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**A Critical Study of Motivation and Social  
Constructivism in the Modern Foreign  
Languages Classroom**

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**Abstract**

This literature review explores the many ways in which a social constructivist model of learning and teaching may enhance students' motivation to learn a second language (L2). Socio-psychological perspectives and research methodologies are considered, alongside the integrative/instrumental orientations of motivation and the social constructivist nature of L2 learning.

**Paper**

If, as Abbas et al. suggest, 'motivation is the "neglected heart" of our understanding of how to design learning and teaching' (2012:15), the role of the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) practitioner and researcher is to expound and act upon the true motives of our language learners. In an oft-paradoxical field of study however, such a task is at best problematic, at worst, unattainable. The notion that motivation is 'the major force determining success in L2 [second language] learning' (Ellis, 2008:75) lies in stark tension with the reality that 'motivation for L2 learning in England, particularly among young adolescents, is low' (Erler & Macaro, 2011:496). This striking incongruity between the importance of motivation for language learning and its conspicuous absence among students in the UK renders research into motivational constructs all the more pertinent. While this literature review will investigate the synergies between students' L2 motivation and a social constructivist model of learning, we must primarily ascertain why L2 motivation, particularly within the British context, is in such short supply.

In recent years, apathy has arguably become a prominent hallmark of MFL learning in the UK. Myriad reasons have contributed to the steady decline of language learning among British students, most notably the change in statutory requirements of MFL provision. The removal of compulsory languages at KS4 has resulted in 'a major decline in GCSE MFL uptake, with 40% of Year 11 pupils in 2011 taking an MFL compared to 78% in 2001' (Malpass: 2014:3). The collateral damage has been extensive. The 'freefall' in pupils studying languages to A-Level, with numbers almost halving in a decade (Paton, 2013), the 'closure of some university MFL departments' (Malpass, 2) and the vicious cycle of 'no post-16 pupils, so no graduates, so no teachers' (Swarbrick, 2002:12) constitute some of the implications of a diminished MFL presence at KS4 level.

Aside from policy changes, L2 motivation remains low for multiple other reasons. The cognitive demands of second language acquisition, for example, can stifle students' motivation. This is particularly true given that, as Pachler et al. observe, 'the discrepancy between the chronological age and the linguistic age of pupils makes it very difficult if not frustrating to address their specific interests' (2009:123). MFL's longstanding reputation as 'the most disruptive subject on the curriculum' (Macaro, 2008:105) by dint of its cognitive challenge, has also contributed to a lack of L2 motivation in the UK. More concerning still, the ubiquity of English as the *lingua franca* has led to an acute indifference towards languages

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education. This lack of interest is then exacerbated by 'wider societal attitudes which undervalue language learning' (CfBT, 2013:80), including an anti-immigration discourse which infiltrates parts of the media and national politics.

The severity of the situation, as evidenced by the aforementioned statistics, has led me to consider whether different models of learning can serve to increase students' L2 motivation. Given that, over the past decades, many schools have adopted an increasingly collaborative approach to MFL teaching with the dual aim of dovetailing with research on 'communicative language teaching' (CLT) and enhancing students' motivation, I have developed the following two research questions as the nexus of this critical study:

- 1) What motivates adolescent language learners?
- 2) Does a social constructivist model of learning influence students' L2 motivation?

In this vein, what follows will examine the relationship between L2 motivation and a social constructivist model of learning and teaching. Our first task is to define the terms 'motivation' and 'social constructivism'. In its broadest sense, Dörnyei & Skehan define motivation as that which is 'responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it' (2003:614). In the context of second language acquisition, motivation 'requires the learner to display a combination of effort, desire to learn the language, and affect or attitude towards learning the language' (Hicks, 2008:17). I hypothesise that L2 motivation can be raised through a social constructivist model of learning and teaching. Espoused by Vygotsky, social constructivism emphasises the importance of social context, given that 'learner construction of knowledge is the product of social interaction, interpretation and understanding' (Vygotsky, 1962).

This review will be limited to literature emerging from Gardner's socio-educational theory, as opposed to cognitive-situated or process-orientated approaches.<sup>1</sup> The rationale for this choice is that Gardner's socio-educational theory aligns most naturally with the social constructivist model of learning. Rather than exploring motivational issues through a neurobiological lens, the focus will be on pedagogic literature. While motivation is by no means the *raison d'être* of foreign language learning, it certainly acts as its most potent catalyst. By understanding students' motives, MFL educators are able to engage their curiosity, develop their passion for languages and ultimately, enable them to discover the immense value of a multilingual Britain.

#### *Socio-psychological perspectives of motivation*

Before critically examining the pressing themes within the L2 motivation discourse, we will first consider its genesis and evolution along with its primary research methodologies. Although in its embryonic stages, the study of motivation in L2 learning arguably emerged with Gardner and Lambert's study into 'Motivational variables in second language acquisition' in 1959, which paved the way for a decade-long exploratory work entitled 'Attitudes and motivation in second-language learning' (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). This work was foundational to Gardner's socio-educational model (1985), which underpins much of the motivation research produced over the last four decades and is situated in the bilingual context of Canada. Gardner and Lambert's work posits that 'the successful learner of a second language must be psychologically prepared to adopt various aspects of behaviour which characterise members of another linguistic-cultural group' (1972:3).

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<sup>1</sup> For cognitive-situated works refer to Deci and Ryan's Self Determination theory (1985) or Weiner's attribution theory (2003). For process-orientated research, see Dörnyei (2005)

Sociocultural theory is an ideal bedfellow of social constructivism because it posits that classroom motivation is 'affected by the environment in the class, the nature of the course and the curriculum, characteristics of the teacher and the very scholastic nature of the student' (Gardner: 2010:10). This holistic approach takes into consideration the social make-up of the classroom in a way that is negated by more individualistic motivational theories. In the more recent history of socio-psychological L2 motivation research, Noels has been concerned with perceptions of competence and autonomy as integral to motivation for L2 learning (2001), while Dörnyei's focus has been primarily on justifying the impact of instrumental, rather than integrative, motives by developing a process model of L2 motivation (2005).

#### *Research methodologies*

With regard to research methodologies, Dörnyei and Schmidt's (eds.) volume offers a 'representative cross-section of current thinking on L2 motivation' (2001:preface) and gives credence to qualitative rather than purely quantitative research approaches. Striking an appropriate balance between the two appears to be a recurring issue within the oeuvre of L2 motivation. While Tremblay & Gardner claim that Crooks & Schmidt (1991) and Oxford & Shearin (1994) propose new motivational theories but without the requisite empirical evidence (1995:505), Ushioda believes the balance should swing in the opposite direction. Ushioda critiques the perennial reliance of quantitative methods within L2 motivation research by suggesting that 'in pursuing rule-governed patterns linking cognition, motivation and behavior, such research depersonalises learners' (2011:12). Instead, she calls for a 'person-in-context relational view' (Ushioda, 2009) whereby the learner's unique identity, in its most holistic sense, shapes the motivational strategies employed by the teacher and the methodologies of the researcher. Despite the blurred battle lines between quantitative and qualitative approaches, according to Broady, L2 motivation research increasingly 'reflects the realities of classroom-based foreign language teaching' (2005:73), an auspicious sign for practitioners and researchers alike. It is important to take into consideration, however, that much of the research carried out, and referred to in this review, has been undertaken in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or SLA settings rather than a school-based context. As such, the findings, while still applicable, must be tempered by an acknowledgement that these contexts can be markedly different.

#### *The Integrative/instrumental binary*

A major theme in the literature on L2 motivation is the interplay between two separate – though not necessarily distinct – orientations of motivation coined by Gardner: 'integrative' and 'instrumental' (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The former, integrative motivation, is defined as 'a high level of drive on the part of the individual to acquire the language of a valued second-language community in order to facilitate communication with that group' (Gardner et al., 1976:199). The latter, instrumental motivation, is concerned with the utilitarian purposes of language learning, that is, the 'pragmatic consequences of L2 learning' (Noels, 2001:108). The *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* provides a comprehensive list of possible instrumental motives, including: 'to gain social recognition and status, economic openings and advantages, ... to find a job or earn money, further career prospects, pass examinations, help fulfil the demands of their job, or assist their children in bi-lingual schooling' (1998:651). Many of these motives can be attributed to learners of MFL in secondary school, although some are certainly more apt for adult learners.

The confluence of integrative and instrumental orientations lies at the core of the literature under consideration, and has been the source of much contention among its respective schools of thought. Some argue, however, that it is too reductionistic – and too impractical –

to pit integrative orientations as an intrinsic motivation, against instrumental orientations, its extrinsic counterpart. Instead, it could be argued that the two work in symbiosis and are therefore 'not parallel constructs' (Noels, 2001:114) but rather 'mutually inclusive' (Abbas, 2012:11). The efficacy of the two orientations is largely dependent on the learning context. In SLA, integrativeness is a more effective motive as it serves the 'social functions' (Littlewood, 1984:3) of the second language. Chief among these functions is the learner's desire 'to learn a language to integrate successfully into the target language community' (Abbas et al., 2012:11). Yu's empirical study (2010) into second language learners in China concludes that integrative motivation plays a significant role in successful socio-cultural adaptation. In an MFL setting, however, where students 'have not had enough contact with the target language community to form attitudes about them' (Dörnyei, 1990: 69), instrumental motives for language learning may come to the fore.

In like manner, Usioda argues that the concept of integrative motivation has lost its explanatory power when 'there is no clearly defined target language community' and when 'physical geographical boundaries separating communities of language users become dissolved in the world of cyberspace and online communication networks' (2011:199). On the contrary, the Internet, if used correctly, can afford students with interminable opportunities to explore 'target language' cultures, which could serve to stimulate curiosity and allow for a more authentic, and realistic, integrativeness. An instrumental orientation is equally fallible, criticised for its superficiality; instrumental motives arguably view language learning as a means to an end. As I have experienced in my own school, students may be willing to learn a language if they can see its concomitant benefits, however this type of motivational orientation seems less likely to stir a longstanding love of languages. Dörnyei also concedes that 'for language learners whose mother tongue is English, instrumental motives may be less important because they can get along with English in most situations' (Dörnyei, 1990: 70).

Despite myriad criticisms brought against both integrative and instrumental orientations the research clearly suggests that 'integrativeness' is more essential than 'instrumentality' for lasting language learning (Yu & Downing, 2012; Noels, 2001) regardless of the learning context. Even Dörnyei, generally considered a champion of instrumental orientation, concedes that in order 'to "really learn" the target language one has to be integratively motivated' (1990:70). What is important is perhaps not actual integration, but rather a feeling of empathy or commonality with native speakers. In a similar vein, Yu and Downing's empirical study, which investigates the motivation of international students learning Chinese in China, advocates "integrativeness" as the overarching orientation for L2 learning because 'psychological integration is more likely to sustain interest and fuel the desire to learn the language for longer periods of time' (2012: 459). Applying such findings to classroom-based context can be problematic, as we have seen with other FLL-based studies, because the necessity of, or desire for, integration is far less immediate for British teenagers.

#### *Social Constructivism and motivation*

Given the inherently communicative nature of language learning, as manifested in the WTC body of research, there exists a strong affinity between motivation and the social constructivist model of learning. Social constructivism, pioneered by Piaget and Vygotsky, posits that 'effective and lasting learning takes place for the individual when engaged in social activity' (Pritchard & Woodward, 2013). Language learners therefore co-construct knowledge through social exchanges. As the central tenet of Macintyre et al.'s study is that integrativeness, as a motivational construct, relies on 'the relationship with members of another language group' (2009:44), there is an undeniable link between social interaction and a learner's integrative motivation. Although the integrative orientation is not explicitly a

desire to learn the language but rather to integrate into the 'target language' community, a probable result of an integrative motivation is an inclination to acquire more language for the purposes of social interaction and immersion into the TL culture. This idea chimes with Bruner's notion that 'language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through use' (Bruner, 1990); students' motivation must be directed towards a desire to communicate, which in turn, leads to effective language acquisition. In this vein, classroom dynamics and the learning environment play a hugely significant role in raising or reducing students' L2 motivation.

Before further exploring the interplay between students' motivation and a social constructivist model, it is essential to decipher the characteristics of a social constructivist MFL classroom. Firstly, maximum exposure to the target language, both through the medium of the teacher and peers, is 'crucial for acquisition of basic knowledge and skills required for effective second language use' (Canale, 1983). Additionally, a skills-based approach enables learners to develop communicative strategies, unlike a knowledge-based approach, which does 'not seem to be sufficient in preparing learners to use the second language well in authentic situations' (Canale, 1983). Finally, and most crucially, social constructivist classrooms must afford learners the opportunity to undertake cooperative learning tasks. While social constructivism is an understanding of how we learn, cooperative – sometimes referred to as 'collaborative' – learning is the practical outworking of the theory. As Oxford asserts: 'Social constructivism is the foundation for collaborative learning in the L2 classroom' (Oxford, 1997:449).

The question remains, what are the effects of a social constructivist learning setting on students' L2 motivation? Dörnyei suggests that 'cooperative learning (CL) tends to produce a group structure and a motivational basis that provide excellent conditions for L2 learning' (1997:491). Ning & Hornby's recent paper, exploring the synergies between CL and motivation for tertiary learners of English in North China, draws similar conclusions by stating that a CL approach was 'superior to traditional instruction in enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation' (2014:118). Dörnyei's work also provides some excellent insights into the interplay between the way students learn and their attitudinal disposition, highlighting the 'consistently favourable impact of CL on L2-related attitudes and motivation' (1997:490). Dörnyei presents multiple reasons for the correlation between motivation and collaboration, including 'a sense of obligation or moral responsibility', the fact that 'the group's goal-orientated norms have a strong influence on the individual', and that 'positive relations make the learning experience more enjoyable' (1997:488). More specifically still, Slavin suggests that CL enhances students' motivation through 'improvements in self-esteem, peer relations, pro-academic norms, and the sense of belonging' (2000). In a much-needed bid to enhance student motivation in recent years, MFL departments have begun to embrace social constructivist educational reforms into their pedagogic practices.

Given that 'effective and lasting learning takes place for the individual when engaged in social activity' (Pritchard & Woodward, 2013), a collaborative MFL classroom that seeks to raise students' motivation is a challenging yet worthy aspiration for the language teacher. The first step, according to Dörnyei et al.'s four principles for improving L2 motivation, is to create 'the basic motivational conditions' (2003:24). Based on the existing literature, I believe that creating a learning environment in which learners are not only willing but eager to communicate, and where L2 production is normative, will inevitably lead to higher levels of motivation among students and greater participation in language learning. Such a classroom is socially constructivist in nature working from the premise that social interaction enables the construction of knowledge. In order to reverse the current trend of students opting out of

languages, researchers and teachers need to decipher the true motives of adolescent learners and adapt L2 pedagogy accordingly.

Although many studies have investigated the validity of motivational strategies in MFL, few have investigated the effect of different learning models on learners' motivation. As such, I have identified 3 potential areas for further research, which could enrich the L2 field, and ultimately, enhance students' motivation to learn a foreign language. Firstly, there is scope to investigate whether a social constructivist learning environment is more motivating for boys or girls. Secondly, more research is needed to determine and compare the effects of other learning models on students' motivation. Thirdly, and finally, future research could – and should – explore the differences between metaphorical and actual integration with the target language community, and the implications on L2 motivation. This would involve comparing the motivation of students who had first-hand experience of native speakers with those who did not.

Claxton defines the hallmark of a motivated student as a 'willingness to persist intelligently in the face of difficulty' (2009:179). Such tenacity is required within the field of L2 motivation to ensure that researchers and teachers alike are not only aware of the challenges posed by motivation – or lack thereof - but are equipped to address them in a compelling way, for the sake of L2 learners. Convincing the public, politicians and most importantly, the young learners under our supervision, of the unequivocal benefits of L2 acquisition – both from an integrative and instrumental standpoint – is the essential first step in raising motivation and raising the profile of languages in the UK.

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