



# **BILINGUALISM MATTERS AT PENN STATE**

# Newsletter

Summer/Fall 2023

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## **Letter from the Editors**

Dear Center for Language Science and Bilingualism Matters  
friends and colleagues,

We are happy to present the latest issue of our Center for Language Science/Bilingualism Matters at Penn State newsletter, which focuses on the topic of “learner motivation.” You may wonder about the timeliness of this topic, since as we make our way into the summer 2023 season many of us are more inclined to be looking for ways to relax and unwind. The summer season is also a time to reflect, and as you will see in our featured research summary, the information we share in this newsletter can be seen as an invitation to reflect on the role of motivation in your own learning process. In addition to the research summary, we share interviews with CLS members who reflect on the role of motivation in their language learning and their language teaching. And you may enjoy tackling our language learning motivation logic problem as a fun way of thinking about how motivation for language learning plays out in different people’s lives. Coming off of an active and productive year, which involved the return to many in person events such as our Language and Linguistics Day for High Schoolers, we look forward to winding down with you and reflecting on the topic of motivation. And who knows, maybe this information will inspire you to tackle some new learning projects during the summer or energize you for the start of some new learning in the fall semester. Whatever the case, we welcome your feedback, and we wish you an enjoyable, relaxing, productive summer and fall 2023 season with lots of learning and enrichment!

Sincerely,

Frances Blanchette, Paul DiStefano, Clin Lai, Allison Link, Catherine Pham, and Megan Wadas (editor-in-chief)



# FEATURED RESEARCH

## What Motivates People to Learn a Foreign Language? Lessons From Language Science Research

By Paul DiStefano and Megan Wadas

If you've ever tried to learn a foreign language, what got you started? Maybe you had to take a language in middle or high school, or wanted to communicate with family members who speak another language. Maybe you started learning just for fun, to understand the lyrics to your favorite song, or to watch something on your favorite streaming service in its original language. Discovering what motivates people to start and continue learning new languages, as well as why they sometimes decide to stop, is an important part of language acquisition research. Understanding how language learners and their teachers can develop and sustain language learning motivation over the course of their learning journeys can potentially help increase learners' success. In this article, we summarize some findings from the field of learner motivation and share some of the insights gained from this line of research. We hope this article will not only be informative, but also thought provoking: consider it an invitation to reflect on your own motivation and language learning experience.

Here are some examples of the research questions that you might encounter in the field of language learner motivation:

- How can teachers motivate their students to learn a language?
- Does increasing students' motivation lead students to speak the language more?
- Is there a relationship between higher levels of motivation and a decision to continue learning a language?

To investigate these and similar questions, motivation researchers draw heavily from related research in psychology, which has a long tradition of studying motivation in a range of domains beyond language. One useful concept is the notion of internal versus external motivation. As the name suggests, internal motivation stems from a self-driven belief that one's actions can significantly affect outcomes. Conversely, external motivation stems from the belief that outside factors such as luck or chance are the driving force behind outcomes. Research has shown that, in second language learning, being internally motivated can be very helpful: People who are more internally motivated to learn a language also tend to be more persistent and successful in achieving their goals [1].

Possible selves, or the ways people think about who they do and do not want to be in the future, is another helpful concept in motivation research. People construct possible selves based on their hopes, fears, desires, or goals [2]. Possible selves can be powerful motivators: When people align their actions with the image of the person they want to become in the future, they are better able to achieve their language learning goals. For example, a person who envisions themselves living abroad and speaking a foreign language with friends and colleagues becomes motivated by this vision to act in ways that will help them to achieve their goals. This is a very positive vision which has a positive impact on learning, but research has shown that fear of a negative possible self may also impact learning positively. For example, someone who can envision themselves not being able to graduate due to a missing language requirement will take steps to avoid that negative outcome.

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Researchers have extended the idea of possible selves to develop the concepts of the Ideal Self and the Ought-To Self. The Ideal Self consists of a learner's future-oriented, idealized vision of themselves as a user of the target language. On the other hand, the Ought-To-Self constitutes a language learner's drive to avoid negative outcomes and to attend to external motivations [3]. These concepts help researchers go beyond the idea that a learner is either motivated or not, and allow them to delve more deeply into learners' complex and multifaceted learning motivations. Viewed in this way, we can also start to see ways in which the multidimensional nature of language learner motivation might be leveraged to support language learning.

The ability to visualize a clear, vivid image of oneself as a competent second language speaker has been tied to many positive language learning behaviors and outcomes. Students with a clear image of their Ideal Self have been shown to display more motivated behaviors [4], [5]. Beyond this, multiple studies [6]–[8] found that students who continue to learn their language are more interested in the culture of the people who speak that language [9]. These students also tend to have more positive attitudes towards the language they are learning. In one recent study [10], researchers found that students learning Chinese who had a more developed Ideal Self were more likely to want to continue studying Chinese, which is a strong indicator of motivation.

Researchers have explored some of the ways in which helping language learners to develop their possible selves might impact motivation, and ultimately, language learning itself. One study attempted to enhance the development of students' possible selves by guiding them through visualization techniques where they imagined themselves achieving their goals. The researchers were interested in whether using visualization techniques and participating in goal-setting activities could help learners develop their possible selves and increase their language learning motivation. The results showed that visualization and goal setting improved students' ability to articulate their ideal future self, which then had a positive impact on language learning outcomes [11]. The research suggests that instructors may be able to help students develop their possible selves, which may stimulate language learning motivation.

Being motivated to learn—whether it's a new language, a sport, an academic field, or useful skill—is immensely helpful in the learning process. We hope to have shown that exploring motivation from a researcher's perspective gives us unique insights into the nature of language learning. These insights can potentially be leveraged to improve not only our learning motivation, but the quality of our learning itself. By drawing inspiration from domains beyond language research, such as psychology, language motivation researchers have gained valuable insights into motivation in language learning. We think this is an excellent example of research that works across disciplines to make new discoveries, which is very much in the spirit of what we try to do here at Penn State's Center for Language Science. We hope this brief description of language learning motivation research has provided a glimpse into a unique subfield of language science, and perhaps even a new way of thinking about your own language learning experiences.



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## FUN FEATURE

# Motivation Logic Problem

By Clin Lai and Catherine Pham



There are many reasons why someone might want to learn a language. Internal motivations include things like a desire to understand your favorite singer's lyrics or communicating with family members. External motivations include things like learning a language to move to the next level at work or fulfill a degree requirement. Learners often have multiple reasons for learning a language, and their motivations may change over time. The logic problem below helps you think about various things that might motivate people to learn a language. As you complete it, think about how the reasons may relate to your own reasons for learning a language.

Imagine that you are an academic adviser at a university. All students at your university are encouraged to take foreign language courses, and part of your job is to help make sure they are registered for these courses. Unfortunately, there was a mix up with the paperwork, and it is not clear which courses your students Isabel, Sabina, Anthony, and Pedro were registered for. Using the clues given, figure out the language course each student is taking and their primary motivation for learning that language. (NOTE: Each student is only learning one language.)

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## FUN FEATURE (CONTINUED)

	Arabic	German	Mandarin	Spanish	Song Lyrics	Grandparents	Internship Abroad	Requirement
Anthony								
Isabel								
Pedro								
Sabina								
Song Lyrics								
Grandparents								
Internship Abroad								
Requirement								

1. Isabel is learning a language to understand her favorite singer's song lyrics, but she is not learning Spanish.
2. Sabina is learning German but not to communicate with her grandparents or fulfill a degree requirement.
3. The student who is learning Spanish is doing so to communicate with their grandparents.
4. Pedro is learning Arabic.

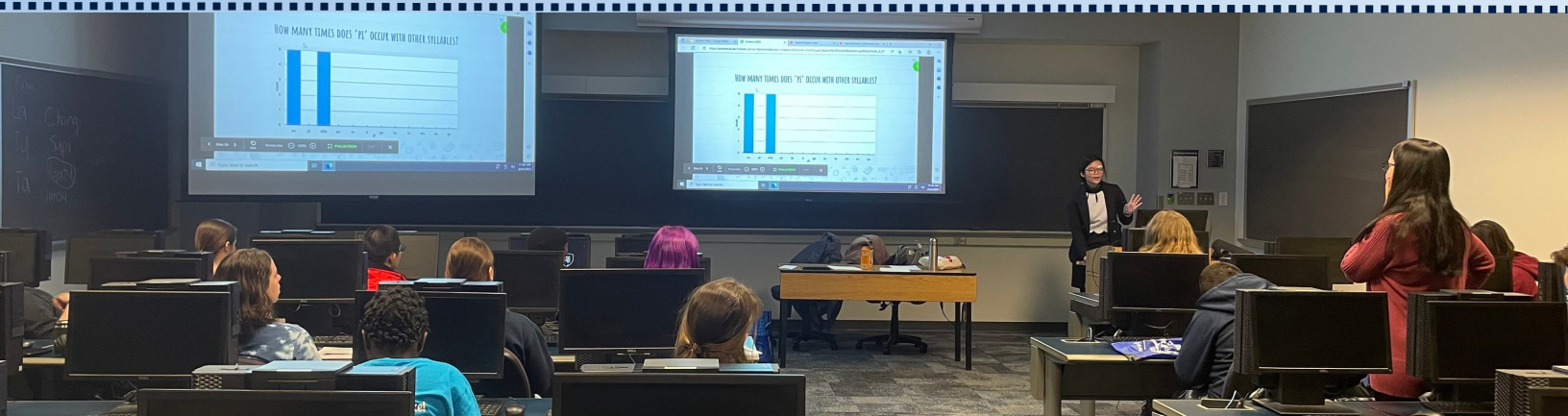


See page 8 for answer key

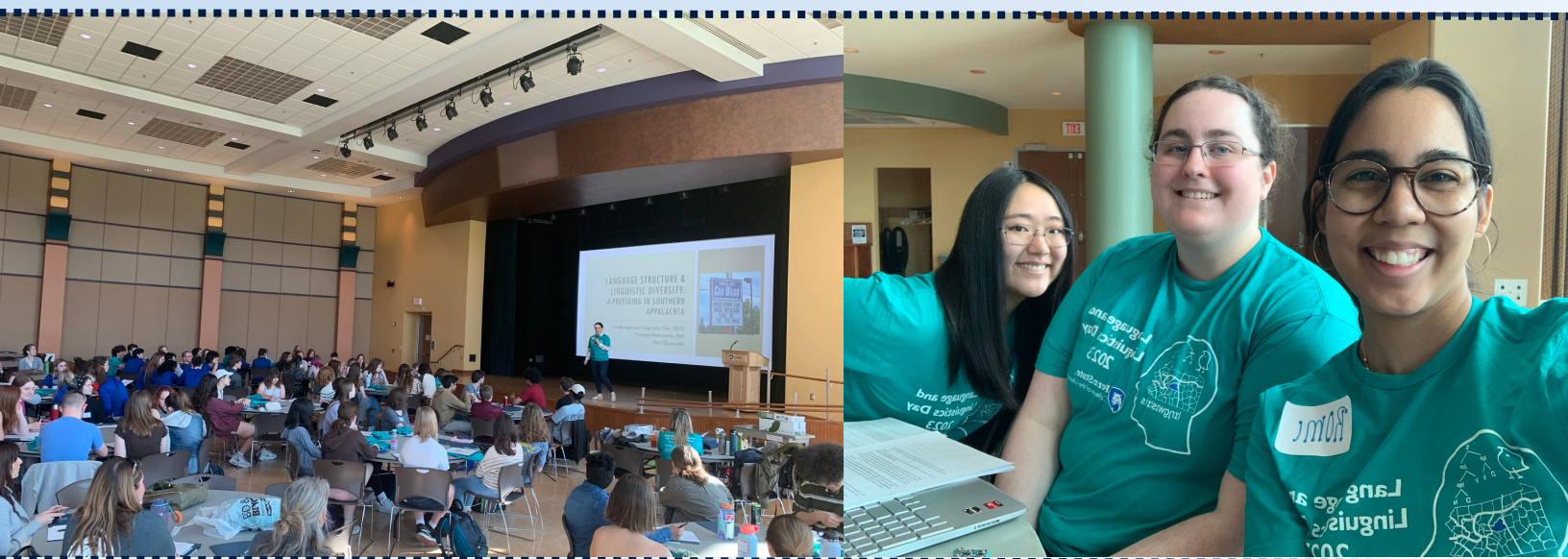


## Recent Events

On February 25, the CLS participated in Penn State's STEM Envision Career Day. CLS Graduate RA Clin Lai led a highly engaging workshop on statistical learning in infants, with support from CLS Assistant Director Frances Blanchette and Lab Manager Erica Hsieh. Thanks to Clin, Erica, Frances, and the young people who enthusiastically participated!



On April 12, approximately 100 students from high schools in Centre County visited Penn State for the CLS's fourth annual Language and Linguistics Day. The students were exposed to the fields of linguistics and language science through hands-on activities and discussions on topics including linguistic diversity, language and thought, and the sounds of English. The day culminated in a linguistics competition and a team from State College High School took first prize.



# FEATURED PARTNERS

Interviewed by Allison Link

For the featured partner segment of this newsletter, we've interviewed two CLS members who are both learners of a foreign language as well as foreign language instructors: Eric Pelzl, a postdoctoral Fellow at Penn State and soon-to-be professor in the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and Carolin Jolitz, a graduate student in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures. Each offers a unique perspective on the role of motivation in language learning, and how it has played out in their own learning of a foreign language as well as in their teaching. We hope their stories of challenge and success will help you connect to your own learning motivation, and appreciate the diversity of language learning experience across different individuals and learning contexts.



**Eric Pelzl**



**Carolin Jolitz**

## 1. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and why you decided to come to Penn State?

Eric: My path to research began with a decade spent learning and teaching Mandarin Chinese. I spent about three years in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, then taught Mandarin at the college level here in the United States. With those experiences in mind, I went to grad school to study Second Language Acquisition. I wanted to understand what makes learning Chinese hard, why it's hard, and what might be done to make it easier. I ended up studying psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics, but the practical applications of research have always been a priority for me. Right at the time I was finishing my doctorate, the Center for Language Science was looking to hire a postdoctoral scholar, and I was thrilled to join this awesome research community

Carolin: I came to Penn State as an exchange student with the intention of staying one academic year. My main reason for coming was the wonderful opportunity to teach German to undergraduate students, which was also a major factor in my decision to stay and pursue a doctorate.

## 2. Can you tell us more about your language background? Do you speak a second language, and if so, what drove you to pursue this language?

Eric: I grew up in southern Minnesota speaking English. I learned a little bit of Latin and German in high school. In college I studied Latin, German, Greek, and Hebrew, but the primary goal of the classes was to read ancient texts, so we never practiced spoken language skills. I always wanted to learn to speak a new language, and in my late twenties when I had the opportunity, I went to China to teach English. I've been learning Mandarin ever since.

Carolin: In Germany, learning (British) English and one additional foreign language is mandatory in high school. In fifth grade, I began learning English as my first second language, and in seventh grade, I had the option of choosing between Latin and French as my third language. I studied both English and French until I graduated from high school.



### 3. Could you tell us more about your experience learning a second language? How did your motivation to learn develop over time?

Eric: I think the first thing that drew me into Chinese was the writing system. I always liked learning the alphabets of Hebrew and Greek and spent a lot more time than was required working on my handwriting while learning them. Given that literacy in Chinese requires knowing two to three thousand characters, Chinese let me go crazy with that urge. I didn't take any formal classes, but worked with tutors while living in China. When you're in a context where the language is used, it's very rewarding to make progress. The first time I successfully ordered food or gave directions in a taxi felt like major achievements. But learning Mandarin wasn't fast. Despite my passion for learning Chinese characters, it was still almost two years of continuous studying before I was able to read my first novel. Conversation developed more quickly, but after the initial stages where you master specific useful tasks like taxis and restaurants, progress feels slower. You're basically trying to learn to converse about a wide range of topics, so you just learn how to talk about those things bit by bit, and it can be easy to lose motivation at that point. The opportunity to teach Mandarin is probably the thing that pushed me forward. In order to teach my students well, I was constantly needing to improve my own language skills. To this day, however, I have kind of a warped linguistic inventory. I'm extremely fluent with basic Chinese, but my vocabulary on any given topic doesn't run very deep. Keeping motivation up is definitely tricky. As long as I lived in a community that was using Mandarin, I was highly motivated to keep learning. The bigger challenge was that, once I wasn't in that situation anymore—especially while at grad school—there wasn't much pressure or reward for continuing to study. These days, I still occasionally watch Chinese TV shows or read Chinese novels to keep my skill fresh, but sometimes I go for long stretches of time without using much Chinese.

Carolyn: During high school, I learned English for eight years and French for six years exclusively in the classroom. When I came to the United States for my study abroad year, I hadn't used any English in four years and didn't feel very confident speaking it. I struggled a lot at first speaking and understanding English, especially because I learned British English in school and had never been to the United States before. Speaking has always been the most difficult challenge for me, especially in conversations with multiple people. I feel like I must speak as quickly as the others to keep up. However, being surrounded by the language and basically being forced to speak it helped me to pick up on expressions, learn idioms, and expand my vocabulary over time. After about half a year in the United States, I noticed that I started becoming more confident. I remember watching a movie for the first time entirely in English, and being thrilled that I could understand most of what they were saying. After my first English presentation in my first semester at Penn State, I told myself: "Wow, you just presented something entirely in English in front of others for the first time, and it seems like they actually understood you." Every experience that I found challenging and frightening (e.g., my first presentation, oral exams) but somehow managed to overcome was, in the end, always a rewarding experience.

### 4. Can you tell us about your experience as a language instructor? What language(s) do you teach and what kinds of students are in your classroom? What kinds of things do your students struggle with? What do you think motivates them?

Eric: In China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan I taught English. In the United States, I taught Mandarin. The students in my English classes varied widely, from young children to retirees and everything in between. My Mandarin classes have all been taught in colleges/universities in the United States. About the only thing that is true for all those groups is that every person is different. The things they find easy or hard, interesting or boring, the reasons why they want to learn, are almost never the same for everyone in a class. When teaching Chinese, some students loved learning Chinese characters, while others were much more interested in spoken language. Some started out taking the course just to fill a requirement, but then ended up going to China after they graduated. Others seemed to find it fun and were making good progress, but then stopped and I never knew why.

Carolyn: My first teaching experience was in 2017 at the Goethe Institut in Bangkok, Thailand. I was teaching face-to-face conversation classes to adult intermediate Thai native speakers. They were all very motivated and interested in learning German because most of them planned to work and live in Germany in the future. This experience made me realize how much I enjoy teaching German and that I want to continue teaching in my future career. Here at Penn State, I have taught German at various levels, both remotely and in the classroom. The majority of my students are undergraduate students from the United States, Asia, or India. Many students struggle with speaking German and learning German grammar. Additionally, they often have unrealistic expectations regarding their own language learning abilities and anticipate being more proficient than they actually are after learning it for such a short time. This can be very frustrating for them. I noticed that students tend to be more engaged when they learn and practice German in a more playful way, by playing games or in the context of learning about German culture.

## 5. Do you have any advice for people who might be struggling with motivation while learning a foreign language?

Eric: Like I said above, it's not easy to keep your motivation up. I try to find things that I can do in Chinese that I would want to do, even if I didn't care about learning the language. For example, texting with Chinese friends (who live in China), since I'm naturally interested in knowing about their lives and what they're up to, or watching Chinese movies or TV shows that I am interested in. I also read novels or books in Chinese on topics that I want to read about anyways. But still the best way to motivate myself is to go to a place where Mandarin is the local language. In any case, I think we can all remind ourselves that learning a language is a long-term commitment and it's OK if our motivation waxes and wanes over time.

Carolyn: Learning a foreign language takes time and effort. Speaking outside the classroom can be even more intimidating than in the classroom, and it can be frustrating to know what you want to say in your head but be unable to express it verbally. My suggestion is to take it step by step and set attainable, small goals for yourself. Learn more about the culture and find your own personal motivation. And connect with other learners and motivate each other! You'd be surprised at how many people struggle with understanding the same grammar concept or pronouncing the same word as you. Struggling is normal, so don't let it discourage you. Use different learning resources, such as videos, music, or apps. And reward yourself, because every step, no matter how small, is a step toward improving your ability to use a foreign language!

## Answer Key to the Motivation Logic Problem (Page 4):

1. Anthony is learning Spanish to communicate with his grandparents.
2. Isabel is learning Mandarin to understand her favorite singer's song lyrics.
3. Pedro is learning Arabic to fulfill degree requirements.
4. Sabina is learning German for her internship abroad.



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To receive research updates, links to articles, and information about our events, check out our Facebook and Twitter pages.

The Penn State **Center for Language Science (CLS)** is an interdisciplinary research group of linguists, psycholinguists, applied linguists, speech-language pathologists, speech scientists, and cognitive neuroscientists who share an interest in language acquisition and bilingualism.

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