

WHAT DO MOTIVATION, IDENTITY, AND AUTONOMY HAVE TO DO WITH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES?

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Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLS) are appealing to learners and teachers as both groups seek to enhance second and foreign language (L2) acquisition. However, the concept of LLS has existed as a grey area for quite some time, and the field has been under attack from the onset. Over time, other concepts related to self-directedness have been incorporated into conceptualizations of LLS, some more suitable than others. This evolution of theory is natural, and is no different than the development of theory in many other areas. Therefore, this short essay will briefly trace the conceptual trajectory of motivation, identity, and autonomy—as per the theme of this collection—in an attempt to learn from the development of these areas, as well as draw connections to similar issues in the field of LLS. In order to enable teachers to effectively implement and evaluate LLS in L2 education, our understanding of the relationship between strategies and other concepts needs to be updated. A general theoretical overview of motivation, identity, and autonomy will be presented in the hope that it can provide insights into future directions for the field of LLS. To conclude, a new model for conceptualizing LLS will be presented.

1 Introduction: Language Learning Strategies

Interest in LLS began in the 1970's with the work of Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). Early theorists and researchers were interested in what 'good' language learners did, thinking that if a register could be established then other *not so good* learners could benefit by incorporating some of their peers' strategies into their own language learning repertoires. Rubin (1981) established the first taxonomy, followed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990, 2011, 2017), among others. As the field progressed, conflicts emerged relating to theory, definitions, classification, and research methodology (see Rose, 2012a, 2012b, 2015). Due to the highlighted issues within the field, some prominent scholars called for an end to LLS in exchange for a focus on self-regulation (Dornyei, 2005; Tseng, Dornyei, & Schmitt, 2006). Others supported views of LLS which incorporated self-regulation and other concepts related to self-directedness in their conceptualizations (e.g. Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Gao, 2007; Gao & Zhang, 2011; Gu, 2012; Macaro, 2006; Oxford, 2011, 2017; Teng & Zhang, 2018). While some argue that advances have been made in terms of research quality (e.g. Rose, Briggs, Boggs, Sergio, & Ivanova-Slavianskaia, 2018), the new era of strategy research in the face of self-regulation is still rife with underlying theoretical, definitional, and conceptual issues (Thomas & Rose, 2018). This is not unlike the evolution of the fields of L2 motivation, identity, and autonomy. Each has its own complicated past. In the following sections, I will provide a brief and admittedly incomplete overview of some of the major trends over the years. I will finish by making connections between what the rich histories and current directions these fields have to offer the field of LLS.

2 Motivation

Motivation is an enormous area of inquiry that spans many different academic domains. Although most people tend to have a general understanding of the concept, in regards to language learning, there can be some disagreement. According to Woodrow (2015), “Motivation comprises the desire to learn the second language, motivational intensity and attitudes towards learning the language” (p. 404). As an individual difference in L2 learners, motivation is an even stronger predictor of success in L2 learning than aptitude, second only to age—which is still debated in L2 contexts—and, therefore, considered one of the most important individual differences (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Dornyei and Ryan (2015) identify three significant periods of L2 motivation theory development: 1) the social psychological period, which lasted from the 1950s until around 1990; 2) the cognitive-situated period, which although introduced in the 1980s made its biggest waves during the 1990s; and 3) the process-oriented period which began around the late 1990s-2000 and has continued through to present day. It should be noted that while these periods and the theories that accompany them have been assigned to certain years/dates, each period continues to have a presence today as theories are revisited, revised, and continue to be tested.

2.1 The Social Psychological Period

The social psychological period arose out of a perceived need to recognize the social context in which learners inhabit. One key tenant that helped to define the social psychological period is that learning an L2 is not like learning other subjects in school due to sociocultural influences and external factors involved (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972), a stance that other prominent theorists still hold today (e.g. Ushioda, 2012). Gardner’s theory of motivation is emblematic of this period even though it has evolved and continues to evolve since it was originally introduced. Both in its original and most recent forms (see Gardner, 2010), the socio-educational model still provides insight into L2 motivation today. Gardner’s theory emphasizes the degree to which people want to learn a language and, in turn, the effort they put forth in doing so, as well as their attitude towards learning the language. The influential dichotomy between integrative and instrumental orientation/motivation arose as part of the social psychological period and Gardner’s theory. Williams, Mercer, and Ryan (2015) define *integrative orientation* as “how people are motivated to learn a language by feelings of identification with the people and cultural values associated with a target language”; meanwhile, *instrumental orientation* explains “how people are motivated to learn a language by the material rewards associated with success” (p. 152). Dornyei and Ryan (2015) argue that many scholars have oversimplified the socio-educational model to only these two components, although I would add that these elements do play a major role in the theory and most popular theories fall to a similar fate when their popularity increases. Ushioda (2008) notes that the socio-educational model does not address individual students’ peculiarities at different periods of time. This snapshot of a learner’s motivation as a static construct is problematic in considering how motivation transforms over time and from context to context, an idea I will come back to later in relating motivation to LLS.

2.2 The Cognitive-Situated Period

In the cognitive-situated period, many theorists began to shift from macro-level social psychological perspectives back to more cognitively situated theory. This aligned theories in

L2 motivation with those in general and especially educational psychology. From this perspective, language learning was no longer viewed as being significantly different from other types of learning; researchers sought to provide “a more fine-tuned and situated analysis of motivation as it operates in actual learning situations”, a micro-perspective (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 80).

Arguably the most influential and illustrative theory to originate during this period is *self-determination theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2002; 2017). SDT is an “organismic theory of human behavior and personality development [...] focused primarily at the psychological level, and it differentiates types of motivation along a continuum from controlled to autonomous” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p.3). It is built around the idea that individuals have and are trying to manage three physiological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Although incredibly comprehensive in nature, SDT has faced the same fate as Gardner’s socio-educational model (see above) in being reduced to an oversimplified dichotomy: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In language learning, *intrinsic motivation* is learning the language due to internal factors such as an interest or curiosity in the language, for the challenge involved, or simply to “exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). *Extrinsic motivation* would be learning the language due to external factors such as rewards and/or punishments from parents, teachers, work, etc. Williams, Mercer, and Ryan (2015) note that “the distinctions between the internal and the external, and the intrinsic and the extrinsic, are not always clear, and neither are they static” (p. 107). Therefore, it is beneficial for teachers to understand a learner’s motivation may vary depending on the task, participants, and other factors, which leads into the push for more process-oriented models. I will expand more on how SDT theory relates to LLS in my own conceptualization of regulated LLS later in this paper.

2.3 The Process-Oriented Period

The idea of motivation being viewed as dynamic, constantly in flux, and emerging from interactions between the psychological and the social enabled the process-oriented period to emerge. While Dornyei and Otto’s (1998) process model was one of the first, Ushioda’s (2009, 2012) work also helps to bridge the gap between learner and context, static versus dynamic. However, Dornyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System has gained the most traction in the intervening years since it was introduced. It is a theory of motivation that “accommodates contextual, personal, and temporal dynamics, and considers motivation as a part of self-realization, as becoming the personal we would like to be” (Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015; p. 114). The theory is made up of three dimensions: 1) the *Ideal L2 Self*, the type of learner one wants to be; 2) the *Ought-to L2 Self*, the type of learner one think he/she should be to meet external expectations; and 3) the *L2 Learning Experience*, the present, situated state of learning. Motivation, then, is derived from the gap between the current self and the Ideal or Ought-to L2 self. Dornyei and Ryan (2015) offer a consolidation of the original theory based on research that has been conducted since its inception.

3 Identity

As with motivation, work on identity expands across many academic domains and subdomains. Its utility in language learning is that it affords a comprehensive view of individual learners in relation to the larger social world (or *worlds*, see below) (Norton, 2013). Whereas some classic

understandings of learners view them as fitting into one of multiple categories relating to motivation, personality, or learning style, among others, as part of one's learner makeup, identity theorists move beyond the psychological domain and emphasize the affective power of social influences (Norton, 2015). Learners are viewed from multiple angles—from one's perspective looking outward, from outside looking in, and from the interactions that take place between the internal and external as determined by influences at micro and macro levels. Identity, then, is “the way we view ourselves in respect to specific contexts and groups—real or imagined” (Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, 2015, p. 49). Thus, language learner identities are influenced by specific learning settings, the learners' role(s) or perceived role(s) within these settings, and their feelings towards the language being learned.

Many theorists argue that individuals will have multiple identities. In language learning and usage, this relates to the *communities of practice* with which individuals belong (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These communities may be real or imagined (Norton & Gao, 2008; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Wenger, 1998) and exist in our physical world or in the ubiquitous digital world of the 21st century (Darvin, 2016; Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2016). For example, an intact classroom community where learners study and practice together; a social group that meets and participates in various activities; and both formal and informal occupational groups all make up physical communities of practice. Conversely, online communities provide a much wider range and more accessibility to communities of practice, only limited by technological restrictions and permission, assuming one has the language proficiency to communicate—often a motivational factor to learn if one does not. In each of these settings, there is a set of norms and practices that members are expected to adhere to. *Legitimate members* will be aware of, follow, and assume roles within each community; they will be recognized for doing so by their acceptance in the group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Whether or not one feels like a legitimate member of a community will have a significant effect on one's identity. As Norton (2015) states, “An imagined community assumes an imagined identity and helps to explain a learner's investment in the target language” (p. 378).

3.1 Investment

Investment is a concept within the broader scope of identity that may have the greatest carryover into language learning strategies. Norton (2013) defines investment as “a construct that signals the complex relationship between language learner identity and language learning commitment (p. 3); it “signals a learner's commitment to learn a language, given their hopes for the future and their imagined identities” (Norton, 2016, p. 476). There is, of course, a strong connection between motivation and investment. However, according to Norton, we can differentiate between the two by viewing investment as a sociological construct that complements motivation, which was traditionally thought of as a psychological construct (Norton, 2013, 2016; Norton & De Costa, 2018). Additionally, Norton conceptualizes investment as complex, dynamic, and situation specific; it is likely to change in response to contextual circumstances whereas motivation is generally viewed as more stable (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2015, 2016). I would argue that modern theories of motivation (as discussed above) have similar views regarding dynamism, diversity, and adaptation that takes place between the learner and context (see especially Ushioda, 2009, 2012 and those discussed in Dornyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015). Therefore, a more detailed discussion of investment is needed to address how it sets itself apart from these motivation theories; Darvin and Norton's recent work provides this

discussion in terms of the way it frames ideology, capital, and other aspects beyond the scope of this paper.

4 Autonomy

Autonomy has ties to both motivation and identity (see Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011). However, it has grown as an area in inquiry in its own right. As Benson (2007) stated over ten years ago, interest in autonomy “has reached a point where it has begun to overflow the banks of the specialist literature” (p. 21), a point echoed by Smith (2008) who also highlighted the rise in publications since the turn of the century. With this explosion of interest in autonomy, time has given birth to an array of definitions and conceptualizations, as the field gets pushed and pulled in different directions. The most widely-circulated definition of autonomy comes from Holec (1981), who is arguably the father of this line of work; he defined autonomy in education as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). In this sense, autonomy is attributed to learners themselves, an idea that has been the topic of debate among theorists over time. Others, such as Dickinson (1987) use the term to describe the situation of being autonomous rather than just the learners themselves. Another addition originated from theorists such as Little (1991, 1996) who emphasized the psychological aspects of autonomy and argued that an interdependence existed between teachers and learners, with freedom and autonomy not always existing as parallels.

Moving forward, another issue has arisen in whether or not autonomy, which is often thought of as a western construct, is appropriate for learners in non-western contexts (see Littlewood, 1999 for discussion). However, whether autonomy is viewed as a sociocultural or constructivist concept, researchers have found evidence of successful learner autonomy in various contexts. Recent book-length accounts (e.g. Blidi, 2017), edited volumes (e.g. Murray, 2014; Murray & Lamb, 2018), and hundreds of journal articles are a testament to this. Benson (2007) notes that that definitional issues largely occurred as dissonance between the *what* of autonomy and the *how*. He states that since then, “[a]ttention has shifted to the range of potential meanings for the idea of learner autonomy and to the different ways in which these meanings are represented in research and practice” (p. 23). Perhaps Holec (2008) sums it up best in stating:

There is no single answer [...] care will have to be taken to avoid looking for monolithic and stable answers. Instead, conditions of plurality and parameters of variability will be sought after, then brought to play in the analyses carried out and finally accommodated in the theories and/or practices provisionally set up. This will probably mean revising a great proportion of our present certainties (p. 4).

So what then for motivation, identity, and autonomy in relation to LLS theory and practice?

5 Discussion: Learning from Other Domains and Future Directions for LLS

This paper has taken the shape of a funnel, working its way from the largest, most robust of the areas considered, motivation, down through identity and autonomy. Each section shorter than the previous in terms of content covered and yet each as important as the last. In this final section, I will address what the field of LLS can glean from the past and future directions of motivation, identity, and autonomy and introduce a new model with which to conceptualize strategy usage over time.

In all areas discussed, early definitions and conceptualizations have been modified by theorists who have pushed the field in new directions. Early theories of motivation and identity viewed learners as static entities, and their dispositions as stable, unchanging. Later theories in both fields, as well as in the field of autonomy, fluctuated from a focus on learner internal and external characteristics, some concentrating solely on psychological or sociocultural constructs; others emphasized a blending of the two. In all three areas, the most recent conceptualizations view learners as part of a greater system, as complex, as unique, and as a product of change and evolution, much like the theories themselves. Each of these areas influence and are influenced by the others as general shifts in larger areas of interest take place due to influential publications and advances both within and without each smaller domain. With an open mind, each can help to explain the other when viewed as systems that interact. L2 motivation can influence one's self-perception and identity; autonomy can fuel and is fueled by motivation; identity is enhanced through autonomy, and vice versa.

In the brief discussion above, autonomy is considered one of the three core psychological needs that must be addressed in SDT; it is also considered a key element in Ushioda's person-in-context view of motivation. It would appear that these concepts are intertwined, although we must be careful not to permanently conflate issues that may also exist independently. While one area *can* or *may* have an influence on another, it may not always be perceived in the same way by someone else, which is why issues arise and disagreements erupt. For example, in the discourse of LLS, self-regulation may indeed occur, but are learners who use strategies always self-regulated? Are they always autonomous in their use of strategies? Do they have the capacity, desire, or need to be self-directed? These are issues I have grappled with in exploring the field of LLS (see Thomas & Rose, 2018) and have attempted to understand better by analyzing motivation, identity, and autonomy. The debate is still raging between whether it is acceptable to subsume related disciplines that appear complementary, as can be seen in Lee (2017) and Lou, Chaffee, Lascano, Dincer, & Noels' (2018) debate over SDT and language learning autonomy. This is reminiscent of the ongoing discussion on LLS and self-regulation.

In Thomas & Rose (2018), we proposed a model that attempts to provide an answer to some of these conceptual issues regarding the source of regulation in LLS usage (see Figure 1 below). By encompassing both self-regulated strategy use and other-regulated strategy use, theorists and researchers are able to align LLS with concepts such as SDT that view regulation as transformative. In doing so, we enable ourselves to disentangling LLS from self-regulation if necessary, as learners may align more with other-regulation or some place in between. This theory has yet to be tested, but we put it forth for other researchers and theorists to build on, critique, and comment on in their own studies. Other developments in the field, most notably Oxford's shift away from trying to categorize individual strategies and her recent adherence to a complexity theory perspective (Oxford, 2017; Oxford, Lavine, Amerstorfer, 2018) shows signs of promise. From this perspective, strategies exist as nested systems. Each learner and context is different, affected by and affecting their own and other systems with which they interact. Individual learner characteristics and the diverse contexts in which learning takes place influence strategy usage. When considering Oxford's movement to complex systems thinking, LLS appears to have already followed in the footsteps of the theories outlined above. This shift has been documented in recent theories of motivation (Dornyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015), identity (Darvin & Norton, 2015), and autonomy (Murray & Lamb, 2018). I see this as a natural progression and look forward to documenting this development over time.

Strategy use	Non-strategic language learner	Other-regulated strategy user	Mostly other-regulated strategy user	Mostly self-regulated strategy user	Self-regulated strategy user	Intrinsically-regulated strategy user
Regulatory style	Non-regulation	External regulation	Introjected regulation	Identified regulation	Integrated regulation	Intrinsic regulation
Source of strategic behaviour	Non-existent	External	Somewhat external	Somewhat internal	Internal	Internal

Fig. 1. The Regulated Language Learning Strategies Continuum (RLLSC; Adapted from Thomas & Rose, 2018)

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