

# Understanding motivation in the language classroom: Insights from complexity perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

In the area of English (and other) language teaching, motivation is recognised as one of the most important factors that affect the process of language learning, and a number of studies on language learning motivation were conducted by researchers in the field and practitioners in language classrooms. In this paper, I will first review some key concepts of motivation in second/foreign language teaching and learning. Also, for a better understanding of learners' motivation in language classroom settings, I will introduce recent theoretical developments in language learning motivation research, particularly the discussions about complexity perspectives. Finally, drawing upon some recent discussions in the field, I will discuss how we can apply research outcomes in classroom language teaching, and conclude with some useful resources for language teachers.

## INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION

In the age of globalisation, the status of English as an international language has a significant impact in countries where English has been treated as a foreign language (EFL). In such contexts, motivation becomes a critical issue for EFL learners, since it is one of the individual difference factors affecting effort to learn English. Moreover, in successful classroom language learning at school, learners' motivation plays a vital role, and either as a language learner or a teacher, we all know that it really matters in teaching/learning a language.

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), the concept of motivation is defined as “the *direction* and *magnitude* of human behaviour” (p. 4, italics in original). From the viewpoint of language learning research, motivation in language learning is one of major topics in the discipline of second language acquisition (SLA) and English language teaching (ELT) research which take an interdisciplinary approach to a science of human process of second/foreign language learning.

Motivation, as most people can easily imagine by the name, particularly maintains a strong interdisciplinary relationship with psychological research, and the foundation of language learning motivation research first emerged in the field of social psychology. In the early period of motivation research (i.e., the social-psychological period: 1950s–), attention was paid to people's motivation for language learning in bilingual settings, such as a Canadian English-French bilingual context (e.g., Robert Gardner's set of studies). The most notable theoretical framework was the *integrative motivation* which relates to people's positive attitudes toward interactions with people who use the target language.

Later, in the early 1990s (i.e., the cognitive-situated period), researchers' interests have shifted

from a social-psychological aspect to a more situated, education-oriented approach, since Gardner's model was criticised for not being related directly to classroom language teaching and learning. In this period, theories from mainstream and educational psychology were applied to language learning motivation research. For example, Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory was brought to language learning motivation research by Noels, Pelletier, Clément, and Vallerand (2000) and related studies, and instruments that can measure intrinsic and extrinsic orientations specific to language learning were developed.

In the early 2000s, a reconceptualisation of language learning motivation occurred. In the social psychological approach of language learning motivation research, the key idea was the attitudes toward target language users and communities. However, in the age of globalisation, international languages such as English are spoken all around the world and it has become difficult to define where actually the "target community" for language learning is. In relation to this discussion, a group of Hungarian researchers explored the changes in the status of languages including English, German, French, Italian, and Russian in the Hungarian context (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006) where the status of English and other Western European language has drastically changed. As a result, Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) concluded that in the transition period of Hungary's standpoint in Europe, learners' engagement in learning the dominant "world language" has increased. Based on the findings from their longitudinal study, together with theories from mainstream psychology, Dörnyei (2005) proposed the L2 motivational self system which focuses on the learners' self-images instead of target community which has become less clear these days.

The L2 motivational self system is composed of three key components: Ideal L2 self, Ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. Ideal L2 self is the L2 specific facet of the ideal self which considers our desired future image of ourselves as language users, and ought-to L2 self is our images that others expect or want of us (Higgins, 1987). The third concept, L2 learning experience concerns "situated 'executive' motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). The key motivator in the L2 motivational self system, supported by self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), is the gap between people's actual selves and possible selves, and L2 learners are effectively motivated when they notice the discrepancy between their current situation and an ideal future image of themselves as language users, and take action to reduce the gap between those two selves.

Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan (2015) systematically reviewed trends in language learning motivation research published between 2005 and 2014, and concluded that the L2 motivational self system is predominantly used by researchers in recent years. However, at the same time, other theoretical aspects such as self-determination theory are also used frequently in language learning motivation research and making contributions to bridge the gaps between research and practice. Also, more recently, trends in language learning motivation research are characterised by a complex and dynamic systems approach.

In the past decades (2000s–), complexity theory has been gaining popularity in applied linguistics and second language acquisition research (DeBot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and language learning motivation research is one of the major areas we can find the applications of complexity theory. The origin of complexity theory is from the hard science (e.g., physics and mathematics) where the foci of research is the complex and dynamic interactions of multiple components in a system.

The emergence of a new paradigm (i.e., complex and dynamic systems) has changed the way we perform studies on language learning motivation. In the social-psychological period, major approach was to identify linear cause-effect relationships between motivation as an independent variable and a factor as dependent variables, and studies in that period were conducted with research questions such as:

- *To what extent does Japanese EFL learners' ideal L2 self correlate with their engagement in classroom language learning?*

However, research questions associated with the complex and dynamic approach to language learning motivation research seek complex, continuously-changing relationships between motivation and mediating factors, as well as non-linear fluctuation of motivation in the process of language learning. For example, Nitta and Baba (2015) looked at the development of learners' self-images with the following research questions:

- *What self-regulatory processes do students equipped with an ideal L2 self employ over one year through language learning tasks?*
- *How do the ideal L2 self, task execution and self-regulation in individual students interact in an EFL classroom over one year?*

(Nitta & Baba, 2015, p. 373)

As above, language learning motivation research in the complexity paradigm focuses more on complex interactions between factors, rather than looking at a linear cause-effect relationship between motivating factor and motivation.

Due to the limited space, this paper reviewed only key concepts of language learning motivation research. For more detailed historical background, see full review articles (e.g., Al-Hoorie, 2017; Boo et al., 2015) and introductory book volumes on language learning motivation and psychology (e.g., Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

## **OBSERVING COMPLEXITY IN LANGUAGE LEARNER PSYCHOLOGY**

As mentioned earlier, more investigations in language learning motivation from a complexity perspective are needed, particularly in the classroom language learning context. However, since language learning motivation and learner psychology are “invisible” concepts, research

methodologies to observe and capture learners' psychological traits need to be carefully considered when conducting studies on language learning motivation.

Since language learning motivation research stems from traditions in the field of mainstream psychology, many psychological research methods and approaches have been adopted to capture language learners' psychological traits. Particularly, studies conducted in the early stage of language learning motivation research (i.e., during the social-psychological period) adopted a quantitative approach which collects data using psychometric scales (e.g., Likert scale questionnaire) and performs analyses with inferential statistics such as linear regression and factor analysis.

However, in the later period, psychometric quantitative approaches were criticised for not being able to capture a dynamic aspect of language learning motivation such as motivational fluctuations, since quantitative studies regard motivation as a quantifiable construct and were measuring motivation with representative values (e.g., mean and median) to capture general tendencies of motivation among target participants. For example, Ushioda (1994) noted that those quantitative studies are looking at motivation from the viewpoint of "difference in degree rather than quality" (p. 78), and called for more qualitative, situated approaches to language learning motivation research.

Since then, foci of language learning motivation research started shifting to a more qualitative and dynamic aspect. However, although theoretical discussions over the complex and dynamic nature of language learning motivation are becoming popular in the field, researchers are still seeking for methodologies that can capture complex and dynamic motivational changes. In light of the complexity approach to language learning motivation research, Dörnyei (2014, pp. 84–85) proposed three strategies for understanding motivation as a complex and dynamic concept below:

- 1) Focus on identifying strong attractor-governed phenomena
- 2) Focus on identifying typical attractor conglomerates
- 3) Focus on identifying and analysing typical dynamic outcome patterns

Furthermore, Dörnyei (2014) introduced a qualitative approach called Retrodictive Qualitative Modelling (RQM) which realises his proposed strategies in a three-step research template, and it has been adopted to several research projects (e.g., Chan, Dörnyei, & Henry, 2015):

- 1) Identifying salient student types in classroom, according to the researchers' observation
- 2) Identifying students who are typical of the established prototypes and conducting interviews with them
- 3) Identifying the most salient system components and the signature dynamic of each system

Apart from Dörnyei's approach, several researchers have invented and introduced new research methods and approaches in Dörnyei, MacIntyre, and Henry's (2015) edited volume. For instance, MacIntyre and Serroul (2015) adopted the idiodynamic method (Macintyre & Legatto, 2011) which focuses on the fluctuation of motivation "from moment-to-moment" (p. 152). In the idiodynamic

method, research participants review their engagements in language activities by watching recorded data, and rate the moment-by-moment level of motivation using a specially-designed computer software. As you can see in both RQM and idiodynamic method, approaches to the complexity of language learning motivation focus on characteristic changes in motivation (i.e., dynamics) and factors mediating the changes by retrospectively analysing phenomena.

Similarly, the Trajectory Equifinality Modelling (TEM: Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009), a qualitative research methodology that emerged in the field of cultural psychology, also looks at the moments where changes occur in human life trajectory, and explores social factors that affect those changes. Although this method is not originally designed for language learning motivation research, several researchers are currently attempting to introduce TEM to language learning psychology research (Aoyama & Yamamoto, 2019). In addition to those innovative methods, mixed-method approach which combines conventional quantitative methods and qualitative method such as interview in one study can also be one solution to overcome weaknesses of each approach.

To sum up, those research methods proposed for motivation research in the complexity paradigm focus on the characteristics of individual learners, rather than a whole group of learners, and each study requires tailor-made approaches to capture the dynamism around the systems each study focuses on. Thus, not only adopting those innovative approaches, but giving research designs a little twist would improve the quality of studies in language learning motivation research.

## **MOTIVATION IN CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING**

The theoretical background and definition of “language learning motivation” refer to the concepts reviewed in the previous chapter. Although a number of theoretical studies on language learning motivation have been performed all around the world, the outcomes of those studies do not always reflect what is going on in the classroom context, as motivation is bound to learning contexts (i.e., situated). As an implication for the future research on L2 motivation in the complex and dynamic systems, Ushioda (2015, p. 53) noted that “the research challenge is to describe interactions among internal contextual processes as well as contextual processes in the external environment”. Therefore, in the studies of language learning motivation among Japanese EFL learners, their motivational characteristics reflect factors that are unique to the Japanese social and cultural settings. Particularly, classroom-based research on language learning motivation in the events that are happening in everyday classroom teaching, and plays a key role in the improvement of language teaching practices.

For instance, Demotivation is one of the characteristics among learners of English in the Japanese school context. Keita Kikuchi’s series of studies (e.g., Kikuchi, 2013; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) identified several key demotivating factors emerged from the highly examination-oriented nature of English education in Japan, such as the overuse of grammar-translation method, quality and relevance of the textbook used in English classrooms. Also, teachers’ behaviour and teaching styles

were identified as the demotivating factors among Japanese EFL learners. Similarly, Sampson (2015) looked at the “emergence” of motivation in an English classroom. His study tries to understand how motivation emerges in a classroom from the complex and dynamic systems viewpoint.

Furthermore, a number of researchers have been investigating the relationships between learners’ motivation and second language proficiency using an experimental method. Take, for example, Saito, Dewaele, Abe, and In’nami’s (2018) study focused on the role of motivation and positive emotion in the attainment of L2 speech comprehensibility. As a result, their study concluded that learners who enjoy classroom language learning with a possession of strong ideal L2 self have advantages in the acquisition of L2 speech comprehensibility.

Drawing upon the outcomes of those studies conducted in classroom settings, it is obvious that learners with positive motivational profiles seem to perform well in learning a language. However, as Aoyama (2017) concluded in his systematic review of language learning motivation research conducted in the Japanese EFL context, the term “motivation” used in some studies does not necessarily mean what is defined earlier. In particular, the way “motivation” used in some studies conducted in the classroom-based context (e.g., ones focusing on high school classrooms) were found to be fairly vague in classroom-based studies. For instance, in the context of classroom language teaching, we tend to evaluate learners’ motivation with ambiguous words such as “strong” and “weak”.

Finally, when you think about your students’ motivation, how do you judge whether your students are “motivated” or not? Is it when the learners are “engaging in” activities happening in the classroom? Or perhaps is it when the learners are “enjoying” activities? For a better understanding of learners in classrooms, it is extremely important to have an idea of complexity situated in the language classroom. To provide some useful resources for understanding learners and their motivation, next section will focus on the complex nature of language learning motivation in classroom settings.

## **CLASSROOM LANGUAGE TEACHING AND COMPLEXITY**

As reviewed earlier, in the early age of language learning motivation research (the social-psychological period), much attention was paid to people’s attitude towards people who speak the target language, and pedagogical aspects of language learning motivation in the classroom context were not well discussed until 1990s, even though the importance of motivation in classroom language learning was recognised. Therefore, in the previous sections, I reviewed theoretical aspects of language learning motivation and introduced studies that have been done in recent years. This section will focus more on practical aspects of language learning motivation, particularly in the classroom language learning context.

Motivation has always been playing a significant role throughout the history of classroom language teaching, and perhaps what most language teachers want to know from researchers is “how a teacher can motivate learners in his/her classroom”. However, the biggest question is whether we

teachers can actually motivate learners. In her seminar talk, Ushioda (2016b) raised this question as a matter of ethical consideration, and discussed whether it is ethical for language teachers and motivation researchers to make learners motivated, even though the learners are satisfied with their current level of motivation and not wanting to be motivated more than that.

In relation to it, teachers sometimes blame themselves when their students are not as motivated as they expected. Or in the worst case, parents blame teachers for their children's lack of motivation. However, what we know from research is that "motivation comes from the learners not the teachers" (Ryan, 2018, p. 27). Of course, as a language teacher, we should try our best to set up conditions that can lead learners to be self-motivated by adopting motivational strategies (e.g., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013). However, at the same time, we should have a good understanding of language learners' motivation which is remarkably complex by its nature. Since every single learner has different motivational profiles and learning experience, we should carefully observe and understand motivational characteristics of learners in our own classrooms. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that what we want our students to become (particularly in terms of the level of motivation) is perhaps not what they want to become.

To give an example regarding the issues around language learning motivation in the Japanese EFL context, one possible reason for the learners' (what teachers and researchers call) low motivation is that they do not have clear images of how it looks like to be a "language user". On this point, Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) warned that it is hard for learners to become aware of their future L2 selves unless they have "tasted" experiences that are associated with target language use (e.g., have a chat with someone from another country in English). Thus, if a teacher has a good understanding of his/her students' level of motivation and why they are motivated/demotivated, the teacher can possibly let students "taste" the use of target language, and it will result in giving positive impacts on the students' future L2 selves.

Regarding ways to better observe and understand students' motivation in classroom settings, a small-scale teacher research project which involves interactive communications between teachers and their students in the classroom may be one possible approach. Since it provides opportunities for teacher-student interaction and cooperative environment, classroom-based research which pursues improvement of one's teaching such as action research and exploratory practice would offer rich insights both for teachers and students (Sampson, 2011). Furthermore, as evidenced by Sampson (2015), communications among teacher and learners in the classroom may trigger an emergence of motivation as an outcome of complexity.

Also, in response to the shortage of classroom-based teacher research on language learning motivation, Ushioda (2016a) proposed research topics that need to be investigated in the future. Some examples are cited below:

- Investigate how learners co-construct their motivation to think through problems and difficulties in collaborative learning tasks.

- Investigate the motivations of teacher and learner participants during ‘critical events’ in a lesson.
- Working with your learners, identify and analyse critical events in a lesson where issues of motivation have surfaced.

(Ushioda, 2016a, pp. 571–573)

Those research topics mentioned above are only a few of research ideas. However, as noted earlier in this paper, teachers’ classroom-based research activities will enrich insight into how motivation plays a role in classroom language teaching and learning.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

In this paper, I have reviewed both basic theoretical concepts of language learning motivation and its application in classroom language teaching, particularly from a complexity perspective. Through a long history of language learning motivation research, there have been a lot of changes in approaches and methods. On the contrary, it is true that still many parts of language learning motivation and psychology are underresearched, particularly in the classroom context (Ushioda, 2016a). Also, as reviewed in the last chapter, classroom-based investigations of language learning motivation are crucial in order to understand phenomena in classroom teaching and learning context. At the same time, teachers’ deep understanding of their learners’ motivation will help improve their classroom practice as a result.

On the whole, what I would like to emphasise in this article is that the nature of language learning motivation is considered to be complex and dynamic in recent approaches, and more investigations are required to unveil the roles of motivation in second or foreign language learning. To conclude, I hope that more classroom-based researchers will engage in, and contribute to language learning motivation research to understand the complex and dynamic motivational dynamics that have not yet been revealed.

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