Bridging the Gap: Motivation in Year One EAP Classrooms

Kevin W. H. Yung

Centre for Applied English Studies
The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Motivation has always been considered an important factor in language learning, and this is particularly crucial for first year undergraduates in the new four-year curriculum. With one year less English learning experience in secondary schools and one more year to study at universities, where English is usually used as a medium of instruction and a lingua franca for international knowledge exchange, this transition can be challenging. To bridge the gap, first year undergraduates are usually required to take courses of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). However, students are usually instrumentally motivated or not motivated at all. Therefore, course developers and teachers play vital roles in developing learners’ L2 learning motivation, and preparing them for further study in their own discipline using English. This paper investigates research in L2 learning motivation and how it can be applied to EAP classrooms to enrich the English learning experience of first year undergraduates. Findings of a study on the English learning experience in secondary school among 14 first year universities through narrative inquiry are highlighted with reference to shadow education (private supplementary tutoring). Practical strategies to motivate students to participate in classroom activities and out-of-class learning are suggested.

Keywords: motivation; higher education; shadow education; teaching and learning strategies; EAP

Introduction

The education system in Hong Kong has been undergoing significant reform, and 2012 is a challenging year for many local universities, when the first cohort of students are admitted to undergraduate programmes under the new 3-3-4 curriculum (3 years junior secondary, 3 years senior secondary and 4 years tertiary). New disciplinary courses are launched to cater for the newly admitted undergraduates. English courses are no exception. To bridge the gap of the missing one year English learning experience in secondary school, first year students in many universities are required to take courses of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) before they learn English for their own discipline. However, because of the usually compulsory nature of these courses, many students are instrumentally motivated or negatively motivated (Chan, 2004; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial for course developers and teachers to apply appropriate motivational strategies to enrich learners’ English learning experience.

Motivation has long been regarded as an important factor affecting learners’ success in second language (L2) learning. Understanding the motivations to learn a language in different contexts ‘may help teachers working within that context to
motivate their students more effectively’ (Humphreys & Spratt, 2008, p. 314). This paper aims to put research into practice by first investigating the development of L2 learning motivation research at different stages, with particular reference to the Hong Kong context, and how it can be applied to Year One EAP classrooms in Hong Kong under the new four-year curriculum. Practical strategies to motivate students to participate in classroom activities and out-of-class learning are then suggested.

Definitions on Motivation

‘Motivation’ is not a simple term that can be conceptualized with a universally true principle. As Covington (1998) suggests, motivation, ‘like the concept of gravity, is easier to describe (in terms of its outward, observable effects) than it is to define’ (p. 1). Dörnyei (2001) has a similar opinion, saying ‘the term ‘motivation’ is a convenient way of talking about a concept which is generally seen as a very important characteristic but which is also immensely complex’ (p. 6). Despite its complexity, researchers do not stop trying to define the term. Gardner (1985) states that motivation is ‘the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language’ and that ‘motivation to learn a second language is seen as referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity’ (p. 10). Dörnyei (2001) thinks motivation can be described in terms of an individual being responsible for ‘the choice of a particular action’, ‘the effort expended on it’ and ‘the persistence with it’ (p. 7). While the definition of motivation is always associated with terms such as desire, choice, goal, want, effort, persistence, and attitudes, some of them have overlapping meanings and some other terms have emerged during analysis. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) comment that ‘researchers are inevitably selective in their focus since it seems impossible to capture the whole picture’ (p. 4). In order to see a clearer picture, it is worth understanding the various models derived in different periods, which are discussed in the next section.

Development of Motivation Research

L2 motivation has been studied for half a century. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), research has undergone four phases: (1) the social-psychological period (1959–1990), when the idea of Gardner and his students and associates dominated, (2) the cognitive-situated period (the 1990s), when cognitive theories were put into educational psychology, (3) the process-oriented period (since 2000), when Dörnyei, Ushioda and their colleagues initiated an interest in motivational change, and (4) the socio-dynamic period, taking into account the situated complexity of L2 motivation with internal, social and contextual factors, and using the ‘future possible selves’ as the focus. It can be seen that researchers have been unceasingly interested in this field, but the emphasis has been changing from time to time.

Gardner first proposed in 1959 and further discussed in 1972 with Lambert that L2 motivation fell into two broad categories: ‘integrative motivation’ (having a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group), and ‘instrumental motivation’ (seeing the practical value and advantages of learning a new language) (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 132). Wilkins (1972) termed them respectively ‘want-to-do’ (desire) and ‘has-to-do’ (compulsiveness), suggesting the
former makes a learner better motivated. Most researchers at that time agreed that it was the integratively motivated learners who were the most successful (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Wilkins, 1972). It is not surprising to come to such a conclusion because Gardner’s discussion was mainly centred upon his French-Canadian Circle, where people in Canada stressed interaction with members of the French speaking community for ‘social-emotional purposes’ (Gardner, 1985, p. 11), and most research was conducted mainly in a multicultural setting. However, in learning situations such as Hong Kong, where English is taught as a school subject without direct contact with its native speakers, the concept of integrativeness is enigmatic and ambiguous and has no obvious meaning (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009).

In Hong Kong as well as many Asian settings, the environment does not provide enough meaningful opportunities for English use with native speakers of English. This does not mean that English is not important, but that its importance is not centred on social interaction with English speakers or integrating with the native speakers (Tsui, 2007). Even if the learners want to integrate with the native English community, it then comes to another question that in such a globalized world, where, as Arnett (2002) argues, people tend to develop a ‘bicultural identity’ which combines their local identity with an identity related to the global culture, what exactly would be ‘the other language community’ that the learners would want to integrate with (Dörnyei, 2009). Therefore, many learners may simply regard English as a lingua franca (Csizer & Kormos, 2009). It then falls into the second category in Gardner’s definition—‘instrumental motivation’, where English is learnt because of its practical value and advantages.

Dörnyei (2005) puts ‘instrumental motivation’ into ‘a practical/utilitarian dimension’, connected with the concrete benefits such as career opportunities that language proficiency might bring about. Although it is a more significant factor motivating students to learn the L2 in many Asian countries (Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Warden & Lin, 2000), this is not an area Gardner focuses on (Dörnyei, 2001, 2005). Rather, it is the ‘integrative motive’ that he is most concerned about. Dörnyei (2001, 2005) conceptualises this idea into a broader concept. It is made up of three main components: *integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, and motivation* (see Dörnyei, 2001, p. 17). As he argues, a problem of the model is that the term ‘integrative’ exists at three different levels (*integrative orientation* → *integrativeness* → *integrative motive*), which leads to misunderstanding. However, this model visualises an important factor – *attitudes*.

The term ‘attitudes’ appears three times in the model in two different levels (‘attitudes toward L2 community’ causes ‘integrativeness’, which then leads to ‘motivation’, and ‘attitudes toward the learning situation’ and ‘attitudes toward learning the L2’ directly lead to ‘motivation’). Wilkins (1972) comments that at the extremes a learner with instrumental motivation is ‘strictly utilitarian and attitudes are intolerant’, while the learner with integrative motivation sees himself as a ‘potential member of the second language group and has liberal attitudes’. He concludes that ‘attitude correlates positively with success in learning’ (p. 184). However, this claim may be too simplistic. Gardner (2001) explains that an individual does not need to be either integratively or instrumentally motivated. In addition, Csizer and Kormos’s (2009) study finds that positive attitudes do not necessarily mean that learners would invest sufficient energy in learning the L2. As Arnold and Brown (1999) state,
one type of motivation is not necessarily always more effective than the other; what is important is the degree of energizing and the firmness of the direction it provides, and that will also depend on other variables within the learner. (p. 13)

Therefore, as we can see in the model and Dörnyei’s (2001) definition on motivation, the ‘desire/choice to learn the L2’ and ‘effort’ (plus ‘persistence’) are important factors contributing to motivation. In his process model, he puts ‘choice motivation’ onto a ‘preactional stage’, which involves goal-setting, intention formation and launching action. Goal setting is important because, as proposed in goal theories, human actions are triggered by a sense of purpose and goals have be to set and pursued by choice (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). This is the stage where motivation is first generated. The choice or decision can be made due to a wide range of factors, including the learner’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and what Williams and Burden (2005) group as internal and external motivations (and all these factors can also appear at other stages). The ‘action stage’ involves actual implementation of motivation. It needs maintaining and sustaining, and requires both effort and persistence because learners may be exposed to a number of distracting influences such as off-task thoughts, irrelevant distractions from others in the learning situation, anxiety about the tasks, or physical conditions that make it difficult to complete the task (Dörnyei, 2001). These two stages are similar to Hiromori’s (2009) process model, where he divides the process into ‘pre-decisional phase’ and ‘post-decisional phase’. In the pre-decisional phase, decisions are made and goals are set according to the learner’s ‘initial values’ and ‘expectancies of a task’ and the ‘desirability and chance of fulfilment’ (p. 314). The post-decisional phase is the implementation stage of motivation. This involves motivational maintenance and control mechanisms, which are the same as ‘persistence’ and ‘action control’ in Dörnyei’s model.

What Hiromori does not include is the ‘postactional stage’ in Dörnyei’s model. Dörnyei (2001) calls this stage ‘motivational retrospection’, which concerns the learners’ ‘retrospective evaluation of how things went’ (p. 21). This stage has adopted the attribution theory, suggesting the learner’s explanations of why past successes and failures have occurred can determine his motivation to initiate future action (Weiner, 1992). This stage and theory can also be linked to ‘resultative motivation’. Hermann (1980) builds up the Resultative Hypothesis that ‘learners who do well are more likely to develop motivation intensity and to be active in the classroom’ (Ellis, 1994, p. 515). Learners who have had good progress in learning the L2 will have a better motivation to learn in the future because the ‘perceived success in achieving L2 goals can help to maintain existing motivation and even create new types’ (p. 515). Conversely, a vicious circle may appear when the learner’s low motivation causes low achievement, and the anxiety aroused will lead to lower motivation in the future.

As far as ‘the future’ is concerned, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) moves the ‘backward-pointing’ attribution theory to a ‘forward-pointing present-to-future’ concept and proposes the L2 Motivational Self System. Inspired by research on ‘possible selves and future self-guides’ in the field of psychology, he comes up with this system which ‘subsumes integrative orientation, instrumental orientation, and L2-speaker-related attitudes’ (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 30). The system is made up of three components: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience.
The ideal self is the person we would very much like to become. Dörnyei (2009) describes it as a ‘representation of hopes, aspirations, or wishes’ (p. 13). In the L2 learning context, this self would be a person proficient in the L2, or, in an ideal case, the native speaker. This then goes back to Gardner’s (1985) proposed ‘integrativeness’, where the person can be described as ‘having an integrative disposition’ (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 27). However, Dörnyei (2009) has reinterpreted it as a key role in L2 motivation, ‘mediating the effects of all the other attitudinal/motivational variables on the two criterion measures Language choice and Intended effort to study the L2’ (p. 26). Attitudes toward L2 speakers/community and Instrumentality are the two immediate antecedents of integrativeness.

Dörnyei (2009) proposes that the learner’s attitude toward L2 speakers determine the ideal self image. The more positive attitude the learner has, the more attractive the idealised L2 self will be. Learners tend to imitate the L2 speakers they like more. Instrumentality has more to do with practicality, as Gardner (1985) proposes, and it also creates an ideal self who may be, for example, professionally successful. However, there are two types of instrumentality which lead to different ‘selves’. When the learner has a more internalised instrumentality, or a ‘promotion focus’ (approaching a desired-state), he is regarded as an Ideal L2 Self. On the other hand, when he has an extrinsic type of instrumentality, or a ‘prevention focus’ (avoiding a feared-state), he is considered an Ought-to L2 Self. L2 Learning Experience is concerned with situated, ‘executive’ motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience, which may include the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer and the experience of success (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). The whole system can be summarised in a schematic representation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the L2 Motivational Self System (based on discussion in Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29)
Implications in the Hong Kong Context

The research and different theories developed on L2 motivation have several implications in the Hong Kong context, particularly in the first-year EAP classrooms in higher education, when learners have to adapt to a different learning environment at university. Evans and Morrison (2011) argue in their study on Year One university students in Hong Kong that undergraduates encounter many transitional challenges such as new methods of learning and teaching, and difficulties are reinforced by ‘having to negotiate this major life transition through the medium of a second language’ (p. 206). Therefore, many universities make EAP a compulsory course to be taken during the first year. However, such a compulsory nature of the EAP courses may reinforce learners’ ought-to L2 selves, and learning English may become more instrumental. The requirement to pass the course may also increase students’ anxiety, making them focus mainly on results instead of the process of learning.

Humphreys and Spratt (2008) argue that students’ past learning experience plays a significant role in their future learning motivation and attitude, so it is worth understanding their English learning styles before they are admitted to university. Unlike universities, which promote student-centredness and learner autonomy and cultivate students’ interest in pursuing knowledge, many secondary schools in Hong Kong put emphasis on teacher-centredness, grades, tests and competitiveness (Kwok, 2004), developing mainly instrumental and extrinsic motivation in learning English. The instrumentality of learning English to pass examinations is even reinforced in shadow education, a term which Bray (1999, 2009) uses to refer to private supplementary tutoring.

Although shadow education plays a significant role in student learning experience (Yung, 2011; Bray, 2009), research in TESOL and applied linguistics tends to focus mainly on mainstream schooling and does not pay enough attention to out-of-class learning contexts, including private tutoring (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Hamid, Sussex, & Khan, 2009). Therefore, exploring the English learning experience in shadow education as an out-of-class learning setting is valuable because it provides ‘alternative perspectives on the meaning of, and social and cognitive processes involved in, language learning and teaching’ (Benson & Reinders, 2011, p. 1). The following part briefly discusses the findings from a study of the English learning experience in shadow education of 14 first-year undergraduates of one of the prestigious universities in Hong Kong, which provides implications on the teaching and learning of English at university.

Experience in Shadow Education

Private tutoring has had a strong impact on the dynamic of teaching and learning in mainstream schooling, and it has become increasingly widespread in Hong Kong. According to the study by Caritas Community and Higher Education Service (2010, p. 6), among 898 respondents, 72.5% of Hong Kong Secondary 1–3 students, 81.9% of Secondary 4–5 students, and 85.5% of Secondary 6–7 students received tutoring. The latest study conducted by Bray and his team also showed that a majority of Secondary 6 students (72%) in the New Senior Secondary curriculum had experience of receiving tutoring, which would impact their study in the four-year undergraduate curriculum. Although not all the respondents participated in private
tutoring in English (PT-E), English typically has the greatest demand (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Ngai & Cheung, 2010).

In 2011, I conducted a study on 14 first-year Hong Kong local undergraduates concerning their PT-E learning experience at secondary school using narrative inquiry. I interviewed them individually and asked them to share their experience and reflect on it (see Yung, 2011 for details). Results show that because of the highly structured and authority-oriented learning style, students tended to be teacher-dependent, passive, focusing on examination success and examination skills and tips (Yung, 2011). Some participants indicated that they did not know why they needed to study English, or they simply regarded it as a subject to be taken for exam. Some admitted that they studied English for getting good grades for university admission:

At that time actually it was only for university admission, so actually for the A-level curriculum … (Hanson, interview transcript from Yung, 2011)

Some acknowledged the value of English as a communication tool:

During communication, I mean, later when communicating with others, if the person was a foreigner, if I had good English, I would communicate better. (Ian, interview transcript from Yung, 2011)

Many of them realised that, after they were admitted to university, they had not learnt English well at secondary school, and their English proficiency was not high enough for daily communication. One of the participants commented:

[PT-E] doesn’t teach too many things. It teaches you exam stuff ... I get to know some foreigners in university, and I am not used to talking to them. Maybe the words they are using are not what we have been learning. For example, maybe those we learnt in Form Six and Seven, like writing business letters or something like that, and reading newspapers, but I wouldn’t use these while talking to others, and it was difficult at the beginning to communicate with others, and I had to learn the words again. And others told me that, while talking to others I had to use formal English, more formal, but they thought that I was not using spoken English... (Lam, interview transcript from Yung, 2011)

Echoing Humphreys and Spratt’s (2008) comment that ‘Hong Kong students often had negative memories of their school language learning which had an impact on their later motivation’ (p. 318), the study suggests that PT-E tends to reinforce the learners’ Ought-to L2 selves and make English learning mainly instrumentally and extrinsically motivating, or not motivating at all. Given the popularity of PT-E among pre-university students, university teachers should understand and take their students’ English learning experience in shadow education into consideration when they implement various motivational strategies in EAP classrooms.

Motivational Strategies

As some students may not have very positive English learning experience in their secondary school years, it is crucial for university teachers to enrich their learning experience in EAP classrooms at the beginning of their undergraduate life. Evans and Morrison (2011) suggest that it could be done ‘through a combination of
strong motivation, hard work, effective learning strategies and—not least—supportive and collaborate peer networks’ (p. 206). However, before applying any motivational strategies, teachers should increase learners’ awareness of the difference between the teaching and learning style at secondary school and university. It is important to let students know that the student-centred way of learning at university can maximise their learning. Learner autonomy should be encouraged so that they can make use of different resources around themselves to learn out-of-class, such as residence halls, where they can communicate with non-local students using English to practice their daily life listening and speaking skills (Benson, 2011).

While Hong Kong tertiary students mainly recognise the instrumental value of English as an international lingua franca and a medium of instruction at tertiary education (Humphreys & Spratt, 2008), and do not show strong desire to embrace Western culture and values (Hyland, 1997), teachers should try to internalise students’ instrumental motivation and develop ideal L2 selves through multiple motivational strategies. Some of the strategies suggested below are highlighted and adapted from Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), which are well suited for the new undergraduate curriculum in the Hong Kong context.

**Designing Meaningful Tasks and Materials**

Teachers sometimes complain that students do not care about learning. On the other hand, students may think they do care, but they are not sure how the teaching content is relevant to them. This can be demotivating. Now that many universities in Hong Kong adopt an outcome-based approach, course developers and teachers may design tasks and materials related to the learning outcomes. However, it is also important for learners to know why they need to achieve those learning outcomes, and how they are related to their life. For example, learning academic writing benefits students when they need to hand in assignments for other courses, use English in their own discipline, and in the future when they need to write in English at work; discussion strategies are not only applicable in a university setting but also at meetings in the workplace, as well as in daily life communication. Therefore, teachers can create a future vision for the learners, emphasising the benefits of being competent in English for study, future work, communication and social life. The future vision will help them to develop ideal L2 selves. It should be noted that while it is unavoidable to relate learning to assessment, which has always been emphasised in secondary school and shadow education, at least teachers can encourage learners to focus less on performance goals and more on mastery goals.

**Enriching Learning Environment**

As the learning environment has a strong impact on the learning experience (Dörnyei, 2009), teachers should create a motivating atmosphere in the classroom, which should be pleasant, fun, relaxing and supportive. The first and fundamental element is teacher enthusiasm. Teacher behaviours determine students’ learning attitude and motivation (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Therefore, to make learners enthusiastic in learning, teachers have to demonstrate that they themselves are enthusiastic about the course content, its materials and tasks. They may even talk about how they benefit personally from the course so that the enthusiasm becomes more ‘persuasive’ and ‘attractive’. The teacher can in turn project an ideal L2 self for
Establishing Relationships

Establishing relationships of mutual respect and trust between the teacher and students as well as among students themselves can also create a desirable and motivating learning environment (Alison & Halliwell, 2002). One of the strategies is to provide feedback on a personal level. For example, a teacher can start with the student’s name while writing comments for academic writing, so the student can feel that the teacher cares about his/her learning individually. The teacher can also encourage friendship among the students themselves and generate a harmonious learning community so that students can help and motivate one another to learn. This can be done by asking them to get to know one another better and work cooperatively in groups. Once the network is established, the classroom environment can become ‘safe’, and students will find it more comfortable to share their thoughts. This is particularly important in peer assessment (Yung, 2012). Sometimes, students may give unconvincing feedback to their peers, but teachers should avoid criticising their feedback, because it will discourage the students from speaking in front of the teacher, especially in the Hong Kong context, where the concept of ‘face’ is of high importance (Kennedy, 2002). Teachers should increase learners’ psychological safety by encouraging ‘mistakes’ and individual comments, and validating every comment students make.

Making Learning Fun

Making the classroom fun and interesting can increase the chance to develop students’ intrinsic motivation. One of the ways is to minimise student anxiety created by a tense classroom atmosphere and maximise enjoyment. Sometimes, teachers can give a ‘surprise’ to students in how the tasks are conducted so that tasks become novel and less boring. For example, in a speaking classroom, instead of pure discussions or formal presentations, teachers may conduct fish-bowl debates (see Appendix 1), role plays or dramas. Teachers should be creative so as to increase the variety of tasks.

Conclusion

‘Motivation is a predictor of language-learning success’ (Gass & Selinker, 1994, pp. 250–251). There is no denying that individuals who are more motivated will learn a language faster and to a greater degree than those who are less motivated. However, how should teachers motivate their students to make them learn the L2 most effectively? There are always controversies and arguments on it, and it is unlikely that there can be a universal answer in these changing times. As there is no single way to motivate every student in different contexts, professional language teachers should understand more about L2 motivation from the learners’ perspective and adjust classroom practices to suit their needs from time to time. Moreover, teachers should bear in mind that ‘[they] can and do impact student motivation!’ (Anderman & Anderman, 2010, p. 2) The new four-year curriculum can be challenging and tough, but teachers should be well prepared with creativity and passion and give their best to the students. While learners should take responsibility for their own learning, teachers may act as students’ ideal L2 self ‘role models’ with motivation and enthusiasm in teaching and provide students with the best learning experience from the beginning of
their university life.

References


Appendix 1  Fish Bowl Debate

You will participate in a ‘fishbowl debate’ on a topic related to science. Please read the ground rules below in order to have an idea about what we are going to do. It is FUN!

**Ground rules for the fishbowl debate**

- Each team should have a leader. The leader is responsible for deciding who starts in the fishbowl, ensuring that everyone participates and encouraging teammates.
- Each team member should spend equal time in the fishbowl.
- Tap a team mate on the shoulder if you want to replace him/her in the fishbowl.
- If you want to leave the fishbowl, tap a team mate on the shoulder sitting outside the circle.
- Swap roles regularly or after a team mate has spent almost 8 minutes in the fishbowl.
- Team members outside the circle can pass notes to team members in the fishbowl with ideas for arguments or counter-arguments.
- Respect each speaker: don’t interrupt when someone is talking; use people’s first names, not ‘he’ or ‘she’; recognize that, even if you do not agree with it, each of us is entitled to our own perspective.
- Participate enthusiastically.

**Possible topics:**

1. *It is morally acceptable to experiment on non-human animals to develop products and medicines that benefit human beings.*
2. *Nuclear power is the best way to meet the ever-increasing energy needs of the planet.*