
Research paper**Motivational dynamics in refugee and migrant language education:
An ecological perspective on teacher perceptions**Konstantina Rizou ¹, Achilleas Kostoulas ^{2*} ¹ *Hellenic Open University, GREECE*² *University of Thessaly, GREECE****Corresponding Author:** achilleas@kostoulas.com**Citation:** Rizou, K., & Kostoulas, A. (2026). Motivational dynamics in refugee and migrant language education: An ecological perspective. *European Journal of Education & Language Review*, 2(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.20897/ejler/220305>**Published:** 21 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This article looks into the language learning motivations of refugees and migrants in Greece, as perceived by their teachers, with a view to making an empirical contribution about the education of minoritized populations and a conceptual contribution to the psychology of language education. Drawing on six interviews, a conceptualization of motivation as an emergent process is put forward. Rather than viewing motivation as a fixed trait or a response to stimuli, it is suggested that motivation emerges from the interplay of individual aspirations, social relationships, school policies, and broader societal ideological structures. The interaction of these shaping influences generates strong motivational affordances (e.g., the desire to find employment, integrate socially, or manage everyday tasks), as well as powerful constraints, including bureaucratic inflexibility, precarious living conditions, and limited institutional support. We suggest that this ecology of shaping influences is dynamic, stratified, and open to both constraint and change. Theoretically, the article advances our understanding of motivation, by illustrating how ecological thinking and complex dynamics systems theory can inform research psychological constructs in contexts of migration. Practically, it underscores the need for more flexible and context-sensitive practices for sustaining language learning motivation and educational attainment.

Keywords: Language Education, Motivation, Refugee Education

Motivation is one of the key determinants for success in language learning, and as such has received a lot of attention in language education research. This article attempts to synthesize multiple theoretical insights into language learning motivation through the lens of intentional dynamics theory (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021), a theoretical perspective that brings together complex dynamics systems theory and ecological thinking. To this end, we present a small-scale qualitative inquiry conducted in the context of the first author's MA studies (Rizou, 2025), which elicited views from teachers in Greece about the perceived language learning motivation of refugees and migrants learning Modern Greek. This study, thus, endeavours to make two contributions: On an empirical level, it adds to the growing discourse about the language education of refugees and migrants (e.g., Palaiologou & Faas, 2012; Peguero, 2024); on a conceptual level, it demonstrates the phenomenological validity and versatility of intentional dynamics theory, by extending it into the domain of language education psychology.

The article begins with contextualizing comments that position the study in within language education for refugees and migrants in Greece. This is followed by a theoretical move that surveys literature on motivation,

paving the way for a presentation of the conceptual frame that informs the study, Intentional Dynamics Theory. The theory is then exemplified from a phenomenological standpoint, by investigating how language teachers perceive the motivation of students with a refugee and / or migrant background. After methodological remarks, we present the findings showing how the motivation of such students can be understood through the lens of Intentional Dynamics Theory. The article concludes with a discussion of findings, and implications for research and practice.

LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY AND PROVISION FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN GREECE

Greece has functioned as a primary entry point into the European Union for people fleeing conflict, persecution, and economic precarity, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa region, due to its geographic position at the intersection of major migration routes. These arrivals are driven by intersecting push factors, including armed conflict and political instability (Canagarajah, 2017), and pull factors such as EU asylum frameworks and family reunification rights. While integration measures have been implemented to support newly arrived populations, the educational response has historically been shaped by an underlying assimilationist logic rather than a genuinely integrative approach (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011). Such measures reflect an uneasy and not always consistent balance between a strong tradition of centralized and conservative language education policy (Fili & Pavlopoulos, 2024) and *ad hoc* responses to emergencies (Motsiou & Kostoulas, 2025). This tension between reactive emergency provision and the structural demands of a diverse and growing learner population constitutes the political backdrop against which the motivational dynamics examined in this study must be understood.

Broadly, the education system is regulated by the Ministry of Education and associated entities. Centrally defined policy is enacted by regional education authorities, schools and teachers with limited decision-making authority (Paschalis, 2017). However, educational programs for refugees and migrants are generally funded by the European Union, and several NGOs also cater for educational niches that the state apparatus has been slow to identify and react to.

On the whole, the effectiveness of the educational provision for refugees and migrants has been uneven. Some younger refugees and migrants either attend segregated classes with peers who live in reception facilities; others are placed into schools where they attend both mainstream classes with local children of the same age group and separate language classes grouped by linguistic proficiency. The pedagogical, psychological and linguistic effectiveness of such models of (complete or partial) segregation is questionable because they limit contact with local and linguistically integrated peers (Erling et al., 2022; Podar et al., 2022; Tajic & Bunar, 2023), but they seem to serve pragmatic and political reasons. Adults who have attended primary education have access to education in ‘Second Chance’ or evening secondary schools, but the curriculum of these schools assumes native-like linguistic proficiency. Alternatively, they might attend language courses in Vocational Training Centers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or universities (Fili & Pavlopoulos, 2024; Nikolaidou & Tsarpa, 2021; UNHCR, n.d.).

The obstacles refugees and immigrants in Greece face regarding their language learning are significant, leading to reduced engagement. A non-exhaustive list of obstacles includes institutional challenges, such as difficulty of access to specialized programs and flexible employment to support learning; personal challenges including financial constraints, family obligations and health issues; affective issues such as self-confidence, attitudes towards learning, negative previous experiences; and, finally, lack of information about the opportunities and benefits of education (Lampidis, 2020; Proiou, 2019; for international perspectives see also Shapiro et al. 2018). Additionally, interrupted and low education attainment in the past seems to be associated with sub-optimal motivation and engagement (Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever, 2021).

Overcoming such structural challenges requires a considerable investment of time and effort, highlighting the role of motivation as a predictor of academic success. With this in mind, in the next section we look into the construct of language learning motivation.

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION

Language learning motivation might be described from three perspectives. Some studies have focused on the antecedents of motivations, such as the learners’ pre-existing needs, cognitive and affective predispositions. Other research focuses on external factors that might trigger or sustain motivation drives. A third perspective focuses on intentionality (understood here in the philosophical sense; cf. Brentano, 2015/1874), which connects present mental and affective states to future, yet unrealized events.

In its simplest form, which focuses on antecedents, motivation is a desire to do something. Individual agency is not random, nor is it enacted just by knowledge of how to do something; it additionally requires a need that can only be satisfied through action. While not explicitly framed as a theory of motivation, Maslow's theory puts forward a hierarchy of internal needs, ranging from physiological to self-actualization needs (Schacter et al., 2012). Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2022), a theory of motivation specific to the domain of learning, also highlights the role of psychological needs (e.g., for autonomy, competence and relatedness) in shaping language learning behaviour. In SDT, such needs are labelled *intrinsic motivation*, and are argued to be powerful determinants of learning success.

Theories of motivation that focus on antecedents can helpfully explain aspects of language learning, but they fall short of providing a comprehensive account of motivation. One criticism they have faced is that they are often constrained by their focus on individuals at the expense of their context (Williams & Burden, 1997). Given the highly relational nature of instructed learning, a theory of motivation that ignores the influence of peers and teachers seems limiting (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). Furthermore, a theory of motivation should not simply explain why learners do something, but it must also bring into focus what motivated action looks like (i.e., its form and direction). Additionally, it needs to discuss what value learners assign to activities, with which SDT does not concern itself. Lastly, such theories risk oversimplifying motivation by describing it as a static construct, and thus ignoring its dynamical fluctuation.

An alternative way of understanding motivation focuses on the incidents that activate motivated behaviour and on the forces that sustain it. This perspective draws on a line of scholarship going back to Pavlov and Skinner's work connecting stimuli and behavioural outcomes (Elliot et al., 2008). Ahl (2006), for example, defines motivation as comprising *triggers*, which are activated by the individual's goals, needs and choices, and *a direction of action*. Similarly, SDT accounts of extrinsic motivation, that is, external rewards and punishments intended to encourage desirable learning behaviours, also provide some limited scope for understanding environmental effects on language learning (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022). However, theories that focus on extrinsic motivation have had limited success in explaining language learning behaviour, not least because similar stimuli can lead to different outcomes. For instance, rewarding effective learning could motivate some individuals but make others complacent if their need for affirmation has been satisfied.

A more nuanced explanation of motivated behaviour in language education is provided by investment theory (Darvin & Norton, 2018; Norton, 1995; Zhang, 2023). As a socioculturally-informed perspective that draws on Bourdieu's construct of capital, investment theory conceptualizes language use as ideologically shaped social practice, inextricably linked to the individuals' social capital. Learners accumulate such capital by 'investing' in language learning, and thus become more effective in the roles they choose to enact. Importantly, investment theory draws attention to the fact that motivation is not a fixed trait of the learners' personality; rather, it is a process of becoming, shaped by the interaction between learners, their environment and the ideological forces that surround them. By drawing on a more robust theoretical foundation than theories of extrinsic motivation, investment theory has been more helpful in accounting for why and how motivated language learning behaviour emerges in a social milieu.

A third perspective, which has had a powerful impact on language learning psychology, is provided by the Second Language Motivation Self-System (L2MSS; Dörnyei, 2009). The L2MSS draws on previous work on 'future selves' (Marcus & Nurius, 1986), reinterpreted through Complex Dynamic Systems theory (Kostoulas, 2018; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). It posits that language learning emerges from the interaction between three system components: a projection of a desirable future 'ideal self', a mental representation of the learners' 'ought to self', and the language learning experience (a broad and somewhat nebulously defined 'catch all' construct intended to capture immediate environmental influences as perceived by the learners). The L2MSS has proved particularly generative in language education scholarship, not least because of its descriptive economy. Moreover, while acknowledging the effects of the 'here and now' of the language learning experience, it enriches the theoretical description of motivation with an intentional, future-oriented perspective, which echoes the etymological origins of motivation (*motivus* means 'purpose' or 'final cause' in Latin). On the other hand, the focus on the emergent properties of motivation and the interaction of the system components has come at the expense of a precise description of the components themselves, thus lending the theory to criticism about unsatisfactory conceptualization (Dörnyei, 2019) and limited empirical usefulness (Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2024).

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MOTIVATION

As can be inferred from the preceding discussion, language learning motivation lends itself to description from multiple theoretical perspectives, although each one appears only partially successful. Some of the challenges involved in such a theoretical endeavour include the complex nature of construct, which involves the interaction of intra-personal and interpersonal (contextual) shaping influences, and the theoretical bridging from existing

antecedents to yet-to-be-realized imagined states. Such issues are increasingly addressed in the language education literature through systems-informed theoretical accounts (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Kostoulas & Stelma, 2026). Among the analytical advantages that such perspectives offer is that they facilitate the explanation of stochastic phenomena (Kostoulas, 2018), that is, phenomena that defy precise prediction but are not completely random. Additionally, they enable the conceptually coherent integration of phenomena at different timescales (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022; Kostoulas & Stelma, 2016). Thirdly, they can account for the influence of structure while acknowledging the scope of individual agency (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2024).

This study attempts to address such challenges by drawing on Intentional Dynamics theory, a theoretical outgrowth of Complex Dynamics Systems thinking and ecological theories. Intentional dynamics theory, originally developed to account for classroom interaction, views human activity, such as motivated behaviour, as a meaning-making process situated in ecologies (Bateson, 1987) – assemblages of personal attitudes and beliefs, collective practices and policies, and societal structures and ideologies. These heterogeneous elements, or 'shaping influences', combine variously to create affordances (van Lier, 2000), that is, perceived or actual possibilities for action (in this case, motivated language learning behaviour). For instance, a safe learning environment, the prospect of job promotion, and free time might come together to 'soft-assemble' the affordance for sustained learning.

In the intentional dynamics model, the structure of the ecology and the activity in it (the 'intentional dynamics') are in a mutually shaping relationship. A language learner, for instance, might feel confident in their learning, which creates the affordance to enrol in a language learning course, which will, in turn, create more affordances for language practice and developing linguistic proficiency (i.e., their ecology is enriched with affordances).

Additionally, the model posits that the intentional dynamics are stratified. This has several theoretical implications. One is that 'higher level' structures can constrain lower-order ones, creating a hierarchical cascade (Young et al., 2002). Another one is that activity in any level can create new structure in higher levels through morphogenesis (Archer, 2013). A third implication is that the levels of intentional dynamics operate at different timescales, the lower levels being more volatile (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). Finally, processes of change and growth are easier when the dynamics are in harmony rather than in tension (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021). Stelma and Kostoulas (2021) distinguish four levels, ranging from individual to sociocultural influences. However, this division is as an artifact for analytical convenience, and indeed other studies (e.g., Stelma & Kostoulas, 2016; Palavouzi, 2023; Taxiarchou, 2022) have adopted different stratifications that more closely reflected their empirical needs and data.

A key feature of complexity-informed and ecological theoretical descriptions of phenomena is that they eschew linear causality (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The intricate feedback loops that connect nodes in a complex system or ecology and the density of connections challenges attempts to ascribe causes to specific conditions (Kostoulas, 2018). Instead, the Intentional Dynamics model puts forward an alternative, holistic perspective that involves focusing on the broad configuration of the ecology. Four such configurations are identified: (a) normative dynamics, which involves the reproduction of past states or top-down influences, (b) contingent dynamics, which allows for limited adaptiveness while preserving the overall structure of the ecology, (c) creative dynamics, which provides sufficient openness to generate new structure, and (d) purposive dynamics, or directed change. This 'broad strokes' perspective on causality enables theoretical descriptions that connect context and agency, while avoiding the pitfalls of over-determinism or epistemic voluntarism (Kostoulas, 2018).

A description of language learning motivation informed by Intentional Dynamics theory can address several empirical challenges. Firstly, it can explain how motivated action emerges (i.e., why refugees or migrants become motivated to learn the language(s) of their host community). This explanation could integrate intrapersonal antecedents of motivation (as described in, e.g., SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the kinds of societal influences that are described in investment theory (Norton, 1995) and elsewhere. Furthermore, it might help explain the stratified nature of 'outside' shaping influences, such as those exerted by peer groups, institutions and society at large (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Furthermore, it can provide a coherent account of how motivated language learning is channelled in different directions, depending on its intentionality (Stelma et al., 2015) and the tempering influence of demotivating constraints, understood here as configurations of an ecology where affordances for a specific action (motivated behaviour) are not present.

By reconceptualizing motivated behaviour not as an individual trait or a response to external stimuli, but as an emergent property within a dynamic ecology of personal dispositions, social relationships, institutional arrangements, and ideological structures, this theoretical account overcomes some of the limitations of existing thinking about motivation. Additionally, this ecological framing advances our theoretical understanding of motivation by integrating multiple timescales (moment-to-moment engagement, longer-term intentions, and developmental trajectories) within a single explanatory framework. Furthermore, it accommodates structure and agency in a coherent account that helps to understand the mutually shaping relationship between them. In doing

so, the model provides a more holistic and process-oriented account of motivation, capable of explaining variability, emergence, and sustained engagement in language learning as contextually embedded and meaning-making activity.

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

This study aimed to describe the motivation of refugees and migrants learning Modern Greek through the lens of Intentional Dynamics theory. In doing so, it makes an empirical and a conceptual contribution to the discourse on language learning psychology. Firstly, it provides insight into the factors that encourage (or discourage) the participation of refugees and migrants language learning, with a view to informing language education policy and practice. Secondly, it offers a simple yet robust conceptualization of language learning motivation, adding to the growing theoretical toolkit that describes how education systems and societies at large engage with refugees and migrants, and the effects of this interaction.

Specifically, the research questions that this study set out to answer were:

1. What are the constraints and motivating influences faced by refugees and migrants learning Modern Greek?
2. How can these constraints and motivating influences be synthesized into a model of motivation?

Although it would have been methodologically and ethically preferable to elicit data on these topics directly from the refugees and migrants, such an endeavour presented insurmountable challenges (e.g., language barriers, vulnerability of respondents, self-selection issues that would likely exclude less motivated learners). As a compromise, data were elicited from six teachers with experience in working with refugees and migrants in diverse settings ranging from posts in mainstream secondary education to volunteer roles in NGOs that serve the refugee and migrant population in Greece. Their professional credentials and experience were equally varied to produce participant triangulation (for more details about the participants, see Rizou, 2025). While this approach comes with obvious limitations regarding the representational bias it introduces into the data, it provides an ethically sound and methodologically feasible window into phenomena that would otherwise remain inaccessible with the resources available.

The participants themselves were a diverse group of people involved in the education of refugees and migrants (Table 1). All of them were Greek citizens, variously employed in primary, secondary and private education or volunteering by NGOs. Their experience ranged from two to 23 years of professional practice, of which substantial parts involved teaching refugees and migrants. They reported that they had taught a variety of students, from countries such as Afghanistan, Morocco, Ukraine or Somalia, and were highly committed to their education.

The participants' views were elicited using semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) that elicited demographic information, perceptions regarding what motivates refugees and migrants to learn a language, perceived obstacles that refugees and migrants face in the language learning process, and practices that they considered would be beneficial in generating, sustaining or increasing the learners' motivation. The interviews were conducted remotely in November and December 2024 and lasted slightly over 36 minutes on average. The interview language was Modern Greek, the participants' and researchers' first language, in order to facilitate the effective communication of meaning.

Table 1

Research Participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Teaching experience (years)</i>	<i>Experience with migrant / refugee learners (years)</i>
P1	Primary Education Teacher (NGO)	6	1
P2	Adult educator and Teacher of Modern Greek as a second language (NGO)	9	4
P3	Greek teacher (Secondary school)	7	3
P4	Greek teacher (NGO)	23	7
P5	Greek teacher (Secondary school)	2	2
P6	Adult educator and Teacher of Modern Greek as a second language (NGO)	6	4

The interviews were recorded, with the participants' consent, and transcribed using a combination of automatic transcription (Cockatoo.com) and manual transcription for verification and corrections. The transcription produced a 28,063-word data corpus in Modern Greek (the extracts presented below were translated after the analysis had taken place). The dataset was subsequently coded in three phases, broadly informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2019; Isari & Pourkos, 2016). This iterative process is presented below in a somewhat streamlined exposition to facilitate reading.

The analytical procedures used in this study reflected the theoretical commitments of both authors to constructivist thinking. They were also informed by their insights as professionals with considerable experience in language education and the education of minoritized learners. Rizou (Author 1) is a language teacher specialising in the education of refugees and migrants, and has first-hand professional knowledge of the context. Kostoulas (Author 2), an academic specializing in language education, also draws on more than ten years' experience participating in education programmes that directly benefit language learners with refugee and migrant background or working with teachers who do so.

In the initial, open coding phase, Author 1 read the data multiple times while listening to the interviews, and marginal comments were made, under the guidance of Kostoulas, to record themes related to key words from the literature on language learning motivation. Following that, all the data under each code were tabulated and summarized in analytical memos (Miles et al., 2014), produced by Author 1 and reviewed by Kostoulas. Through a process of 'constant comparison' (Hadley, 2017), various analytical categories emerged and their definition was refined. These categories were subsequently related to the Intentional Dynamics theory to generate a conceptual model of motivation (see following section). Finally, a codebook was created, with the definition of each category, examples of its occurrence and a standardized code. This was used to guide a second wave of coding, by Author 1, intended to relate the model to the data. For example, an interview extract referring to the requirements of citizenship examinations, which had been inductively coded as "exams", was initially reassigned to the category "top-down expectations" and eventually brought under to the theory-driven code "normative dynamics". The occurrences of each category in every interview were again tabulated, and another wave of analytical writing, led by Author 1 and overseen by Author 2, was used to document the findings that are presented in the following section.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE REFUGEE AND MIGRANT LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION

Building on the theoretical perspective that was put forward in the previous section, and the empirical findings of this study, a conceptualization of language learning motivation emerged, which is presented below.

Motivated language learning activity is conceptualised as a process moving towards (or 'intending to', in the philosophical sense put forward by Brentano, 2015) linguistic proficiency and integration in the host society. This process is shaped by motivational affordances and constraints, which are created by the synthesis of intrapersonal, learning environment and societal activity. Based on inductive engagement with the data, the latter are further grouped into activity by the local authorities, national agencies and supra-state institutions (such as European Union agencies) working directly or indirectly with refugees and migrants. This analytical stratification, it should be noted, is mainly done for the purposes of descriptive convenience, since most of the activity in such complex systems is interconnected across levels (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022; Kostoulas, 2018).

Perceptions of intrapersonal activity and structures

The intrapersonal level in this conceptualization encompasses the background, strengths and interests of refugees and migrants. The methodological design of this study has meant that information pertaining to this level is indirect, but the available data provide some indication about the motivational affordances and constraints that appear to be in place. It should be noted that flagging that teacher perceptions—especially those reflecting deficit orientations—are treated as data about pedagogical ideology and institutional context, not as objective descriptions of learner characteristics.

The interview data suggested that the refugee and migrants' academic background and potential were generally not perceived as relevant or useful, and often echoed deficit ideologies of learning. One participant claimed that "Especially when there is such a big difference in culture, in alphabet, in mentality, these people are essentially starting from scratch" (P5), while another one added that "some [...] were not even used to sitting and being in school" (P1). Older, more mature learners seemed to be viewed with equal scepticism, as they were perceived as unable to adapt to new situations and lacking in cognitive flexibility. The lack of alphabetical literacy skills, particularly among women, was also emphatically pointed out, for instance, by P6 who argued that "were illiterate in their native language, meaning they might have known Arabic orally, but they did not know the

written word. Therefore, all of this made it very difficult for them to learn the written word in a foreign language". It should be pointed out that such data reflect the participants' perceptions, priorities and values of the participants, which cannot be generalized broadly, but they hint at perceptions among teachers that (if more widely present) would constitute a constraint in the refugees' education.

Some of the motivational affordances that were recorded included an intrinsic valuation of education and culture, as well as utilitarian motives, such as immediate interaction needs and access to the job market. Several participants suggested that most refugees and migrants seemed to have little interest in remaining in Greece and, therefore, in investing effort in integrating. But it was also pointed out that other learners, particularly those who had some academic socialization ("a culture for school", in P4's words), would commit to learning Modern Greek because they "believed that you cannot understand people or how people think in general if you do not learn their language" (P4). Other motivational affordances that were mentioned included a desire to learn Modern Greek as a "survival tool" (P2), that is, having "a basic knowledge to be able to interact practically with the population" (P1). This was perceived as important in that it enables refugees and migrants to engage in everyday tasks (e.g., "go to the kiosk to buy cigarettes", P2) and interact in daily life without losing face ("prestige", P5). Employment-related concerns were also mentioned in the data (e.g., "knowledge of the Greek language was a basic requirement [because] all employers required it", P5). Closely related to this, refugees and migrants were reportedly motivated by the need to certify their linguistic proficiency in order to renew their residence permit.

Perceptions of activity and structure in the immediate environment

This level of activity refers mainly to the motivational affordances and constraints emerging from the interactions within a learning group and also between refugees and migrants and the schools or NGOs where the former attended language classes. Opportunities for interaction with other learners, including people who were not refugees or migrants, were reportedly particularly motivating for some refugees and migrants, as they allowed learners "to see other students, not to feel alone" (P4), with the caveat that gender-mixed groups were discouraging for some female learners.

The participants also reported that interaction with teachers seemed to be a strong motivational force ("This can often be exciting and create even more enthusiasm to continue learning", P5). Considering the frustrations that refugees and migrants face in their language learning trajectory, affective support ("real interest and love", P4) from their teachers seemed to be a powerful motivator. In addition, the teachers' position as 'insiders' in the community also appears to have motivational effects, as learners' reportedly sought to engage with teachers "for some services that wanted to get, let's say, some tax IDs, social security numbers and so on, or to make an appointment, maybe with doctors and such" (P2). It was noted, however, that suitably qualified staff were not always available, thus constraining the learning experience. In one teacher's view, "volunteer work is very important [...] However, sometimes, there is not that much consistency" (P3), and another commented argued for the need to hire specially qualified teachers because "it [i.e., teaching Greek to refugees] is a different science" (P1). In similar vein, other participants commented on issues such as limited plurilingual competences and lack of intercultural sensitivity among teachers, all of which could be demotivating.

Another set of influences on the motivation of refugees and migrants concerned educational materials and practices. Several participants pointed out the role of realistic activities, such as role-plays, which reportedly added a degree of authenticity to the language learning experience and helped learners "see how this can be useful in their daily lives" (P6). A typical example of activities perceived to be motivating is presented below:

Many times when we visited museums or some parts of the city, I don't know, like the market, etc. we might do dialogue [...] We could then have a discussion about this [...] [rather than teach] in the way we have learned: the classic alphabet, grammar, vocabulary; but rather in more interactive and practical ways. (P6)

Personalized materials, which matched the refugees and migrants' needs, were also described as motivating. In the words of one teacher, "each case is unique, each case has different needs, you plan your lesson accordingly to be suitable for each student" (P4), whereas another pointed out the need to constantly update their learning materials ("if I take the material that I used in [20]19 with speakers of Arabic speakers and Persian [i.e., Farsi] and Francophones from Africa and show it to a Ukrainian speaker today, it does not match their needs at all", P2). Conversely, the role of standardized curricula and testing were described as lacking relevance ("Although they don't know [the Modern Greek verb] 'eimai', they have to learn 'eim' [its equivalent in Ancient Greek] (P4). Such tasks were described as inherently demotivating (e.g., "another question was 'tell us 10 cities in Greece that start with [the letter] beta'. I can't think of even one that starts with beta. How should a foreigner know this?) (P4). Such perceptions seemed to have led teachers to deviate from them in order to sustain the learners' motivation.

Organizational issues also created constraints in the motivational process, and indeed, several participants seemed critical of the organizational procedures with which they were familiar. It was pointed out that “initially they [i.e., refugees and migrants] do not know where to turn to [...] for learning” (P4). The pragmatically challenging requirement to document prior learning was also noted as a constraint in the motivational process, as was the practice of not providing credit for school-leaving certificates, certifications or degrees that refugees and migrants could provide. Another issue pointed out was the suitability of the learning environment. For example, one participant commented that he had had to hold lessons in classrooms housed in shipping containers, which “was certainly a problem in terms of the capacity of the rooms and to some extent also in terms of safety” (P3), whereas another expressed concerns about the online delivery of lessons to refugees and migrants who do not have access to hardware or guaranteed access to the internet (P5).

Perceptions of activity and structure in the broader context

The third level of activity in the conceptualization of motivation concerns the refugees and migrants’ interaction with institutions and individuals outside the learning environment, and the affordances or constraints that emerge from it.

The most salient of the constraints that were mentioned in this regard concerned the demands placed on learners by other commitments, such as legal, medical and administrative appointments necessitated by their foreigner status. Because language lessons generally take place on workdays, learners “who found a job and started working [...] quit” (P3). Also, the precarity of their learning situation, and the fact that they often worked for multiple employers and at irregular hours, placed additional constraints on learning. This was noted, for instance, by P2, who stated that irregular attendance is “due to the motivations that the students have” and connected this to “the part we call survival, problems, finances”. Women, who tend to have more childcare responsibilities, seemed particularly vulnerable to having their learning disrupted in such ways (“they had families [...] so of course the children are the priority”, P5). Similarly, language learning was also disrupted by multiple forced relocations (“many of these families lived within the city of Athens [but] they were forced to leave again for the camps”, P1), and the challenging conditions in the camps where the refugees were housed. As P5 noted, “there was no personal space, no logistics, and no structure [...] the computer could sometimes break down, there was no peace during classes [...], so all of this made the whole process difficult.” In addition to the direct impact of such problems on learning, irregular attendance also necessitated frequent revisions, which reportedly had a demotivating effect on all learners (“So, we had to go back. To repeat some things, while some have already heard them”, P4).

Several responses focused on the constraints generated by poor coordination among various agencies involved in refugee education, the following extract being a typical example:

In the school I’m at, for instance, they are now starting classes for parents of children who are from other countries. I have collected the registration forms, and now I’m stuck at the legal framework. The school is not allowed to organize voluntary activities, that is, to have me as a volunteer, to recruit volunteer teachers [...]. It must be organized by the municipality. [On another occasion] we had tried to set up a centre in our region with volunteer teachers [...] there were so many obstacles that [...] we were disappointed by the immense bureaucracy. And it didn’t happen. (P4)

Such difficulties, in conjunction with xenophobic sentiments sometimes expressed in the local communities, often created the demotivating impression that the integration of refugees and migrants is not a priority (“this population is not among the government’s political target groups” P6). It seemed hard to sustain language learning motivation when there are no convincing counternarratives to the impression, conveyed by one participant, that:

If we wanted these arrivals to go to university and be educated, we would have succeeded. [But] they are not sent to our country and to Europe for this reason. They are sent to be workers. Why does a worker need to know? Or a farmer? [That’s why] we don’t make any effort for them to learn [Modern] Greek or to learn any [other] European language. (P4)

DISCUSSION

Epistemologically, this study is situated within an interpretivist framework, which holds that knowledge of social phenomena (including language learning motivation) emerges from the interactions that participants and researchers assign to their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Consistent with this stance, the findings presented here are understood as one plausible and theoretically coherent account of the phenomenon, shaped

by the researchers' own positionality and analytical commitments, rather than a definitive or generalisable description.

Teachers' perspectives on the language learning motivation of refugees and migrants

The description of the refugee and migrants' language learning motivation that emerges suggests that motivation is complex construct. This is brought into existence from the co-activity of multiple people, including the learners themselves, the teachers and the administrators and policy makers indirectly involved in language education. It includes intrapersonal shaping influences, such as the desire to integrate and communicate effectively, as well as broad policies, such as accreditation requirements for prior knowledge and the linguistic component of citizenship examinations.

What is particularly salient in the description the teachers provided is how language learning motivation is constrained across several levels. For instance, on an individual level, refugees and migrants are depicted as being primarily concerned with immediate survival needs, and lacking in required competences and skills; on the level of schooling, their multiple roles as laborers and carers are presented as competing with the desired role as language learners; on the societal level, the bureaucratic and political challenges are highlighted. Such enumerations of challenges seem consistent with existing accounts of the education of refugees and migrants, in Greece (e.g., Arvanitis, 2006; Kalantzi, 2021; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021; Magos & Simopoulos, 2009; Stelma & Kostoulas, 2024) and elsewhere (e.g., Banulescu-Bogdan, 2020; Van Nieuwenhove & De Wever, 2021). In an obvious sense, these constraints suggest the need for corrective actions that will create more affordances for language learning. Viewed from a more critical perspective, however, many teachers' remarks seem to stem from deficit ideologies (Sharma, 2018), as when the learners are described as unready for school or too inflexible on account of their age. The refugee and migrants' communicative priorities (e.g., being able to carry out transactions), also seem to align poorly with the teachers' values ('learning correct Greek', 'learning for its own sake'). These observations appear to underscore the scope for further improving the pedagogical and critical literacy of language teachers, especially those working with vulnerable and minoritized populations (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2020).

A second salient aspect of this description is the prevalence of top-down thinking. There are repeated instances in the data discussing how local, national and supra-national entities (such as the European Union) might approach the education of refugees and migrants differently. The implied (and at times explicitly stated) criticism of top-down policies does point to disfunctions and poor coordination. At the same time, it also seems to suggest that language education in the context is shaped by normative dynamics (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021), which—as noted above—are produced when teaching and learning activity is primarily driven by past experience and top-down authority. In other words, the participants appear to perceive the learners' motivation as something produced top-down by classroom activity; equally, top-down initiatives (from local authorities, national agencies and the European Union) are viewed as strong determinants of classroom activity.

A further theoretical insight that emerges from this description concerns the role of deficit ideology (Sharma, 2018) as a shaping influence within the motivational ecology. In the Intentional Dynamics framework, shaping influences operate across levels and can function as either affordances or constraints on motivated behaviour. The reported deficit perceptions reported, which framing learners as cognitively inflexible, culturally unprepared, or instrumentally unmotivated, are not incidental to the ecology. They constitute a form of normative structure at the learning environment level that constrains the affordances available to learners. When such perceptions are widely shared among teachers, they can sediment into institutional practices and curricular expectations, thereby operating also at the societal level through the reproduction of exclusionary assumptions about who language education is for and what counts as legitimate participation. In this reading, deficit ideology functions as a mechanism of normative dynamics, reinforcing existing hierarchies and limiting the scope for contingent or creative restructuring of the ecology. Foregrounding this dimension not only strengthens the explanatory reach of the Intentional Dynamics model in contexts of migration, but also underscores the need for critical professional development that equips teachers to recognise and interrupt deficit-informed framings in their practice.

In summary, the participants appear to be describing the language learning motivation of refugees and migrants as a highly constrained phenomenon, and attribute these constraints to top-down influences. In the Intentional Dynamics model, such activity is associated with normative dynamics and is considered highly resistant to change. Ascertaining the validity of such a description lies beyond the scope of this qualitative study. However, such attributions lend themselves to speculation that the top-down constraints might be invoked to justify the lack of visible success in developing the learners' linguistic proficiency or to normalize the reluctance in undertaking initiatives.

An intentional dynamics perspective on language learning motivation

In addition to the intrinsic value of the findings presented for understanding the language learning motivation of refugee and migrant learners, this case study contributes to the broader theoretical conversation in two ways. On one level, it illustrates how the Intentional Dynamics framework can be analytically deployed to understanding motivated behaviour in other educational and sociocultural contexts, provided that appropriate levels of abstraction and contextual sensitivity are maintained. From a more conceptual standpoint, the study extends the descriptive and explanatory potential of model beyond its original focus on classroom interaction — like similar research on motivation by Taxiarchou (2022) and Palavouzi (2023)— it empirically demonstrates the model’s versatility as a broad metatheoretical frame for conceptualizing language education. In other words, this present study both illuminates local particularities of refugee and migrant language education in Greece, but also helps to test and refine a transferable theoretical model that can inform analyses of similarly complex ecologies elsewhere.

This ecological description of motivation offers multiple theoretical affordances in understanding both motivation and complex systems. Firstly, the description shows how stratified systems can exchange information across levels (e.g., how classroom activity is constrained by broader policy) (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021), highlighting the usefulness of holistic descriptions. It also serves as a reminder that local activity, such as motivated learning, is shaped by higher-order systems in which it is embedded (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). Viewed in conjunction with the numerous examples of motivating activity at the level of educational institutions and teacher actions, it also suggests how lower-order dynamics (such as the one that takes place in the classroom) tend to adapt faster to stimuli compared to higher-order ones (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021).

Secondly, while the description seems to highlight normativity (see above), a systems-informed perspective inherently contains the possibility of change. Such change (‘contingent dynamics’) often involves limited adjustment that preserves the structure of the ecology — this appears to be the case, for instance, when teachers accommodate to the linguistic diversity of the classroom by adopting translanguaging practices, expand their linguistic repertoire with some token words from the learners’ languages, or resort to gesturing. However, when normative pressure is weaker (e.g., in informal education contexts that are unconstrained by formal curricula or examination requirements), complete restructuring of the ecology (‘second-order transformations’; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) are also possible. In this sense, refugee and migrant language education can provide a space for pedagogical experimentation and creativity from which new structure, such as the flexible, translingual future-oriented pedagogy advocated in the literature (e.g., Beacco et al., 2017) might emerge.

Challenging constraints to motivation

The description of motivational dynamics presented above can be used to guide educational interventions in refugee and migrant education. The key objectives in such interventions should be either to reduce normative pressure, allowing for more space for new practices to emerge (i.e., encourage creative dynamics) or to produce directed change through purposive dynamics.

One way to do the former would be to invest teachers with more autonomy and decision-making capacity, such as the freedom to design syllabi and materials that align more closely to the specific needs of their learners (Charitonos et al. 2025). Taken a step further, it also suggests a need to encourage greater participation by learners into the design of their language learning experience. This might involve, for instance, experimenting with participatory curriculum design activities, collaborative goal-setting, and learner-led projects drawing on their multilingual repertoires and lived experiences. Exploratory practice, in which teachers and learners collaboratively investigate issues in their teaching and learning lives with a view to improving their classroom experience (Hanks, 2017), lends itself well to work in this direction.

The second pathway, building on purposive dynamics, is likely more challenging, not least because —in the Greek context at least— initiatives in refugee and migrant education lack temporal depth and tend to be under-resourced (Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021). One direction for such action would involve the formal accreditation of the qualifications and funds of knowledge that refugees and migrants bring to the learning process (Beacco et al., 2017; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021), either in the form of official qualifications or micro-credentials. Additionally, it seems useful to reposition language education as a bridging mechanism connecting vocational training, higher education and community participation. Informal and non-traditional learning can be facilitated by curating open-access repositories of learning materials (e.g., Council of Europe, 2020), ideally co-produced by teachers and learners to reflect authentic interests and needs. Finally, establishing and sustaining communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2022) for teachers working in refugee and migrant education, through regular peer-learning meetings or online forums for teachers (e.g., Blume et al., 2025) would provide support for attempts to re-structure language education provision, in ways that generate more affordances and remove constraints to motivation.

Limitations and suggestions for future work

It should be borne in mind that this study is limited in a number of ways. The most important of these is that pragmatic challenges have precluded direct access to refugees and migrants, so any insights into their motivation are mediated by their teachers' perceptions and ideological lens. Many findings, such as the emphasis on how teacher activity enhances motivation and how their efforts are thwarted by unhelpful learner attitudes or bureaucratic indifference, can be interpreted through this lens. The powerful impact of the 'accuracy ethos' and credentialism that typifies language learning education in Greece (Kostoulas & Stelma, 2017), and the role of central planning also need to be understood in connection with the mediating effect of ideology. Added to this, the small number of participants and their limited geographical distribution (they were all based in Athens) means that this study should be viewed as a hypothesis-building step towards a broader more comprehensive and conclusive broader research agenda.

Further studies, including refugees and migrants and teacher educators, in a variety of contexts, using different methodological tools, could all be used to extend, refine and triangulate the model put forward here. Studies by teachers, perhaps using classroom-based research (Kostoulas, 2026), can also provide invaluable contributions to this growing understanding.

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Ethical statement

This study was conducted in compliance with the ethical procedures of the Hellenic Open University, with internal review by the MA *Language Education for Refugees and Migrants* board.

Competing interests

The authors do not have any competing interests to declare.

Author contributions

KR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, & Writing (original draft); AK: Project administration, Conceptualization; Supervision, Writing (review & editing).

Data availability

Data are available upon reasonable request, subject to Hellenic Open University approval.

AI disclosure

No use was made of generative artificial intelligence in the preparation of this article.

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