necessity of English for future career plans</i>	<i>Not needed</i>	<i>Probably not needed</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>Probably</i>	<i>Yes, definitely</i>	
ECLs	0	4	12	62	22	$\chi^2 = 4.82$
LCLs	1	5	14	47	33	df = 3 prob = 0.186
3) <i>Desire to improve English due to parental support</i>	<i>No desire at all</i>	<i>No strong desire</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Certain amount of desire</i>	<i>Definite desire</i>	
ECLs	4	9	42	28	17	$\chi^2 = 6.50$
LCLs	5	7	29	28	31	df = 3 prob = 0.09
4) <i>Necessity of English to be respected in society</i>	<i>Not needed</i>	<i>Probably not needed</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>Probably</i>	<i>Yes, definitely</i>	
ECLs	23	23	42	9	3	$\chi^2 = 2.27$
LCLs	18	35	32	12	3	df = 3 prob = 0.517
5) <i>Intensity of motivation to learn foreign languages in gen.</i>	<i>Very weak</i>	<i>Weak</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Very strong</i>	
ECLs	3	6	37	34	20	$\chi^2 = 5.70$
LCLs	6	8	23	35	28	df = 3 prob = 0.127
6) <i>Satisfaction with the English teacher</i>	<i>No satisfaction</i>	<i>Low satisfaction</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>High satisfaction</i>	
ECLs	1	6	10	27	57	$\chi^2 = 6.62$
LCLs	2	0	18	33	47	df = 3 prob = 0.085
7) <i>Desire to improve English for personal reasons</i>	<i>No desire at all</i>	<i>No strong desire</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Certain amount of desire</i>	<i>Definite desire</i>	
ECLs	3	11	47	23	16	$\chi^2 = 18.7$
LCLs	6	8	20	45	21	df = 3 <b>prob=0.01**</b>
8) <i>Importance of English to graduate from high school</i>	<i>Not important</i>	<i>Low importance</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Very important</i>	
ECLs	4	12	34	47	3	$\chi^2 = 3.60$
LCLs	3	17	36	44	0	df = 3 prob = 0.308
9) <i>Desire to improve English to initiate contact to English speakers</i>	<i>No desire at all</i>	<i>No strong desire</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Certain amount of desire</i>	<i>Definite desire</i>	
ECLs	0	1	18	46	35	$\chi^2 = 2.48$
LCLs	1	3	20	47	29	df = 3 prob = 0.479
10) <i>Importance of English in popular culture</i>	<i>Not important</i>	<i>Low importance</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Very important</i>	
ECLs	6	8	25	43	18	$\chi^2 = 0.425$
LCLs	3	8	26	45	18	df = 3 prob = 0.935
11) <i>Desire to improve English for future studies</i>	<i>No desire at all</i>	<i>No strong desire</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Certain amount of desire</i>	<i>Definite desire</i>	
ECLs	3	3	46	30	18	$\chi^2 = 4.47$
LCLs	0	9	33	41	17	df = 3 prob = 0.215
12) <i>Intensity of motivation to go to English class</i>	<i>Very weak</i>	<i>Weak</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Very strong</i>	
ECLs	1	0	24	52	23	$\chi^2 = 7.83$
LCLs	4	3	28	37	28	df = 3 <b>prob=0.05*</b>

\* Significance at 95% confidence level

\*\* Significance at 99% confidence level



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