

Language learning motivation and approach and avoidance orientations

What this research was about and why it is important

It has long been recognized that motivation for learning can be focused on possibilities and opportunities, or concerns about failure. Possibilities and opportunities are things that people are motivated to approach, while failure is something people wish to avoid. Although the approach–avoidance distinction is a characteristic fundamental to human functioning, it has not been systematically investigated in second language acquisition (SLA). For adults who learn a second language, learning can be driven by approach orientations or by avoidance orientations. In this study, 18 highly motivated adult learners of Swedish were interviewed about their goals and learning behaviors. A third of the learners had approach orientations. Another third had avoidance orientations. For participants with approach orientations learning was associated with enjoyment and well-being. For participants with avoidance orientations it was associated with worry and stress.

What the researchers did

- We contacted teachers at 3 universities in Sweden with fast-track programs for adult learners of Swedish with professional backgrounds. We asked these teachers to identify students who they had taught in recent months and who were particularly motivated.
- We contacted these students and interviewed them using an interview guide.
- The questions in the interview guide focused on dimensions of Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs), a new theory of long-term perseverance developed by Zoltán Dörnyei and his colleagues.
- In our study we focus on the experiences of 18 of the adult language learners who were interviewed.
- In our analyses we used a theory-driven thematic approach where the theory of DMCs was used to explore the data.
- In coding the data we focused on five areas: participants' goals and learning behaviors, their experiences of effort in learning, and their self-confidence and emotions.

What the researchers found

- We found that around a third of the participants had approach orientations. Learning was enjoyable, and they were motivated by the personal and professional possibilities that skills in Swedish could provide. Although effort was needed, they experienced satisfaction, fulfillment and optimism in their work.
- Another third had avoidance orientations. For these people, motivation was driven by the desire to avoid negative outcomes that could occur if they did not develop good enough language skills. Learning was not enjoyable, and they experienced worry and stress.
- The final group of participants had both approach and avoidance orientations. Although they were motivated by opportunities and possibilities, they also experienced stress and anxiety.

Things to consider

- The study points to the importance of understanding how language learners formulate and pursue their goals. By providing insights into how motivation can be underpinned by approach or avoidance orientations, and how these can be associated with differences in well-being, the research provides important insights into the sustainability of focused effort.
- The study also shows how the theory of DMCs can be used to investigate long-term motivation and commitment to language learning.
- The study highlights the importance of applying an approach–avoidance perspective in contexts of migration, and how social duress can have a negative impact on adult language learners' well-being.
- For teachers, knowing about the approach and avoidance patterns that underpin students' learning behaviors can help them identify students with avoidance-focused dispositions and who might be at risk of stress and burn-out.

How to cite this summary: Henry, A. and Davydenko, S. (2020). Language learning motivation and approach and avoidance orientations. *OASIS Summary of Henry & Davydenko (2020) in Modern Language Journal*, <https://oasis-database.org>

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