

Pedagogical implications of motivation research: An interview with Ema Ushioda

Keywords

motivation, autonomy, identity, socio-cultural theory

Ema Ushioda has been leading the incorporation of sociocultural theory (SCT) in second language (L2) motivation research, understanding motivation as something that is not innate and fixed within learners, but situational and dynamic, and influenced through their social context. She is programme director of the Doctorate of Education in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching at the University of Warwick, and has recently co-authored *Teaching and Researching Motivation* with Zoltán Dörnyei (2011). She will be visiting Japan as a plenary speaker at both the JALT CUE Conference in July 2011 and the JACET Summer Seminar in August 2012.

Ema Ushiodaは学習者の動機づけを先天的で固定されたものではなく、社会的文脈の中で状況に応じて動的に変化するものとしてとらえ、第2言語教育の動機づけ研究分野に社会文化理論(SCT)を先駆的に取り入れている。UshiodaはUniversity of Warwick応用言語学・英語教育学博士課程のプログラム・ディレクターであり、先ごろ、Zoltán Dörnyeiとの共著 *Teaching and Researching Motivation* を出版した。2011年7月JALT CUE 年次大会と2012年8月JACET夏季セミナーで基調講演を行うために来日する予定である。

Joseph Falout

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Joseph Falout (JF): How did you get started on incorporating the concept of sociocultural theory (SCT) with your research on L2 motivation?

Ema Ushioda (EU): SCT has been used quite a lot to inform discussions of autonomy in language learning (e.g. in the writings of David Little, with whom I worked for nine years at Trinity College, Dublin), and so it was through my engagement with the autonomy literature that I became interested in SCT and began to see its value in informing analyses of motivation too. I felt that SCT offered a useful perspective on the internal/external dichotomy in motivational theorizing (i.e., motivation as internally or externally regulated) and an explanation for how the social environment can mediate the development of internally regulated motivation. In other words, SCT seemed helpful in informing pedagogical principles for how to develop students' motivation from within, and I have always been interested in the pedagogical dimensions/implications of L2 motivation research, which have been rather under-developed to date.

JF: Can there be problems in autonomy?

EU: There can be in the sense that it is not necessarily easy to promote autonomy. If, for example, students come into the classroom with the expectation that the teacher is going to tell them what to do, and the teacher tries to get them to take responsibility, then in some cultural contexts students may think, "But it's your job as the teacher to tell us what to do."

JF: How do your M.A. students adjust to the notion of autonomy?

EU: Some of them research that area, looking at adjustment of international students as they enter the culture of British higher education. The majority of our M.A. students are from China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Thailand, and other parts of Southeast Asia. On the whole they don't find it too difficult to adjust because we give them support and we also explicitly discuss with them principles of autonomy as it's actually part of the content of the courses they study. So they engage with those issues openly.

Peter Brown, Richard Smith, and I (2007) reported that we encountered resistance in an anonymous letter from an M.A. student who expected us to provide massive amounts of input, whereas we wanted the students to follow their own directions and discover things for themselves, with our support. Our response was not simply to provide massive amounts of input—that would be defeating our pedagogical principles—but to provide much more in the way of support, and try to be explicit about why we were doing things in this way.

My colleague, Annamaria Pinter, and I have another strategy. We introduce motivational concepts in the abstract, and then we give the students a questionnaire. It has questions such as why they decided to enroll in this M.A., and why they read applied linguistics literature—with various possible reasons that they can either tick or add. They compare their responses with one another to find similarities and differences. Then they map their responses onto those abstract motivational concepts. It's a way of helping them to engage with those concepts from the perspective of their own motivation, their own experience.

JF: How can a task-based approach relate to autonomy and motivation?

EU: In terms of pedagogies to promote autonomy, something like a task-based approach—in other words, the kind of approach that autonomy expert Leni Dam works with in her classes and promotes—would be very effective in developing the students' autonomy. Because once the task is set up, then much more responsibility is handed over to the students in terms of how they engage the task. And then because autonomy and motivation are very much intertwined, it can also help to promote motivation.

Back to responding to student resistance, ever since that anonymous letter, I've become much more aware of the importance for the teacher to be constantly open and explicit with her students in terms of why they are doing these things and what it means. So if you're going to use a task-based approach, then ensure that the students understand the principles.

Leni Dam starts a new project or task with these questions, "What are we going to do? Why are we doing it? How are we doing it?" And then as they proceed with the task, "How did things go? What were the results? What have we learned from it? What can or should we do next?" Talking about these things amongst themselves is a way to externalize their thinking, and thereby internalize their understandings and their awareness of how learning happens.

JF: Recently you've been speaking about the *Dogme approach*.

EU: The original Dogme was a cinematic Danish movement in 1995 with a group who felt that filmmaking should be stripped down to the human story and focus on dialogue. Forget about special effects and all that.

Then Scott Thornbury (2000) wrote a provocative article that the same principle should apply to language teaching. Forget about technology and fancy materials. What's important is enabling students to express themselves. Language teaching should focus on dialogue between students and between students and teacher. If you need materials or technology it's only in the service of whatever the student really wants to say.

Keith Richards (2006) provides empirical evidence to show that when you try to engage students' *transportable identities*, when you talk to them as people, when you connect with them that way, that actually it can help to motivate them in terms of effort and engagement in interaction.

Transportable identities are always in the plural because we have so many different aspects of identity or identities that we carry in our lives. For example, all of us have identities as being a son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother. We have identities in terms of our profession, culture, the languages that we speak, interests that we have; some of us might

be a keen photographer, amateur footballer, and so on.

In the language class we can bring in these aspects of our transportable identities that are relevant to us or that we are happy to express. But then there might be other aspects of self or identity that are much more private, that we don't wish to expose in the language class, which is perfectly legitimate. It would be unethical to force students to express things that they didn't want to say. And teachers also have private aspects they wouldn't wish to expose.

So the notion of transportable identities in the plural is very rich. It contrasts very much with treating students as language learners, getting them to repeat things or practice things or give the right answer. That's not really engaging any aspect of their identity.

JF: How can teachers be aware of these things?

EU: I think effective teachers have always been aware of these things, and actually do engage their students' identities, and do know how to motivate their students. If anything, those of us who are away from the classroom who theorize about motivation perhaps have been a few steps behind.

A lot of motivation research tends to be on these abstract models rather than on learners as unique human beings. If you're working in the kind of paradigm that builds toward—"If you have this kind of motivation, and as a teacher you do this sort of thing, then it's likely that students will behave in this sort of way"—that's just talking in very general, abstract terms. While that might work in theory, if you look at individual students, who are all uniquely different people in your classroom, then that may not work. The story of Sean is a case in point (Ushioda, 2009).

Sean was a student of French in Dublin. When I interviewed him first time around he told me about his relationship with his French girlfriend. And when I interviewed him second time around he'd had a very bitter breakup. I was expecting him therefore to tell me he'd lost interest in learning French, as might be predicted by an integrative motivation model. So I was amazed when he said this had motivated him even more, to really study French hard, out of spite, he said.

He wanted to prove to himself and also to his ex-girlfriend that he could be as proficient as she or anyone else. And then I met him a few years later and he'd just come back from finishing a Ph.D. in French studies. This illustrates what a theoretical model might predict about a student's behavior may not necessarily apply to whoever is in your class.

JF: One of the findings from that study was the learners were able to remotivate by taking a break from schoolwork and doing something fun in the L2 outside of class.

EU: The important thing here is to ensure that students do not constantly associate language learning with schoolwork (i.e., just another school subject that has to be studied) or with monotonous tasks and exercises, but that they see how this language can connect with their life outside the classroom and experience this connection in ways that are personally enjoyable or fulfilling. Then, when motivation (in class) is at a low point, they can try to reconnect with what they enjoy about learning or using the language, as a strategy for remotivating themselves.

JF: When you were teaching at the secondary level in Japan, what do you think was the biggest demotivator in English education?

EU: I'm not sure I'm in a good position to comment on this. I was a naive and inexperienced English teacher in my early 20s, so I don't think I was particularly aware of or had the professional knowledge to understand issues of student motivation or demotivation in English education in Japan. In retrospect, I guess the biggest demotivator was probably the hurdle of entrance exams. I can remember feeling appalled at the way my cousin (I was living with my aunt and her family in Tokyo) simply tried to memorize pages and pages of English word lists for his university entrance exams and asked me to test him on them.

JF: In what ways do you think tests can motivate or demotivate?

EU: I think formative tests can be a good way of motivating students if their aim is to evaluate learning and identify strengths and areas for improvement, if they are pitched at a moderately

challenging level, and if students understand the purpose and value of these tests. Similarly, self-administered or self-assessment tests that serve these evaluative functions can also be motivationally effective, and developing good self-assessment skills and practices is of course important to developing autonomy and self-motivation. Appropriately pitched formative tests and self-assessment tests may also help to remotivate students by making learning gains transparent and visible.

Clearly, summative tests and high-stakes tests can demotivate students in the sense that they may interfere with intrinsic learning enjoyment in the stages leading up to the test, and bad test results (or tests that are too difficult) are also likely to impact negatively on post-test motivation. But I think we should remember that students are unique individuals and will react to tests and test results in different ways. Some may actually thrive under pressure and quickly bounce back after failure, while others may find the stress of high stakes tests very demotivating.

JF: How can one research with complex dynamics systems theory?

EU: If it's a complex system, to my mind it's got to be focused on a particular case—whether that case is an individual, class, teacher and student, or group. You need to have a fairly sharp focus if you're going to try to capture the complex system or systems around that focus, and so you try to define what your core unit of analysis is going to be. Then for that research to have significance beyond that case, you've got to engage in multiple case studies. Not necessarily you yourself, but in a way that's perhaps replicable. So I can see a potentially quite interesting program of research, if one was able to get the research funding and someone to do that.

JF: From your own experiences, do you have any suggestions to young researchers who are struggling to stay motivated?

EU: I would emphasize two things. Firstly, talk to like-minded research colleagues and share ideas and problems. I think this social dimension is motivationally so important to our development as researchers, and so much more productive than plowing our own lonely furrow.

Secondly, if what you research is also relevant to what you teach, use your research to inform your teaching and engage your students in discussion about your research ideas. My experience in teaching an M.A. module on the psychology of language classroom practices which adopts an SCT framework and engages with issues of motivation and autonomy, collaborating with my colleague who co-teaches it with me, and engaging students (many of whom are practicing teachers from different parts of the world) in discussion of the issues I research and their relevance to classroom practice—all of this has been so valuable in helping me to develop my ideas further, stay focused, and stay motivated.

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