

Motivation in foreign language learning. What kind of motivation leads to success? A literature survey.

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Introduction

This paper is a survey of the literature addressing the issue of motivation in foreign language learning. It discusses the findings of research studies and seeks to draw conclusions from them which might help answer the question of which kind of motivation is most likely to lead to success in foreign language learning. Knowledge of this would, of course, be helpful in our role as teachers of English or other foreign languages here in Japan.

The issue of motivation in second language acquisition (SLA) has been regarded for nearly forty years, since the early work in Canada of Gardner and Lambert (1959, cited in Crookes and Schmidt, 1991), as one of the key variables which affect the amount of success in learners of a second or foreign language. Studies in motivation developed apace out of the influence of Gardner and Lambert's (1972) seminal work and the burgeoning interest in individual learners' differences (c.f., Schumann, 1978), as well as an increasing belief that the contexts of learning were significant (discussed at length in Clement and Kruidenier, 1983).

Teachers are interested in motivation because they see it as directly helping to determine their students' attitudes in the classroom. As Crookes and Schmidt (1991) point out, this is rather different from the perspective of researchers in SLA, who believe the type of motivation, as well as its

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strength, is significant in learners' success or not in achieving proficiency in a language other than their first language (L1).

The question at the heart of this paper is: What kind of motivation has the strongest positive effect on SLA? It is an important question because the answer should help us explain why some language learners do better than others; and the answer may be useful for language educators – indeed, educators in general, – in their attempts to create certain conditions for learning.

The basic continuum of motivation types, referred to in all studies of motivation, is Gardner and Lambert's (1972) model, which has integrative motivation at one end and instrumental motivation at the other. The former reflects some desire to integrate into the target language community, perhaps from an interest in its culture or people. With the latter, the learner views the target language as useful, probably for his or her career. According to this model, an integrative motivation is the more likely to lead to success in learning a language.

However, the issue is an important one to review because studies conducted by others have yielded opposing results (Lukmani, 1972), more particularized interpretations (for example, Svanes, 1987), and even contradictory claims (Hermann, 1980), as well as a search to explain unclear answers (Chihara and Oller, 1978). The importance of considering the question of which type of motivation is potentially more successful has been emphasized by Fitzgerald (1978), who showed that a whole social and education policy can end up down the wrong track if educators and even politicians do not make themselves aware of their students' inclination. Furthermore, Muchnick and Wolfe (1982) say once sources of variation in language-learning success, such as motivation, are identified, these sources "will provide useful information for curricular or program evaluations and subsequent revisions" (p.263).

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Before arriving at the main question, however, I shall discuss the significance of two other terms related to motivation in the question, namely foreign language learning and success. I shall also discuss some criticisms of the methods used to measure motivation and also of Gardner and Lambert's (1972) influential integrative-instrumental scale. Finally, I shall consider whether success itself is the prime contributor to motivation.

The importance of a foreign language learning context in relation to motivation.

Despite general claims that one or another type of motivation results in superior learning, research in a variety of learning contexts has made it clear that results of particular motivation studies can be generalized only to similar contexts. Thus it is important to distinguish between English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. As motivation is one of many variables which can affect language acquisition, so the learning context will affect the motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1972) recognized this. Having pioneered their work in officially bicultural and sometimes bilingual Canada, they conducted comparative studies with learners of French among Americans in Connecticut (their one true foreign language learning context), as well as with learners of English in the Philippines, learners of French in Maine and Louisiana and learners of English among French-speaking Americans in Maine and Louisiana. In another influential early study, Lukmani (1972) looked specifically at Marathi schoolgirls learning English in Bombay's post-colonial society, where the English-speaking Indians were still considered the elite and English ability was a passport to a better job. Indeed, those of Lukmani's subjects with the highest instrumental motivation performed the best in the English cloze tests given them. In other ESL settings, Gardner and Lambert (1972) found instrumental motivation was slightly more prevalent among

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Filipino learners and Fitzgerald (1978) found the same among immigrants to England from south Asia, even though most schools had wrongly assumed their first priority was to integrate socially and culturally into their new host society. In fact these immigrants, in their ESL setting, were more concerned with economic assimilation. In other words, their motivation was more likely to be instrumental, which ties in with the findings of Gardner and Lambert.

Chihara and Oller (1978) wondered if their unclear results relating to motivation and proficiency—from 123 adult Japanese speakers learning English in Osaka—were due to their clear foreign-language learning context. A dozen years later Dornyei (1990) was more certain that although “SLA contexts are varied, they are clearly distinct from.....a foreign-language learning (FLL) context, which involves a community in which one or two languages are taught in school for several years as an academic subject and many students develop proficiency in them” (pp. 48-9). Others, such as Clement and Kruidenier (1983), have also argued that there is a significant enough difference between the SLA and FLL settings for the results of motivation studies to be valid only for the particular setting in which they are carried out. No one has argued the other way.

Thus, there has been an increasing recognition by researchers that it is important to distinguish the type of learning context – FLL or ESL – when trying to draw any conclusions from the results of these motivations studies. Motivations for learning English (or any other language) in a foreign language learning environment will be different from those in a second language context.

What is success for the second or foreign language learner?

The question posed at the beginning of this paper asks what kind of motivation leads to success in language learning. Success in this case,

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though, is a vague and often a subjective, even intangible term, which means there is also a problem of evaluating the effect of motivation. Success for some people is passing a basic exam, for others being able to “get by” while on holiday, while for a few others it means achieving a proficiency as close to native speaker-like competence as possible. Schumann (1978) brought up the importance of this in discussing his L1 Spanish-speaking subject Alberto, who seemed satisfied by being able to communicate in a “pidginized” fashion with his English-speaking work colleagues in the United States.

However, most people would judge success more objectively as a learner who had at least reached a so-called intermediate stage in the L2, intermediate being determined usually by some kind of exam or test, by way of generally recognized exams such as TOEFL, Eiken and so on, or by in-house tests and grades made and given by educational institutions. Much of the research, therefore, has been with university students (Ely, 1986 ; Svanes, 1987 ; Berwick and Ross, 1989 ; Dornyei, 1990). Since grades and tests represent an objective means of evaluating success, they may affect the interpretation of the term among researchers. Ramage (1990) separated the learners in her study – American school students studying Spanish and French – into those who dropped the subjects after two years and those who persisted in their studies beyond that to an intermediate level. She found that the latter group were more likely to have a goal of proficiency in the foreign language than merely a goal of fulfilling a requirement, which is what those who dropped their language studies had.

Baldly stated, then, the answer seems to be that what is success depends on who is judging it. However, for the purpose of the studies referred to here, success is dependent on reaching certain standards in terms of tests and grades, probably in an educational setting. More studies of people such as Schumann’s Alberto would therefore be welcome.

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Can we believe the results and interpretations of the studies?

The question above needs to be posed because even some of the researchers themselves have done so about their own studies. The reliability of results of studies always needs to be looked at carefully, but perhaps even more obviously so in such studies where interpretation plays such a big role, and where the focus of the studies – motivation – has several definitions along a continuum. The answer indicated by the research seems to be, at the very least, “not without reservations”.

Chihara and Oller (1978) were perhaps the first to suggest that the answer to the question above could be “no.” They found only weak correlation between attitudes and motivation for learning the L2 and achieved proficiency in it. They questioned the validity of measuring motivation through self-reports, which they argued would draw into question “the results and conclusions of many previous studies” (p.55). Schumann (1978) explicitly cast doubt on the self-report measures of motivation when he disregarded the positive responses of Alberto because his life-style contradicted his claims of being strongly motivated to learn English.

Ramage (1990) had a different caveat. She argued that many studies were hampered by focusing too closely on the integrative-instrumental categories: Although appropriate particularly to the Canadian context of second language learning, this approach was not sophisticated enough because it prevented the emergence of certain other motives which were context specific. Clement and Kruidenier (1983) and Ely (1986) pointed out that some reasons for learning a language – for example, travel abroad – could be, and have been, categorized as both integrative and instrumental.

In the most comprehensive critique of the methods adopted, and conclusions drawn, by Gardner and his associates, Au (1988) also found fault with the questionnaires used to assess learners' attitudes and motivation. He doubted that the direct and indirect questionnaires used to elicit the

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integrative motive accurately reflected it at all : The direct methods were too varied and the indirect methods too vague to give clear results.

Au also argues that the hypotheses that an integrative motive is positively related to L2 achievement, and that an integrative motive causally affects L2 achievement, are faulty. He argues that the first theory seems to be unfalsifiable because “contextual considerations are often invoked to explain away disconfirming evidence” (p.87), and points out that a causal relation opposite to that predicted by the causality hypothesis can be argued from the results (as Hermann, 1980, does) ; moreover, he says, there is “no confirming empirical evidence” (p.87) to support it.

Gardner (1988) rejects Au’s criticisms as “simplistic” (p.105) and “unfounded” (p.115) respectively, largely because the hypotheses are not claimed to be hard and fast theories so much as proposed tendencies. Even Gardner accepts some of Au’s points as “valuable” (p.101), but it would appear there is not much support for the idea that Gardner’s hypotheses are not a valid base.

Which kind of motivation is most likely to lead to success?

Many studies point primarily to integrative motivation, especially in a foreign language learning situation. In their clearly FLL-setting, Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) study of American school students learning French in Connecticut found that those who did well had a strong motivation which seemed “to be based on an integrative orientation toward the French people and their culture” (p.52). Muchnick and Wolfe’s (1982) study was conducted with American school students in a mainly white suburb of Philadelphia. They found a composite picture of both integrative and instrumental motivation for learning Spanish, though there was more of a bias among achievers for an integrative orientation. They also found that the females in the group had the most positive attitudes towards foreign languages

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including Spanish, and towards Hispanic-American and European Spanish people, and that they performed better in general than the males.

Other studies which support Gardner and Lambert's findings include that of Laine (1984, cited in Svanes, 1987). He found a strong instrumental motivation for learning English as a foreign language in secondary schools in Finland, but he also found that the students with the best performance were more integratively motivated.

Dornyei (1990) found something similar in his study of 134 adult learners of English in Hungary. While a course requirement motivation did not correlate positively with proficiency, a high level of instrumental motivation and need for achievement did make learners more likely to attain an intermediate level of proficiency. However, he found that "to get beyond this level, that is, to 'really learn' the target language, one has to be integratively motivated" (p70).

Like Dornyei, Ely (1986) found a course requirement did nothing to increase the strength of motivation among his L1 English-speaking university students learning Spanish in California, but that instrumental and integrative reasons for learning were both positively correlated with motivation strength and success. More confusingly, Chihara and Oller's (1978) 123 Japanese adults – beginners, intermediate and advanced – gave answers all along the integrative-instrumental continuum, none of which clearly tallied with proficiency in English.

Although Gardner and Lambert's (1972) view that learners tend to be integratively or instrumentally motivated has since dominated discussion of the issue, by the late 1970s, researchers in SLA contexts were concluding that other types of motivational factors were also at play. The concept of a Machiavellian motivation was introduced by Oller and Perkins (1978) (following the study of Oller, Baca and Vigil (1977)), to explain why the Mexican-American women with negative views of Anglos were more

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successful in learning English than those with positive feelings. Then Schumann (1978) suggested that the failure of his subject learner Alberto to be more highly motivated was due to a wide social distance: Alberto belonged to “a social group designated as lower class Latin American worker immigrants.....subordinate in relation to Americans” (p.262).

In a variation on this theme, Svanes (1987), in his study of 167 students from all parts of the world studying Norwegian at the University of Bergen, concluded that the key factor was cultural distance – that is, a “familiarity with/exposure to Western culture and language” (p.346): the smaller the cultural distance, the more success the students had in learning Norwegian. As it happens, the students from Europe and North America were more integratively motivated, while those from the Middle East, Africa and Asia were more instrumentally motivated, possibly because more of them were funded by government grants and studying to further their career prospects.

Some studies have broken away from the integrative-instrumental continuum. Clement and Kruidenier (1983) found that their FLL students – English and French L1 speakers learning Spanish in Canada – tended to have a socio-cultural orientation, which “might imply a rather distant or ‘bookish’ interest” (p.288), without the desire to integrate properly with the target language community. Clement and Kruidenier also argued that ethnicity influenced the motivational orientation of learners. Only members of secure, clearly dominant groups had an integrative motivation, a finding which the studies of Gardner and Lambert (1972), Lukmani (1972), Muchnick and Wolfe (1982), and Svanes (1987) would seem to back up.

Ramage (1990) failed to find what is known as integrative motivation among her students; and she also found little interest in learning a foreign language for its practical uses, still less for a course requirement motivation, at least among those who continued to study for more than two years.

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Instead, those who persisted with French and Spanish to intermediate level had an intrinsic motivation, an “interest in the language for its own sake” (p.208). This runs counter to Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) assertion that, in learning a language, “the sustaining motivation appears to be one of group membership, not of language acquisition per se” (p.12).

Another factor to add into the equation is the question of how much achievement, usually shown by high grades, affects motivation. This has been explored by various researchers such as Berwick and Ross (1989) and Ramage (1990). I will examine it under the last question.

The Chicken or the Egg Question : Which comes first, the Motivation or the Achievement?

Berwick and Ross (1989) found their Japanese university freshmen attending English classes largely in “a motivational vacuum” (p.207) at the beginning of the year, with little relation between their attitudes toward English and their proficiency. By the end of the academic year, however, proficiency had developed along with “an experiential dimension” (p.207) – a mixture of some sense of achievement, along with a widening of their interests in English following the offer of new opportunities to study abroad. Berwick and Ross found their students’ motivation had increased by the time they had achieved reasonable scores in tests after a year of instruction.

Ramage’s (1990) subjects were much more likely to continue learning French and Spanish if they received a high grade after two years initial study. Although it was in an SLA setting, it is of interest to note that the young L1 Spanish-speaking children in Strong’s (1984) study were much more likely to develop an integrative orientation in their English learning if they had already developed a fair degree of fluency.

The strongest argument for the significance of these findings was put

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forward by Hermann (1980) in her Resultative Hypothesis. She concluded from her study of 750 German school children learning English that “foreign language learning causes the formation of positive and negative attitudes” (p.254), and that positive ones follow success. Dornyei (1990) considered the possibility that the instrumental motivation felt by the intermediate learners in his study was the consequence of achievement, but decided against it: it had been their superior motivation which gave them the energy and persistence to “sustain the long and tedious process of language learning” (p.61) while others had given up.

In fact, Hermann’s case for the negative consequences of low achievement are more powerfully made and appear to be less contentious. Dornyei too believes that learning failure is so common in FLL settings it should be researched as an independent factor related to motivation.

Conclusion.

The studies in FLL settings reveal a variety of types of motivation felt by language learners. Because researchers have come to various conclusions, because the questions used to measure learners’ attitudes have varied somewhat and their learning contexts been rather specific, it is hard to give a clear answer to the question heading this paper. However, on balance, it would seem that for a foreign language learner to achieve real success he or she would be greatly helped by having a genuine interest in the L2 and /or its people and related culture, even if only expressed by exploring them in books. That motivation might be called intrinsic, integrative or socio-cultural.

It would seem, too, that the encouragement gained from some success could help the development of further motivation. Even more strikingly, learners are likely to become discouraged and demotivated and even poorer achievers if they feel, and if bad marks tell them, they are making little or

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no progress.

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