

# Individual learner differences in second language acquisition education essay



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## **1. Introduction**

The fact that competency levels attained by second language learners fluctuate so greatly (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 53), raises an intriguing question with regards to second language acquisition (SLA), why are some individuals better at acquiring language than others? A major reason for this variation in L2 proficiency levels is commonly attributed to individual learner differences (ILDs), (Dörnyei, 2005: 2).

This essay sets out to explain the important role that ILDs play in SLA, through an in-depth discussion on the contribution made by L2 motivation. Three influential theories offering different perspectives on L2 motivation: the Socio-educational model, self-determination theory and the Process model will be discussed in detail. I will also look at the theoretical shifts currently taking place in L2 motivation research, before concluding with a discussion on the strategies that teachers can use to instil and nurture motivation in their students.

## **2. Role of ILDs in SLA**

Individual differences are unique learning characteristics which are present in all learners to varying degrees. They can help to distinguish learning needs and identify the extent to which learners will succeed in acquiring a second language (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). These differences are social, cognitive and affective in nature, and include aptitude, motivation, age, personality, learning strategies, learning styles and anxiety (for detailed reviews, see for example, Naiman et al 1995; Skehan 1989; Dörnyei 2005).

Their relevance to language achievement has made ILDs, a focus of considerable attention in SLA research (Dörnyei, 2005). Developments in research, especially in relation to aptitude and motivation, has seen a shift from a product-orientated approach to a more process-orientated stance (ibid: 6). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of the temporal nature and situational context of learner characteristics (Dörnyei, 2009). Current arguments however, have suggested that rather than being monolithic variables, ILDs are complex attributes consisting of a combination of sub-components and sub-processes (ibid). All ILDs are implicated in language learning, however they do not function in isolation and some even have elements in common (Gardner, 2008).

A look at some of the influential theories which have emerged from research on L2 motivation over the last fifty years will help to explain the complex role that ILDs can play in the language learning process.

### **3. L2 Motivation**

Motivation is a learners' orientation towards learning goals (Gardner, 1985), and is regarded by many as the most influential ILD in the language learning process (Ellis, 1985). Therefore its relevance to the classroom environment becomes evident, and to know what drives this motivation is of great pedagogic interest.

Many of the learner characteristics involved in the SLA process are dependent on, and in some cases completely overridden by motivation (Gardner, 2006). A learner with a natural aptitude for learning languages, for example, may find it difficult to attain long-term language goals without the

necessary motivation (ibid). On the other hand, high levels of motivation may lead to successful learning, even where little aptitude exists for language (ibid).

Theories looking to explain the role of motivation in language learning have evolved through four main stages. Dörnyei (2005) categorises these as: the Social Psychological period (1959-1990); the Cognitive-Situated period (1990's); the Process-orientated stage (late 1990's); and finally a period (last decade) consisting of new approaches that have focused on a learners sense of self-identity. Table 1 summarises the main L2 motivation theories and concepts.

### **3. 1. The Social Psychological approach to L2 motivation**

Interest in L2 motivation was initiated by social psychologists Wallace Lambert, Robert Gardner and associates as early as 1959, looking to understand the language and cultural

#### **Approach to motivation**

#### **Examples**

Social-psychological

#### **Socio-educational model, (Gardner, 1985).**

Key concepts: Integrative motivation, Integrativeness, integrative orientation.

#### **Theory of Linguistic self-confidence, (Clement, 1986).**

Key concepts: Self-confidence – a self-belief of having the ability to manage the learning process.

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Cognitive - Situated

**Self-determination theory, (Brown, 1994; Noels et al., 2000).**

Key concepts: intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, amotivation.

**Attribution theory, (Weiner, 1992).**

Key concepts: attributing past success or failure to current actions.

**Goal setting theory, (Oxford and Shearin, 1994).**

Key concepts: Cognitive perception of goals as a motivating factor.

**Goal orientation theory, (Ames, 1992).**

Key concepts: Goal mastery and performance orientations.

**Motivation and learner strategy use, (Oxford and Nyikos; 1989, Macintyre et al., 1996).**

Key concepts: Motivation as a key factor in stimulating strategy use.

**Task Motivation, (Julkunen, 2001; Dornyei, 2003).**

Key concepts: task execution, appraisal, action control.

Mixed approach

**i. Willingness to communicate, (Macintyre et al., 1998, 2003).**

Key concepts: Willingness to communicate as a key factor for achieving

communicative competency.

Process-orientated

**Process model, (Dornyei and Otto, 1998; Dornyei, 2001b).**

Key concepts: temporal nature of motivation, which includes a preactional/actional/postactional stage.

Current and future

**L2 motivational self system, (Dornyei, 2005).**

Key concepts: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self.

**Complex dynamic systems, (Larsen-Freeman, 2007).**

Key concepts: integrating different theoretical perspectives.

**Table 1. Some of the different approaches used in L2 motivation research**

conflicts between English and French speaking communities in Canada. Their research adopted a socio-psychological approach, based on the central idea that a learner's success in acquiring a second language is dictated by an attitude towards the target language community (Gardner, 1985). Their research on students learning French showed that aptitude and motivation are closely associated with achievement in language learning (ibid). They concluded that motivation is characterised by an individual's willingness to be like members of the target community (ibid).

A model based on a socio-psychological approach that has been very influential in L2 motivation research is Gardner's socio-educational model (see for example, Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991). The most recent version of this model is shown in figure 1.

## **LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT**

### **Other Factors**

**(for example, Learning strategies, language ANXIETY (Gardner, 2001))**

### **Other Support**

## **LANGUAGE APTITUDE**

INTEGRATIVE MOTIVATION

## **INTEGRATIVENESS**

## **MOTIVATION**

## **ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE LEARNING SITUATION**

**Figure 1. A basic model of the role of motivation in SLA (adapted from Gardner (2001b)).**

The most elaborate and researched aspect of Gardner's model is 'integrative motivation', which he defines as the motivation to learn a L2 because of a positive attitude towards, and a desire to integrate with that community (Gardner, 2001b). The three variables that constitute integrative motivation are (ibid):

Integrativeness – this represents a desire to learn a second language to identify with the target community, and is reflected in a learner's behaviour through the following:

An integrative orientation, representing the reason for learning, which in this case is an interest in learning an L2 to interact with the target community.

A positive attitude towards the target language group.

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An interest in foreign languages or a general openness to all language groups.

Attitudes towards the learning situation (ATLS) - this refers to attitudes towards the language teacher, the course in general, the course materials and other factors related to the learning context.

Motivation - this is a learner's goal driven behaviour. A motivated learner: makes a concerted effort to learn a language, for example by doing extra work and seeking more learning opportunities, displays a strong desire to learn a language and is focused on achieving the goal, enjoys learning and has an overall positive attitude towards the learning process.

An integratively motivated learner is therefore: motivated to learn a second language, keen to interact and be associated with the target community, and has a positive outlook on the learning situation. To sustain consistent levels of motivation, integrativeness and/or a positive ATLS are essential characteristics, however, it is the motivation element of the 'Integrative Motivation' complex that is the active variable and which directly influences 'Language Achievement' (Gardner, 2001b: 6). Therefore, a learner who has a high level of integrativeness and/or a positive attitude towards learning, but is low in motivation is unlikely to achieve high levels of proficiency.

The affect of instrumental factors on L2 motivation was not included in Gardner's core theory, but he suggests that they could be one of the 'other supports' affecting motivation (Gardner, 2001a: 7). Based on this, it is possible to substitute integrativeness with instrumentality in the

representation of the model in figure 1, to give what Gardner calls '  
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Instrumental Motivation' (ibid). This is a motivation to learn a L2 for instrumental gains, such as better employment or education. An instrumentally motivated learner has specific communicative needs, which provide a purpose for learning and an impetus for successful language acquisition (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

Gardner's model makes little reference to other attributes, for example, personal aspirations and past experiences, which could affect an integratively motivated learner. However, empirical research in different contexts is continuously bringing to light the possibility of including more factors in the general L2 motivational construct. To check Gardner's model for adaptability, Tremblay and Gardner (1995) integrated other measurements of motivation, such as anxiety and goal-setting strategies. Empirical testing of the extended model showed that addition of the extra variables did not affect the structure of the original model (ibid).

Research on motivation in different context has led some applied linguists to suggest the notion of the language community associated with integrative motivation is untenable for international learners of English (Ushioda and Dörnyei, 2009). In a multi-lingual society like China, for example, few opportunities exist for interacting with native English communities. In such a context, instrumental motivation or external factors (for example, exams and employment) are more prevalent among learners than a desire for integrating with native speakers of English (Warden and Lin, 2008).

For this reason, other researchers have suggested that the integrative construct should at least be re-examined by including the global L2 learning

context and the multi-dimensionality of a learner's identity. Dörnyei and Csizer, (2002) suggested that rather than identifying with an external language community, the integrative concept could be more accurately linked to a learner's internal process of identification with a self-concept. Dörnyei's (2005) motivational self-system which developed from this idea is discussed in section 3. 4.

### **3. 2. Self-Determination Theory and SLA**

Influenced by advances in motivational psychology, and a need to understand the classroom-situated nature of motivation, L2 research moved on from a socio-psychological approach, to look at affects of classroom-situated factors on motivation.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a highly influential approach in motivational psychology, and several studies have attempted to incorporate some of its components to explain L2 motivation (for example, Brown, 1994; Noels et al., 2000).

According to this theory there are three types of learner motivations: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (Deci and Ryan, 2002). These motivations form a continuum depending on the degree of learner self-determination, where self-determination is as an individual's sense of choice and control over the learning process (ibid).

Intrinsic Motivation (IM) refers to an individual's motivation to undertake an activity, purely for personal feelings of pleasure and enjoyment associated with that activity, and is driven by a desire for competence and self-

determination (Noel et al., 2000). Intrinsically motivated students are  
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considered more likely to achieve autonomy, competence and fulfil long-term language goals (Ramage, 1990).

Extrinsic motivation (EM), on the other hand, relates to actions carried out for: instrumental gains, in search for reward or to avoid punishment (Noels et al., 2000). This motivation can vary in degree depending on the extent to which the activity is controlled by the learner or other variables (Deci and Ryan, 2002).

Vallerand et al., (1993) have suggested six subtypes of IM and EM which lie on a continuum of self-determination (see table 2).

Noels (2001) suggests that L2 learner motivation can be assessed using the intrinsic and extrinsic constructs. These motivations however, do not necessarily have to be exclusive, for example, a learner whose behaviour is consistent with 'identified regulation' may also exhibit some of the adjacent motivations on the continuum (ibid).

## **Self-Determination**

### **Type of Motivation**

#### **Description**

HIGH

Zero

Intrinsic Motivation to know

Performing an activity for the pleasure associated with learning or exploring new knowledge. E. g., when reading a new book.

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### Intrinsic Motivation to accomplish

Performing an activity for the pleasure associated with accomplishing or creating something. E. g., a student doing more homework than is required.

### Intrinsic Motivation to experience stimulation

Performing an activity for the stimulated sensations (e. g. pleasure and excitement) associated with engagement with the activity. E. g., a student who goes to class for the pleasure of participating in discussions.

### Extrinsic Motivation - Identified Regulation

Extrinsic motivation is internalised to the extent that learner behaviour is regulated by a sense of value and usefulness of the activity to the self. E. g., a student who studies the night before an exam because they think it is important to them.

### Extrinsic Motivation - Introjected Regulation

Learner behaviour is regulated by internalisation of past external means. E. g., studying the night before an exam because it is expected of a good student.

### Extrinsic Motivation - External Regulation

Learner behaviour is regulated completely by external means (rewards or constraints) - showing the least self-determined form of extrinsic motivation. E. g., Studying the night before an exam because of pressure from parents.

## Amotivation

A lack of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. A learner feels their behaviour is regulated by factors out of their control, and may eventually drop out of the learning process.

### **Table 2. Language Learning Orientation Scale: Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation and Amotivation (adapted from Vallerand et al., (1993)).**

Intrinsic motivation is characterised by a strong sense of self-determination, and is closely associated with integrative motivation (Noels, 2001). This suggests that students learning a language for pleasure may also be seeking interaction with the L2 community. Intrinsic motivation however, is identified more with attitudes towards learning, than the target community (ibid: 54).

The social environment (for example, the teacher, family members and the L2 community) has considerable influence on a student's perception of self-determination. A teacher plays a significant role in this regard, and can promote intrinsic motivation by encouraging learner autonomy and providing positive feedback (Noels, 2000: 55). Similarly, students learning for intrinsic reasons are more sensitive to the teacher's instructional style (ibid).

In contrast, the less self-determined external regulation component of extrinsic motivation is linked to instrumental behaviour (Noels, 2001: 53). A limitation of extrinsic behaviour is that it can have short-term characteristics. A study carried out by Ramage (1990) showed that students who learnt a language for academic reasons are more likely to discontinue future language classes. Extrinsic course pressures, for example, compulsory

reading, can also negatively affect a learner's intrinsic interests (Dörnyei, 1994a).

### **3.3. A Process-orientated approach to motivation**

Dörnyei and Otto's (1998) process model of motivation integrates various theoretical perspectives of L2 motivation, and draws attention to the temporal nature of motivation in classroom learning. The model is influenced by Heckhausen and Kuhl's Action control theory, which proposes two sequential phases of motivational behaviour: an individual's motivation to form an intention, and a motivation to initiate and sustain the intended action (Heckhausen, 1991).

Dörnyei and Otto's model breaks down the motivational process into three temporal phases. The first relates to the transformation of initial desires to goals, and then intentions. The next sees these intentions being enacted, leading to the successful/unsuccessful accomplishment of goals, and the final phase is an overall evaluation of the learning process (see figure 2).

#### **Preactional Stage**

##### **(Choice Motivation)**

Motivational Functions: generate motivation to select a goal; form an intention to act; select an action plan to enact the intention.

Possible factors influencing motivation: goal properties; attitude towards the learning process; attitude towards the target community; perception of self-ability; social environmental encouragement or discouragement.

## **Actional Stage**

### **(Executive Motivation)**

Motivational Functions: carry out sub-tasks to maintain motivation; ongoing appraisal of achievement; action control (self-regulation to help persevere with learning).

Possible factors influencing motivation: quality of the learning experience; degree of autonomy; teacher, learner group and family influence/support; classroom structure (competitive or co-operative); knowledge and ability to use self-motivating, goal-setting and learning strategies.

## **Postactional Stage**

### **(Motivational Retrospection)**

Motivational Functions: attribute reasons to success or failure; elaborate internal standards and action-specific strategies; dismiss original intention and further planning.

Possible factors influencing motivation: personal attribution style; self-confidence; feedback.

## **Figure 2. Process model of L2 learning motivation (adapted from Dörnyei, (2003: 19)).**

An important assertion made by the process-orientated model is that motivational behaviour is influenced by different factors. Consequently, different theories of motivation can be associated with each phase (Dörnyei, 2003: 18). Integrativeness, for example, may be the motivational influence on goal setting in the preactional stage. In the executive phase, situated

aspects of motivation play a greater role, mechanisms of the task processing system are more relevant here (Dörnyei, 2003). The retrospective links that learners make between the original goal and actual achievement in the post-actional stage are likely to be attributed to past learning experiences, a motivational behaviour addressed by Weiner (1992) in the attribution theory.

Two aspects that the model overlooks are: the possibility of several actional processes running concurrently, or an actional process with multiple motivational influences (Dörnyei, 2003). This is likely in a school setting, where students often have multiple goals (for example, social and academic) and overlapping motivational influences (for example, task, course or curriculum related) (ibid). The model assumes that the actional processes have defined boundaries, however in an educational context it may be difficult to identify where one actional process starts and the next begins.

### **3. 4. Present and future: The motivational self-system and a Dynamic systems approach.**

Since the socio-psychological period of motivation research, the global reality of English has changed immensely. The rapid globalisation of English has challenged the validity of many SLA theories (Kachru, 1988), because these theories fail to consider the context of the world Englishes learner (Sridhar and Sridhar, 1992).

With limited or no contact opportunities with the native target community, the notion of a 'self-concept' (referring to an individual's images and cognitions of the self) suggested by Dörnyei and Csizer (2002), is possibly a more relevant motivational feature in many EFL contexts. Dörnyei developed



this idea further, in his L2 motivational self-system, which equated integrativeness with an 'ideal L2 self' (Dörnyei, 2005; 2010). The main components

of this system are: (Dörnyei, 2010)

'Ideal L2 Self' - a L2-specific image of the attributes that one would like to possess. For example, hopes, desires, aspirations.

'Ought-to L2 Self' - a self-guide which refers to those attributes one thinks one ought to possess to meet expectations and avoid negative outcomes.

'L2 Learning Experience' - this refers to the executive motives (similar to those identified in the Process model) associated with the immediate learning environment and experience. For example, impact of the teacher, other learners, the course, the experience of success.

The hypothesis behind the self-system is that a learner's desire to become a person proficient in the L2, serves as a powerful motivating force to learn a language (Ushioda and Dörnyei, 2009: 3-4). A recent study in the Japanese context showed that this desire represented by the ideal L2 self is equivalent to the concept of integrativeness in Gardner's socio-educational model, but the ideal L2 self is probably more accurate in explaining motivated behaviour (Ryan, 2009)

Dörnyei's idea of placing the 'self' at the centre of the conceptual role of motivation offers a new perspective, however it overlooks the process-oriented, and contextually dynamic nature of motivation. Justifying this

complex nature of L2 motivation, can only be possible by integrating more than one approach (Macintyre et al., 2010).

A possibility of combining different perspectives of motivation is suggested by Ushioda (2009) with her person-in-context, relational view of emergent motivation. She suggests that integrating relevant theoretical frameworks to support future analysis of the complex nature of interactional processes and contextual factors in motivational behaviour can help to provide a better understanding of how L2 motivation is shaped (ibid).

A similar possibility is offered by the theoretical paradigms of dynamic systems theory (for a detailed review, see Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008). This theory involves a study of systems, where the system is analysed as a whole rather than as its individual parts (ibid). Learner variation is seen as the result of a complex system of relevant factors working in unison, rather than as a result of differences in individual determinants (for example, aptitude or motivation) (Dörnyei, 2009). As an example of an application of a dynamic systems approach to L2 learning, Dörnyei suggests the possibility of identifying an optimal combination of motivational, cognitive and affective factors with regard to task behaviour, that function as an integrated unit (for a detailed review see, ibid).

#### **4. The practical value of theory – motivational strategies for the classroom**

Chomsky (1988) emphasises the vital role played by teachers in learner motivation by suggesting that ninety nine per cent of teaching involves getting students interested in learning. A language teacher's motivational

practice is also linked directly to increased levels of learner motivation (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008). Therefore, the need to use appropriate strategies to manage classroom motivation is extremely relevant to L2 practitioners.

Motivational strategies are techniques used by a teacher to manage learner motivation, or used by individual learners to regulate their own motivation levels (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008). Although, several motivation strategies have been proposed in L2 literature (for example, Williams and Burden, 1997; Dörnyei, 2001a; Alison and Halliwell, 2002), very few are supported by empirical evidence. Self-motivating strategies for learners are an even less researched area of L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2006).

An example of an elaborate, theory-based framework which looks at motivational strategies from both a teacher and learner perspective is proposed by Dörnyei (2001a). This model consists of four phases (ibid):

Creating the basic motivational condition, by establishing a good student-teacher relationship, a relaxed learning atmosphere and a cohesive learner group.

Generating initial motivation by:

Strengthening language related values and attitudes (intrinsic, integrative or instrumental values).

Increasing the expectancy of success.

Increasing goal-orientedness, for example, by making learners aware of the practical (non-syllabus related) reasons or value of doing an activity.

Making teaching materials relevant.

Creating realistic learner beliefs. Many new learners have inaccurate beliefs about language learning, a realisation of their falseness can have a demotivating influence.

Maintaining and protecting motivation, to keep sight of goals, and maintain interest and concentration. The most relevant strategies in this phase include:

Making the learning process stimulating and interesting.

Presenting tasks in a motivating manner, making them stimulating and relevant.

Setting specific learner goals.

Preserving the learner's self-esteem and promoting their self-confidence.

Creating learner autonomy.

Promoting self-motivating learner strategies in order to:

Preserve the original goal commitment, for example, by encouraging learners to remember favourable expectations or positive rewards.

Maintain concentration, for example, by encouraging learners to: identify and manage distractions; and focus on the first steps to take when beginning an activity.

Eliminate boredom and add extra interest in a task, for example, by showing learners how to add a twist to a task and using their imagination to make it more stimulating.

Manage disruptive emotions and generate a positive emotional state, for example, by getting students to self-encourage and introducing them to relaxation techniques.

Remove negative and utilise positive environmental influences, for example, by encouraging students to remove distractions and asking for peer help.

Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation, by :

Promoting positive learner attributions (an idea supported by the Attribution theory, Weiner, 1992)

Providing motivational feedback, that is informative and encouraging. This can help to increase learner satisfaction and self-confidence, and encourages constructive self-reflection on weaknesses.

Using rewards and grades cautiously, as they can distract the learner from the real purpose of the task (Dörnyei, 2006: 730). When they are used, they should be offered in a motivational manner.

The most motivating of teachers are considered to be those who rely on a few simple and carefully selected techniques (Dörnyei, 2006: 730-731).

Therefore, achieving optimal levels of learner motivation are more likely if motivational strategies are matched by a teacher selectively, to learners' specific needs.

## **5. Conclusion**

This essay discussed the significant role that motivation, as an example of an ILD variable, plays in the long and arduous task of second language acquisition. I presented three influential theories that have approached L2 motivation from different perspectives, and looked at some of the current trends in motivational research. A look at some possible motivational strategies demonstrated how theoretical concepts can be applied to improve the quality of classroom learning.

The motivational characteristics of the L2 learner highlight the complex but influential role played by ILDs in SLA. Many of the variables involved in L2 motivation have a degree of overlap, and interact both with each other and other ILDs (Gardner, 2008). In order to understand the true nature of these webs of interactions and their affect on L2 achievement, the possibilities offered by a dynamic systems approach is probably the best way forward.