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Middle Schools Students' Attitudes and Motivations About L2 Acquisition

Abstract: Middle school can be a time when students' attitudes and motivation, or lack thereof, can greatly affect their abilities to learn another language. Middle school can also be a good time to introduce learning a new language. Lambert and Klineberg (1967) found that the best time to present a new culture to students was right at the beginning of the middle school time frame, around the age of ten. Brown (2007) also stated that learning another language can seem like a daunting task to students the older they get, as early as age fourteen or fifteen, which may hinder their desire to take a foreign language class.

While introducing languages to students earlier in their education seems like a positive endeavor, many middle schools do not provide their students the means to learn a second language. Students also may not be taking advantage of those resources when they are offered. Kissau, Adams, and Algozzine (2015) found that data collected from 2008 showed that when a foreign language was offered at public middle schools only 35% of students chose to participate in a foreign language class. Based on this evidence, it seems that American adolescents do not show interest in or prioritize learning another language.

The present study was conducted to discover what kinds of attitudes middle school students in Northwest Indiana have regarding learning another language. These students are part of a small, private school environment and are only offered one foreign language option (Spanish). The study sought to discover how interested students are in learning another language, and what factors motivated them to learn or not learn another language. The purpose of the study was also to evaluate factors that influence students' attitudes about learning another language, discover what motivates them, and use that information to improve the foreign language atmosphere at the school.

Students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade at a small private school were surveyed. All middle school students were given the opportunity to participate in the survey and sixty-six percent (46/70) of middle school students agreed to participate in this research project. The students all obtained parental permission to take part in the survey. The survey asked the students to answer a combination of short

written response and scaled responses with the four following answer choices: totally agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, totally disagree. The survey given to the students was adapted from the FLAG survey by Cid, Grañena, and Tragent (2009). Students were given the survey in their study hall, and the survey took students 10-20 minutes to complete although students could take more time if necessary. Before beginning the survey, students were reminded that the survey was anonymous and that they should truthfully share their opinions, not those of friends, family members, teachers, etc.

The results of the research showed that students overall had a positive attitude toward learning another language. They also appeared to be motivated to learn or continue learning another language. Many of the students knew someone that spoke another language and even some of the students themselves claimed to speak another language. However, most of the students had never been in an environment where English was not the primary spoken language and only a small portion had ever traveled to a location where English was not the primary spoken language. Many students responded that they would prefer to learn another language in a classroom setting with a language teacher. When asked what made students more or less likely to learn another language, “the teacher” was an overwhelming factor, both positive and negative. Many students answered that they found learning another language “tiresome” but “fun”. Some of the reasons students gave for wanting to learn another language was that it may help them find jobs in the future and simply because they wanted to learn another language. The students were split fifty percent to fifty percent as to whether they would continue learning another language after high school.

Students had an overall positive attitude toward learning another language with a majority even agreeing that they wanted to be able to speak another language when they grew up. Students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade appear to have their motivation affected by the foreign language teacher. This research will assist a small but growing school in making changes that foster the positive attitudes many students have about learning another language.