

# **The long-term evolution of language motivation and the L2 self**

*Stephen Ryan & Zoltán Dörnyei*

In this chapter we consider theories of language learning motivation and how they may help us understand language learning as a long-term pursuit. We begin by outlining current developments within the field of L2 motivation theory and after briefly reviewing how adult learners have been portrayed in the L2 motivation literature, we then move on to a discussion of the challenges posed by the lifelong learning context to established theories of L2 motivation. We conclude by offering suggestions as to how current thinking about language learning motivation may be integrated into a research agenda that will contribute to a meaningful understanding of long-term L2 learner motivation.

## **1. Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed considerable changes in both the role and provision of education. Education is no longer confined to the years between childhood and early adulthood; for an increasing number of people around the world, education is becoming a lifelong pursuit. The field of foreign language education has not been immune to these developments. Similarly, although not directly related, profound changes have also occurred in how we have come to understand the motivation to learn languages. In this chapter, we address a key gap in the literature by exploring some of the links between shifting conceptualisations of language learning motivation and the increasingly important context of lifelong learning.

## **2. Motivation and language learning**

### **2.1. A historical overview**

There is not the space for a detailed discussion of the numerous conceptualisations of L2 motivation that have been proposed over the years (thorough accounts can be found in Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011; Ushioda 2008). For our current purposes we will simply borrow Ushioda's (in press) succinct synopsis of the broad sweep of the history of L2 motivation theory:

[...] L2 motivation research originated in a focus on what makes L2 learning distinctive from other forms of learning (1960s-1990s). Researchers then recognized the need to redress the balance and bring L2 motivation theory in line with mainstream motivational psychology (1990s). Since the turn of the century, L2 motivation research has kept pace with significant developments in mainstream psychology.

Our primary interest here is with the last phase identified by Ushioda, the phase in which L2 motivation research seeks to work in tandem with mainstream psychology. We intend to pay particular interest to how L2 motivation researchers have met the challenges of accommodating temporal and contextual factors.

## 2.2. Language learning motivation over time

In its early years, L2 motivation research was dominated by cross-sectional quantitative studies examining cause-effect relationships. However, even for the most successful learners, learning a language is a long and often arduous process in which motivation fluctuates over time and in response to events; for any individual learner the motivation to learn a language is likely to vary greatly across the learning experience. In order to more satisfactorily explain language learning motivation, more attention needed to be paid to this temporal dimension.

An early attempt to integrate a temporal aspect to the theorisation of L2 motivation was Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) *Process Model of L2 Motivation*, which in contrast to then established models of L2 motivation, recognised that for most individuals motivation is a complex, evolutionary process. Levels and intensity of motivation rise and fall over time. Individuals make choices before embarking on an activity, pre-action; they act upon these choices, action; and they assess their performance of the activity, post-action. These post-actional assessments then serve to inform subsequent behavioural choices. This process model pointed to a key future direction for L2 motivation research by recognising that behaviour has antecedents and consequences, that the actions of an individual do not occur in an historical vacuum.

## 2.3. Motivation in context

A further development in recent conceptualisations of L2 motivation has been a greater awareness of the role of context in human behaviour. Earlier models of motivation looked at the relationship between the individual and context as a linear, causal process; in essence they were concerned with the unidirectional effects of context on individual behaviour. However, more recent perspectives emphasise the interactions between context and the individual. Individual action

is both shaped by context and contributes to the further shaping of that context; context is not a fixed or static entity, it is dynamic and is constantly in a state of flux. As part of this general move towards understanding the interrelationships between context and the individual, there has been a significant shift towards considering the individual learning a language as a 'person' rather than as an abstract, depersonalised 'learner' (see Ushioda 2009). Language learners do other things in addition to learning languages and in order to understand fully their motivation to learn a language it is important to look at the person as a whole, not just those aspects that mark them as a 'language learner'; we need to understand more about who is learning, with whom, where, when, and why. From this 'person-in-context' perspective, a theory of motivation needs to understand how language learning relates to other ongoing behaviours and should not attempt to separate the 'language learner' from the whole person (see also Dörnyei 2009a).

## 2.4. The L2 motivational self system

Perhaps the most influential current model of L2 motivation is the *L2 Motivational Self System* (Dörnyei 2005, 2009b). This is a motivational framework that seeks to incorporate affective and emotional factors with cognition. It also opens the door to newer socio-dynamic perspectives that have gained currency within applied linguistics in general (see Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008) and within understandings of language learner self-concept (Mercer 2011); it is a framework that acknowledges and accommodates the social psychological roots of L2 motivation theory rather than renounces them. The L2 self system fuses two aspects of self theory from psychology: possible selves (see Markus & Nurius 1986; Oyserman et al. 2006) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987). Possible selves represent future-oriented visions of the self-concept that may function as guides to direct current behaviour. It is theorised that those visions which represent 'ideal' future self-images are more likely to direct behaviour due to a basic psychological need to reduce discrepancies between the perceived current self and this ideal self.

The L2 motivational self system proposes two principal sets of self guides: the *Ideal L2 Self* and the *Ought-to L2 Self*. The ideal L2 self represents an ideal future self-representation of the individual as a user of the L2; aspirations towards realising these desirable future images as a proficient L2 user are theorised to both initiate and sustain the motivation to learn the language. The learner also develops an ought-to L2 self, which emerges from the individual's perceived obligations and responsibilities to others. A third, experiential component, the *L2 Learning Experience*, is also included in the framework. This part of the motivational system stems from both the immediate learning environment

and learners' perceptions of their own previous language learning successes and failures.

In order to energise motivation, self images must be plausible; individuals are unlikely to expend effort on an activity where they do not anticipate a successful outcome, consistent with basic expectancy-value theory. Second, self images must be in harmony with the current social environment; individuals may find it difficult or even unappealing to realise a future self image that clashes with social norms. Additionally, self images should not be comfortably within reach and should be sufficiently different from the current self; basically, if the vision of the future self is too close to the current self, then the individual is likely to perceive that little effort is required or that little value is likely to occur from realising something that is similar to the current situation. Finally, future self images should be regularly activated; if individuals do not have the opportunity to access or experience their visions of a future self, then these visions are unlikely to have any significant impact on behaviour.

The L2 motivational self system is radically altering understandings of the motivation to learn a language, reframing language learning motivation as a form of self-development or self-realisation. This has profound implications for how we may conceptualise and research language learning motivation over the long term.

### 2.5. Adults in the L2 motivation literature

Much of the L2 motivation literature focuses on young people learning languages; although this focus is not always explicit, there is very often an underlying assumption that the 'language learner' in question is a young person in formal education. Many of the major studies that have defined the theoretical and research agendas have been conducted with such young people, for example, Gardner's (1985) early pioneering work in Canada or the large-scale longitudinal research carried out by Dörnyei and various colleagues in Hungary (Csizér & Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei & Csizér 2002; Dörnyei, Csizér & Németh 2006). Our concern in the rest of this chapter is essentially to ask how models of motivation developed through research conducted with younger learners may be applied to contribute to an understanding of the motivation of adults to learn a language.

Having stated that the bulk of the L2 motivation literature concerns younger learners in formal educational contexts, we should point out that adults are not totally absent from this literature. For example, in a fascinating study of the participation of older Japanese learners in a self-access language learning programme, Murray (2011) discusses some of the challenges faced by older learn-

ers in the form of declining physical – poor eyesight, hearing loss – and cognitive – memory loss – powers. Language learning takes place against the backdrop of declining physical and cognitive abilities and in fact, for some learners a key motivation for learning a language is to combat this decline; one of Murray's participants described her principal reason for learning English as an "anti-aging activity." This is an extremely interesting motivational proposition, highly indicative of a form of motivation that cannot be explained by conventional theory relating to attitudes towards an external language community. This is an area of language learning that can only be explained by a self-based view of L2 motivation connected to notions of personal growth and development.

### 3. Motivation across the life span

Our next task is to look more specifically at how motivation develops across the life span. But, perhaps we should first remind ourselves at this point that the motivation to learn later in life is not entirely disconnected from learning experiences when young (see Dweck 1998). Many of the resources we have as adults, many of the constraints that are imposed on us and that we impose upon ourselves, are a product of patterns developed early in life. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that there are aspects to the motivation of older learners that are significantly different to that of younger learners.

One of the most established frameworks of motivation that considers how people behave at different stages of their lives is the *life span theory of control* (Heckhausen 2005; Heckhausen & Schulz 1995). According to this model, people have two basic modes of behaviour control: primary control and secondary control. Primary control is directed towards the outside world, whereas secondary control targets internal mental processes. Primary control enables individuals to shape their environment, and examples of this in action might include major life decisions, such as applying for a job or buying a house, or smaller undertakings such as joining a foreign language course. On the other hand, secondary-control processes serve to protect the individual against the threats to the self posed by failure; examples of secondary control could be the attributions an individual makes for various successes and failures, perhaps blaming failures on external factors perceived to be beyond his/her control. These secondary control processes represent an essential part of generating and maintaining commitment to a given goal.

Across the life span these feelings of control undergo major changes. In the early years, primary control is low, as the capacity of young children to shape their environment is limited by their physical capabilities and knowledge of the

world, but primary control then rises through adolescence peaking in middle age, subsequently falling again later in life as social roles are restricted and physical limitations increase. In contrast, secondary control is believed to remain constant across the life span (Heckhausen & Schulz 1998), thus secondary control strategies come to form a more significant part of our motivation as we get older and feelings of primary control decrease.

Self-protective secondary control strategies take many forms and one of the most important changes that has been observed across the life span is an increasing tendency to make downward social comparisons as one gets older (Heckhausen & Schulz 1998). Younger people tend to compare themselves to others they may regard as 'superior', whereas older people may compensate for a perceived lack of primary control by making comparisons with 'inferior' others. These social comparisons have important motivational consequences, as we accommodate our behaviour to that of the people around us; when we make upward social comparisons we are aspirational but when we make downward social comparisons we are less aspirational and more protective of the self.

Connected to these changing social comparisons is the observation that the nature of goals that individuals set themselves also tends to alter over the life span, with Heckhausen and Schulz (1998, p. 63) noting "a shift from positive-outcome focus, in terms of the striving for developmental growth in young adults, to a negative-outcome focus, in terms of the avoidance of developmental decline in older adults." As we get older we become more interested in protecting what we have than in seeking further gains.

One of the greatest impediments to a more complete understanding of the self-concept of adults and how it relates to learner motivation is a simple paucity of empirical research. Researchers have tended to pay far more attention to the development of self-concept during childhood and adolescence: "It is during these years when most of the action regarding development of the self is assumed to be occurring" (Brinthaupt & Lipka 1992, p. 2). Scholarly interest has been drawn to the 'sexier' issues concerning the developing self concept in young people at the expense of interest in the more stable aspects of the adult self.

#### 4. Life span challenges to the L2 motivational self system

In this next section, we consider how the L2 motivational self system can be applied across the life span. How do people reconcile the shifting opportunities and constraints that occur at different life stages? We have seen that as they get older, people regard themselves and other people differently, they set different

kinds of goals and they interact with others in a different manner. We now need to consider how all of this affects the motivation to learn a foreign language and we will do this by looking at some of the issues we have identified from the life span research against the background of the L2 motivational self system.

The first part of the L2 self system we need to consider is the ideal L2 self. The ideal L2 is theorised as the principal engine of L2 motivation, as individuals attempt to reduce discrepancies between the current perceived self and positive future self-representations. The ideal L2 self is essentially aspirational, but how does an ideal L2 self operate in those stages of the life span where individuals tend to become less aspirational, where protective secondary control strategies are known to play a greater role? We saw in our earlier discussion of the literature that as humans get older they tend to focus less on positive outcomes and more on protecting themselves from negative outcomes. The tendency towards downward social comparisons as a protective secondary control strategy at certain stages of the life span presents a further challenge to the notion of an ideal L2 self, which is in many respects a form of upward social comparison, as an energiser of motivation. All of the above suggest a different role for the ideal L2 self in adults with a developed and stable self-concept to that found in young people.

There has been some concern that "the self approach may not be appropriate for pre-secondary students" (Dörnyei 2009b, p. 38) and discussion of the relevance of the ideal L2 self as a motivating force for younger learners (see Lamb, *in press*), since the self-concept of younger learners may not be sufficiently robust to channel motivation. However, there is an equivalent need to consider what happens at other points on the age spectrum, when the self-concept, in contrast to being insufficiently formed, has become relatively stable.

The second component of the L2 motivational self system is the ought-to L2 self. When conceptualised for younger learners in formal learning contexts, it is easy to identify a sense of obligation or responsibility to learn a language coming from parents, teachers or even peer pressure. However, none of these are significant factors for most adult learners. The make-up of the ought-to L2 selves of adults is likely to be very different from those of young people. In one respect, it may be possible to simply substitute educational demands on the self with those of the workplace. For many learners, externally imposed factors connecting to career development and opportunities may form a significant part of the ought-to L2 self. People may feel a requirement relating to their professional lives to learn a language.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the L2 motivational self system in adults is how it connects to other aspects of the self system. The societal obligations and expectations of young people as learners tend to be very clear; in fact,

in many areas of life, young people are defined by who they are as learners. However, this is not the case for adults, who are usually defined through other social roles, such as husband, mother, pilot, volunteer worker and so on. For such adults, there may be times when these other social roles clash with aspirations to become a proficient L2 user. As mentioned earlier, some degree of harmony with the individual's current social environment is necessary for the ideal L2 self to energise motivation.

For many adults, it may be more difficult to separate the L2-specific parts of the self system from other domains. For example, if we consider the apparently simple case of someone learning a foreign language to advance their career prospects, it is possible that a number of factors from various domains of the self may be influencing this behaviour; it may be that the individual feels a strong responsibility as a parent to advance in order to provide for his/her family, or it may be that this motivation comes from a strongly internalised ideal self image as a dependable provider for the family. In both cases we can observe a clear overlap with other domains of the self, such as parent, spouse, and professional; this suggests that the L2 self systems of adult learners are likely to be more complex and interconnected to other parts of the self than in younger learners.

## 5. The research challenge

It is clear that the context of lifelong learning presents many challenges to conceptualisations of an L2 motivational self system. It also provides great opportunities. First of all, we must acknowledge that we simply lack the empirical research base to make any sweeping claims. However, making broad generalisations about the motivation of lifelong L2 learners might probably not be a desirable objective in the first place as these would detract from the unique dynamics of long-term human development. Indeed, understanding the motivation of lifelong learners presents a huge methodological challenge, since even the best longitudinal designs cannot possibly do justice to giving an empirical account of the unobservable aspects of the individuals' evolving disposition for the whole of their lives. Thus, it might be both difficult and counter-productive to embark on research that attempts to generalise across the whole lifelong learning experience; attempts to generalise lifelong learners' motivation to learn a foreign language are likely to fall into 'how long is a piece of string' territory.

So what are we to do? We would like to conclude by offering two approaches, both consistent with current motivational thinking, that may help us understand the motivation of lifelong language learners in a meaningful way.

### 5.1. A person-in-context approach

Firstly, the lifelong language learning context, even more so than formal educational contexts, demands that we look at the person as a whole. As discussed earlier, it is not tenable to try to isolate adult 'language learners' from other aspects of their lives. For most of us, the motivation to do anything is influenced by events in multiple domains of our lives; for example, we may find that our enthusiasm for learning is affected, either positively or negatively, by developments at work or by things happening to our children. We cannot separate the 'learner' from the 'person', therefore we need more research that looks at individual learners situated in context. One attempt to achieve such an approach was offered by Shoaib and Dörnyei (2005), who conducted qualitative interviews focusing on the participants' motivational history and established six salient '*motivational transformation episodes*' recurring in the data: (a) maturation and gradually increasing interest; (b) stand still period; (c) moving into a new life phase; (d) internalising external goals and 'imported visions'; (e) relationship with a 'significant other'; and (f) time spent in the host environment.

### 5.2. A complex systems approach

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the L2 motivational self system posed by adult learners is the relative stability of the adult self-concept, which therefore does not offer much room for energy emerging from any desired changes in the self. It may be the case that late adolescence and early adulthood, with a constant background of change and development, present the optimum conditions for ideal L2 self to energise motivation. However, this is not to say that the ideal L2 self cannot function at other stages of the life span; it simply means that we, as researchers, have to look harder to observe subtle change and dynamism within a relatively stable system. A complex dynamic systems approach that places emphasis on mapping unique variation that would have been considered 'noise' by most other paradigms may enable us to do this. Above all, such an approach involves adopting a *systemic* perspective in L2 motivation research (cf. Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011). Looking at the self as a whole may help us understand those focal points of change that energise motivation. According to complexity theory, a system emerges from the dynamic interactions of various parts of that system, which are constantly in flux (Spivey 2007). These system interactions may at times fall into more stable states, conceptualised as basins (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008). In the case of many adult language learners the L2 motivational self systems may settle into extended periods of equilibrium; the challenge for

researchers is to understand those phases of change when the system moves out of equilibrium and motivation is (re-)energised.

Somekh et al. (2005, p. 3) assert that "Human experience is characterized by complexity, and social science researchers need to resist the temptation to impose unwarranted order through the application of 'one size fits all' theories." We consider these words a fitting foundation for establishing a body of research that examines the motivation of lifelong L2 learners in ways that recognise that the individual cannot be isolated from context, and that the two are interwoven. The motivation of lifelong L2 learners stems from numerous contextual and internal systems, from the emergent interactions of individuals within context. Our approaches to researching and conceptualising L2 motivation across the life span need to reflect this exciting and challenging reality.

## References

- Brinthaupt, Thomas M. & Lipka, Richard P. (1992), Introduction. In: Thomas M. Brinthaupt & Richard P. Lipka (Eds.), *Self-perspectives across the lifespan*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1-8.
- Brinthaupt, Thomas M. & Lipka, Richard P. (Eds.) (1994), *Changing the self: Philosophies, techniques, and experiences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Csizér, Kata & Dörnyei, Zoltán (2005), The internal structure of language learning motivation and its relationship with language choice and learning effort. *The Modern Language Journal* 89: 1, 19-36.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán (2009a), Individual differences: Interplay of learner characteristics and learning environment. In: Nick C. Ellis & Diane Larsen-Freeman (Eds.), *Language as a complex adaptive system*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 230-248.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán (2009b), The L2 motivational self system. In: Zoltán Dörnyei & Ema Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 9-42.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán (2005), *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán & Csizér, Kata (2002), Some dynamics of language attitudes and motivation: Results of a longitudinal nationwide survey. *Applied Linguistics* 23, 421-462.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán; Csizér, Kata & Németh, Nóra (2006), *Motivation, language attitudes, and globalisation: A Hungarian perspective*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán & Ottó, Istvan (1998), Motivation in action: A process model of L2 motivation. *Working Papers in Applied Linguistics* 4, 43-69.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán & Ushioda, Ema (2011), *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. 2nd edition. Harlow: Longman.
- Dweck, Carol S. (1998), The development of early self-conceptions: Their relevance for motivational processes. In: Jutta Heckhausen, & Carol S. Dweck (Eds.), *Motivation and Self-regulation across the Life Span*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 257-280.

- Gardner, Robert C. (1985), *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Heckhausen, Jutta (2005), Competence and motivation in adulthood and old age: Making the most of changing capacities and resources. In: Andrew J. Elliot & Carol S. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of Competence and Motivation*. New York: The Guilford Press, 240-258.
- Heckhausen, Jutta & Schulz, Richard (1995), A life-span theory of control. *Psychological Review* 102, 284-304.
- Heckhausen, Jutta & Schulz, Richard (1998), Developmental regulation in adulthood: Selection and compensation via primary and secondary control. In: Jutta Heckhausen & Carol S. Dweck (Eds.), *Motivation and self-regulation across the life span*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 50-77.
- Higgins, Edward T. (1987), Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect. *Psychological Review* 94, 319-340.
- Horn, James (2008), Human research and complexity theory. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40: 1, 130-143.
- Lamb, Martin (in press), A self-system perspective on young adolescents' motivation to learn English in urban and rural settings. *Language learning*.
- Larsen-Freeman, Diane (2001), Individual cognitive/affective learner contributions and differential success in second language acquisition. In: Michael Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language Learning: New Directions in Research*. Harlow: Longman, 12-24.
- Larsen-Freeman, Diane & Cameron, Lynne (2008), *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Markus, Hazel & Nurius, Paula (1986), Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954-969.
- Mercer, Sarah (2011), The self as a complex dynamic system. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 1: 1, 57-82.
- Murray, Garold (2011), Older language learners, social learning spaces, and community. In: Phil Benson & Hayo Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 132-145.
- Oyserman, Daphna; Bybee, Deborah & Terry, Kathy (2006), Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91: 1, 188-204.
- Shoaib, Amel & Dörnyei, Zoltán (2005), Affect in life-long learning: Exploring L2 motivation as a dynamic process. In: Phil Benson & David Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 22-41.
- Somekh, Bridget; Burman, Erica; Delamont, Sara; Meyer, Julianne; Payne, Malcolm & Thorpe, Richard (2005), Research communities in the social sciences. In: Bridget Somekh & Cathy Lewin (Eds.), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage Publications, 1-13.
- Spivey, Michael (2007), *The Continuity of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ushioda, Ema (2008), Motivation and good language learners. In: Carol Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from good language learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge, 19-34.

- Ushioda, Ema (2009), A person-in-context relational view of emergent motivation, self and identity. In: Zoltán Dörnyei & Ema Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 215-228.
- Ushioda, Ema (in press), Motivation: L2 learning as a special case? In: Sarah Mercer, Stephen Ryan & Marion Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for language learning: Insights from theory, research and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.