Motivation in Learning English as a Second Language: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Motivation in second language acquisition (SLA) refers to the attempt and desire to learn a language and positive attitudes toward learning it (Dornyei, 1994). Motivation in SLA has been extensively investigated in different contexts (Feng & Chen, 2009; Wu & Wu, 2008; Melendy, 2008; Wang, 2007; Lamb, 2007). Still, more research seems necessary to shed light on this area because of the potential impact of motivation on SLA. This literature review compares and contrasts the research questions, settings, theoretical frameworks, and results of several studies on motivation. Following this, implications for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, learners, parents, and textbook designers are provided. Finally, the limitations of these studies are highlighted and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Introduction

Similar to other types of learning, second language acquisition (SLA) does not take place in a vacuum. Various factors are involved when it comes to SLA in general and English as a second language (ESL) in particular, one of which is motivation. From the Latin root *movere*, motivation refers to a process that starts with a need and leads to a behavior that moves an individual towards achieving a goal (Melendy, 2008). In SLA, it refers to the attempt and desire to learn a language and positive attitudes toward learning it (Dornyei, 1994).

Studying motivation is important to many SLA researchers, because it is believed that without ample motivation, even learners with the most notable abilities cannot achieve long–term goals. In other words, appropriate curricula and good instruction might not be enough to guarantee success. Students also need to have a degree of motivation (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). According to Ebata (2008), motivation produces successful second language (L2) communicators by making them self–confident. Moreover, it can lead learners to continue learning even after they fulfill a specific goal. The other reason why some scholars are interested in investigating motivation might be the complexity of the issue, and the fact that motivation seems to be related to a variety of factors, each of which can be tackled in a separate study.

Many studies have been conducted on motivation in SLA (Balkir & Topkaya, 2009; Feng & Chen, 2009; Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Melendy, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2008; Lamb, 2007; Liu, 2007; Wang; 2007; Wei, 2007). At the same time, more research in this area seems necessary because of the potentially great impact of motivation on SLA. This literature review is an attempt to address this issue with the aim of

highlighting key perspectives across the various relevant studies. The criterion for selecting the reviewed studies was their publication year. Except for a few classic, pivotal texts in this area, only research that was conducted within the past decade was reviewed and included in this article. Any similarity regarding the setting or the nationality of the participants is just a matter of coincidence.

In particular, Gardner and Lambert's (1959) influential *theory of attitudes and motivation* (Samaei, Sahragard & Parhizkar, 2006) is used here as a deliberative construct for this literature review. Gardner and Lambert (1959) formulated the theory of attitudes and motivation, in which they made a distinction between orientation and motivation. Accordingly, orientation refers to the purpose of learning a second language, which can be integrative or instrumental. Integrative orientation refers to reasons for L2 learning that emphasize identification with an L2 community. Instrumental orientation refers to reasons for learning an L2 that "reflect the more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement," (p. 267) with no intention of integration with the L2 community on the part of the learner. For example, an immigrant to an English–speaking country who studies English to identify himself or herself with that society has an integrative orientation to L2 learning. On the other hand, a person who learns English because she or he needs to get a job has an instrumental orientation to L2 learning. Gardner and Lambert (1959) have stated that integrative orientation seemed to be superior to instrumental orientation in SLA. Some researchers have relied on this theory to provide a definition for motivation, to distinguish between different kinds of motivation and orientation, and as a means of comparing their own research findings (Feng & Chen, 2009; Liu, 2007; Wang, 2007; Yihong, Yuan, Ying & Yan, 2007; Chen, Warden & Chang, 2005; Rahman, 2005). Thus, this theory, and a directed focus on motivation in SLA, remain significant in the face of contemporary educational issues (Wei, 2007).

This review is organized in the following way. First, historical perspectives on motivation are presented, and some studies on motivation in ESL will be compared and contrasted regarding their research questions; contexts; inquiry frameworks; and investigative findings. Following this is a discussion of the implications of motivation research to date for ESL learners, parents, teachers, and textbook writers. Finally, limitations with the reviewed studies and some suggestions for further research are mentioned.

Historical Perspectives on Motivation

Various researchers have classified motivation from different points of view. From a cognitive viewpoint, two types of motivation are recognized: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*. The former is applied by others and involves systems of rewards and punishments, while the latter is self-applied, lying in the affective domain of feelings and emotional responses (Slavin, 2003). In other words, extrinsic motivation is related to doing an action in order to receive an extrinsic reward or to avoid punishment, whereas intrinsic motivation is about an action that is done for its own sake to experience satisfaction (Dörnyei, 2001). An example of extrinsic motivation would be the case of an employee who studies English because she or he will be sent to England for work, and if it were not for that sake, she or he would not study it. An instance of intrinsic motivation would be learning English because one is interested in it, and nobody has asked him or her to do so.

Although the terms intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been widely used by many researchers (Balkir & Topkaya, 2009; Chen et al., 2005; Lamb, 2007; Liu, 2007; Wei, 2007; Wu Man–Fat, 2007), some scholars have identified other motivational patterns based on the contextual features or other aspects related to specific participants or groups of participants. *Required motivation* is a term that was first coined by Warden and Lin (2000) because the participants in their research were motivated by certain requirements. In another study in the same setting, Warden (2000) found that social expectations emphasizing standard requirements are likely to be motivating for Chinese students. *Chinese imperative* was another term first used by Chen et al. (2005) to emphasize their findings that among Chinese and Taiwanese people, strong adherence to traditional values like obtaining good grades will bring social respect. Therefore, being respected by others can motivate individuals in such settings to do their best.

Julkunen (2001) mentioned other forms of motivation, such as situation-specific motivation and task motivation, and the researcher believed that motivation depends on context and task. Accordingly, individualistic; cooperative; and competitive situations might affect motivation differently. Furthermore, Wlodkowski (1984)

identified three sequences in motivation: (a) attitude and needs; (b) stimulation and affection; and (c) competence and reinforcement. Within the first stage, the teacher's job is to create a positive attitude in L2 learners towards an L2 and to provide a collaborative rather than competitive environment in the classroom. At the next stage, learners' attention should be stimulated and a positive atmosphere should be created. Finally, at the third stage, the teacher should have the students engage in activities that give them a sense of accomplishment, such as praising them for making progress. Although these researchers have come up with new terms and categories for motivation, the usage of such classifications seems to be limited in scope, and they are not widely referred to in other studies.

Literature Review

A close examination of research on motivation in SLA might lead to the identification of potential common trends or similarities in terms of research questions, contexts, and inquiry frameworks. These inquiry aspects will be discussed in this section along with a consideration of differences regarding the study results. Traditionally, the focus of many motivation studies has been on describing motivational patterns of English language learners on the one hand, and finding a relationship between motivation and another variable in learning ESL on the other hand. These variables were examined mainly from a pedagogical perspective, including specific learning programs, learners' levels of English proficiency, a new plan for teaching listening comprehension, and the impact of instructional materials (Balkır & Topkaya, 2009; Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Liu, 2007; Wang, 2007). However, investigations of strategic variables, like motivational and metacognitive strategies and strategy use (Feng & Chen, 2009; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008), and psychological variables, such as anxiety and self-identity changes, have also been the subject of scrutiny (Wei, 2007; Yihong et al., 2007). Other variables that have come under investigation include learning environments and power of choice (Wu & Wu, 2008) and goal setting (Melendy, 2008). Some studies were devoted to orientation, either describing it or finding a relation between orientation and another variable, i.e. self-evaluation skills (Lamb, 2007; Chen, et al., 2005; Rahman, 2005). As well, few conceptual studies were found to review theories and concepts through a critical lens (Feng and Chen, 2009; Ebata, 2008; Samaie, et al., 2006).

Gardner and Lambert's (1959) theory of attitudes and motivation has been commonly utilized as a framework for inquiries into motivation and SLA. Still, in some studies, depending on their purpose, other frameworks have been used. For example, Ajibade and Ndububa (2008) based their theoretical framework on Maslow's theory (1954), in which the notion of motivation is centered on satisfying basic needs. Additionally, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) used "categories of observable teacher behaviors derived from Dörnyei's (2001) motivational strategies framework for foreign language classrooms" (p. 55).

With regard to the cultural context of the studies included in this literature review, almost all of the studies that were found in a general search on motivation and SLA within the temporal period of the past 10 years were conducted in Asia, and one was performed in Nigeria (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008). Less than half of the Asian studies were done in China and Hong Kong (Liu, 2007; Wang, 2007; Wei, 2007; Wu Man-fat, 2007; Yihong et al., 2007) and others were located in South Asia (Rahman, 2005), Southeast Asia (Lamb, 2007), Southwest Asia (Balkir & Topkaya, 2009), or East Asia (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Melendy, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2008; Takase, 2007; Chen et al. 2005). As well, most of the physical settings of the studies were universities, where university students were recruited for inquiry participation (Balkir & Topkaya, 2009; Melendy, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2008; Liu, 2007; Wang, 2007; Wei, 2007; Yihong et al., 2007; Rahman, 2005). Only one study was performed at an institute (Wu Man-fat, 2007), and the rest were conducted at high schools with adolescents (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Lamb, 2007; Takase, 2007).

Most of the studies that were performed in China or with Chinese participants yielded similar results with respect to the type of orientation of the participants (Liu, 2007; Wei, 2007; Wu Man–fat; 2007; Rahman, 2005) and potentially influential factors in motivation (Balkir & Topkaya, 2009; Melendy, 2008; Liu, 2007; Wang, 2007; Wu Man-fat, 2007; Yihong et al., 2007). The findings of some of these studies that were performed in the university or high school context indicated that the students possessed instrumental, rather than the integrative orientation (Liu, 2007; Wei, 2007; Wu Man–fat; 2007; Rahman, 2005). The variables under study included a training program (Balkir & Topkaya, 2009); the power of choice and goal setting (Melendy, 2008); L2 proficiency

(Liu, 2007); anxiety (Wei, 2007); motivational strategies, such as doing enjoyable tasks (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008); language learning strategies (Wu Man–fat, 2007); and the learning atmosphere, including "the physical environment, instructional arrangements, and social interaction" (Wu & Wu, 2008).

It was found that all of these variables might influence motivation in SLA positively. In particular, the reviewed literature indicated that integrative motivation might lessen anxiety (Wei, 2007), and that teachers' motivational practice could increase students' motivation (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). It was also discovered that the use of metacognitive language learning strategies could potentially motivate learners, and that strategy use might be linked to integrative motivation, rather than instrumental motivation (Wu Man–fat, 2007). Furthermore, it was found that the classroom atmosphere might be positively correlated with L2 learners' motivation (Wu & Wu, 2008). Finally, the study that was conducted in Nigeria concluded that the use of games; songs; and stories might also influence motivation in SLA (Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008).

However, there is no agreement among the researchers on the superiority of one type of motivation or orientation over the other, despite the fact that integrative orientation was initially thought to be a predictor of successful ESL learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). In one case, the findings even contradicted that of a previous study done on a similar subject in the same context (Lamb, 2007). Since some studies aimed solely at describing participants' motivational patterns (Rahman, 2005; Chen et al., 2005), they did not predict whether certain kinds of motivation can guarantee success in learning ESL.

Discussion and Implications

While studies on motivation have tackled the issue from a variety of viewpoints, with the exception of conceptual studies, the focus is seemingly on finding a relationship between motivation and other factors. Moreover, motivation was found to be a determining factor in ultimate language performance, regardless of the context or the participants of the studies. With regard to the setting, most reviewed studies were conducted either in China or about Chinese people. This might be because "[l]ittle empirical evidence is available to understand motivational patterns in China" (Wei, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, although a national attempt has been made for learning English in China, according to some scholars, a large number of learners have not gained a satisfactory command of English to use it communicatively (Wei, 2007). English in China is a foreign language, that is, its use is limited to international communications (Wei, 2007). Therefore, many Chinese learners of English might not have the opportunity to use it beyond classrooms. This could be another reason why so many researchers examine students' motivation in learning ESL within this context.

Recognizing the interplay between motivation and SLA seems to be crucial not only to L2 learners, but also to teachers, parents, and materials developers in educational settings. Examining the recent literature on motivation and SLA highlights how understanding the relationship between motivation, goal setting (Melendy, 2008), and L2 proficiency (Liu, 2007) can make L2 learners more responsible for their own learning by setting realistic goals for themselves, the attainment of which would be self-rewarding. Additionally, the literature indicates that this might be especially important when it comes to students who are dependent on their teachers for guidance. Moreover, integrative motivation seems to reduce anxiety among L2 learners (Wei, 2007). This perspective on self–directed and self–motivated language study might lessen L2 learners' competitive frustration arising from comparisons with the progress and abilities of peers in the L2 classroom.

Awareness regarding the importance of motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1959) and learning environment (Wu & Wu, 2008) in SLA on the part of L2 teachers might inspire them to facilitate L2 learning for learners in a variety of ways. This literature review highlights the need for teachers to praise their students for their own accomplishments, instead of comparing them with their peers. Teachers might build collaborative rather than competitive atmospheres in which the students can learn from more competent peers. These all might increase students' motivation by lowering their anxiety (Wei, 2007). Teachers could also use various motivational strategies (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008) and language learning strategies (Wu Man–fat, 2007) to motivate their students.

Furthermore, this literature review highlights research that focused on motivation in connection with enjoyment (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). As such, this article reinforces for teachers the need to shape enjoyable and, perhaps less complex, language learning interactions so that learners might be more eager to study the L2. Feng and Chen (2009) even stressed the importance of teacher's personality for learning:

> An enthusiastic and considerate teacher can offer satisfaction to the learner's extra needs. This helps strengthen the learner's study motivation. On the other hand, a teacher's attitude towards the learner has major influence on the learner's learning. As regards emotional cramming, a teacher's physically and mentally pouring into his teaching, and being filled with affection, will help arouse the learning enthusiasm of the learners. However, if the teacher only works as a "teaching craftsman" and put no emotion into teaching, the classroom will become static to lessen the learning enthusiasm of the learners. (p.64)

Changes in teachers' perspectives on motivation, teaching strategies, and learning activities might all result in more inviting and friendly classroom atmospheres, which seems to facilitate L2 learning for students (Wu & Wu, 2008). Similarly, it is important for parents to be aware of the role of motivation in SLA. Knowing this, they might appreciate what their children are doing in terms of SLA, instead of comparing tjeir children's language learning progress with their childeren's peers or setting unrealistic goals for them. Acknowledging their progress might motivate learners integratively, hence it might decrease their anxiety (Wei, 2007).

This comprehensive review of some of the recent literature on motivation and SLA might also benefit materials developers and textbook designers. A focus on motivation and enjoyment in materials and textbooks might aid in shaping motivating learning contexts (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). For example, the difficulty level of materials is an important factor that needs attention, because very difficult or very easy tasks might create the sense in students that they are either incompetent or that they are not adding to their knowledge. In either case, because they cannot satisfy their need to learn more, they might feel unmotivated.

Since motivation was found to be positively related to cultural materials such as games, songs, and stories, using them in textbooks can improve learners' motivation to learn, and ultimately, increase their L2 competence and performance. According to Ajibade & Ndububa (2008), games can be used to teach communicative activities, that is the activities that focus on both competence and performance. Songs might be used to develop L2 learners' listening; speaking; reading; and writing skills; and to teach vocabulary, sentence structure, rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation, as well as L2 cultural themes. Finally, stories might be the starting point for a variety of activities. Therefore, stories might be used in educational programs that focus on the appreciation of diversity and tolerance (Rossiter, as cited in Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008, p. 33). While this finding was only the main focus of one study, further work in this area by researchers and course and textbook developers might prove illuminating.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The importance of research on motivation, and the light it has shed on SLA and teaching is undeniable. However, some points are worth mentioning. First, an inconsistency is found among some researchers in the use of the term motivation. Many of them took Gardner and Lambert's theory of attitudes and motivation (1959) as their framework of study, in which a clear distinction is made between motivation and orientation, and the latter is categorized as instrumental and integrative. However, some researchers use these terms interchangeably, and they take integrative and instrumental notions to be different types of motivation (Wei, 2007; Wu Man–fat, 2007). Even Gardner and Lambert themselves had called these two notions different forms of motivation in their earlier work (Samaei et al, 2006). It is not clear if these terms are actually related to motivation or orientation; however, as Gardner and Lambert (1959) mentioned, motivation and orientation are considered to be two different concepts.

A similar contradiction exists between approaches to investigate attitude and motivation. What Gardner and Lambert (1972) had mentioned about these notions earlier on does not seem consistent with what they said in their later work. Gardner and Lambert (1972) maintained that attitude and motivation are not necessarily related to each other. However, they later admitted that being ethnocentric can make a learner have a non-integrative view. In

fact, they seemingly find a relationship between motivation and attitude, believing that attitude towards L2 community determines one's motivation.

All but one of the reviewed studies were performed in Asia, and nearly half of them were conducted either in China or with Chinese learners of English. In many of these studies, it was found that variables such as a training program; the power of choice and goal setting; L2 proficiency; anxiety; motivational strategies; language learning strategies; and learning environments might influence motivation in SLA. Given the fact that people from different national backgrounds have different characteristics, the results of these studies might be influenced by the participants' nationality, home language, and culture. In other words, nationality, culture, or home language might intervene between the participants' motivation and the variable(s) under investigation. For example, in one study, the Chinese participants "showed higher collectivism", compared to the ones from other countries including the States, The Netherlands, Australia, Germany, Greece, Korea, and Japan (Triandis, Chen & Chan, cited in Chen et al., 2005, p. 613). These characteristics should not be generalized to all people of the same background. Moreover, what seems to be true about Chinese ESL learners' motivations might not work well with students from other ethno–linguistic backgrounds. As a result, there is a need to be cautious about generalizing the results of research on motivation. More research is needed to examine how the factors of nationality, culture, and motivation might influence each other.

The setting of research studies is another factor for further consideration. In all of the reviewed studies, the learners studied English in academic situations, such as high schools; universities; or institutions, and the findings of such studies mostly indicated that the students possessed instrumental orientation. This kind of orientation may be related to the specific contexts of the study, since students in formal learning situations usually focus on passing their courses. Moreover, they might have few opportunities to use the L2 for communicatitve purposes in these contexts. For this reason, similar studies might need to be conducted in different settings, and the results can then be compared to those of the present studies to see if changes in setting affect the orientation or motivation types of learners.

Another point to consider is the age range of participants. All participants of the reviewed studies were either high school or university students. That is, as far as age is concerned, they were either adolescents or adults. However, the results of these studies might only apply to other groups of learners within similar age ranges. Further work might be necessitated in order to investigate the motivation of L2 learners in other age groups, and the results can be compared with the current ones to see whether age plays a role in the motivation and/or orientation patterns of L2 learners, as well as to what degree age might contribute to motivation and orientation.

This literature review has served to draw together common themes from recent research on motivation as a means of influencing future inquiry in this area, and for informing curriculum and textbook developers. In particular, this literature review highlights the increasingly international perspective in the field of motivation and SLA. Although much research on motivation in SLA has been conducted, it seems that motivation still has a limited place in L2 teacher education programs all over the world (Dornyei, 2001). Therefore, future literature review work in the area of motivation might focus on research into practical aspects of motivation, such as motivational teaching strategies devised and employed by L2 teachers worldwide. In this way, a review of classroom-oriented and practice-oriented work that highlights educators' successes and challenges in motivating L2 students might bring together new themes, international perspectives, and pragmatic experiences of relevance to both researchers and practitioners. This type of review might further serve as a guide to L2 teachers, especially novice teachers seeking ways of enhancing L2 learning for their students.

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