Original Research Article

Motivation and Motivating in Second Language Acquisition: A Literature Review

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Abstract: In the field of second language acquisition, motivation has always been considered as a crucial element in second language learning and achievement. Few pieces of research, however, have been conducted to analyse motivational techniques, even fewer have focused on empirical studies concerning the effectiveness of motivational strategies. To fill the gap, this review aims to update major literature of motivation from both theoretical and practical perspectives, especially focusing on the effectiveness of motivational strategies applied in the classroom. Suggestions concerning further research directions are also provided.

Keywords: L2 Motivation; Motivational Strategies; Literature Review; Second Language Acquisition

1 Introduction

'Motivation' is frequently used by teachers and learners when explaining successful second language (L2) learning[1]. It has long been considered as a vital factor determining L2 achievement. According to Dörnyei, L2 motivation explains why people initiate L2 learning and how much time and effort they are willing to invest to pursue and sustain the process[2].

For decades, far more researches have focused on motivation than on motivating[3]. It was not until the 1990s, when a group of academics led an educational shift, that motivational strategies (MSs) received considerable attention for the first time[4]. The past 20 years have witnessed a growing number of academics designing and summarising motivational practices based on theoretical models, which indicates that more scholars have realised the importance of locating MSs in a specific context to increase practical effect.

2 Main approaches to L2 motivation and motivating

2.1 Approaches to L2 motivation

Looking at the big picture of L2 motivation, there are mainly four periods in the development of motivation research. Before the 1990s, Gardner and Lambert had dominated the field with a social psychological approach[5]. They laid the foundation for L2 motivation by dividing it into 'integrative motivation' and 'instrumental motivation'. Due to their focus on a general community level in Canadian context, a large number of scholars called for an educational shift, thus beginning the cognitive-situated period. Among the research, Dörnyei's paper was salient, since it established a comprehensive model including three levels of motivation ('language level', 'learner level' and 'learning situation level'), thus drawing researchers' attention to practical MSs[6]. More recently, motivation research seems to enter the socio-dynamic phase as Dörnyei and Ushioda featured it as a period with 'more socially grounded, dynamic and complex interacting systems' when analysing L2 motivation in the context of globalisation[7].

2.2 Frameworks for L2 motivational strategies

Due to the educational shift in the 1990s, MSs received considerable attention for the first time, and scholars started to explore and develop various lists and models of MSs. It began with Dörnyei's pioneering three-level framework ('language level', 'learner level' and 'learning situation level') with 30 MSs adapted to this system.

In reply to the challenge from Gardner and Tremblay, who required empirical evidence to prove that teacher MSs are effective in strengthening student motivation, Dörnyei and Csizér concluded 10 MSs to motivate L2 learners by conducting a survey among 200 Hungarian teachers[8]. Based on this and previous studies, Dörnyei established perhaps the most systematic MSs taxonomy with four dimensions in teaching process order, and many empirical studies have chosen this taxonomy as their theoretical framework and observation instruments of motivational behaviour in the classroom.

3 The effectiveness of motivational strategies

3.1 From subjective perception to objective observation

The study concerning the effectiveness of MSs began in the 1990s, when there was a debate focused on whether MSs were useful in the classroom-specific environment. Gardner and Tremblay challenged the advocates of educational shift by requiring empirical studies and evidence to prove the positive effectiveness of teachers' use of MSs[9]. Dörnyei and Csizér replied to the challenge just in time with their study towards 200 Hungarian teachers' perceptions of most important and frequently used MSs; however, it was limited in Hungarian context and lacked cultural comparison as well as a theory-based MSs framework.

Regarding the effectiveness of Dörnyei's MSs taxonomy in terms of cultural transferability, an investigation different from Hungary in educational, social and cultural perspectives was conducted. According to the result, some MSs could transfer across various cultural contexts, while certain motivational instructions might only suit in the specific context.

Though some empirical studies have made contribution to suggesting the influence of MSs on learner motivation, there are mainly two gaps: one is that the previous studies are based only on teachers' subjective perceptions of MSs; the other is that the real effectiveness MSs depends on student perceived ones rather than what teachers see or do. Thus, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of MSs by considering student perceived motivation, observing student motivational behaviour and measuring L2 achievement[10].

To narrow the gap, some more sophisticated studies started to highlight the importance of student perceived motivation by including both teachers' application of MSs and students' perceived use of MSs. Further improvement was made in Sugita and Takeuchi' research, which indicated the effect of MSs was affected by students' language level[11]. Based on this research, they further indicated that learner's original motivational intensity should also be considered as a factor influencing the effect of teachers' MSs.

3.2 From significant correlation to positive causal relationship

Compared to previous studies, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei's pioneering study in 2008 was far more reliable since they were the first to combine self-reporting method with classroom observation instrument. In 2012, Papi and Abdollahzadeh conducted an improved study which further supported the strong correlation between instructors' motivational practices and language learners' motivation[12]. The causal relationship between MSs and L2 motivation remained to be confirmed.

To date, perhaps the most sophisticated and ambitious quasi-experiments is Alrabai's investigation, as it extends the effect to achievement, indicating trained MSs can lead to better L2 achievement[13].

4 Conclusion and further research suggestions

This review firstly introduced theoretical development in L2 motivation, and frameworks of MSs were discussed chronologically. Followed by a series of studies approaching the effectiveness of MSs, several future research directions are to be provided. As Ushioda' emphasised, a 'small lens' is needed when approaching L2 motivation study[14]. In the context of globalisation, further empirical studies considering cultural factors can be conducted[15]. For example, the effectiveness of MSs in various cultural contexts can be compared, thus providing teachers with tailored pedagogical suggestions to increase students' motivation. In the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, further exploration for online-specific MSs is also warranted as online language courses are likely to take larger proportion.

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