

MOTIVATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE DYNAMIC INTERACTIONS OF MANY FACTORS

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Abstract

As all educators know so well, motivation is one of the most, if not the most, challenging aspect of language learning and teaching that they must deal with in their classes. We are therefore presenting a review of the last 10 years' literature on the major constituents of motivation, and on the intrinsic factors (anxiety, emotions, attitude, etc.) that have a deep impact on L2 learners' motivation.

Keywords: *Motivation, anxiety, emotions, self-concept, personality.*

1. Introduction

All language teachers will agree that motivation is one of the most, if not the most challenging aspect of language learning and teaching that they deal with in their classes. Indeed, they often wonder why they can motivate most, but not all of their students, despite their vigilance, efforts, and strengths as skilled language educators. Still, they are very aware that to learn well and efficiently, learners need to be motivated; they need to *want* to learn. (Ekiz et Kulmetov, 2016; Gardner, 2010).

We are therefore presenting a review of the last 10 years of literature on the major constituents of motivation, delving deep into this particularly rich issue.

First, it is important to understand that language learning differs from all other subjects as it is not limited to the learning of facts such as new words, new sounds, and new grammar rules; it also encompasses the discovering of new communities, new cultures and new mores. And in doing so, it triggers not only the learners' cognition but also their affect. It requires endless patience, discipline, perseverance, and self-efficacy from the learners as L2 learning extends over a protracted period of time (Kormos et al., 2011).

Motivation is a multi-faceted, complex and wide-ranging concept (Csizér et al., 2010; Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016; Gardner, 2010; Kormos et al., 2011) that encompasses the duration and intensity of effort learners are ready to invest, their attitude towards the L2 and the community that uses it, their desire to meet and interact with its members, and their interest in discovering the new language itself. Motivation is very dynamic as it fluctuates rapidly over time (Cao, 2014) and it is deeply influenced by multiple intrinsic factors. These include emotions, anxiety, self-perception, self-esteem, false beliefs, attitude, age, gender, willingness to communicate (Boudreau et al., 2018). It is also influenced by extrinsic factors such as teachers, families, peers, the learning environment, and the interactions with natives of the L2, etc. (Al-Hoorie, 2017 ; Csizér et al., 2010 ; Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016 ; Kormos & Kiddle, 2013).

This particularly wide range of characteristics and factors explain why there exist so many individual differences among learners regarding their degree of interest, motivation, effort, perseverance, readiness to take risks, open-mindedness towards other people and cultures, active participation in their language classes, and ultimately, their willingness to communicate with the L2 whenever possible.

2. Very brief history

In 1959, the Canadian professors, researchers, and scholars Gardner and Lambert, became the first people to fully grasp the central and foundational role of motivation in the quality of language learning. From the beginning of the 1960s until today, research on this major concept is divided into 3 main periods: the socio-psychological period (1959-1990) lead by Gardner & Lambert, the cognitive period lead by Dörnyei (1990-2015), and the educational period which we are in and which considers emotions and affect as being central to motivation.

3. Main characteristics of motivation

Al-Hoorie (2017), Cao (2014) and Csizér et al. (2010) underline the dynamic and variational nature of motivation. Indeed, motivation is deeply and constantly influenced by variations in feelings of self-efficacy, self-confidence, as well as the level of interest and comfort generated by the learning environment that educators create.

4. Emotional states

Emotions or more accurately emotional states are very complex, as they are psychophysiological reactions to exterior stimuli which, in turn, trigger a large variety of behavioral reactions. The learning environment is particularly rich in such stimuli as teachers, peers, teaching techniques, corrective style, curriculum, and the overall atmosphere of the class have a constant and strong emotional impact on all learners of a same group. But as research has shown since the late 1990s, these stimuli trigger different reactions and behaviors among students, and greatly influence learning through a deep impact on their attentional, cognitive and memory capacities (Boudreau et al., 2018).

It is undeniable that emotions pervade communication and social interactions, and that the more positive they are in the language classroom, the better the learning. This is why it is paramount to fully grasp the major role that enjoyment and anxiety play in the quality of language learning in an institutional environment, whether elementary, secondary, or post-secondary.

5. Enjoyment

Influenced by Maslow's theories on human motivation and in particular, by his hierarchy of needs, humanistic education in the 1980s considered that, in the realm of cognition, affect is as important as intellect, and that positive emotions are the best facilitators of good learning. Later, a number of researchers applied the main principles of positive psychology to the field of second language learning and teaching, and pointed out that indeed, students learn best when enjoying the whole learning process. Furthermore, Shao et al. (2013) mentioned that to best promote a positive attitude towards L2 learning, teachers need to be gifted with a strong emotional intelligence which keeps them attuned to their students' emotional states and needs. And Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) and Dewaele et al. (2016) wrote that the students' main sources of enjoyment in the language classroom are opportunities to succeed, interesting class activities, good teaching skills, and recognition from one's teachers and peers.

6. Foreign language anxiety

All researchers (Boudreau et al., 2018) agree that language anxiety is a negative emotional reaction which makes learners feel apprehensive and anxious when reading and writing in another language, or else made to talk and comprehend an L2 in front of their teachers and peers. Dewaele (2013) argues that language anxiety is particularly complex and multidimensional as it is triggered by the learners' self-perception, self-beliefs and self-regulation which, when they are negative, interfere with the learning process.

Language anxiety creates a barrier to the learners' full cognitive functioning by weakening their attention, and by making them doubt their ability to be successful. It interferes with the cognitive functioning of learners as their attention is constantly divided between the language task and the control of their anxiety. In fact, Boudreau et al. (2018) state that language anxiety is a strong predictor of success or failure in L2 learning. It mainly manifests itself through the fear of having to publicly communicate in the L2, the fear of a bad evaluation, and the fear of tests.

In the language classroom, the degree of anxiety that learners feel can depend on the number of languages they know, whether the L2 they study belongs to the same language family as their L1, and their culture. But it mainly depends on the teachers' teaching and corrective strategies, and on the classmates' judgments.

It is also worth mentioning that the effects of anxiety on the learners' motivation is considerable, as it prevents them from noticing and therefore benefiting from the teachers' corrective feedback (Rassaei, 2015). It also diminishes their willingness to communicate, it weakens their self-perception, self-concept, and self-confidence, and it prevents them from taking risks as they fear failure. Anxious language learners are not motivated, and try to avoid language courses as they often experience learned helplessness.

7. Self-perception, self-concept and self-confidence

Today, it is widely recognized that the learners' perception of their own potential to learn a language has a profound influence on their motivation to learn it. If it is positive, then their motivation to keep trying will be high. But if, due to repeated failed experiences, their self-perception is negative, they will not be motivated to keep trying for fear of failing again (Dörnyei, 2009; Kormos et al.).

It is also worth mentioning that the more anxious students are, the more they tend to underestimate their own potentials (Dewaele et al., 2008). Good teachers can make a huge difference if they are guided by the principles of positive psychology and they are fully aware of the importance of giving all students, even the weakest and the most demotivated, opportunities to succeed.

While it is difficult to know if, because their self-concept and their self-confidence are low that their anxiety is high, or if it is because their anxiety is high that their self confidence and self image are low – everybody agrees that anxiety undermines motivation, and that it can be mitigated with the use of good teaching strategies.

8. False beliefs

Many researchers point out that, from an early age, students hold preconceptions about their own intelligence and their own capacities to succeed, along with false beliefs about the main constituents of good language learning. Here again, good teachers, who are aware of these kinds of challenges, can manage to dissipate such misleading beliefs with the help of discussions and the use of effective learning strategies.

9. Attitude

Dörnyei (2009) and Kormos et al. (2011) as well other researchers stressed that the learners' attitude towards the learned language and the community who speaks it has a profound impact on their motivation to actively study it in and out of school, to take every opportunity to communicate in it, and to embrace the native speakers and their culture with an open mind.

10. Personality

It is also interesting to wonder if the learners' personality has an impact on their motivation. But research on the issue is rather scarce. Nevertheless, a number of studies have focused on the link between neuroticism and language anxiety (Dewaele, 2013) and have discarded any link between psychoticism, extroversion and language anxiety (Dewaele, 2013). And because researchers like Dewaele (2002) mention that many anxious language learners are introverts who underestimate their own proficiency and are often reserved and less confident, it is tempting to conclude that they lack motivation due to a tendency to remain silent and talk less than their extroverted peers, who speak more and with more fluidity and ease. But this does not mean that introverts are less motivated, as when they write and read, they are as active and involved as the extroverts. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the anxiety that many introverts feel, especially when asked to communicate in front of others, may make them appear unmotivated and uninterested even though it is often far from the truth.

Another personality trait that has an impact on motivation is perfectionism. Anxious individuals are quite often perfectionists (Dewaele, 2013), whose fear of making mistakes prevents them from taking risks. And yet, taking the risk of making mistakes is considered to be one of the best strategies good language learners use, as they recognize that using corrective feedback enables them to make progress.

11. Willingness to communicate (WTC)

WTC is the desire and initiative learners take to communicate in the L2. According to many researchers like MacIntyre et al. (2003), WTC depends mainly on the learners' apprehension of making mistakes, the perception of their own proficiency, and ultimately, on their self confidence.

In 2014, Cao pursued research on WTC by adopting a socio-cognitive perspective, and identified the influential factors such as integrative motivation, attitude, personality, emotions, gender, and age, to which she added culture, the desire to interact and communicate with the natives of the L2, and the learning environment (teachers, class procedures, peers, etc.).

Moreover, it is important to recognize that all these factors are highly dynamic and they interact with one another at all times so as to constantly impact the learners' motivation.

12. Age

Although it has been long established that younger language learners have a clear phonological, a lexical and a morphosyntactic advantage over later L2 learners, it is less recognized that older learners can reach the same level of proficiency thanks to their greater cognitive maturity, their greater capacity for abstraction and their greater emotional self-regulation abilities (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016; Zhengwei & Kerong, 2019).

But the impact of age on learners' motivation is multifactorial and depends not only on social, cognitive, developmental, linguistic, experiential, and psychological factors, but also on life circumstances (i.e. if you are an immigrant, etc.) and on the learning environment. And what is of particular interest is that in a formal setting, the group dynamic between learners has a major impact (Kormos et al., 2011).

But according to Pfenninger & Singleton (2016), older learners at the secondary and post secondary levels tend to be more motivated, as they are likely to be more confident, less anxious, and hold a more positive attitude towards the L2 and the learning environment than younger learners from elementary school. Moreover, older learners tend to be more motivated to learn other languages, especially English, as they 'consume' a lot of music, TV programs, films, videos, Internet sites and social network platforms in the language.

13. Gender

Today, more and more researchers are interested in understanding why in Anglo-Saxon countries like Canada, Australia, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, at the middle and secondary school level, girls are more motivated than boys when studying certain languages (Kissau). These studies show that boys are as motivated as girls until early adolescence, but the longer they have to pursue the study of certain languages – like French in Canada – the less motivated and interested they become. On the contrary, with age, girls become more and more motivated in the study of such languages.

The above researchers found that girls' motivation is integrative, as they are interested in communicating with natives of the language they learn and in learning about their culture and mores. On the other hand, boys are more instrumentally motivated, and mainly view the practical advantages (i.e. a career) of knowing an L2.

Such major differences between boys and girls are largely due to society's and families' attitudes towards L2 learning, to the boys' perception of certain languages (like French) as being too feminine, to the lack of male language teachers, and to language activities which answer more to the needs and interests of girls.

Such an issue is all the more disappointing, as recent research clearly shows that boys' aptitudes for L2 learning are as good as girls' (Wucherer et Reiterer, 2018).

14. Extrinsic factors

Even though this paper does not focus on extrinsic factors such as teachers, families, peers, the learning environment, and interactions with the natives of the L2, they must also be taken into consideration, as they have a major impact on motivation (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Csizér et al., 2010; Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016).

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