Learning environments and their influences on learner motivation

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Reference data:

Learner motivation is increasingly being recognized as a complex phenomenon that changes over time depending on student learning goals, objectives, and many facets of the learning context. This study investigates specifically how Japanese college student motivation changes over time in relation to changes in peers and learning environments. The author conducted interviews with five third- and fourth-year university students, probing their learning objectives, their relationships with their teachers and peers, and their previous overseas experiences. Several recurrent motivational components emerged in the analysis of the interview data. The influence of the learning environment and personal relationships (both teacher-student and student-student) stood out as the most salient factors determining fluctuations of learner motivation in the classroom.

　本研究の目的は、日本人の大学生を対象に、彼らの英語学習への動機づけが、クラスメートや、学習環境によってどのように影響を受け変化していったかを調査することにある。海外語学研修に参加した、英語学習への動機が高いと思われる5人の学生にそれぞれ30分程度のインタヴューを行った。インタヴューでは、学習者の動機を上げる要因、また動機を下げる要因についても調査した。その結果、学習者の動機づけに影響した要因として、教員又は、学生との関係、教授法や授業の内容、個人的目標の設定などが挙げられた。これにより、本研究は学習環境と、自己実現が学習者の動機づけに大きく係わっていることを示唆している。

L2 Motivation studies

Studies of second language (L2) motivation have been popular in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) for many years. The majority of motivation studies have attempted to identify the types of motivational components among learners of different L2s in various learning environments. While past studies on motivation have enabled researchers to analyze motivational components among L2 learners across different social contexts, a small number of researchers have also started to address the influence of specific learning environments within larger educational contexts. Dörnyei

(1997) and Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) discussed the complex nature of motivation affected by elements of the immediate educational context including the teacher, specific learning goals of the class, and group norms of the classroom. Clément, Dörnyei**,** and Noels (1994) investigated the relationship among perceived group cohesion, course evaluation, teacher's rating of relative cohesion, and the cooperativeness of the group. As a result, they found that there were close associations between the evaluation of environment, teacher's appraisal of the group, and the students' evaluation of their own group.

Though these motivation studies focus on the importance of immediate learning environments, they used self-reported questionnaires and have not discussed the effects of interaction among learners, the teacher, and other aspects of classroom instruction such as course evaluation, materials, and peer group pressure on learner motivation.

Social motivation and personal motivation

In order to investigate learner motivation in relation to learning environment, it is necessary to consider the influence of learner motivation from two perspectives: social motivation (external influences) and personal motivation (internal influences). Weiner (1994) describes social motivation as human motives that are directly linked to an individual's social environment. Urdan and Maehr (1995) provide examples of social motivation, such as trying to become a productive member of society, bring some degree of honor to one's family, and do well in school to gain the approval of peers or teachers.

In contrast to social motivation, personal motivation concerns issues such as trying to fulfill personal desires, becoming more educated, and building up self-confidence and self-efficacy. Personal motivation may be seen as motives developed internally without support from peers or significant others. Of course, it is often difficult to distinguish these two types of motivation since they mutually influence each other (Dörnyei, 2001).

The qualitative study of L2 motivation

While large scale quantitative studies offer overall trends of learner motivation, they can provide only limited information on the temporal development of motivation and its causes. This temporal development is what makes learners motivated to learn or causes them to lose their motivation. In addition, in order to investigate the complex process of interaction among groups and the influences of key people in specific groups and environments, it is necessary to pursue the answers to motivational questions using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

To date, there has been little research that uses interviews and a qualitative analysis in examining student motivation. The pioneer in this area is Ushioda (1994, 2001), who conducted a long-term qualitative study of the motivation of learners of French as a foreign language. Through interviews with those students who decided to pursue French as their major, Ushioda was able to show how motivational thinking evolves over time and experience, particularly through positive and negative learning experiences.

Ushioda (2001) discusses how motivation is defined in terms of students' thinking patterns, enhancing their positive learning attitudes, and is also reflected in how learners sustain their involvement in the learning process. Ushioda's two sets of interviews, one set before and one after students had decided to major in French, addressed questions regarding positive and negative learning experiences. Her analysis revealed eight descriptive patterns of motivation; academic interest, language-related enjoyment, desired levels of target language competence, personal goals, positive learning history, personal satisfaction, feelings about target language speakers, and external pressures. In her conclusion, she states that studies of motivation should examine not only how teachers motivate students, but also how teachers create conditions in which students motivate themselves.

Syed (2001) also used interviews, in addition to observations and questionnaires, to investigate learner motivation in relation to heritage and social identity. In a study of female students in the US studying Hindi as a foreign or heritage language, Syed investigated: what motivated students to undertake foreign language study, how learners managed their interest during their course of study, and social influences surrounding their participation in these language classes. He concluded that these learners were constantly defining who they were and where they fit, and this identification process of self as a language learner contributed to and shaped learner motivation.

Studies by Ushioda (2001) and Syed (2001) provide understanding of learner motivation in relation to learning process and social context. Syed's approach to learner motivation gives some answers about how a teacher,

teaching materials, and methods influence learner motivation. In order to address the influences of teacher, students, materials, and methods for learner motivation, the present study uses narrative inquiry as the method of investigation. Narrative inquiry assists understanding of the transitions among events, and by looking at personal experience in sequence suggests why people's motivation changes either positively or negatively. In this way, I try to address previously unresolved issues regarding learner motivation.

Narrative inquiry

What is the purpose of inquiry-guided research? Qualitative research serves its purpose for investigating personal experiences in relation to people and situations. It elicits detailed information necessary to analyze what is going on with a person in a particular situation. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1990). Cizek (1995) discusses the difference between quantitative and qualitative research and their purposes, "If one views qualitative research as sustained, reflective observation and interpretation, it is not storytelling at all. In fact, it is the process of sustained concerted, reflective observation that is unquestionably the foundation of all science" (p. 26). Qualitative research, thus can penetrate cultural, psychological, and attitudinal variables which quantitative research will not address in depth (Ushioda, 2001). While narrative inquiry seems well-suited to exploring self identity in relation to others and particular social milieu which provide understanding of social and psychological aspects of learners, qualitative researchers also argue that there is a need to understand the

problem of subjectivity and research validation issues based on narrative studies (Carter, 1993; Mishler, 1990; Riessman, 1993). Thus, when we focus on the validity and subjectivity of narrative inquiry, hermeneutic aspects of narrative inquiry need to be properly addressed. In other words, researchers of narrative inquiry need to be aware that analysis will be based on the interpretation of the researcher and the readers (Polkinghorne, 1988).

If narrative inquiry properly addresses the issue of trustworthiness of human experiences by providing enough information for the reader to analyze and interpret the data, it can lead to a deeper understanding of thinking and learning processes, and changes of directions in language learning motivation. For example, explanatory narrative analysis will ask questions about a certain event and why the event has occurred. This type of narrative analysis will provide detailed information about what influences positive or negative aspects of language learning in relation to a particular social situation and people.

Statement of purpose

The present study investigates aspects of motivation in relation to learning environments among Japanese university EFL learners. The study inquires about the influences of particular events and learning situations on students' L2 motivation and provides in depth information about what influences learner motivation to change over time by examining the results of interviews with students.

Research questions

1. What are important classroom influences on learners' motivational dynamics?

2. What are important internal influences on learners' motivational dynamics?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study are five female Japanese university students majoring in business. Pseudonyms are used for these five students. There are four junior students (*Natsu*, *Aki*, *Fuyu*, *Ai*) and one senior student (*Haru*). I selected these students for two reasons. First, they all participated in a short summer study abroad program. These students have demonstrated a relatively high level of motivation to improve their English by virtue of applying to and participating in the program. These students represent a category of students who are motivated to learn English and willing to go overseas. Second, I had close contact with these students and built up a rapport with them. While the students were studying at university in the U.S, I accompanied them and participated as the leader of the study abroad program. Therefore, the rapport and trust that developed among us was particularly helpful. In addition, I had three of the junior students in my class for a semester before they joined the program. I discussed the interview process with them and the reason for conducting the interviews. They all agreed to participate in the study.

Data collection

I conducted individual interviews after the students came back from the study abroad program in Fall 2004. One interview per student was conducted for 20 - 30 minutes once during the Fall semester in my office. I tape-recorded the data, and transcribed it later. Although this was not intended to be a guided interview study, I prepared some questions in advance. I tried to avoid being too directive in my questions, but at some point during the interview I needed to guide them towards talking about motivation. I conducted all interviews in Japanese in order to collect as accurate information as possible.

Since the purpose of the research is to discover what influences learner motivation, the directed questions included *What increased your motivation*? and *What discouraged you to continue studying English?* However, students continued their stories based on their past experiences of learning English throughout the interview. It was clear that the interviews were not structured principally toward answering directed questions.

After transcribing the data, I found that there was one transcribed interview which did not provide sufficient information to answer both research questions. This participant, Ai, was often distracted from talking about learner motivation and didn't seem to have a clear idea about how and why she was motivated to learn English. She often stated, "I don't know" in her interview. After screening all the data, I decided to eliminate this interview from analysis.

Procedure

After transcribing the data, I tried to identify motivational dimensions which were similar to Ushioda's (2001) study. Ushioda identified eight dimensions of motivation in her study: (a) positive learning history, (b) language-related enjoyment, (c) desired levels of L2 competence, (d) personal goals, (e) academic interest, (f) feelings about French-speaking people, (g) personal satisfaction, and (h) external pressure and incentives. Although this study did not aim to duplicate Ushioda's investigation, her categorization of motivational dimensions is useful in the analysis of the current data. Therefore, I used several categories from Ushioda's study.

In addition to the two research questions about the influence of motivating factors, I also asked the students about demotivating factors. These factors were analyzed and categorized into four dimensions. I analyzed the interview data based upon how many of these dimensions were found in the transcript. For example, one student mentioned that she had two or three different learning situations in which she felt that she had had positive learning experiences. Therefore, the number of these dimensions are more than the number of students.

Results

First, the data were analyzed and categorized into motivating factors and demotivating factors. A total of seven factors were identified as motivating and four were identified as demotivating, as indicated in Tables 1 and 2. Factors are ordered from highest to lowest prominence for students. For example, four students mentioned how external pressures influenced their motivation in nine different incidents during

their interviews, making this the most prominent motivating factor. A total of 27 factors were identified as motivating and 12 were identified as demotivating. Numbers indicate different situations which had influence on learner motivation.

Table 1. Most frequently cited motivating factors

	Factor	Instances
1.	External pressures/incentives	9
2.	Positive learning history	6
3.	Personal goals/Ideal self	5
4.	Language-related enjoyment	4
5.	Personal satisfaction	4
6.	Desired levels of L2 competence	2
7.	Academic interest	1

Table 2. Most frequently cited demotivating factors

	Factor	Instances
1.	Negative learning history	6
2.	Self-dissatisfaction related to classroom	4
3.	External pressures at school	1
4.	No personal goals	1

RQ1: What are important classroom influences on learners' motivational dynamics?

Among the seven identified motivational factors, five related to classroom learning: (a) external pressures/incentives, (b) positive learning history, (c) personal goals/ideal self, (d) personal satisfaction, and (e) academic interest (see Table 1). Of the four demotivating factors, two related to classroom learning: (a) negative learning history, and (b) self-dissatisfaction related to the classroom (see Table 2).

The interviews revealed that there were five instances of peer influences, one instance of teacher influence, and one instance of grade influence with the external pressures/incentives factor. As indicated in Table 3, there were seven instances of classroom related influences out of nine identified as external pressures/incentives. The following is an example student statement on peer influences.

Data sample 1: Natsu

"When other students in class are energetic and active, I feel comfortable and try to put more effort. It doesn't matter if the students' levels are not so high, it is how much they try in class."

Fuyu and *Natsu* also mentioned how important the classroom atmosphere is to create an environment in which students feel comfortable in actively participating in class. In *Natsu*'s case, she was unable to show her ability in class when her partner refused to try a more advanced task. There were three motivation factors identified as positive learning history. They were all related to classroom learning. The following statement is an example from *Haru*:

Data sample 2: Haru

"I had a substitute teacher in middle school. She brought us English magazines and we studied these authentic materials. As an activity, we created our own column. That was very interesting."

Haru mentioned that her motivation changed after she had a substitute teacher for a year while her original teacher was on maternity leave.

Table 3. Motivating factors

Factors	Instances	Source of Motivation
1. External pressures/incentives		
Peer influences	5	Classroom
Teacher	1	Classroom
Grade	1	Classroom
Job	1	
English is important	1	
2. Positive learning history		
Successful conversation with ALT	2	Classroom
Teacher's instructional methods	2	Classroom
I was doing well in class	2	Classroom
3. Personal goals/ideal self		
Be fluent in English	1	Self
Become a flight attendant	1	Self
Converse with foreigners at my parents'ryokan	1	Self
To do well	1	Self/Classroom
Be No. 1 in English classes	1	Self/Classroom
4. Language-related enjoyment		
Watching TVs	2	Self
Going to conversation school	1	Self
Read story and do games	1	Self
5. Personal satisfaction		
Satisfaction for doing well	2	Classroom
Matching goals and objectives	2	Classroom
6. Desired levels of L2 competence		
Maximum fluency	1	
Competence in reading	1	
7. Academic interest		
I want to read in English	1	Classroom

Table 4. Demotivating factors

Factor	Instances	Source
1. Negative learning history		
Goals and objective didn't match	2	Classroom
Teaching methods	2	Classroom
Frustration	2	Self
2. Self-dissatisfaction related to classroom		
Class was too easy	2	Classroom
Frustration	1	Self
Not meeting my goal	1	Classroom
3. External pressures at school		
Need to study subjects other than English	1	School
4. No personal goals		
No personal goals	1	Self

Other classroom influences included personal satisfaction and academic interest as shown in Table 3. As for personal satisfaction, the students mentioned that they felt good if they knew more than other students or could feel successful using difficult materials in class. They also felt good if instructional goals and objectives matched well with their personal goals. For academic interest, Aki really enjoyed reading a story in class, but she also tried to read *Harry Potter* and other stories in English for her personal interest.

Table 4 shows demotivating factors related to classroom learning. When students were unable to enjoy the class, they appear to have lost motivation. Learning objectives and classroom goals were also important factors to motivate them to study. The following statement is from Aki.

Data sample 3: Aki

"I had to memorize 10 words every class period and I was tested at the beginning of each class. I would forget the words right away. I didn't enjoy this at all."

Aki mentioned how she lost motivation during this period when she had to constantly memorize words in class.

RQ2: What are important internal influences on learners' motivation dynamics?

Among seven identified motivational factors, two were related to internal influences: (a) personal goals/ideal self, and (b) language-related enjoyment (see Table 3). Out of four demotivational factors, three were related to internal influences: (a) negative learning history, (b) self-

dissatisfaction related to classroom, and (c) no personal goals (see Table 4).

Personal goals/ideal self were identified as the third most prominent category of motivational factors. The students mentioned that they had a specific goal for the future and they needed to study English in order to pursue that goal. The students were able to identify their goals by giving specific examples and that lead to the motivation to study English. Although *Haru* did not mentioned her personal goal, other students all mentioned personal goals as an important factor for motivation. The following statements are examples of pursuing goals.

Data sample 4: Natsu

"Because I want to work overseas someday, I check web sites and watch TV dramas as much as I can and try to remind myself why I am studying English."

Data sample 5: Aki

"My parents own a ryokan and I helped them during the summer. We had lots of foreign customers, but I wasn't able to help as much as I wanted. I thought I want to study more and want to help my parents with English."

When students were able to find interests outside the classroom, they were able to generate and maintain their motivation.

Table 4 shows demotivational factors related to internal influences. For example, frustration appears in both the category of negative learning history that of self-

dissatisfaction. *Natsu*, who was a highly proficient user of English, felt frustrated when she was not number one in the class. On the other hand, *Haru* complained that the class was too easy and not challenging enough. As a result, she lost her motivation to study in that particular class.

Discussion

The present study revealed influences on Japanese students' motivation from two perspectives. First, the study focused on external influences which included the effects of learning environment and social environment on learner motivation. Second, it focused on internal influences which were developed from learners' personal interests and desire to learn English. The study showed that learner motivation was influenced by both internal and external factors. External influences included both in-class and outside classroom experiences. When analyzing the data, I particularly stressed the classroom-related motivation factors because the study also addressed the influences of group dynamics on learner motivation. Therefore, classroom-related issues such as interaction among students and the teacher, teaching methods, and learning goals were important. As expected, most of these external influences were related to classroom learning experiences. Although external influences were cited more often than internal influences, personal goals and incentives were identified by these learners as one of the most prominent influences on motivation.

Although these students were interested in foreign people and culture, reflected by their decision to join the study abroad program, their major motivational changes were based on particular classroom experiences. For example,

Fuyu was concerned about peers and very sensitive to the atmosphere of the class. *Natsu* was also worried about how well she could perform in class. *Haru* was influenced by the teaching method. These students possessed their own goals for achieving proficiency in English, but external influences sometimes prevent them from generating and maintaining their motivation.

Finally, personal goals and ideal self were identified as prominent factors by these students. *Natsu, Aki,* and *Fuyu* all mentioned how they had to focus on personal goals to maintain their motivation when they were losing interest in learning English. By setting specific goals and objectives in learning English, they overcame the problems of boredom, difficulty in class, and the problems of losing motivation to learn. *Haru*, *Natsu* and *Aki* all mentioned that joining the summer program was action taken to increase their motivation. They felt that they needed to go above their current stage at which they were facing problems in maintaining a high level of motivation.

Conclusion

By conducting interviews, I was able to identify motivating factors and demotivating factors among these Japanese students. While the majority of motivation studies have focused on conducting surveys, I interviewed individual students and analyzed their experiences. The interview data provided detailed information about how learner motivation was influenced both externally and internally. The study also revealed what caused the students to lose motivation. Many of the external influences included classroom-related issues such as peers, teaching methods, and course objectives.

Internal influences were related to personal goals and personal experiences with language-related enjoyment.

Since the current study only focuses on the highly motivated learners who participated in the study abroad program, the study needs to expand the research further to investigate those who have low motivation to study in the future. In order to investigate further on the effect of group dynamics, another series of interviews should be conducted in the future to support these findings.

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