

Research Article

University Students' Motivation to Study the French Language: A Time Trend Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore students' motivation to study French at a state-funded public university in Estonia. The first set of data collection was carried out in 2008 and repeated in 2020 using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory and in-depth interviews. The results of the quantitative part indicate a significant increase in students' intrinsic motivation in the subscales of interest/enjoyment and perceived competence, and a slight increase in perceived choice as well as in pressure/tension. The qualitative data reveal clear personal goals, but in some cases weak motives, such as the desire to live in the target country without either being ready to contribute to the academic work or a weakly justified choice of discipline. In addition, some unrealistic expectations emerged, such as being able to work as a professional translator or language teacher immediately after the end of bachelor's degree. The results indicate relatively poor learning skills, referring to a gap between students' secondary school study habits and expected study habits in university studies. Based on the results several suggestions are made to facilitate university support systems.

Keywords: self-determination theory, Estonia, language learning, motivation, undergraduate learners

INTRODUCTION

Research on motivation to learn a L2 other than English is receiving increasing international attention, particularly in a context where English has established itself as a lingua franca (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). However, there are several studies exploring the motivation of students to learn French especially at university (see Arvidsson & Lundell, 2019; Baranowski, 2015; Velázquez Herrera, 2011; Noels et al., 2003, 2019). This research attempts to contribute to these studies by adding the perspective of an Estonian university. For the purpose of clarity, the commonly used term ‘second language’ (L2) will not be used in this paper, as in Estonia, English is the second language and French is either the third or the fourth language. Instead, the term ‘foreign language’ is used when appropriate.

Throughout history, the status of the French language in Estonian society has been the language of high culture, diplomacy, and an elegant lifestyle. Since 1631, French has been taught as a foreign language in Estonia with its highs and lows; until the late 19th century it was practiced as a foreign language by the German and Russian upper class and was rediscovered by schools at the beginning of the 20th century¹ (Saagpakk & Meristo, 2021). French has never competed with German and Russian as languages of governance and schooling or with English which is the current dominant foreign language. Nevertheless, French has represented an image of culture and language, and has either a symbolic role in commercial contexts or has been a linguistic fetish as defined by Kelly-Holmes (2014). Acknowledging the role of the French language in society becomes important when analyzing students’ expectations and motivation to study the language at university level. The drop-out rate of students who major in French, especially during their first year, has been alarmingly high at some universities and aligns with Yorke and Longden’s (2008) findings about students’ academic failure at the beginning of their studies. Even though student candidates to the French program are asked to compile a letter of motivation, and individual admission interviews are carried out to detect motivation to study at university, this assessment does not adequately select motivated students, as demonstrated by the fact that students who quit their studies often do so during their first year. In order to better support student retention it is important to understand the dynamics of their motivation to study the French language. In addition, it is important to listen to students’ voices regarding their

academic studies (Busse & Walter, 2013). Two studies, framed by Self-Determination Theory, utilizing identical methods, were carried out to establish differences in the level and dynamics of students’ intrinsic motivation at two different time points, in 2008 and 2020.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Determination Theory

The motivation to learn a foreign language or L2 has been conceptualized in many ways since Gardner’s (1985) pioneering work which distinguished between instrumental motivation (learning a language to gain external rewards) and integrative motivation (learning to become part of the target language community). The concept of integration has in turn encouraged further conceptualizations of motivation to learn L2. This study will look at the theory of self-determination.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a psychological framework to understand and explain motivation and it postulates that humans, in an innate way, have basic psychological needs whose satisfaction is essential to their growth, integrity and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The three basic psychological needs are autonomy (the willingness to exercise one’s abilities), competence (the desire to interact effectively within the environment), and relatedness (the desire to feel connected with other people; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nurturing and satisfying these psychological needs help to enhance the motivation to perform an action. The self-determination continuum indicates three distinct types of motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic and amotivation, and frames the dynamics of motivational factors and their complex relationship with basic psychological needs. Thus, in the first case (intrinsic), the motivation comes from within and, therefore, personal interests and values are at the forefront of any intention to act; in the second case (extrinsic), motivation is caused by external factors, both positive and negative, such as praise and deadlines; and the last case (amotivation) illustrates the complete lack of personal intention towards fulfilling an action.

According to SDT, the most important components of motivation are interest and enjoyment. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that some individuals are motivated because they enjoy the activity as such, while others are stimulated by

strong external influences. Extensive research by Ryan and Deci (2017) shows that self-motivation, that is, intrinsic motivation, is the focal point of creativity, responsibility and healthy behavior. Threats, deadlines, grades and goals can reduce intrinsic motivation, and intrinsically motivated behaviors occur independently of any form of reinforcement or reward (Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). Intrinsically motivated people work on tasks because they find them pleasant and are characterized by a tendency to seek novelty and face various challenges, to develop and use their abilities, and to be thirsty for research and training (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, it is important to point out that although a person by nature is inclined to show intrinsic motivation, it can be very fragile and unstable under adverse conditions.

In contrast, controlled motivation is the motivation to engage in an activity to achieve results. Extrinsic control tends to focus people's attention solely on the result, instead of the process and people are engaged in the activity because they feel it will have pleasant consequences such as a reward and/or praise from the teacher (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation has the effect of controlling; and control usually means the threat and use of power - deadlines, monitoring, imposed objectives, evaluations - all which undermine autonomous motivation. Moreover, by pretending to be motivated by extrinsic factors, such as rewards, one does what one thinks needs to be done, and yet it does not come from inner desires, but from external forces which results in becoming alienated from one's autonomous motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

Language Learning Context

It is the social context (and its role in the manifestation of various forms of motivation and effective activity of the individual) that is the catalyst for motivation and personal development, which determines how people decide to become motivated, energetic and integrated in some situations and areas more than in others (Gordeeva, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The social environment can either increase or decrease intrinsic motivation, depending on its effect on people's innate psychological needs. Several studies (Campbell & Storch, 2011; Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001; McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Noels et al., 2019) emphasize the role of the language learning context as it may affect how teachers, peers, family and friends may

enhance learner's motivation. The particular language learner group may have an impact on the individual learner's motivation (Busse & Walter, 2013; Chang, 2010; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Agawa (2020) also highlights that establishing good relationships enhances university students' motivation to study a foreign language. Comanaru and Noels (2009) go even further and argue that the learning environment may cause a shift from intrinsic orientation to either external regulation or amotivation. Campbell and Storch (2011) add that the learning environment is the most important factor to impact the language learners' motivation and is also most likely to demotivate learners. They explain that offering tasks matching students' interests in an encouraging and patient surrounding increases students' involvement and enjoyment.

University Students' Motives

Busse and Walter (2013) explain that students' choices to learn a foreign language at university level depend on their previous experiences at upper-secondary school as well as on their engagement and enjoyment during their first year at university. The sources of enjoyment in language learning are various, such as overcoming an intellectual challenge, perceiving progress, an increased opportunity to use the target language. They also identified a connection between investing effort in language learning and a sense of enjoyment in language learning. Moreover, they found a discrepancy between learners' wish to become fluent in a foreign language and their level of engagement. In addition to enjoyment, there are studies on motives to learn French at university where the affective disposition for French has emerged (Arvidsson & Lundell, 2019; Ushioda, 2001; Velázquez Herrera, 2011), e.g., French is 'my love and passion'; or the esthetical side of the language, e.g., 'the French language is so beautiful' (Velázquez Herrera, 2011). Another strong motive, externally regulated though, was linked to the students' visions of their future – they see themselves living and working in a Francophone country, or at least in a community among Francophones, or French is necessary for their professional life (Arvidsson & Lundell, 2019; Velázquez Herrera, 2011). However, motives to learn a foreign language may change in time, even over the course of a semester (Campbell & Storch, 2011), although Noels and colleagues (2019) argue that there is stability in external regulation across the language course. The latter concerns

primarily the ongoing language studies, whilst the former (motives) are predominantly future-oriented.

Vallerand and colleagues (1997) proposed a motivational model for dropping out of high school which explains complex relationships between low levels of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, low perceptions of competence and autonomy and low perceptions of family, teachers and school support. Their model indicates that competence plays a crucial role of mediator between the social context and self-determined motivation. Noels and colleagues (2019) argue that 'relatedness' satisfaction is most important at the beginning of studies and influences students' orientation toward language learning.

Objectives of the Study

The current study aimed to investigate students' motivation to learn French using mixed methods to compare the results of 2008 and 2020 in order to support their retention, especially in light of the high drop-out rate. The following research questions (RQs) were asked:

RQ1: What describes ongoing motivation to learn French as a foreign language at university?

RQ2: To what extent did motivational factors to learn French differ in 2008 and 2020?

METHOD

The Context of the Study

This study was carried out in two stages utilizing mixed methods, following two major reforms affecting Estonian universities. The first study took place in 2008, four years after the curricular reforms came into force. The purpose of the reforms was to adjust the needs of the society and university to the ongoing Bologna process² (Lisbon Recognition Convention of European Higher Education Area). The second study was conducted in 2020, four years after further reforms which focused on the financial reorganization of Estonian state-funded public universities³. Both reforms affected the curriculum of French Studies (BA level), but the last set of reforms reshaped and reconceptualized it completely. Since the last reforms,

modern languages, such as French, English, Italian, German and Spanish, are part of the same curriculum, whilst before, they all had their own curriculum. The new combined curriculum allows learning languages without prior language skills (except English where an advanced level is required due to its status in the Estonian education system). This last shift is a major innovation in the curriculum. The possibility to choose French as a major has opened the doors to all interested individuals regardless of their previous experiences and contacts with French. At the same time, it means intensive language learning from the very first academic day at the university.

Participants

The sample was formed from the whole population of students at a particular university studying French as either a major or a minor in 2008 and in 2020. The total population was 25 students in 2008, and 50 students in 2020. In the first study in 2008, 22 students participated (21 females, 1 male) in the quantitative study (age between 19-32); the response rate for the questionnaire was 88%. In the second study in 2020, 46 students participated (36 females, 10 males) in the quantitative study (age between 19-43), the response rate for the questionnaire was 92%. The Estonian demographic situation (1.3 million people) explains the small size of the total population and the sample size. Despite the small sample, it was representative of the total population which allowed to conduct descriptive statistics and *t*-tests (Cohen et al., 2010; Peterson, 2008). However, to complement this data collection, a qualitative approach was also used, and questionnaire respondents were invited to volunteer for follow-up interviews. In 2008 there were 4 students (3 females, 1 male) who agreed to participate in the interviews. In 2020, there were 16 students (14 females, 2 males) who agreed to be interviewed.

Data Collection and Instruments and Procedure

Both rounds of data collection took place four years after the implementation of the reforms to give time for adjustments, in the middle of a semester. During the period of four years all the courses and syllabi became stable and no further improvements were proposed, and academic staff involved in the curriculum of French Studies became used to new circumstances and a certain work rhythm was

established. Both studies used the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (McAuley, Duncan, & Tammen, 1989; Ryan, 1982), which had been extensively used in the Estonian context by this time (cf. Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2012; Meristo et al., 2016). In 2008, however, there was no version of the questionnaire in the Estonian language. Therefore, it was translated into Estonian and back-translation was performed to ensure the equivalency of the two versions. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was administered online through Google Forms between March-May 2008 and 2020. The students were provided with the link to the questionnaire via email. First in March, then a reminder to participate was sent two weeks later and after five weeks. They were also informed about the ongoing study during their courses. Participants were informed that the survey was anonymous and that their participation was voluntary. They were also informed that data from the survey would inform support mechanisms. In addition, demographic information, such as age and gender were asked. No delicate personal questions were asked.

The questionnaire consisted of four subscales and 22 questions altogether, that used 7-point Likert-scaled items to measure Interest/Enjoyment; Perceived Competence; Perceived Choice; Pressure/Tension. The properties of the subscales together with Cronbach's alphas are presented in Table 1. The Interest/Enjoyment subscale is considered the self-report measure of intrinsic motivation, the Perceived Choice and Perceived Competence subscales are considered as positive predictors of intrinsic motivation, whilst Pressure/Tension is considered as a negative predictor of intrinsic motivation.

All data were imported into SPSS 25 for descriptive and statistical analyses. Means and standard deviations were computed, and a two-sample T-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the responses of the participants of 2008 and 2020. Reliability was guaranteed by measuring internal consistency. Cronbach alphas (Table 1) remained between 0.68-0.91, indicating adequate internal consistency.

Table 1. *Description of the Subscales with Internal Consistency Scores (Coefficient Alpha)*

Subscale	No. of subscale items	coefficient alpha		Example item
		2008	2020	
Interest/ enjoyment	7	.83	.91	I enjoy learning French very much
Perceived competence	5	.79	.82	I think I am pretty good at learning French
Perceived choice	5	.68	.70	I feel like it is my own choice to learn French
Pressure/ tension	5	.79	.83	I am anxious while learning French

The qualitative part included interviews and was guided by an abductive approach. In abduction, researchers examine how the data is supported by existing theories or to the contrary, and thus, how the data may suggest modifications in theories (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018). Interviews aimed to detect the motives to study French as well as to understand what kind of obstacles occurred, how much effort a student put into their studies and what kind of relationships they had between them (e.g., *Why did you come to study French? Have you encountered any obstacles related to your studies? If yes, could you describe them*). The semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. They were recorded with permission and transcribed.

At the outset, interview transcripts were thoroughly read several times to detect issue-relevant descriptions from the participants. Firstly, these descriptions were chunked into meaning units (i.e., small sections of text two or three lines long for detailed coding; Langdridge, 2007). Secondly, the meaning units were given codes according to the main ideas they were carrying, thus highlighting the participants' perspective, that is, how they described their motivation to learn French. Altogether twelve codes were formed. Thirdly, reflecting on initial coding and going back to the transcript data as the richest data source followed. This process resulted in identifying four themes. The themes were the words that carried a broader meaning, for example, the codes "Positive challenges", "Usual rhythm" and "Hard

work” led to the theme “Effort”. The four overarching categories were called “Motives”, “Effort”, “Relatedness” and “Obstacles”. These broad categories were theory inspired as is common to an abductive approach, where “pre-existing theories are used as a source of inspiration, and identification and interpretation of patterns” (Alvesson

& Sköldbberg, 2008, as cited in Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018, p. 52). The pre-existing theory in the case of this particular study was SDT. Table 2 gives an overview of codes with respective examples that constituted the thematic categories. The examples have been translated from Estonian into English for the purpose of this paper.

Table 2. *The Codes and Thematic Categories of the Interviews*

Examples	Codes (No. of occurrences)		Thematic Categories
	Sample size		
	N = 4	N = 16	
<i>I studied French at school, so I wanted to maintain my language skills. It was a natural continuation.</i>	Previous experience in the field		Motives
	3	9	
<i>The French language is so beautiful. I adore the sound of it and want to learn to speak it.</i>	Object of affection		
	0	4	
<i>I see myself as a teacher of French in the future and for that I need to master it perfectly.</i>	Professional expectations		
	1	3	
<i>I love courses where I have to put lots of effort into, this is what I expected from university education.</i>	Positive challenges		Effort
	0	5	
<i>I don't see any difference with my previous learning experiences. The amount of my homework has not changed.</i>	Usual rhythm		
	0	2	
<i>University courses demand a lot of work, time and attention.</i>	Hard work		
	4	9	
<i>It really helps me to see that others struggle too and that we keep together and help each other.</i>	Peer support		Relatedness
	3	12	
<i>Our lecturers are very supportive and helpful. Besides encouraging us, it is also nice to have academic discussions on broad topics with them.</i>	Teacher-student communication		
	1	4	
<i>I have a 2-year old son, so I can't always be present and fully engaged.</i>	Personal duties		Obstacles
	0	2	
<i>At work I have a contract, I have to be there at fixed times, but at university, I believe, it's more flexible.</i>	Work		
	3	6	
<i>Learning was easy for me at high school, but it is very difficult here [at university]. As if I don't actually know how to study.</i>	Poor learning skills		
	1	4	
<i>Many deadlines overlap and then they accumulate. Sometimes I can't handle the situation, it makes me stressed.</i>	Time management		
	0	4	

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Sample Groups

Subscale	2008		2020	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Interest/ enjoyment	4.91	1.22	5.87	1.10
Perceived competence	4.23	1.07	4.91	1.42
Perceived choice	5.58	1.36	6.27	1.54
Pressure/ tension	3.15	1.04	3.60	1.03

Quantitative Data Results

The means and standard deviations of all the subscales can be seen in Table 3.

The two-sample *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the students of French in 2008 and 2020. The results reveal a statistically significant difference in the variable of Interest/Enjoyment, $t = 3.242$, $df = 66$, $\eta^2 = .14$, $p < .001$, and in the variable Perceived Competence, $t = 1.986$, $df = 66$, $\eta^2 = .06$, $p < .005$. Students in 2020 had a higher level of Interest/Enjoyment ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.102$) and Perceived Competence ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.422$) than the students in 2008 (respectively, $M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.224$ and $M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.073$). Effect size within the variable Interest/Enjoyment (.14) is considered ‘very large’ and within Perceived Competence (.06) ‘moderate’ (Cohen et al., 2010, p. 522). As suggested by Ryan et al. (1991), the Pearson correlation test was conducted to detect a hypothesized correlation between Interest/Enjoyment and Perceived Choice in order to reduce the bias caused by self-reports. The correlation was found to be statistically significant both in 2008 ($r = .702$, $p < .001$) and 2020 ($r = .743$, $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

This research sought to understand university students’ motives to study French and measure their level of intrinsic motivation. This section is structured into parts that are based on the categories that emerged from the interviews and on the subscales from the questionnaire.

Motives and Internalized Motivation

In 2008, the participants’ decisions to study the French language was their free choice and often a logical step after secondary school. They had all previously studied French at secondary school and they opted for further studies at university level because of their wish to master the language. One student expressed a clear personal goal to become a teacher of French whereas others did not yet know what their professional pursuits would be. The desire to master French was rather an intrinsic motive than an external one. Excerpts from the interviews of 2020 show students’ previous contacts with the language as a motive to continue learning French, but these contacts denoted a broad spectrum, such as travelling to or living in the target country; studies at school or language school (extra-curricular activity); close francophone friends; and working at a French-speaking enterprise. Some of those motives raised a question concerning sustainability of the motivation. For example, “I like to travel a lot. It would be nice to be able to communicate in French while travelling in France”. Somebody who travels around, visits countries of different linguistic backgrounds might not be interested in investing three years in intensive study of the French language, culture and society.

In addition, the in-depth interviews in 2020 revealed a new motive to study French, which is the “object of affect” (Ushioda, 2001 p.102) towards the language itself. Students were fascinated by the sound and intonation of the language. Some even possessed a romantic notion, calling French the language of love. Furthermore, throughout history, the French language has had a special image of an elegant lifestyle in Estonian society and students often refer to

French as a language of fashion (Saagpakk & Meristo, 2021). These motives were expressed by students who did not have prior learning experience with French and align with the results of Mexican students (Velázquez Herrera, 2011). Enrolling in university without having previously studied French became possible after the last reforms. Yet, those who already had a certain level of French, entered the university aiming to improve their language skills or saw themselves as future translators, teachers, or officials at international organizations. These motives corroborate those of 2008 as well as the previous studies (Arvidsson & Lundell, 2019; Noels et al., 2019; Velázquez Herrera, 2011). In light of SDT, clear personal goals towards language learning refer to an identified motivation, i.e., non-intrinsically motivated behavior, without any internal resistance, that has been completely internalized and willing to learn the language because it is important and valuable to the self, even when it is not enjoyable (Dörnyei, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, another concern emerged in relation with some professional expectation. One student of 2020 clearly desired to become a translator and shared the existing experiences. The curriculum of French Studies does not foresee courses of translation, instead a curriculum of Translation Studies is offered at Masters level. If that student is already a practicing translator her motivation may be undermined during the three-year-course while studying compulsory courses without a direct link to her professional goal. Nevertheless, self-reported answers on the subscale *Interest/Enjoyment* confirmed that the participant's level of intrinsic motivation was above the average score. The 2020 sample saw even higher scores which are significantly different statistically from those of 2008. High levels of intrinsic motivation corroborate the results of a Swedish study conducted among students of French at university (Arvidsson & Lundell, 2019).

Competence and Choice

Another statistically significant difference emerged in *Perceived Competence*, which is seen as a positive predictor of intrinsic motivation and indicates the extent to which students perceive their efficacy in achieving their goals, as well as, enjoying participating in learning activities in which they consider themselves efficient. Although the score was above the average in 2008, it was notably higher in 2020. Possibly, in 2008, students entering the university

had to have a certain level of French, measured by entrance exams. This result reflects the situation where not all the students succeeded in the same way and pace. For some the learning process might have been more difficult, hence the lower perceptions of their competence in French. In contrast, in 2020, students could enter with or without any prior knowledge of French and start learning the language at the level appropriate for their linguistic needs. This curriculum change has strongly supported students' perception of their competence and thus reinforced their intrinsic motivation. Appropriate level language is easier to engage with. The university offers the French language at four different levels⁴ in both semesters. Intrinsic motivation is also underpinned by the individual's choice towards an action to be taken.

The notion of *Perceived Choice* is theorized as a positive predictor of the behavioral aspects of intrinsic motivation. The respective means of both data collections are very high, meaning that learning French is a conscious choice for most students and can also be explained by the motives, discussed above. In 2008, for three students, French studies at the university was the only option they considered, while one participant stated that the second choice would have been English, though related to language learning. Language learning out of personal choice coincides with learners of Chinese in a Canadian study (Comanaru & Noels, 2009). Moreover, this result could be very satisfactorily explained especially at the institutional level and reflect the good choice of candidates during the entrance exams. Apparently, students, regardless of their age, are free in their career choices: free to pursue their aspirations and strive for continuous improvement through learning at the tertiary level.

Effort

Following one's 'professional calling' by studying at university demands certain *effort*. The reasons for dropping out of studies might lie here. As four interviewees in 2008 and nine students in 2020 admitted, they put lots of effort into university studies and they worked hard. But the notion of 'working hard' needs more attention. One participant in 2008 and four in 2020 acknowledged issues with their time management skills and poor learning habits. Both may have caused the feeling of struggling, working hard and not succeeding sufficiently. The participants mentioned

deadlines piling up, procrastination, and the stress it caused. Wolters (in Dörnyei, 2005) calls it “defensive pessimism” when the lack of ability or unpreparedness increases anxiety and the feeling of insufficient effort as a result (p. 114). In addition, effort can also pertain to co-learning with peers. One student in 2008 and three students in 2020 admitted straightforwardly that for them it was easier to study and prepare for seminars when encountering difficulties together with group mates. “It is very important for me to see that other students are trying hard, and that we discuss it. It encourages me not to give up”. According to two interviewees of 2020, the primary reason was not necessarily a need for peer support, but for them it was comforting to witness that their peers experience difficulties too. “It comforts me and somehow encourages not to give up to see that others suffer too, they have problems with meeting the deadlines or reading the books.” Vicious though this may seem, there is a hidden desire for peer support and for an unknown reason(s) they do not want to admit it. The importance of peer support is also highlighted by Noels and colleagues (2019). All the above-mentioned aspects could also be the characteristics of poor learning skills and strategies. There might exist a gap between students’ learning skills at secondary school and university, referring to low self-regulated skills. There is some evidence that draws attention to this possible gap (Busse & Walter, 2013; Oga-Baldwin, 2020). On the one hand, students mentioned that some university lecturers were flexible and supportive in situations where duties were accumulating. On the other hand, counting on the delay of deadlines may be a one-time-solution, but it certainly cannot be a sustainable learning strategy. External factors, both positive and negative, such as rewards, competitions, deadlines, and social pressures can have an undermining effect on motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is important to emphasize that intrinsically motivated students try harder and longer and thus may be far more flexible to overcome some tension. The current study confirms that there were five participants in 2020 to whom effort meant positive challenges, and who added how excited they were in dealing with more difficult tasks or learning situations. “I really love linguistic brain-teasers, or orally demanding situations. Then I can feel that I have made some progress that I am able to express myself in a more nuanced way.” According to Campbell and Storch (2011), tasks which are too difficult may hinder motivation, and Malmberg and Little (2007) add that “difficulty” can be interpreted as either an obstacle or

an opportunity depending on the student’s perception of competence. There are students who believe in the role of effort and being effortful, while those who perceive a high level of difficulty together with lack of engagement are at risk of dropping out.

Relatedness

Relatedness emerged in two contexts. Most often it refers to positive relationships with peers, aligning with Comanaru and Noels (2009). Either students support each other in their studies, especially during the exam sessions, or they are emotionally supportive friends outside the classroom. A possible establishment of a strong emotional bond between group mates during university studies was also highlighted by Agawa (2020). Those interviewees (one in 2008 and three in 2020) who preferred to encounter difficulties together with group mates highlighted that only group mates understood fully what difficult times mean. Moreover, good relationships with lecturers were emphasized, one student in 2008 and four in 2020. “Our teachers are always there for us. Even if it’s outside office hours, you can turn to them and ask for advice”. This finding contradicts the study by Busse and Walter (2013) where first year German students did not feel related to their language lecturers. Being able to ask for advice and sometimes simply talk outside the classroom enhanced students’ identity to their university community. On one hand, the same lecturers have high demands and requirements that might cause stressful situations (which cause procrastination and missing deadlines), yet, on the other hand no interviewee reproached the lecturers for a too heavy workload. A good trusting relationship between students and academic staff might explain this. In the context of SDT relatedness is even more important to the process of internalization than for intrinsic motivation (Noels et al., 2019).

Obstacles and Pressure

The subscale *Pressure/Tension* refers to a negative predictor of intrinsic motivation. In 2008 the mean was below the average score, while in 2020 it was above the mean score, although the increase is not statistically significant. Interestingly, those who scored low at perceived competence did not necessarily score high at pressure/tension, but those who scored high at perceived

competence, scored often very low at pressure/tension. The latter cohort seems to better handle their tension and stress sources related to their studies. The perception of pressure and tension might be related to poor learning skills and suggest difficulties with time management and feelings of hard working (doing so much for little reward).

When analyzing the interview excerpts about *obstacles* that students perceive in relation to their studies we cannot ignore that for years within the Estonian tertiary level context, it has been widely known that the majority of students seek employment during their university studies. The need for earning money to pay the tuition fees while studying was evident and understandable when higher education studies were free from tuition fees only for academically the best students. The last reforms were initiated namely by the desire to make higher education affordable to all possible students who previously competed for free university places while the rest had to pay. Unfortunately, the reforms have not had this effect and students continue seeking employment. When subjects do not appeal anymore and learning becomes more difficult, quitting studies may seem an easier decision, made in favor of employment. A study conducted at Tallinn University about students' motivation to do homework revealed that students who have part time jobs alongside their studies inclined towards extrinsic motivation (Meristo, 2017). Families are not always able to cover the cost of living for their children studying at university and even if studying is free from tuition fees, it is still unaffordable for many students unless they find employment during their studies. Exceptions, however, apply to students who have managed to find a job where French is needed. Those rare cases strengthen motivation as the students are able to connect their studies to their future professional life, as mentioned by Campbell and Storch (2011). In addition, the interviewees added that spare time activities were equally important and in some cases the priorities seemed to fluctuate. As academics we wish that the studies come first but in real life it is much more complicated. Three participants in 2008 and six in 2020 acknowledged that having a job interferes with their university studies. None of them had a job directly linked to French, although one student (2020) considered French useful in her profession: "I work in tourism and sometimes, quite rarely, to be honest, I see French people with who I can practice my language." Besides having a job, family matters were seen as an

obstacle in two cases in 2020. Students with small children must be extra careful with their time management and it is not always easy. "Every time my child falls ill, as 3-year-old children often do, I must stay home and cannot participate in my courses. It is frustrating for me. I really do want to study, but my child comes first."

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the small sample size does not allow generalizations, although it permits us to draw conclusions about the context of this particular university. Second, the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory does not measure the whole continuum of motivational aspects, however, this instrument was chosen in 2008 and for the purpose of making comparisons the same exact instrument was used in 2020. Third, although representative, the sample size did not allow any multidimensional statistical analysis (e.g., to measure variances between gender, age groups, study years, major and minor specialties) to be conducted. Fourth, the number of interviewees differed; in 2008 it was 4 and in 2020 it was 16. Both numbers reflect the students' readiness to be interviewed. The bigger number of participants gives more insight into their perceptions and therefore it was considered important. The future direction could focus on exploring language learning orientations and online engagement in learning French.

CONCLUSION

In this small-scale study, both the quantitative and qualitative approaches allowed to investigate foreign language learner motivation. This research had two objectives: to understand students' motivational factors and to compare the results of 2008 and 2020 in order to offer efficient support mechanisms to prevent student dropout. For the participants of this research opting for French Studies was a clear voluntary choice and the motives to study the language were predominantly internalized, regardless of the curriculum. Yet, changes in the curriculum have fostered the perception of competence to the preferable direction. According to Vallerand and colleagues (1997), the low perception of competence is a decisive key factor in increasing a risk of dropout. In this study the overall score of competence was above average, indicating however, that

some concern is justified and those who scored below the average should be reached out to through a personal approach, by continuous monitoring of the results, classroom observations and individual performance appraisals when necessary. Students' high level of intrinsic motivation alone is not a guarantee for successful learning at university. It is important to understand their motives, especially future-oriented perspectives and offer a supportive environment which should not remain as empty

words but where a true learning environment has been established, including a sense of community among students and university teachers. Adjusting the learning process according to the students' needs is of utmost importance and a continuous process. Introducing effective time management skills as well learning strategies might be justified to reduce the tensions caused by the lack of appropriate learning habits.

¹ In 2019/20, 4,165 students studied French as L2/L3/L4 at lower and upper secondary school levels, compared to 12,331 studying German, 59,002 studying Russian and 131,315 studying English (Haridussilm, 2021).

² As a result, the so-called Bologna system was implemented: 3 years of BA studies followed by 2 years of MA studies.

³ As a result, state-funded universities became free from tuition fees. Before the reforms students had two options: to study for free when their secondary school academic results and national examination results were at a high academic level, or in the case of a lower academic record, they had a chance to study by paying for university tuition. The latter option is no longer available.

⁴ The levels are based on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In autumn term: A1, B1.1, B2.1, and C1.1. In spring term: A2, B1.2, B2.2, and C1.2.

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APPENDIX

Intrinsic Motivation Questionnaire

1. While I am studying for my French courses, I am thinking about how much I enjoy it.
2. I don't feel at all nervous while learning French.
3. I feel like it is my own choice to learn French.
4. I think I am pretty good at French.
5. I find my French studies very interesting.
6. I feel tense when studying for my French courses.
7. I think I do very well at my French courses, compared to other students.
8. I feel that learning French is fun.
9. I feel relaxed while learning French.
10. I enjoy learning French very much.
11. I don't really have a choice about doing my French studies.
12. I am satisfied with my performance at my French courses.
13. I am anxious while learning French.
14. I think my French studies are very boring.
15. I feel like I am doing what I want to do while I am working on the French materials.
16. I feel pretty skilled at my French courses.
17. I think the French material is very interesting.
18. I feel pressured while I am learning French.
19. I feel like I have to do the French studies.
20. I would describe my French courses as very enjoyable.
21. I do French studies because I have no choice.
22. After learning French for a while I feel pretty competent.