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Motivation in ESL Classrooms, with a focus on the Kurdish Region of Iraq

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Abstract

The paper attempts to shed light on how to discern and manage ESL lessons in terms of learners' myriad forms of motivation. A key focus is on the motivation of first-year English language students in the Kurdish region of Iraq. It examines the significance of differing motivations in ESL learning and the factors that might affect learners' motivation spanning narrow career aims to desires to emigrate, licitly or illicitly. Motivation is a crucial element in the realm of second language learning. It directly impacts both the quality and extent of language learning. This article posits the view that ESL teachers have an almost insurmountable task in that each student in their classroom is, in John Schumann's words, on a 'unique affective trajectory'. Thus, teachers have to discern and take into account, the whole personality of their learners. The article also provides a brief discussion and a modicum of straightforward suggestions for practising teachers in the field of ESL.

Keywords: ELT, ESL classroom, second language acquisition, motivation, engagement, needs analysis

INTRODUCTION

Students in ESL lessons harbour visions of possible selves. They may envisage a rich self, a professionally successful self, a less podgy self, as well as perhaps a non-alcoholic self, or unemployed self. Each

individual can have a repertoire of possible selves, some of which they may strive for and others which they attempt to strenuously rebuff. This repertoire represents, in the words of Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, “the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats” (1986, p.954).

In real life, one’s repertoire of possible selves derives from an individual's particular sociocultural and historical context. Nowadays, social media also exert a strong influence. U.S. Senators Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, and Kirsten Gillibrand, no doubt, conceive their possible selves as the first U.S. female president, but whilst they have this aspiration in common, there will be unique variations in how they perceive this possible self. Similarly, an ESL student’s vision of self may motivate them to learn English to acquire course credits, pass an exam, acquire a better job or they may be learning because they have a boyfriend/girlfriend from a foreign country. According to John Schumann, every learner of a second language has a “unique affective trajectory” (p.178.)

Schumann’s notion is not worlds apart from Zoltan Dörnyei’s recent focus on the notion of vision and its ‘actional component’. The “mission statement” of his 2016 Cambridge EFL lecture was:

> “The vision of who students would like to become as L2 users, seems to be one of the most reliable predictors of long term intended effort”. (Dörnyei, 2016).

Leaving aside short term contingencies like whether particular classes or semesters go well, according to Dörnyei, “…vision is almost like [sic] highest order motivational force which can create ..[a].. long term engagement” (Dörnyei 2016, 3.30-4.00). The idea of a personal ‘vision’, or a ‘future self’ forms a part of everyone’s ‘unique affective trajectory’.

Celeste Kinginger (2004), citing Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), refers to the need for ESL professionals to ‘encompass the history, agency, and engagement of language learners...’ and to conceive ‘…of language learners not as bundles of variables, but as diverse *people*.’ (emphasis in the original). The truth is that no studies on motivation, can capture the gamut of idiosyncrasies and personal circumstances which mould an individual’s motivation to learn a second language. For example, Richard Watson’s gut aversion to the sound of the French word ‘l’oiseau’ or Alice Kaplan’s up and down romantic

relationship with a French-Canadian boyfriend offer singular strands of their complicated motivational make-up (Schumann, 1994, pp.103-171).

In my own 'unique affective trajectory' with regard to the French language, reference needs to be made to having an inspiring teacher in 1970s Ulster up to my 'O' Level studies. I particularly looked forward to the weekly 'language lab' lesson where the booths with their switches and electric gizmos were a welcome break from the drudgery of taking notes from the blackboard in History and Geography. A particular craving was to be summoned to the teacher's elevated control panel where there was a plethora of controls not dissimilar to Captain Kirk's deck on the Starship Enterprise. For my 'A' level studies, the teachers changed and the motivation altered and matured, driven more by the reading of poetry by Rimbaud and novels such as Camus' 'L'Étranger'. I opted to study a joint degree in French and Italian at Hull University, but the second semester's emphasis on phonetics and Rabelais, together with a few NNS lecturers who chose to deliver their lectures in French, not English – somewhat affectedly, in my provincial view – diminished my motivation considerably, so much so that I switched my main subject to Theology. Clearly, then, motivation is not static, but dynamic, and can ebb and flow depending on learning and personal circumstances: it can even be snuffed out altogether.

My current ESL students comprise first-year undergraduates at a university in the Kurdish region of Iraq. They are pursuing their studies in the Engineering, Mathematics, Humanities (Geography, History & Philosophy), Nursing and Chemistry departments. All have 4x45-min. lessons one day per week. *Face2Face* books are used. Students are assessed by means of a combination of traditional exams, 'exit slips', participation marks, quizzes, speaking activities and general performance in homework assignments. Many students studied English in their primary and secondary schools, using a publication called *Sunrise*. However, owing to this book's limitations (largely non-communicative in nature), as well as other obstacles such as large class sizes (40+), and a Kurdish/Iraqi didactic approach to teaching combined with a propensity to focus on rote learning and regurgitation of facts, students arrive predominantly at an elementary level, if that. There is some knowledge of grammar, but writing and communication skills are mostly rudimentary. Some

students have a rather instrumental motivation in that their primary goal is simply to achieve good scores, or credits and progress in their university degree course. Others, many of whom dislike their subjects, are motivated to improve their English in the hope of transferring to a better subject in a different university in their second year.

Gardner's seminal study on integrativeness has been influential as he claimed that there cannot be a dichotomy between learning another language and the learners' 'social dispositions towards the speech community' in question (cited in Dörnyei, 1998, p.122.) Indeed, this can be taken to quite extraordinary lengths. Schumann (1997, chapter 4) presents the case of Alice Kaplan, who wrote of her highly intensified motivation to learn French (p123):

> Why do people want to adopt another culture? Because there's something in their own they don't like, that doesn't *name them* [emphasis in original.] When I was an adolescent, French was my store-house language. I collected secrets in French;
>
> I spoke to myself in French. Why did I hide in French? If life got too messy, I could take off into my second world.
>
> This illustrates, in a startling way, just how personal and intense a 'unique affective trajectory' can be.

I would like to focus a little more on those studies on motivation which may be more germane to my current situation in Northern Iraq/Kurdistan. Dörnyei has probed the factors of orientations and attitudes, "antecedents that [Gardner's] socio-educational model had identified as the bedrock of L2 motivation" (Ortega: 2009, p.178). In Dörnyei's native Hungary, and more so in Kurdistan, students do not often make contact with L2 speakers, so there are much less intense attitudes towards them and virtually no desire to 'integrate' with them. He deduced that instrumental forms of orientation and classroom attitudes (curriculum, attitudes towards the teacher) may influence learners' attitudes more markedly. In the case of Kurdish students, the desire to emigrate – licitly or otherwise – is sometimes an additional, powerful, driver.

Clément et al (1994) have also sought to reconceptualise the antecedents of motivation so that L2 motivation models are more relevant to a wider range of foreign language contexts, rather than just the Canadian model which was Garner's focus. In their study of 301 17- and 18-year-old Hungarian students, additional orientations such as 'friendship' and 'travel' came to the fore in their examination

of motivational factors. They adopted the term ‘xenophilic orientation’ as the desire to make friends was more general, rather than centred on members of a specific L2 group. In addition, instrumental and knowledge orientations were prominent as, in a post-communist former eastern bloc country, “being more educated and knowledgeable [in English] is related to success in work and studies’ (Ortega, p.179) and “English as knowledge is perceived to have pragmatic consequences (p.179). This also chimes with my previous 12-year experience in the neighbouring country of Slovakia. Out of 12 students in the final year of the private school where I worked for two years, 25% students pursued their undergraduate studies abroad, at Aarhus University in Denmark, Tilburg in the Netherlands and the University of Central Florida. Notably, though they completed English as a subject in their ‘Maturita’ (school leaving exam), they pragmatically also sat the Cambridge CAE exam due to the domestic Slovak qualification not being a recognized credential outside Slovakia.

An orientation, which has become crucial, was also given recognition by Clément, namely media orientation or, to use Dörnyei and Csizér’s term, “cultural interest orientation”. This reflects “the appreciation of cultural products associated with the particular L2 culture and conveyed by the media [and] …. cultural products and artefacts” (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005, p.21, cited in Ortega, p.179).

Clément and his associates sum up the orientations which play a greater role in locations like Hungary thus:

> *The absence of Anglophones from the immediate environment would appear to sustain distal friendships (through travel), an interest in English culture as a foreign phenomenon, and an instrumental orientation based on the acquisition of knowledge and media usage…*

Other studies, such as Yashima in Japan and Lamb in Sumatra, Indonesia, confirm the importance of factors such as a ‘xenophilic orientation’ and what Yashima calls a positive “international posture” (Ortega, 2009, p.179).

Dörnyei and Csizér (2005) (cited in Ortega, p.179 sq.) carried out a study covering 8,500 13- and 14-year-old Hungarian students and the results were more nuanced. For instance, respondents who resided in touristy areas like Budapest and who experienced high frequencies

of personal encounters with members of an L2 community sometimes entertained more negative perceptions. Contrariwise, respondents who lived in areas where encounters with L2 speakers were relatively sparse had more positive perceptions.

This aligns, to a great extent, my own experience in Bratislava in Slovakia. Local residents in the capital city can be a little blazé due to the numbers of English-speaking foreigners living and working there. Unfortunately, stag party weekend revellers significantly contribute to negative perceptions. However, outside Bratislava, residents are more curious and welcoming. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Kurdistan. My current university town of ca. 80,000 only has six native speakers to interact with, whereas in Erbil, the local populace is more acclimatised to the presence of English-speaking residents and they present less of a novelty. Residents of both Erbil and Bratislava may be more keenly aware that tourism, globalization and, in the case of the latter, EU membership and freedom of movement, are not unalloyed benefits and those who seek to learn English may have more ambivalent attitudes in terms of 'xenophilic' and 'integrative' intent. [Dörnyei & Csizér (2005), cited in Ortega, p.184].

Aside from my first-year students, my Kurdish university language centre organises booster courses for academic masters and PhD candidates. Here, the motivation is highly instrumental (or extrinsic, *pace* Vallerand's paradigm, (Dörnyei, 1998, p.121)) namely, to achieve accreditation by the Ministry of Higher Education to teach in tertiary education institutions, a score of 5.5 in IELTS is required.

It is clear that motivation cannot be viewed as a static concept and that it is dynamic. (Schumann, 1994, p.186; Ortega, 2009, p184). It can ebb away due to a plethora of circumstances: a change of teacher, mismanaged curriculum, breaking up with a boyfriend etc. Motivation needs to be viewed in concrete contexts, activities, classrooms, institutions, and various other situations. M. McGroarty (2001, p86) sums it up thus:

> The motivation tenor of any classroom, including its constructive social relations, can probably only be gauged over time. It is likely that the motivational level of a social unit, whether an entire classroom or a small group or pair working within the class, waxes and wanes somewhat depending on both the variety of activities and tasks occurring … and on the social interactions framing the activity.

Schumann (p.186) echoes this point and claims that the only way to genuinely track motivation would “involve videotaping classes, analyzing the classroom interaction, interviewing students, and asking students to keep day-by-day introspective diary studies of their affective reactions to the instruction and their learning. The teacher might also keep such a diary.” This is a salutary check on the temptation to make overly generalized, speculative conclusions about the role of motivation in SLA.

Schumann believes that language teachers essentially set out to ‘influence their students’ stimulus-appraisal systems to make their learning of the foreign language more productive’ (p.186). Schumann draws attention to the fact that the ESL teacher faces competing forces. In my case, I am “in competition” with the staff of the faculties to which the students belong – Nursing, Engineering, Humanities etc. in terms of their faculties’ deadlines, priorities, designated assignments, enthusiasm (or lack of) for the English language and so on. For instance, Nursing students value our first-year course’s input more than the Kurdish language, Arabic and Kindergarten departments. Coping with the positive or laissez-faire attitudes of different faculties towards English will inevitably affect the way individual students appraise my subject, namely whether they view English as central to achieving their goals or realizing their possible ‘self’ or, indeed, if it is peripheral to their personal goals.

As part of teachers’ arsenal to motivate students, Dörnyei (1998) lays out ten points for consideration (Appendix 1). Some of these are axiomatic, e.g. “make the language classes interesting”. In my case, number 5, (from an earlier version, quoted by Schumann) “Make the course relevant by doing a needs analysis and adjusting the syllabus accordingly” is a tall order. This is due to the fact that my university decreed last October that *all* students would be taught at pre-intermediate level as a minimum standard. One small fly in the ointment: our placement test classified only 20% of them as being ready for this level, a huge majority being elementary or beginners, according to the placement test results.

In such circumstances, what can we make of the role of the teacher? Whether as organizer or assessor or tutor (*pace* Harmer), how can teachers motivate students if the Krashen formula of $i + 1$ is ignored and replaced with one which seems to be $i + 2$ or even $i + 3$? Teachers have an appraisal role which involves appraising textbook

materials, pedagogical methods as relevant to their professional and classroom goals (Schumann, p.187). However, not only may the teacher's appraisal conflict with the appraisal systems of some students who may view the material as too difficult; in my case it also conflicts with the appraisal system of the university which may be said to have a quixotic notion, to put it mildly, of how students' language needs can be addressed and strive to push students on to a level for which they are not yet prepared. Naturally, a teacher is 'in control' of a class, but his degree of control is considerably vitiated and complicated if he is handicapped by being obliged to follow a B1-level coursebook with elementary or beginner level students. A phrase referencing cricket from Sir Geoffrey Howe's (1990) resignation speech from Mrs. Thatcher's government springs to mind: "It is rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease only for them to find, the moment the first balls are bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game by the team captain."

Nevertheless, a skilled teacher can differentiate, even *in extremis*, and with the assistance of able teaching assistants, progress can be made. Navigating the demanding path of trying (in Schumann's words) '…to find maximum congruence between ..[teachers'].. appraisal of how language should be taught.' (p.187) whilst coping with learners' "built-in" syllabi (Corder 1967, cited in Ellis & Shintani, 2013: p60) place significant stress on the teacher's ability to control the learning process, whilst avoiding student demotivation.

An additional key issue I face as 'controller' and 'organiser' is whether the use of L1 can realistically be eliminated in the classroom. In my experience, this is neither practicable, nor desirable. L1 use, if carefully and clearly circumscribed, can perform a useful function in organizing lesson activities. As Ellis and Shintani point out (2013, p.232), L1 language can be deployed to carry out interpersonal functions which would otherwise be challenging or impossible in L2. This seems logical and pragmatic in my situation and is consonant with Scrivener's perception of the role of the teacher as using '…appropriate teaching and organizational procedures and techniques to help the students learn…' (p.25). The 'monolingual assumption' (Hall & Cook, 2012, p.272) has been increasingly questioned, the authors claiming that this assumption "has inhibited the development of bilingual and bicultural identities and skills that are actively

needed by most learners" (p.273). The goal of my Kurdish students is not to communicate in monolingual environments or to emulate native speakers' use of English, 'a goal which for many learners is neither useful, desirable or attainable.' (A. Davies, cited in Hall & Cook, p.276). Hall & Cook also cite a U.S. study by Lucas & Katz (1994) where they declare that 'the use of native language is so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumptions mitigate against it.' (Hall & Cook, p.278).

In addition, the use of L1 can assist in highlighting cross-cultural differences in the ways speakers communicate (Stiefel 2009, cited in Hall & Cook, p.279). When organising lessons and teaching materials, the teacher should perhaps bear in mind that many classrooms are effectively cases where a form of "compound bilingualism" operates (Weinrich 1953, cited in Hall & Cook 281). This is where bilingual language users fuse their knowledge of two languages into a single system or, in V. Cook's words, 'are interwoven in the L2 user's mind' (V. Cook 2001, cited in Hall & Cook, 281).) Widdowson goes so far as to say that the monolingual approach can "stifle" second language learning processes (Widdowson 2003: 150, cited in Hall & Cook, 281). Certainly, the careful and planned use of the L1 language can serve to reduce learner anxiety.

One final aspect of the teacher's role is how he marries his perceived role with the textbook allocated. Evidently, most textbooks are produced for the widest use possible, and the specific cultural, religious contexts of learners cannot be easily accommodated. (The only exception I'm aware of is a redacted version of *Headway* for the Saudi market, where any photograph of an 'immodestly' dressed lady is either excised or altered.) *Face2Face* is a very commendable book and I used it in my former position teaching B2 and C1 students in a Bratislava university. Clearly, the Kurdish context is more specific than a medium-sized, European capital city. As Stephen Bax points out, there is a need to adopt a 'context approach' in the selection of textbooks and other material so that students' 'wants, needs, learning styles and strategies' are more fully considered (2003, p283). Harmer emphasizes that teaching groups comprise individuals who must be responded to individually. Additionally, teachers need to "pay attention to the different identities we are faced with." (Harmer, 2007, p85.) (We could almost replace the word 'identities' with Markus and Nurius' 'selves'.)

To briefly conclude, as Ellis & Shintani (2013, p28) rightly state, “Instruction that is not compatible with the way L2 acquisition takes place cannot be successful”. That much is clear. But whether we focus, like Schumann on the precise role of the brain’s amigydala, or the various aspects of motivation, or Dörnyei’s recent focus on “the vision thing” (*pace* the late George H W Bush (1998)), all ESL teachers will struggle to find the precise key which fits all student’s motivation stimuli as there are as many ‘unique affective trajectories’ as there are second language learners.

APPENDIX 1

Dörnyei 1998

1. Set a personal example with your own behaviour.
2. Create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.
3. Present the tasks properly.
4. Develop a good relationship with the learners.
5. Increase the learners’ linguistic self-confidence
6. Make the language classes interesting
7. Promote learner autonomy
8. Personalise the learning process
9. Increase the learners’ goal-orientedness
10. Familiarise learners with the target language culture.

(Schumann, lists point 5 in an earlier draft as ‘5. Make the course relevant by doing a needs analysis and adjusting the syllabus accordingly’.)

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