

Motivation in ELT

Steven McDonough

Motivation is what moves us to act, in this context to learn English, to learn to teach English, or to teach it. This deceptively simple statement reveals, however, the four elements it involves:

- the reasons why we want to learn,
- the strength of our desire to learn,
- the kind of person we are, and
- the task, and our estimation of what it requires of us.

Motivation is a property of the learner, but it is also a transitive concept: coaches can motivate their clients, teachers can motivate their students. Furthermore, it is dynamic and changes over time, especially in the usually long-drawn out process of language learning. Motivation is thus remarkably complex.

For many years, studies of motivation for language learning concentrated on reasons for learning. Empirical evidence showed that for some people a wish to integrate, in some sense, with the speech community of the language being learnt seemed to be more strongly associated with success, while for others a wish to capitalize on the usefulness of knowing a language within the learners' own culture was more effective. This was the distinction made famous by Gardner and his colleagues (Gardner 1985) between 'integrative' and 'instrumental' orientations. Although this work had the advantage of direct relevance to language learning, its almost universal acceptance masked equally important but more general distinctions, such as:

- extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985), which referred to the source of the influence, whether within oneself or perceived as being from the outside; and
- striving for success versus avoidance of failure (Heckhausen 1991).

In Gardner's approach, strength of motivation was typically estimated only from attitude questionnaires and thought of as a hidden psychometric trait. However, other educational traditions had used indices from observed on-task behaviour: choice of task according to perceived difficulty, the learner's persistence in tackling a problem, level of participation in class or group activities, attention focus and span; or qualitative data such as verbal reports of self-monitoring and self-regulation.

Crookes and Schmidt's (1991) 'new research agenda' incorporated developments in general educational studies into the narrower field of language learning motivation. This focused on individuals, the contexts of learning, the strategies learners might adopt, and the observable learning behaviour of class members.

Following the new agenda, attention then shifted to ideas about the individuality of the learner. For example, Covington's (1998) self-worth theory emphasizes the importance of the beliefs learners hold about themselves, and therefore their level of aspiration and the kinds of strategies they operate or can be taught to adopt, to achieve what they want for themselves. A very important related concept is Bandura's (1997) notion of self-efficacy, looking at how learners estimate their capabilities and manage themselves. Learners who can develop effective motivational thinking, capitalize on success, and minimize the effect of failure will depend less on externally imposed structures and strategies than on their own resources. This connection between intrinsic motivation and the development of learner autonomy in language learning has been investigated by Ushioda (1996).

Learners' beliefs about the task or sub-tasks, their perceptions of the level and nature of the difficulties, and of what is expected of them, represent another very important motivational influence. Attribution theory (Weiner 1972) has long been a means of capturing how learners evaluate tasks differently, by considering the reasons why the learners believe learning outcomes occurred. If success is attributed to having a good teacher, that learner will not believe it will occur in the absence of that teacher; if failure is seen as the result of lack of effort rather than talent, the learner may believe working harder will result in success.

A comprehensive source-book for all these approaches is Pintrich and Schunk (1996) which succinctly describes the range of motivational theories in education and associated research and applications.

Dörnyei (2001: 21) argues that motivation changes over time in three phases: choice, execution, and retrospection. The initial choice to actually learn the language or start the task rather than just think about it requires different springs to the maintenance of effort, perseverance, or tolerance of frustration in the second phase. Finally the learner needs to come to terms with the whole experience and evaluate the outcomes. Dörnyei (*ibid.*: 136) offers a checklist of 35 motivational strategies covering the three phases for teachers to try out—warning that the aim is to become a 'good enough' motivator, not a perfect one.

The teacher's role in all of this is central, and difficult. It goes far beyond the provision of reward (itself dependent on the learner's self-efficacy). It involves providing a supportive and challenging learning environment, but also facilitating the development of the learners' own motivational thinking, beyond simply identifying their original orientation. Perhaps the most difficult aspect is not doing anything to de-motivate them.

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The author

Steven McDonough was formerly a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the University of Essex, and still teaches psychological aspects of language learning part-time. He has published many articles and several books in this field, the most recent being *Applied Linguistics in Language Education*, Arnold (2002).
Email: stevenmcdonough@tiscali.co.uk