Motivation in Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in English is essential for success in today's highly interconnected world, but the majority of undergraduate learners remain deficient in English. Motivation, being a malleable learner variable, can be manipulated in such a way that a maximum number of learners achieve a desirable level of ESL competence. This paper attempts a theoretical study of motivation and its significance in ESL learning.

Keywords: Motivation; ESL competence; attitude.

Introduction

Motivation is the one variable in the absence of which no learning can happen. Learning can take place only when the learner has a desire to learn, and when he recognizes that it is a meaningful activity. In the case of Mother Tongue (MT) acquisition, motivation is always present. But in learning a foreign language (FL) or a second language (L2) formally, the whole situation is artificial. However, motivation of some sort exists: students are aware of the importance of English, which makes them put in the necessary effort; but how to make them sustain the interest is a significant question.

Lennon (1993, p. 41) calls it "the most important single factor influencing continuing development in oral proficiency." Corder (1967, p. 164) is of the view that "given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data." According to Littlewood (1984, p.53), "In second language learning, as in every other field of human learning, motivation is the crucial force, which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres." It is a complex phenomenon and includes many components: the individual's drive, need for achievement and success, curiosity, desire for stimulation and new experience, and so on.

Theories of Motivation

The early psychological approaches to learning gave rise to the concept of classical conditioning and behaviorism, which consider motivation mainly in terms of external forces: the Stimulus-Response bond. That is, how one behaves in order to meet one's needs, how this behaviour is reinforced when those needs are met, and how this reinforcement affects future behaviour. Murray (1938) identified a large number of human needs, such as our need to affiliate with other people, our need to dominate others, our need to understand or make sense of our worlds, as well as basic biological needs, which cause inner tensions. Motivation was thus defined in terms of the pressure or the urge to release the tension and satisfy the needs.

The keystone of the Achievement Theory of motivation, proposed by Atkinson (1964), is that people differ significantly in their need to achieve or to be successful and that the assessment of such differences had important implications for their learning patterns. Rivers (1983, p.151) defines achievement motivation as "the inherent desire of all human beings to achieve something of excellence." This need to achieve, interacting with external factors, determines the achievement of success. A person may also tend to avoid engaging in a particular activity because of a fear of failure. "Achievement motivation for any individual can thus be determined by the relative strength of the tendency to approach a task compared with the strength of the tendency to avoid the task" (Williams and Burden 1997, p. 114).

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs/ Motivation Pyramid envisages that every individual has a hierarchy of needs, which can be variously applied to specific situations. An individual is naturally motivated to achieve higher-order needs which can be achieved only if the lower order needs have been fulfilled (Wright 1987, p.29).

The implications of this hierarchy are of great significance in the field of L2 learning. The physical needs must be fulfilled first: the hungry and the cold can hardly feel an urgent need to learn another language. When the next level–the need for safety, security, and stability–is gratified, the students need to feel that they are accepted by their teachers and peers. Their potential can be realized through educational programs only when they are socially accepted and rise in self-esteem. Once the lower-level needs of safety, belonging, and esteem are fulfilled, the students' strong drives will be devoted to self-actualization, self-fulfilment, and self-realization.

Therefore, if L2 learning does not seem to yield the expected result, the reasons may be traced to unsatisfactory lower levels of the hierarchy. Also, what the teacher perceives as learners' needs may be different from the learners' own perceptions. If students do not appear to be interested in SL learning activities as designed by the teacher, they should be modified to suit, at least to some extent, the students' real needs, interests, and preoccupations.

Gardner's (1985, p.147) Socio-educational Model of language learning has greatly contributed to the research on motivation in FL and L2 learning. It incorporates the learners' cultural beliefs, their attitudes towards the learning situation, their integrativeness, and their motivation. The essential element, motivation, is described as "the effort, want (desire) and affect associated with learning a second language." The 'desire' factor is intimately related to Integrative/Instrumental orientations of motivation. The component 'affect', relating to factors such as risk-taking, self-esteem, and anxiety, is defined as a combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language, plus favourable attitudes towards the language. For the purpose of measurement, Gardner and his associates define motivation slightly differently, as comprising a desire to learn the language, motivational intensity, and attitudes towards learning the language.

During the 1990s, writers such as Crookes

and Schmidt (1991) and Dornyei (1994) put forward alternative ways of conceptualizing motivation in FL and L2 learning. Dornyei's (1994) model is a three-level categorization of different components involved in motivation and acknowledges the situational factors involved in L2 learning. The language level relates to the various orientations and motives of the learner (culture, community, the utility of the L2, etc.); the learner level involves individual characteristics of the learner; and the situation level includes social factors such as the teacher and group dynamics. This model highlights that motivation is a multifaceted phenomenon that will be affected by situational factors.

The cognitive view of motivation attributes the key role to choice: why people decide to act in certain ways, what factors influence the choices they make, and the amount of effort one is prepared to make in order to achieve one's goals. Thus, one makes decisions about one's own actions, and the role of the teacher is to help and enable learners to make suitable decisions. This is opposed to the behavioristic perspective according to which one's actions are determined by external forces such as rewards, over which one has no control. However, the purely cognitive approach fails to take account of the whole person of the learner: the influence of psychological and environmental factors.

On the other hand, the social-constructivist perspective of motivation, founded on a cognitive framework, presented by Williams and Burden (1997, p.120), holds that each individual is motivated differently. Motivation is defined as "a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals)."

At the centre of motivation is the individual's decision to act, whether to do something, how much effort to expend on it, the degree of perseverance, and so on. These decisions also depend on one's internal attributes like interest, curiosity, perceived value of the activity, self-concept regarding one's strengths and weaknesses, sense of control over one's actions, attitude to language-learning in general, to the target language and the target language community in particular, affective states such as anxiety, fear, confidence, etc., age, gender, and so on.

The decision is also influenced by external factors that interact with each other, such as parents, teachers, peers, exams, feedback, learning environment–the size of the class, school ethos, etc.; societal expectations, cultural norms, etc. For instance, the culture of a country influences the educational system which in turn affects schools, teachers, parents, and others.

The internal factors, which interact with each other in a dynamic manner, undergo dynamic interaction with the external forces as well. The extent to which these factors interact with each other and the relative importance attributed to them by the individual affect the level and extent of learner's motivation to complete a task. The social constructivist approach is thus "cognitive and constructivist, socially contextualised and dynamically interactive" (Williams and Burden 1997, p.140).

Thus, the social-constructivist model of motivation has significant pedagogical implications. Teachers usually attempt to motivate learners simply by arousing an initial interest, for instance, presenting an interesting language activity, but motivating implies far more than this. Even after the commencement of the activity, the effort needs to be sustained so as to achieve the goal, by processes internal to the learner but influenced by the environment.

Instrumental/Integrative Motivation

Gardner (1985) suggests that motivation can take an integrative or instrumental orientation. An integrative orientation occurs when a language is learned because of a genuine interest in the language–a desire to identify with and move closer to the community where the language is spoken. Learners are willing to regard themselves as potential members of the target language community, have a low degree of ethnocentrism, and a love of other cultures and ways of life. On the other hand, L2 learners who are instrumentally motivated, learn the L2 as a useful instrument towards furthering other goals or as a means to other ends, such as passing exams, career enhancement, or financial rewards. It is held that an integrative orientation will be more lasting and more concurrent with the achievement of L2 proficiency since it is an essential and enduring part of the learner's personality. But, instrumentally motivated learners are more influenced by external factors such as rewards, which are regarded as less constant.
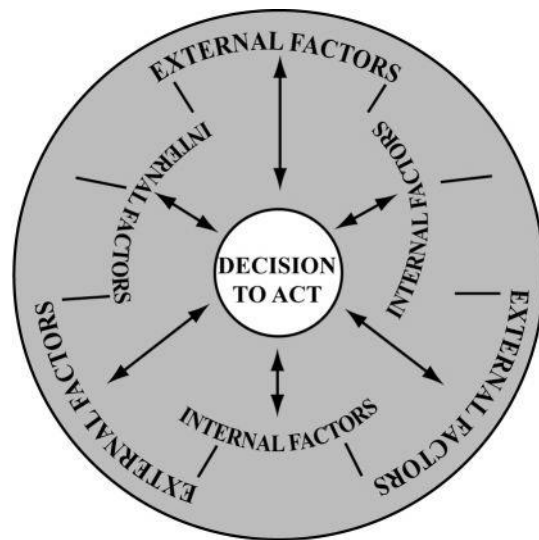
However, as viewed by Littlewood (1984,

Fig. 1. The Social-Constructivist Model of Motivation

p.57), "the two kinds of motivation do not exclude each other: most learners are motivated by a mixture of integrative and instrumental reasons." Burstall et.al. (1974), in a study of secondary pupils learning an FL in British schools, found that both instrumental and integrative orientation played a part in success. Therefore, it may be inferred that, while integrative motivation is perhaps more important in an SL context such as learning French in Canada or English in the USA, instrumental orientation may be important in situations such as learning English in the Philippines or India or in other contexts where English functions more as a foreign language, as in Japan. More recent studies are doubtful of the instrumental/integrative distinction, but still stress the importance of positive attitude to the SL country as well as the instrumental aspect of motivation. Thus, we see that it cannot be asserted, as Gardner originally did, that integrative motivation is necessarily more beneficial than other forms.

The distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation is similar to that between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, conceived by cognitive psychologists in theories of learning in general. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1989) provide a clear definition of these concepts. Motivation is considered to be extrinsic when the only reason for performing an act is to gain something outside the activity itself, such as passing an examination or obtaining financial rewards. Conversely, when the act of doing something generates interest and enjoyment, and the reason for performing the activity lies within the activity itself, the motivation is intrinsic. Thus, an intrinsically motivated person does an activity for its own sake, or as an end in itself, whereas an extrinsically motivated person considers an activity as a means to an end.

Factors that Affect Motivation

Several factors have been identified as influencing the level of motivation of L2 learners. These include the following.

1. Need for Communication

The chief objective of learning an L2 is the need for communication. The degree of this need depends to a large extent on the nature of the social group in which the learner lives. In L2 situations, the language is used for internal communication, for social contacts or professional enhancement, for instance, in a bilingual or multilingual community. There is a similar need for an SL for internal communication among linguistic minorities. In contrast, in an FL situation, the language has no internal functions and is used mainly for communicating with outsiders and hence,

communicative need is less, as in learning of French in England, English in Germany, Japan or Holland (Littlewood 1984).

The need to communicate varies widely among individuals, within any community. Littlewood cites the example of older women in some immigrant families in Britain, who, having less desire for contacts outside the home, achieve only limited proficiency in the SL, perhaps just enough to satisfy their survival needs. Clare Burstall et.al. (1978) found that there were more successful foreign language learners among children of middle-class families than working-class families because they were more oriented towards contacts outside their own community. Thus, people who reach an advanced level of proficiency in the foreign language are those who perceive a high degree of communicative value in it.

2. Attitude Toward the L2 Community

According to Littlewood (1984), motivation is promoted by favourable attitudes towards the L2 community, due to two reasons. First, attitudes influence the perceived purpose of learning the SL. Favourable attitudes to the speakers of the SL make one seek more contact with them, which reinforces the communicative need. Secondly, our attitudes toward the foreign culture influence the nature of the process of SL learning. When learning a foreign language, we are, to some extent, giving up markers of our own identity to adopt those of another cultural group. If we favour such a process that results in cultural modifications, SL learning can enrich and liberate us. Otherwise, there may be strong internal barriers against learning, which create only resentment and insecurity

in the learners. Learning may proceed only to the minimum level required by external demands. If the L2 community is not so familiar to the learners to have positive or negative attitudes, and if an L2 is learnt primarily for its international function, attitudes relate more directly to the classroom learning experience.

3. Curiosity/Interest

Curiosity can be provoked by making tasks surprising, incongruous, or innovative. The tasks must ensure an optimum level of arousal and complexity, in order to be motivating. Too complex a task is likely to induce confusion. The notion of optimal arousal was put forward by Csikszentmihalyi and associates (1989), who coined the term 'flow experience' to describe the sense of total involvement–a state of sustained arousal.

4. Sense of Achievement

Another factor that affects the learner's level of motivation is his experience of success. A sense of progress achieved is the greatest motivation one can think of in any learning situation. Yet, the relationship between achievement and motivation is a controversial one, as to which leads to which. Researchers such as Gardner (1985, p. 153) have claimed that achievement in L2 learning is mainly the result of motivation and aptitude. Meanwhile, there is equally convincing evidence that success heightens motivation (Burstall et al. 1974). Conversely, failure may demotivate students, which may lead to further failure.

5. Perceived Value of the Learning Activity

The greater the value that individuals attach to the involvement in an activity, the more highly motivated they will be, both to engage and persist in the activity. This holds good whether they are influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Williams and Burden 1997).

Crookes and Schmidt ((1991, p.488) point out that motivation is strongest when learners find their ability to be equal to the challenge, and both as comparatively high; in other words, when they have "the sense of feeling competent and feeling challenged."

6. Understanding of the Learning Objectives

A poor understanding of the learning objectives may reduce learners' motivation and will to succeed. This is also true if learners' objectives are in conflict with the teacher's. If learners are not able to pursue what Allwright (1984, p.3) calls a "personal agenda" for language learning, it may severely ruin their motivation. The language teacher must discuss with the learners why they are carrying out particular learning tasks and how each of them leads them towards this goal. Again, learners may be involved in making decisions about what activity to perform, how to go about them and how much effort to expend.

7. Self-concept

Motivation is greatly affected by the students' perception of themselves. High degrees of self-esteem have been associated positively with oral proficiency in L2 (Heyde 1977). Learners with high self-esteem are rarely embarrassed when communicating in a strange language or in an unfamiliar situation. The association between language proficiency and risk-taking is generally held

to be directly proportional, particularly in oral communication. Beebe (1983) argues that learners having high self-esteem attempt to improve their L2 ability by listening to and using language which is beyond their present proficiency level, and are more ready to risk making mistakes or to project a reduced image of themselves.

8. Feedback

The nature of feedback provided to learners is a powerful motivating influence. External reinforcers in the form of rewards—gold stars, house points, tokens—often prove to be excellent ways to motivate under-achieving or reluctant learners. Extra homework, detention, and reprimands for poor learning progress are intended as motivators towards positive change, but they can often have the opposite effect. Nevertheless, there are great dangers in relying excessively on rewards and praise as motivators since these can have a potentially negative effect, especially if learners are already extrinsically motivated (Williams and Burden 1997).

9. External/Environmental Factors

The teacher can build a supportive learning environment which fosters the will to learn, and where individuals are encouraged to express themselves and develop their full potential and individuality, thereby creating powerful motivating conditions in the classroom.

In spite of the multitude of research which proves that motivation is related to success in L2 learning, there is no clear indication as to how motivation affects learning: whether it is motivation that produces successful learning, or whether it is successful learning that enhances motivation (Skehan 1989). Moreover, the concept of motivation is composed of many different and overlapping factors such as attitude and curiosity. These, in turn, will differ in different situations and are also subject to various external influences. Therefore, any debate on motivation is inevitably complicated.

Educational Implications

Many of our actions are prompted by a mixture of both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. It is usually found that our students learn English for purely extrinsic reasons. Learners must be offered tasks that exploit their intrinsic motivation at the stages of initiating and sustaining motivation, and promote in them interest, curiosity, challenge, and development of independent mastery and judgment. A good language teacher can make language learning more fruitful by encouraging intrinsic motivation–by helping them see value in carrying out activities for their own sake rather than purely for external reasons.

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