



What Motivates Students to Study Foreign Languages?

Report by

Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS), University of Oregon

March 9, 2011

CASLS is a National Foreign Language Resource Center committed to supporting foreign language educators and improving language education. This report, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, is part of the Ten Burning Questions series, in which CASLS investigates educators' questions about language teaching and learning.

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Question:

I know it's important for students to take extended sequences of foreign language classes, but our students just want to get the requirements over with as soon as possible. How can we motivate them to continue?

Answer:

Motivating students is a challenge for teachers of all subjects, and a complete answer would take a book (or two). Our study showed that one factor, high levels of language proficiency, correlates strongly with students' desire to continue studying language. Successful learners were eleven times more likely to want to continue, which would lead to even greater mastery.

Research Summary:

Students are motivated to take language courses for a variety of different reasons. Previous research has identified two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is characterized by the student's positive attitudes toward the language group and a desire to become part of the target language community. Instrumental motivation is characterized by more utilitarian reasons for studying the language, such as satisfying school program requirements or increasing one's job skills.

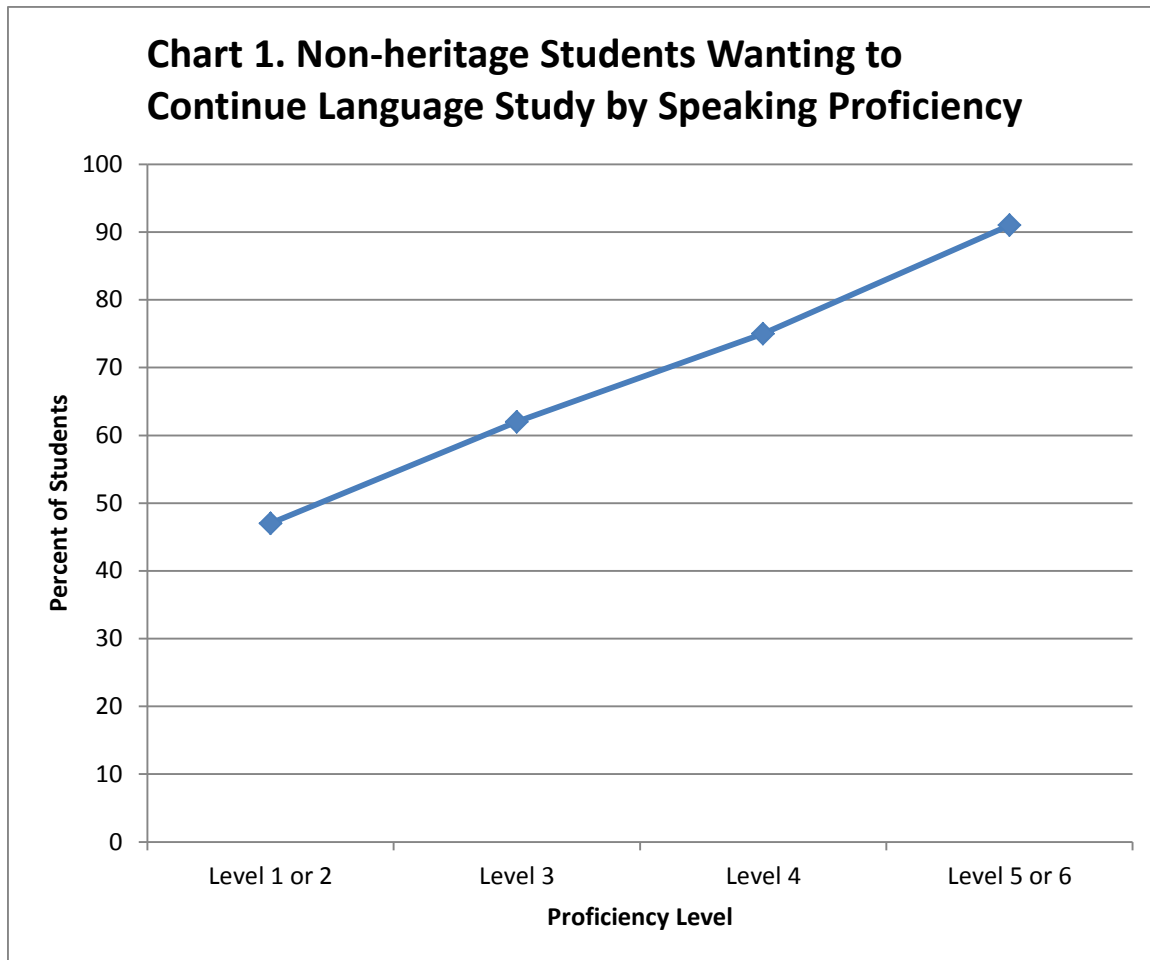
Generally, integrative motivation has been found to sustain long-term success. In a county that is predominately monolingual, such as the U.S., many students have little opportunity to use the language they are studying outside the classroom, so there is little chance for them to integrate into another language community. The most prominent exceptions are heritage language learners whose family members speak the target language and who often have many opportunities for integration.

In this study, we looked closely at learners who are not heritage learners and thus less likely to use the target language outside the classroom. For these students, maintaining their interest by developing programs that set obtainable, short-term goals is important. When students are able to communicate successfully in the new language, they can experience a sense of accomplishment that motivates them to continue studying and improve their skills even more. Our results suggest that, for these students in particular, successful learning outcomes are important if they are to continue language study.

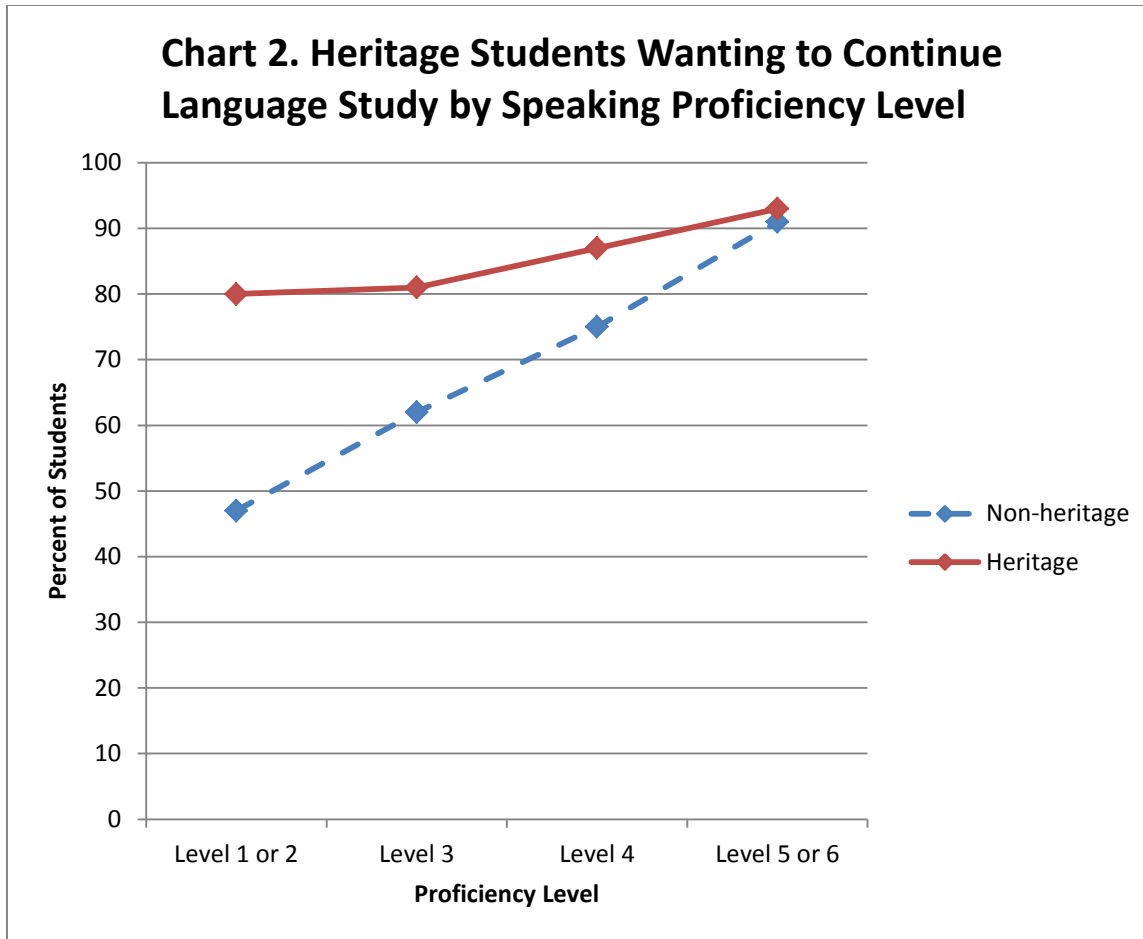
We examined speaking proficiency results from high school students currently enrolled in foreign language classes. The data also included information about the students' desire to continue language study. Chart 1 below shows the percentage of students who wanted to continue, organized by proficiency level. This chart demonstrates that the higher the level of proficiency, the greater the likelihood the student will want to continue in the language program. Statistical results showed that students with speaking proficiency levels of 5 or 6 (similar to ACTFL Intermediate-Mid or -High) are eleven times more likely to want to continue studying the

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language than those at levels 1 or 2 (similar to ACTFL Novice-Low or -Mid). Similarly, those at level 4 were over three times more likely, and those at level 3, nearly twice as likely. These results clearly demonstrate that success is related to a desire for further study, and ultimately to even greater success.



As a comparison, we looked at heritage language learners whose family members speak the target language and who therefore have many opportunities for integration. For this group as well, successful students were more likely to want to continue, but the effect was much smaller. Over 80% of these students wanted to continue, even when their proficiency level was very low. This group contrasts sharply with the non-heritage group, where less than half of low-scoring, non-heritage students want to continue. The comparison of the two groups is shown in Chart 2 below.



Students may be motivated to study language for integrative or instrumental reasons. In fact, both motives may be at work in the same student. Among students who are less likely to have strong integrative motivation, success in language study appears to be critical to their continued study. Yet, even among students who are highly likely to have strong integrative motivation, success adds to their desire to continue.

Mastery, of course, is not the only factor related to students' desire to continue. For example, the data shows that as students move through their high school years, their desire to continue language study declines. Twelfth graders are about half as likely to want to continue as ninth graders. This effect is much smaller than the mastery effect and does not interact with it; therefore, we have not taken it into account in this analysis. The important point is that mastery is a very large effect, although not the only one.

Data Analysis:

This analysis examines whether students' success in learning a foreign language is related to their desire to continue language study. Student success was measured by speaking proficiency level

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on the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP), while the desire to continue language study was determined by responses on a questionnaire.

We selected students from the STAMP database who took the speaking portion of the assessment; were in the first through fourth year of a language program in a U.S. high school in 2008, 2009, or 2010; were in grades nine through twelve; and had had less than two years of immersion instruction, if any. Based on student responses to demographic questions, two groups were identified: non-heritage learners who did not have family members who spoke the target language and heritage learners who did. The final dataset contained scores for 19,361 non-heritage students and 1,775 heritage students. The students were enrolled in 900 classes situated in 184 schools in 99 districts and 27 states. Although this study is based on a convenience sample, it represents a regionally diverse cross section of U.S. high schools.

The dataset contained students' responses to a brief questionnaire given after they completed the assessment. This analysis examines student responses to the statement, "I want to learn all the <language> I can." Response choices were on a five-point Likert scale (i.e., "strongly agree," "agree," "partly disagree/agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree"). For our analysis, we grouped "strongly agree" and "agree" responses together and compared them to the combination of all other responses. We coded responses "strongly agree" or "agree" as "1" and all other responses as "0."

We compared student questionnaire responses by speaking proficiency. Speaking proficiency was chosen as the measure of foreign language success, because this skill is the most comparable across multiple languages. STAMP speaking proficiency scores are reported on the CASLS benchmark scale, where descriptions for levels ranging from 1 to 6 are based on the descriptions of ACTFL levels Novice-Low to Intermediate-High. To increase cell sizes to appropriate levels, students scoring at levels 1 and 2 were grouped together, as were those at levels 5 and 6.

Table 1 below shows the percentages of students responding "strongly agree" or "agree" to the questionnaire statement, organized by speaking proficiency level and heritage status.

Table 1. Percent of Students Wanting to Continue Language Study

	Proficiency Level			
	1 / 2	3	4	5 / 6
Non-heritage (n = 19,361)	47.0	62.3	74.7	90.7
Heritage (n = 1,775)	80.2	80.8	87.2	93.0

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We used the LOGISTIC procedure in the SAS statistical software to test whether differences in responses to the questionnaire statement could be explained by speaking proficiency levels. We conducted separate analyses for non-heritage and heritage groups. For each analysis, the effect of proficiency level was significant: Non-heritage ($X^2 = 828.16$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.0001$), heritage ($X^2 = 26.26$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.0001$). This shows that speaking proficiency level is strongly associated with students' desire to continue language study.

The relationship between proficiency level and desire to continue study can be quantified more precisely using odds ratios. We calculated these using proficiency level 1/2 as the reference point, which is shown in Table 2 below. A non-heritage student at level 5 / 6 in speaking proficiency is 10.96 times more likely to want to continue language study than one at level 1/2. Students at levels 3 and 4 are similarly more likely to continue, 1.86 times level 1/2 students, and 3.33 times, respectively. For heritage students, the increased odds at higher proficiency levels are much smaller. A heritage student at level 5 / 6 is 3.27 times more likely to want to continue, while students at levels 3 and 4 are 1.04 and 1.68 times more likely, respectively.

Table 2. Odds Ratio Estimates for Desire to Continue Language Study by Proficiency

Proficiency Levels		Estimate	95% Wald Confidence Limits		
Non-heritage					
Level 3	vs. Level 1/2	1.86	1.73	2.00	
Level 4	vs. Level 1/2	3.33	3.05	3.64	
Level 5/6	vs. Level 1/2	10.96	7.80	15.35	
Heritage					
Level 3	vs. Level 1/2	1.04	0.68	1.59	
Level 4	vs. Level 1/2	1.68	1.09	2.60	
Level 5/6	vs. Level 1/2	3.27	1.78	6.01	

These results demonstrate that increased mastery of language skills is associated with an increased desire to continue language study, which in turn can lead to even great mastery. This effect is significant for both non-heritage and heritage learners, but is especially strong for non-heritage students, who are more likely to have instrumental reasons for pursuing language study.