

## Runnin' on Empty: A Short Critique of Motivation Theories

ランニング・オン・エンプティ  
— 動機説批評 —

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**Abstract:** The study of motivation in the field of second language acquisition, now in its sixth decade, has focused on distinctions between two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. This has become a fixed star in the English education cosmos, as accepted as any other longstanding theory. Without minimizing the labor of so many who shaped the direction of this research, I believe it is important to step away from this body of literature and consider its relevance, since research on motivation seems to have been accepted uncritically. Since it is largely “unquantifiable,” teachers are left with either belief or disbelief, and this, I feel, is counterproductive and may in fact add stresses to both teachers and English education programs. Here, I will briefly consider the conclusions from some studies on motivation.

**Keywords:** intrinsic, extrinsic, universal grammar, a theory, a hypothesis

**要約:** 第2言語習得の分野において、動機が研究されるようになって50余年になるが、研究の焦点はおもに、内因性の動機と外因性の動機の違いに当てられてきた。これは英語教育界の恒星のように、長年広く受け入れられてきた理論の一つである。この方面の研究に注がれた努力を軽んじるわけではないが、動機の研究が無批判に受け入れられてきた事実を考慮し、筆者はここでこの研究関連の多くの文献から距離を置き、その妥当性を見直すべきであると考え。動機は定量化できないものであるから、教師は半信半疑のままである。これは逆効果であるし、教師にとっても英語教育のプログラムにとってもストレスを増やす要因となっていると考えられる。本稿では、いくつかの動機に関する研究の結論について考察する。

**キーワード:** 内因性の、外因性の、普遍文法、学説、仮説

### Introduction

Today English education is overloaded with a plethora of theories for learning, indeed a full smorgasbord. Most are from the United States, where certain universities specialize in churning them out. America culture (and I speak as an American) prides itself on having a three-point prescription for every challenge.

These theories ebb and flow, as if following a secret universal pattern, from simple to more complicated and back again to simplicity. They lend support to Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) paradigm that “magic must come before critical

thinking.” Yet, many remain in the realm of magic (here meaning faith). Some resemble American theologies (if you do this, certainly this will happen). Others are recipes, “inputting” measures of this and that during a ninety-minute class and viola: “education.” Still others carry the weight of harsh IMF ideologies: “pain now, prosperity later.” We wonder where to draw the line, however, when certain theories assure us that if we use the “Red Card” to dismiss off-task students from the room, classroom learning will increase by leaps and bounds (the “Yellow Card,” by the way, is a “caution.”) Furthermore, each hypothesis is so laden with jargon that it must require a great deal of effort for those from opposing hypotheses to communicate with each other.

Most disconcerting is how these theories have taken the force of dogma, as standards for excellence in education, despite the fact that few, if any, are true in any real sense. Japan has been a testing ground for almost every theory on the market. Fortunately, Japan’s own cultural sensibilities have been resistant to the assaults of imported ideologically driven educational theories.

Here I will focus on just one theory of motivation, but I believe my comments could apply equally to many theories that have come arisen over the past forty years. Some things indeed can be quantified, but the mystery of human interaction in a classroom setting has remained illusive, despite sincere attempts to understand this dynamic. Theories, on some level, are useful, since most spring from the impulse to understand. None, however, is an answer in any absolute sense. The theory of motivation, I should say, is both compelling and humane. It is therefore easier to discuss. Other, more popular theories are not so compelling and not so humane. I admit my presentation of the research here is selective, but I hope it is by and large representative.

## **Research overview**

The research on motivation in second language acquisition has a long and venerable history. It began in 1959 when Robert Gardner and W. Lambert coauthored their first study of learners in a Montreal French immersion program; they identified a correlation between attitude and those who successfully completed the program. Beginning with this study, researchers have defined two types of motivation: “intrinsic” and “extrinsic,” with a general consensus that intrinsic motivation is the superior in language learning.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) used a questionnaire to measure two areas of motivation: integrative (intrinsic) and instrumental (extrinsic). The intrinsically motivated, they found, wanted to learn French, their target language, in order to help understand the French people and culture better, to enable them to make friends among French-speaking people, to think and behave the way the French people do, or to meet and converse with more interesting and varied people. The extrinsically motivated, on the other hand, wanted to learn French to get a better job, to acquire social recognition, to show others they were "educated," or to fulfill a university requirement for graduation. Gardner and Lambert (1972a) went on to write:

[T]he typical student of foreign languages in North America will profit more if he is helped to develop an integrative outlook toward the group whose language is being offered. For him, an instrumental approach has little significance and little motive force.

Edward Deci (1975), who expanded Gardner and Lambert's categories, described intrinsically motivated people as having no desire for external rewards, but that the activity of learning was, in itself, the reward. The intrinsically motivated are reaching for inner rewards: satisfaction in one's own competence, a personal sense of accomplishment and enrichment. The extrinsically motivated, by contrast, are looking for external rewards, in the form of avoidance of criticism and poor grades, or career aims and financial gain.

Intrinsic motivation, because it is seen as superior, has inspired researchers to offer strategies to cultivate it. Piaget (1985) wrote that people simply enjoy a challenge. Learning a language should be presented as working out a giant crossword puzzle; others say it is a ladder to attain more sophisticated thought patterns or a broader consciousness; still others see in language education a moral elevation, of empathetically connecting with others internationally. Ideally, the target language can be broken down into smaller pieces for students to master one "chunk" at a time, before moving on to the next piece. Eventually, the student will begin to perceive the "whole" and therefore attain a deeper satisfaction in having mastered it. If the challenge does not seem too daunting, according to Krashen (1985), people will "go after" it in an attempt to put the pieces together. H. Douglas Brown (1991) wrote in support of these studies: "[T]he key principle of intrinsic motivation is its power to tap into the learner's natural inquisitiveness and then captivate the learner in a process of a

confidence building, ego-enhancing, quest for competence in some domain of knowledge or skill."

Some researchers have seen the teacher as the focal point for infusing intrinsic motivation. Studies have shown student attitudes toward their teachers to either increase or decrease the mastery of certain language skills. Stevick (1976), in his book *Memory, Meaning, and Method*, found that students with a more positive attitude toward their teachers were more willing to accept them as an authoritative resource for information. These students were more "interested" in the lesson; they volunteered more frequently in class and provided more correct answers. Others found that a positive attitude toward the teacher and native speakers of the target language increased a language learner's capacity. In America, Oller, Hudson, and Liu (1977) studied educated Chinese speaking EFL students and concluded that students who rated Americans as "helpful, sincere, kind, reasonable, and friendly" did better on a Cloze English test. Naimon, Frohlin, Stern, and Todesco (1978) reported that "general attitude" was the best way to predict if a student would be a successful language learner. The "general attitude" they spoke of included "how the student perceives his individual situation and his general attitude toward learning the language in the particular environment."

My summary was only meant to highlight a few important studies that have framed the direction of the research. Are the studies useful, and if so, in what way?

### **Theorizing the un-measurable**

Gardner and Lambert gave a definition of intrinsic motivation that can "imply" an extrinsic gain of some sort. For example, a learner desiring to meet people whose native language is the target language is singled out as more intrinsic than extrinsic. Understanding French, the French people, and the French way of thinking may have an extrinsic motivation in Canada (where the studies took place), where competency in the two national languages is important for government bureaucratic and service sector jobs. Granted, first-year students may not begin with a financial motivation, but this can change quickly once they consider finding a job as graduation draws near. At some point in their training, then, Dr. Jekyll can become Mr. Hyde in the student's motivational center. Yet, the intensity of the motivation may not change, only their goals have either matured or become corrupted, depending on one's perspective.

Second, the research tends to have a one-dimensional vision of human psychology. While everyone can readily recognize the extremes of intrinsic and extrinsic, say between Mother Theresa and Donald Trump, judging everyone based on one of the two becomes problematic. Motivation toward any endeavor is mixed, simply because of the vagaries of human consciousness. Most have an abundance of motives, and perhaps only the most dogmatic among us are convinced of the absolute purity of their motives (though they be unable to convince anyone else!). Since mutability characterizes consciousness, a language student on a written questionnaire may specify their motives as intrinsic, while in reality harbor an assortment of motives that are difficult for him or her to articulate. We think of military or religious service as the domain of the intrinsically motivated--devotion to country or God--but we cannot dissect the extrinsic benefits of an early pension or a promotion in the administrative hierarchy from a life of selfless service. This is true of any endeavor, where financial rewards or status tempt the person's "lower" nature.

This division (intrinsic and extrinsic) is so thoroughly North American that it is natural to see it as universal. Sunday Schools, where the New Testament is taught, instruct that the Greek word for "love," *agape*, is superior to all other forms of love; it inspires the highest virtues, of giving oneself for another; it seeks no reward, since the reward is giving. *Philio*, "brotherly love," is friendship based on mutual esteem and respect. Both *agape* and *philio* are love's positive forces, in contrast to *eros*, "carnal love," the negative motive force from the lower nature. Eros is self-centered, callous, blind, caring only for personal satisfaction. Is not the motivation theory another metaphor of the good angel on one shoulder and the bad angel on the other?

Should extrinsic motivation be devalued, if the divisions between intrinsic and extrinsic are indeed mutually exclusive? The most gifted in any field may covet the Olympic Gold Medal, the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize, or the Academy Award for recognition of excellence. Even America's space program, which succeeded in sending a man to the moon, appeared to stem from purely extrinsic national chest thumping. The Greeks called this *thymos*, translated as "pride," "vanity," or "the competitive drive." For every intrinsic saint, an Albert Einstein or a Ludwig Wittgenstein, ten thousand seem to strive for the garland. On the surface extrinsic seems a better indicator of eventual success in reaching a goal.

Next, research based on questionnaires can be bent to almost any conclusion. In his 1984 study of Spanish speaking children learning English in the United States, M. Strong found the children became more motivated after initial successes. They were

eager to learn more because they were happy with their accomplishments, for which they received rewards in praise and better grades. Children who did not feel successful, on the other hand, became less motivated. Depending on the definition of “intrinsic” and “extrinsic,” researchers can use these conclusions to either support or debunk the importance of intrinsic motivation. When the students were praised and rewarded with good grades, was the researcher encouraging intrinsic or extrinsic motivation? The divisions are too equivocal, too loosely defined, and cannot theorize a complete vision of a student’s reasons for learning. In other words, it falls short in assessing exactly what makes people want to learn.

Unfortunately, the results of studies tend to follow the biases of those conducting the studies. Stephen J. Gould, in *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996), wrote of two myths regarding the scientific method: 1) that science will lead to the truth; 2) that science is objective:

Science is rooted in creative interpretation. Numbers suggest, constrain, and refute; they do not, by themselves, specify the content of scientific theories. Theories are built upon the interpretation of numbers, and interpreters are often trapped by their own rhetoric. They believe in their own objectivity, and fail to discern the prejudice that leads them to one interpretation among many consistent with their numbers.

Categories for theorizing aspects of learning or behavior must be relatively stable to serve as effective paradigms. The work of Noam Chomsky (1965) and Derek Bickerton (1981), for example, also used a division of faculties to theorize the innate capacity for language development. On the surface their “universal grammar,” with innate programmed settings in the mind, seems too outlandish to be of practical application. Yet the theories help explain the remarkable phenomenon of the Indonesian language. It began as a pidgin, a mixture of native dialects with the vocabulary of European traders, mostly Dutch, before its transformation into a creole that led to the creation of a language with a consistent grammar spoken by the world’s fifth most populous nation. Children, who separately imposed the identical grammar structure interacting with their parents and community’s fragmented speech, brought about this evolution. Though we do not fully understand how this was possible, we have theories to explain part of this process.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), also

theorizing of divisions in consciousness, speculated after the First World War about why people at times seem hostile toward civilization: Civilization enforces a restraint on more primal forces that emanate from the deeper self (id). The anarchist (id), whom the civilized person (superego) fears most, in fact lurks within. Freud's insight, that people are not individually as "good" as the civilized standards they purportedly espouse, is painful for most to accept. Freud was not surprised, therefore, when the Nazis, after taking power in Austria in 1938, also wanted to kill him; he escaped to England, because of his renown, to live the last year of his life. Centuries of civilization, therefore, as we have seen in the twentieth-century from Germany to China, is no antidote against sudden barbarism, but may actually work to encourage it. Freud's dialectic, of a building up (superego) followed by destruction (id), is also seen in education, perhaps in the urge to return to simplicity. Freud's theory did indeed explain something essential, both about human nature and civilization, mysteries as yet not fully understood.

While we cannot expect second language education to have such a lofty and sweeping understanding of human life and learning processes, educators should still have theories that are useful and practical. In order for this to take place, a theory needs to be relatively free of cultural biases.

### **Overloaded with cultural assumptions**

The motivation studies represent widespread beliefs in North America that a positive outlook can heighten personal wellbeing, successfulness, and health. Many health care professionals claim they have research proving the association. Yet, neither attitude in healing nor certain forms of motivation in learning can be quantified as consistently producing the desired outcome. Presently, we lack the analytical tools to understand the relationship. Most believe a connection exists--as I certainly would--but the anecdotal evidence is too scanty to base either medical treatments or educational programs on. Neoclassical economics, which has a much longer history of quantifying human behavior, is right only about eighty-percent of the time in predicting what people will do. Social and economic motives have proven too unpredictable. Variables in learning are so much greater and include more subtle characteristics like aptitude, age, level of ambition, and a whole host of others that have yet to be articulated.

The research indeed says a great deal about American culture and its own need of

intrinsic motivation. For all its ideals of education as liberation, the fundamental drive is often for grades, credentials, and professional accomplishments, typical of a consumer driven culture. I offer some anecdotes below of the North American consumer mind-set in education.

Andrei Toom, a Russian mathematician and teacher, who in the nineteen eighties immigrated to America, began teaching at a state college in Massachusetts. Toom was still acting on the premises he had as a teacher in Russia, where the challenges of learning were more important than grades. First, Toom was disappointed by the textbook, which he called “max-mim-maximal,” (maximum pretensions with minimal content). To stimulate learning, he offered new mathematical problems outside the text. To his dismay, students responded with frustration and anger. By and large, students wanted to get an “A,” whether they learned anything or not. Toom’s exercises were just getting in the way; when students complained to college administrators, they urged Toom to stick with the “max-mim-maximal” textbook. Toom concluded (1998):

The grade looks like the ultimate value, and neither students, nor parents, nor university officials see anything wrong with this. In fact, all officials completely supported the top priority of official records. It seems to be generally taken for granted that students normally learn as little as possible for a certain grade.

It is the basic principle of the market that everybody tries to get as much as possible and to pay as little as possible. [Students] seem to think that they buy grades and pay for them by learning.... Learning comes from the lash of grades, not from the pure enjoyment of it. I was forced to care about my safety from students’ complaints at the expense of their own best interests.

Toom could not transfer his “love of learning,” part of his cultural tradition, to American students, steeped as they were in more self-centered goals for education. Toom’s definition of “intrinsic” is also different from American researchers. H. Douglas Brown spoke of education as “ego-enhancing,” but I think few outside America would agree. For Toom, learning was risk, failure, the sacrifice of good grades, the pain of missing the mark--all this for the sake of knowing. Whatever its



ultimate rewards, education is largely ego deflating, not therapeutic, at least in the beginning. For a nation scarred by the “lash of grades,” however, Toom concluded that perhaps ego-enhancement is warranted.

Peter Sacks (1996), in *Generation X Goes To College*, wrote of his success in becoming tenured by increasing his positive ratings on student surveys, essentially evaluations of the teacher’s personality. Since the university’s financial success was paramount, Sacks became an asset, but academic standards were the trade off. If Sacks was awakening “intrinsic” values by creating a pleasurable classroom experience, he saw it as compromising for the sake of customer satisfaction. Whatever self-esteem the students may have gained, Sacks was following purely extrinsic goals, that of cynically making a living.

Morris Berman (2000) wrote that education has become “buying in order to be.” In North America, by the time a high school student graduates from high school, he or she has seen on average three hundred-fifty thousand consumption messages on television. Why would anyone growing up in that culture see education as anything other than a commodity? Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), the French philosopher, has underscored this notion of what education has become (1989):

The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become even more so... Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases the goal is exchange.

## **Conclusion**

This is too board a topic for a discussion on the challenges of education in a world culture of consumerism. But a deeper question looms: Are these theories on motivation--along with other education theories--in fact a defense against a general discomfort of what modern education has become? Do they sanitize consumerism as an acceptable ideology? Language skills, of course, are measurable, at least eventually, and students may resent a pleasurable class experience at the expense of real learning. While many see universal applications in the research motivation, we have to ask how valid the conclusions are. These studies can feed too easily into today’s commercial values, of the student as consumer, who equate the amount spent

with an expected gain. Moreover, one can do little to transform students into intrinsic acolytes; alas, even consumerism has limits.

The elevation of intrinsic motivation seems more a message from North Americans to North Americans. Economic realities dominant, with pragmatic American students understanding transcripts are useful for jobs and for admission to graduate schools; actual learning is relegated, even deferred. Perhaps the studies will aid Americans in examining their motives for entering college or for studying languages. Students in Japan, it seems to me, mirror the intrinsically motivated students of the French language program that Gardner and Lambert wrote of. English language skills, unless exceptional, have little extrinsic value for most in Japan.

The research, I am sure, was never intended for “buying in order to be.” Gardner and Lambert did find an authentic connection between successful learners and attitude. All teachers have seen this connection. Granted, it is a valiant probe into the reasons why people want to learn. This literature needs to be in perspective, as anecdotal to encourage teachers in what others have found useful in certain situations, but also understanding that its conclusions cannot be reproduced by another teacher with another group of language learners. I think this is enough for most, as a source of encouragement to try new approaches and to be more positive about language teaching. In the commercially driven field of English education, the search for the magic formula that will expedite learning underlies a great deal of what is carried out under the banner of “research.” Motivational studies are nebulas enough to accommodate many of these newfangled approaches. A more mature vision cautions that nothing is gotten for nothing. Learning, whether in life or in the classroom, is hard work. As Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) said, “Inspiration is not for sale.”

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