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rprofile_fchbog@unal.edu.co

Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Colombia

Espinar Redondo, Rocío; Ortega Martín, José Luis

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Motivation: The Road to Successful Learning

La motivación: el camino para un aprendizaje exitoso

Rocío Espinar Redondo*

José Luis Ortega Martín**

Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain

This research has the aim of highlighting the importance of motivation in the process of learning English as a foreign language. For that purpose, some factors that affect motivation are described, using as a starting point the answers obtained from a questionnaire given to students in their fourth year of compulsory secondary education. The main conclusions of the research show the fundamental role of factors such as the teacher, the four skills, students' interests and daily habits, among others. Finally, some guidelines for a teaching methodology are proposed with the intention of future development.

Key words: Factors, foreign language learning, motivation, skills, students' interests, teacher.

Esta investigación nace con el objetivo de resaltar la importancia de la motivación en el proceso de aprender inglés como lengua extranjera basándose en los resultados obtenidos en un cuestionario para alumnos de cuarto curso de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. Las principales conclusiones de la investigación muestran el papel fundamental que juegan algunos de los factores que afectan a la motivación como el profesor, las cuatro destrezas, los intereses y hábitos de estudio de los alumnos, etc. En la parte final de la investigación se describe una serie de pautas para desarrollar una propuesta metodológica que tenga en cuenta los resultados de este estudio.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, destrezas, factores, intereses de los alumnos, motivación, profesor.

* E-mail: rocioer_13@hotmail.com

** E-mail: ortegam@ugr.es

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Introduction

In recent decades, the role of the English language has increased throughout the world, and the necessity of fully understanding it is generally accepted. Nevertheless, how this language is addressed in Spain is still insufficient, which is clearly demonstrated in the results from the *Education First: English Proficiency Index* (Education First, 2012), in which Spain is ranked in the group of “medium level of English” along with a small number of European countries such as Portugal, Italy, and France; the remainder, meanwhile, are at higher levels. This result is even worse if we focus our attention on Andalusia, which is classified as having a “low level of English” in comparison with the other communities in Spain. By observing these outcomes, two assertions can be made:

1. We recognise the importance of English
2. We are attempting to improve our English levels, but we are doing it erroneously.

Regarding the first statement, it is important to mention that the consideration of English as the essential tool for communication has forced the Spanish government and educational institutions to attach importance to its presence in the learning development of children and teenagers. Consequently, all students in primary and secondary education in Spain are taught English as a foreign language (EFL) as one of their compulsory subjects. Since 2007/2008, students have begun learning English at the age of 6 (the first year of primary school), continuing to age 16 (the fourth year of compulsory secondary education [CSE]) and, if they continue studying, also in *Bachillerato*. Furthermore, the Spanish Ministry of Education introduced the MEC Programme¹ in 2007, which was designed for students and teachers who wanted to improve their foreign language skills by living abroad for a short period of time.

¹ Characteristics of the MEC (Ministry of Education and Culture) can be found at <https://sede.educacion.gob.es/catalogo-tramites/becas-ayudas-subvenciones/para-estudiar/idiomas.html>.

Concerning the second statement, we can confirm that it is also partly true because the current measures are less than sufficient, which is shown in the poor results (only 23% of the Spanish population consider that they speak English well [Education First, 2012]). One of the main criticisms of the Spanish education system regarding teaching foreign languages is that students spend approximately 10 years learning English at school but that very few of them end secondary education with a B1 level (the level described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe, 2001).

There should definitely be some incongruities in the process of teaching English in Spain that can explain the differences between the number of hours of English taught at school and the students' low levels of the language at the end. Consequently, this research will focus on the different factors that affect motivation in secondary school students who study English to discover if there is a connection between their low English levels and their motivation.

Motivation and Foreign Language Learning

Definition of Motivation

The idea of motivation is a recurring topic throughout the history of language teaching and is considered fundamental for achieving positive results in any task. This long journey is reflected in the fact that there is no single definition, but instead a number of them. The existence of this variety of definitions shows the difficulty in describing motivation and its role in the process of learning a language. Consequently, the first step is to clarify some of the problematic aspects of the term “motivation” as it was described in Rodicio (1999):

- Motivation is not a physical feature; that is, it cannot be observed directly.

- Motivation is just one of the pieces in the complex mechanism that moves people's conduct, but it is not the only one.

With these problematic areas in consideration, it is important to remember some of the definitions that have been written in previous investigations:

- Crookes and Schmidt (1991) identified motivation as learners' orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language.
- Madrid (1999) explained the concept of motivation as an individual state that is influenced by different factors such as beliefs, interests, goals, and wishes that demand an effort from students.
- Spolsky (2000) described motivation as the amount of time a learner is prepared to spend on learning tasks.
- Ortega Martín (2002) explained that motivation is an individual's disposition to learning a task that can be modified both by him- or herself and by the surrounding circumstances.
- Cole (2007) defined motivation as the internal state that instigates, directs, and maintains behaviour.

These are just general ideas to be considered in defining "motivation" that will be followed in this research. That is, motivation will be understood as what encourages students to freely devote their time to a specific activity. It encourages students not only to initiate the activity but also to continue working on it throughout their lives. These reasons are individual and personal and different in each individual context, and they can come from the students themselves or from external stimuli.

Theories About Motivation in Foreign Language Learning

If the idea of motivation can be problematic to define, we find the same situation regarding the numerous theories and classifications put forth by authors. In this respect, some of the most famous

theories about motivation in the field of foreign language learning will be mentioned.

One of the most important theories comes from Gardner (as cited in Madrid, 1999) and his socio-educational model, which depicts the attitudes and motivation in foreign language learning and the distinction between *integrative* and *instrumental motivation*:

- Integrative motivation: Consists of students' desire to become part of the culture related to the language they are studying. Students may identify themselves with the values and features of the culture that represents the language. Therefore, they might want to learn English in order to live in an English-speaking country, work or study in one, interact with people who speak the language, and so forth.
- Instrumental motivation: Is connected with the idea of learning a language that will be used as a tool for different purposes. The language is not the students' goal but their means to a higher purpose, such as studying, reading, or promoting. Students with instrumental motivation think that English will be helpful for them, but they have no real interest in the language itself.

Another traditional classification has been the distinction between students who are intrinsically vs. extrinsically motivated by Deci and Ryan (2000), who explained intrinsic motivation as the choices people make for their own sake without considering any external component, such that they are intrinsically rewarded.

This definition is close to Gardner and Lambert's (1972) view of the subdivision of motivation into two separate aspects, but Deci and Ryan (2000) change the names of the categories in order to include some considerations that were left out of previous classifications. In this respect, intrinsic motivation was related to students' interests and goals, that is, when they develop a skill for a task because it is their will. In contrast, extrinsic motivation consists

of external stimuli that influence students' behaviour regarding the language.

Factors That Affect Motivation

In terms of this point, different theories have been compiled. Some of the most interesting authors and their classifications will be mentioned here.

1. Spolsky (1969) refers to the most meaningful factors that affect the teaching/learning process:
 - a. The teaching method.
 - b. The age.
 - c. The aptitude.
 - d. The attitude. This last factor is the one that most affects motivation because it directly relates to the education context (teachers, friends, family, etc.) that surrounds the learner.
2. Skehan (1989) lists four motivating factors as the most significant:
 - a. The activities in the teaching/learning process: This factor is important because a great part of the learner's interest in the language will depend on the types of activities developed in class.
 - b. The final results: Good results are understood as a reward for the learner, whereas bad results are similar to a punishment. In this case, motivation is the consequence of these results: Students with good final results are going to be more motivated than students with bad results.
 - c. Internal motivation: This is connected to the student's ideas about the language as a consequence of previous experiences and the use of the language at home, among others.
 - d. Extrinsic motivation: The influence of external stimuli such as rewards or punishments.
3. In the outcomes extracted from Madrid's (1999) research about the factors that affect motivation

in EFL learning, some factors were mentioned as the most noteworthy. These were as follows:

- a. The importance of the English language in the present society.
 - b. The personal features of the English teacher.
 - c. The types of tasks developed in class and the teaching methodologies that are implemented.
 - d. Features about the subject itself in comparison with other subjects.
 - e. Environmental factors (family, school, etc.).
 - f. The intention of integration in English-speaking countries.
4. Dörnyei (2001) presents three main types of motivational sources:
 - a. Course-specific components: the syllabus, teaching material, teaching method, and learning tasks.
 - b. Teacher-specific components: the teacher's behaviour, personality, and teaching style.
 - c. Group-specific components: the dynamics of the learner group.

The Research

Objectives of the Research

The following are the objectives established for this research:

1. To discover some of the current factors that affect motivation in EFL learning in the fourth year of CSE in two different schools in Granada, Spain.
2. To study how other aspects of English teaching affect students' motivation, such as the following:
 - The role of the English language in the student's life.
 - The approach to the four skills and how they are treated in class.
 - The teacher's role in the student's motivation.
 - Other factors.

3. To offer a methodological proposal in relation to the results obtained in order to reflect the most important factors that affect motivation in teaching practice.

The Sample

This research took place among a group of 51 students (male and female) who were in their fourth year of CSE, and their ages ranged from 14 to 17 years. This school level was selected because it is one of the most problematic levels of secondary education; it serves as a passage between compulsory and optional (*Bachillerato*) education. As a consequence, some students in this year are willing to complete it in order to finish school, but others study hard in order to reach the *Bachillerato* as well prepared as possible. Because of this, there is a vast difference in students' skill levels and also in their motivation. It can be considered that at this level, motivation as a key factor in the learning process is easier to identify and study.

The students who participated in this investigation were not from the same school: Group A was from a state high school, and Group B was from a semi-private school; both were located in the central area of Granada.

Group A

This sample consists of 14 boys and six girls who have different characteristics. At the school, this group is considered problematic compared with the other groups in the same academic year because some students have significant personal problems that usually interfere in their school lives. These problems are related to economic difficulties, cultural interference, and, as was mentioned above, lack of motivation. This is exemplified in the fact that only 10% of the students have passed all subjects in the second term of the school year. Moreover, 35% of the students have repeated a year during CSE.

Group B

At this school, there are students from many different cultures and ideologies, despite the school's religious orientation. This class comprises 31 students (19 boys and 12 girls), and the students are considered, in general, to be a hardworking group. It can be added that 3.2% of the students in this group have repeated a level during their CSE. Generally speaking, these students have higher English levels than those in Group A, which can be seen in the percentage of students who have passed all of their subjects in the second term (51.6%).

Measurement Tools and Data Collection

Two different procedures were used in order to systematically collect the data for this investigation: a questionnaire and a period of observation. The reason for selecting these two measurement tools for data collection is that they were considered to be appropriately suited to the research purpose. They are presented below:

The Questionnaire

This questionnaire was considered the main measurement tool. In order to select its questions and items, the authors consulted different sources such as Brown (2002), Dörnyei (2001), and Madrid (1998). The questionnaire was in Spanish (because Spanish is the mother tongue of most of the students) in an effort to avoid misunderstandings among students with difficulties in foreign languages. The students' names were not asked so that they would answer the questions unguardedly.

The questionnaire was "face-to-face", with the researchers taking notes on what was said, and it consisted of 20 questions that were both open- and closed-ended. The following is a brief classification of the questions:

Personal information questions about three different aspects:

- Biological characteristics: age, sex, and mother tongue.
- Questions related to their academic lives.
- Questions linked to the role of English in their lives.

After these personal questions, the remaining items were grouped into three different organizational fields:

1. Items connected to the language itself and students' interest in it (Questions 1–8).
2. Items dedicated to “English at home,” comprising queries about homework, the students' parents, their study habits, etc. (Questions 9–12).
3. Items related to “English in the classroom,” with questions about the teacher, the four skills, the materials used, etc. (Questions 13–20).

The questionnaire's validity was analysed by three experienced lecturers, as was explained in the theory of investigator triangulation described by Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2013). This method consists of using different investigators in the related field of study in order to check the resources and techniques that were used. If the group reaches the same conclusion, the research and its results can be considered valid. In this case, the experts studied the following aspects of the questionnaire:

- The items are clearly presented, specifically the wording.
- The items accurately reflect the information the student is being asked about.
- The items are closely related to the students and their contexts.
- The items do not present more than one piece of information each.
- The items are relevant to the study of motivation.

The Period of Observation

In the field of education, observation is an important tool for data collection, usually as a complement to

other techniques. It can be a useful device if it is properly used, for which good planning and organisation are needed. The first step is to determine the type of observation that will be developed (Anguera as cited in López Fuentes et al., 2012):

- Level of interaction between the observer and the observed. The observation will have two different periods: *participative* and *non-participative*.
- Level of systematicity: It will be a *non-systematic* observation.

Other Devices

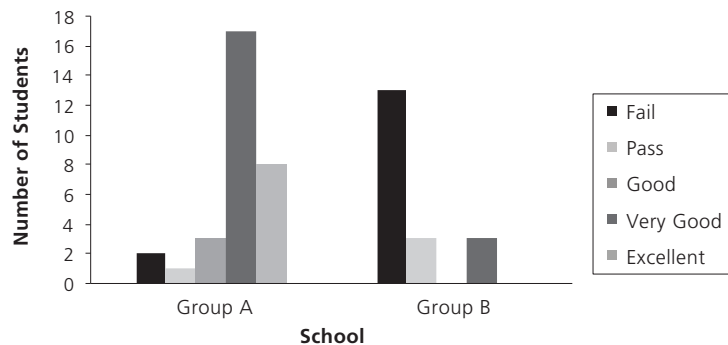
Finally, it is interesting to make a brief commentary about the computer programme that was used to analyse the data that were collected from the questionnaire. The programme was the most recent version of IBM SPSS 21 (Armonk, NY, USA), which is one of the most popular databases used in research. For the qualitative data—that is, the open-ended questions—a series of charts were designed to cover this extra information.

Results

First Variable: Personal Information

The average age of the participants in this research is 15.51 years, which means that despite the number of students who have previously repeated a level, the average age is appropriate for the level of the fourth year of CSE (15–16 years). Regarding sex, there were a total of 51 students, 33 male (62.7%) and 18 female (35.3%). The greater number of male than female students may be justified because both schools were traditionally single-sex schools (only boys), and although this situation has already changed, the higher number of male students could be a leftover of this tradition, even more so in the last levels of secondary education.

It is important to mention that 15.7% of the students have repeated a level. An interesting aspect

Figure 1. English Marks Obtained by the Students in Both Groups

of this variable is the great difference between the two groups of students: in Group A, 35% had repeated a level, but in Group B, only 3.2% had repeated a level.

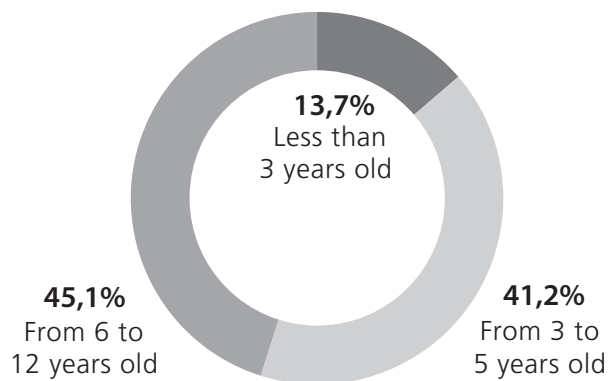
In order to consider the different marks the students had obtained, the marks were classified into five groups: (1) failed, (2) pass, (3) good, (4) very good, and (5) excellent. Marks were grouped from 1 to 4.99 = failed, 5 to 5.99 = pass, 6 to 6.99 = good, 7 to 8.99 = very good, and 9 to 10 = excellent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows the great difference between the two schools: looking at the figure, it can be seen that Group A has higher English levels than Group B, considering that the students' marks likely reflect their English levels. The main conclusion that can be drawn after observing these results is that the differences in the levels of students in the same class could be problematic for good development in the language teaching and learning process.

The age of beginning to study is another key factor that can help us to understand students' English levels. To group all of the answers, there are four different categories:

1. Under 3 years of age
2. From 3 to 5 years of age
3. From 6 to 12 years of age
4. Over 12 years of age.

The selection of ages was not made randomly but was based on students' ages at the beginning of each education stage: at 0–3 years of age, students can start

Figure 2. Starting Age

nursery school; at 3–5, they start preschool; at 6–12, they begin primary education; and over age 12, they have begun secondary education (Figure 2). Thus, by analysing the age at which students began school, it can be established at what stage they began learning English.

Most students (45.1%) began to study English in elementary school (6 years); only 13.7% had begun learning English before they were 3 years old. Muñoz (2006) demonstrated that young learners have better understanding of the concepts of new languages. Nevertheless, the age of beginning to learn is not as important as the amount of exposure; as Lightbown and Spada (2006) summarised foreign language programmes that begin with very young learners but offer only minimal contact with the language do not lead to a great deal of progress. Hence, the age and the amount of input can be determining factors in

Table 1. Students' Daily Activities and Their Use of English

		Television		Internet		Mobile Phone	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Like English	Yes	24	16	36	4	25	15
	No	2	9	8	3	4	7

learning languages, but we will not be focusing our attention on these aspects, given that we consider the age of beginning only as personal information, the same as age or native language.

Second Variable: Students' Interests

This group of questions is essential to describing students' motivation towards the language. The first important thing to know is whether or not students like English in order to consider that those who admit they do like it are likely to be more motivated to learn than those who do not. Other factors will be considered and described subsequently, but this will be the basis for the explanation of the outcomes. In this research, 78.43% of the students liked English, and the remainder (21.57%) did not.

In general, we can say that students usually like English not as a subject but as a language itself. This assertion can be made because they like English independent of their marks, for different reasons: most of the positive answers are related to students who enjoy using English in real life, such as for communication, travel, hobbies, and future plans. The remaining positive answers are connected with characteristics of the language itself (interesting, easy, beautiful, etc.). In the negative column, most of the answers are related to specific aspects of the language such as its difficulty, the required effort, and so forth.

It is also significant to mention that 100% of students intend to improve their English levels because they are clearly aware of its current importance (96.1% of them think they will use English in the future). They have different justifications for their reasoning,

such as having better work opportunities, traveling, and making friends.

It is also worthy to note the importance of some students' opinions about the language. The massive presence of the Internet in these students' lives has brought some benefits for learning languages, and one is the immense data bank of media that they can now access. Nearly half of the students responded that they were accustomed to watching films or TV shows in English.

Apart from the previously mentioned hobbies, there are other daily activities in which students usually use English, for example, television, the Internet (including social networks), mobile phones, computers, and games. The results show that in all of the aforementioned activities, the students who usually use English are those who confessed that they like it. In contrast, among the group of students who do not like English, more of them did not use it daily (see Table 1).

Finally, regarding music, it is not necessary to mention that a very large percentage of the music available on the Internet and on the radio is in English. The influence of music is unquestionable, but the intention of this query was to go further and discover if students were really interested in understanding and singing songs in English. The result of this query was that 82.4% of the students have looked for song lyrics in order to better understand the song at least once.

Third Variable: English at Home

This group of questions is related to the students' habits in relation to studying English at home. The

outcomes show that only 29.4% of the students usually study every day. Another interesting point is whether they usually travel abroad with their families, and there is a great difference between the two groups of students: in Group A, 60% of students do not travel abroad with their families, but in Group B, the percentage increases dramatically to 95% of students.

Fourth Variable: English in the Classroom

In the last group of variables, the point of interest is the connection between students' opinions about the English language and how it is approached in the classroom. Students had to select characteristics from a list to describe their English classes. The results show that most students used positive adjectives, such as interesting (64.7%), useful (58.8%), funny (45.5%), and innovative (39.2%). It is interesting to highlight that only 9.8% of the students considered their English classes difficult, and some (27.5%) described them as easy. Regarding this result, we would like to comment that three students (all from Group B) wrote commentary on this fact. They explained that in all of their years in secondary education, the topics and the level have always been the same, and therefore, although they selected some positive aspects of the class, they think their teachers should be more demanding in order to make the most of the English classes.

The students were also asked about the characteristics of a good English teacher. These are the results: "having a good level of English" (86.3%), "making participative lessons" (66.7%), and funny lessons (60.8%). At the end of the list, they included characteristics such as "be young" (19.6%) and "be strict" (3.9%).

As a final point, students had to answer questions about different skills and how they are approached in the classroom (Figure 3).

The results presented in Figure 3 can be explained with students' own justifications. They consider

Figure 3. How Skills Are Approached in EFL Classes

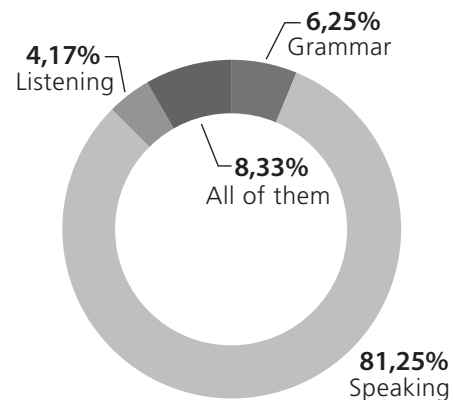
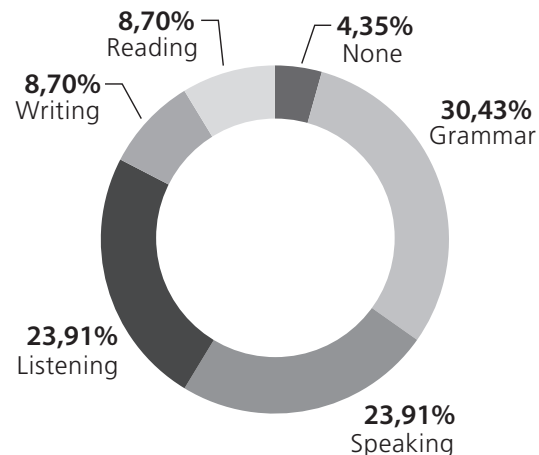


Figure 4. Level of Difficulty as Perceived by Students



speaking the most important skill, mainly because they think that it is the skill they will use most often in real life to communicate. Those who answered all skills explain that they are all part of the language, and therefore, they are all useful depending on the context. Those who mentioned *grammar* did so mainly because they consider that they will not be able to speak or write if they do not have the necessary knowledge of the language's grammar. Finally, students who selected *listening* did so because you should be able to speak but also to understand what others say.

In this reasoning, we can perceive how students understand the English language mainly as a tool for

oral communication, one of the main characteristics of the communicative approach. Nevertheless, although students recognise the importance of the oral skills, these are also the most difficult skills along with grammar (see Figure 4).

Conclusion and a Methodological Proposal

The most significant results of the research are presented here based on the established objectives:

There was an in-depth study of some of the current factors that affect motivation in the study of EFL in the fourth year of CSE at two different schools. It was discovered that currently, students are aware of the importance that English will have in their futures, and therefore, some of their primary motivations to learn it are to have better jobs, travel abroad to meet new people and new cultures, and live in an English-speaking country, among others. All of the students in this research want to improve their English, and all of them have clear ideas in this respect. Another important factor that affects their motivation levels is the idea that English is present in every aspect of their daily lives. Consequently, they watch films and series in English, they listen to songs and read their lyrics in English, and they are becoming accustomed to reading magazines, blogs, etc. in English. They usually use English on their computers, on the Internet, in social networks, and so on.

Additionally, how other factors in their lives and in their classrooms may affect their motivation was studied. Specific factors were considered, such as the following:

- The role of the English language in students' lives. As was mentioned before, English is present in nearly every hobby, and therefore, it plays an important role in the students' lives. In spite of this, some students are likely to use it and are not afraid of it, but a small part of them are still on guard.
- The approach to the four skills and how they are treated in class. The results show us that students are more motivated when the focus of the lesson is on skills such as speaking and listening; they do not enjoy a high emphasis on grammatical aspects, and they missed some extra practice in other skills such as reading and writing. Most students agree with the idea that the most important (or at least the most useful) skill is speaking, and therefore, they are ready to learn more and enjoy more in lessons in which this skill plays a central role. In contrast, more than half of the students agree with the fact that grammar is the most difficult aspect of learning English. It is not necessary to discuss grammar's importance in this process, and consequently, it cannot be neglected, but it can be approached in different ways, likely in ways that are more related to students' interests.
- The teacher's role in the students' motivation levels. This is likely the factor that was most directly related to students' motivation in the classroom. The students' responses showed that in general, they preferred teachers with good English levels, although this was not a determining factor for them, and they also had teacher age preferences. Nevertheless, from the students' points of view, some factors are important such as having good English levels, having good pronunciation, and making funny and participative lessons. Because of this, we can observe that students are more motivated with teachers who show proficiency in the language and who teach it through funny and participative activities. Apart from these results, specific student comments showed the importance of the teacher in their learning English.
- Other factors such as the importance of games and of diversity in the materials used in class. In general, most students like the use of new

technological devices in class to enhance their learning opportunities.

The final objective refers to proposing a methodology that contains all of these factors in order to give students more reasons to be motivated. Some guidelines are proposed here to consider in developing future work:

- It is important to follow a *communicative approach* to the language because communication is the main reason students want to learn English. Moreover, specific time should be devoted in each lesson for this purpose that “forces” students to use the language to talk about particular topics.
- It would also be interesting to follow a *task-based approach* because each task can be oriented to a specific field of the students’ interests, and in each of these tasks, different materials can be used. Then, all tasks should lead to a final task in which students must demonstrate what they have learned. This idea is also connected to the *spiral approach*, which uses graded activities that progress from easier to more difficult. This is also a device for considering attention to diversity, referring to the differences between higher and lower achievers.
- Equally important is the idea of *scaffolding*, that is, building students’ new knowledge in connection with their prior knowledge in order to avoid the problems students reported about repetitive content each year without learning anything new. Scaffolding is also essential for students at lower levels because if a teacher knows a student’s starting point, it will be easier to target new concepts to that student.
- In class, integrating the four skills is fundamental so that students will not miss practicing any particular skill, such as writing.
- The need to use material that is linked with students’ interests, including information and communication technology. This material

should contain interesting topics and should relate to students’ daily lives. Therefore, the use of authentic materials, similar to what students will have to face in real life, is important. In this way, they will understand English as a real tool for their personal development.

- Regarding the classroom itself, it is important that the class be organised and systematic in order to make the most of each lesson and to not waste time. Additionally, students respond better to activities if they know what will come next, and thus, it is important to have clear lesson guidelines.
- The teacher should attempt to combine features that are important to students (as shown in the variable of the characteristics of a good teacher), for example: teaching with kindness and enthusiasm, having a good sense of humor, being patient, teaching in English as much as possible, developing rapport with students (knowing their names and some personal information is important), creating a positive but working atmosphere, encouraging students’ performance, and avoiding tension and anxiety in the classroom (McLaren & Madrid, 1996).

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About the Authors

Rocío Espinar Redondo is a former student of English philology at the Universidad de Granada (Spain) and a novice teacher of English as a second language. She has completed her studies with the Master's Degree for Teachers at Universidad de Granada, where this investigation took place in the 2012/2013 school year.

José Luis Ortega Martín works as a principal lecturer at the Universidad de Granada, Spain. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics, and his professional activities have included school management, language teaching and teacher training as well as specific training for state teachers.