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Author/s:

D'Orazi, G

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The L2 learning experience as the Cinderella of the L2 motivational self system

Giuseppe D’Orazzi

Abstract

Drawing on Dörnyei’s (2019) invitation to examine in more depth students’ *L2 Learning Experience*, which he considers to be the ‘Cinderella of the L2 Motivational Self System’, this study proposes a tridimensional analysis of Dörnyei’s (2009) *L2 Learning Experience* construct. *Teacher-specific Motivational Components*, *Course-specific Motivational Components* (Dörnyei 1994), and the *University Context* (based on Dörnyei’s [2019] *School Context*) were used as categories of motivators to organise themes and variables emerging from research participants’ responses to two questionnaires and two rounds of interviews. Students of French, German, Italian and Spanish enrolled at different Australian universities were asked to reflect on their *L2 Learning Experience* as part of a larger study on motivation and demotivation in L2 learning (D’Orazzi, 2020a). The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data allows the researcher to offer a detailed discussion of the dynamics which predominantly motivated L2 beginner students during two semesters of L2 studies. The examination of changes of motivation over time aims to cater to the interest of L2 educators who wish to understand which activities proposed within a formal learning environment foster students’ motivation to learn European languages in Australia.

Keywords: L2 learning experience, L2 teaching, Australian university students' motivation, language education, European language studies

1. Introduction

In the field of applied linguistics, researchers have offered multiple definitions of second language (L2) learning motivation. Dörnyei (2020), for instance, posits that ‘motivation, by definition, concerns the choice and direction of a particular action, the effort expended on it and the persistence with it’ (p. 61). This chapter bases its analysis of students’ experiences in the formal learning environment on this definition of motivation in the attempt to integrate the understanding of L2 learning motivation. It aims to expand on recent research on L2 learning motivation (cf. Mendoza & Phung, 2019) where effort and investment shown by L2 learners are investigated from a psychological and emotional perspective (Dewaele, 2011; Dörnyei, 2020) as well as from a sociocultural angle (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Ushioda, 2009).

In the recent literature on L2 learning motivation, a strong emphasis has been put on discussing the *Ideal L2 Self* and *Ought-to L2 Self*, which guide the analysis of a number of studies as presented by, for instance, Boo et al. (2015). The *Ideal L2 Self*—considered to be the learners’ vision of themselves as future proficient users of an L2 and the *Ought-to L2 Self*—understood as a set of external obligations and expectations reflected on learners by people around them—make up the *L2 Motivational Self System* (L2MSS) theorised by Dörnyei (2009). A third component of Dörnyei’s (2009) three-dimensional construct—the *L2 learning experience*—has not been extensively researched. The lack of attention to such an important constituent of learners’ motivation led Dörnyei (2019) to label it the ‘Cinderella of the L2 Motivational Self System’. In response to this gap in the literature, this study explores students’ L2 learning experience with the purpose of answering two research questions:

1. How does the formal learning environment contribute to students’ motivation when learning French, German, Italian and Spanish at Australian universities across two semesters?
2. Which classroom and extra-curricular activities are particularly motivating for students who have just started to learn French, German, Italian and Spanish at the tertiary level?

Students' responses to two online questionnaires and individual interviews inform the exploration of their experiences during one academic year while learning French, German, Italian and Spanish at beginner level (D'Orazzi, 2020a). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the Group of Eight (Go8) Australian universities¹ to give voice to a wide range of students in multiple institutions and discover which variables are more influential than others in terms of L2 learning motivation. It is hoped that the answers to the two research questions formulated for this study will support new pedagogical practices within L2 programs and research-informed L2 teaching strategies at higher university levels (see also Weinmann et al., 2021).

2. The impact of the formal learning environment on L2 learning motivation

This study accepts Dörnyei's invitation (2019) to focus on the direct impact of the classroom environment on students' motivation, and conduct new research, where the *L2 Learning Experience* theoretical construct is defined 'as a comprehensive rubric to cover the whole range of motivational influences associated with the actual process of learning an L2' (p. 21). In particular, this chapter targets a large range of classroom-related motivational influences which appear in the research conducted by You et al. (2016) but also, specifically within the Australian tertiary education landscape, by Martín et al. (2016). This study groups together multiple aspects listed by Dörnyei (2019) such as school context, syllabus and teaching materials, learning tasks, one's peers (group dynamics) and teachers. In doing so, this research is assisted by Dörnyei's (1994) ground-breaking *Three-level Framework of L2 Motivation*, which encompasses *Course-specific Motivational Components*, *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* and *Group-specific Motivational Components*, as reported in Figure 1.1.

¹ The Go8 universities are Australia's leading research-intensive universities: the University of Western Australia, Monash University, The Australian National University, the University of Adelaide, the University of Melbourne, the University of New South Wales, the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney.

<i>Course-specific Motivational Components</i>	<i>Teacher-specific Motivational Components</i>	<i>Group-specific Motivational Components</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘concerning the syllabus, the teaching materials, the teaching method, and the learning’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘concerning the teacher’s personality, teaching style, feedback, and relationship with the students’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘concerning the dynamics of the learning’

Figure 1.1 Dörnyei’s Three-level Framework of L2 Motivation

Source: Dörnyei (1994, p. 277).

The two categories of *Course-specific Motivational Components* and *Group-specific Motivational Components* have been merged together, since the dynamics developed in class appeared to be triggered by both the syllabus proposed by course coordinators and the interaction among students stimulated by teaching methods, materials and in-class activities. Drawing on the ‘syllabus/curriculum level’ theorised by Crookes and Schmidt (1991), the L2 syllabus remains a compelling force in the stimulation of motivation and in-group cohesive actions.

Studies on foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) also shed light on the role of teachers, course planning and classroom dynamics in triggering enjoyment and, conversely, causing anxiety among students (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Frascini & Tao, 2024). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) referred to the enjoyment fostered by social dynamics happening both inside and outside the L2 formal learning environment as *FLE-Social*. Li et al. (2018) delivered an analysis of how teachers’ approaches and rapport-management with their students stimulate students’ interests, participation and enjoyment, labelling this dynamic *FLE-Teacher* (see also Dewaele et al., 2017). The understanding of the role of teachers in the L2 learning environment is fundamental not only in terms of student motivation but also in emphasising teachers’ agency within their course delivery, following Crozet and Díaz’s (2020) qualitative research among L2 teachers at different Australian universities. Crozet and Díaz’s exploration through the lens of teachers’ identity construction and self-reflections on their agency in the academic world—teaching and researching—validates the argument that teachers hold a fundamental position in motivating and sustaining students during their L2 learning process, as strongly confirmed also by Kubanyiova (2012) (see also Irie et al., 2018).

In addition, Li et al. (2018) investigated the role of *FLE-Atmosphere*, the construct utilised to examine the enjoyment that stems from the immediate social environment created in class with interactive, engaging and interesting activities. Dörnyei's (2019) 'one's peers' component of the *L2 Learning Experience* pictures the settings created in class by students' active participation and contributions fuelling 'particular social acceptance, group cohesiveness, norms of operation and tolerance' (p. 25). The understanding of group dynamics and the internal operational norms and scripts influenced the research undertaken by Joe et al. (2017), who investigated the contribution of the 'classroom social climate' to increase student motivation. This social, inclusive and interactive atmosphere created in an L2 classroom was found to be strongly connected to students' FLE but also to their willingness to communicate within and outside the formal learning environment in several Australian universities (D'Orazio, 2020b).

In addition to the analysis of *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* and *Course-specific Motivational Components*, this chapter encompasses a third category of motivators classified as *University Context*. This category draws upon Dörnyei's (2019) *School Context* exploring the wider university space in which students benefit from the school community and norms, including extra-curricular activities and opportunities to apply for exchange programs overseas (cf. Lasan & Rehner, 2018). The university context is strongly influenced by policies adopted by universities to favour the learning of L2s and increase students' exposure to the countries and cultures where the studied L2s are spoken—for example, exchange programs overseas (Yashima, 2002), the University of Melbourne *Breadth Subject* model and the University of Western Australia *Broadening Unit* model (Brown & Caruso, 2016) and ad-hoc L2 learning pathways such as the diploma of languages (Baldwin 2019; Brown et al. 2019).

3. The Australian university landscape

Studies on L2 learning motivation at tertiary level in Australia do not always engage with the dynamics emerging from the classroom environment. A comprehensive examination of L2 classroom dynamics in terms of motivation and demotivation was carried out by Martín et al. (2016). Their study at The Australian National University provides a multidimensional portrait of the factors that triggered students' interest in learning multiple L2s and affected their choice of continuing to pursue their L2 learning

process. Martín et al. (2016) distinguished between committed students, doubters and quitters who were motivated and demotivated by a long array of variables stemming from their social environment but also from the classroom environment in which they were learning an L2 at different levels of proficiency.

The L2 classroom environment was at the centre of another study on L2 motivation in Australia. De Saint Léger and Storch (2009) emphasised the function of willingness to communicate, self-confidence and anxiety when learning French at university level. Based on their longitudinal research findings, they suggested the implementation of small-group discussions to enable students to achieve fluency and enhance their performance in a university setting. This was also considered crucial in terms of decreasing anxiety and increasing participation, which would enable affiliation orientations within the small groups to be expanded in the social context in which students were planning to use French in authentic scenarios. De Saint Léger and Storch's (2009) study resonates with the encouragement recently given by Arber et al. (2021) to rethink how languages are learnt and taught in Australia and to explore 'the complex links between languages, cultures and identities' (p. 5).

In a similar vein, more recent research conducted among learners of Italian at the University of Western Australia sheds light on the tight and pivotal links between languages, cultures and identities. Caruso and Fraschini (2021) discovered that students constructed 'multicultural' and 'mobile and linguistically competent' identities that were able to enjoy and understand Italian culture. Learners of Korean were motivated by the same factors mentioned above, with an additional desire to enjoy Korean culture in Korea and develop the intercultural communicative competence necessary for dealing with various culturally diverse scenarios (Fraschini & Caruso, 2019). A strong sense of identity also emerged among adult learners of Italian in two private schools in Sydney, who acknowledged the influential role of Italian communities in their suburbs and the general perception of Italian culture in Australia (Palmieri, 2019). Indeed, the value of the studied L2 was found to be socially constructed for learners of French (D'Orazi, 2020c), German (D'Orazi et al., 2022) and Italian (D'Orazi & Hajek, 2021; 2022) across different states and territories in Australia. Students' perceptions of these languages appeared to be influenced by the value that the whole Australian society would give to the cultures and countries where these languages are spoken (D'Orazi, 2020a; Palmieri, 2019).

4. Data collection and methodology

Data were collected principally at the Go8 Australian universities during two semesters in 2018 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) to provide consistency across institutions that offer all four language courses selected for this research. In two cases, Italian lessons were provided outside of the Go8 universities: the University of Queensland outsources Italian classes at Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology, while students of Italian enrolled at the University of Adelaide attend lessons at Flinders University. Responses provided by students enrolled at Griffith University, Queensland University of Technology and Flinders University were not presented in D’Orazi (2020a), nor were three questionnaire items that were originally cut off by a Principal Components Analysis conducted to reduce the size of a very large data set (D’Orazi, 2020a, p. 73). These three extra items are intended to enlarge the scope of this chapter and offer a more rigorous analysis of the dynamics experienced by students within their classroom environment. Out of 20 five-point Likert scale items included in the questionnaire and analysed in this chapter, 13 were inspired by Sakai and Kikuchi’s study on demotivation in learning English as L2 (2009), since their analysis focuses on the dynamics experienced by students in a formal learning setting in terms of demotivation (D’Orazi 2020d). More items were added to encompass a wider range of elements characterising students’ learning experience in terms of motivation. Students had the choice of one response, from *strongly agree* (value 1) to *strongly disagree* (value 5).

All participants were *ab initio* students who received the link for the online questionnaire from their course coordinators. Overall, 31 out of 32 course coordinators agreed to forward the online questionnaire to their students. Those students who volunteered to participate in further stages of the research received a second link to complete a second questionnaire in their second semester of L2 studies at the university. A selection of students at the University of Melbourne was also interviewed after each of the two semesters in which data were collected, as explained below.

4.1. Research participants

The first questionnaire was completed by 728 participants (199 for French, 176 for German, 154 for Italian and 199 for Spanish), whereas the second questionnaire was fully filled in by 213 participants (47 for French, 57 for German, 55 for Italian and 54 for Spanish). Among these students, 37 of

them (10 for French, 9 for German, 10 for Italian and 8 for Spanish) were interviewed after the first semester and 25 (6 for French, 7 for German, 6 for Italian and 6 for Spanish) were interviewed after the second semester. All interviewees' recordings were de-identified, and pseudonyms were given to ensure that their statements would remain anonymous. Table 1.1 provides a summary of the biographical features of student participants, who were all beginner learners with little or no prior exposure to the four languages considered in this study.

Table 1.1 Student participants' biographical information in both semesters

Demographic	Percentage in semester one	Percentage in semester two
Age	Below 30: 96.5% Over 31: 3.5%	Below 30: 95.3% Over 31: 4.7%
Gender	F: 72.1% M: 27.1% O: 0.8%	F: 75.6% M: 22.5% O: 1.9%
English as L1	Yes: 79.8% No: 20.2%	Yes: 85.9% No: 14.1%
English at home	Yes: 68.5% No: 31.5%	Yes: 82.2% No: 17.8%
Category	Domestic: 79% International: 21%	Domestic: 87.3% International: 12.7%
Course in study plan	Core: 32% Optional: 63.7% Other: 4.3%	Core: 47.4% Optional: 50.7% Other: 1.9%
More L2s at present	Yes: 22.8% No: 77.2%	Yes: 25.8% No: 74.2%
Prior L2 experience	Yes: 80.6% No: 19.4%	

Source: Compiled by author.

Students were mainly native English speakers, but around 20 per cent in the first semester and 14 per cent in the second semester spoke a language other than English as their first language or one of their first languages. Notably, around 20 per cent of students were learning more than one L2 at the same time and roughly 80 per cent of them had already been exposed to an L2 learning experience before starting to study French, German, Italian or Spanish at beginner level at university. Students' biographical information will be considered in the analysis of research participants' responses both to questionnaire items and interview questions.

4.2. A quantitative perspective

Mean values, standard deviations and correlations were calculated in an attempt to highlight which variables motivated students during their L2 learning experience, in line with previous studies on motivation undertaken in Australia (e.g. Palmieri, 2019; Schmidt, 2011). These statistical tools

help describe students' preferences and their changes in motivation across one year of L2 studies drawing upon Fink's (2017) work. In addition, correlations contributed to the analysis of how the three categories of motivation chosen for this study were connected and to what extent they influenced each other (Pollock, 2016). The SPSS software was used to conduct statistical analysis and facilitate the visual representation of data analysis findings (Pallant, 2007).

4.3. A qualitative perspective

Following Creswell (2013), a thematic content analysis of students' narratives elicited from individual interviews was undertaken to identify the main recurrent themes related to the variables included in the two surveys. A thematic content analysis of interview narratives was chosen, since previous studies on L2 motivation at Australian universities made use of it (Campbell & Storch, 2011; Nakamura, 2016). Such an analytical tool was needed to expand on the results of quantitative data analysis previously performed by Schmidt (2014) when exploring German students' motivation in very similar settings. Students were asked to reflect on the mean values emerging from the statistical analysis to integrate their understanding and verify that the quantitative data were correctly interpreted.

5. Data analysis

Quantitative analysis of the mean values and standard deviations of the three categories of motivators suggests that students' motivation did not largely change from one semester (S1) to the other (S2) (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values for the three categories of motivators

Category of motivators	M S1	M S2	SD S1	SD S2
Teacher-specific Motivational Components	1.96	1.97	0.57	0.63
Course-specific Motivational Components	2.22	2.21	0.50	0.52
University Context	2.64	2.58	0.51	0.52

Source: Compiled by author.

Teacher-specific Motivational Components was found to be the strongest category of motivators with means below the value 2—corresponding to students' answer *agree* to the five-point Likert scale items included in the questionnaires. *Course-specific Motivational Components* and *University Context* recorded higher mean values, signalling a less strong agreement of students that their course and university environment were stimulating their motivation across the two semesters under analysis.

5.1. Teacher-specific Motivational Components

A closer look at *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* confirms that students enjoyed their relationship with teachers who were found to create rapport (variable 1) and make students comfortable in the classroom (variable 2), as shown by the low mean values listed in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values for the variables belonging to the category of motivators *Teacher-specific Motivational Components*

Teacher-specific Motivational Components		M S1	M S2	SD S1	SD S2
1	I get along well with my teacher	1.66	1.69	0.66	0.79
2	My teacher makes me feel comfortable during lessons	1.74	1.73	0.77	0.84
3	My teacher focuses on all main language abilities (speaking, reading, listening and writing)	1.86	1.83	0.83	0.85
4	Teacher's explanations are easy to understand	1.90	1.92	0.80	0.86
5	I often have the opportunity to communicate in French/German/Italian/Spanish in class	1.98	1.95	0.81	0.87
6	My teacher focuses on translation	2.63	2.70	0.99	0.99

Source: Compiled by author.

Teachers were also praised for their ability to design their lesson around more than one skill at the same time (variable 3) and to give clear explanations (variable 4). Variable 5 also reached a generally high level of agreement, since motivated students were satisfied with the extent of opportunities available to communicate in their L2 in class. This indicates that teachers were able to create activities which would allow students to interact and develop their oral skills. Nonetheless, higher standard deviations for variables 2–5, especially in the second semester, indicate that students provided quite different responses ranging from *strongly agree* (value 1) to *strongly disagree* (value 5) depending on the specific teacher they were engaged with.

The last variable of *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* recorded higher means and higher standard deviations, which raises important questions about the use of translation drills in class but also teachers' decisions to translate lesson materials into English. Students experienced very different dynamics depending on their teachers' approaches. This is confirmed by qualitative data. Students were explicitly asked to comment on these six variables and provide plausible explanations for the results presented in Table 1.3. Students from all four cohorts highlighted that variables 1 and 2 received the highest levels of agreement because of the crucial role of their teachers in fostering motivation, as asserted by Veronica (French, S1):

She was a lot of help in that way and made you speak and being interactive. She made it easier to learn. [...] She was always asking and answering. It was very helpful in our class, definitely! I think in other classes teachers talk more and want interaction less.

Building rapport with teachers stimulated not only students' engagement but also positive emotions, which translated into a desire to learn more language content and attend lessons in good spirits. Oswine (French, S1) describes these dynamics as follows:

I enjoyed the teaching, so I was not afraid to go to tutorials every morning.

Changes across semesters were not particularly noticeable when analysing quantitative data. Conversely, research participants commented on the low means recorded in the second semester by underlining the impact of teachers' attitudes and determination to offer students high-quality classes and opportunities to speak in class once students were able to express more concepts in their L2. Students like Kevin (German, S2) genuinely believed that teachers were active promoters of motivational forces:

In German, I feel like the teacher wants everyone to do well. [...] My teacher speaks German a lot in the class and gets us to participate a lot, so I feel that that helps a lot create motivation because we're actually speaking it. I feel all the amount of communication in the class has increased a fair bit.

The same student also extensively commented on the relatively higher standard deviations for variables 2–6, acknowledging that students might have answered differently depending on the teacher who was delivering L2 content:

I think it depends a lot on the teacher you have because I felt that some teachers did interactive things during the lesson like with the Padlet—we had to write about a topic in German on this online page, so that the whole class could read it. I feel that this semester we did that a lot more than the previous semester. [...] I feel it [students' motivation] has gone up.

A similar dynamic was experienced by Alex (Italian, S2) when identifying differences between her teacher in the first semester and her new teacher in the second semester:

Compared to semester one teacher, he was more structured. I could see the linear progression of the course a lot more than with my other teacher. He was very accessible. I didn't feel weird asking him questions. [...] My class had really good dynamics. We caught up outside class and we studied together.

Differences in students' perceptions of their teachers from a personal and professional point of view encapsulate students' learning styles and L2 aptitude. Research participants portrayed these differences quite clearly when trying to understand the wide range of responses provided to these six Likert scale items across universities and language cohorts. Cameron (Italian, S2), who changed his teacher in the second semester, posits:

Their teaching style was a little bit different. All the things that I like they both had. [...] If they both teach visually, and you are a visual learner it doesn't make a difference, but if one teacher is all about writing things down or likes to do lot of audio and the other teacher is more visual than yours and you are a visual learner, you might like the second one better.

5.2. Course-specific Motivational Components

A more diverse variety of responses is presented in Table 1.4, where students generally strongly agreed or agreed that the material used in class was useful to learn French, German, Italian or Spanish (variable 7) and liked their classmates and the relationship they developed with them (variable 8). Indeed, variables 7 and 8 recorded low mean values in semester one and slightly lower values again in semester two when students could engage with the class material and their classmates more closely.

Table 1.4 Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values for the variables belonging to the category of motivators *Course-specific Motivational Components*

Course-specific Motivational Components		M S1	M S2	SD S1	SD S2
7	The material used in class is useful to learn French/German/Italian/Spanish	1.88	1.85	0.69	0.63
8	I like my classmates	1.90	1.85	0.75	0.76
9	Visual and audio materials (such as videos and DVDs) are used during lessons	2.01	2.02	0.94	0.89
10	Cultural topics covered in lessons are interesting	2.04	2.00	0.87	0.78
11	French/German/Italian/Spanish language content we study for the course is easy to understand	2.22	2.28	0.82	0.87
12	The amount of hours I need to study for tests/ assessments and final exams satisfies my initial expectations	2.42	2.36	0.93	0.96
13	The pace of lessons is appropriate for learning French/German/Italian/Spanish	2.47	2.32	1.03	0.97
14	Interactive computer-based/online activities are used during lessons.	2.83	2.96	1.15	1.20

Source: Compiled by author.

Variables 9 and 10 also appear to record consensus among students over their first year of L2 studies. Students enjoyed audiovisual materials and cultural topics. A different change over time pertains to the content delivered in class (variable 11), which became less easy to understand in the second semester when more complex grammar rules were explained. In a similar vein, high means for the response *neither agree nor disagree* and relatively high standard deviations increased in the second semester for variable 14, indicating the amount of computer-based/online activities made available in class prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Very surprisingly, in the second semester, students declared that they took fewer hours to prepare their tests/assessments (variable 12) and that the pace of lessons was more appropriate (variable 13) compared to the first semester. This is represented by a noticeable decrease of mean values for these two variables in the second semester, despite the increase in difficulty of the L2 course experienced by many students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements proposed for variables 12 and 13, as indicated by the high standard deviations.

Interview narratives helped to unpack students' responses to Likert scale items and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how *Course-specific Motivational Components* contributed to motivating research participants. Materials and activities motivated students to a very large extent, as mentioned by Grace (Spanish, S1):

My teacher had activities lined up and conversations with different people in the class in the language. It allowed us to know people and practice and then also you have time to read and know about the culture as well very effectively.

The perception of lesson pace and workload to keep up with in an L2 course varied not only across institutions and L2 departments but also across students, depending on their prior exposure to L2 learning situations and the learning strategies applied. Angela (Italian, S1) briefly summarised these dynamics when commenting on the quantitative data analysis outcomes related to *Course-specific Motivational Components*:

I think the pace was perfect, but you have to bear in mind that I've done another romance language before and I've a good grasp of French. I can see it in my other classmates. It was fast for people who didn't learn another language before. [...] It was great. In class, there was plenty of opportunities to practice listening, speaking and writing.

In a similar vein, students were differently motivated by the number of hours to be invested to prepare tests, assignments and exams. A large percentage of students agreed that the time spent was adequate for the reasons that Helen (Italian, S1) presented:

I think it's very good that they do a lot of different small-work assessments [...], because it forces you to study more. If you have an assessment in week 4 and week 6, you don't do a big study in week 4 and week 6. You sort of revise more frequently than if you've only two grades a semester and it's not a big deal for the frequent assessments because they are only 10 per cent or 20 per cent. Having short goals helped my learning.

Audiovisual materials and interactive activities appeared to be used more often in the second semester than in the first semester, as mentioned by Sam who contradicts the increase of the mean for variables 9 and 14 over time (German, S2):

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It's increased the quality of interactive activities. We talk about more stuff now. I watched a movie that is old from German production, so we actually discussed a lot.

The use of more interactive online materials increased over time due to the improvement of students' proficiency in their L2 after almost one year of studies. Indeed, Olivia (German, S2) noticed how her motivation was boosted by the understanding of authentic material proposed in the L2 classroom:

We are doing *Run Lola Run* and that's really interesting. It's a really good film, so looking at that in terms of sort of culture is really interesting. You can relate to the characters and you can see a lot of expressions and then listen to what she's saying and you connect with the character and that's more interesting. I suppose the character symbolises the culture, sort of, and not all of it, obviously.

Cultural activities motivated students even more when they needed to practise their L2 outside of the formal classroom environment. Rebecca (Spanish, S2) introduced one activity which motivated her and her classmates who could practise their L2 and observe how much language capital they acquired during two semesters of L2 studies:

We did one project this semester which was an interview with someone else who was not from the class. That was really good because we only spoke Spanish [...]. That was a good opportunity to practise my Spanish.

One more aspect that increased students' motivation over time was the improvement of the classroom atmosphere and the creation of stronger friendships among classmates. Alex (Italian, S2) emphasised how L2 classes were different from other courses since they allowed her to establish strong bonds with her peers:

It was a really good break from my other more academic studies. It was a really good way to meet awesome people and to form friendships that you don't have a chance to do in other units. It was really fun.

5.3. University Context

Quantitative data analysis shows very heterogeneous outcomes for the variables belonging to *University Context*, which was deemed as a positive but also negative space for many student participants. Higher mean values suggest that students mostly did not agree with the variables grouped in this category of motivators. Nonetheless, relatively high standard deviations demonstrate that students held very different opinions depending on their own specific L2 learning experience (Table 1.5).

Table 1.5 Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values for the variables belonging to the *University Context* category of motivators

University Context		M S1	M S2	SD S1	SD S2
15	The class size is appropriate to learn the language	2.10	2.11	0.97	0.98
16	The facilities in class are useful to stimulate my learning	2.18	2.12	0.76	0.68
17	There are lots of exchange programs overseas I can access if I learn French/German/Italian/Spanish	2.28	2.38	1.15	0.90
18	The time spent in French/German/Italian/Spanish classes is enough to learn properly	2.77	2.56	1.10	1.05
19	My university organises many activities where I can learn more on the culture of French-/German-/Italian-/Spanish-speaking countries and practise the language	2.96	2.83	0.99	1.04
20	There is substantial government financial support (e.g. scholarships) to study French/German/Italian/Spanish at university	3.34	3.39	0.86	0.86

Source: Compiled by author.

L2 class size (variable 15) and university facilities (variable 16) were normally considered adequate for an interactive and enjoyable learning experience that would allow students to acquire their desired level of L2 proficiency. The low mean for these last two variables kept students motivated during both semesters under study. Depending on the university taken into consideration—see high standard deviations—students could apply for a large number of exchange programs, as signalled by low mean values for variable 17.

Time spent in class was an issue for all those students who did not consider the number of contact hours enough to be able to learn an L2 (variable 18), despite an improvement registered in the second semester with a lower mean value.

High means and standard deviations recorded for variable 19 signal that students could not always access extra-curricular activities. This was found to be dependent on the L2 department where participants studied and on whether course coordinators highlighted the different opportunities available to students, not only to practise their L2 but also to increase exposure to the culture(s) of the countries in which the languages are spoken. Similarly, negative responses were often provided by students in both semesters when asked if there existed funds/scholarships set up to specifically enrol into L2 courses at their university (variable 20).

Qualitative data assist in completing the analysis of the *University Context* and in understanding the extent to which the variables listed in Table 1.5 motivated student participants, given their very general nature. Students confirmed that having small cohorts in class increased their motivation, as in the experiences reported below:

Sam (German, S1): For a subject that has so many people enrolled in it, the class sizes were pretty good. I felt they were small enough to be effective. We didn't have 30 students.

Francesca (Italian, S2): I feel the class size is a good number, maybe we have 10 or 15 people. That is a good number. It's enough to have a class conversation and to sit in different groups.

Exchange programs gave students a sense of purpose and a goal to achieve with the knowledge of their L2. Despite not having specific funds to study an L2—which justifies the high means for variable 20—students were motivated to apply for exchange programs overseas and summer courses because of different scholarships they could access. Ella (French, S1) explored how exchange programs and overseas courses increase students' motivation and how costs can be covered by scholarships and government schemes:

I'm doing an overseas subject [course] for Italian so, I know that having something to look forward to, like visiting the country, is important. [...] When you put in your application to go overseas the university puts you automatically to receive a scholarship if you deserve it [...]. And then also something the government allows to

put the cost into your HECS² loan so that you don't have to pay it upfront. You can pay it whenever you earn enough. [...] So, by allowing to put it on a loan this gives more people the chance to experience other cultures and therefore people are more driven to learn other languages.

Narratives were often a space to reflect further on the responses given to survey Likert scale items, as Angela (Italian, S1) put it:

I was really motivated because I knew I would be using Italian really really soon in my daily life when I'm going on exchange, but it's a little bit more difficult when you don't see the future when you'll be using it quite a lot, so there's no motivation to keep it up at university level. For example, the university is supporting me financially. It helps and it makes the decision easier. [...] On top of that, I know there's an Italian club as well outside the classroom.

Cultural events organised either by L2 departments or student social clubs increased students' interest whenever they had the time and possibility to attend them. As a result, students considered extra-curricular activities engaging and helpful to boost their interest in the L2 learning process itself. These activities varied largely across departments, as students repeatedly mentioned during interviews, especially in the second semester when they reported possessing a better understanding of the language after almost one year of L2 studies:

Peter (French, S1): I do think that cultural events are nice in a way they really encourage people to either learn the language or just visit the country.

Eike (German, S2): Some tutors who hold a conversation with students who want to go. You can go there and talk to her and talk to people who want to speak German this way. [...] I realised that's a good opportunity for me to speak a little bit more German.

2 The Higher Education Contribution Scheme is a state-managed loan which allows students to pay the Australian government for their university studies after graduation once their income hits a certain threshold.

Paolo (Italian, S2): I went to the Italian ball, which increased my motivation. It was very cool—Italian things, Italian songs. It was fun and the Italian food, which is cool. [...] I went to one pass session³ when I was in first semester. I'm lazy. I guess people go more to pass sessions and stuff. They have a Facebook page where they put the ad.

Students reflected on the importance of having more contact hours to improve their L2 proficiency levels, especially in the second semester when the workload increased, as highlighted by quantitative data analysis outcomes (variable 18). Nonetheless, a considerable number of participants were aware of the time needed to pass other core courses given the weight of an L2 course in their study plan—63.7 per cent of the research participants in semester one and 50.7 per cent in semester two chose an L2 as their optional/elective course (Table 1.1), as Veronica (French, S2) posited:

I think that you need more contact hours to be able to learn more sufficiently, but I also think that with having most people have three other classes as well, it would be difficult to keep up to all the other classes if they have to spend so much extra time on French, because it is something you need to actively learn.

6. New directions for the field of motivation in learning European languages

Quantitative data analysis demonstrates that all three main categories of motivators identified for this study were interconnected allowing multidirectional influences. *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* recorded the strongest positive correlations with *Course-specific Motivational Components* in the first semester and even more so in the second semester, represented by the high Pearson's correlation coefficients ($r = .632$ and $.699$, respectively) presented in Table 1.6. Pearson's correlation was used because of the nature of the data (scored and not rank-ordered data) and to measure the strength of the relationship. These positive correlations suggest that teachers' actions were deeply impacted by the course syllabus and materials suggested by course coordinators and L2 department chairs. At the same level, the effectiveness of lesson plans and activities proposed in class was found to be dependent on the clarity and communicative skills of teachers who were in close contact with their students.

3 The Peer Assisted Study Scheme (PASS) is an internationally accredited peer-learning program that aims to support students with group study sessions led by certified student PASS leaders.

Table 1.6 Correlations between the three categories of motivators analysed in this study

Correlations in semester one			
		Teacher	Course
Course	Pearson Correlation	.632**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
University	Pearson Correlation	.506**	.588**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000

Correlations in semester two			
		Teacher	Course
Course	Pearson Correlation	.699**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
University	Pearson Correlation	.497**	.586**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Compiled by author.

Strong and statistically significant correlations were also identified between *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* and *University Context* ($r = .506$ and $.497$ in semesters one and two, respectively) as well as between *Course-specific Motivational Components* and *University Context* ($r = .588$ and $.586$ in semesters one and two, respectively). These last correlations with *University Context* nevertheless appeared to be slightly weaker in the second semester when the correlation between *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* and *Course-specific Motivational Components* became stronger. Such a shift from one semester to the other confirms both quantitative and qualitative data analysis results, which painted the learning environment as a space in which students slowly constructed positive and close relationships with their teachers and classmates over time. Strong positive correlations between *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* and *Course-specific Motivational Components* also show that the ways teachers delivered culture-related content were as important as the lesson content itself.

In response to the first research question formulated for this study—‘How does the formal learning environment contribute to students’ motivation when learning French, German, Italian and Spanish at Australian universities across two semesters?’—we can confirm that teachers’ ability to create communication opportunities appears to be a strong motivational component that boosted positive emotions such as enjoyment, as observed

by Frascini and Tao (2024) with students of Korean. Teachers generated engaging and inclusive learning situations while providing clear explanations and focusing on all main L2 skills (cf. Arnold, 2018; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Martín et al., 2016). Data contribute to an understanding that teachers were considered to be essential components of a motivating and engaging L2 learning experience (Kubanyiova, 2012; Irie et al., 2018). Students' narratives assist in explaining that some of their teachers were able to develop close ties with them and demonstrate their agency within the formal L2 learning environment, especially in the second semester when relationships became stronger (cf. Crozet & Díaz, 2020; Dörnyei, 2020; Fukada et al., 2020). As a result, motivated students experienced high levels of enjoyment in learning a language in a positive and highly stimulating environment (D'Orazzi, 2020b; Dörnyei & Muir, 2019; Frascini & Tao, 2024). Favourable teacher–student and student–student dynamics confirm the compelling importance of *FLE-Teacher* and *FLE-Atmosphere* theorised by Li et al. (2018) and of the 'classroom social climate' explored by Joe et al. (2017). *Teacher-specific Motivational Components* were not always tied to motivation for those students who did not appreciate their teachers' approach and explanations. The wide range of L2 departments involved in this research ($n = 31$) indicates that teaching styles are different across teachers and departments and might not always motivate the whole class cohort (D'Orazzi, 2020d; Lamb, 2020).

Based on statistically significant and strong positive correlations, teachers' success was dependent on the material—paper-based, audio, visual and digital—used in class and the cultural topics proposed to trigger interest and boost intrinsic motivation (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Hanna & de Nooy, 2009; You et al., 2016). Particular attention given to concrete daily-life situations increased students' willingness to communicate and helped them acquire the communicative competence necessary to travel to countries where their L2 is spoken (Campbell & Storch, 2011; D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021; 2022; D'Orazzi et al., 2022; Yashima, 2002). In the second semester, students declared that in spite of an increase in difficulty in keeping up with lesson content and workload (cf. de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009), they benefited from a more social and inclusive environment characterised by friendships with their classmates and a more comprehensive understanding of the material proposed by their teachers (Dewaele et al., 2017; Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). This seems to confirm the outcomes of previous longitudinal

research on motivation where the formal learning environment gained more importance over other factors over a period of time (Chan et al., 2015; D’Orazzi, 2020a; Gardner et al., 2004).

Positive and engaging group and teacher–student interactions were often deemed successful thanks to the availability of appropriate space offered by those universities which also allowed classes with a maximum of 15 people—especially in the second semester when the number of students enrolled on L2 courses was smaller. Nonetheless, high standard deviations recorded for *University Context* suggest that students retained very different opinions in this regard. Not surprisingly, studies on L2 learning demotivation throw light on the demotivating role of the *University Context* on students’ L2 learning experience where student cohorts are excessively large (D’Orazzi, 2020d; Thorner & Kikuchi, 2020).

Universities also motivated those students who wanted to apply for exchange programs overseas and appreciated extra-curricular activities during which they learnt more about their L2 and L2-speaking countries’ cultures (Yashima, 2002). Based on qualitative data and biographical information drawn from the two surveys, *University Context* also triggered interest in learning an L2 among those students who wanted to choose an interesting optional/elective course (Table 1.1)—including breadth subjects at the University of Melbourne and broadening units at the University of Western Australia, or enrol in a diploma of languages (see also Baldwin, 2019; Brown & Caruso, 2016; Brown et al., 2019)

In regard to the second research question—‘Which classroom and extracurricular activities are particularly motivating for students who have just started to learn French, German, Italian and Spanish at tertiary level?’—a range of activities were mentioned by interviewees, confirming and articulating in greater detail some of the outcomes of the quantitative data analysis. Extra-curricular activities were welcomed by motivated students who enjoyed social events in which they were invited to practise their L2 and be exposed to the cultures of the countries where their L2 is spoken. Students stated that they had attended such activities in an attempt to acquire communicative competence to be applied in real-life scenarios—that is, sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), confirming the finding by Dewaele (2004) that student participants developed greater sociolinguistic competence when they ‘socialised’ with French-speaking people because of ‘a superior understanding of the need to express respect through pronoun choice’ (p. 399). This result is closely

related to the analysis offered by Lasan and Rehner (2018) of Collentine and Freed's study (2004, cited in Lasan & Rehner 2018), which explores the main features of widely accepted learning situations: *study at home*, *immersion* and *study abroad*. Lasan and Rehner (2018) criticise the flurry of research on *study at home* and *study abroad* learning situations as 'extracurricular target-language contact' opportunities against the scarce existence of studies on *immersion*, which is characterised by 'some combination of the learning and communicative contexts' (p. 633).

The study of movies and songs in class or in special events was also considered to be motivating, since it not only gave students the opportunity to test their listening and reading comprehension abilities but also helped them understand in more depth the culture of the countries in which their L2 is spoken, confirming what L2 teachers perceived in Crozet and Díaz's (2020) study. Consequently, cultural materials contributed to building students' new 'multicultural', 'mobile and linguistically competent' identities (Caruso & Fraschini, 2021; D'Orazzi et al., 2022).

Lasan and Rehner's (2018) argument that the *study abroad* learning situations have received more attention is validated by the long list of studies on L2 motivation confirming the availability of multiple exchange programs offered by universities and the positive feedback received by students who studied in hosting universities overseas (Fryer & Roger, 2018; Huang et al., 2015; Kong et al., 2018; Yashima, 2002). This is certainly the case of one research participant, Nicole (Spanish, S2), who went on an exchange program overseas and realised how studying abroad increased her motivation to interact in a Spanish-speaking social context:

She's [my Mexican housemate] sitting there too and she's talking to a Mexican friend and she's speaking Spanish. I feel like it makes me want to keep learning because all I want is to being able to talk with her fully in Spanish and introducing me to her other friends.

Further understanding of the formal learning environment is offered by students who declared themselves to be strongly motivated by innovative and engaging forms of assessment. Some students needed to interview native speakers of the language they were studying. The use of task-based teaching approaches as a form of assessment allowed students to interact in their L2 and boost their interest in the people and cultures of the countries where their L2 would be used in daily situations—thus improving their self-esteem, engagement, motivation and autonomy (Ellis et al., 2020; Lambert, 2010). Task-based conversational activities in which students needed to

show how much they had learnt increased their motivation when they realised how much they could express in their L2, especially in the second semester when their motivation and willingness to communicate increased (see also de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009). The improvement of *FLE-Social* and *FLE-Atmosphere* (D’Orazzi, 2020b; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Li et al., 2018) was often fostered by online debates and the creation of group chats via social networks in which students shared information pertaining to events and course materials, news and images of the countries in which they aimed to travel and used the language learnt at university (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009; Reinhardt, 2019).

7. Conclusions and final observations

Based on Dörnyei’s (2019) critique of recent studies on motivation which do not focus on the *L2 Learning Experience*, labelled the ‘Cinderella of the L2 Motivational Self System’, this study has shed light on three specific motivational components by partially drawing upon an older framework theorised by Dörnyei in 1994 and a more updated understanding of the significance of the *L2 Learning Experience* (Dörnyei 2019). *Teacher-specific Motivational Components*, *Course-specific Motivational Components* and the *University Context* appeared to motivate students in multiple ways depending on the class activities but also on the stages of their L2 learning experience during their two first semesters studying a European language, namely French, German, Italian or Spanish, at a university in Australia. Quantitative as well as qualitative data contributed to confirming the importance of enjoyment in and outside the classroom environment, which places a greater responsibility on L2 departments to provide a larger range of immersive extra-curricular activities for their L2 students (D’Orazzi, 2020b, 2020d; Lasan & Rehner, 2018).

The dynamics experienced by students during their L2 learning experience also allowed them to construct new identities and imagine culturally diverse settings in which they could apply their L2 communicative competence acquired at university. These outcomes confirm previous studies focusing particularly on the *Ideal L2 Self*—for example, Caruso and Frascini (2021), D’Orazzi (2020a), and D’Orazzi and Hajek (2021; 2022). New multicultural and multilingual identities were found to be triggered by the use of interactive and engaging activities in face-to-face settings, but also by the use of technology-mediated teaching practices (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009;

Henry, 2017; Reinhardt, 2019). It is hoped that the outcomes of this study might inspire L2 teachers and departments to set out new research-based strategies to increase students' motivation and engagement, as promoted by Weinmann et al. (2021), when arguing for research-based policies within the Australian L2 educational landscape. More research on this last component is strongly recommended to enable us to discover how, for example, the use of digital tools and social networks influenced students' motivation in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020 and 2021. As Reinhard (2019) posits, 'social media, not fully explored, might offer affordances for multimodal, visual, location-based, and different forms of socio-collaborative learning' (p. 31), which might increase L2 motivation in students and fuel their desire to experience foreign cultures and develop communicative and intercultural competence.

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