Self-motivation: Who is motivating whom?

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Motivation is a maturing topic in second language studies, and the study of extrinsic motivators in other language learning is becoming informed and informative. The study of intrinsic motivation, however, can be no better than our current knowledge of human cognition; and, while we have made considerable advances in understanding the chemistry of the brain, the causes of self-motivation remain obscure. It is an area requiring input from neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, biology, and selfhood studies; and, currently, we have not made sufficient progress in integrating these areas into a viable meta-theory.

This presentation looks at some issues of self-motivation which were highlighted in an assignment for the MA English Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics degree course at King's College London. The assignment simply required the student to learn a new language and comment on their learning process. However, the different ways the students approached their learning provided some useful insights into self-motivation: first, it highlighted the importance that the students placed on self-motivation; second, it identified significant differences between self-motivation and other-motivation; and third, it showed that self- and other-motivation do not co-identify with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Introduction

According to an old story, a tramp approaches a rich person as they are entering a high-class dining establishment and says, "Please, I haven't eaten for three days"; to which the rich person replies, "You poor man, you must force yourself"[1]. This short exchange is more than just a rather stale story about privilege and misunderstanding, it represents a key problem with motivation: what can you do when the only resource available to keep you going is you?

I teach at King's College London on, among other things, the Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching MA degree. Specifically, I co-lecture on the Social and Psychological Aspects of Second Language Acquisition (or SPA2LA) module, providing lectures on the psychology of second language learning and teaching. One of the assessable assignments for the module involves learning a language previously unknown to the student, keeping a diary of the experience, and then using the diary to produce a reflective report. The purpose of the assignment is to give the student-teachers a first-hand experience of

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[1] This is attributed to a wide range of people as joke or an apocryphal remark, including Max Miller, Steve Allen, Tallulah Bankhead, and Queen Mary; but the earliest reference seems to be: Paul M Levitt (ed.) (2002). *Vaudeville Humor: The Collected Jokes, Routines, and Skits of Ed Lowry*. Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, IL, USA, 130.

learning, and to help them to understand how, as a teacher, they can play a role in the learning experiences of others. The key instructions for the assignment are given in figure 1.

Guidelines for Writing the SPA2LA Language Learning Report

- After each language learning session remember to complete the language log. Make a note of the length of the session, the aims of the session, and comment on the session.
- Do not start writing the report until you have completed the language learning log (at least 6, but no more than 10, hours of study).
- The language log provides the evidence you will use in your report. Your log needs to be accurate and complete.
- Once you have completed the language learning log, go through all the entries and start to identify recurring themes. Then reread your entries highlighting the different themes in different colours.
- Decide which of the themes you will focus on in your report.
- The report is not an essay! You should discuss what you have learned, how you have learned, and what you have learned about teaching and learning.

Your 4,500-word report should include the following:
- **Introduction:** set the scene and provide the background to your language learning study (about 500 words)
- **Discussion of identified themes:** briefly introduce the two, three or four themes you have selected for discussion; then discuss each in turn. Give each theme a suitable subheading (e.g. fluctuating motivation; remembering vocabulary; the isolation of learning a language on one's own, etc.). Situate your discussion in relation to the Social and Psychological Aspects of 2nd Language Acquisition. Show how your comments either fit with the literature or contradict it. Include extracts from your log, remembering to provide a reference to the relevant part of the log. (about 3,000 words)
- **Conclusion:** draw the report to a conclusion. How you conclude will be up to you. You may focus on what you learned from the experience, on how your findings match or contradict theory, on how the experience will influence your future teaching, etc. Remember that the conclusions constitute a very important part of the paper and should be substantive (approx. 800 words)
- **References:** include the references you have cited in your report.
- **Appendix:** the log you have written.

Figure 1: Guidelines for Writing the SPA2LA Language Learning Report

Self-motivation in a Learning Task

The module is now in its fourth year, and over 150 reports have now been generated. It is a database awaiting detailed analysis; but so far only a cursory analysis has only been performed on the first year of the full-time students' reports (35 reports). However, this has shown that the database does contain some interesting reflections on the problems of self- motivation.

The first point of interest is the frequency with which the student's motivation is discussed as a key theme of the learning experience: Of the 35 reports, 25 had a section dealing with motivation. The ten which did not specifically cover motivation formed a different population from the rest. Those who discussed motivation as a topic approached the report as a view of their own learning, providing a largely introspective and quite personal

account; those who did not topicalize motivation produced a more detached report, more like a literature review than a report of personal learning.

Of the 25 who wrote about their motivation, three different motivation profiles appeared. The first, labelled here "positive motivation", started high and, subject to small blips, remained high throughout the learning; six reports fell into this category. The second profile, labelled "mixed motivation", started high, fell during the middle of the learning, and then recovered to quite a high level at the end. In each case there was a particular event (a sudden revelation, a speaking success, an engagement with the language) which reinvigorated the student's interest. Seven reports fell into this category, of which five shared an instrumental motive in learning the language: communication with a loved one, a relative, or the relatives of a loved one. The third profile, labelled "negative motivation", started high and then fell steadily throughout the learning, often ending in complete disillusion with the language-learning exercise. Twelve reports fell into this category.[2]

Didn't cover motivation	10
Positive motivation	6
Mixed motivation	7
Negative motivation	12
TOTAL	**35**

Table 1: Students reporting motivation as a key factor in their learning

It is clear from this that motivation seems to have been a key feature in self-learning for over 70% of the students, and for about 34% of the students it was a major obstacle to success. Remember that these language learners are themselves language teachers; so, in theory at least, they should have had greater access to motivational strategies than the average learner. Yet of the 25 who discussed motivation, only 24% maintained motivational momentum and, while serendipitous events seemed to raise the motivation of a further 28%, for 48% there seems to have been no way to sustain their motivation.

The students identified a range of reasons for their lack of motivation. The chosen course of study was found wanting:
⇨ "The third session dealt with grammar rules and I felt very overwhelmed. Although I had set goals for myself at the beginning of starting French this particular session seemed far from my goals."
⇨ "There was lack meaningful and interactive communication over the course."
⇨ "A lot of memorisation of words was required during the lesson, which was a demotivating feature."

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[2] The allocation of reports to categories is, at present, based on my personal assessment, unverified by a second opinion.

The lack of a community of (and for) practice was blamed:

⇨ "I noticed that I needed real communicative experiences, which was impossible to get through online classes."

⇨ "My integrative motivation began to lower because of limited chance to participate in the culture of the target language."

Feeling deskilled was taken as an obstacle and not a challenge:

⇨ "German letter 'a' was pronounced like 'ə' in English and I kept pronouncing it like 'æ'. The word 'Mann' was repeated several times in every lesson and every time the buzzer kept sounding when I attempted to pronounce it."

A somewhat inexplicable failure to engage with the assignment was noted:

⇨ "I'm being forced to learn Portuguese."

⇨ "I seemed to have lost my initial excitement. Even the clever interactive techniques, like activating Merche's video message on the mobile phone, didn't prove that engaging, but felt rather contrived."

⇨ "I don't feel like doing it anymore and see no benefit as far as being able to communicate in German. I think it was a waste of time in terms of language learning."

This failure to engage could have been seen as an ideal learning moment for the student-teacher, but the me-as-student somehow seemed to be silencing the me-as-teacher.

Even a lack of external targets was seen as problematic. The fact it was a marked assignment contributing to their MA grade did not seem to be incentive enough:

⇨ "I soon realised that it was difficult to motivate myself to work independently because I did not feel the pressure of (or motivation for) a high stake examination, or a similar influence."

A single, simple action was available to resolve most of these problems: if the chosen educational tool isn't working, change the tool. Weirdly, the students seemed to feel disempowered from making changes to their learning programme, despite the fact that this was a valid and expected strategy. They soldiered on with a failing methodology as if their previous decisions had somehow gained the force of law over their current self. There was something very strange going on in terms of the relationship between the learning self and the teaching self.

How Can a Self Motivate Itself?

The assignment was designed to remove extrinsic motivation from the learning process so that the student-teacher could look at their own intrinsic motivation as a model for that of their own students. The primary objective of the assignment was not the learning of a language, it was learning about learning; but somehow the language itself became the goal. The students set themselves ambitious targets (learn the number system in an hour, correct phonology in another hour, grammar in a couple of hours, vocabulary in a couple

of hours…) – all the expectations that they must surely warn their own students against somehow seemed personally achievable. They seemed able to model a future version of themself that they would have treated with considerable suspicion if their students had suggested it. Failure to achieve these ambitious agenda was viewed as a failure of ability and not as a failure of planning.

Issues with the assignment seemed to centre on the difficulty of finding a learning self to be motivated. The failure to separate the role of the learning self from that of "the self learning about learning" produced a confused, reflexive selfhood, leading to the unasked meta-questions, how can a self motivate itself, and where does the motivation come from, and where does it go to? To understand the answers to these questions we need to abandon our belief in the single integrated identity that most of us feel we experience in our everyday existence. Instead, we need to look at the several types of self we each carry around.

If we start from the premise that we actually do have an integrated identity, then motivation helps us to see why we probably do not. An integrated identity has no use for consciously generated motivation because all necessary decisions can be made by automatic stimulus-response mechanisms. There is no role for strategic choice; and if there are no strategic choices to be negotiated then the capacity to choose is counter-productive. We humans, however, are convinced that we do have choice, and that we are able to produce effective decisions by conscious, rational selection between possible cases. To do this, though, we must maintain multiple selves to argue the multiple cases; if we are to have a capacity to motivate ourselves then our identities must be fractured and fractious, not integrated and harmonious.

Types of self

So what are these selves, and where do they come from? The first self is my ACTUAL SELF, the genetic imperative to self-preserve. This self, however, is impervious to introspection: it is what it is, and knowing what it is does not change it; which is probably why it is not available to conscious cognition. Knowing about other people's selves is useful, because I can manipulate those selves to my advantage; but those other selves are third-person objects inside my head, not actual objects in the world; they tell me nothing about my own first-person actual self.

The unconscious actual self is the basis for the social cognition of many animals, including our closest living relatives, the chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) and bonobos (P. paniscus). The two Pan species not only seem to have quite detailed models of what other individual group members know, they seem to be capable of quite sophisticated social modelling of the relationships between those individuals. This social calculus gives them ways of

manipulating other individuals, making their societies into ever-changing alliance mosaics, a process we label Machiavellian Intelligence.

For the Pan species, social calculus seems to stay strictly inside an individual's head. A communication system can show that other individuals are carrying social calculus schemes inside their heads, but only if it involves sharing cognitive models of others with others. In the case of Pan species, there seems to be no natural communication system to share their social calculus; in contrast, human language seems fine-tuned to share such information. With language I'm not just aware that you likely have a third-person model of me, you are able to share your third-person model of me with me. If I am to merge your model of me into my social calculus then, like you, I have to treat your model of me as a third-person model, giving me a consciously-available selfhood, labelled here as the SOCIAL SELF. When I have integrated sufficient social models of me into my calculus then I can start to build an impression of myself as a representation of my unknowable actual self, a SELF-MODEL. This self-model (or an instantiation of it) can then be used to model myself into remembered and imagined events, creating a series of EPISODIC SELVES; and these can be stitched together to create a modelled self which is continuous through time, a NARRATIVE SELF. The series of episodic selves can be in the past or future or both, allowing us to create a narrative from the past through the present to the future, or from the future through the present and back into the past. In terms of motivation, the narrative from present self to future self is most significant.

There are two further selves that we seem to carry around with us, and which may be more burden than benefit. The first is the CULTURAL SELF, a model of an ideal individual against which I judge my models of others and my own self-model. It is the model I must try to emulate if I want to fit in with a particular group; and the conflicting demands that my different cultural selves impose on me further fracture my unintegrated identity. The outcome of emulating these cultural selves means that I create a PROJECTED SELF for each culture and subculture I belong to, so that I can establish my credentials as a good group member.

All of these different selves provide a sufficient answer to our first question, how can a self motivate itself? The solution seems to be that my actual self can generate a self-model from my social self as a current episodic self, and another model as a third-person future episodic self; motivation then becomes the production of a narrative capable of converting one model into the other. However, the multiple selves make the answer to the second question more complex: which self is the motivator and which is the motivated? Obviously, the ideal motivated self is the actual self, because the others are all just third-person models; but it is not at all clear that this will be, or even can be, the case. How can we know whether our actual self is motivated or not when the actual self is unknowable? Unfortunately, the ideal motivating self is also the actual self, because it is the only self

that has actual motives. To unpick this dilemma we need to look at what we mean by knowledge and learning.

Types of Knowledge, Ways of Learning

Broadly speaking, knowledge can be of two types. First is implicit knowledge: we know what we know, but we don't know how we know it. For instance, we are born with a capacity to produce and comprehend any human language sound, even though we will probably lose the ones we do not use; and we know how to use our local repertoire of language sounds (our accent), but we are seldom aware that we are doing so. Second is explicit knowledge: we know what we know and we know how we know it. For instance, we learn not just the sounds for first- and second-person pronouns in our first language, we learn the trick that my me is your you, and my you is your me; and (in English) we learn that the past tense can be formed by adding –ed to the present tense in many cases, and we learn the exceptions. Interestingly, because we learn pronouns and past tense before we have developed an episodic self, we usually have no memory of learning them.

From this we can see that all explicit knowledge is learned, but implicit knowledge can be learned or innate. Learned implicit knowledge has to be incidentally learned – no conscious self is involved in the learning; but explicit knowledge can be learned either incidentally or intentionally – and, if learned intentionally, there must be a conscious self involved in the process. Incidental learning is motivation-free: conscious motivation may get us back on the bicycle every time we fall off, but the moment when we learn to balance is impervious to our intentions.

There are two other forms of learning, both of which are about the organisation of knowledge in our heads. Things that we know explicitly can be taken out of conscious consideration and rendered implicit, a process known as sublimation; and things that we know implicitly can be consciously recovered, a process known as explication – although the explicated version of the knowledge may not accurately recreate the implicit knowledge. Motivation plays a role in how closely the explicated knowledge matches the implicit knowledge; how good is good enough is a matter of how accurate we wish to be. This means that explicated knowledge is always an explanation, not a description.

From this we can see that motivation applies only to intentionally learned explicit knowledge and consciously recovered explicated knowledge – which, fortunately for us, covers the vast majority of post-infant other-language learning.

Types of Motivation

Motivation is often seen as coming in two flavours: extrinsic motivation, which is imposed on the learner from outside, and intrinsic motivation, which the learner generates from

their own resources. This, however, assumes that the learner who is motivating is also the learner who is learning – which seems likely to be a recipe for nothing to happen. Instead, we can ask how motivation is likely to work if the learner uses different models of themselves as motivational targets. The three obvious targets are the cultural self (what others expect me to be), the social self (what others believe me to be) and the projected self (how I want others to see me). Of these, the projected self is a nonstarter: it is a current two-dimensional façade rather than a three-dimensional self-model, and is therefore incapable of sustaining a four-dimensional narrative from the current self-model to a future projected self. The cultural self and the social self are good bases for motivation, but they offer different types of motivation. The cultural self is an extrinsic reality – the self I should be – while the social self is an intrinsic reality – my internalisation of what others believe me to be. The cultural self motivates me to achieve what, as a human being, I should be able to do; the social self motivates me to achieve what my current self-model says I can achieve. The cultural self sets the bar higher, but also makes it more likely I will fall short; this means that it is a more brittle form of motivation, but whether it is a better or worse motivator than the social self is probably a matter of context and choice.

Conclusion

This has been a quick canter around a new approach to self-motivation. It is not intended to form the basis of a new theory at this stage, but hopefully it has presented another possible route into the topic. I also hope it shows that motivation remains a largely undiscovered territory: you need to keep your elephant gun close by when exploring the interior of this continent; but keep your butterfly nets handy, too.

This booklet and its contents is a work-in-progress. Feel free to use the ideas set out here, but be aware that it is not yet peer-reviewed. A version of this booklet with references, frills and furbelows will eventually be available on my website, along with a copy of the PowerPoint: http://martinedwardes.webplus.net/.