

# Attitudes and motivation towards learning French in primary school

## The role of developmental changes between the ages of 5 and 7

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Young children have often been shown to be highly motivated towards learning foreign languages in primary school, but for their enthusiasm to decrease during secondary schooling. Many reasons have been put forward, such as novelty wearing off, teaching styles, or societal and peer pressure. Little is known about changes in attitudes and motivation in primary school aged children when these factors are kept constant, the only variable being the age of the children. The present study investigated differences in attitudes and motivation at two different ages (5 and 7) in such a setting. Two intact classes in the same school (53 children with no prior knowledge of French), taught the same material by the same teacher, took part in focus groups and one-to-one interviews during the course of a larger longitudinal project investigating the role of age in early classroom learning. Results show that changes in motivation might occur earlier than previously thought, and be shaped by developmental changes in children's cognitive, social and emotional growth. Children as young as 5 and 7 were shown to exhibit differences in levels of self-regulation, self-efficacy, and thought and beliefs frames which had a direct impact on their attitudinal and motivational profiles.

**Keywords:** motivation, attitudes, young learners, French, cognitive development, middle childhood

### 1. Introduction

It has been widely reported that young learners are enthusiastic about learning foreign languages (FL) in primary school (Cable et al., 2010; Courtney, 2014; Lanvers, 2017; Martin, 2012; Mihaljevic Djigunović, 2012), even if their positive

attitudes can be tempered by various contextual factors (Chambers, 1999). However, this enthusiasm is usually reported to wane with age, especially post primary, in a wide range of different contexts (e.g. Cable et al., 2010; Mihaljevic Djigunović, 2012; Williams et al., 2002). The reasons for this enthusiasm and its subsequent decrease, however, remain relatively little understood, and some studies have actually found an increase in motivation at the onset of secondary schooling (Chambers, 2016, 2019; Courtney et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2016). A range of reasons have been put forward, but it can be difficult to tease out what is due to the chronological/developmental age of the learners, and what is due to contextual factors such as for example how long children have been learning the foreign language (FL) or the teaching methods used with different age groups (Martin, 2012; Muñoz, 2017; Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011). The purpose of the study reported here was to investigate and compare beginner primary school children's attitudes and motivation towards learning French in the classroom at two different ages (5- and 7-year-old), in a setting where other variables, such as the context of learning, teacher and teaching style, and background of the children (socio-economic; geopolitical; cultural etc.), were kept constant as far as possible. Two intact classes in the same school (53 children overall), each taught by the same specialist French teacher for two hours a week over 19 weeks, took part in focus groups and one-to-one interviews during the course of a longitudinal project investigating the role of age in early classroom learning. The focus groups explored children's attitudes towards learning French, towards France and French people, as well as their motivation for learning French. The interviews explored similar issues on a one-to-one basis with each child.

Section 2 presents the background to this study, by reviewing current research on motivation and attitudes as well as developmental changes in middle childhood, with a focus on young learners and the primary foreign language learning context. Section 3 outlines the study design and its rationale, before presenting and discussing the results in Sections 4 and 5.

## **2. Background**

This study took place within the context of England, where language competencies of school leavers in England are among the weakest in Europe (British Council, 2017; European Commission, 2012; Lanvers, 2017), and where motivation to learn them is low (Bartram, 2010; Lanvers, 2017; Mitchell & Myles, 2019; Williams et al., 2002). To counter this challenging situation, languages were introduced in the National Curriculum for English primary schools in 2014, hoping that an earlier introduction would generate long-lasting motivation and positive

attitudes, and lay the foundation for continuing engagement at higher educational levels (Fenyvesi, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017).

## 2.1 Attitudes and motivation – conceptual issues

Attitudes and motivation are known to be crucial factors in the successful learning of foreign languages and are linked to achievement in many studies (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017), although this can depend on what measures of language proficiency are used (Araújo & de Costa, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017). Consequently, developing positive attitudes to language learning and enhancing motivation are seen as key goals for primary languages classrooms (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017).

Attitudes can be defined as “the set of values which a pupil brings to the FLL experience” (Chambers, 1999, p.27). These are shaped by the social, educational and cultural context, which influences the expectations that children bring to the task of FL learning (Bartram, 2010). As the child progresses through schooling, we can expect attitudes to change, according to their experience of FL learning, but also as they mature and become more self-reflective and self-motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Del Giudice, 2018; Robson, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Three dimensions of the concept of attitude have been investigated: the cognitive dimension (thoughts and beliefs); the affective dimension (feelings and emotions); and the conative dimension (behavioural intentions) (Baker, 1992; Bartram, 2010). We could expect the relative weight of these different dimensions to change during middle childhood (usually defined as ages 6 to 11), as the child develops (Del Giudice, 2018; Lantolf & Swain, 2020).

Although conceptually different from motivation, attitudes are generally considered a major constituent of the motivational process (Bartram 2010; Gregersen, MacIntyre & Ross, 2020), representing a disposition towards the second language (L2), the learning situation and the speakers of the L2. Motivation, on the other hand, is a more goal-oriented construct referring to what provides the impetus for learning a FL. In practice, however, the two concepts are often investigated together as a composite (Fenyvesi, 2018; Heinzmann, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). Whereas attitudes research has paid some attention to developmental characteristics of childhood, motivation research has not paid much attention to the developmental dimension of the changing nature of motivation. Deci & Ryan’s (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) *self-determination theory* gives a central role to motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic), in the fulfilment of our innate needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. This can be linked to the concept of self-efficacy, that is learners’ beliefs in their ability to succeed at a given task (Bandura 1997; Graham 2021), which is thought to be a driver of motivation

(Graham 2022). Of particular relevance to the present study is the developmental change during childhood from primarily intrinsic motivations – enjoying an activity – to more extrinsically motivated behaviours which ideally become internalised and self-regulated (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and lead to the achievement of desired outcomes through perseverance and self-belief (Graham 2022). In schools for example, intrinsic motivation has been shown to become weaker with each grade (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.60).

Some of the developmental changes which might affect attitudes and motivation during middle childhood are well documented from different theoretical perspectives. For example, the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie*, thought to emerge around age 7, whereby children start to unite emotion and thinking, leads to different needs and motives controlling children's behaviours (Lantolf & Swain, 2020). Similarly, developmental psychologists have documented changes in middle childhood, in terms of increased reasoning and problem-solving skills, increased self-regulation and executive functions as well as the acquisition of cultural norms and social skills (Del Giudice, 2018; Robson, 2006). These maturational changes alter the child's relationship to learning and school, and are bound to have an impact on attitudes and motivation.

## 2.2 Attitudes and motivation in young FL learners

Recent empirical research in primary foreign language classrooms has engaged not only with the social and psychological contexts of primary language learning (e.g. McCall, 2011), but also with how motivation and attitudes can be shaped over time by variables such as age and gender, the teaching context, etc. (e.g. Cable et al., 2010; Kissau, 2006; Williams et al., 2002). For example, some researchers have shown that motivation is initially high and closely linked to the teacher and the classroom experience, but as children grow older, motivation drops and becomes linked to other factors such as self-efficacy and a feeling of achievement and progress (Chambers, 2016; Courtney, 2014; Graham et al., 2016; Martin, 2012; Mihaljevic Djigunović, 2012; Muñoz, 2017; Nikolov, 1999; Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011), reflecting developmental changes in motivational profiles (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Demotivation has been tentatively linked to boredom with classroom activities which are unchallenging, or finding learning a foreign language difficult (Cable et al., 2010; Chambers, 2019; Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011).

Some studies, however, have found motivation to be stable over time (Cenoz, 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović, 1995), and a few studies document an increase in motivation over time (but see Chambers, 2016; 2019; Donato et al., 2000; Graham et al., 2016). Heinzmann (2013) found that by age 9, children had more or less established their attitudes and motivation, but Mihaljević Djigunović (2017) in

her study of children between 10 and 14, found motivation to be fluctuating, and argues that young learners should not be seen as a homogeneous group over a wide age range. Generally, however, empirical research has found that attitudes and motivation towards FL learning in primary schools are largely positive, in different countries and cultures, but that the picture becomes more complex as children grow up (Enever, 2011; Tragant, 2006).

Regarding the nature of primary children's classroom motivation, most studies report intrinsic motivation, enjoying activities such as games and singing, and generally having fun (Bolster, 2009; Cable et al., 2010; Courtney, 2014; Lanvers, 2017; Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011). It has also been reported that for some learners "the personal characteristics of the person teaching them languages" increases enjoyment (Cable et al., 2010, p. 62; Nikolov, 1999). Enjoyment for languages has also been found to increase with themed lessons, such as building language learning around popular cultural events like the World Cup (McCall, 2011). When a dislike is expressed, it appears to focus on specific aspects of teaching, such as persistent repetition of known words and lack of challenging tasks (Muñoz, 2017). Furthermore, Cable et al.'s (2010) findings indicate that young children's motivation is both intrinsic and instrumental in orientation, with young children speaking about their enjoyment of learning about the language community and going on visits, and older children (9–11 year olds) generally perceiving languages as 'useful'.

Overall, for young learners, motivation is 'associative' with classroom activities such as singing and the teacher. As children age, external rewards (e.g. receiving badges for good work/behaviour) slowly lose their attractiveness and children seem more able to talk about how they see language learning become useful for the future (Muñoz, 2017).

In most of these studies, however, it is difficult to tease apart which changes in attitudes and motivation are due to the chronological age of the children and their stage of cognitive, social and emotional development, and which are due to other factors such as: the length of time they have been learning the FL; changes in pedagogies, quality of teaching or teacher subject knowledge; expectations of level of attainment not being met (Erler & Macaro, 2011; Graham et al., 2016; Muñoz, 2008; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). Research has neglected so far the role played by the chronological age of the child, linked to important developmental changes taking place in middle childhood (Del Giudice, 2018; Guz & Tetiurka, 2013; Robson, 2006). For example, a quite general shift to more self-regulated behaviours and more extrinsic motivations for learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000) might have some impact on what drives children of different ages.

The present study aimed to fill this gap by keeping all variables except age constant as far as possible, including proficiency in French, teacher and teaching

style, and socio-economic context. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Are there age-related differences in 5- and 7-year-olds in terms of:

RQ1.1 Attitudes

RQ1.1.1 Towards learning French

RQ1.1.2 Towards French people and culture

RQ1.2. Motivation (intrinsic vs extrinsic)

RQ2. What is the role of developmental changes in middle childhood in accounting for any differences?

### 3. The study

This study took place within the context of a larger project comparing how three groups of beginner learners aged 5, 7 and 11 learn French in the classroom in England, prior to the formal introduction of foreign languages in primary schools (for details, see <http://www.flloc.soton.ac.uk/primary/index.html>). Each group received 38 hours' instruction, taught by the same teacher following the same curriculum and similar pedagogical principles. The present article focuses on differences in learners' motivation and attitude towards learning French in the two primary age groups (aged 5/6 and 7/8).

#### 3.1 Participants

Two intact classes in each of Year 1 (5/6-year olds) and Year 3 (7/8-year olds) were identified in a community primary school in England (Table 1). Children had not been exposed to French in the classroom prior to the project, and the teaching of French ceased at the end of the project. The two groups were highly comparable in terms of social and cultural characteristics (low economic status; isolated rural community).

None of the children had had previous instruction in French and they were all complete beginners, as ascertained by a receptive vocabulary pre-test at the onset of the project, which showed no statistically significant difference between the two year groups (Wilcoxon rank sum test with continuity correction;  $W=393.5$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.8468$ ). Additionally, 79.5% of the children had never been to a French-speaking country (Year 1: 76.2, Year 3: 83.3). The difference between the two groups was not significant ( $\chi^2=.303$ ,  $p=.582$ ). The few who had visited France had

Table 1. Participants\*

Participants	Year 1 (5-yr olds)	Year 3 (7-yr olds)
Girls	18	11
Boys	9	15
Total	27	26

\* The distribution of boys and girls in each of the year group is asymmetrical. Consequently, the analysis paid particular attention to any possible gender differences in the children’s responses. No differences emerged, however, with both boys and girls giving very similar responses, and we therefore do not report on this variable.

mostly been on short trips to Disneyland Paris, where exposure to French was likely to have been minimal.

3.2 Study design

A part-time qualified teacher employed by the project delivered 38 hours of French for each group of learners over 19 weeks at the rate of two weekly hours. The teaching followed the same curriculum in both groups, using a primarily oral approach with literacy playing a supporting role.

As part of a wide range of tests, focus group interviews were carried out in English with all children in small groups (3 to 6 children) after approximately 25 hours of French lessons, and individual interviews with all children took place in English at the delayed post-test session two months after the end of the project (see Table 2 for timeline). The author attended all the lessons, building a close rapport with all the children, and she carried out all the focus groups, ensuring all children had an opportunity to voice their opinions. The individual interviews were carried out by members of the research team according to a specified set of questions. Their aim was to elicit individual answers, thus redressing any potential group effect in the focus groups’ responses.

Table 2. Project timeline (relevant testing only)

Pre-test (before start of project)	Week 13 of project (after 25 hours teaching)	2 months after end of project
Vocabulary test	Focus groups	1:1 interviews
Background questionnaire		

The present article draws on the focus group and interview data.

Discussion in the focus groups took place in English and centred around the following broad questions:

- Do you like learning French? What do you like/dislike about it?
- Do you think it's useful? Why/why not? Will you want to carry on learning French? Do you do some French outside the French class?
- What classroom activities do you think help you most with learning French?
- Do you do anything to try to remember words? What do you think helps you most to remember the words you have learnt?
- Would you like to meet French children? Do you think they're like you/different? What's the same/different?

The one-to-one interviews were carried out to ensure that children had the opportunity to respond individually to similar questions. The only question which was omitted from the interviews was the last one about their attitudes towards French children.

### 3.3 Data analysis

All data from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed and checked, before being coded according to the children's responses to the questions and emerging themes. All data coding was checked by two researchers independently and inter-coder agreement was very high. The aim of the analysis was to first draw out broad trends within and across groups through descriptive statistics, and then to use a qualitative approach to probe into the reasons behind these trends (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mackey & Gass 2015). Although it could be argued that differences in the results obtained could be due to the way in which children of different ages deal with the instruments (focus group and interviews), there was little evidence that either age group struggled with the process. All the children were used to discussing things in class and giving their opinions, and the 5-year olds were as vocal as the 7-year olds in their responses.

The results are presented in the next section, starting with the attitudes of the children towards learning French and towards French people and culture, followed by their motivation for learning French. Throughout, the emphasis is on documenting and analysing similarities and differences between the 5- and 7-year olds.



4. Results

In this section we present quantitative and qualitative results from the focus group and the one-to-one interviews. The focus groups had the advantage of encouraging the children to discuss views and opinions, thus providing full and rich data. The interviews, on the other hand, tended to be shorter, with children seldom elaborating at length on their answers, even when probed. However, they avoided peer influence on responses, and enabled the researcher to follow up on children’s responses from the focus groups. Using these two sources of data facilitated a more nuanced view of children’s opinions.

In each section, we first present a numerical overview of the children’s responses, using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends and to provide the backdrop for the qualitative analysis which forms the centrepiece of the analysis.

4.1 Attitudes

We first present results on learners’ attitudes towards learning French, followed by attitudes towards French people.

4.1.1 Attitudes towards learning French

Learners were asked if they enjoyed learning French and what they enjoyed about it (Table 3).

Table 3. Enjoyment towards learning French

Task	Response	Year 1 % (n = 27)	Year 3 % (n = 26)
Focus group	Yes	92.6% (25)	61.5% (16)
	No	7.4% (2)	7.7% (2)
	It’s alright/ok	0	30.8% (8)
Interview	Yes	96.3% (26)	88.5% (23)
	No	0	11.5% (3)
	so-so	3.7% (1)	0

A great majority of the children reported enjoying learning French in both year-groups, although the 5-year olds were markedly more enthusiastic (92.6% vs. 61.5%). The Year 3 picture was more mixed: a majority were still very enthusiastic (61.5%), and only two (one boy and one girl) disliked French, but many had become less decisive in their answers (*It’s ok/ it’s alright*). This is in keeping with the literature reviewed earlier which has shown that enthusiasm usually declines

with age, although this decline has mostly been documented with children much older than 7, usually within the context of early secondary schooling. Differences in the responses given by the children in the focus group versus interview were most likely due to the fact that a certain amount of peer pressure could sometimes be observed in the focus groups, although this was by no means widespread, with productive disagreements arising frequently. Additionally, it is possible that in the interviews, some children might have been reluctant to say they disliked French, in case they might have offended the researcher. Nonetheless, there remained a striking difference in enthusiasm between the two year-groups.

Next, we analyse what children reported that they liked/disliked in their French classes. In the focus groups, the 5-year-olds spontaneously said they liked the activities and games. They liked French because they were having fun, as explicitly mentioned by many of them. In the interviews, when asked what they preferred in the French classes, their responses were more varied and they spontaneously mentioned a wide range of classroom activities, such as singing, making things, drawing, games, speaking and/or learning – e.g. new words, and stories. Some of the children also mentioned liking doing well and getting stickers (which were given to them when they participated in classroom activities). Interestingly, only two children mentioned liking the language itself *‘the funny words that they say for things’*, *‘learning French words’*.

When asked specifically during the focus groups about what they disliked, many 5-year olds had to think quite hard and concluded that they liked everything. When pushed, a few of the children mentioned things like *‘it takes too long’* or *‘it’s too slow’*; *‘I don’t understand French’*; *‘getting things wrong and being told off’*; *‘having to repeat things over and over again’*; as well as some games which they found too boisterous.

The 7-year olds enjoyed similar activities as the 5-year olds, although in the focus groups, they reported learning French words more frequently as enjoyable, and they liked showing off what they had learnt. During the interviews, some differences emerged when compared to the 5-year olds. When asked what activities they preferred, the range of activities was similar, but a smaller number of children mentioned them spontaneously. This might be indicative of their lower enthusiasm: the 7-year olds were not quite as intrinsically motivated by the fun aspect of the language classroom, and the novel activities were not quite as memorable for them; however, they did mention the actual learning of French as enjoyable, which the younger children did not.

Another age-related difference between the two year-groups relates to their ability to express reasons for enjoying French. The 5-year olds clearly enjoyed the hands-on fun activities, but struggled to say why these activities made learning enjoyable. In contrast, the 7-year olds seemed less excited by the songs and games,

but enjoyed the word learning and linked it to their enjoyment of learning French. For some 7-year old children, it was the novelty of learning a foreign language as well as the potential usefulness of French which appealed to them: *'we learn something different all the time'; 'I like it because we learn French like if a French kid came and he didn't know English we would know some French and we could be friends with him.'*

When asked about their dislikes during the focus groups, similarly to the 5-year-olds, most 7-year-olds also struggled to come up with answers and replied that they liked everything. The vast majority of the children said they liked everything, and the few negative responses centred around having to do written/silent work and the teacher shouting when some children misbehaved. During the interviews, a few of the children mentioned personal dislikes, for example singing or crafts.

Overall, both groups of children enjoyed the French classes, although the 5-year olds were more enthusiastic than the 7-year olds. The latter group's responses were more nuanced: they liked the French class but... In both groups, what they liked about the French classes was primarily that they were fun and enjoyable, and they liked the activities they engaged in. However, the 7-year-olds also mentioned liking learning new things and the usefulness of learning French. We will come back to this later when discussing the children's motivation for learning French.

#### 4.1.2 Attitudes towards French children

In the focus groups (only), learners were asked if they would like to meet French children (Table 4) and also if they thought French children were like them (Table 5).

**Table 4.** Interest in meeting French children (Focus Group)

Response	Year 1 % (n = 27)	Year 3 % (n = 26)
Yes	96.3% (26)	96.2% (25)
No	3.7% (1)	3.8% (1)

The only child in Year 1 who would not like to meet French children was worried she might have to comfort them if they were homesick and was concerned she would not be up to the task with her limited French. Similarly in Year 3, the one child who responded negatively was worried about not being able to understand them. In one of the Year 3 focus groups, three children who said that they would like to meet French children did also express some concerns about having sufficient French, before collectively agreeing that if they knew enough French words they would love to meet them.

The 5-year olds' reasons for wanting to meet French children were primarily '*when we go on holiday*', '*to make new friends*' and '*to play with them*'. Two children mentioned '*to use my French*' and '*to learn more French*'. The 7-year olds also mentioned holidays and play, as well as speaking French, but they also put forward a wider range of reasons '*because they are cool*', '*their accent is cool*', '*so that they might teach us their cultures and what they eat and teach us a bit more*' and '*because they could teach us French and we could teach them English*'.

Overall, the children's responses were similar in the two year-groups, with the 7-year-olds focusing more on the language and cultural benefits and worrying about their linguistic inadequacies, although some 5-year olds discussed playing games that do not involve language to avoid the language barrier.

When asked in the focus groups whether French children are like them, interesting contrasts emerged between the two groups, as evidenced in Table 5:

Table 5. Similarity with French children

Focus group	Year 1 % (n = 27)	Year 3 % (n = 26)
Yes	0	57.7% (15)
No	100% (27)	42.3% (11)

The Year 1 children all answered that French children are different from them, and focused almost exclusively on the language difference in their spontaneous responses. When asked by the researcher about similarities/differences apart from the language, they struggled. One of the focus groups did not seem to be able to go beyond the fact that '*everybody is different*' (different ages, places where one lives, different tastes, different experiences, etc.) so of course French children would be different too. In another group, a consensus emerged that, in fact, apart from the language, they would not really be different, whereas in two other groups, the children discussed at length possible differences in clothing, food, housing and looks, with some disagreements emerging.

There was also some discussion of the role of language in games; children in different groups tried to imagine how it would work for French children playing the same games as them, with two children worrying how they would explain a new game to a French child with their limited French, and with a few children suggesting they should play games which do not involve language (skipping, hopscotch, football).

Overall, year 1 children had difficulties conceptualising difference other than due to the language difference and ensuing communication difficulties, or through crude concepts of 'otherness' (everybody is different) and 'foreignness'. Most of the

children in the study had never been abroad and had a limited understanding of contexts other than their own.

Year 3 learners also initially focused on language as a difference between themselves and French children. However, discussion quickly moved spontaneously beyond the language difference and focused on similarities, with over half concluding that French children are like them really: *'I think we're the same because we're both like humans'*; *'a kid is a kid though, Miss'*; or *'the only thing that's different about them is the language'*. When discussing similarities, they focused on general features characteristic of being human/children, such as playing the same games (football), having birthdays, wearing clothes, similar histories, etc.

Children in the Year 3 group who concluded that French children are not like them (42%) tended to focus on physical attributes. Geographical differences were mentioned *'we haven't got the Eiffel Tower'*, but the focus was primarily on looks e.g. *'they'll be different looking'*. For example, skin colour was mentioned by many children, and stereotypes had started to appear, for example French people wearing black and white striped matching outfits and berets.

In sum, both ages groups primarily saw language as the prime difference between British and French children. However, most older children considered the only major difference to be linguistic and focused on similarities, whereas the 5-year-olds struggled to see past differences.

## 4.2 Motivation

This section focuses on how motivated to learn French the children are, both from the point of view of extrinsic motivation (is learning French useful?), and from the more intrinsic point of view of their enjoyment, captured by wanting to continue learning French and the reasons why.

### 4.2.1 *Is it useful to learn French?*

Learners were asked if they thought learning French was useful and why it could be useful (Table 6).

Nearly all children thought that learning French is useful. The 5-year olds generally struggled to explain their reasons, and it could be argued that this is because they do not fully understand the concept of usefulness at that age. However, they seemed to understand it when it was explained to them, and some children mentioned that knowing a foreign language could be useful for going on holiday, talking to French people, singing French songs and also teaching other people French. The 7-year old children also mentioned these reasons, but they also thought that learning French could increase job prospects.

Table 6. Usefulness of French

Task	Response	Year 1 % (n= 27;26)	Year 3 % (n= 26)
Focus group	Yes	88.9% (24)	92.3% (24)
	No	0	3.8% (1)
	Unsure	11.1% (3)	3.8% (1)
Interview	Yes	92.3% (24)	92.3% (24)
	No	3.8% (1)	3.8% (1)
	Unsure	3.8% (1)	3.8% (1)

If certain aspects of the usefulness of learning a language cut across age differences (e.g. holidays), others such as the awareness that learning a language may be useful beyond their immediate experiences (e.g. future job prospects), were only mentioned by the 7-year olds, who projected a wider range of imagined future situations.

4.2.2 Continuing with learning French

Children were asked if they wanted to continue learning French (Table 7).

Table 7. Interest in continuing French

Task	Response	Year 1 % (n= 27;26)	Year 3 % (n= 26)
Focus group	Yes	85.2% (23)	80.8% (21)
	No	14.8% (4)	19.2% (5)
Interview	Yes	96.2% (25)	96.2% (25)
	No	3.8% (1)	3.8% (1)

A vast majority of children said they wanted to continue learning French after the French classes have ended, with the 5-year olds showing slightly more enthusiasm: ‘I love French’; ‘I want to learn it every day’.

Overall, the 5-year olds expressed a lot of enthusiasm towards French, French people and the French class. This enthusiasm was also visible in their desire to continue learning it. In comparison, the seven-year olds’ enthusiasm was more subdued, despite expressing similar levels of interest in continuing to learn French.

## 5. Discussion

Interesting differences emerged in our two different age groups, which we first summarise, before exploring possible explanations for the developmental trends observed.

The first interesting observation is that, despite the similarity of both context and FL experience, notable differences were apparent between the 5- and 7-year old children. This was not expected on the basis of previous research, which has suggested that changes in attitudes and motivation occur somewhat later, in the upper primary school/early stages of secondary schooling, when the novelty of learning a foreign language wears off. The main findings of the present study were as follows:

1. Enthusiasm differed between the ages of 5 and 7; although hardly any children disliked French, 7-year olds gave more nuanced and less categorical responses;
2. The reasons for liking French were mostly similar in both groups, with children's motivations being primarily intrinsic and associative (they liked the games and activities); however the 7-year olds also reported a wider range of both instrumental and intrinsic motivations (French is useful and they like learning the language – sense of achievement);
3. The older children were more aware that their proficiency in French remained very limited; the 5-year olds reported higher levels of self-efficacy;
4. Both age groups reported very positive attitudes and all children (bar 2 who were anticipating communication difficulties) would love to meet French children;
5. All the 5-year olds thought that French children are NOT like them, because they speak another language; among 7-year olds, less than half thought in this way, and they focused more on commonalities (children; playing etc.); stereotypes started to appear;
6. The range of reasons for finding French useful were broader among the 7-year olds, and less tied to immediate experiences (family holidays) with children projecting themselves into the future e.g. jobs;
7. Nearly all children would like to carry on learning French.

No studies to our knowledge have investigated differences in attitudes and motivation in primary school children of different ages, all other variables being equal. Decreases in levels of enthusiasm have mostly been reported later on, around transition to secondary school, for many reasons usually linked to the context of learning, such as the novelty of learning a language wearing off, changes in pedagogies in secondary schools, the quality of teaching or teacher subject knowledge,

expectations of level of attainment not being met, etc. (Cable et al., 2010; Erler & Macaro, 2011; Graham et al., 2016; Muñoz, 2008; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). Even in studies which reported a decrease in motivation during primary school years (e.g. Cable et al. 2010; between ages 7 and 10), it is impossible to tell whether this decrease was due to the novelty wearing off after a few years of learning the language. In the study presented here, because the novelty of FL instruction was the same for all children, as were the amount of teaching, the teacher and the teaching style, none of these factors could play a role, and we might therefore have expected attitudes and motivation to be similar in both age groups. However, we have shown that some of the widely documented differences in motivation levels in children of different ages reported in the literature might have their source much earlier, and we believe this could be a direct consequence of children's general social, emotional and cognitive development. The 7-year olds in our study were clearly more sophisticated thinkers, less anchored in the here and now and in immediate gratification, than the 5-year olds. They were better able to project themselves into the future, and imagine themselves as communicators in the foreign language in a range of situations, and this impacted on their attitudes and motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Studies which have investigated changes in attitudes and motivation and their source longitudinally in primary aged children have reported differences too. For example, Mihaljević Djigunović (1995) also found that in 6-year old children, positive attitudes towards foreign language learning derived mainly from their enjoyment of classroom games. By age 9, those same children linked their positive attitudes to learning (rather than playing). Other studies have also suggested that young learners are first motivated by the classroom activities and games, before developing more extrinsic types of motivation (Mihaljevic Djigunović, 2012; Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011; Muñoz, 2017; Nikolov, 1999). Nikolov's (1999) longitudinal study of EFL children in Hungary found that 6–8 year olds mentioned teacher-related aspects when asked about their motivation; from the age of 8, these same children tended to mention more utilitarian reasons, especially as they reached ages 11–14 (Tragant, 2006). Heinzmann (2013) found that young learners' motivation shifted from being primarily intrinsic to more instrumental and Fenyvesi (2018) reports that longitudinal studies show children's motivation becoming increasingly instrumental and oriented toward future goals. Pfenninger & Singleton (2017) did not find that their late starters (age 13–14) were less motivated than their early starters (age 8–9), only that their motivation was more goal-oriented.

It is difficult to conclude from the evidence from these studies, however, whether changes in attitudes and motivation are due to the maturation of the children, or to the fact that the children have been learning for a number of years and



are therefore more proficient and have different expectations: novelty has worn off, and the context of learning has changed, with different teaching styles and content.

So how can we explain the differences reported in the present study between 5- and 7-year olds, when all contextual factors were kept constant, enabling us to tease apart the role played by chronological age?

Many developmental changes occur in early to middle childhood which might underpin some of the differences observed. For example, between the ages of 3 and 7, a qualitative shift in self-regulation takes place when children typically progress from behaviour which is reactive or co-regulated, to behaviour which is more self-regulated (Diamond, 2002; Kopp 1982; Montroy et al., 2016). Bronson (2000, p.3) defines cognitive self-regulation as “the ability to control attention, to direct and monitor thinking and problem solving, and to engage in independent learning activities”. Children increasingly demonstrate abilities which are both conscious and voluntary, and the result of a choice. This can be linked to Ryan & Deci’s (2000; 2017) claim that self-regulation and extrinsic motivation become more prevalent during the course of schooling, or to Del Giudice’s (2018) characterisation of development during middle childhood by – amongst others – important changes in self-regulation, planning and setting goals, as well as acquisition of cultural norms and the ability to consider multiple perspectives and conflicting goals. Self-regulation and motivation are very closely interrelated and in the present study, we can see the younger children’s attitudes and motivations being reactive and moulded by the learning context: the classroom activities are fun and the teacher is engaging. In the 7-year olds, the rather less enthusiastic response to learning French reflects a shift to a more goal-oriented disposition, where they become more aware of their learning and also of gaps in their knowledge. Their motivation becomes more extrinsic rather than primarily intrinsic: they are still having fun, but it is not quite enough any longer to fully motivate them. Their sense of self-efficacy is lower than in younger children, in line with their emerging ability to reflect more critically on their own goals or learning. In the present study, the 5-year olds tended to be more confident in their own abilities in French than the 7-year olds, who were more tentative in their replies, and often acutely aware that their beginner French would not allow them to hold a conversation. We can see the older children’s sense of efficacy and intrinsic motivation becoming negatively influenced by their own perceptions of their (lack of) progress and belief that they can become competent (Chambers, 2019; Graham et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008).

We can also observe in our data the emergence of cultural norms and social awareness typical of development in middle childhood (Del Giudice, 2018). Stereotypes are absent from the 5-year old responses, but make an appearance in

the 7-year olds, who also reflect more on their own and French children's social and geographical context. This can of course be partly due to their longer experience in school and consequent increased knowledge, but it also reflects a new-found sensitivity to social norms and context.

In terms of cognitive development, while children's emotional engagement is still governed primarily by adults and peers throughout middle childhood, and they enjoy fun and varied activities, they are also increasingly capable of concentration and sustained attention (behavioural engagement). They start to plan and to reflect on their learning, and to develop their sense of self as autonomous learners (Del Giudice, 2018; Guz & Tetiurka, 2013, 2016; Robson, 2006). In our study, this is evident in children's increasingly more sophisticated understanding of their own learning and of extrinsic reasons for learning French. It is also evident in the learning strategies they reported using. Most 5-year olds mentioned that repeating words helps them remember words learnt in class, along with a few other strategies, such as writing down words, saying the word out aloud and '*in your head*'. The 7-year olds also mentioned that repeating words (including singing and chanting) helps them most to learn words, but in contrast to the five-year olds they report a wider range of strategies such as linking words with pictures, relating words to familiar items (e.g. pets) and matching words to actions, showing more evidence of self-regulation and control over their own learning.

As we have seen earlier, the constructs of attitude and motivation are multifaceted and shaped by many influences, both internal and external to the learner (Muñoz, 2017). If we think of the 3 dimensions of the construct of attitude first hypothesised by Baker (1992) and developed by Bartram (2010), it seems obvious that the developmental stage reached by the child would have an effect on which dimension is dominant at a given point in time. The cognitive dimension (thoughts and beliefs) is developing throughout middle childhood, and we would expect it to play a larger role in the 7-year olds than the 5-year olds; this is quite evident for example when the two age groups reflect on French children and how different they think they are from them, or when they reflect on how useful learning French is. Conversely, the affective dimension of the construct (feelings and emotions) tends to be the driving force in younger children, and the 5-year olds in our study commented repeatedly on their motivation being driven by having fun, getting rewards, and liking the games and activities in the classroom. Finally, the conative dimension (behavioural intentions) was shown to be more developed in the older children, as we would expect; for example, their learning strategies, although still underdeveloped, were more varied than in the younger children. The use of memory strategies has been shown to develop with age and to play an important role in self-regulation (Robson, 2006).

Overall, although there is no doubt that external factors such as novelty, pedagogies or social pressures play a part in changing attitudes and motivation in secondary school age children, the study presented here showed that these changes originate earlier during the primary cycle, and are largely motivated by developmental changes in children's cognition and their growing awareness of the world and their place within it. A better understanding of the changing nature of attitudes and motivation at different ages is crucial if we are to meet policy-makers' expectations that an early introduction to language learning will generate long-lasting motivation and positive attitudes, and lay the foundation for continuing engagement at higher educational levels.

These findings have important pedagogical implications. As well as considering external factors which impact on learning, curriculum planners and teachers need to take account of what drives children's attitudes and motivation at different ages, given their changing cognitive, social and emotional profiles (Enever, 2011).

## 6. Conclusion

The study presented here investigated differences between 5- and 7-year olds in attitudes and motivation towards learning French, when contextual factors are kept constant. This enabled to tease apart explanations due to the chronological age of the children, rather than the changing nature of the educational and social context children find themselves in. Previous research had shown that enthusiasm and motivation tend to diminish in children in early secondary years, and possibly also towards the end of the primary cycle. Reasons put forward have included the fact that novelty wears off after a few years of learning a foreign language, that teaching styles change, or that children become more susceptible to societal and peer pressure. However, previous research did not allow to decide whether these proposed reasons for a decrease in motivation are intrinsically linked to contextual changes and the fact that children are not FL novices any longer, or whether they are linked to developmental changes in middle childhood (or both). What the present study has been able to show, in the context of primary language education in England at least, is that changes in attitudes and motivation might occur earlier than previously thought, and be due to developmental changes in children's cognitive, social and emotional growth. Children as young as 5 and 7 were shown to exhibit differences in levels of self-regulation, self-efficacy and thought and beliefs frames which had a direct impact on their attitudinal and motivational profiles. FL professionals need to pay attention to these developmental changes and their impact on attitudes and motivation.

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