

The Significant Effect of Motivation on Language Proficiency in the Process of Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Within the SLA field, relevant researchers study individual differences from different perspectives, such as motivation, aptitude, learning strategies, and anxiety. In this essay, I will mainly focus on the significant effect of motivation on language proficiency based on my own learning experience and provide feasible implications for those students in future teaching design and practices after obtaining master's degree in MA TESOL.

Keywords: Motivation; Target Language Learning; Motivational Self System

1. Introduction

During the process of learning a foreign language, individuals present distinct language proficiency. It is generally accepted that physical, cognitive or affective, etc. differences among L2 learners are the most influential factors that can determine L2 learners' high or low level in ultimate language ability to a large extent. The fact differing individuals' language proficiency is varied arises a great interest of numerous SLA researchers.

This essay consists of three main parts. The first section is a review of my own learning context at university and I divide my learning process at university into 4 stages, which lays a foundation for the following two sections to combine theoretical framework with practical learning situations. The second section discusses how motivation influences L2 learning, and in this part, I give a brief introduction of previous L2 motivation research, then I mainly analyse the motivational power of current popular L2 motivation theory on L2 learning in process-oriented stage, namely L2 motivational self system. Finally, the concluding section contains some recommendations for future pedagogical context and a summary of the whole essay.

2. My learning context

The situational context of this essay is a Foreign Language University in a northern city, China. Content-based instruction (CBI) is a teaching approach aiming to combine specific contents or subjects with language rather than just focus on grammatical or lexical knowledge (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). CBI teaching pattern provides an effective framework for independent learning. In the CBI classroom, students can participate actively.

As a student majoring in English in this University for four years, drawing on my own learning experience and reviewing some specific English learning details I will divide my university English learning process into three stages: in the first and second year of university (stage 1), attracted by foreign history and culture, I showed great interest in CBI classes. Meanwhile, I, a student with poor English speaking and listening ability, was not willing to attend listening and oral class and was afraid of taking listening exams. In the third year (stage 2), I decided to pursue my master's degree in the UK after acquiring my bachelor's degree; therefore, I started to prepare for my IELTS exam and struggled to achieve a higher GPA in order to satisfy my dream school's requirement. In the last year at my university (stage 3), I was looking forward to heading for the UK and starting my postgraduate life.

3. Motivation

Motivation is very complicated in the L2 learning process and it is defined from two dimensions, one is L2 learners' communicative needs and the other is L2 learners' attitudes (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). As Lightbown and Spada (2013)

point out, motivation plays a significant role in learners' language ability. Therefore, in the past years, many relevant theories were come up with by numerous L2 motivation experts and they have been developed gradually. As a result of word limits, in this part, I will give a brief introduction of three different L2 motivation development periods and mainly focus on the facilitating effects of the newly theory.

3.1 The development of L2 motivation research

Prior to process-oriented period, L2 motivation research had gone through an evolution from the social psychological period (1959-1990) to the cognitive-situated period (during the 1990s). Although the concept of integrativeness/integrative motive has a predominant position in the L2 motivation research (Dörnyei, 2005), the drawbacks of this notion lead to strong criticism from some researchers (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 2009). Dörnyei (2009) criticized that the integrative motive does not apply to the educational environment. According to the educational context, Dörnyei (2005) adopted a "self" framework to define L2 learning motivation, proposing the new theory "L2 Motivational Self System", including three main components: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. In the following years, a large number of researches have been conducted to prove the effects of the L2 motivational system (Dörnyei & Ryan Stephen, 2015).

3.2 The motivating power of L2 motivational self system on target language learning

Ideal L2 self refers to the ideal image that L2 learners imagine that one can become in the future and it can be a powerful motivating factor encouraging language learners to strive to achieve what they are eager to become in the future (Dörnyei 2005, 2009). Ought-to self is considered as the image others hope that the L2 learners will be and L2 users will do their utmost to avoid negative consequences to satisfy or achieve others' anticipation (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). L2 learning experience refers to the impact of some kind of external learning climate or some related learning experience (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009).

Based on current educational context, the motivating power of ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience might be worth considering. Through some effective techniques, it can assist language learners to boost their motivation (Dörnyei, 2009). Relevant studies have been carried out to explore the strength of the correlation between three dimensions of the L2 motivational self system and the language proficiency.

As Dörnyei & Chan (2013) suggest, both ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self are positively related to the amount of efforts students put into their language learning, but ideal L2 self has a more significant influence in L2 learners' efforts than that of ought-to L2 self. It can be inferred, therefore, that the students will invest more effort in language learning and achieve a high language level with the help of constructing an ideal image during the process of language learning. Meanwhile, ideal L2 self has a strong and positive motivational power on L2 learners' academic performance while ought-to L2 self does not have a direct link with academic grades (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). This correlation between ideal L2 self and intended efforts is in line with Iwaniec's (2014) study and she adopted a mixed-method design to examine Polish students' motivational features in the process of English learning. In her research, she found students acquire a low score on the ideal L2 self scale, thus implying that those participants might not regard themselves as proficient English learners during their learning process (Iwaniec, 2014). This view is supported and confirmed again by a more recent study conducted by Kong et al. (2018) on Korean college students. Furthermore, it is in line with Kim's (2019) study. In his research, he states that the ideal L2 self contributes more to L2 users' motivated behaviour and personal efforts (Kim, 2019). Such a view similarly noted by Safdari (2019) suggests that ideal L2 self can facilitate language learning to a large extent.

Reviewing my English learning experience in stage 2 and 3, it might be a typical example of the above finding. In terms of stage 2, my parents expected me to receive a great university's offer. If I couldn't get a higher GPA and failed to pass the IELTS exam, I would disappoint my parents. The result is that I tried my best to attend some boring English literature classes and listened carefully so that I can get high scores in the final exam to achieve a higher GPA. In stage 3, I prepared for my undergraduate dissertation and started to do some pre-departure preparation for studying in an English-speaking country. At

this stage, I imagined myself studying abroad and using English fluently to communicate with local friends, and I imagined myself understanding lectures easily. Therefore, I spent a large amount of time in English learning and spared no effort to practice my English skills. Every day I was crazy for practicing my spoken English through watching a series of English movies and I imagined myself speaking a beautiful British accent like Lady Mary in the drama series *Downton Abbey*. Apparently, during this period, I constructed a perfect ideal self-image for myself. Correspondingly, I invested much effort in L2 learning and got an ideal score for my dissertation. My learning process in stage 2 and 3 prove that ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self can result in L2 learners' intended effort and the ideal L2 self can be associated with course scores. Compared with stage 2, my motivation was more powerful and stronger at stage 3 and I was willing to study English actively. Not like stage 2, I just showed an "I had to" attitude to study English literature. This could suggest that the ideal L2 self can have a stronger influence on intended effort than ought-to L2 self.

However, Moskovsky et al. (2016) conducted a study on EFL students in Saudi and found a completely contrary result, that is, L2 performance is not always associated with three dimensions of L2 motivational self system. It may be surprising that in the study of Moskovsky et al. (2016), ideal L2 self has a negative and weak impact on L2 achievement. According to my learning context, the ideal L2 self can more or less facilitate language learning. The research result in this study might be as a result of ignoring L2 learners' listening and speaking scores. They just focus on L2 users' reading and writing scores in the IELTS exam and regard these two test results as the standard to access language learners' L2 competence. Additionally, as Moskovsky et al. (2016) explained in their paper, investigating in different socio-cultural contexts is more appropriate and EFL students' L2 performance in Saudi might be an exception.

Importantly, Lamb (2012) claims that among three components of the L2 motivational self system, L2 learning experience is the most influential factor in the correlation between language learners' motivation and L2 achievement. Lamb (2012) found that except the ideal L2 self, the teacher plays a significant role in L2 users' attitudes, and it is more similar to Azarnoosh's (2014) study. Azarnoosh (2014) conducted a research in a compulsory English learning context and the result clearly shows that the external environment elements, such as learning context, teacher, learning material and activities, can exert a positive effect on creating a motivating atmosphere for students. Two relevant studies prove although the ideal L2 self is closely related to students' motivated behaviour, the educational environment has the most significant impact on students' language learning motivation.

Reviewing back to my learning context, it is in line with stage 1 in which the school of English in my university offers English majors diversified teaching and learning resources ranging from history, geography to culture and creates an active learning environment. I have been a history lover since I was a child. Such a learning environment arose my interest. At that time, I was passionate about learning English so that I can understand history stories in my textbook easily and read faster. I remembered I planned a schedule to memory English vocabulary and to read related passages before English history class. My strong motivation is probably down to interesting CBI textbooks and an energetic and active class atmosphere. After one year, my English competence improved a lot, especially my reading skills. This could suggest the motivational power of the L2 learning experience.

However, the effects of L2 learning experience mentioned above are not shared by every researcher. Kikuchi (2019) argues that the effect of L2 learning experience contributing to L2 proficiency is temporary. He focused on four female Japanese students' learning process for two years and found that at the beginning of the class, the fact that students show strong motivation in learning English may be due to the curiosity of courses and teachers in a new environment, but they kept a high ideal L2 self all the time (Kikuchi, 2019). It can be inferred, therefore, the effects of ideal L2 self on facilitating English is more permanent. This view is contradictory to mainstream ideas that hold the view of stronger predictor of the L2 learning experience. But it just focuses on four female students in Japan. More participants in different educational contexts should be included to verify this point of view.

3.3 The future direction of L2 motivation research

In the past ten years, the concept of ideal and ought-to L2 self is refined gradually; meanwhile, numerous empirical studies have validated the facilitating effects of the L2 learning experience (Dornyei, 2019). In terms of the importance of the

L2 learning experience, Dörnyei (2019) criticized that despite the gradual refinement of ideal and ought-to L2 self, there is an issue within the L2 motivational self system and the L2 learning experience is somewhat ignored and related studies do not provide a formal and theoretical concept for the L2 learning experience. Since there are adequate studies to support the L2 learning experience, it is possible to add more theoretical support and redefine the L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2019). The L2 learning experience is redefined as “the perceived quality of the learners’ engagement with various aspects of the language learning process” (Dörnyei, 2019, p25). Although Dörnyei (2019) introduces the “engagement” into the L2 learning experience, it is necessary for future L2 motivation researchers to study which kinds of “engagement” are applied to the pedagogical context.

4. Conclusion and pedagogical implication

By and large, the learners’ characteristics, specifically motivation, can exert a huge effect on L2 learning process according to my own learning experience. Through analysing how the L2 motivational self system influence the success or failure of the target language learning and relating to my four learning stages, it has enabled me to realize some difficulties of learning a foreign language as a student and some current existing problems in language teaching. Therefore, this essay will provide some recommendations for future teaching practice as an MA TESOL student.

In terms of the significant role of motivation in language learning, teachers could consider whether it is effective to attempt to help students more successful in target language learning by improving students’ language motivation. As (Blair & Azaz (2019) point out in their research, in terms of ideal and ought-to L2 self’s positive and negative effects on language achievement, it might have important implications for the teaching context. Importantly, teachers should provide language learners with a positive and motivating classroom atmosphere that is expected to have a positive impact on learners’ intended effort to achieve learning goals. Furthermore, the appraisal of poor students will dispel the students’ enthusiasm for learning (Blair & Azaz, 2019), which means teachers can adopt some strategies to better access students’ learning ability and encourage them to develop themselves towards expectedly future self-image. By boosting the ideal self-image, students can be diligent to struggle for their language goals, in order to make a breakthrough between the current self and ideal self (Safdari, 2019). If future self can be changed, as Safdari (2019) suggests, then it can be assumed that language teachers should attempt to help L2 learners sustain and enhance their enthusiasm and motivation for language learning. Importantly, it is worth considering for language teachers to attempt such ways to increase the possibility of successful target language learning among students.

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