

## *Motivational dynamics in language learning*

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The anthology *Motivational Dynamics in Language Learning*, edited by Zoltán Dörnyei, Peter D. MacIntyre and Alastair Henry, constitutes an attempt, admittedly a very successful one, to apply the tenets of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) (de Bot & Larsen-Freeman, 2011; de Bot, Lowie, Thorne, & Verspoor, 2013; de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) to empirical investigations into the role played by motivation in the process of learning second or foreign languages (L2). The editors elucidate in the introduction to the volume that the decision to embark on the project was dictated by the virtual absence of second language acquisition (SLA) research that would venture beyond examining cause-and-effect relationships and seek to explore instead the dynamic and complex nature of this enterprise. As they comment in justification of tackling this challenge,

we believed that the topic of L2 motivation was an ideal content area for such an endeavor, partly because motivation, with its ups and downs and ebbs and flows, was an SLA phenomenon that seemed to lend itself to the application of dynamically

informed research designs, and partly because the currently most established constructs in the field – the various L2 self-guides – are by nature inherently dynamic and would therefore be well-suited targets for investigation using dynamic approaches. (p. 5)

Bounded by the introduction, where the rationale for the entire undertaking is outlined, and a conclusion, in which an attempt is made to spell out the criteria for high-quality research carried out within the dynamic systems perspective as well as the contributions of this stance to the study of second language motivation, the book has been divided into two main parts. The first, titled “Conceptual Issues” and comprising nine contributions, is intended to offer a succinct overview of key constructs related to CDST and illuminate how these relate to the study of motivation in second language learning. Consequently, the reader will find here papers dealing with such issues as the defining tenets of CDST (Diane Larsen-Freeman), attractor states (Phil Hiver), the importance of timescales in examining second language development (Kees de Bot), the contribution of initial conditions (Marjolijn Verspoor), the role of contextual factors (Ema Ushioda), the extent to which humans are capable of exercising agency (Ali H. Al-Hoorie), the application of social network analysis to the investigation of foreign language learning (Sarah Mercer), the constantly evolving nature of possible selves, as conceptualized in Dörnyei’s (2009a) L2 motivational self-system (Alastair Henry), and the notion of directed motivational currents as a groundbreaking framework in the study of L2 motivation (Zoltán Dörnyei, Zana Ibrahim and Christine Muir). The second part, “Empirical Studies,” includes twelve papers, all of which serve the purpose of illustrating how an investigation of various aspects of second language learning motivation can be handled from the perspective of CDST. The aspects that are touched upon include: (a) fluctuations in approach and avoidance motivation in the course of task performance, captured on a second-by-second timescale, as a manifestation of the intricate interplay between motivation, emotion and cognition (Peter D. MacIntyre and Alicia Serous), (b) the multi-level character of the L2 self, as measured in terms of months, weeks, minutes and seconds (Sarah Mercer), (c) changes in motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy, representing a conglomerate of cognitive, affective and motivational factors (cf. Dörnyei, 2009b), in the course of an academic writing seminar spanning the period of one semester (Katalin Piniel and Kata Csizér), (d) factors impacting L2 learning experience, that is engagement, interest, anxiety and boredom, together with combinations thereof (Frea Waninge), (e) the gradual development of language teacher immunity as an integral part of evolving motivational dispositions (Phil Hiver), (f) the identification of language learner archetypes with respect to motivational trajectories (Letty Chan, Zoltán Dörnyei and Alastair Henry), (g) the interaction of learner and teacher motivation within

an individual (Tammy Gregersen and Peter D. MacIntyre), (h) fluctuations in motivation in nonmandatory foreign language courses (Tomoko Yashima and Kumiko Arano), (i) motivational dynamics in learning a third language (Alastair Henry), (j) the development of learner L2 self-concept as a result of participation in a study abroad program (Kay Irie and Stephen Ryan), (k) the interplay between self-regulation, as manifested in the execution of writing tasks, and the growth of the ideal L2 self (Ryo Nitta and Kyoko Baba), and, finally, (l) the impact of imagery in second language learning on the evolution of future self-guides (Chenjing [Julia] You and Letty Chan). What is of paramount importance, these diverse aspects of the dynamic character of L2 motivation are in many cases explored with the help of innovative methodological procedures that have thus far rarely or even never been employed in the study of motivational processes, let alone other facets of SLA, a huge contribution that is repeatedly emphasized throughout the review.

The value of this anthology should be obvious to anyone involved in research into various aspects of SLA, especially those related to the contribution of individual difference factors in general and motivational processes in particular, although opinions about what constitutes its primary strength are likely to vary. For the editors as well as the authors of some of the chapters, the main contribution of the volume is without doubt its firm and consistent grounding in the selected theoretical perspective, namely CDST, and the inclusion of practical guidelines on how research within this perspective should beneficially be conducted. This assumption is closely tied to the deep conviction that the espousal of such a stance allows obtaining insights that would otherwise elude us and thus researchers in fact have no choice but to follow this path and do so with as much dedication, persistence and rigor as possible. For instance, the editors confidently state in the conclusion that “adopting complex, dynamic system principles is integral to the language processes we study and therefore cannot remain optional” (pp. 420-421), whereas Yashima and Arano note that “DST-informed motivation research has tremendous potential for helping us understand why people do what they do” (p. 314). Henry, in turn, comments that

many of the motivational shifts identified here would have surfaced even if the data had been analyzed without the benefit of a CDS lens. However, by adopting a complexity approach . . . it means that we conceptualize the objects of our enquiry – the classroom, the students and their motivation – as systems that are *by nature* dynamic [emphasis original]. (p. 339)

Indeed, these benefits can hardly be denied and the immense consistency in applying the tenets of CDST is truly commendable, which makes the collection an invaluable resource for those who wish to investigate second language learning

motivation from this perspective. This should not be interpreted as indicating that the long-term contributions of CDST approaches to investigating L2 motivation should be taken for granted or, for that matter, that its benefits will ever lead to or should even result in the abandonment of traditional methodologies tapping static relationships and focusing upon groups rather than individuals. This is evident in the words of Mercer, who insightfully points out that “no single research method or theoretical framework can answer all the complex questions posed by the field of SLA” (p. 80), but also the editors themselves, who admit that

just as they have not supplanted traditional longitudinal studies in developmental psychology, CDS methods are unlikely to replace other approaches to research in our field. Correlations, analysis of variance, interviews, classroom observation schemes and other methods will continue to have their place in the literature for the foreseeable future. (p. 428)

The obvious merits mentioned above notwithstanding, to me, personally, the true value of the volume does not lie in the rigorous, if in some cases perhaps somewhat exaggerated while at the same time entirely understandable, efforts to cast the discussion of the applied research procedures and the obtained findings in relation to such notions as initial conditions, attractor states, perturbations, self-organization, coadaptation, timescales or signature dynamics, to name but a few. Rather, in my view, the main contribution of this edited collection is its clear success in raising our awareness of the multifarious ways in which the dynamic nature of second language learning motivation can be explored, both with respect to the foci of investigation and the methodological choices made, irrespective of allegiance to one theoretical stance or another. It is truly fascinating and engrossing, for example, to get familiarized with conceptualizations, contexts and issues that are only emerging as fruitful lines of inquiry in motivational research, such as the dynamics of possible selves (Chapters 9, 20 and 22), directed motivational currents (Chapter 10), the intricate character of L2 learning experience (Chapter 14), motivation to learn a third language (Chapter 19), study abroad situations (Chapter 20), teacher immunity (Chapter 15), or the tensions between teacher and learner motivation (Chapter 17). On the other hand, it is hugely instructive and inspiring to become acquainted with the nuts and bolts of such entirely novel or still budding research procedures as idiodynamic methodology (Chapters 11 and 12), a nested systems approach (Chapter 12), latent growth curve models and longitudinal clustering (Chapter 13), retrodictive qualitative modeling (Chapter 16), or Q methodology (Chapter 20). All of these developments bode well for the future of research into language learning motivation as they hold the promise of allowing scholars to stake out

little known territories, gaining fresh insights in this respect, and disclosing influences or amalgams of influences that have thus far been hidden from view.

Perhaps with the notable exception of the contribution by Mercer (Chapter 12), somewhat conspicuously missing from the volume are examples of studies that would tap the peaks and valleys in motivational intensity, however operationalized, as they transpire during naturally-occurring, regularly-scheduled classes, such as the one carried out by Waninge, Dörnyei, and de Bot (2014). Such an omission is surprising and unfortunate since research projects of this kind do not only enable examining motivational fluctuations on a minute-by-minute basis but are also characterized by high ecological validity, a quality that experimental research employing the idiodynamic method (e.g., MacIntyre and Serroul) can never be expected to possess. For this reason, their findings are much more likely to resonate with practitioners and provide a more sound basis for implications for what happens in real classrooms on an everyday basis. Clearly, research of this kind also has the potential to reflect the fundamental tenets of CDST, and therefore there is every reason why this line of inquiry should be vigorously pursued by those opting to pledge their allegiance to this theoretical framework. In light of all the contributions of the volume, this, however, is a relatively minor shortcoming, one that testifies to the fact that research reflecting CDTs principles is still in its infancy and that an attempt to explore real-time changes in motivation in classroom conditions poses a formidable challenge. It is also a limitation that can be viewed as more than likely to be rectified in the near future as existing data collection tools are refined and new research procedures are developed.

All things considered, the collection of papers represents a valuable and at the same time much-needed addition to the field of research into second language learning motivation and in particular its temporal dimension. This is not only because it constitutes a highly successful attempt to situate the study of motivation within the framework of complex dynamic systems, as reflected in the use of relevant terminology, acceptance of a set of well-articulated principles or adherence to rigid guidelines on how such empirical investigations should be conducted, but also, or maybe even primarily, because the contributions included therein open up new avenues in research on motivational dynamics, both in terms of its directions, scope and methodological approaches. As a result, the edited volume is bound to become a recognized source of reference, inspiration, insight, reflection and self-education for all those who set their sights on uncovering the intricate nature of motivation to learn additional languages, whether with respect to its causes, intensity or the factors responsible for shaping it. Its merits will undoubtedly be appreciated by undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students, experienced scholars who feel the need to apply a wider

lens to their research, one that is more focused on the individual, context or interactions between the two, as well as teachers who are determined to gain a greater understanding of the factors impinging upon motivation in the hope of devising efficacious motivational strategies. It is my stance that these benefits are by no means confined to those who elect to comply with CDST principles and are best viewed as theory-neutral, which, somewhat paradoxically, offers evidence for yet another strength of the anthology, even if such an outcome may not have been anticipated by the editors. It is fitting to end this review with the words of John H. Schumann, who declares in the foreword that “this volume marks an exciting new beginning” (p. xviii). While this comment is meant to refer to CDST and the methodology it embraces, it should, to my mind, be interpreted more broadly and be taken to suggest that the edited collection is bound to give an impetus to a spate of studies on the dynamic nature of L2 motivation, such that will reflect innovative designs, utilize new data collection tools and avail themselves of ingenious methods of analysis, the theoretical persuasions of scholars conducting these studies being a far less significant issue. Even though the jury is still out on whether insights gained in this way will indeed translate into more effective ways of motivating language learners, there are strong grounds to assume that adding this nascent micro-perspective to the well-established macro-perspective will considerably enhance the chances that this crucial goal will be attained.

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