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Language learner motivation, where it's been and where it's going

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Abstract

Since 2005 there has been a surge in empirical and theoretical research in second language (L2) motivation. This phenomenon has been quantified as the equivalent of one paper being published every twenty-two days in 2005, and one paper every five days in 2014 (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). This unprecedented boom is still on an incline, meriting the unique domain status of L2 motivation (Boo et al., 2015). This paper will give an overview of previous research in L2 motivation, discuss if such claims are still valid twenty-two years later, and discuss developments in the L2 motivation regarding engagement and visualisation.

Keywords motivation; language learners; engagement; visualisation; L2; EAL; self-determination; L2MSS

1. Introduction

Since 2005 there has been a surge in empirical and theoretical research in second language (L2) motivation. This phenomenon has been quantified as the equivalent of one paper being published every twenty-two days in 2005, and one paper every five days in 2014 (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). This unprecedented boom is still on an incline, meriting the unique domain status of L2 motivation (Boo et al., 2015). Conversely, educational psychology and sociopsychology have seen a similar surge in *engagement* research over the same timeframe (Philp & Duchesne, 2016), arguably highlighting the role of the social context in learning. This is a noteworthy alignment illustrating engagement's close, complex relationship with motivation, (Reschly & Christenson, 2012) and shall be discussed later in this paper.

In 1998 Zoltán Dörnyei said, "Motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/foreign language (L2) learning" (117). This paper will give an overview of previous research in L2 motivation, discuss if such claims are still valid twenty-two years later, and discuss developments in the L2 motivation regarding *engagement* and *visualisation*.

2. What is motivation?

Before considering if motivation is still holding court as a dominant language learner characteristic, it is helpful to explore what is meant by motivation. Dörnyei and Otto (1998) define L2 motivation as "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out" (p. 65). Hence, motivation is a multifaceted, dynamic, and complex construct eluding a singular definition. However, researchers generally agree that motivation is responsible for human behaviour but exactly how this occurs remains uncertain.

3. Background

Three core historical phases can illustrate the development of L2 motivation theory by providing a picture of the research landscapes that gave rise to some of the most significant L2 motivation models. The was followed by an alignment with modern cognitive and educational psychology in the 1990s. Currently, we see a mixed approach of contextual or situated, and dynamic aspects of L2 motivation.

Until the 1990s, a sociopsychological approach, spearheaded by Gardner and Lambert in the 1970s took centre stage. Research in this area emerged in Canada,

a truly bilingual environment due to anglophone and francophone communities' coexistence. Through rigorous data collection, Gardner & Lambert (1972) surmised that attitudes towards the L2 communities were the precedent to success or failure in the L2 and thus Gardner's (1985) *integrative/instrumental motivation theory* was born. This has been operationalised by the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) which has been utilised in numerous studies such as Gardner and Macintyre (1993b), Cocca, Garcia, Zamarripa, Demetriou, Cocca (2017), Al-Mubireek (2020). Integrative (intrinsic) motivation stems from positive attitudes towards the L2 community, a willingness to communicate in the L2, and in some cases, even cultural appropriation (Dörnyei, 2001). Instrumental (extrinsic) motivation, in contrast, is the motivation to learn a language for practical reasons such as applying to university or furthering one's career. This macro-perspective helps researchers make inferences about language learning communities, language globalisation, multilingualism, and language contact. While this theory paved the way for a surge in research in the L2 motivation field, the integrative/instrumental dichotomy has also been criticised for not offering a *micro* perspective on L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2003).

During the 1990s, there was a shift in the educational research landscape, acknowledging the classroom environment as an influential factor in successful learning. This pragmatic shift saw researchers take an education-based approach, considering real-life teacher experiences. The connection of theories with practice thus boosts the relevance and impact of such research (Dörnyei, 2003). During this time, cognitive psychology influenced the SLA field with constructs such as *Attribute Theory* (Försterling, 1998), *Self-efficacy Theory* (Bandura, 1977), and Deci & Ryan's (1998) *Developmental Model*. Another important paradigm shift during this time was the novel connection between cognitive psychology and neurobiology: cognitive neuroscience. As initiated by John Schumann (1997), cognitive neuroscience allowed SLA brain functions, which could only be speculated upon before, to be scientifically observed. His pentaplex motivation theory, of which *stimulus appraisal* is the main component, was developed. According to his research, stimulus appraisal occurs along five dimensions in the brain: novelty, goal significance, coping potential, and self/social image (Schumann, 1997). Schumann (2002) later added to his theory with the conception of *mental foraging*, suggesting learning activates the same neural systems as when organisms forage for food or mate (Dörnyei, 2003). Connections can be seen here with goal theory, self-determination theory, and motivation theory, plus alluding to the innate underpinnings of the human need for knowledge.

At the end of the 1990s, in consideration of the *dynamic character* and *temporal variation* of motivation, Dörnyei & Otto's (1998) influential *Process Model* emerged. By operationalising a *process* model, in contrast to Gardner's (1985) *static* notion of integrative *or* instrumental motivation, Dörnyei & Otto (1998) provided a framework that better reflects the true nature of language learners general flux of language learning motivation. Three distinct phases are utilised in the process model: *preactional* (selecting of a goal or task), *actional* (relating to the L2 learning environment), and *postactional* (reflective evaluation). Many studies have examined the temporal relationship with motivation using this process model, such as Mori (2004) and Huang (2011).

A current paradigm in the L2 motivational field examines contextual and dynamic aspects of language learner motivation, best illustrated by Dörnyei's *L2 Motivational Self System*, (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). In line with contemporary psychology developments, the L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) accounts for temporal changes in motivation through an interrelated tripartite system: *Future L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self*, and *L2 Learning Experience*. The L2MSS can be interpreted as an educational application of Markus and Nurius' (1986) work on *Possible Selves: might* become, *like* to become, and *afraid* to become. The *L2 Learning Experience* has seen much less interrogation than the two future guides of the L2MSS, but that seems to be changing.

The *L2 Learning Experience* focuses on the immediate learning experience, such as the teacher, curriculum and materials, classmates, and tangible success, whereas the L2 self-guides focus on future selves or goal attainment. It was not as developed as the *Ideal L2 Self* and *Ought-to L2 Self* at the time of publication because it was not rooted in the established *possible-selves* theory; it did not get the head start the future-selves did. Dörnyei (2009) acknowledged this when he named it the 'Cinderella' of the L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2019) and offered a further definition of the *L2 Learning Experience* as 'the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with various aspects of the language learning process' (26).

The above gives a brief historical overview of the L2 motivational field but is by no means exhaustive. Further prominent theoretical conceptions worth noting include Bandura's (1977, 1997) Self-Efficacy theory; Weiner's (1972, 2010) Attribution theory; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels' (1998) Willingness to Communicate in an L2 theory (WTC), and Complex Dynamics Systems Theory (CDST) (Adolphs, Dörnyei, MacIntyre, Henry, et al., 2014; De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007).

4. Influential Studies

Green's (1999) survey of 1978 Cantonese L2 learners of English at a university in Hong Kong addressed some concerns about Gardner's (1985) theory's limitations. Green (1999) also added a fifth category, *avoidance,* to Deci & Ryan's (1988) *Developmental Model* (a continuum of *external, introjected, identified, and integrated motivation)* to

compensate for perceived limitations of the model. The developmental approach allows for changes in motivation which come with maturation and experience. Green (1999) argued that Gardner's (1985) theory is only applicable in Montreal, Canada, where it originated. In other words, the dichotomy of integrative/instrumental motivational theory is not transferable to English learners in Hong Kong, and elsewhere, given the multicultural rather than bilingual community (Green, 1999). The data showed that a quarter of second-year university students still relied on extrinsic motivation or even avoided engagement altogether. Students who relied on integrative motivation showed the greatest success levels. Ideally, learners develop their language skills in the language classroom and follow the developmental path from *external* through to *integrated* motivational drives. By linking the empirical findings with educational pedagogy, Green put teacher impact into the L2 motivational limelight.

Dörnyei & Csizer's (1998) seminal paper surveyed 200 Hungarian L2 teachers to compile a list of the most useful L2 motivational strategies. Their data exposed another tripartite construct: *integrative motivation*, *linguistic self-confidence*, and *appraisal of the classroom environment*. Integrative motivation came as no surprise as it upheld Gardner's (1985) integrative motivational theory. The second supported previous linguistic self-confidence studies (Clément and Kruidenier, 1985; Labrie and Clément, 1986). However, the third component was novel, and unassumingly, the most influential some twenty years later. As alluded to above, *appraisal of the classroom environment* has been transformed into the construct now widely known as the *L2 Learning Experience,* the third element of the L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2009).

5. Engagement

Building on the *L2 Learning Experience* notion, Philp & Duchesne (2016) explored *task-engagement* in language classrooms. They reviewed a great number of engagement components: the *importance of engagement, the construct of engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, social engagement, the importance of context in defining engagement, engagement as a multidimensional construct, engagement in task-based interaction, examples of indicators of engagement in task-based interaction research,* and *implications for measures of engagement in task-based interaction.* They posit that motivation and self-regulation run through each dimension of engagement, not as separate ideas. Indeed, engagement is a multidimensional construct, with dimensions which 'operate interdependently and mutually influence one other' (67), often described as the visible manifestation of motivation (Ainley, 2012; Reeve, 2012), or the precursor of motivation (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). This is an important reciprocal relationship.

Engagement consists of many different dimensions - not simply 'paying attention' (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004). It can be characterised as motives that initiate or sustain learning actions (Ainley, 2012), so conflates with existing constructs such as motivation and self-regulation in a reciprocal relationship (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012). Like motivation and other SLA constructs, defining engagement is a complex task.

Engagement research, which has been the topic of considerable study in educational psychology for more than a decade (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015), covers the four realms of school, community, classrooms, and learning activity (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Here, the commonality of engagement theory and current L2 motivation theory is illustrated. Furthermore, the overlapping social, cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions of engagement reflect some widely accepted applied linguistic notions of instructed language learning (Shumann, 1997; Swain, 2013; Philp & Duchesne, 2008). Philp & Duchesne's (2016) review article suggests that engagement looks different according to context, and the recognising of engagement as multidimensional begs further exploration in the language learning context; notions echoed in L2 motivation. According to Guthrie, Wigfield, Barbosa, et al., 2004, engagement increases motivation, suggesting that a bottom-up approach to increasing success in the classroom could be valuable.

Highlighting the impact of engagement in language learning permits inferences that a deeper understanding of language learner engagement could progress research in the L2 motivational field (micro), and general SLA research (macro). In support of bridging the gap between theory and practice to better provide practical strategies for motivating language learners, there is a need to develop a stronger theoretical framework for teachers and researchers. This would enable them to select tasks, develop curriculum, and cultivate efficient and classroom cultures more effectively. As noted by Philp and Duchesne (2016), engagement is a construct with enormous potential for language learning. It has been linked with success both in and out school (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004), and even described as the holy grail of learning (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015). In Dörnyei's 2019 paper, he seconded this suggestion, arguing that 'tapping into the domain of engagement in educational psychology might be a fruitful way forward' (26).

6. Visualisation

In addition to exploring engagement as a worthy companion in developing the field of L2 motivation, the role of vision and imagery is worth examining. Arguably this compliments the theory of future selves in the L2MSS, as illustrated in the results of studies such as You, Dörnyei, and Csizer (2016).

In large-scale surveying of Chinese secondary

school and university students (N > 10,000) on their motivational dispositions, the researchers surmised that visualisation positively affects language learning success. Furthermore, they note that *Vividness of Imagery* has a strong link with the two future self-guides (.81); *Attitudes to L2 Learning* was the dominant generator of motivation, and the individual's ongoing experience of visualisation and language learning contributed to motivation. Their findings have practical implications since Vividness of Imagery, Attitudes to L2 Learning, and Ease of Using Imagery can potentially be improved through teacher intervention (Csizer & Magid, 2014; Bier, Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

However, are learners successful *because* they can visualise their future selves, or do they visualise their future selves *because* they are successful learners? We see a similar conundrum in successful learners versus motivated learners' debate, language learner strategy use and motivation's relationship, and successful implicit language acquisition. It seems impossible to extrapolate one variable from the others, one construct from the others, or even one theory from another.

7. Concluding Remarks

The surge in publications exploring L2 motivation between 2005-2015 is unprecedented (Boo et al., 2015) but other factors seem to be bidding for first place in the key influencer rank. Given the increasing amount of experimental and nonorthodox methodology, such as Q methodology, idiodynamics, retrodictive qualitative modelling, and CDST (Dörnyei, Muir, & Ibrahim, 2014), other areas of L2 motivation could see a surge in investigative research from fields other than applied linguistics. In fact, this is one of the reasons proffered as explaining the 'motivational renaissance' (Gardner & Tremblay, 1994) of the1990s (Dörnyei, 2003).

Increasing task-engagement in classrooms seems beneficial and attainable. For example, with teacher intervention, students could set mastery goals, potentially resulting in deeper learning strategies with more engagement (Anderman & Patrick, 2012). Here, perhaps there is scope for another paradigm shift in the applied linguistic research landscape. Boo et al. (2015) suggested that their retrospective analysis of publications could predict future trends in the field. Conceivably a similar review of engagement and visualisation publications could predict a coming trend in motivational research.

Visualisation is an exciting addition to the cannon of L2 motivational theories. Following the collaborative climate between educational psychology and applied linguistics outlined above, perhaps a deeper connection with sports psychology, motivational psychology, and applied linguistics could be future taskforce in untangling and improving L2 motivation.

While motivation is still key to language learners' success, the research outlined in this paper also suggests that the precursors to motivation are perhaps even more important. If motivation can be initiated by engagement, and engagement can be initiated for all learners by selecting appropriate tasks (Christenson, Wylie, & Reschly, 2012), then arguably educators are in fact the key to language learners' success in classroom settings.

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