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Pat Goodridge

University of Pennsylvania, pgoodr@sas.upenn.edu

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Second-language acquisition and motivation: A literature review

PAT GOODRIDGE

University of Pennsylvania
pgoodr@sas.upenn.edu

Advisor: Cain Elliott

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This literature review traces the development of motivation in second-language acquisition, a field that has evolved from basic associations between affective factors and second-language performance to nuanced approaches of how motivation is shaped by a learner's subjective cognition. With this review, we see that motivation's role has always been central to language learning, and the development of our understanding of this role has mirrored the development of our understanding of second-language acquisition's psychological and cognitive aspects. Such understanding contributes to many areas of second-language pedagogy, developmental psychology, and applied linguistics, all of which are relevant to our practical research goals of maximizing student effectiveness in second-language learning.

Introduction

A diverse and interdisciplinary area of work, the field studying motivation in second-language acquisition (SLA) combines research in psychology, pedagogy, and applied linguistics. In doing so, it forms new and ever more revealing findings about how and why students are motivated to study other languages. Though it is highly specialized, the field contributes greatly to a wider understanding of effective second-language education.¹ Such an understanding of second-language pedagogy can positively inform educational policy in a way that helps individuals and whole societies overcome very real language barriers in international dialogue. In this sense, furthering our understanding of second-language education, and specifically of the role of motivation within it, has the capacity to impact an entire generation of students academically, professionally, and interpersonally. Second-language learning is an issue of great significance for nearly all students of non-English speaking countries. This is due to the necessity of learning English and other *lingua francas* like it, for reasons both academic and professional. Additionally, the significance of English education globally may also explain why so much of the research completed in the field is by non-native speakers of English through experiments on non-English speaking populations. The most notable of these researchers are Zoltan Dörnyei (Hungary) and Ema Ushioda (Japan), who have emerged as figures central to the field's progress, and both of whom work out of British universities. As we will see, however, the development of the field goes much deeper than the work of only two scholars; it reaches into the annals of psychology and other of science's most fundamental fields. While approaches of those in the field are varied both in their methodology and theoretical positions, the general trend of motivation in SLA is as follows: the evolution of theories from the earliest, most basic discoveries of motivation's function in language learning, to a more discrete binary of two motivational systems (*integrativeness* and *instrumentation*), to the current integrated and nuanced concepts involving the learner's self-concept and subjective cognition (the *Ideal L2 Self* model). The latest research has also employed methodologies consistent with those used in related scientific fields like cognitive science in order to develop theories that can best represent empirical findings in a format familiar to the wider scientific community.

Review

The topic of SLA and motivation has become most interesting to researchers in the last three decades. The roots of that interest, however, go back much further, to the work of R.C. Gardner and W.E. Lambert of the University of Western Ontario. With their seminal 1959 work "Motivational variables in second-language acquisition," Gardner and Lambert asserted that motivation may be more important than aptitude in second-language performance.² This opposed prevailing opinions of the time that so-called "ability for languages" was the best measure of success in language learning. The study also introduced the relevance of "affective factors", the emotional components to the language learning experience that vary between students, such as anxiety and internal self-esteem. Beyond discussing motivation as it relates to aptitude, Gardner and Lambert went a step further by actually characterizing motivation in SLA; they created what they called the "Orientation Index", a model specifying two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. The integrative theory, based on studies of Canadians learning French, proposed the idea that learners develop language skills in order to better integrate with another group. Furthermore, Gardner and Lambert maintained that desire to integrate with such a group could be a strong motivating factor for students to achieve success in learning that group's language. According to them, "An individual acquiring a second language adopts certain behaviour patterns which are characteristic of another cultural group and his attitudes towards that group will at least partly determine his success in learning the new language."³ In this case, Canadians learning French to better relate to the majority French-speaking Québécoise were motivated according to the integrative approach. The instrumental approach, on the other hand, described students who pursued the pragmatic reasons for learning languages, such as increased work opportunities. For example, a knowledge of French in Quebec would likely help one to procure a job, get admittance to the region's best universities, or to other-

wise more smoothly interact with customers, classmates, or coworkers in a way that would externally benefit the learner. The difference between these two types of motivation represented the difference between intrinsic (natural drive) and extrinsic (material, reward-reinforced) motivation in language learning. Gardner and Lambert sought to compare the two; they gave Montreal students of French a battery of tests to determine verbal intelligence and motivation in conjunction with proficiency tests. They found that the strongest determinant of language-learning success was, in fact, the integrative type of motivation—a “willingness to be like valued members of the language community.”⁴

This work by Gardner and Lambert ushered in the social-psychological period in language learning, which lasted from the 50s to the 90s. The movement consisted of a flood research in the bilingual context of French Canada, both by Gardner and Lambert themselves as well as by Clément, who focused on phenomena like linguistic self-confidence in motivation.⁵ Clément’s work would influence much of the future work on affectual, psychological aspects of language study, such as “foreign language anxiety,” which is worry and nervousness experienced when learning or using a foreign language.⁶ The social-psychological period was followed by a shift toward looking at language from a cognitive perspective, a move that reflected the “cognitive revolution” taking place in psychology during the 90s. In contrast to a social-psychological model that emphasized the relationship of a learner to other cultures and linguistic groups, the idea advanced by scholars during this period was that motivation was more self-contained and subjective, relying on how one’s perception of one’s own abilities, limitations, and past performances influence motivation.⁷ A major example of a cognitive-based theory is Ushioda’s “attribution theory.” First described in the late 90s, the theory contends that the causal reasons a student attributes to his or her past performance play a critical role in her motivation in future endeavors within that area.⁸ In other words, a student’s motivation to study will skyrocket if they believe they are responsible for a good grade on a language test, whereas their motivation will not change if they believe it was due to luck or some other reason. Likewise in a negative situation; If a student believes they failed because of their own shortcomings, their motivation will plummet, whereas it will stay constant if they “attribute” their failure to, say, a bad teacher. After over a decade, the theory still persists, with the support of researchers like Weiner, who maintain that a student’s motivation is influenced by how much control that student feels she has over his or her progress.⁹

Following this cognitive shift came the so-called “process-oriented” period, which studied motivation as being dynamic, fluctuating within a semester, a year, and a lifetime.¹⁰ This period consisted mainly of two different models by Dörnyei in the late 90s and 2000s: the process model and the motivational self system. The process model tracks learner motivation chronologically, from the beginning goal stage, to intermediate learning stages, to a “reflection” stage. At each of these stages, motivation develops and takes on diverse forms as the learner gets feedback and his or her learning circumstances shift. The motivational self system focuses on a phenomenon Dörnyei calls the “ideal L2 self,” a person’s imagined ideal future self as a second-language speaker.¹¹ It is thought by Dörnyei and others that a desire to actualize this imagined self is a deep source of motivation for language learners. It remains unclear, however, whether ideal L2 self is a dominant, primary means of motivation, or whether it is simply an auxiliary to the already-established concepts of instrumentation and integrativeness. That is, it could be that pursuit of an ideal L2 self has less to do with a learner pursuing the fluent version of him or herself, and instead more to do with the learner’s desire to become the L2 self that has an ideal career or that is perfectly integrated into another cultural group. It seems that this is a likely scenario, though further research is needed to determine the scope of the ideal L2 self as a motivational mechanism.

Advancing out of this idea of ideal L2 self, future perspectives will, in the words of Ushioda, “seek to analyse L2 motivation with reference to a person’s motivational self-systems and future self-representations as a whole, rather than just as an L2 learner.”¹² That is, future research will assess learners holistically and consider what types of non-linguistic, psychological factors may affect their language acquisition. In turn, motivation to learn languages will be considered as a single piece of a student’s larger system of life motivations, including those motivations for personal growth. This will provide new understanding as to how language learning relates to other forms of motiva-

tion within a single learner. Other possible avenues for future research involve teacher motivation and teacher-student interface.¹³ The principal reason for interest in these areas is evidence showing that teacher performance, as a product of a teacher's motivation, can have a profound effect on student motivation and, consequently, on student success.¹⁴ Such an impact on student outcomes is of great concern to language educators and to the administrators who determine language policy in schools. Other researchers have been interested in affective factors of personality type, such as those found on the introversion-extroversion spectrum,¹⁵ that may be influencing motivation by shaping a learner's temperament and approach to social interaction in the classroom, to intercultural education, and to learning more generally. Adding these elements of teaching and personality to the field adds layers of complexity, but also layers of accurate variability that will help form a more precise portrait of second-language motivation in the future.

Endnotes

- ¹ Christopher Hastings, "Teacher Motivation: The Next Step in L2 Motivation Research," *TNTESOL Journal* 2012, 2012.
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- ⁴ Gardner and Lambert, "Motivational Variables in Second-language Acquisition," 274
- ⁵ Robert C. Gardner and Peter D. Macintyre, "On the Measurement of Affective Variables in Second Language Learning," *Language Learning* 43, no. 2 (1993): , doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1992.tb00714.x.
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- ⁹ Bernard Weiner, "The Development of an Attribution-Based Theory of Motivation: A History of Ideas," *Educational Psychologist* 45, no. 1 (2010):, doi:10.1080/00461520903433596.
- ¹⁰ Zoltán Dörnyei, "Motivation in action: Towards a process-oriented conceptualisation of student motivation," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 70, no. 4 (2000): , doi: 10.1348/000709900158281.
- ¹¹ Ema Ushioda, "Motivation: L2 Learning as a Special Case?," 65
- ¹² Ema Ushioda, "Motivation: L2 Learning as a Special Case?," 68
- ¹³ Christopher Hastings, "Teacher Motivation: The Next Step in L2 Motivation Research," *TNTESOL Journal* 2012, 2012.
- ¹⁴ Christopher Hastings, "Teacher Motivation: The Next Step in L2 Motivation Research," *TNTESOL Journal* 2012, 2012.
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