

# The Role of German Language Education in Sri Lanka: Current Trends and Learner Motivation

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the present condition of German language education in Sri Lanka, focusing on the motivations, challenges, and experiences of learners in government universities, with special reference to University of Kelaniya and Sabaragamuwa University. The participants comprised final year students pursuing the degree in German. A qualitative research design was employed, and data were gathered through a semi-structured questionnaire. Thematic analysis was employed to discern significant patterns within student responses. The findings indicate that learner motivation is primarily extrinsic, with the majority of students motivated by objectives such as pursuing higher education in Germany, improving employment prospects, and seeking migration opportunities. Numerous learners perceive proficiency in the German language as a valuable asset for academic and professional development. A subset of participants indicated intrinsic motivations, such as personal interest in German culture, language structure, and a pursuit of intellectual enrichment. Students encounter various substantial obstacles, notwithstanding their high levels of motivation. Common challenges encompass restricted opportunities for speaking practice, insufficient access to native German speakers, and a deficiency of interactive teaching materials. Conventional instructional approaches characterized by a focus on grammar, coupled with large class sizes and obsolete infrastructure, impede language acquisition and diminish learner confidence. In response, numerous students utilize digital tools, cultural institutions, and peer-led initiatives to enhance their formal education. Participants provided various insightful recommendations for enhancing German language education. Proposed measures encompassed the reduction of class sizes, the integration of native-speaker interaction (either virtually or in-person), the enhancement of audiovisual and online learning tools, and the organization of cultural events to facilitate language immersion. This study offers practical, student-informed recommendations for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to improve German language teaching effectiveness in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** German language education, higher education in Sri Lanka, language learning motivation, learner challenges, private and public institutions

## INTRODUCTION

The significance of foreign language education in Sri Lanka has increased in recent years, influenced by heightened global mobility and expanded international educational opportunities. German has garnered considerable interest among the foreign languages offered in Sri Lanka, attributed to the tuition-free university system, progressive immigration policies, and esteemed educational standards in Germany. Consequently, German has emerged as a favorable option for students seeking opportunities to study or work internationally. German language education in the Sri Lankan context is still insufficiently researched. Scholarly attention has predominantly concentrated on English, with some focus on languages such as French and Japanese. The academic disparity is especially evident regarding the motivations and experiences of students learning German. Considering the nation's growing interaction with German-speaking countries, it is essential to examine the methods of teaching and learning German, especially concerning student objectives and the efficacy of existing instructional strategies.

German language education is offered through both in public and private educational institutions in Sri Lanka. While the University of Kelaniya and Sabaragamuwa University are the only government universities that offers

German as a full degree program (UOK,2024), other public and private institutions typically provide it as a certificate course or elective subject. These programs vary considerably in terms of available resources, pedagogical approaches, institutional infrastructure, and the demographic profiles of the learners.

This study investigates the experiences of learners across these diverse contexts in German language education, aiming to address the following research questions:

1. What are the primary motivations for Sri Lankan students to learn German?
2. What instructional trends and learning environments characterize German language education in Sri Lanka?
3. What are the main challenges encountered by students in their efforts to learn German?
4. What improvements do learners suggest for enhancing German language instruction?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation in second language acquisition has been a focal area of linguistic and educational research, particularly concerning the role of learner agency, socio-cultural influences, and institutional structures. In the Sri Lankan context, where English maintains a dominant position in academia and the job market, the growing popularity of German as a foreign language presents a notable shift. This trend is primarily attributed to external incentives such as opportunities for higher education in Germany, migration pathways, and employment prospects in German-speaking countries. Germany's tuition-free university system and progressive immigration policies, including the Blue Card initiative, have increased the perceived utility of German language acquisition (GIZ, 2020).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as conceptualised by Deci and Ryan (2000), provides a robust theoretical framework for analysing the phenomenon of the motivational dynamics. SDT categorizes learner motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. Intrinsic motivation relates to personal interest, enjoyment, and cognitive challenge, whereas extrinsic motivation is linked to instrumental goals, such as academic advancement, migration, or employment. In Sri Lankan university context, extrinsic motivation appears to predominate as proficiency in German is widely viewed as a means of accessing worldwide educational and professional opportunities. This aligns with Ushioda's (2011) person-in-context relational model, which underscores the influence of social and institutional environments in shaping learners' motivation.

Socio-cultural factors such as peer influence, family expectations, and national aspirations toward internationalisation can be identified as the key extrinsic motivators. Many learners are motivated by the success stories of friends or relatives who have studied or worked in Germany, reinforcing a pattern of goal-oriented language learning. Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) observe that in many Asian contexts the L2 motivational self-system tends to emphasise extrinsic over intrinsic goals due to cultural expectations and pragmatic concerns. Nevertheless, intrinsic motivation is also not absent. Some students express a deep appreciation for German culture, literature, and music, which enriches their language learning experience and adds a personalised dimension to their academic journey.

Beyond individual motivations, institutional factors play a critical role in shaping the trajectory of German language education in Sri Lanka. Several government universities offer German as part of degree programs, electives, and certificate courses, indicating formal academic recognition. However, curricular content, teaching quality, and resource availability disparities persist across institutions. Macaro (2018) emphasises that effective second language instruction depends significantly on teacher competence, learner engagement, access to authentic materials, and opportunities for communicative practice. However, German language education is often hampered by systemic limitations, including a shortage of trained instructors, limited exposure to native-speaking environments, and outdated pedagogical models that rely heavily on the grammar-translation method. Scholars like Richards and Rodgers (2001) have described the grammar-translation method as lacking a solid theoretical foundation and being ineffective in developing learners' communicative skills. Even though, digital

technologies have partially mitigated some of these limitations, their contribution into formal instructions may remain inconsistent. While, learners increasingly rely on online platforms and language learning forums to acquire formal instruction, the integration of such tools into formal education creates significant challenges such as limited teacher training in digital pedagogy, and the lack of physical infrastructure (language labs, reliable internet access) in universities.

Furthermore, the absence of a German-speaking community within Sri Lanka severely restricts opportunities for real-life conversational practice. Unlike English, which enjoys the privilege of widespread usage, German remains confined to academic spaces. This limits the opportunities for students to develop communicative competence. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in national education policy regarding promoting less commonly taught languages such as German. While the importance of foreign language education is acknowledged broadly, strategic planning, resource allocation, and teacher development for languages beyond English are insufficiently addressed in Sri Lanka. Consequently, universities face challenges in sustaining high-quality German language programs, underfunding large class sizes, limited course options, and a lack of extracurricular initiatives such as language clubs, immersion programs, or cultural exchanges. These limitations undermine student motivation and hinder long-term retention.

The academic literature on German language education in Sri Lanka remains extremely limited. Most existing research focuses on English or, occasionally on French and Japanese, creating a significant empirical gap concerning the German language. Moreover, there is limited documentation of learner motivation, instructional practices, or educational outcomes specific to German language education in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by providing data-driven insights into the current state of German language education in Sri Lanka. By examining learner motivation, pedagogical practices, and systemic challenges, the research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical improvement in the field, highlighting the urgent need for policy support, teacher training, digital integration, and immersive opportunities to elevate the quality and appeal of German language education across Sri Lankan universities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate learner perspectives via a semi-structured questionnaire. The objective was to obtain comprehensive, contextually nuanced insights that quantitative methods may neglect.

### **Participants**

Forty final year undergraduates who study German for their degree program were selected as the participants. Participants were selected from University of Kelaniya and Sabaragamuwa University, as these are the only two Sri Lankan government universities currently offering a Bachelor's degree in German language (UOK,2024). A purposive sampling method was employed to guarantee relevance and diversity among participant backgrounds.

### **Data Collection**

A semi-structured questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms. The questionnaire included sections on motivation, learning environment, challenges, and student recommendations. Participants provided responses ensuring thoughtful and reflective answers.

### **Data Analysis**

The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and writing. Codes were generated manually and grouped into four overarching themes that addressed the study's research questions. This method allowed for both convergence and divergence in the data to be systematically explored and reported.

## Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. No identifying information was collected, and participation was entirely voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Motivation for Learning German

The responses gathered from students across both government and private educational institutions in Sri Lanka revealed a diverse but predominantly goal-driven set of motivations for learning German. A majority of participants expressed clear, pragmatic reasons for pursuing the language, particularly linked to academic advancement and employment opportunities. Students often mentioned the prospects of studying in Germany, obtaining scholarships, and increasing their chances of migration or securing positions in international companies. Many students learning German highlighted their intention to apply for higher education in Germany. They viewed German proficiency as a critical requirement for accessing tuition-free education and securing scholarships. One student noted, “I want to continue my postgraduate studies in Germany”. Another explained, “I’m planning to apply for a DAAD scholarship, and German is required”. These statements underscore a widespread perception that German is a pathway to global academic mobility. Similarly, some students enrolled in certificate programs or short-term courses expressed strong interest in using German as a career asset. Several participants were either preparing for work in the hospitality and tourism sectors or aspiring to migrate for skilled employment. A participant remarked, “My goal is to become a translator or interpreter in the future”. Another said, “I want to improve my CV with a foreign language, especially for international companies”. These responses reflect a clear instrumental motivation among learners who are actively preparing for professional engagement with German-speaking contexts. Although practical goals dominated the responses, some participants also revealed personal interest in the German language and culture. A smaller group of students described German as “fascinating,” “structured,” or “beautiful,” noting that they enjoyed its logic and form. One student shared, “I chose German at university because I was curious about European languages”. These learners, while fewer in number, demonstrated a more personal, self-directed form of motivation. They appeared to engage with the language not only as a means to an end but also as a source of intellectual or cultural curiosity. Social influences were another notable motivator. A number of students cited the encouragement and success stories of seniors as inspiration to study German. One participant remarked, “My seniors who studied German shared their experiences, which motivated me”. These statements indicate that learners often rely on social proof and personal networks when making educational decisions, especially regarding foreign languages.

Across both institutional types, the motivations for learning German were strikingly similar in nature, though the immediate goals sometimes differed. The students tended to prioritize academic outcomes, employment readiness and migration prospects. However, the core motivation—advancement through language—was consistent across the board. These findings suggest that German language programs in Sri Lanka are largely serving a motivated, goal-oriented student population. Whether for higher education, employment, or cultural engagement, learners demonstrate a clear purpose in pursuing the language. This awareness can help institutions design more tailored programs that align with student goals, whether academic or professional.

### Learning Environment and Instructional Trends

Student responses revealed a mixed picture of the learning environment in which German language education is currently delivered. While some participants acknowledged the efforts made by instructors to create engaging and supportive classrooms, the majority of students expressed concerns about overly theoretical instruction, limited practical exposure, and resource constraints. These findings highlight inconsistencies in the instructional quality and learning experiences across different educational settings. Many students commented on the dominance of grammar-based instruction in their classes. Textbooks, grammar drills, and written exercises were described as the primary tools of teaching. One student noted, “We mostly follow theory” Another echoed, “practical use of language is still missing”. These comments suggest that the traditional grammar-translation

method still plays a significant role in the classroom, limiting opportunities for students to develop communicative competence. Despite these limitations, a few students shared positive experiences, mentioning that their teachers tried to incorporate more interactive methods such as group discussions and role-plays. One student shared, “our lecturers are qualified and use interactive methods like group discussions”. However, these approaches appeared to be the exception rather than the norm, as most students felt that practical engagement with the language remained minimal. Students also highlighted a lack of authentic resources and modern teaching tools. While some classes used printed materials and outdated audio CDs, digital content was either underutilized or entirely absent. One student remarked, “We don’t have proper audio-visual resources or language labs. It’s hard to learn pronunciation without hearing native speakers”. In response, many students turned to external sources for self-study. Online platforms like YouTube, Duolingo, and Goethe-Institute webinars were frequently mentioned as valuable supplements to formal instruction. As one student explained, “I use apps and online videos every day to practice what I don’t get in class”. In response to these limitations, many students actively sought ways to enhance their learning outside the classroom. Several participants mentioned visiting external language centers, such as cultural institutions, to supplement their university coursework. One student stated, “I’m studying German through the university’s language department, but I also visit the Goethe-Institute to supplement university classes”. These additional resources were seen as vital, especially for improving speaking and listening skills. Others reported turning to digital tools, with platforms like Duolingo being particularly popular: “I also use online platforms like Duolingo” one student shared. In addition, peer-led initiatives such as student-run language clubs played an important role in creating a more engaging environment. A participant remarked, “I joined to the student-run German language club to practice speaking at my university”. These examples reflect a high level of learner autonomy and a strong desire to seek out practical experiences with the language when institutional offerings fall short. Together, they highlight the importance of extracurricular and self-directed learning opportunities in sustaining student engagement and progress. Students also described structural issues such as large class sizes, irregular class schedules, and limited access to learning support. Overcrowded classrooms and time constraints were cited as reasons why teachers could not provide personalized attention or conduct frequent oral assessments. One participant stated, “*Our* classes are too large, so individual feedback is limited”.

Overall, the learning environments described by students show a system that is trying to meet demand but remains uneven in quality. While there are glimpses of interactive and student-centered practices, most learners feel their classes still rely heavily on traditional instruction with limited opportunities to apply the language in meaningful ways. The gap between instructional methods and student expectations is clear, and these findings suggest a pressing need for pedagogical reform, better access to digital resources, and more speaking-focused activities in the curriculum.

### **Challenges in Language Acquisition**

Students reported facing a variety of challenges in their efforts to learn German, many of which related to limited exposure, lack of speaking opportunities, and the overall difficulty of the language itself. These challenges were consistent across the group, regardless of their educational setting, and point to systemic gaps in both classroom instruction and the broader learning environment. One of the most commonly mentioned challenges was the lack of opportunities to practice speaking German in a meaningful way. Students repeatedly noted that classroom time was often dominated by grammar explanations and writing exercises, with little room for oral practice. A participant shared, “We do oral exercises in class, but they’re short and not very interactive.” This limited exposure to spoken German left many students feeling underprepared and lacking confidence in real-life conversations. In connection with this, students also emphasized the absence of speaking interaction. Most had rarely chance to a speak German with outsiders, either virtually or in person, and many believed that speaking exposure would significantly improve their fluency. One student remarked, “I don’t get enough speaking practice outside the classroom”. This lack of interaction was viewed as aalso a barrier to improving listening and speaking skills. Pronunciation and listening comprehension were also frequently cited as difficult areas. Students explained that German sounds were unfamiliar and sometimes difficult to reproduce correctly. One student stated, “The pronunciation is hard. There are sounds that don’t exist in my mother tongue”. Additionally, because of the limited use of audio materials in their classes, many students struggled to follow spoken German when watching videos or listening to conversations. As another participant put it, “I can read and write, but when I

listen to German speakers, I understand very little”. Grammar emerged as a major source of frustration for most learners. Case usage, verb positioning, and sentence structure were described as especially confusing. Several students referred to grammar as the most difficult part of their studies. One wrote, “The grammar rules are confusing, especially verb positioning and cases”. Another added, “Even after three years of learning, I still make basic grammar mistakes”. These difficulties often caused anxiety and reduced students’ confidence in their overall progress. Finally, some students mentioned the challenge of balancing German language study with other academic or work responsibilities. As one participant explained, “Balancing German with other academic subjects is difficult”. This issue was particularly common among learners taking German as an additional subject rather than as part of their main degree focus. In summary, the challenges students face in acquiring German are multi-layered. They range from linguistic difficulties and lack of speaking opportunities to broader structural and resource-related constraints. These obstacles can hinder student progress, lower motivation, and delay language mastery. Addressing these issues will require a combination of improved classroom practices, better access to resources, and institutional support that prioritizes communicative learning.

### **Student Suggestions for Improvement**

Despite the challenges they faced, students demonstrated a strong awareness of their own learning needs and offered a variety of practical suggestions for improving German language education. Their recommendations reflected both their frustrations and their aspirations, focusing on creating a more engaging, communicative, and supportive learning environment. One of the most frequent suggestions was the inclusion of native speaker interaction. Many students expressed a desire for exposure to authentic pronunciation and conversational flow. While they acknowledged the lack of German-speaking communities in Sri Lanka, they suggested practical alternatives such as online speaking sessions, virtual exchange programs, and guest lectures. One participant proposed, “Even if native speakers can’t come here, we can do online video sessions or join programs with German universities”. These suggestions highlight the students’ willingness to embrace digital tools for immersive language experiences. Students also called for more speaking practice and opportunities for real-life communication. While many acknowledged the importance of grammar and vocabulary, they emphasized the need for interactive methods that reflect real-world use of the language. Role-plays, conversations, group projects, and oral presentations were among the preferred formats. As one student put it, “We need to use the language, not just study it. Speaking with others helps us remember and understand better”. Others asked for regular speaking assessments to encourage practice and build confidence. Another suggestion was the need for smaller class sizes. Many students felt that overcrowded classrooms limited their ability to participate, ask questions, or receive individual feedback. One student explained, “The class is too big, so we don’t get a chance to speak or get personal help.” Another echoed, “we need smaller classes for more personalized learning and speaking practice.” These responses suggest that reducing class size would not only improve interaction but also create a more personalized and effective learning experience. Students also recommended the increased use of digital and audiovisual materials in classroom instruction. Many had already turned to online platforms to supplement their learning and believed these tools could be formally integrated into the curriculum. One student said, “If teachers used videos and apps in class, it would be more interesting. We learn better when we hear and see things, not just read them”. Others called for improved internet access and language labs to support digital learning, particularly in areas with weaker infrastructure. Beyond classroom practices, students proposed creating extracurricular activities that support language use and cultural immersion. Events such as “German Day”, film nights, language games, and cultural workshops were seen as enjoyable ways to practice the language informally. A student noted, “If we had fun events like a German culture day, we could learn and enjoy at the same time”. These suggestions reflect the desire to make language learning a more holistic and engaging experience. Finally, several participants emphasized the need for ongoing teacher training, especially in modern and communicative teaching methods. While they acknowledged the efforts of their instructors, some felt that the methods used were outdated or overly rigid. As one student explained, “Our teacher is good, but I think more training in new teaching styles would help us all”. This feedback points to a broader need for professional development that equips instructors with current methodologies and digital skills. In summary, students expressed clear, well-founded ideas for improving German language education. Their suggestions emphasize practical engagement, resource enhancement, and institutional support. If implemented, these student-driven recommendations could significantly improve learning outcomes and create a more motivating and effective language learning environment.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examines the current state of German language education in Sri Lanka, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of students enrolled in both academic degree programs and non-degree language courses. The findings derived from semi-structured questionnaire responses provide significant insights into learner motivation, instructional trends, learning challenges, and actionable recommendations for enhancing language education. Students exhibited significant motivation, primarily influenced by academic and career objectives, including opportunities for higher education in Germany, professional development, and international migration. Some individuals articulated personal motivations, such as an interest in the German language and culture. Students, irrespective of their backgrounds, exhibited a significant dedication to learning and a clear comprehension of the potential impact of German on their future goals. The learning environment reported by students exhibited multiple deficiencies. Numerous classrooms continue to be characterized by a predominance of theoretical instruction, resulting in restricted opportunities for communication-oriented activities. Speaking and listening skills frequently remain underdeveloped as a result of large class sizes, outdated teaching materials, and limited opportunities for authentic language use, including interactions with native speakers. Students often enhance their education via self-directed learning through online platforms, cultural institutes, and peer-led clubs, demonstrating their motivation and resourcefulness despite structural limitations. Reported challenges encompass difficulties with grammar, a lack of personalized feedback, and inadequate speaking practice. Logistical barriers, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient infrastructure, and time limitations, exacerbate the issues. In spite of these challenges, students presented a clear and actionable plan for enhancement. This study presents the following recommendations to enhance German language education in Sri Lanka:

1. Reduce class sizes to encourage more interaction and individualized feedback.
2. Provide regular access to native speakers, even through virtual platforms, to support pronunciation, listening, and cultural learning.
3. Integrate audiovisual materials and interactive tools into classroom teaching to create a more engaging and realistic learning experience.
4. Use task-based and communicative teaching methods, such as role-plays and real-life simulations, to build confidence in language use.
5. Organize extracurricular activities including cultural events, speaking clubs, and film nights to provide informal, enjoyable practice.

This study, though limited in scope due to its focus on a small group of students from specific educational contexts, offers valuable, learner-centered insights that may inform enhancements at institutional and policy levels. Future research could enhance these findings by applying a clearly defined theoretical framework while incorporating perspectives from both educators and administrators to deepen contextual understanding.

In summary, German language education in Sri Lanka benefits from a motivated learner base; however, it encounters distinct challenges that require attention. Institutions can enhance learning environments by actively listening to students and implementing their suggestions, thereby aligning with global standards and student objectives.

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