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Language learning motivation: current insights and implications

Ema Ushioda

Introduction

The issue of learner motivation has long exercised researchers and practitioners in the field of language education. However, it is only within the past decade or so that we have witnessed productive interaction between the interests of researchers and teachers. Up until the early 1990s, research interest focused primarily on describing, measuring and classifying language learner motivation and exploring its role in theoretical models of the language learning process. The findings from such research offered little to teachers concerned with the practical question of how to motivate their learners and keep them motivated. Moreover, this research agenda was powerfully shaped by social-psychological perspectives on learner attitudes to target language cultures and people (Gardner 1985; Gardner and Lambert 1972), while motivational influences and processes within the social environment of the language classroom remained relatively unexplored. In a seminal critique of the social-psychological tradition, Crookes and Schmidt (1991) set forth a new agenda for research on a more 'practitioner-validated' classroom-based concept of language learning motivation. The need to establish closer links between theory and practice and to develop what Dörnyei (2001a:103) has called more 'education-friendly' approaches to language learning motivation research stimulated an unprecedented wave of discussion during the mid-1990s (for a detailed summary, see Dörnyei 1998), and has considerably reshaped the direction of theory and research in the field.

My purpose in this paper is to review insights from current theory and research and identify implications for classroom practice. I shall organize this review in three parts: (i) learner-internal motivation; (ii) motivation and the social environment; (iii) the process of motivation over time.

Learner-internal motivation

With the move towards more classroom-based approaches to the study of language learning motivation, research attention has increasingly turned to cognitive theories of motivation in education (for comprehensive overviews, see Pintrich and Schunk 2002; Stipek 2002).

Cognitive theories focus on the patterns of individual thinking that shape motivated engagement in learning. These patterns of thinking include goals and expectations, self-perceptions of competence and self-efficacy beliefs (beliefs about one's capability to perform particular tasks), locus of control (learner-internal versus learner-external) and causal attributions (beliefs about the causes of success or failure).

From a pedagogical perspective, a key message emanating from research on cognitive theories of motivation in education and in language learning is the vital importance of fostering learner-internal motivation (see, for example, Boggiano and Pittman 1992; Dickinson 1995; Ushioda 1996). Generally speaking, the optimum kind of learner-internal motivation has been labelled *intrinsic motivation* – i.e., doing something as an end in itself, for its own self-sustaining pleasurable rewards of enjoyment, interest, challenge, or skill or knowledge development. Intrinsic motivation is contrasted with *extrinsic motivation* – i.e., doing something as a means to some separable outcome, such as gaining a qualification, getting a job, pleasing the teacher, avoiding punishment (Ryan and Deci 2000; Vallerand 1997). To some extent, however, this contrastive definition is a little misleading, since, in most educational contexts, it can be argued that certain types of extrinsic goals are to be positively valued (e.g., examination success, academic or career aspirations, life ambitions). Rather, what seems pedagogically crucial is not whether motivational goals are intrinsic or extrinsic to the learning process, but whether they are internalized and self-determined (emanating from within the learner) or externally imposed by others (teachers, negative peer pressures, parents, curriculum demands, educational and societal expectations). The clear message is that externally controlled motivation (the traditional 'carrot-and-stick' approach) can have short-term benefits only, and that our real aim as educators must be to foster learner-internal motivation or 'motivation from within' (Deci 1996).

Learner-internal motivation is variously discussed in the context of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985; Noels et al. 2000), the role of personal causation or agency (McCombs 1994; Williams 2004), and theories of autonomy (Dickinson 1995; Lamb 2004; Spratt et al. 2002; Ushioda 1996, 2003). Pedagogical implications common to these different theoretical frameworks include the importance of catering for individual needs and interests, involving learners in making informed choices and decisions about their learning and in setting their own short-term targets, and thus fostering feelings of personal agency, freedom and responsibility. Insights from theories of intrinsic motivation also point to the importance of ensuring that learners experience feelings of competence and skill development (Csikszentmihalyi 1978). Where mastering a language is concerned, this places a premium on

frequent opportunities for meaningful language use in the classroom, so that learners experience their own developing capacity to use the language, instead of simply relying on external evaluations and teachers' grades (for further discussion, see Ushioda 1996, 2003).

Motivation and the social environment

Thus, whereas motivation has traditionally been regarded as something that teachers 'do' to learners through a variety of motivational tricks and strategies, current thinking emphasizes the importance of fostering learners' own motivation and sense of autonomy or self-determination. This does not imply, however, a reduced research interest in the role of the teacher or the social learning environment. As noted in the Introduction, there has been a significant growth of research interest in classroom motivational processes, and in the interaction between social and individual processes in the development of motivation. Such interaction is reflected in current influential models of language learning motivation. For example, Dörnyei's (1994) framework of motivation integrates language-related and learner-internal factors with learning situation factors, including teacher socialization of motivation and classroom group processes. Similarly, in their comprehensive cognitive model of language learning motivation, Williams and Burden (1997:137–140) combine learner-internal factors with external factors such as interactions with significant others (parents, teachers, peers) and influences from the broader social context (e.g., cultural norms, societal expectations and attitudes).

The interactions between social and individual processes of motivation can, of course, be negative rather than positive. For example, tensions and divergence between peer-related interpersonal goals on the one hand and teacher-led curriculum goals on the other may give rise to resistance, disaffection and low motivation, particularly among adolescent learners (Lamb and Fisher 1999; Williams et al. 2002). More generally, the controlling social forces of teachers, grades, curricula and examinations may stifle intrinsic motivation (Harter 1992), so that motivation becomes externally regulated, or regulated through forced compliance by what Deci (1996:94) calls 'introjects' – i.e., internalizations in the form of 'shoulds' and 'oughts' rather than genuine personal desires.

In order to promote healthy interaction between social and individual processes of motivation, it seems clear that there must be close alignment between pedagogical goals and values, individual needs and interests, and peer-related interpersonal goals (Ushioda 2003:95). As the literature on autonomy suggests, achieving such alignment entails involving learners in some of the decision-making processes that shape classroom learning (Dam 1995:2).

Important insights derive also from research in cooperative and collaborative language learning (e.g., Crandall 1999; Dörnyei 1997; Littlewood 2002; Nunan 1992). Incorporating classroom activities where learners work together in pairs or small groups to achieve common goals can help to foster cognitive and motivational interdependence among learners and a sense of shared responsibility. The powerful role of collaborative learning in mediating the growth of individual motivation is widely recognized in studies of child development (e.g., Bronson 2000), theories of intrinsic motivation (see, for example, Deci 1996 for discussion of the concept of 'social relatedness'), classroom studies (e.g., Good and Brophy 1987), and research on peer tutoring in higher education (e.g., Falchikov 2001). In the field of language learning, this view of motivation as socially mediated or constructed has been developed in particular by Williams and Burden (1997), and Ushioda (2003, forthcoming), while a study by Dörnyei (2002) offers clear empirical evidence of the co-construction of motivation by learner pairs working on oral communicative tasks.

The process of motivation over time

So far, the review has focused on motivational issues in getting learners involved in learning. For teachers and for learners, however, the real challenge lies in finding ways of sustaining motivation through the long process of learning a language. Aside from the inevitable detriments to motivation posed by institutionalized learning (e.g., coursework requirements, examination pressures, competing demands from other courses of study), steady increases in the cognitive burden of language learning may also have negative consequences. Sadly, research all too often points to a steady decline in levels of motivation, once the initial enthusiasm and novelty of learning a new language begin to wear off (Chambers 1999; Little et al. 2002; Williams 2004; Williams et al. 2002). As language proficiency develops, the learning demands grow exponentially in terms of cognitive and linguistic complexity, and skill and activity range (Little and Perclová 2001:36–38), while any pay-off for the learning effort expended in terms of increased mastery becomes less and less tangible.

For motivation to be sustained through the vicissitudes of the learning process, it seems clear that learners need to develop certain skills or strategies to keep themselves on track. These might include setting themselves concrete short-term targets, engaging in positive self-talk, motivating themselves with incentives and self-rewards, or organizing their time effectively to cope with multiple tasks and demands. Such strategies are variously discussed in terms of self-motivating strategies (Dörnyei 2001b:109–116), effective motivational thinking (Ushioda 1996:52–64), and self-regulatory skills (Dörnyei and Ottó 1998; McCombs

1994; Ushioda 2003, forthcoming). The value of self-motivation and positive thinking is of course widely recognized in areas of life outside language education, such as sports psychology, psychotherapy, medical care, business management and life coaching. An underlying message is that through pro-active thinking, people learn to see themselves in charge of their life and as active agents of their own future, rather than at the mercy of forces beyond their control (Deci 1996). In the educational domain, lack of perceived control over learning processes and outcomes can lead learners to become trapped in defeatist patterns of thinking and self-perceptions, a phenomenon well documented in studies of 'learned helplessness' (Dweck 1999; Peterson et al. 1993).

Unfortunately, research on how language learners might be brought to think positively and develop skills in motivational self-regulation is still scarce. In keeping with much of the literature on learning strategies, Dörnyei (2001b:109–116) stresses the importance of raising learners' awareness of self-motivating strategies through discussion and sharing of experiences. Ushioda (1996:52–64; 2003) emphasizes the role of teacher feedback in promoting positive and constructive thinking. Clearly, this is an important pedagogical area where research is much needed.

Concluding thoughts: the need for teacher research on motivation

Inevitably, constraints of space have made this a very brief and selective review of current theory and research in the field. One difficulty in undertaking a review of this kind is the need to sustain a balance between offering general insights and implications on the one hand, and on the other, recognizing that current thinking in the field emphasizes what Dörnyei (2002:137) calls a 'situated' view of motivation embedded in the dynamic interactions of teachers and learners in particular classroom environments. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that, despite the growing body of theorizing in the field, actual classroom-based studies of motivational events and processes in this 'situated' framework remain surprisingly few in number. Undoubtedly, the key players who have potentially much to contribute here are teachers themselves, since they are ideally positioned to undertake research on motivation in their own classrooms – research that is sensitive to local needs and conditions, that is shaped by clear pedagogical aims and principles, and that can contribute to teachers' own professional development as well as to professional knowledge at large. There is growing recognition of the value of practitioner research in language teaching, whether framed as action research (Edge 2001; Wallace 1998), exploratory practice (Allwright 2003) or teachers' narrative inquiry (Johnson and Golombek 2004). More experience-based research

insights from teachers would greatly enrich our understanding of language learning motivation, and contribute to bringing theory and practice in much closer interaction.

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