

Final Report

Motivational Processes and Practices in Accelerated Ab-initio Language Learning

Ulrike Bavendiek

University of Liverpool

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1. Introduction

In 2004, Modern Languages were made non-compulsory in Key Stage 4 in secondary schools, which led to a decline in the take up of languages for GCSE and A level studies, in particular for the traditionally most frequently studied languages, French and German

(http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research_and_statistics/statistics.aspx, last accessed January 2011). An increasing number of state schools in particular have changed or limited their languages on offer, with the result that many pupils do not have the opportunity to study the language of their choice in school, whilst 'independent schools have a richer languages offer as well as much higher levels of participation in language learning', as stated in the latest CILT report on language learning in secondary schools

(http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research_and_statistics/language_trends_surveys/secondary/2009, last accessed January 2011). For this reason, ab initio language learning in HE has become an important tool for widening participation, since it gives students access to languages which were not offered to them in schools. Many universities try to counteract the inequalities regarding their students' language skills at point of entry by offering a wide range of language learning opportunities. As a result, Institution Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs) continue to develop. Most beginners' language learning in HE takes place in IWLPs and/or as subsidiary subjects for students on non-language degree courses. Hotho (1999:41) finds that language teaching on such programmes is influenced by the particulars of language learning for subsidiary subjects. It can be assumed that it is also, in other ways, comparable to beginners' language teaching in secondary and adult education.

Dwindling numbers of applicants with appropriate A level language skills also put pressure on language departments to enrol students ab initio and to educate them, often alongside post A level students, to degree level in that language. As a result, ab initio language teaching has become more prominent in universities in recent years in response to the needs of the students, departments and universities. A wide range of ab initio languages in HE allows students to study for a language degree in a language that they had not studied in school.

Communication about ab initio language learning and teaching in the UK has mostly focused on the sharing of good practice. In 1996, Leder, Reimann and Walsh edited a volume on good practice in ab initio language learning, containing practitioner reports and theoretical underpinnings of innovative teaching ideas in action.

In November 2009 the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies organised a workshop with the title 'Teaching Languages Ab initio'. It became apparent that the challenges and demands of ab initio language teaching are shared by many institutions and their teachers, yet they differ in their responses to them and practices were shown to be diverse and dependent on institutional and departmental circumstances. The report on ab initio language teaching in UK language degree

programmes (<http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/2723>, last accessed January 2011) published by the LLAS Subject Centre, concludes that there is 'no standard ab initio language provision in the UK higher education sector'.

It was felt that it is important to investigate and share good practice, in order to aid further developments in this important area of HE language learning and to base them on the solid foundation of pedagogic inquiry.

1.1 Ab initio language learning as a form of accelerated language learning

The situation for ab initio students on language degree courses is markedly different from the one language learners in subsidiary subjects find themselves in. Since the standards for the award of a language degree qualification do not take into account the proficiency level on entry, i.e. whether a student started the programme with an A level or ab initio in a particular language

(<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/languages.asp>, last accessed January 2011), many ab initio students find themselves having to catch up with post A level students in a very short space of time. Using the example of ab initio learning in his own institution over several years, Baumann showed that, with the right support, it is possible for students to achieve the same degree results as their peers with traditional entry qualifications. Comparing the performances of ab initio students with those of their post A level counterparts in the final year, he found that 'taking the overall final mark (which converts into a degree class) as the main valid standard for this comparison, it has been shown that there is very little difference in the final mark and the degree class between the ab initio and the post A level entry students' (Baumann 1999:12, italics in the original).

Ab initio language modules on language degree programmes are normally geared towards an intensive, fast-track progression, which poses high demands on the students, the teachers and the institutions. The universities differ with regard to the progression routes of ab initio students and the point at which they expect the learners to have caught up with their A level peers. According to the LLAS Subject Centre report on ab initio language teaching (<http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/2723>, last accessed January 2011), post ab initio students will join their post A level peers for their final year studies after the year abroad in most universities, though a small number of universities expect students to catch up in only one year. Universities also differ in terms of the support they offer ab initio students. Since an intensive, fast-track module is very teaching-intensive and some ab initio classes contain only a small number of students, some universities opt to group ab initio and post A level students together for some of the teaching, often from year two onwards, and provide additional contact hours or other forms of support, such as online resources, advisory sessions, tutorials or workshops.

This study sets out to describe practices in accelerated ab initio language learning at the University of Liverpool from the points of view of the students, the teachers and the researcher and to explore possible student reactions to them.

1.2 Ab initio language learning at the University of Liverpool

The University of Liverpool has a long tradition of ab initio language teaching. At present, the ab initio languages on offer in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies (SOCLAS) are: Catalan, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. All language teaching in the department, including ab initio, is especially designed for the needs of language degree students. Students from other degree programmes studying a language as a subsidiary subject need special permission to be allowed onto a SOCLAS module and will normally choose a course from the Continuing Education programme at the University. This means that students studying an ab initio language in SOCLAS should normally have at least one good A level in another foreign language.

Ab initio languages can be studied as part of a variety of programmes, ranging from Modern European Languages, which heavily focuses on language studies, to Joint or Combined Honours Language programmes, which are based on the intensive study of one or two languages and their cultures. In the case of Single Honours language courses, students are not usually allowed to start their degree language ab initio, but they can decide to supplement their studies with a second foreign language in the first and second year. Modern European Languages students, on the other hand study up to three languages in years one and two, of which one language can be at beginners' or post beginners' level. They can then either drop one language after year two and graduate with two languages, or they can continue their studies of three languages to degree level. At that level, all students have to be assessed to the same benchmarking standards, so no difference is made between post beginners and post A level students.

The individual language sections handle the pathway from first year beginners' to final year degree level slightly differently. In Spanish and Italian, the students are kept in a post beginners' group in the second year and are assessed as post beginners. In German, the students are also assessed as post beginners in their second year, i.e. they are set separate assessment components, but they join the incoming post A level first year students for three hours of their teaching. In addition, they receive one extra contact hour and extra support from the lecturers. The pressure to reach A level standard is therefore most immediate for ab initio students of German, while students of Spanish and Italian ab initio are still kept in a group with their post ab initio peers. Since there are no post A level entries for Portuguese and Catalan, the students can move up together in their group from ab initio in the first year to graduation.

There are also noticeable differences between the individual language sections with regard to teaching practice. In Spanish, two hours a week are spent on the teaching and practice of grammar, taught by an English native speaker, one hour is spent on listening comprehension, and the remaining oral hour is used for the practice of reading, speaking and writing skills. The latter hours are both taught by Spanish native speakers. In German and Italian, three language hours are taught by native speaking lecturers. In addition, there is one conversation hour for each language, again taught by native speakers.

In Spanish, most of the lessons are taught in English, while in German and Italian most teaching, apart from the teaching of grammar, is in the target language from early on in the year.

In the first two years, Spanish, Italian and German are intensive language courses with four weekly contact hours and extra support, compared to the usual three hours for other language modules in SOCLAS.

In their third year, both post A level students and ab initio students study or work abroad for two semesters, either in one or in two countries. It is strongly recommended that ab initio students spend at least one semester in a country where their ab initio language is spoken, if they wish to continue with it in the final year.

In year four, post A level students and ab initio students are taught and examined alongside each other.

1.3 The challenge of motivation in accelerated language learning

Motivation is a summative construct (Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2006:188), consisting of a variety of factors which determine learning behaviour. It can be assumed that ab initio language learning is driven by many of the motivational factors that also influence other foreign language learning in the tertiary sector. Given the dynamic, changing nature of motivation (Dörnyei, 2001:85-100), the motivation of the ab initio language learner is likely to be affected by the learning experience, inside and outside of the classroom, since behaviour is not only determined by personal traits, but also by situational stimuli (Beckmann, J. and H. Heckhausen 2008:69). The particular challenge for the ab initio language learners considered in this study is the fact that they have to reach a high proficiency level in the language in as short a time as possible, so that they can start to access the target culture through the language early on in their studies. Not only do they enter with no language skills whilst their peers are likely to have had at least five years of study of that language up to A level, they also have to complete the beginners course while the others engage in advanced language studies and conduct much of their studies for the cultural aspects of their degree in the target language. The earlier the ab initio students can join their fellow students in this, the easier it is for them to reach the same standard for their final year studies.

The challenges posed by the accelerated language learning mode in ab initio language learning situations will most certainly have an effect on the motivation of the learners. Ab initio students need to have a high initial motivation and the ability to sustain it in order to meet the challenges of ab initio language learning, while, at the same time, the fast track programme itself impacts on the motivation of the students.

The 'cyclic relationship' of motivation with learning experience and success, acknowledged by Ushioda (1996:10), is an individual process for each learner. The challenges of ab initio language learning will be differently experienced by each learner, with distinct consequences for their self-esteem and for their motivation. However, very little is known about the learner experiences in fast-track ab initio language courses and of the interaction between its specific characteristics and the individual learner. Funder (2006, in Dörnyei 2009:237) explains:

[It] is difficult to pin down just how situations are important, in part because of the common but unilluminating practice of assigning "the situation" responsibility for all the behavioural variance not accounted for by a particular personality trait, without specifying what aspects of the situation are psychologically essential. There is a good deal of confusion concerning how situations should be conceptualized (p. 27).

As one of the three cornerstones of the study, I will therefore outline the motivational challenges of accelerated ab initio language learning, as they can be explained from the research literature. The situation will be described with the aim of identifying aspects which potentially affect the motivational states of the students.

While the recognisable, fast progress from week to week can be a motivating factor and increase the sense of achievement, the students also have to cope with a range of demotivating factors, including a possible feeling of failure and a perceived loss of control over the learning process. Practices to create a stimulating and enjoyable learning environment can also be difficult to implement under the pressures of an intensive, fast-track ab initio language classroom.

The following motivational features can therefore be regarded as specific to the fast track language learning situation discussed in this paper.

1.3.1 The sense of achievement and control

Learners tend to evaluate their achievements against their own expectations or a perceived external standard of excellence. The noticeable, fast progress from week to week can be a motivating factor and increase the sense of achievement.

Normally, students will experience improvements regarding their ability to comprehend and express themselves in the target language, and therefore notice progress towards the ultimate goal of communicating in the foreign language. They may perceive their level of excellence as a language learner as higher in the fast track language course compared to their language learning experiences in the past, which may increase their motivation.

However, ab initio learning can also induce a sense of failure, if the standards of excellence are considered unachievable by the individual. If the external aims and objectives of a beginners' module, namely to learn the language up to B2 level in only one year, are seen to represent the standard of excellence, some learners are likely to experience failure in view of those standards and question their competence as language learners.

Students who feel that they cannot achieve the desired learning outcomes may lose their feeling of control over the learning process. Judging from the teachers' perspective after having taught German ab initio for almost ten years, this is likely to happen a few weeks into the course, since it is difficult even for experienced and gifted learners to keep up with the amount of work in an intensive language programme. It usually takes time for revision and consolidation, such as the Christmas or Spring break, for students to master the grammatical structures and vocabulary well enough to enable further progress. The gap between passive and active knowledge in the foreign language becomes increasingly bigger over the space of one semester, and many students are frustrated by their inability to use structures and vocabulary which they have already covered in class. Keeping the achievement expectations in perspective may therefore be particularly important in an accelerated language course, in order to avoid the frustration of perceived incompetence and lack of control.

1.3.2 The learning situation

The psychological environment of the classroom is an important component of language learner motivation, as discussed by Dörnyei (2001) and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003). A positive motivational group disposition and attitudes and strategies beneficial to language learning are effective in the long term, but can take time to develop. Thus, they are easily ignored under the pressures of short-term goals, such as the fast acquisition of language skills. The lack of time to create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in class, to promote learner strategies and autonomy and to familiarise the students with the target language culture is particularly problematic in the pressurised environment of a fast track language module, in which students are expected to cope with extraordinary demands and possibly consequent frustrations. In order to cover as much ground as possible, language classes may take the form of lectures about the language, without much chance to practice and apply the structures learnt. Whilst it is paramount to foster a stimulating and enjoyable learning environment especially in a fast track course, it can be particularly hard under the circumstances.

1.4 The research questions

The investigation consists of two parts, starting with a pilot study aimed at the exploration of themes around motivation in ab initio language learning from the points of view of the learners and their teachers. These themes will be evaluated and transformed into statements about motivation in language learning, which other students will rank according to their perceived relevance. This second part focuses on the evaluation of the relevance of institutional, departmental and pedagogical procedures and practices and the psychological responses of individual learners to them.

The questions to be answered in this study are:

Which themes do students and teachers find worthy of consideration in the context of ab initio language studies?

Are the motivational challenges extracted from the research literature perceived as relevant by the students?

Which assumptions about ab initio language learning do the students agree with, which do they disagree with and which do they find irrelevant?

2. The study

The overall aim of the study is to find out the students' perceptions of the diverse practices of accelerated language learning at the University of Liverpool in order to inform new programmes and changes to existing courses. The investigation is an exploratory study of ab initio language learning issues at the University between the academic years 2007/08 and 2010/11. Since it is a qualitative study, no attempt will be made to generalise the results beyond this context. Instead, readers are invited to draw conclusions from the findings about their own practices, with which they are more familiar than the researcher.

Data was gathered from students and teaching staff during the first semester of the academic year 2010/11. However, the experiences under investigation cover more than three years of practice for subjects in their final year.

2.1 Ethical considerations

At the point of data collection, all student participants in the study were or had been ab initio students on one of several Modern Languages degree programmes at the University of Liverpool and were enrolled at the University. I was employed as a member of staff in the German section while gathering data for the study and some of the students I interviewed were students of German. However, approval was granted prior to the research being carried out by the University's Ethics Committee.

Teacher participants were fully informed about issues of anonymity and confidentiality in the study before consent was sought.

Before giving their consent, the students were assured that all information would be treated confidentially and would not be shared for reasons other than research. Individual students cannot be identified from the publications, since information such as subject combinations, languages studied, gender and marks are not part of the discussion. Both students and teachers received a fee for their participation in the study.

2.2 The exploratory study

The first part of the study aims at the exploration of teacher behaviour, teaching strategies, institutional policies and procedures and the students' motivational disposition to be further evaluated in the second part of the study. Data was gathered from two different groups of participants in order to inform the second part of the study. Students and teachers were consulted in order to develop a set of statements about ab initio language learning.

2.2.1 The student interviews

Informal, open-ended interviews were carried out with four students for the pilot study.

The students were chosen so that a range of experiences of accelerated ab initio language learning in the department was represented. In order to cover different practices, all students who had studied German or Spanish first year ab initio in 2009/10 and were still available on campus were put in one group of 44 students for selection. Students from Italian were not invited for this part of the study, since a recent staff change meant that I would not have been able to clarify the students' statements with a member of staff if necessary. Portuguese and Catalan ab initio students are working under slightly different conditions, since there are no incoming A level students whom the ab initio students have to join and, as a consequence, there is less pressure to reach a high proficiency level in a short time. They were therefore not added to the group of potential research participants.

The group was then split into sub groups, since it was important to cover both positive and negative student experiences. The continuation of the study of the same ab initio language beyond the first year can be regarded as an indicator of a reasonably good language learning experience, since students have the opportunity to drop or change their ab initio language after year one. Variety on this variable was therefore the most important selection factor. Subjects were selected from these groups. The participants thus included one student who had dropped the ab initio language after the first year, one student who had dropped it after the experience of a few weeks of learning in year two, and two students who were happy to continue with their ab initio language learning.

Modern European Languages is the programme most often associated with ab initio language studies at Liverpool. The students study two languages post A level and one language ab initio. At Liverpool University students can also study an ab initio language on other programmes, such as Joint and Combined Honours and it can be assumed that the experiences of specialist language learners and learners who spend less time on learning languages differ. To get perceptions of students from a variety of programmes, two of the chosen participants studied the language as part of their Modern European Languages course, one student as part of a Combined Honours course and one learner as an additional subject for a Single Honours language degree programme.

The interviews were individual face-to-face conversations with the researcher. All four students invited to take part in the study via email replied and were subsequently interviewed. The interviews lasted between 19 and 31 minutes.

After introducing the students to the aims of the study, they were encouraged to talk about their ab initio language learning experiences. With the explorative purpose of the study in mind, the interviewer kept questions to a minimum and as general as

possible, in order to give the students a chance to raise relevant issues by themselves. Once an area of concern had been mentioned by a student, the interviewer would then ask further questions for clarification. In order to cover the same areas of information with all subjects, the students were asked to think about possible benefits of, or improvements to, their ab initio language learning course with regard to the institution, the department and the teachers and their methods and pedagogies. The main role of the interviewer was to keep the conversation focused on ab initio language learning.

The interviews were recorded and, for each interview, topics and statements about ab initio language learning were transcribed in chronological order.

2.2.2 The focus group discussion

The second part of the exploratory study was conducted with three ab initio language teachers, including myself. Only teachers with responsibility for the module, who also teach the main language hours, were invited. Two of the teachers, including myself, are native speakers of the languages they teach, while one teacher is an English native speaker.

All teachers who were invited participated in the study. The discussion lasted 48 minutes.

To start the conversation, the teachers were encouraged to describe what, in their views, makes accelerated ab initio language learning and teaching in HE 'work'. In this discussion, I participated rather than guided, mentioning issues I found important. This was deemed acceptable, since the only aim of the discussion was to explore areas of interest for further investigation. The discussion was recorded and transcribed in the form of simple statements about ab initio language learning.

2.3 The statements

The statements from the transcripts of the interviews and the discussion were cut and arranged according to their content in order to eliminate similar and unrelated statements from the study and to discover general topics or themes around accelerated ab initio language learning. Since the first part of the study was of an exploratory nature, the interviews and discussion did not follow a tight structure. Consequently, the focus of the main study had to be kept in mind when choosing the statements.

Firstly, all statements which did not relate to the topics under investigation were deleted from the study, as were assertions of the obvious, such as lessons should be motivating. Removed were also comments on practices not specific to accelerated ab-initio language teaching. For example, one student did not like the listening classes. However, the problems mentioned were of a nature that would be seen as bad practice in most language teaching contexts, and were therefore unlikely to inform future ab initio language teaching. The statements were thus not transferred

to the second part of the study. However, statements about practices such as target language use or concentration on different language skills were deemed crucial yet unresolved, and thus formed an important part of the main study.

Some of the statements were of a general motivational nature and not specific to ab initio language learning. These statements were mostly made by the teachers and inform their teaching practices. It was seen as important to keep them in the study, so that the students could either confirm or dismiss these views. Such general statements will also be useful for a further investigation into the motivational profiles of individual participants in a different study.

Secondly, the statements were grouped around similar ideas. This enabled the researcher to summarise similar statements under one, typical statement. If necessary, statements were then rephrased so that they were easy to understand. They are all formulated in the first person singular from the students' points of view.

As a result of the exploratory study, 58 statements about practices and motivations in accelerated ab initio language learning were gathered. The statements were checked by a colleague in the department to ensure comprehensibility and relevance in the context of ab initio language learning.

The following table lists the statements extracted from the pilot study.

Table 1: List of statements about ab initio language learning (in alphabetical order)

Statement
All ab initio language teaching should start with grammar, and oral, listening, reading and writing practice should be used to consolidate grammar teaching, adding vocabulary and practice.
All ab initio students should have learnt another language in school, so that they can cope with the grammar.
Because we are/were progressing so fast, I sometimes feel/felt stupid because I do/did not know what is/was expected of me.
Beginners have to be spoon-fed.
Classes should be conducted in English.
Considering my (lack of) practice in my ab initio language, I would find/find/found it scary to join the post-A level students in the second year.
Exams and other forms of assessment set the standard and motivate me to reach that standard.
Good marks motivate me.
Grammar should be taught in English.
Grammar should be taught in the context of other language skills.
I am always competing with myself.
I am/was concerned that continuing my ab initio language would jeopardise my other languages and/or my final year mark.
I am/was confident in my ab initio language class.
I am/was less motivated in my ab initio language class, because my skills are/were not comparable to my post A level language skills.
I am/was more motivated in my ab initio language, because I want/wanted to be as good as in my other language/s.

I am/was motivated by the fact that I can/could see rapid progress in my learning.
I am not prepared to work for something if it is not assessed.
I compare myself to other students.
I do/did not think I am/was making any progress in my ab initio language learning.
I do/did not understand grammar in my ab initio language class.
I expect/expected to be able to communicate after a few weeks into the intensive ab initio course.
I feel/felt more confident in grammar in my ab initio language than in my other language/s.
I find/found ab initio language learning easier to do than other language learning.
I find/found ab initio language learning too hard/difficult.
I find continuous assessment more helpful than formal exams.
I like the fact that teachers in the ab initio class do not have to undo previous bad teaching of the language.
I lose/lost motivation because I can/could not see myself progressing.
Independent learning with the help of computers, the resources centre and conversation partners is essential in ab initio language learning.
In the second year, ab initio students should be kept with their class of other ab initio students.
I prefer/preferred ab initio classes to post A level classes, because I do/did not have the feeling that I have/had done it before.
I prefer being thrown in at the deep end.
I prefer the teaching of grammar when I can discover and apply the rules myself through the texts we use and produce in class.
I sometimes feel/felt that I am/was losing control of my language learning.
I wanted to study the ab initio language for a long time but could not do so in school.
It depends on your grammar teaching in school how well you do in ab initio language learning.
I would like/have liked more or better support for my grammar.
I would like/have liked more or better support for my listening.
I would like/have liked more or better support for my reading.
I would like/have liked more or better support for my speaking.
I would like/have liked more or better support for my writing.
Keeping ab initio students together in the second year keeps them in a bubble and disadvantages them in the final year.
Learning about grammar is the best way to learn an ab initio language.
More contact hours would help/have helped.
Oral classes should be taught by a native speaker in the target language.
Teachers have to have high expectations of the student.
Teachers have to put pressure on me to make me work.
Teachers should encourage us to discover for ourselves how best to learn.
The atmosphere in class is very important for my motivation.
The fact that we all are/were starting from scratch and are/were in the same boat motivates/motivated me.
The intensity of ab initio language learning motivates/motivated me.
The prospect of going to a country where the ab initio language is spoken motivates/motivated me.
There is/was no time in ab initio language learning to address motivation issues.
The teacher makes/made me anxious by telling us that we have/had to reach A level standard in a year.
The teacher should point out the achievement of reaching A level standard in a year.
The teachers should use the target language in class.
The topics we are/were able to talk about in ab initio language classes are/were not intellectually stimulating.

The way I will spend/spent my year abroad will make/made the crucial difference regarding my ab initio language skills in the final year.

Vocabulary has to be tested regularly otherwise I will not learn it.
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We should not be expected to do things we cannot do, because we have not learnt the vocabulary or structures yet.

As the statements were gathered from students and teachers in semi-structured conversations, they do not follow one particular theoretical motivational construct. Rather, they can be classified into three categories:

1. Inherent motivational factors in ab initio language learning
2. Individual motivational traits
3. Motivational practices in the language classroom

2.4 The main study

The perceptions of the students regarding the practices and procedures of ab initio language learning as well as their motivations and attitudes towards it were the focus of the second part of the study.

The statements extracted from the interviews and from the discussion were used as stimulus items for a different group of participants, who were asked to rank order the statements and to comment on their decisions.

Nine students were randomly chosen from a group of 69 students, who had studied German, Italian or Spanish ab initio in their first year in 2009/10 or in 2007/08 and whose degree programmes allowed them to continue their studies into the second or final year respectively. Participants of the pilot study were excluded, as were beginners from the 2008/09 cohort, who were on their year abroad during data collection. Going back to the earlier, first year ab initio groups ensured that both continuing learners and students who had discontinued their ab initio language studies were included in the sample. The response rate of 35% was quite low, with the result that three rounds of invitations had to be sent out, totalling 26 invitations. I decided not to send out another round of invitations due to time constraints.

The reasons for the low response rate can only be guessed. The fact that the data collection for the second part of the study took place at a busy time in the semester may have been one reason. This may also have contributed to the low response rate of two students from the final year student group; in addition to the fact that few programmes allow students to continue their studies into the final year, which means that the sample included a relatively small number of final year students to begin with. The selected group of participants includes five ab initio German students and four students of Spanish, although the sample group for Spanish had approximately three times as many students as the German one. Familiarity with the researcher may have prompted the students of German to respond. Most importantly, none of

the subjects had discontinued their studies. For these reasons, the sample is not representative of the whole group of ab initio learners at the University of Liverpool.

The students were asked to sort the statements according to those with which they most strongly agree (+5) to those with which they most strongly disagree (-5), following a largely normal distribution pattern, with fewer items at the extreme ends of the spectrum. In a short face-to-face interview with the researcher, the students were invited to comment on all the statements they had most strongly or very strongly agreed or disagreed with. The interviews were recorded and will be used to illuminate the decisions of the students in a later investigation.

3. Results

The exploratory nature of the pilot study required an open approach. Guidance and restrictions to the issues brought up in the interviews were kept to a minimum, in order to encourage the flow of ideas. However, the unstructured results are difficult to evaluate, since they include a variety of components and approaches belonging to different conceptualisations of motivation. The results of the pilot study are therefore presented here under the three different aspects resulting from the exploratory study, so that the evaluation of the main study can start from the three different sets of statements. The numbers in the first column show the ranking in the combined group of statements. The numbers behind the statements indicate the strength of agreement ranging from -5 to +5 for subjects 1- 9.

Table 2: Rank ordered statements in three categories

1. Inherent motivational/demotivational factors in ab initio language learning

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	sum
5	The intensity of ab initio language learning motivates/motivated me.	3	4	1	1	1	3	1	3	3	20
10-11	I am/was confident in my ab initio language class.	2	2	4	2	1	-4	5	3	0	15
10-11	I am/was motivated by the fact that I can/could see rapid progress in my learning.	1	0	2	2	2	-1	1	5	3	15
14	I wanted to study the ab initio language for a long time but could not do so in school.	-3	-3	5	1	0	-1	2	4	5	10
16-17	I like the fact that teachers in the ab initio class do not have to undo previous bad teaching of the language.	0	1	0	3	0	0	4	0	0	8
19-20	I am/was more motivated in my ab initio language, because I want/wanted to be as good as in my other language/s.	-5	0	-2	-1	0	2	2	5	5	6
22-23-24	I am/was concerned that continuing my ab initio language would jeopardise my other languages and/or my final year mark.	-5	5	4	3	0	-2	0	-4	3	4
29-30	The fact that we all are/were starting from scratch and are/were in the same boat motivates/motivated me.	-2	-1	0	-1	-1	3	0	1	0	-1
32	There is/was no time in ab initio language learning to address motivation issues.	0	-1	0	2	-2	0	-3	2	-1	-3
33-37	I prefer/preferred ab initio classes to post A level classes, because I do/did not have the feeling that I have/had done it before.	0	-3	-2	-2	-1	4	1	-1	0	-4
38	I expect/expected to be able to communicate after a few weeks into the intensive ab initio course.	-4	2	1	-3	0	1	1	-1	-2	-5
39-40	Because we are/were progressing so fast, I sometimes feel/felt stupid because I do/did not know what is/was expected of me.	1	-2	0	-1	-4	4	0	-1	-3	-6
41	The topics we are/were able to talk about in class are/were not intellectually stimulating.	0	3	-3	-5	-1	-4	2	0	1	-7
49	I do/did not think I am/was making any progress in my ab initio language learning.	0	0	-1	0	0	1	-5	-5	-3	-13

50	I sometimes feel/felt that I am/was losing control of my language learning.	-3	-1	-3	-1	-3	1	-3	-2	1	-14
51	I find/found ab initio language learning too hard/difficult.	-1	-2	-3	-1	-1	2	-5	-5	1	-15
52	I am/was less motivated in my ab initio language class, because my skills are/were not comparable to my post A level language skills.	5	-2	-4	-5	-4	2	-1	-3	-4	-16
53-54	I feel/felt more confident in grammar in my ab initio language than in my other language/s.	-1	2	-5	-1	0	-5	-2	0	-5	-17
55	I lose/lost motivation because I can/could not see myself progressing.	2	0	-3	-4	-3	1	-4	-4	-4	-19
58	I find/found ab initio language learning easier to do than other language learning.	-4	-4	-5	-3	0	-5	1	-1	-5	-26
59	I do/did not understand grammar in my ab initio language class.	-3	-5	-4	-1	-2	-3	-3	-5	-5	-31

2. Individual motivational traits

1	Good marks motivate me.	5	5	3	3	3	2	2	5	4	32
3	The prospect of going to a country where the ab initio language is spoken motivates/motivated me.	4	-1	1	4	5	5	3	3	4	28
6-7	The atmosphere in class is very important for my motivation.	4	4	4	4	-2	2	4	0	-1	19
15	Exams and other forms of assessment set the standard and motivate me to reach that standard.	1	-1	2	1	2	-1	1	0	4	9
31	Teachers have to have high expectations of the student.	-2	0	2	2	0	-4	-1	2	-1	-2
33-37	I am always competing with myself.	-2	2	2	0	3	-2	-4	0	-3	-4
33-37	I compare myself to other students.	3	-4	0	-2	2	0	-1	0	-2	-4
33-37	Vocabulary has to be tested regularly otherwise I will not learn it.	2	0	3	-3	-5	0	0	-3	2	-4
53-54	Teachers have to put pressure on me to make me work.	2	-2	-5	0	-4	1	-2	-4	-3	-17
56-57	I am not prepared to work for something if it is not assessed.	0	-4	-4	-4	-3	-2	-1	-3	-3	-24

3. Motivational practices in the ab initio language classroom

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	sum
2	Oral classes should be taught by a native speaker in the target language.	1	5	3	5	5	4	3	2	2	30
4	The way I will spend/spent my year abroad will make/made the crucial difference regarding my ab initio language skills in the final year.	-1	3	5	4	2	3	3	2	5	26
6-7	Grammar should be taught in English.	-2	4	3	5	1	-3	5	2	4	19
8	I find continuous assessment more helpful than formal exams.	3	1	2	2	-1	3	3	4	0	17
9	Independent learning with the help of computers, the resources centre and conversation partners is essential in ab initio language learning.	4	-1	1	3	4	5	0	-2	2	16
12	The teachers should use the target language in class.	-1	0	-1	0	5	5	4	-1	3	14
13	Considering my (lack of) practice in my ab initio language, I would find/find/found it scary to join the post-A level students in the second year.	2	1	3	5	-3	4	-4	3	2	13
16-17	In the second year, ab initio students should be kept with their class of other ab initio students.	-2	3	4	4	-5	3	-2	3	0	8
18	All ab initio students should have learnt another language in school, so that they can cope with the grammar.	1	2	4	0	4	-2	1	1	-4	7
19-20	We should not be expected to do things we cannot do, because we have not learnt the vocabulary or structures yet.	1	0	-1	0	4	1	5	-2	-2	6
21	Learning about grammar is the best way to learn an ab initio language.	1	3	-3	0	1	0	0	4	-1	5
22-24	Grammar should be taught in the context of other language skills.	4	4	-2	-2	1	0	2	1	-4	4
22-24	I would like/have liked more or better support for my speaking.	-1	1	5	0	3	-1	-1	-3	1	4
25	It depends on your grammar teaching in school how well you do in ab initio language learning.	-1	0	2	1	1	0	-1	1	0	3
26	I would like/have liked more or better support for my writing.	3	-2	0	1	-1	-2	3	-1	1	2
28	More contact hours would help/have helped.	0	3	1	3	-2	0	-4	0	-1	0
29-30	The teacher should point out the achievement of reaching A level standard in a year.	-5	1	0	2	1	-1	2	1	-2	-1
33-37	Teachers should encourage us to discover for ourselves how best to learn.	-4	1	0	1	3	-3	-3	1	0	-4

39-40	I prefer the teaching of grammar when I can discover and apply the rules myself through the texts we use and produce in class.	-4	2	-1	-2	2	-3	0	-2	2	-6
42-44	I would like/have liked more or better support for my listening.	0	1	1	-3	-3	-1	0	-2	-1	-8
42-44	I would like/have liked more or better support for my reading.	2	-3	-2	0	-4	-1	-2	1	1	-8
42-44	The teacher makes/made me anxious by telling us that we have/had to reach A level standard in a year.	5	-4	0	-2	-2	1	-2	-2	-2	-8
45	Classes should be conducted in English.	0	-3	-1	-2	-5	-2	-2	2	3	-10
46-47	I prefer being thrown in at the deep end.	-3	-2	-1	-3	2	-5	-1	0	2	-11
46-47	I would like/have liked more or better support for my grammar.	3	-3	1	-5	-1	2	-5	-4	1	-11
48	Keeping ab initio students together in the second year keeps them in a bubble and disadvantages them in the final year.	-1	-5	1	-4	3	-4	0	-1	-1	-12
56-57	Beginners have to be spoon-fed.	-2	-1	-4	-4	-2	-3	-3	-3	-2	-24

The first category of statements refers to the inherent motivational factors in ab initio language learning. The students' preferences will be analysed in order to identify the motivational challenges and advantages of ab initio language learning as they are perceived by the students. These perceptions will then be compared to the researcher's assumptions as outlined in chapter 1.3.

The second category will be analysed to describe the learners' attitudes and perceptions of ab initio language learning in the context of their wider motivational profiles. This can only be a rather vague review of the data at this stage. The information, together with the recordings of the interviews, will be used for more detailed case studies in order to describe the impact of the ab initio language learning experience on different learners in a separate investigation.

Finally, reactions to the third class of descriptions will be used to assess the practices in ab initio classrooms and the impact of wider institutional procedures. The results will be particularly interesting for HE staff thinking of introducing ab initio language learning in their institutions.

3.1 Inherent motivational factors in ab initio language learning

The learners most strongly agree with the statement, The intensity of ab initio language learning motivates me, and, in third position, I am/was motivated by the fact that I can/could see rapid progress in my learning. The learners' ranking of the statements indicates that they perceive the intensity of the ab initio learning experience as motivating and that they enjoy noticing their progress. Most subjects also quite strongly disagree with the statement, I lose/lost motivation because I can/could not see myself progressing and, similarly, there is hardly any agreement with the statement, I do/did not think I make/made any progress in my ab initio language learning. The intensity of a fast-track ab initio language course can therefore be regarded as a positive motivational challenge for the students, rather than as a debilitating experience.

A similar outlook is evident in the students' strong agreement with the statement, I am/was confident in my ab initio language class, which was ranked the second highest statement to agree with in this subgroup. Similarly, almost all students disagreed with the statements, Because we are/were progressing so fast, I sometimes feel/felt stupid because I do/did not know what was expected of me and I sometimes feel/felt that I am/was losing control of my language learning. Cognitive theories of motivation often link feelings of confidence and control to motivation (cf. Weiner 1980; Weiner 1984; Deci and Ryan, 1985). The data in this study provide little evidence of a feeling of confidence or control loss in the intensive language course and therefore give no indication of a detrimental effect of the experience on student motivation. It also shows that the learners generally have realistic expectations with regard to their own achievements, as evident in their low level of

agreement with the statement, I expect/expected to be able to communicate after a few weeks into the intensive ab initio course.

The specific learning situation, in particular the lack of time to create a motivating, supporting classroom environment, was anticipated as another negative factor on student motivation. Teacher practices to create a stimulating and enjoyable learning situation include building trust and a good rapport with the students, developing their language learning strategies and familiarisation with the target language culture, to name but a few (Dörnyei 2001a:116-140). These can be difficult to implement under the time constraints of the ab initio language class. However, the results from the study do not confirm a negative effect on the students. Most subjects did not agree with the statement, There is/was no time in ab initio language learning to address motivation issues and therefore I do not think that this poses a problem for their motivation.

In addition, there seem to be several positive motivational factors specific to ab initio language learning. The fact that many of the students did not have the chance to study that particular language in school has a motivating effect, evident in their agreement with the statement, I wanted to study the ab initio language for some time but could not do so in school. The learners' perception of the discrepancy between proficiency levels in their post-A level and ab initio languages is also regarded as a motivating factor by some students, as they assert, I am/was more motivated in my ab initio language, because I want/wanted to be as good as in my other language/s.

According to the data, the only negative aspect specific to the ab initio language learning situation is the threat it poses to the students' degree classifications, as some participants agree with the statement, I am/was concerned that continuing my ab initio language would jeopardise my other languages and/or my final year mark. This, anecdotally, is a reason given by many students for dropping out of an ab initio course, since they are acutely aware of the fact that they will be assessed to the same standards as their peers who entered the course with an A level in the language.

3.2 Individual motivational traits

Some of the topics mentioned especially by teachers in the pilot study concern general motivational characteristics of language learners. These were gathered in a sub group, since they are not specific to the motivation of ab initio language learners, yet are regarded as relevant by the participants in the pilot study.

The statement with which the students most strongly agree concerns success as a motivating factor, Good marks motivate me. Though good marks may be particularly reassuring for beginners of a new language, it is generally assumed that positive feedback is important in most foreign language learning as well as in other subject areas. Ushioda (1996) in her work on attribution theory describes the positive effects of success and the perception of achievement on learner motivation. The importance

of external expectations and evaluations for their motivation is also evident in most students' agreement with the statement; Exams and other forms of assessment set the standard and motivate me to reach that standard.

However, the participants in the study don't overly rely on teacher assessments for their motivation, as they very strongly disagree with the statements, I am not prepared to work for something if it is not assessed, Teachers have to put pressure on me to make me work and Vocabulary has to be tested regularly, otherwise I will not learn it. Interestingly, these three statements are based on assumptions from the teachers rather than the students. It seems that students, though prepared to benefit from positive motivational factors inherent in the perception of high achievement, are autonomous enough to not rely on external pressures for their motivation.

3.3 Motivational practices in the ab initio language classroom

The motivational practices mentioned by the students in the pilot interviews are diverse and difficult to classify. They comprise both aspects which regard the initiation and aspects which regard the maintenance of motivation and are therefore difficult to evaluate. Hence it is recommended that teachers and policy makers read through the statements and their evaluations themselves in order to draw the relevant conclusions.

One aspect with a marked significance for all the students is the language use in class. In particular, they all agree on the importance of native speaking teachers in conversation classes in their reactions to the statement, Oral classes should be taught by a native speaker in the target language. Similarly, most students welcome the practice of teaching the target language grammar through English, since they agree with the statement, Grammar should be taught in English, though this may only reflect their appreciation and familiarity with the practices at Liverpool University. However, as it is usually the case regarding the question of language use in class, other students assert that, The teachers should use the target language in class, which at least partly contradicts the previous statement. Yet, most students disagree with the statement, Classes should be conducted in English, suggesting that even beginners mostly prefer their teachers to use the language they are learning. The subjects in this study express strong yet sometimes contradictory feelings about their teachers' language use in class, in harmony with students in most language learning contexts.

4. Conclusions

The pilot study raised a number of diverse topics perceived as relevant to ab initio language learning by the students and teachers. Further investigation of these assertions has shown that the students in the main study benefit from some positive motivational factors particular to ab initio language learning, such as their perceived progress and intensity of the course.

The inferences from the research literature regarding negative motivational factors are only partly relevant to the students. In particular, it became evident that the students in this study did not experience a loss of control, nor did they feel that their confidence was undermined by the expectations and demands of ab initio language learning. Similarly, they did not feel that their motivation had not been addressed in class due to time constraints.

A more general evaluation of the students' motivation revealed a tendency to benefit from positive feedback for the maintenance of motivation, yet not to rely on outside rewards and assessments. There seems to be a marked discrepancy between the teachers' estimations of student motivations and their own perceptions.

Finally, a range of diverse motivational institutional and teacher practices was evaluated by the student participants, which will hopefully be relevant for policy makers in their planning of ab initio language learning in HE.

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