

MOTIVATION

Introduction

Of all the concepts discussed in this book, motivation is perhaps the most familiar and the one that has attracted the most interest from both researchers and teachers. We encounter discussions of motivation in various walks of life, from sport to education to the business world, and we all feel we have some understanding of what the term means. Across the psychology literature, descriptions of motivation have been varied and the focus of inquiry has inevitably shifted over time. The diverse nature of the various conceptualizations of motivation can be partially explained by the sheer scope of the topic; the study of motivation seeks to explain nothing less than why people behave as they do. In this chapter, we do not have space to cover the whole spectrum of motivation theory; instead, we will limit our discussion to those theories of motivation that have been most closely connected with foreign language learning.

What is motivation?

In this section, we will look at some of the main theories of motivation that have appeared in the psychology literature. We do this primarily because although we often discuss motivation, it is not always clear what we mean when we use the term, nor do we always share a common understanding of what motivation is. To give an example, consider what might be meant when a teacher says 'This student is motivated'. To some teachers, this might mean that the student carries out activities and achieves outcomes that the teacher selects. For others, it might mean that the learner has identified specific goals and makes efforts to realize them. These differing views can be explained by different theories of motivation.

Before moving on to the next section, take some time to think about Activity 6.1, below. After you have completed the activity, keep your answers in mind as you read on through the chapter.

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Activity 6.1

Different approaches to 'motivating'

Let us step back a little from language learning for a moment and consider motivation more generally. Imagine, for example, a young child learning to play the piano. Which of the following do you think would motivate the child?

- 1 offering a reward or treat each time the child performs well
- 2 not allowing the child out to play with friends until he has completed his daily practice
- 3 adopting a policy of constant praise and encouragement, regardless of actual performance
- 4 scolding the child when he makes a mistake
- 5 allowing the child the freedom to choose when and how long to practise
- 6 setting clear goals for the child
- 7 regularly discussing progress and future goals with the child
- 8 making a fixed schedule so that the child practises regularly at the same time every day
- 9 asking the child to make a schedule for his practice
- 10 encouraging the child to believe that he is more gifted than those around him.

Think about the strategies that you thought were motivating. Why did you think so? How about those you did not consider motivating? What were your reasons?

Teachers have different ideas about their role in motivating students and the best ways to go about doing this. If we look at the various strategies listed in Activity 6.1, we see a diverse range of approaches, and individual teachers would probably have different opinions as to their relative effectiveness and appropriateness. However, these strategies share a common characteristic: they all assume that motivation is externally directed—that a teacher has the power to motivate a student. What we regard as motivating greatly depends on how we understand the concept of motivation. And a fundamental aspect of this is where we see the origin of this motivation: does it come from outside the learner or from within?

Without a clear understanding of what we mean by motivation, we cannot say whether a particular strategy is motivating or not. Teachers readily acknowledge the importance of motivation in language learning, but there is often little explicit consensus as to what is meant by the term. A robust working definition of motivation is surely an essential in any language teacher's toolbox.

Defining motivation

Before we explore some of the descriptions of motivation found in the psychology literature, we need to think a little about everyday, lay understandings of the term, as these have a significant effect on how teachers regard motivation in the classroom. The word 'motivate' itself can be unhelpful. If you pick up a dictionary, you are likely to find a definition that categorizes the word as a transitive verb, accompanied by an illustration referring to somebody or something 'motivating' another person to do something. For example, the *New Oxford English Dictionary* (1998) offers the following:

Stimulate (someone's) interest in or enthusiasm for doing something: it is the teacher's job to motivate the child at school.

The verb 'motivate' suggests that motivation is very much an external entity and this is reflected in many of the strategies that teachers have conventionally adopted to 'motivate' their students. Many familiar educational practices, such as rewarding or punishing behaviour, are based on this premise that motivation is linked to the teacher controlling learners or guiding them in a particular direction. Such practices are often informed by the behaviourist theories we discussed in Chapter 1, which regard human behaviour as a consequence of external stimuli and imply that the teacher's role is to provide the appropriate stimuli. In the motivation literature, there is a closely related concept known as **push-pull**. According to push-pull theories of motivation, individuals are either pulled by external stimuli, such as rewards and incentives, or pushed by subconscious forces or drives within themselves. For many, basic understandings of motivation are a combination of behaviourism and push-pull theories of motivation; thus, they come to regard the role of a teacher as navigating the learner towards learning outcomes through the provision of various stimuli.



Push-pull theories of motivation

Early descriptions of motivation focused on the human tendency to either approach pleasure or avoid pain—in other words, on basic needs. In the field of education, Hull's (1943) **drive theory**, for example, attempted to explain learning and motivation in terms of precise scientific formulae, where certain needs or deficits create drives which, in turn, direct human behaviour. Such an approach was typical of its time, but from these simple beginnings the study of motivation gradually became more sophisticated; Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele (1998) trace the development of motivational theory as moving away from a needs base towards the cognitive perspective which dominated the latter part of the twentieth century. This move represented a major shift in conceptualization as we moved from seeing motivation as externally controlled to viewing it as something that comes from within the individual. This shift has considerable implications for language teachers. A view of motivation that emphasizes its external nature places the teacher in a central, controlling role. However, a view that focuses on the internal nature of motivation—as a cognitive perspective does—puts the learner in that

central role and thus suggests a whole different set of challenges for the teacher. Since the cognitive perspective is the one that has had the greatest influence on how we understand language learning motivation, we will now focus our discussion on it. (See also Chapter 1.)

Cognitive theories of motivation

Cognitive theories of motivation are concerned with how our thinking shapes our behaviour. In the field of education, they refer to the mental processes that direct learning. In other words, learners make decisions about their own learning. Central to this theoretical framework are what are known as **expectancy-value** theories. These describe how behaviour results from whether a person expects success in a particular activity and the perceived value for that person of success in that activity. Imagine, for example, that a tall adult tempts a small child by holding out some treat. The child is unlikely to make a sustained effort to obtain that treat if it is held at an impossible height for her. The child will soon realize that effort is futile and give up, as she does not expect to succeed. Similarly, if the child regards the actual treat as not especially desirable, then she is unlikely to devote much time or energy to the task of getting her hands on it—the child does not value the object that would result from her efforts. On the other hand, if the child sees that treat as highly desirable and it is placed at an attainable height, then we are likely to observe an intense and probably sustained burst of activity in pursuit of that treat. Expectancy-value theories describe behaviour in terms of ongoing mental cost-benefit calculations and, over the years, researchers have theorized motivation in many different ways based around the expectancy-value framework. This is something language teachers, or even educational institutions, need to take into account when they promote the pragmatic or material benefits of learning a language. For example, if learners are being encouraged by the prospect of economic rewards associated with successfully learning a language, then those learners may make the calculation that the actual likelihood of success and the amount of effort required are not justified by the scale of those rewards. Learners may have a low expectancy of success and place little value on that success.

Teachers and institutions may need to find other ways to encourage learners, ways that acknowledge the expectancies and values of learners. It is important that teachers make efforts to understand the particular value learners place on learning language and help them to see long-term purpose in the venture. Additionally, teachers can play a role in enhancing motivation by encouraging learners to understand their own abilities in a way that increases the expectation of success.

Achievement and competence

An influential early model of motivation was known as **achievement theory** (Atkinson & Birch, 1978; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). In its earliest forms, achievement theory described motivation in terms of a personality characteristic resulting from a basic human need to improve and strive for excellence. However, in more recent years, the focus has shifted away from

achievement to the idea of **competence**. In areas such as music and sport—where so much of the motivational psychology originates—it makes sense to think of effort being directed in the pursuit of excellence. Yet for the majority of us, as we go about our normal, everyday lives, excellence is not usually our primary consideration; we are typically much more concerned with simply getting by, hence the term ‘competence’ (Elliot & Dweck, 2007). Competence is considered a basic psychological need and is essentially concerned with feeling capable at a given activity. From a motivational perspective, it is important for teachers to foster in learners a sense of competence and also challenge them to develop it further; doing this requires a skilful balancing act when planning and designing learning activities. If learning tasks are beyond current competence, then learners may become demotivated or give up altogether; however, when learning tasks do not push the limits of competence, then learners are unlikely to feel challenged or motivated to improve.

Goals

A central concept within cognitive-based theories of motivation is that of goals. We all have goals and make efforts to achieve them, but we make greater efforts to realize some goals than others. The term ‘goals’ can refer to anything from a simple to-do list pinned on a desk at the start of the working day to something more significant, such as a deeply held long-term ambition. Understandably, goals have been discussed in many different ways, but one highly influential contribution to our understanding of how people create goals for themselves and work towards those goals was Locke and Latham’s (1994) **goal-setting theory**. Goal-setting theory considers three key aspects to the goals we set ourselves: their specificity, their perceived difficulty, and our degree of commitment. Individuals are more likely to commit to a particular action when the likelihood of successfully achieving a goal is high—which means the level of difficulty of a particular task is appropriate to the abilities of the individual in question—and when the goal is clearly expressed in specific, concrete terms. Echoing the earlier discussion of competence, all of this indicates a clear motivational role for teachers in the tasks that they set learners. In order to be motivating, tasks must be appropriate to the current proficiency of the learner—meaning that the goals must include some element of challenge—while the nature and aims of the task must also be clear. If learners do not feel capable of carrying out a particular task or if they are not sure what they are supposed to do or why, then they are unlikely to invest much time or effort in that task. In addition, it is important that teachers encourage learners to set their own goals in language learning, both long-term and short-term. This can be an interesting activity and one which can be carried out in the target language. Learners could be asked to identify their long-term goals of learning the language and discuss these in groups. They could also be asked to set more short-term goals such as: how many words they will learn this week; how many books in the target language they will read; how they will practise speaking the language; or how many television programmes they will watch in the language.

A further important distinction in the nature of goals concerns what is known as the orientation of the goals people set for themselves: the distinction between mastery and performance goals (see Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1999; Woodrow, 2012). Learners with a **mastery goal orientation** are motivated by the satisfaction of successfully learning to perform specific tasks, whereas individuals with a **performance goal orientation** engage in tasks to show their worth in relation to others. As an illustration, imagine two amateur musicians who belong to a local orchestra. They are both accomplished and dedicated musicians who practise diligently. However, the reasons they practise are very different. One of them does so because she genuinely loves playing the cello and wants to become the best cellist she possibly can, while the other practises hard because he derives great pleasure from performing on stage in front of an audience. Although their actual behaviour is the same, one of them is motivated by a mastery goal—simply to become a better cellist—while the other is motivated by a performance goal—to be respected and admired by an audience. The performance-oriented musician is principally concerned with how he looks in front of other people, so he is unlikely to make efforts without the threat, or promise, of evaluation by others.

Additionally, referring back to the discussion of self-esteem in Chapter 3, self-esteem can, for some people, become contingent on the praise they receive. The evaluations of others can therefore assume a significant role in how we feel about ourselves and, as a consequence, how we behave. What is particularly interesting about the second musician in the example above is that he is not especially concerned with his proficiency as a cellist; he would be happy so long as other people thought he was good. In contrast, the evaluations of others are not the main concern of the first musician, the mastery-oriented person. She is more focused on improving her ability to play the cello, and it is for this reason that mastery goals are generally considered to have more beneficial long-term motivational effects and, in turn, be more likely to lead to improved performance. The crucial practical implication for language teachers is that learners should be encouraged to aim to master the language rather than merely to score higher grades than their peers or impress others. In environments where learners have little opportunity to use the target language outside the classroom, language education can become strongly associated with competitive testing and, in such environments, students may tend to measure their language development in terms of test scores and how they perform in relation to others. Teachers need to encourage learners to value mastery of the language. However, in doing so, they may find themselves in conflict with the values of their institution or even the broader societal educational values. (See Chapter 7 for further discussion of goals.)

Activity 6.2

Thinking about performance-oriented and mastery-oriented behaviour

Read the following descriptions. Which do you think suggest more performance-oriented behaviour and which more mastery-oriented?

- 1 a committed gamer who often forgets the time while absorbed in playing online games late into the night
- 2 somebody who plays online games casually but is determined to get the top score visible on the scoreboard for a particular game
- 3 a runner determined to beat his own personal best time
- 4 a student working hard in order to become top of the class in a test
- 5 a business traveller in a foreign country engaging in conversations with locals to practise the language
- 6 a person practising the guitar, wanting to play it just like a particular musical hero
- 7 an ambitious student signing up for a summer workshop because some of the high-performing students in the class have also signed up
- 8 a child practising reading a poem for a poetry-reading competition the next day
- 9 an amateur tennis player trying to perfect her serve.

One consideration in distinguishing between mastery and performance goals is the role of other people. If, as in the second example above, the individual is primarily concerned with how he performs in relation to others, then this is performance-oriented behaviour. On the other hand, when there is no concern with how others perform or may evaluate the individual, as in the third example in the activity, then this is mastery-oriented behaviour. When we talk of evaluations by others, we need to be careful not to oversimplify what we mean. These evaluations are not only about competition or receiving praise; considerations such as the desire not to feel foolish in front of others can also be factors. Imagine a group of language learners meeting for a short intensive course with people they have mostly not met before. At the beginning of the course, the learners are streamed into classes according to scores on a placement test. One learner is placed in the high-proficiency class and is worried that his classmates will be much better than him, making him look foolish. These concerns may inhibit his behaviour so that he becomes focused on avoiding making embarrassing mistakes in front of others; this is known as an **avoidance orientation**. Meanwhile, another learner may be placed in a lower-proficiency class and may feel that this is a great chance to show everybody how good she is, even though she is not actually learning much; this is known as an **approach orientation**. When learners are overly concerned with their performance in relation to others or with how other people are evaluating their performance, this can steer their approach to learning in an unhelpful direction.

Of course, an essential aspect of being a good language learner/user is developing an awareness of others and their proficiency. However, teachers need to take care that this awareness does not lead them to overemphasize competition in the classroom, which could encourage performance-oriented behaviour. (See also Chapter 2 for other effects of competition on group dynamics.)

Self-determination theory

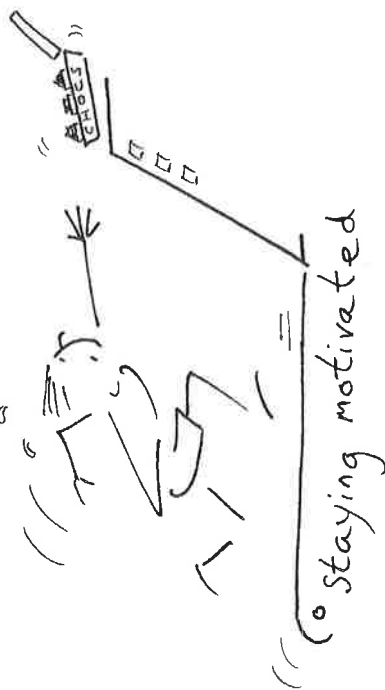
At the beginning of this section, we referred to a behaviourist view of motivation as a function of external threats and rewards. However, as we have seen, motivation is also internally driven, and **self-determination theory** (Deci & Moller, 2007; Deci & Ryan, 2002) seeks to explain how people manage both external and internal factors. Key to self-determination theory is the idea that people are constantly trying to manage three core psychological needs: autonomy, a need to feel in control of one's own actions; relatedness, a need to belong or feel connected to other people; and competence, a need to feel capable or accomplished. People do not simply act in response to external stimuli like animals in laboratory experiments; they make and sustain efforts more successfully when they feel competent, when they feel in control of their actions, and when they feel valued by and connected to others.

Self-determination theory is often understood in terms of a simplistic dichotomy between **intrinsic** and **extrinsic** motives. However, this would be a misrepresentation of self-determination theory, and one reason behind this misunderstanding is the slightly confusing terminology involved. The terms 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' are often conflated with 'internal' and 'external'; however, it is important to understand the distinction between these terms. Basically, one is intrinsically motivated if one carries out an activity for the enjoyment or satisfaction it provides. One is extrinsically motivated if one does something in order to achieve another goal that is not related to the activity itself. An example would be someone studying for an exam to gain a promotion or more money; if the promotion or the money were not there, then the individual would not want to study for the exam. As another example, think of someone who strongly dislikes running but who decides to run a long distance to raise money for a charitable cause that has deep personal significance for him. How would we explain the motivation to run in such a case? It is extrinsic, since the individual actively dislikes running; in this case, the effort is directed by his own belief in the value of the charitable cause, which is an internal factor. So, we can say that the motivation is extrinsic and internal. However, over time, this person may come to enjoy the physical sensations associated with running and look forward to the feelings of satisfaction or even exhilaration that come from a long run. Now the motivation is both internally directed and intrinsic.

The internal/external distinction can be a very useful one in helping us to better understand the motivation of learners. However, we need to exercise great care not to apply the distinction too broadly or rigidly. What may be an internal factor for one learner may be an external factor for another, and what may be an external factor for an individual learner at one point in time may become internal at another, and vice versa. Nevertheless, as a useful rule of thumb, we can say that motivated behaviour tends to be more focused and sustained when the motives are internal to the learner.

Although self-determination theory is often understood as a dichotomy, it is much more accurate to think of a continuum from the strongly extrinsic to the strongly intrinsic. Unfortunately, in the real world, discussions of extrinsic/intrinsic motivation tend to be oversimplified, often portraying extrinsic as 'bad' motivation while intrinsic

is seen as the 'good' kind. The reality is more complex and for teachers, the important thing to realize is that the distinctions between the internal and the external, and the intrinsic and the extrinsic, are not always clear, and neither are they static. People are constantly changing, and central to self-determination theory is the idea of internalization—the degree to which someone comes to feel that a perhaps once external motive belongs to them in the sense that it now feels internal.



Staying motivated

For a language teacher, it can be helpful to acknowledge that there may be certain activities that very few learners ever find intrinsically rewarding, and it may be very difficult for teachers to change this. However, teachers are able to influence how learners understand the purpose of these activities. If learners understand these activities as being connected to outcomes that they value, that are internally valid, then they are more likely to make sustained efforts towards such ends. It is important, therefore, that teachers explain the purpose of the activities they present so that rather than simply carrying out tasks because the teacher tells them to, learners approach tasks with clear aims in mind.

In the field of language education, perhaps the clearest manifestation of self-determination theory has come in the area of learner autonomy. (See also Chapter 7.) Language learner autonomy is concerned with how language learners are able to take charge of and direct their own learning (see Benson, 2011; Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011; Ushioda, 2011). Somewhat coincidentally, self-determination theory was emerging at the same time that the field of language education was beginning to expand the provision of independent learning facilities and self-access learning centres (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). As a consequence, the notion of autonomy has, perhaps a little unfairly, become associated with the notion of learners studying independently in self-access centres. This is a narrow and unhelpful view of learner autonomy, which is an altogether much richer concept that attempts to explain how learners take responsibility for setting their own learning goals, how they assess their successes and failures, and how they attribute those successes and failures to their own strategies and efforts.

Activity 6.3

Investigating what motivates your learners

- 1 Ask your class to consider the following questionnaire.

Which of the following factors do you think make you work harder at something or make a big effort? Which don't make you work hard? Give each one a score of 1, 2, or 3.

- 1 = This demotivates me.
 2 = I don't have any feelings about this/This doesn't affect how I work.
 3 = This motivates me to work hard.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| ☐ | getting a high mark for some work |
| ☐ | liking the teacher |
| ☐ | being with classmates I like |
| ☐ | being interested in the topic of the lesson |
| ☐ | receiving praise |
| ☐ | feeling happy |
| ☐ | seeing other people doing better than me |
| ☐ | working in groups |
| ☐ | working in pairs |
| ☐ | finding the work easy |
| ☐ | feeling uncomfortable, such as too hot or cold |
| ☐ | feeling confident that I can do something |
| ☐ | thinking the teacher is interested in me |
| ☐ | having clear goals for the lesson |
| ☐ | having clear rules about how we work together in class |
| ☐ | sitting still for a long time |
| ☐ | being in a bad mood |
| ☐ | feeling that I have some choice in what I do |

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- 2 Ask students to compare their answers with two other students and see if there are any similarities or differences.
- 3 Collect the questionnaires and examine them. What have you learned about your class? What can you do differently in the future?

Emotions and context

Cognitive theories of motivation provide a solid framework for understanding behaviour, but they do not tell the full story. Although we may like to think of ourselves as logical, rational beings, there are many occasions when our actions are informed by more than cold, cognitive calculations. We have all done things in our lives that have been difficult to explain—things that may not have made sense from a purely rational perspective and that may even have been considered bad for us. Emotional responses to a situation can be immediate, powerful, and often unpredictable. As an illustration, think of an ostensibly highly motivated learner making efforts to use the target language outside the classroom. Instead of the anticipated supportive reaction, the learner encounters indifference and even a little hostility as the people she tries to use the target language with ignore her efforts and reply to her in her first language. The implication is that she is just not good enough to communicate in the target language. She finds this experience very frustrating and a little embarrassing. Rationally, she understands the value of practising the language outside the classroom, but the accumulation of frustration means she just cannot put herself in that situation again, and, even worse, it is affecting her approach to learning the language in general. As teachers, we need to take this emotional dimension of motivation into account.

Activity 6.4

Exploring irrational decision-making

Consider the following three cases, familiar from everyday life. In each scenario, the individual chooses a course of action that cannot be simply explained by rational thought. Think about each case and consider some of the reasons why the different individuals choose to act in the way they do.

Case 1

This individual lives in the centre of a busy and congested city. The roads are in semi-permanent gridlock and cars are taxed very highly in order to discourage ownership. Additionally, parking is almost impossible at times and, even when it is possible, it can be prohibitively expensive. Fortunately, the city has an excellent and affordable public transport system. It simply makes no sense to own a car here, yet this particular individual chooses to do so despite not being especially wealthy.

Case 2

This individual is in early middle age and has been experiencing a few worrying health issues—nothing major yet, but the kind of thing that is regularly publicized in awareness campaigns as being a possible indicator of something very serious. He is aware of this and a few people close to him have encouraged him to see a doctor, yet he stubbornly refuses to do so.

Case 3

This individual is a secondary school teacher who recently had to take some time off due to personal and stress-related issues. Her school and all her colleagues have been both understanding and highly supportive, doing their best to help her through a difficult time. Nevertheless, she has developed a tendency to be the first in school every morning and one of the last to leave in the evening.

Now think about your own experiences as either a teacher or a learner. Can you recall any occasions when you took a course of action that was difficult to explain by simple logical reasoning? Can you remember some of the factors that influenced your actions?

One characteristic of thinking about motivation in the twenty-first century is a growing awareness of the need to develop multi-level models of motivation that take into account more than cognitive factors (Ryan, 2007). Our physical and emotional states can often override cognitive processes. (See Chapter 5.) The particular context in which an activity is taking place is also a crucial factor in determining how people act. If we think about a contextual factor as apparently trivial as the weather, this can have a huge impact on our eagerness to learn. Imagine being a student in a class in a hot, humid climate, where everybody around you seems to be drained of energy and the sound of the constant heavy rain makes it almost impossible to hear what the teacher is saying. These considerations are probably a much more significant factor in your immediate motivation to learn than any higher-level motives. Earlier theories of motivation regarded these unpredictable emotional or contextual factors almost as inconveniences or distractions, but these factors can play a huge role in shaping our behaviour and teachers cannot afford to ignore them.

Review

In this section, we have presented a brief overview of developments in motivation theory with the aim of encouraging teachers to work towards their own working definitions of motivation in language learning. We have seen that motivation is a term we all know and use, but it can be understood in different ways and there are numerous different facets of motivation. As teachers, we influence learner motivation both directly and indirectly, through obvious means—such as the types of goals we present or the learning tasks we set—and through less obvious means—such as how we interact with students in a class. Motivation is complex and difficult to pin down; learners can be motivated by deeply held internal goals or by seemingly unimportant contextual factors. The huge challenge for teachers is to understand how all of these factors come together within the motivation of a learner.

Key developments in foreign language learning motivation theory

Historical origins

Let us now turn our attention to how motivation has been discussed within the specific context of foreign language education. In order to do this, we briefly need to consider the historical development of theories of foreign language learning motivation, as it is difficult to understand current discussions of language learner motivation without some knowledge of previous controversies.

There has long been a belief that foreign language learning is essentially different from other educational pursuits, and this has certainly influenced how the motivation to learn a foreign language has been discussed (Ushioda, 2012). For a very long time, prior to the 1990s, L2 motivation theory was dominated not by theories from educational psychology but by the ideas of two Canadian social psychologists, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972). Starting in the late 1950s, Gardner and Lambert pioneered the systematic investigation of language learning motivation and, in many respects, the focus of their research was influenced by a uniquely Canadian perspective on learner attitudes to a target language, its culture, and its people.

The **socio-educational model**, as it later became known (Gardner, 1985), posited two key orientations that shaped the motivation of language learners: an **integrative orientation**, concerned with feelings of identification with the speakers of the target language, and an **instrumental orientation**, connected to the material rewards associated with acquiring the target language. The socio-educational model of L2 motivation hypothesized that an integrative orientation—the desire to be liked and accepted by speakers of the L2—was more likely to lead to sustained motivated language learning behaviour. This model proved intuitively appealing to both researchers and teachers, with its apparently clear dichotomy between those learners who felt some kind of connection with the target culture and those who were learning for pragmatic, material reasons.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, it is easy to underestimate the significance of Gardner and Lambert's work. Prior to Gardner and Lambert, language learning success was seen very much as a function of learner aptitude allied to teaching methods. Little attention was paid to learners or the effects of some of the attitudes they may have held; recognizing the role of learner attitudes towards the language and learning was a major breakthrough that we now take for granted. However, the social psychological approach to language learning motivation was primarily concerned with understanding broad trends across large population groups. Although this approach offered some genuinely fascinating insights, it had little to say to teachers about what was happening with a particular student in a particular class at a particular time (Ushioda, 2008).

Moving away from social psychology

From the 1990s, the focus of language learning motivation research began to shift towards the actual events occurring in the classroom (see Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). The general trend within L2 motivation research over the last twenty years or so has been to move away from the kind of investigations favoured by social psychologists that describe broad patterns across large populations towards interpretations of motivation that are situated more within education. This growth in 'education-friendly' accounts of language learner motivation has served to make research in the area more relevant and accessible to practising teachers.

Motivation over time

An approach that was deliberately and clearly education-friendly was the model of learner motivation proposed by Williams and Burden (1997), which describes how social and contextual factors influence the development of motivation within language learners. Williams and Burden recognized the importance of the distinction between internal factors and external factors that we discussed earlier in this chapter and argue that motivation needs to come from within if it is to be meaningful. They take an essentially constructivist approach, seeing motivation as involving learners making their own decisions about what to do and how much effort to expend based on their own understanding of a situation. (See Chapter 1 for a discussion of constructivism.)

A further important aspect of Williams and Burden's model is that it introduced a specific temporal dimension that distinguishes between initiating motivation and sustaining it. Motivation is often seen as initiating—getting learners interested or turning them on. However, motivation is also concerned with sustaining effort over time. The reasons a student embarks on a particular activity should not be confused with how that student sustains efforts. For example, a young person may be attracted to a particular language out of admiration for a certain figure from popular culture, but this admiration is unlikely to sustain efforts to learn the language over an extended period of time. In fact, the young person's admiration for that figure may soon fade while the efforts to learn the language persist, influenced by considerations other than those that stimulated the initial efforts to learn. Williams and Burden point out the dangers of conflating these separate stages. For language teachers, there is a clear need to be aware of this distinction when trying to understand the motivation of their students and to pay attention to sustaining motivation in what is a long endeavour.

Motivation as a process

Dörnyei & Otto (1998) further explored the temporal dimension to L2 learning motivation in their **Process Model of L2 Motivation**. This model identifies three stages of motivation: the preactional stage, the actional stage, and the postactional stage. The preactional stage corresponds to initiating motivated behaviour

and relates to the choices individuals make when setting particular goals. The actional stage explains how motivation is sustained in the pursuit of those goals set at the preactional stage. The postactional stage relates to how people evaluate their execution of a particular task and this evaluation, in turn, feeds into the preactional stage of a subsequent action. So the process described in this model is one of making choices to act in a particular way, acting on those choices, and then evaluating those actions in a way that informs future behavioural choices. As an illustration, let us consider a recently retired person who decides that she would like to use some of her new free time to study a language. Since she also greatly enjoys reading, she decides to begin by reading some graded readers in order to improve her vocabulary. At the outset, the preactional stage, she makes a plan of how many books to read and decides to keep an accompanying vocabulary notebook. She later goes to the library full of enthusiasm and borrows as many books as possible. She starts to read some of the books; we can consider this the actional stage. After some time has passed, she realizes that her vocabulary notebook entries are a little inconsistent, with some books requiring almost every other word to be entered and others none at all. She also feels a noticeable drop in her enthusiasm for the project. She reflects on why this may be: the postactional stage. As a result of this reflection, she concludes that she initially took out too many randomly selected books and decides that a better future course of action would be to borrow fewer books and limit the books she chooses to particular reading levels. She then goes to the library again, with her initial enthusiasm returned, thus starting the next round in the process.

The process model acknowledges that actions do not occur in isolation; they have both antecedents and consequences. Language learning is a long-term endeavour usually characterized by many ups and downs, and over the course of learning a foreign language, any learner is likely to encounter many fluctuations in enthusiasm and commitment. For a model of motivation to be educationally meaningful, it needs to help teachers and learners themselves understand some of these motivational ebbs and flows. Importantly, it makes clear that we must be careful not to simplistically label learners as being either motivated or not. Motivation can change over time and is a more complex set of emotions, thoughts, and behaviours than such binary thinking would suggest.

Considering context

One of the greatest recent changes in thinking about foreign language learner motivation is that we no longer consider motivation as an individual trait, i.e. a fixed attribute a person possesses. We no longer think of motivated or unmotivated learners; we prefer to think of learners who are motivated at a particular time or place to do a particular thing.

Motivation is less a trait than a fluid play, an ever-changing one that emerges from the processes of many agents, internal and external, in the ever-changing complex world of the learner

(Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 563)

Of course, people have individual goals and aspirations, but they are also motivated through their relationships with others and their environment. They can be demotivated by these too. Think of a young person joining a new school and being full of enthusiasm for learning a foreign language for the first time. In the first few lessons, this individual is brimming with excitement and curiosity, but he gradually begins to notice that few of the forty other people in the classroom share this enthusiasm, and that this is not helped by the fact that the teacher is barely audible above the general buzz of conversation. If we were to isolate such a person from this particular context in order to investigate his motivation, we may come up with a very positive picture. However, this would be almost meaningless given the actual context in which learning is taking place.

When we think of the learning context, it is necessary also to think beyond the walls of the language classroom. As a language teacher, it is easy to forget that language learners do other things in addition to learning languages. They have other interests, roles, and responsibilities, and they do not simply abandon these other aspects of their identity when they enter the language classroom. Motivation to learn a language is connected to other ongoing behaviours. For example, teenage language learners have other social identities—they may be sons or daughters, musicians, athletes, or countless other possibilities—and these are not entirely separate from the language learning experience. At times, these other identities may be competing with identities as language learners. For example, a learner may feel that too much effort in the cause of learning a foreign language threatens her identity as a dedicated athlete. And, at other times, these other identities may reinforce language learning behaviour. Consider how the prospect of an overseas trip connected to the sport at which this individual excels may serve to inspire and energize her language learning. In order for language teachers to fully understand the motivation of their students, it is necessary for them to look not only at the 'language learner' but at the person as a whole (Ushioda, 2009). This implies that it can be useful for teachers to get learners to write or talk about their lives outside of the language classroom. In doing so, learners may discover various links between competing identities and ways of connecting or harmonizing them.

Motivation as self-realization

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System

At the present time, the dominant model of language learning motivation is Zoltán Dörnyei's **L2 Motivational Self System** (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). This is a conceptualization of motivation that accommodates contextual, personal, and temporal dynamics, and considers motivation as a part of self-realization, as a part of becoming the person we would like to be. The L2 Motivational Self System is based upon the concept of **possible selves** (see Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), which refer to the various images we have of who we might become. These may be positive, aspirational images—'hoped-for selves'—or negative images of the person we hope to avoid becoming—'feared

selves'. This conceptualization provides a framework for understanding how we all have some idea of the person we are, the type of person we would like to be at some point in the future, and the kind of person we are afraid of becoming. Within this framework, we are guided to make efforts to move from our current state towards becoming the person we hope to be and to protect ourselves from becoming the feared self.

We all have visions of ourselves in some possible future state and these visions reflect assessments of our potential, our expectations, our hopes, and our fears. The L2 Motivational Self System is concerned with the L2-specific dimension to these visions and how they direct efforts to learn a language. The model proposes two principal sets of self-guides: the **ideal L2 self** and the **ought-to L2 self**. The ideal L2 self represents the person we would like to become if we could use the L2. The learner also develops an ought-to L2 self, which emerges from perceived obligations and responsibilities to others as a language learner. These can come from a variety of sources, such as parents, teachers, and even peer pressure. A third, experiential, component, the **L2 learning experience**, is included and this dimension of motivation stems from our interaction with the learning environment as well as from our perceptions of past language learning successes and failures.

The main driving force in the motivation to learn a language comes from the perceived discrepancies between one's current sense of self in the L2 and one's ideal L2 self, and it is the strength and intensity of these visions that are crucial in initiating and sustaining learning. These visions derive much of their motivational power from the unique human capacity to 'experience' events in our imagination. Possible selves are more than simple goals or mere internal representations of ourselves in some future state; they contain some degree of experienced meaning and relevance to the current self-concept. An illustration of this might be a young graduate student whose ideal L2 self-concept involves giving presentations at academic conferences in English. For this individual, visions of the future self might include some of the nervousness experienced at the beginning of the presentation, feeling lost for words or intimidated by the large audience, as well as some of the elation felt when the audience bursts into applause at the end. The nervousness shows that the vision is realistic and sufficiently close to the individual's current self-concept; a vision in which the individual gives a perfect presentation smoothly and without any difficulty is likely to be implausible fantasy having no motivational effect. Mental imagery enables the learner to 'experience' through the power of the imagination the emotional highs and lows associated with achieving the ideal state, feeling competent, and preparing the coping strategies necessary to achieve this ideal. Since the human brain processes imagined events in the same way that it processes actual events, learners are able to feel that they have already lived the experience through their ideal L2 self visions, and thus feel prepared, competent, and motivated.

Activity 6.5

Considering mental imagery in context

Look at the following cases of language learners and their mental imagery. In which cases do you think the mental images are likely to lead to motivated learning behaviour? Can you think of reasons why any of these visions might not result in sustained learning effort?

Case 1

A man in his mid-twenties sometimes imagines working in a section of his company that does a lot of business overseas. The transfer will probably happen one day anyway, but it would be a good idea for him to learn a foreign language in order to speed up that move.

Case 2

A woman in her early thirties is enthusiastically attending language classes, at her employer's expense. The deal with her employer is that she must achieve a certain score on a standardized test within a fixed period of time. At home, she sometimes finds herself dreaming about using the language to travel around the world by herself. However, these thoughts are usually interrupted by one, or both, of her two young children.

Case 3

A young woman is in her final year at school and is currently considering her options for university. She has always wanted to learn English and see the world working as a flight attendant and this is a big factor in her thinking. However, although her English is not bad, she is aware that it may be difficult for her to find her dream job because she has always been quite a short person.

Case 4

A group of three friends start their own small company shortly after university. For most of the time, it has been more of a labour of love than a successful business, based around a shared interest. However, they recently received a large order from China that has the potential to make the business very successful. One of the three partners visited China and found that he enjoyed trying to use the language. He also realized that the ability to use the language may be essential to the future success of their company. Since returning, he often finds himself imagining using Chinese in both business and social situations.

Visions on their own are not sufficient to generate motivated behaviour and certain conditions need to be met to enable the motivating power of these self-guides. We all have visions of our future selves, but not all of these visions lead to motivated behaviour. If we look at Case 1, we can see that his vision does not seem radically different from his current self and is likely to happen at some point anyway, without the extra effort. In such cases, it is unlikely that an individual will exert much effort to realize something that does not represent a sufficient contrast to the existing situation. Furthermore, both his imagery and his future prospects appear rather vague, yet in order for mental imagery to be motivating, it needs to be highly specific and detailed. In Case 2, we can see that the visions of travelling around the world alone are likely to conflict with her ought-to L2 self as represented by the demands of her employer and also with other elements of her self-concept, such as her responsibilities as a mother of two young children. Additionally, in this case, since her thoughts are often interrupted by her children, these mental images are unlikely to be either vivid or regularly activated within

the current working self-concept. In Case 3, there is an issue of plausibility. She is unlikely to get much taller, and since there is a height requirement for her dream job, she knows that there is very little possibility of her ever meeting this requirement. An ideal L2 self must be plausible in order to energize learning. Visions in isolation may simply lead to daydreaming or fantasies, which can be very pleasant but which do not energize learning. It is the visions operating under certain facilitating conditions that create a motivating ideal L2 self. We see this best illustrated in Case 4, where the individual's visions of being a successful language user exist in harmony with other aspects of his life, and his professional activities are, in fact, likely to activate and develop those visions. Importantly, there are also negative consequences associated with a failure to realize these visions.

Motivation in the classroom

Motivation and successful language learning

So what do any of these theories of motivation have to say to teachers in language classrooms? One thing we need to be wary of is oversimplifying the relationship between motivation and language learning success. There are many studies that show strong correlations between motivation and proficiency, but this is far from saying that motivation necessarily leads to high proficiency. It may simply be the case that proficient learners feel more motivated because they are engaged in something they are good at. Although we cannot claim that motivation directly leads to proficiency, we can be more confident in putting forward the argument that low levels of motivation impede successful learning. For this reason alone, an awareness and understanding of motivation must be a priority for teachers.

Motivation, unpredictable learners, and unpredictable learning

One of the joys—and sometimes one of the frustrations—of being a teacher is how unpredictable the job can be. For example, a certain activity may work wonderfully well with one group of learners, but when we try it again with another, perhaps even very similar, group it may fall flat. At the beginning of the chapter, we discussed the early attempts of psychologists to describe learning behaviour in terms of precise formulae, but teachers soon find out that learners and their learning do not follow exact, linear patterns. Sometimes people can behave in the most unexpected ways and this is something teachers must bear in mind when thinking about how students motivate themselves and about their own role in that process. Teachers need to be wary of settling upon a one-size-fits-all approach to motivational strategies. Activities that work in one case may not work in another, something one learner may find motivating may demotivate another, and something that may motivate an individual learner at one time may have the reverse effect at another.

Activity 6.6

Exploring the unpredictable side of motivation

Look at the following list of episodes that may happen to a language learner. Try to think of ways in which the episode may be motivating for the learner. Next, think of ways in which the same episode may be demotivating.

- 1 getting a surprisingly high score on an important test
- 2 getting a disappointingly low score on an important test
- 3 finding an authentic listening activity surprisingly easy
- 4 seeing a classmate do something impressive in the target language
- 5 falling in love with a speaker of the target language
- 6 breaking up after a serious relationship with a speaker of the target language
- 7 being praised by the teacher for excellent pronunciation
- 8 being moved by a film in the target language
- 9 being in a class where very few people seem interested in learning the language.

No event is inherently motivating in itself; learners are primarily motivated through their own interpretations of an experience. So if we look at one of the episodes mentioned in Activity 6.6—say, the case of seeing a classmate do something impressive in the target language—a possible outcome is that the other learners would feel inspired by witnessing this, believing it is also within their potential to achieve such a feat. Another possibility is that some of the learners may feel disheartened by or even resentful of their classmate's success. The result in this case could be demotivation, frustration, and a subsequent resistance to learning the language. We simply do not know how any individual is going to react to a particular experience, and this suggests that it makes more sense for teachers to think in terms of motivational contingencies. By this, we mean that teachers should think more about a range of possible or typical outcomes. A further practical illustration of this idea could be a teacher planning to introduce a musical activity into a class with younger learners. There is a sound and coherent rationale behind this choice of activity, as young learners tend to be stimulated by musical activities. However, there are some young people who intensely dislike such activities, and if these individuals are influential within a particular class, then attempting to force such an activity on unwilling learners could meet with disaster. Motivation comes not only from the activity itself but also from the group of learners, the particular context in which it is taking place, and the personal interpretations of that activity by the individuals involved.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, the learning group and the various sub-groups operating within it constitute a crucial element of the learning context. In order for teachers to understand the motivation of individual learners, they also need to be aware of and understand how the group dynamics work within their classes.

Motivation and the teacher

One of the issues recurring throughout this chapter is that of the role of the teacher in motivating learners. However, we also need to consider the motivation of teachers themselves. Many of the general principles of motivation—such as the fundamental psychological need to feel competent and autonomous that we described earlier in this chapter—apply as much to teachers as they do to learners. Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify particular motivational characteristics of being a teacher. We can point to two broad areas in which teachers derive pleasure and satisfaction from their work: one is their interest in the subject matter and the other is the appeal of the educational process itself, interacting with learners and feeling a part of their development. Obviously, individual teachers differ in the degree to which they feel satisfied or motivated by these aspects of the teaching process, but there is a clear implication that factors threatening opportunities either to engage with the subject or to feel a part of learners' development may demotivate teachers. Since language learning can be a long and arduous process, many teachers are not around by the time their learners develop into proficient L2 users. A particular motivational challenge for language teachers is therefore to stay positive and enthusiastic without having immediate access to the rewards of their efforts.

A further factor to consider is the context in which teaching is taking place. Like learners, teachers are affected by the immediate physical environment; they may approach a lesson full of energy and enthusiasm on a beautiful spring day, but very differently when the weather is less inspiring. Teachers are also motivated—and demotivated—by groups; they often look forward to and make extra efforts for teaching certain groups of learners yet feel apprehensive about teaching others. Finally, we need to recognize the huge influence the institutional context can have on the motivation of teachers. When teachers are working in a context that does not reflect their own values and aspirations as educators—at the micro-level of a particular institution, the macro-level of the broader educational system, or both—then they are likely to become demotivated. On the other hand, teachers working in a supportive context tend to make greater and more sustained efforts to help their learners.

Teacher motivation is an important issue in itself, but a particular interest for us is the connection between teacher motivation and learner motivation. Perhaps the most important motivational task for teachers is that of serving as a role model for learners. Teachers are constantly sending motivational messages through their own behaviour and interactions with learners. When teachers show enthusiasm and passion, students pick up on this and it can be contagious. Expertise in a subject and pedagogic 'technique' can be great assets in the classroom but, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), it is a passion for teaching and commitment to a class that learners really pick up on. When teachers are passionate and enthusiastic, and when they demonstrate this to their classes, students are encouraged to develop a similar passion for learning.

Summary

Understanding the motivation of students and playing a part in enhancing that motivation is surely one of the most rewarding aspects of being a teacher. The first step towards achieving this must be to understand motivation itself, and a crucial part of this is acknowledging that teachers can only do so much. Teachers do not motivate learners by trying to control them or direct them towards particular outcomes; motivation comes from within learners themselves. Attempting to force learners into directions they do not wish to go in is an approach doomed to failure and one that can only result in stress and disaffection all round. On the other hand, working with learners, getting to know them and their dreams, and helping them to realize those dreams must surely be one of the most rewarding occupations available.

Questions for reflection

1. What role, if any, can teachers play in motivating students to learn a language?
2. What can you do as a teacher to help learners set goals and develop motivating visions?
3. As a teacher, your own motivation will fluctuate over time. What are the specific things that cause you to feel demotivated? What can you do to combat these feelings of demotivation?

Suggestions for further reading

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and researching motivation, second edition*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

This is the second edition of the standard work in the field. This book provides a general overview of theories of motivation from educational psychology, a detailed account of the various approaches to understanding the motivation of language learners, and a discussion of some of the practical considerations for teachers.

Dörnyei, Z., & Kubanyiova, M. (2014). *Motivating learners, motivating teachers: Building vision in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This is a teacher-friendly summary of new perspectives on motivation, with a particular focus on vision and its motivational role. What is noteworthy about this book is that it pays attention to the motivation of both learners and teachers.

Schunk, D. H., Meece, J. R., & Pintrich, P. R. (2014). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications, fourth edition*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education. The latest edition of this classic text offers a comprehensive yet accessible summary of some of the key themes discussed in this chapter. The book does not address any of the specifics relating to the motivation to learn a language, but it should still be considered one of the most authoritative, and most readable, accounts of motivation in educational contexts.

7

AGENCY AND SELF-REGULATION

Introduction

So far in this book, we have focused on what learners bring to the learning process—their perceptions of themselves, their beliefs, feelings, and motivations, and the significant influences these have on language learning. We now move on to consider how learners actually carry out their learning—the actions they engage in as they navigate their way through learning a language, and the ways in which they regulate these processes and develop a sense of **agency**. As we have seen in previous chapters, agency is the feeling that one can act and have control over one's actions. We first focus on the strategies learners need in order to learn effectively and autonomously, and then discuss other aspects of **self-regulation**, such as goal setting and achieving. Finally, we examine the area of **metacognition**, which involves the processes used to plan and regulate our learning.

Agency

Successful language learning does not depend solely on the teacher, although teachers play a central role in creating the conditions conducive to learning. What is also needed is the activity, initiative, and engagement of the learner (van Lier, 2008). In this respect, learners need to feel a personal sense of agency—a belief that their behaviour can make a difference to their learning in that setting. This feeling of agency emerges from the interaction of many of the psychological factors covered in the book so far.

Firstly, in order to develop feelings of agency, learners actually need to believe that they are capable of learning a foreign language. They need to believe that they have the ability to do it and that this ability can be developed. They also need to see that their attributions for their past successes and failures are within their control. This takes us back to the key role of beliefs, in particular self-beliefs, and how optimistic learners feel in respect to their language learning. (See Chapters 3 and 4.) Secondly, learners need to be willing and motivated to take action to develop their language skills. If learners are motivated to work on their language skills, they need to feel able to do this and view it as a worthwhile undertaking, anticipating some kind of improvement or outcome worth pursuing.