

**A Book Review: *Motivational Currents in Language Learning: Frameworks for Focused Interventions***

By Zoltán Dörnyei, Alastair Henry and Christine Muir  
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Abstract

This review asserts that *Motivational Currents in Language Learning: Frameworks for Focused Interventions* is an informative and engaging book for those interested in L2 motivation research, particularly for those curious about the underlying structures involved in the successful completion of long-term goals and projects. Though a good deal of the book is devoted to the explication of individual experiences and may not be clearly applicable to classroom contexts, the authors have included numerous suggestions for classroom practices to make their research more relevant to teachers. In the first section, a basic overview of the book and its central concept of directed motivational currents is presented. The next section offers an in-depth description of the book's contents, and this review concludes with a critical evaluation of the text.

## Introduction

*Motivational Currents in Language Learning: Frameworks for Focused Interventions* is a book from Routledge's ESL and Applied Linguistics Professional Series which, according to their website, comprises works intended "to be used as primary or supplementary texts in graduate-level and teacher training courses to enhance students' and practicing teachers' professional qualifications and knowledge" ("Routledge," n.d., para. 1). As such, the book is targeted towards relatively well-versed ESL practitioners, with frequent references to methods, theories and researchers from applied linguistics and related fields. Nevertheless, as will be explained in further detail later, the authors take pains in the book to never let their research and theories stray too far from the ESL classroom by frequently demonstrating how their ideas can work for teachers in the classroom.

As can be deduced from the title, the book falls under the subject of language learner motivation. Though the authors admit this to be an exhaustively researched corner of the language learner experience, they feel they have something unique to add to the mix: namely, the concept of Directed Motivational Currents, or DMCs as they label them. This is a term coined by the authors to describe a concept which their own past research, personal experiences, and numerous anecdotal sources led them to an awareness of. In the authors' view, "motivational currents ... enable people to function for prolonged lengths of time at heightened states of productivity and, for a period, to perform at levels over and above what they may have believed themselves capable of" (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. xi). They equate DMCs with a state of 'being in the zone,' a feeling akin to what people working on projects or towards long-term goals experience when (according to one of the many anecdotal sources the authors cite in the book), "You can be so absorbed that you lose all track of time" (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. x).

The authors acknowledge a similarity between the DMC concept and earlier work in positive psychology, particularly that done by the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on the notion of *flow* (1975). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), this is a "state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (p. 4). Nevertheless, the authors assert that their concept of DMCs differs from the concept of flow, most notably in the duration involved. Whereas the flow experience typically involves concentration on a single activity over a relatively short period of time (e.g. an artist absorbed in creating a painting, or a surfer riding a wave), according to the

authors, DMCs involve a number of coordinated activities carried out over a longer period of time (e.g. a planner organizing a charity event, or a student composing a thesis). The authors employ the image of ocean currents as a metaphor for DMCs, as according to them “Both motivational and ocean currents represent a formidable flow of energy, carrying the life-forms caught up within them unimaginable distances” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. xi). The book they have produced is primarily devoted to an explanation of the DMC process in individuals: from its formation, to its realization as a highly productive state, through to the attainment of an important goal and finally, its eventual diminution. The latter sections of the book attempt to expand the DMC concept, from an individual experience to group experiences on long-term projects, with corresponding references to L2 classroom applications.

### **Summary**

The book is divided into nine chapters, with a preface. The preface is largely devoted to explaining the concept of DMCs, and how they are related to language learning and can be of use to L2 classrooms and teachers. The first seven chapters of the book deal with the introduction and explanation of DMCs, including how they form, what drives and sustains them, and how they eventually wane over time, typically after the attainment of a long-anticipated goal. The last two chapters of the book deal with the concept of ‘group DMCs’ and how teachers can help generate these in L2 classrooms.

As mentioned earlier, the book is liberally interspersed with anecdotes from a wide variety of people who have experienced DMCs. The authors also frequently cite relevant research from the fields of psychology, education, and applied linguistics to bolster their claims. In addition, from Chapter 3 on (with the exception of the final chapter), there is a concluding section devoted to relating the subject of each chapter to specific classroom practices and techniques. The book also has a number of sidebars summarizing the most important points from each section.

In more detail, the first chapter takes up where the preface leaves off by giving a detailed description of what DMCs are, as well as what they are not, and reiterates how they differ from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) concept of flow. It then goes on to share the DMC stories of three different language learners: Bina, a Congolese woman studying Swedish in Sweden; Hanna, a Hungarian woman studying Polish; and Asan, a Kurdish man studying English. The backgrounds, motivations, and experiences of each of the learners are explained

in detail, by the authors as well as in each of the learners' own words. The stories of the learners serve a dual purpose, as they are initially used to introduce the DMC experience, but will also be referenced throughout the book to highlight key points about DMCs.

In Chapter 2, the authors delve into the history of L2 motivation research to explain how DMCs relate to earlier theories, as well as how they are unique in L2 motivation research and add an important element to the field. They point out that early studies done in L2 motivation, such as that done by Robert Gardner (1985), tended to take a macro view of motivation by focusing on communities of learners. This was followed by a host of researchers who shifted the focus onto the micro level of motivation, including classrooms and individual students, while also importing a number of theories from educational psychology. From there, the field shifted towards a *process-oriented period* which considered the temporal aspects of motivation, and then a *socio-dynamic period* which considered aspects of motivation such as learning task and environment. The most direct theoretical antecedent to DMCs, according to the authors, is the concept of *vision* (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), defined as “a vivid mental image of the experience of successfully accomplishing a future goal” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 22).

However, according to the authors, none of the previously established constructs in L2 motivational research adequately describes the experience of a DMC. This is because, as the book explains, traditional motivational theories tend to separate motivation from subsequent behavior, and also tend to overlook temporal aspects of motivation. The concept of DMCs, in the authors' view, fuse the former and correct the latter, as according to them “A DMC is a motivation construct which handles goals and goal related behaviors together in an experiential form within a concrete learning context” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 33). How DMCs are able to accomplish this is the subject of Chapter 3.

In this chapter, the authors expound upon the idea of *vision* and also cover the related concepts of self-concordant goals and proximal subgoals. In order to illustrate the *vision* concept more fully, the authors return to the story of Hanna, the Hungarian woman studying Polish. Hanna was motivated to study Polish by a desire to communicate with the father of a Polish friend, who after meeting her lamented her inability to speak Polish. During her studies of Polish, Hanna states that “I was daydreaming about how his face will look ... I had conversations in my head in Polish. Like what I would say, what he would answer and stuff like that” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 45). According to the authors, this is illustrative of the way in which the use of a goal-oriented *vision* allows Hanna “to intricately imagine the specific

locations in which her language-speaking future self would be, thus providing a powerful and near permanent presence guiding her learning behavior” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 45). This use of Hanna’s account is typical of the way the authors return to the three previously mentioned DMC stories throughout the text.

In addition to *vision*, DMCs are also composed of self-concordant goals according to the authors. They claim that by aligning goals with personal identity and values, the energizing force behind these goals increases in strength, allowing them to be sustained over time and through difficulties. Finally, according to the authors, those caught up in a DMC are able to regularly affirm their progress by setting and attaining proximal subgoals (e.g. by passing a test en route to successfully completing a course). As they state, the attainment of these subgoals then serves to re-energize the positive feelings and motivational force of the DMC, in a kind of positive feedback loop. Chapter 3 ends with a short section describing ways to promote long-term motivation in the classroom, including the ideas of formulating class goals with students and “a six-phase *visionary training approach* to increase the capacity of vision to motivate action effectively” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 55).

The theoretical underpinnings of the DMC process being, at this point in the text, largely established, in Chapters 4 through 7 the authors turn their attention to what might be termed the ‘life-cycle’ of a DMC. In Chapter 4, the authors discuss the launch of a DMC, including necessary pre-conditions and triggers that initiate the process. In terms of pre-conditions, the authors cite a clear set of goals, a sense of ownership, a perceived balance of challenges and skills, and an openness to the DMC experience as all being necessary for the launch of a DMC. Triggers that start a DMC can be of a much more idiosyncratic nature however, as the authors highlight with the case of Benjamin, a dieter whose weight-loss DMC is triggered by purchasing a new battery for his scale in the supermarket. In Chapter 5, the authors move on to the subject of how a DMC is able to sustain itself over time. According to them, a DMC is a kind of “self-renewing stream of motivation” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 80). Set routines play a key role in enabling this phenomenon as, according to the authors, these “create a type of *motivational autopilot* which allows the initiation and execution of learning activities to become a semi-automatic process” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 83). These routines are then connected once more by the authors to the concept of subgoals, the successful attainment of which “generates high levels of satisfaction, which in turn fuels further action” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 91). Along with affirmative feedback received from

people and environments, the stage is set, according to the authors, for DMCs to become self-sustaining.

By Chapter 6, the DMC process has attained a kind of peak mode, leading to a state of ‘eudaimonia,’ according to the authors. This is a term which, readers learn, originates from Greek philosophy and has gained renewed interest in the field of positive psychology. It is defined as “a deep and often enduring sense of personal contentment ... linked to the experience of actualizing one’s potential and the realization of personal fulfillment” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 105). The authors single out Alan Waterman’s (1993) research into eudaimonic identity theory as being especially germane to the DMC experience. In research involving graduate and undergraduate college students, Waterman found a link between personal expressiveness, or eudaimonia, and enjoyment. His analysis of this link further divided it into activities with different variables that led to enjoyment. Amongst these, the authors highlight Waterman’s concepts of *dedicated effort in the pursuit of excellence* and *authenticity*. According to the former, those caught up in a DMC are able to take on even the most mundane of tasks with pleasure because “the anticipated joy of successfully achieving the final goal filters throughout the DMC pathway in a fractal manner into each of the varied activities and subgoals it subsumes” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 108). This is possible because, according to the authors, a DMC is strongly linked to feelings of *authenticity*, another term taken from positive psychology which (with reference to relevant theorists) is explained by the authors as “a *state* of being ... experienced when activities pursued in the present are concordant with the core values and features of the self” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, pp. 110-111). Chapter 6 then ends with a short section connecting the concepts of eudaimonia, dedicated effort and authenticity with L2 classroom contexts, explaining ways both teaching techniques and materials can be optimized to promote them. It suggests adapting class materials and activities so that they engage learners’ real interests and passions, while also allowing them to express their identities.

Chapter 7 finds the authors contemplating the end of the DMC life cycle, including why it occurs, how those previously caught up in DMCs react to their conclusion, and how teachers can help students transitioning out of a DMC. Throughout the text, the authors maintain that although they can last months or, in some cases, even years, DMCs are nevertheless finite. They accordingly re-visit the cases of Bina, Hanna and Asan to examine the end of their respective DMCs. The good news is that all three of the learners attain the goals that originally initiated their DMCs. However, the aftermath of this success, as readers

learn, can produce a mixture of feelings, both good and bad. According to Hanna, “I had to find out where to go or what to do ... I had to reconsider or re-evaluate what I do because one thing is accomplished and then now what’s next, where to go?” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 121). The authors explain that previously effortless routines once again require significant concentration, which can cause corresponding feelings of frustration in those who have recently exited a DMC. This is when, according to the authors, teacher intervention can be crucial. They state that teachers can aid students by highlighting the progress they have made during their DMC experience, raising their awareness of their transfer out of it, and helping them to develop sustainable action plans for their future language learning journey.

The final two chapters in the book, as mentioned earlier, attempt to expand the DMC experience from individuals to group contexts. In addition to a variety of anecdotal evidence, from successful school projects to political campaigns, in Chapter 8 the authors cite Aarts and Custers (2012) on the concept of *goal contagion* as well as Keith Sawyer’s (2006) research into *group flow* as theoretical justifications for the notion of group DMCs. According to the former, goals can be adopted automatically, and even unconsciously, as they are perceived in the behaviors of others. Thus, a classroom of students, or a group of co-workers, can take on a common goal simply by observing their cohorts, without explicit instructions. Though Sawyer’s research focused specifically on theater and music, and the ways in which performers use a blend of improvisation and structure during performances, the authors nevertheless feel the concept is relevant for general education. In a classroom setting, according to the authors, intensive group projects are the most common manifestation of a group DMC. In order for group projects to take on DMC like characteristics however, the authors cite the need for what Shernoff (2013) has termed *environmental challenge* and *environmental support*. In the authors’ summation of these:

*environmental challenge* is characterized by tasks of sufficient complexity, clear goals and perceived importance, the construction of conceptual understanding and/or language skills, and opportunities to demonstrate performance. *Environmental support* is characterized by positive relationships between teachers and peers, support for motivational drives ... constructive feedback, and opportunities to be active and interactive. (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 144)

The rest of Chapter 8 explains how these conditions can be effectively met in the classroom, differences between the functioning of individual and group DMCs, and how teachers can facilitate the transition out of a group DMC.

Chapter 9 is the most practice-oriented of all the chapters in the book, as it goes into the details of facilitating group DMCs within the classroom. According to the authors, this requires instructors to have a project-based mindset, in which teacher-student roles can be dramatically altered; to assure the class achieves and maintains appropriate group dynamics, including roles, norms, and cohesiveness; to provide adequate support structures and facilities, including resources and physical environment; and to provide a clear and engaging project goal with a tangible outcome, such as a group presentation. The book concludes with the presentation of the ‘frameworks’ mentioned in the book’s subtitle: seven project outlines for promoting group DMCs in the classroom, each with its own signature component and unique emphasis. As an example, there is a project titled ‘Detective Work’ which involves groups searching for the answer to a difficult problem, thereby sustaining “extended periods of concentration and motivated action” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 177), according to the text.

### Evaluation

In this reviewer's opinion, *Motivational Currents in Language Learning: Frameworks for Focused Interventions* is a fascinating look into a previously unexplored aspect of motivation. The book's central concept of DMCs is impressively researched, well-explained, and convincingly proven. The use of anecdotes from a wide variety of sources enables readers to connect complex pedagogical and psychological theories to actual lived experiences. Indeed, while perusing the text, readers are likely to have numerous moments in which they recognize their own motivational experiences in both the ideas put forth and anecdotes described. The book should be of interest to anyone curious about the mechanics of motivation in individuals, and particularly those interested in learning how people are able to take on long, seemingly insurmountable tasks while maintaining not only focus, but also enjoyment.

On the other hand, many of the same qualities that make the book an engaging read for those interested in motivation, and the DMC process, may count against it for those seeking practical classroom advice. As noted, a DMC is at heart an *individual* experience, and the bulk of the text is therefore taken up with its effects on the personal level. As such, teachers may well find themselves wondering what to do with such a wealth of information geared towards individual experience, when faced with a class group of 20 or more students. As the authors themselves admit, “because of the somewhat atypical nature of the



phenomenon, the pedagogical implications within L2 contexts are arguably limited” (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 141).

As if in anticipation of this very criticism however, the authors have taken care to connect the DMC concept to L2 classroom contexts throughout the book. As noted, the end sections of Chapters 3 through 8 offer specific classroom techniques based on the preceding concepts. The concluding two chapters as well, though less exhaustively researched and, correspondingly, slightly less convincing than the chapters devoted to individual level DMCs, nevertheless provide a number of ideas appropriate for L2 classroom contexts, especially for classes involving group projects. Moreover, it could be argued that, at base a classroom is composed of individuals and, though we are unlikely to ever teach an entire class of students caught up in DMCs, we should (hopefully) at some point come across one or two students who are experiencing them. In this case, reading the book will better prepare us to assist these students (who are likely to be, moreover, some of the most motivated and successful we will ever encounter).

Finally, it should be noted that in the intervening years since the publication of this book, a good deal of research has been conducted into DMCs, much of which addresses the aforementioned shortcomings. As an example, Christine Muir, one of the authors, has produced a book entitled *Directed Motivational Currents and Language Education: Exploring Implications for Pedagogy* (2020) which, as its subtitle implies, expands upon the ways DMCs can be promoted in the classroom. Closer to home, Olya Yazawa (2020) has looked into the specific context of Japanese college students, and the potential benefits of project-based learning in promoting long term motivation.

### **Conclusion**

This book makes for informative and absorbing reading for anyone interested in the subject of motivation, particularly in long-term individual motivation. It is well-researched and explained, with a number of pertinent anecdotes that illustrate the authors’ central idea of directed motivational currents. Though teachers searching for pedagogical advice may find large portions of the text irrelevant, the authors have nevertheless made attempts to link their theories to the classroom, particularly in the final two chapters of the book. In addition, for those lacking in time, the frequent inclusion of sidebars and end of chapter summaries make it possible to comprehend main ideas while skimming the book.

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