International Conference on Current Trends in ELT

Divergent Consequences of Success and Failure on Language Learners' Self-Improvement Motivation

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Abstract

Research interest in the evolving interactions among self and motivation, has originated in a concern to shift from the concept of abstract second language learners to the notion of real persons in context. Motivation for self-improvement is a motivational process that involves the self. It gains considerable significance when learners need to overcome obstacles while in the meantime, sustaining the motivation. Despite the similarities in individuals' motivation for improvement, yet, how people endeavor to improve their capabilities varies across cultures. Individuals display either self-enhancement tendencies or self-criticism inclinations in response to evaluative feedback. This is clearly influenced by the cultural environment.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Urmia University, Iran.

Keywords: Culture; language learning; motivation; self-improvement

1. Introduction

Motivation has been found to significantly affect language learning achievement. It provides not only the initial spark to set the second language learning in motion, but also establishes the further stimulus to maintain the long and sometimes boring process. The initial enthusiasm to enter a language course somehow predicts the extent of active and personal involvement in the second language learning. However, a learning process has its ups and downs. Having the initial desire to learn a second language does not promise a safe and secure path towards the ultimate goal of acquiring the second language. Even an intrinsically motivated learner of the second language might feel demotivated and less enthusiastic when it comes to failure or when things do not go according to plan.

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Historical changes in second language motivation studies draw attention to an important principle. This principle is that when we talk about motivation in the language classroom, a concern for many language teachers is not just the learner's reason for studying the target language; rather, they are concerned with whether students sustain an involvement in the activity despite the temporary ups and downs through the learning process. As part of this sustainment, self-improvement motivation takes on an important role during the process of working through the rises and falls of the learning process. While students work toward improvement of personal capabilities, their reactions to success and failure events can be different. The motive for self-improvement rest on a belief that people work toward improvement of personal capabilities, a growing body of theory and research in social psychology lends support to the idea that not everyone in the world shares the same idea on how to motivate the self (Heine, 2003).

Today, second language motivation research has moved beyond the individual differences and started to explore and analyze the complex interaction between the individual and the social and contextual factors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Scholars have started to rebuild the motivation in the second language studies in the context of theories of self and identity (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). In shifting from the concept of abstract second language learners to the notion of real persons in context (Ushioda, 2009), it becomes clear that self-concept is at the core of human motivation. Likewise, research in social psychology comes to agree that the motives that are linked to the self may assume a very different form depending on the nature of the self that is being affected (Heine, 2003). A growing body of research supports the idea that the self is a cultural construction (Heine, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers and educators to be informed and to reflect on the diverse needs of students from various cultural backgrounds. The investigation of self-improvement motivation implies that there is a combined effect of the two aspects of motivation. First, self-improvement motivation entails inquiring into the motivation as a continuous process not just a snapshot phenomenon at the time. Second, since self-improvement motivation encompasses the self component, it leads to a convergence of theories of both self and motivation in second language studies.

This paper will address what the research has to say about variation in student motivation. More specifically, it aims to first identify and establish the accepted place for self-improvement motivation in second language motivation studies. Second, it looks at the dynamic aspect of motivation in terms of the interaction between self-improvement motivation and various self-construals across cultures. This will contribute to address a dearth of literature in the theoretical investigation of motivation combined with different conceptualizations of the self. First, let's have a quick scan of the development of second language motivation studies toward the evolving interaction among self and motivation.

2. The Reform Movement in Second Language Studies

All The study of second language motivation has developed independently from mainstream motivational psychology for some time due to the particular concerns that acquiring a second language might encompass. In the 1990s, however, the emergence of innovative studies and the desire to move fast enough to gain the same progress as motivational psychologies provoked fruitful attempts to bridge the gap between second language motivation and other psychological studies of motivation. Motivation research was primarily reviewed in terms of broadening Gardner's concept of motivation which was confined to the social-educational range of influences (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). The reconstruction process included a review of both second language and main psychological literature. Since the cognitive approach had overtaken the behaviorist approach by this time, established frameworks in second language motivation studies were also influenced by the cognitive motivation concept. The cognitive approach to second language motivation was somehow able to satisfy the growing need of motivation studies to take the active role of students and personality factors into account. Researchers perceived the language acquisition as a continuous and ongoing process of learning which doesn't start or end at school; rather, it involves continuous learning and demands an active role of students (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991). This, as Dörnyei (2005) pointed out, laid the primary stones to switch the focus from general factors of motivation to the actual learning practices such as the tasks and the teacher.
With the growing concern in more situated investigations of motivation in classroom settings, studies turned to investigating the inconsistent features of motivation during the learning processes (Williams & Burden, 1997; Dörnyei & Otto, 1998; Dörnyei, 2005). Researchers, in pursuit of the changing feature of motivation, began to integrate motivational variables into the learning process so they would be able to address the ongoing fluctuations of motivation during the long term process of language learning. The development of the process oriented approach toward motivation was mainly influenced by Dörnyei's (2005) process model. It has offered a dynamic procedure for the investigation of second language motivation through which the various motivational factors are organized in a sequence of three distinct stages. The model elaborates the transformation of motivation along pre-actional, actional, and post-actional stages. The process-oriented approach analyzes the notion of motivation step by step through each phase by bringing the psychological, cognitive, situational, and temporary aspects of motivation together.

Researchers started to identify the relevance of personality factors to the kinds of motivation that students possessed. This investigation of individual differences provided valuable insight into the links between personality factors and motivation. However, current research on second language motivation studies (Ushioda, 2009; Dörnyei, 2009) has started to caution against the idea that emphasizes the correlation between approaches to motivation and individual differences. It has been claimed that these individual differences impose a cause and effect relationship upon individual behaviors which are only able to describe the person as the sum of the descriptions. Ushioda (2009) is one of the primary researchers who criticized the dominant view which attempts to measure the characteristics of language learning motivation in individuals. She argues that this view to second language motivation creates the assumption that motivation is an abstract psychological entity which exists as the cause or effect of another variable. Her argument, in fact, is consonant with the two nomothetic and idiographic approaches to the study of personality in mainstream psychology. While the nomothetic approach impedes the researcher from extending the situation to outside the structure assigned, the idiographic approach seeks to be flexible and contains the notion of a dynamic interaction. Language motivation research also, as Ushioda (2009) mentions, needs to replace the linear view of personality with the complex and dynamic relations between person, as a self, and contextual factors. 'We should view language learning as a socio-cultural and socio-historically situated process, rather than as primarily a cognitive psycholinguistic process' (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220). Another approach which represents a significant reformation of motivation in second language studies is the "L2 motivational self system" (Dörnyei, 2005). This approach represents a major theoretical shift of attention to the internal domain of self and identity. It emphasizes the impact that an individual's self-definition has on behavior and focuses on the motivational power of individuals' views of themselves in the future. The possible view of future selves that people would hope to become, fear they will become, or expect to become are likely to be powerful motivators for goal accomplishments.

Research interest in L2 motivational self systems has originated in a concern to take account of the evolving interactions among self and motivation. Motivation as the reason underlying individuals' behaviors is directed through mental processes. People develop mental images of themselves and their abilities based on judgments and perceptions of themselves. These mental processes stimulate people and work as a drive toward goals and objectives. As explained above, over the past years second language motivation studies have shifted toward taking the agency of the individual person into account. This is in line with what is happening in social psychology which attempts to create a link between an individual's self perception and the action which will be performed as a result of the motivated self (Higgins, 1987; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, individuals' perceptions and evaluations of themselves and their capabilities can be converted into a motivator for future goal achievement. Throughout the next section I will further discuss how these motivational processes reflect individuals' desires to improve their achievements and capabilities.

3. Self-evaluation Process

One of the major motivational processes in social psychology, which is believed to have a critical role in individuals achieving their desired end state, is a self-evaluation process. People often judge their achievements as
well as their past performances in relation to personal or external criteria. This also happens within the classroom environment. Students evaluate their capabilities in a classroom environment to not only gain a better understanding of themselves and their capabilities, but also to improve any identified shortcomings. They evaluate the quality of their work at the end or along the learning process for the purpose of doing better in the future. In this way, learners' past experiences occupy a significant proportion of their motivation for their future plans. As Dörnyei (2005) suggested in his process model of motivation, if we consider a motivated behavior as a cyclical process, students self-evaluation does not constitute only the final step; rather, it is followed by further planning, which leads to the initiation of the subsequent motivated action. In characterizing the literature of self-evaluation studies in general, it becomes evident that the importance of the self-evaluation skill is emphasized by researchers from two main areas of study including: a) education researchers, who focus on student self-evaluation processes and their impact on pedagogy in the promotion of academic attainment (Zimmerman, 1989; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Sadler, 1989; Stiggins, 2001), and b) social psychology researchers, who approach the topic of self-evaluation in pursuit of conceptions of self-knowledge and self-developmental skills (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor, Neter & Wayment, 1995).

Self-evaluation in the learning context has highlighted the role of students in the classroom, which was regarded by behaviorists as a passive component of the classroom context. In order for students to be actively engaged, they need to delve into their own thinking and learning process through setting goals, monitoring their movement, and evaluating their progress. Educationalists view the value of self-evaluation either as a helpful self-regulated strategy in the learning context (Bransford et al., 1999; Alderman, 2003) or as a classroom formative assessment (Sadler 1989; Shepard, 2000). On the other hand, based on the social psychological perspective, people are engaged in the self-evaluation process whenever they judge and place value on different cognitive representation of one's own attribute, i.e. self-concept (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Individuals therefore, through making use of different sources of information including what they have received as feedback, have the ultimate goal of improvement when they are going through a self-evaluation process. In this way the past will stimulate future efforts rather than pulling people backward in their focus.

The current paper is focused on self-evaluation congruent with social psychology. Similar to what Ushioda (2009) argued for, this will provide the opportunity for moving the research forward to take the more real and natural part of the learning process into account. It will also contribute in filling the literature gap between the second language motivation studies and the mainstream motivational psychology. Self-evaluation in this study therefore, as Lewkkowicz (1985, p. 50) suggested, is the consequence of 'self-motivated and spontaneous involvement' in learning context rather than an organized procedure. Throughout the next section, I will further discuss how the improvement strivings of individuals are reflected in the self-evaluation process.

4. Self-evaluation is Governed by Motives

Self-evaluation process, like any other human activity, is purposeful and cannot be conducted without the primary impetus of individuals. From the social psychological perspectives, self-evaluation deals with subjective judgments that people make about various aspects of their self-concepts (Sedikides & Strube, 1995). Researchers in social psychology (Taylor, Neter & Wayment, 1995; Sedikides & Strube, 1997) consider self-evaluation as a motivational process in general which is directed by four distinct motives. Self-verification, self-assessment, self-improvement, and self-enhancement are the key self-motives (or self-evaluation motives) which manage and direct self-evaluation (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor et al., 1995). Self-enhancement reflects a motivated desire of individuals to provide reasonable grounds for enhancing the positivity of the self concept. The self-verification motive (Swann, 1997), on the other hand, refers to an internal drive to verify and maintain the existing perceptions of self-concept that people have in their minds. Through the self-assessment motive people get motivated to assess the accurate quality of their work based on evidence criteria (Trope, 1982, 1986). And finally, the role of self-improvement motive is to stimulate individuals to improve their skills and capabilities. Through the following sections I will further discuss the motivational process of self-improvement in terms of how culture has shaped different tendencies of individuals to improve their capabilities.
4.1. The motive to self-improve

Technically speaking, the self does not improve itself directly; rather, it may improve skills and abilities that comprise it. In this sense, as Leary (2007) noted, self-improvement refers to the improvement of personal capabilities rather than improving the psychological self. Researchers in personality and social psychology (e.g. Sedikides and Hepper, 2009) have approached the notion of self-improvement motivation from the self-evaluation perspective and considered it as part of everyday experience. Taylor et.al (1995) for the first time added the motive for self-improvement to the other three major self-evaluation motives. They suggested that the addition of the self-improvement motive solves the puzzle of the evaluation process in meeting its ultimate goal to improve specific skills and to enhance capabilities. According to Taylor (1995), what particularly makes the self-improvement motive distinct from the other three motives is its emphasis on gaining skills and personal capabilities which do not exist at the current time.

The trace of self-improvement in education is mainly identified in students' desire for achievement. It gains considerable significance when learners need to overcome obstacles while in the meantime, sustaining the motivation. While students' pathways to goals are likely to be hindered and delayed by obstacles, students may sustain their attempts to achieve their goals. As Bandura and Cervone (1983) put it, the perceived differences between the current status of individuals and the future achievements they desire to make, creates a self-dissatisfaction that leads to motivational influences. That is, the need for achievement is the result of students' dissatisfaction with their ongoing progress to attain their goals. This emotional conflict between the expectation of achieving success and the tendency to avoid failure develops the self motivation to improve.

Apparently, when we are talking about the self component of self improvement motivation process, we are referring to an individual person in the position of a learner. However, if we want to go beyond and take the agency of the person with his/her unique background (Ushioda, 2009) into account, we need to take the meaning of self as it is argued by researchers in social psychology refer to. The word self in social psychology, as well as in this paper, is defined as the initial conceptualization of personal self-images when people think of themselves (Oyserman et al., 2012; Marsh et al., 1998). This usage is far beyond the frequent usage of self in everyday language which mainly is used to mean a person. It is more or less synonymous with people's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about themselves. Moreover, the self in this paper is different from identity. Although they are interrelated concepts, their focuses and emphases are different. As Owens, Robinson & Smith (2010) and Mercer (2011) indicate, the nature of identity is properly understood based on social interactions. That is, identity is developed to make social interactions meaningful through classifying individuals into socially meaningful categories. However, as Mercer (2011, p. 19) argues, the self is the 'mobile core sense of self' that represents the inner psychological sense of self. In other words, while identity emphasizes people's conception of how they relate to others, self-concept highlights the individuality of people independent of social interactions.

People do not make sense of their selves automatically. Their perception of the self is shaped by their contexts (Cross & Gore, 2011). Considering the self as a social entity, leads to the understanding of the strivings for improvement of students far beyond an educational process. Since the improvement component of this motivational process is intertwined with the self, it depends on the nature of the self concept. That is, people's conceptualization of the self will not be treated as an independent variable outside the individual. Rather, the self as a social and dynamic entity will be inherently involved in shaping the motivational processes. According to Cross and Gore (2011) the construction of self-beliefs is among the key components of cultural meaning systems. Therefore, the cultural models of the self provide significant information on how cultural processes construct individual's self views.
4.2. Cultural differences in self-improvement motivation

There are similarities in individual's motivation for improvement, yet, how people endeavor to improve their capabilities varies significantly across cultures. This study examines self-improvement from a self-evaluation perspective. Therefore, the cultural differences in self-improvement motivation are explored in terms of reactions that people have in response to evaluative feedback. Individuals show considerable variability in responding to success and failure events and this has implications for the self (Heine, Lehman, Markush & Kitayama, 1999; Heine, 2003, 2007). Despite the common strivings toward improving the self, it is important for people not to lose the positive view of the self. However, how people endeavor to maintain positive self-views varies across cultures (Heine, et al., 1999; Heine, 2003, 2007). This variability is mainly associated with two independent versus interdependent concepts of the self. It has been argued by researchers that people with interdependent self-views tend to put more weight on interpersonal relationships. Therefore, they avoid the disharmony in their social interactions. In contrast, people with independent self construals are more likely to differentiate themselves from significant others by emphasizing their distinct personal attributions. Thus, people with independent self-views tend to motivate the self through maintaining positive self views. That is, following a failure experience they give the cold shoulder to the shortcomings and seek to voice the strong points. On the other hand, people associated with interdependent self recognize the shortcomings in an effort to correct the perceived weaknesses. Cultural differences in the strivings for improvement are routinely examined between North Americans and East Asians who are believed to have two contrary self-construals (Independent versus Interdependent) and cultural values (Individualistic versus Collectivistic) (Heine, Kitayama, Lehman, Takata, Ide, Leung & Matsumoto, 2001; Heine, 2003; Oishi & Diener, 2003; Brown & Kobayashi, 2002).

An examination of the cultural differences in relation to self-concept will allow researchers to investigate variations beyond physical and personal differences of individuals. These construals of the self have consequences for different psychological processes including motivation. As Markus and Kitayama (1991) remind us, it is worth noticing that when dealing with motivational processes that make reference to the self (such as self-improvement motivation), researchers are supposed to take the variations of the self-concept into account.

5. Conclusion

Today, researchers in second language motivation studies have moved beyond the individual differences and have started to explore and analyze the complex interactions between the individual and the social and contextual factors. By looking at the dynamic aspect of the motivation, this paper provided theoretical information about the fluctuations of the motivation in terms of the interaction between self-improvement motivation and various self-construals across cultures. Self-improvement motivation in this study was explored from an evaluative perspective. When the improvement process is connected to the self, it is rational enough to assume that the improvement takes different forms depending on how the self is perceived. People in different cultures have different construals of the self. These construals of the self have consequences for different psychological processes including motivation. In this sense, culture as a social entity considerably shapes the tendency of self-improvement. This paper elucidated further directions for combining non-second language theories of the self's motivational property with findings of the current L2 motivational research.

References
