

# **Go with the flow! Tracing language learning motivation research to Directed Motivational Currents**

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## **Abstract**

Just prior to the start of the new millennium, theories about second language learning motivation began to move away from the view that motivation is more or less a trait that learners possess and toward the view that understanding the language learning experience requires seeing that experience as being a fundamentally dynamic process. Learners are influenced by a wide range of factors, some of which are external while others are internal, and it is mainly these internal factors that researchers have come to examine in earnest. Drawing heavily from theories and research rooted deep in educational and social psychology, language learning motivation researchers like Dörnyei have, over the past two decades, attempted to increase their understanding of language learners and their motivation by focusing on them as individuals replete with identities, beliefs, goals, and desires. This paper will begin by presenting a brief overview of the continuing shift in language learning motivation theories before addressing the most recent construct that involves the role of Directed Motivational Currents and learner vision, as proposed and explicated by Dörnyei and others.

## **Language learning motivation research: The early years**

Motivation as a general construct is inherently difficult to research, largely because of its multidimensional and highly abstract nature (Dörnyei, 1994, 2001), but also due to it being a phenomenon typically both unobservable and unconscious on the part of learners (McGroarty,

1996). This may help to explain why it took so long for language learning motivation to become the focus of concerted and rigorous second language acquisition research. Although one may look as far back as Gardner and Lambert's 1959 seminal work on language learning motivation, which attempted to illuminate the potential variables in such motivation, it was not until the publication of their 1972 book that second language (L2) researchers and practitioners began to realize the importance of motivation in learning and started to ponder ways by which they themselves could research motivation and, when applicable, employ the fruits of such learning to their own teaching situations.

In their early and subsequent publications, Gardner and Lambert set the stage for how L2 motivation would be researched and viewed for decades to come by their proposing that an individual's motivation to learn an L2 is largely determined by his attitude toward either the target language group or foreigners (i.e., speakers of other languages) in general, or by his orientation with regard to the task of learning. Learner attitudes within the context of language learning therefore became crucial elements to be studied with regard to second language learning motivation. Due to space constraints, little more will be said about learner attitudes, beliefs, and values here, but suffice it to say that these various factors were thought to have a major impact on language learning motivation (Gardner, 1985), with research results bearing this out (see Gardner, 1985; Spolsky, 1989).

In their 1972 book, Gardner and Lambert proposed a dichotomy of language learning motivation orientations, namely, the orientations of integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is defined as the motivation of a learner to enter a target language culture in order to communicate and interact with its native speakers. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, is understood as motivation associated with a desire to learn another language for practical or pragmatic reasons, such as to be able to conduct business or to secure a TOEIC score high enough to warrant a pay raise or job promotion.

Over the years, Gardner, Lambert, and others conducted a considerable amount of research that analyzed motivation via this integrative/

instrumental motivation orientation dichotomy in what is termed the socio-educational model of motivation, and as a result much informative data was collected about learner motivation. In fact, my own doctoral dissertation, researched and completed in the early 2000s, relied heavily on this prevalent model of L2 motivation, and it revealed fascinating insights into Japanese high school students' motivation to study English (Rubrecht, 2004). In general, the long-used integrative/instrumental motivation orientation dichotomy went some distance in explaining what motivated learners engaged in second or foreign language studies.

### **Motivation research in the 1990s**

Throughout the 1990s, motivation research continued to rely heavily upon the dichotomy, mainly because there were few competing theories that could adequately challenge (i.e., replace) the socio-educational model that Gardner and colleagues proposed. During this period researchers began to explore — first tentatively than concertedly — the educational and social psychology literature and its various cognitive (i.e., learner-centered) theories (e.g., attribution theory, self-determination theory). The reason for this was essentially twofold. First, it was thought that Gardner's model, while useful and empirically validated, was nevertheless inadequate to fully explain the intricacies of learner motivation. For instance, the model was initially constructed in the officially bilingual French and English Canadian context. One glance reveals that the model immediately lacks face validity when taken out of such a context, such as when it is applied to English as a foreign language (EFL) situations (e.g., native Japanese speakers learning English in Japan) as opposed to English as a second language (ESL) ones, which aptly describes the Canadian situation. Second, serious concerns were raised that second language acquisition research was not taking advantage of psychological theories that, at least on the surface, appeared to be both pertinent and applicable to explain second language learner motivation (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Language acquisition

researchers therefore began to openly question the socio-educational model's efficacy and ability to explain second language learning motivation in various scenarios and contexts. They wondered if the entire specialized field of language learning motivation research itself could be bolstered if the theories developed to explain such motivation were to include elements from the educational and social psychology literature that include the mental processes *within* learners that influence them and hence possibly produce, stimulate, diminish, or extinguish their motivation to learn a second or foreign language.

This is not to say that L2 motivation researchers, in voicing their frustration with the socio-educational model of motivation and their looking into tangential areas of education and social psychology research, were ready to throw the baby out with the bathwater. There was general consensus that even if motivation were determined to be a cognitive activity, calls for the reconceptualization of L2 motivation must continue to take into account sociocultural factors (Rueda & Dembo, 1995), as such factors had been found to be influencing agents in learners' cognition, behavior, and achievement to a significant — and measurable — degree. Nevertheless, researchers were overall becoming less concerned about researching learners' social contexts and learner interactions and more conscious of the need to focus upon the processes occurring within the learners themselves.

By way of example, one major area that researchers borrowed heavily from in the educational and social psychology arena is that of goal theory, particularly that of goal attainment. Second language acquisition researchers looked to goal theory because it blends well internal cognitive and external (and therefore context-dependent) sociocultural elements (see Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Ford & Nichols, 1991; Locke & Latham, 1990; Schunk, 1991, for examples of goal-related literature often cited at this time). This application of theories and research from other fields was gradual at first but over time steadily increased. Many researchers, both doctoral candidates and well-established researchers alike, began to take to the task of applying concepts generated from goal theory research to their understanding of L2 motivation and their

own research designs. So marked was this sea change in thinking that even Gardner (2001) was forced to “clarify” that the variable heretofore called “motivation” in second language acquisition circles must necessarily comprise three elements, namely, *effort* (to learn a language), *desire* (to achieve a goal), and positive *affect* (enjoyment in learning the language), and that the motivation orientations of integrative and instrumental motivation are simply classes of reasons — with end goals — for learning another language. In effect, Gardner was striving to keep his long-lived model relevant by stating that a motivation “orientation” was just another way of stating what the “goal” of the learner was.

Despite the enormous impact of the socio-educational model of motivation and the later attempts to better pin down the integrative and instrumental motivation orientations by viewing them through the various lenses abundant in the fields of educational and social psychology, the model was nevertheless viewed as still fundamentally inadequate, or at least, it was recognized that a new lens had yet to be forthcoming to better view and therefore better explain learner motivation. The socio-educational model was too static in nature, as it fundamentally only categorized and described learners while doing little to explain the dynamic motivational forces that, for instance, drive a learner to regularly stay up past midnight studying irregular verb tenses so that he may understand and communicate in the target language better or to travel halfway around the world on an extremely tight budget in order to practice speaking the language with native speakers, even if only for a short time. It became ever more imperative to open up and explore new research avenues. One of the lead researchers in second language learning motivation, Zoltán Dörnyei, took up that challenge.

Early in 1990s, researchers like Crookes and Schmidt (1991) and Ford (1992) had hinted that motivation must necessarily be more than a static concept because it is an internal psychological phenomenon, not just one influenced by factors found in an individual's external environment. Others agreed. By the close of the millennium, the Process Model of L2 Motivation (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998) had been developed in

response to the need of addressing numerous motivation model shortcomings, not least of which were that the models then in favor/under scrutiny (a) did not examine or explain why learners choose certain courses of action, (b) ignored or downplayed the importance of the motivation extant behind the execution of goal-directed behavior, and (c) failed to consider motivation as being dynamic and continuously changing over time.

While certainly progressive and a step in the right direction, as it attempted to address all of these issues, the Process Model of L2 Motivation did not quite spark a revolution in thinking about L2 motivation. Nevertheless, it gave Dörnyei and colleagues additional insight into what would be required to more finely tune the components needed to explain second and foreign language motivation. It would be almost another decade before the next remarkable step in L2 motivation theory advancement was to occur.

## **The L2 Motivational Self System**

In the early years of the 2000s, Dörnyei, unsatisfied with the Process Model of L2 Motivation but energized by the new and exciting prospects it provided, began anew to reconceptualize L2 motivation. In collaboration with other leading researchers, he came to develop the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), which sought to incorporate those heretofore missing temporal elements into a motivation model while continuing to address the situational and contextual factors faced by learners as they engage in the language learning process.

The L2 Motivational Self System has three components:

1. The ideal L2 self. This is the learner's ideal self with respect to the person the learner wishes to become as an L2 user.
2. The ought-to L2 self. This component concerns the attributes the learner believes should be possessed to meet expectations (e.g., from family, from teachers) and to avoid possible negative

outcomes.

3. The L2 learning experience. Put simply, this component encompasses the learning environment and other situational factors.

The model was initially presented (Dörnyei, 2005) and then later expounded upon in more detail (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Presenting the model in this rolling fashion allowed the model first to be pondered, then examined, and then tested. Over the years the model has been validated multiple times by various methods, including through the use of structural equation models, correlational analyses, and qualitative methods, “with the ideal L2 self, in particular, seen as a strong predictor of various criterion measures related to language learning,” as it has been found to play “a substantive role in determining motivated behavior” (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013, p. 439). The model has also been found to be highly applicable to individual learner cases (see Rubrecht & Ishikawa, 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

This is not to say that the model was without criticism (cf. Rubrecht & Ishikawa, 2015). Indeed, Dörnyei himself was not above believing that this newest model was the last say in L2 motivational theory. In fact, although the L2 Motivational Self System showed promise in its attempt to add a temporal dimension to motivation, others were calling for and developing temporally inclusive models (cf. Rubrecht, 2007). Ultimately, Dörnyei’s model was in danger of falling into a trap similar to that of Gardner’s socio-educational model, that is, though it included a temporal element via the ideal L2 self component, which explains that a (motivated) learner will attempt to lessen the gap between their current L2 ability self and their future imagined L2 ability self by their engaging in L2 study and practice, it nonetheless failed to address motivational flux in language learners. Stated differently, while it was deemed useful, the model did not attempt the difficult task of explaining learner motivation *in the moment* that motivation is experienced. Being able to understand what is happening when motivation is present — and, more importantly, how (ideally) to induce such moments in language learners — is of great concern to many in the

language teaching and learning field.

## Directed Motivational Currents

It would only be a few short years after producing the L2 Motivational Self System before Dörnyei and colleagues announced a novel psychological construct (Dörnyei, Muir, & Ibrahim, 2014; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013), the key aspects of which are well established in major motivational theories found in social psychology. What they developed was not a replacement of the L2 Motivational Self System, as it is not a full-fledged motivational theory in its own right, but rather, it is a conceptual framework that attempts to depict and explain unique periods of intense motivational involvement by learners pursuing a highly valued goal or personal vision. This new construct, called a Directional Motivational Current (DMC), shows promise as it depicts motivation as (necessarily) temporal in nature, that is, that it can wax and wane and be influenced by both internal and external forces. More importantly for language instructors, it appears to have the potential to be applicable in L2 learning contexts (e.g., in the language classroom) to energize learners and help them to perform beyond expectations across both short- and long-term timescales.

Fundamentally, a DMC is an intense motivational drive. One might occur when a variety of factors converge together in a person or a group of people and generate a strong momentum that propels that individual or group toward a specific significant goal. This momentum is “directed” because it occurs along a set pathway. Dörnyei and colleagues decided to call this phenomenon a “directed motivational current” because of its similarity to major world ocean currents (e.g., the Gulf Stream) because, once inside the current, the “rider” will be able to go with the flow of the current and travel long (and in some cases nearly unimaginable) distances because he is carried along by a formidable flow of energy.

By way of example, let us look at two common situations that are often provided to illustrate such directed goals and pathways.



## Example 1:

*An overweight person constantly expresses a desire to lose weight for health reasons, but his job requires him to sit all day long in front of a computer screen, which is not conducive to the living of a healthy lifestyle. He provides excuses to his friends and family for why he does not start getting in shape. Then, one day, something changes with the man. His friends and family come to find out that he has gotten a membership at a local gym. They see that he has also significantly changed his eating habits. He foregoes his usual deep-fried fare and sweet deserts and opts instead to eat salads for lunch and fruit for dessert. No one hears him complain about his new culinary fare. Within a matter of months, he loses 25 pounds, has a vastly improved mood, and looks fitter and healthier than he has in years.*

## Example 2:

*A class of students has been assigned a semester-long project by their teacher. The students are divided into groups and must complete the project by working together. One major requirement for the project is that their final product must be inspected and judged by the mayor of the city, as the best project will be put on display for a month at city hall. All the students' friends and family members are expected to attend the project judging ceremony. One group of students works incredibly hard on the project, much more than any of the other groups, as they put in after-school hours working together to complete their project that, they hope, will surpass all the rival projects in the competition.*

Both of the above examples illustrate strong DMCs. The man in the first example and the students in the second example have determined their own respective goals that they want to reach (in the former it is to lose weight, while in the latter it is to win the competition). The normally difficult or troublesome aspects involved with reaching their respective goals are lessened or disappear entirely as they “ride” their

way to goal completion.

When considering DMCs in the realm of institutional language learning, imagine that a group of students is making plans to study abroad for a month. The more they prepare for the trip, the more their curiosity and fascination about the target language and culture increases, so much so that they spend a great deal of time in preparation for the trip. They speak to each other in the target language — both in and out of their language classes — and they gather information about the food, landscape, and unique cultural treasures of the places that they plan to visit. In this way, the students become engrossed to the point where the trip has become a central part of their lives, long before they depart.

As can be seen from the above-mentioned examples, a DMC is not simply a category like integrative or instrumental motivation. Neither can a DMC simply be labeled “high motivation,” for such a label fails to take into account the actions, feelings, and beliefs, not to mention the thought and learning processes, of the people involved. Rather, it is an intensive burst of motivational energy that is relatively short-term in duration. Depending on the individual and the situation, a DMC can last for weeks, such as in the case of a class project, or even months, which is the time typically required for a semester-long language course. Objectively, such time spans as weeks or months may be thought of as long-term, but in the grand scheme, because there is a specific pathway that leads to a clearly defined goal over what may be thought of as a determined length of time, the length of a DMC is better described of as being short-term. Additionally, while a DMC does not replace motivation that might, for example, be exhibited by an earnest or diligent student, being highly personal, well structured, and energizing beyond normal levels of motivation, a DMC can nevertheless stimulate a learner or group over and above the steady motivation that they normally exhibit and propel them toward their own language learning goal.

In the tradition of looking at and applying theories, concepts, and ideas already extant in other disciplines, Dörnyei and colleagues looked

to Csikszentmihalyi's explanations on "flow" and say that in many ways a DMC, because it is a state of experience, can be likened to flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1988), flow is the experience of peak activity engagement, and in daily parlance it is often referred to as being "in the zone." When "in the zone," a person will find himself in an intense state of focused productivity. A person in this state does not feel the drain or stress of the task at hand, but rather, there is something about the task or the background conditions to doing the task that seems to provide a boost of energy to the person engaged in that task. Additionally, due to being incredibly focused during such times, people often end up doing much more than they believed was possible at the outset.

DMCs have four main dimensions to them: (1) goal/vision-orientedness, (2) a triggering factor coupled with a launch, (3) a facilitative structure, and (4) positive emotionality. These dimensions are explained in detail elsewhere (see Dörnyei, Muir, & Ibrahim, 2014; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013), but suffice it to say that a DMC:

- is directional, as there is a salient purpose or objective that provides cohesion to learners' efforts and focuses their energy,
- has a trigger that initiates learners' energy (e.g., taking advantage of a long-awaited opportunity, discovering a piece of missing information),
- requires behavioral routines (to provide a "motivational autopilot") and progress checks (i.e., the creation of subgoals and the subsequent evaluation of the completion and the performance of completion of said subgoals via affirmative feedback), as the current is strengthened in an ongoing manner and its flow is maintained via salient structured properties, and
- provides a pleasurable experience that delivers a unique sense of authenticity, accomplishment, connectedness, or the like that cannot normally be experienced by other means.

Let us briefly revisit the two example situations presented

previously. The man in Example 1 may not necessarily find eating salads daily a joyful experience as he attempts to lose weight and become healthier. Similarly, the students in Example 2 may experience some amount of anxiety due to interpersonal incompatibilities as they work with each other to complete their project, which they all wish will be the best possible since creating a substandard final project will no doubt be disappointing (in their eyes) to their friends and family. Such activities (i.e., eating unfulfilling food and enduring clashes of opinion while engaging in a stress-inducing project) are not enjoyable acts in their own right, yet because those involved in the above examples possess a highly valued end goal, they are taken along a DMC pathway and thus perceive those activities to be enjoyable, or at least, some amount of pleasure can be derived from them when normally this would not be the case. In some way, it is as though the overall passion for reaching that longed-for end goal permeates all of the steps — even the traditionally less enjoyable ones — that are required to reach that end goal.

It is admitted that genuine DMCs are few and far between. Nevertheless, it is imperative to understand them because it is thought that DMCs may in fact be long-term motivation writ small. That is, the principles that are at work that see individuals strive to reach a goal over longer time spans are speculated to also be active when learners are attempting to reach their short-term goals. What can be seen from examining DMCs are thus the optimal forms of long-term motivational behaviors in general, and here in the closing years of the second decade of the new millennium language learning researchers are exploring in earnest the insights gained from studying DMCs, as they may be applicable to furthering their understanding of language learning motivation.

On a final note, a discussion of the L2 Motivational Self System and DMCs would be incomplete were a word or two not said about the concept of “vision” and the associated imagery involved with the perceived future self. The ideal L2 self, as a component within the L2 Motivational Self System, requires learners to generate mental imagery of their imagined future selves. Vision is defined in this and other similar cases

as “a mental representation that occurs without the need for external sensory input” (Stopa, 2009, p. 1). Because “vision is one of the highest-order motivational constructs” (Dörnyei, 2014, p. 15), the potential import of research into vision and its connection to L2 learner motivation is considerable, especially given its applicability to language learning contexts. For instance, imagery skills, being potentially trainable (see Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), could be taught to and harnessed by learners, the result being that learners generate personal visions complete with vivid imagery so that they may sustain their motivation and see to it that that vision is realized (i.e., to see that vision become reality) as they go through the language learning process. As language motivation researchers continue to explore the cognitive mechanisms at work behind learner vision, language practitioners look to the future in anticipation of the ways in which the fruits of that research will be applied in second language learning classroom settings.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper has attempted to trace the history of language learning motivation primarily over the past two decades and has briefly presented the recent theories L2 motivation researchers have proposed that have the potential to more accurately explain how language learners experience motivation over both short- and long-term spans of time. As researchers and language practitioners are all too aware, the task of increasing and refining our understanding of language learning motivation is never complete. The progress made to date regarding research in this area should only further our resolve to study more the ways in which individuals approach their language learning endeavors, the learning environments in which these individuals find themselves, and the resultant cognitive conditions that arise as a result of the language learning process.

At this point, with the concept of DMCs being one focus in contemporary language learning motivation research, what are some possible questions to ask and consider about DMCs? The first and arguably

most important one is can a person actively and knowingly create a DMC, either for himself or for others (e.g., a teacher for a student or a student for himself)? By way of example, we can state at present that projects are *potentially* facilitative to DMC construction, but we realize that not all projects facilitate the emergence of DMCs in all people in all cases, either because there is something about that project (e.g., a task component or project requirement) that lies beyond what an individual is willing to do or cope with or there is something about the individual that blocks or fails to facilitate the personalization of the project and its associated tasks. No matter how beneficial or conducive a project may be to furthering a person's knowledge or building someone's language skills, if there is no link that connects an individual to the project, then a DMC will fail to materialize.

Relatedly, additional links must exist and be connected to the individual. First, for instance, a learner must be cognizant of the connection between the project and the end goal. By way of example, suppose a class project requires that L2 students research amusement park roller coasters by visiting different such parks and riding all of the roller coasters each park has. While it might be speculated that a number of L2 students (particularly those of younger ages) would find this project thrilling and enjoyable to participate in, many if not all of the students might question how this project is related to the end goal of the class, which we shall suppose in this example is for the students to have demonstrated a certain level of proficiency in one or more target language skill areas. Because roller coaster rides and amusement parks are not a phenomenon unique to one country or region and because they have very little implicit or explicit connection to L2 studies, the students engaged in the project would be extremely hard pressed to discern the link between the project and its stated end goal. Lacking a discernable link here would mean the project would not be conducive to — and indeed could possibly block — DMC creation.

Similarly, the second link that would be required is the one that exists between the end goal and the real world. Much like the (hopefully fictitious) roller coaster ride project example above, if learners

cannot grasp the reasoning behind why they are being required to engage in a project and its ultimate connection to the target language or L2 culture (i.e., the real-world application of what they are learning), then a DMC will likely not come about. Thus, DMCs will not always be generated automatically.

This is not to say that poorly planned projects are the only reason why DMCs would not be created, though they certainly stand large as one major reason. There are multiple possible factors that could potentially block the formation of a DMC. One such factor is related to individual differences and personal interests. Not all students enrolled in an L2 course will necessarily be taking the class because they desire to improve their target language skills and expand their knowledge of the target language culture. They may simply be taking the class in order to get class credit (a not uncommon scenario at both pre-tertiary and tertiary levels of education). While it is conceivable that a student who falls into this category may come to find joy and pleasure in the act of L2 learning and hence come to experience a DMC at some point, what is more likely is that initial disinterest in the course topic, which, let's suppose, originates from the personal preferences of the student, will persist when a project is assigned and continue until the project is completed. To such a student, the project is little more than a task to complete for class credit to be gained and is therefore not viewed globally as a means for the student to enrich himself or broaden his horizons as far as the target language and culture are concerned.

Another such factor involves group work. Even students motivated to engage in L2 learning may experience anxiety and evince general aversion when required to engage with others in project completion, which in turn could either block or extinguish a DMC. Researchers have long been interested in increasing their understanding of groups, group cohesion, and group dynamics (Beebe & Masterson, 1982; Evans & Dion, 1991; Forsyth, 1990; Hogg, 1996; Shaw, 1981; Silver & Bufanio, 1996; Weldon & Weingart, 1993; Witte & Davis, 1996), with some specifically examining group dynamics in foreign language teaching and learning settings (e.g., Cooper & Robinson, 2000;

Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997, 1999; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Kohn & Vajda, 1975; Little & Madigan, 1997; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Naughton, 2006). Should a student find himself a member of a group that does not work together cohesively (e.g., group members find themselves constantly arguing over how to proceed with a course of action, group members do not readily come to a consensus regarding project task allocation), that student may come to view the project as taxing and possibly not worth the effort instead of finding it instructive or enriching, even if it may be somewhat challenging.

What must finally be proposed are research studies conducted in order to gather data evidence, either from classroom-based sources or elsewhere, so that we can come to understand the ways in which DMCs occur naturally and how to facilitate them in classroom settings. Some such studies have already been conducted, with promising results (cf. Muir, 2016), but more are needed if we are to answer questions about DMCs, such as how widely they are experienced, the frequency and extent to which they come about with and without intervention from others, and how the examination of DMCs can lead L2 motivation researchers on to the next chapter of the language learning motivation story.

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