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A SMALL SCALE INVESTIGATION INTO MEXICAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION

UNA INVESTIGACIÓN DE PEQUEÑA ESCALA ACERCA DE LA MOTIVACIÓN DE LOS
ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS MEXICANOS PARA APRENDER
UNA SEGUNDA LENGUA

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Abstract: *This small-scale research paper aims to shed additional light on L2 learning motivation. In particular, it looks into the connections between the EFL students' learning context and the socio-cultural influences within which it operates. The study was conducted in a language center which is part of a state university located in the Northeast part of Mexico. The participants are six students of an intermediate level EFL course. They are also engaged in undergraduate programs majoring in areas such as psychology, engineering, computer science, business, and education with specialty in ELT. Drawing on qualitative data derived from a focus group interview we argue that it is not a question of either the students' learning context or the socio-cultural influences that determines L2 learning motivation, but a combination of the two. We found that the dominant conceptions of success in academic and professional Mexican contexts intermingle with the students' learning context in determining language learning motivation.*

Key words: L2 MOTIVATION, MEXICAN CONTEXT, UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, SOCIO-ECONOMIC INFLUENCES, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.

Resumen: *El propósito de este trabajo de investigación de pequeña escala es ampliar el debate actual en el tema de la motivación para aprender una segunda lengua. En particular analiza las conexiones existentes entre el contexto de aprendizaje en el que están inmersos los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua y las influencias socio-culturales en que este opera. El estudio se llevó a cabo en un centro de lenguas que forma parte de una universidad estatal localizada en el Noreste de México. Los participantes son seis estudiantes de un curso de inglés como lengua extranjera de nivel intermedio. También se encuentran realizando estudios de licenciatura en áreas tales como psicología, ingeniería, sistemas computacionales, negocios y educación con especialización en enseñanza de inglés. Con base en el análisis de los datos recopilados mediante un grupo focal de discusión, se sostiene que la motivación para aprender una segunda lengua no emerge únicamente del contexto de aprendizaje ó del contexto sociocultural, si no más bien de una combinación de ambos factores. Se encontró también que las concepciones dominantes respecto al "éxito" profesional y académico en México confluyen con el contexto de aprendizaje para determinar el nivel de motivación para aprender una segunda lengua.*

Palabras clave: MOTIVACIÓN, CONTEXTO MEXICANO, ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS, INFLUENCIAS SOCIO-ECONÓMICAS, INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, the study of motivation in second language (L2) has received a great deal of attention. Scholars such as Gardner (1985) have argued that second language learners' motivation stems from a desire to be able to interact with and eventually become members of the target language speaking community. Thus, the integrative aspect plays a central role in determining the degree of motivation that learners have and their success in learning a second language. In other words, Gardner and his colleagues argued that the higher the desire to want to belong to a particular language speaking community, the more motivated students were to learn a second language, and therefore, more likely to learn it successfully.

In the early 1990's the centrality of the integrative aspect in determining L2 motivation started to be challenged. Scholars such as Crookes and Schmidt (1991), Oxford and Shearin (1994), and Dörnyei (1994) claimed that the idea that learners learn a L2 mainly for integrative motives was limited as it was mainly focused on ESL contexts. They proposed an expansion to Gardner's theoretical framework through the internationalization of the focus of L2 motivation research and the integration of a number of well-established motivation theories in the fields of general, industrial, educational and cognitive developmental psychology. Some of the theories that were integrated into this expanded motivational framework and that stimulated new research into L2 motivation were expectancy-value theory (Atkinson, 1964), self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and attribution theory (Weiner, 1986).

The 1990's motivation renaissance also marked the beginning of an alternative approach to researching L2 learning motivation. While the research conducted by Gardner and his colleagues was characterized by large-scale quantitative approaches, the expanded theoretical framework involved the adoption of small-scale and interpretive research approaches. This meant that the researcher was now more interested in understanding L2 motivation from the participants' views, opinions and behaviors rather than from the researcher's perspective. This also meant that the research efforts were focused on small populations such as individual language classrooms rather than large or whole communities. This is why this thinking has also become known as *situated approach to L2 motivation research*. Among the scholars who adopted this thinking included Ushioda (1998, 2001), Williams, Burden and their colleagues (1999, 2001, 2002), and Shoaib and Dörnyei (2004).

However, other L2 learning motivation researchers have been careful to emphasize that although the expanded theoretical framework proposed by Oxford and Shearin (1994) had been very useful, it needed to be further expanded as it did not fully account for either all the motivational influences in the L2 learning context, or the fluidity and dynamism that characterize L2 learning motivation (Dörnyei and Ottó 1998). These issues are particularly important in second language acquisition since this process is firstly the result of sustained deep learning (Schumann, 1998) and secondly, a lengthy one that is commonly characterized by motivational variations (Williams and Burden, 1997).

The purpose of this paper is to shed additional light on the issues raised in the debate around L2 learning motivation by exploring some of the complexities involved in trying to uncover the determinants of foreign language learning motivation. In doing so, we will demonstrate that the learning context intermingles with societal influences in determining language learning motivation. Drawing on qualitative research the paper demonstrates the intricate and intimate connections between what language schools and teachers do and the socio-economic and discursive contexts within which they operate.

2. Context

The paper focuses on a language center (LC hereafter) which is part of a state university, which we will name Border University, located in the Northeast part of Mexico. This language center is a very interesting case because its intake reflects the great diversity in terms of age, educational background and socio-economic status that characterizes many language schools' student populations across the country. However, we believe that the way the students at the LC talk about their motivations to learn English, namely to be competitive, reflects the current socially constructed discourses on the importance of the English language in the country.

The LC houses a population of 1,800 students approximately. Although it was initially created as an effort to provide its services to the Border University community, the LC soon started to attract students from different sectors of the wider community. Interestingly, the current school intake does not come from within the University itself. According to the student service department of the LC, 45% of the student population come from local high schools (grades 10 to 12), mainly public ones. An additional 25% are professionals who study languages when

they are off work. The rest (30%) are undergraduates and graduates studying either at this or other local university.

The language courses in the centre are non-compulsory and non-credit bearing. Most of the students who attend the language courses are young adults; their ages range between 16 and 55. The center has an age policy document stating that only those who are 16 years of age or over are eligible for registration in the English courses. However, a common cultural aspect is the fact that people holding powerful positions within the university or in governmental departments request a place for their children in the LC even if they are under 16 years of age. Therefore, their children have to be secretly given a place in order to avoid problems, or following instructions from the main administration office, or simply as a personal 'favor'⁴.

3. Participants

The participants in this study were six young adults who were enrolled in an intermediate English level course with one of the authors at the time when the study took place. All of the participants had at least two years of experience learning English. Three male and three female students were selected in order to have gender balance. Also, all the participants were undergraduate students at the Border University. One was majoring in psychology, one in engineering, one in computer science, one in business, and two more in education with specialty in ELT. We decided to include only undergraduate students at the Border university mainly because, although the language center also accepts students from the general public, according to its mission statement, one of its main goals is to provide university students with English language learning opportunities so they are able to interact in the international context. This issue is very important because as we will see in the paper the composition of the classes influences L2 learning motivation.

4. Methodology

This piece of research was carried out within an interpretive paradigm. The main source of data collection was a group interview or focus group. This method proved very helpful since it encouraged self-disclosure in this small group of acquaintances. The focus group similarly

⁴ Favors of this kind are very common in Mexico, including in educational contexts.

served as a site of collective remembering (Kitzinger, 1994) since most of the participants had gone through similar English learning experiences. This method also produced a more natural form of discourse, since participants were engaged in a frank exchange of experiences, which other methods such as one-to-one interviews may not totally achieve, especially when there is a student - teacher relationship (Wilson, 1997).

The data from the present study was collected the day the course was over. The participants were initially given an informed consent form, which basically contained a brief description of the study and its purpose. It also contained information about their rights: anonymity, confidentiality of data, the right to withdraw from the study, to read the content of the transcripts, and to refuse permission for information to be published. Upon students' request, the focus group was conducted in Spanish and it was about 1 ½ hours long. It began by asking students to narrate some motivating learning experiences in their lives.

The focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The three researchers participated as data analysts. We analyzed data individually first, and then we met to discuss salient issues. We agreed that we should focus our attention on the instances in which the participants expressed strong emotions about particular topics. A total of five categories emerged out of this initial analysis, which were then regrouped into two major thematic strands that were closely interrelated.

5. Results and discussion

During the focus group participants continuously made reference to a diversity of influences that had an impact on their degree of motivation to learn English. Some of these influences were directly related to their immediate L2 learning context. Students' accounts of their motivations to learn English would appear to suggest that there are also socio-cultural factors influencing their motivation to learn a second language.

5.1 Learning context influences

The argument that the learning context in which students are immersed exerts a heavy influence in students' motivational levels is certainly not new. Ever since the *motivational renaissance* (Gardner and Tremblay, 1994) scholars such as Crookes and Schmidt (1991), Oxford and Shearin (1994), Dörnyei (1994) have made this claim. The participating students

in this research identified teacher-specific motivational components and group-specific motivational components as the two most influential factors from their learning context in determining their L2 learning motivation levels.

5.1.1 Teacher-specific motivational components

One of the most recurrent themes in the students' accounts was their belief that the quality of the teaching provided was a crucial factor in determining their levels of motivation. In particular, the students placed a strong emphasis on the idea that teachers' attitudes played an important role in their motivational variations. The following comment made by one of the participating students illustrates this point:

From the moment the teacher shows up, her face has a lot to say. You know, for example, that today the teacher did not want to come to work, or you say "Look! The teacher is really happy today." The teacher herself makes you wake up or fall asleep. Her attitude is contagious. Do you get me? I think the teacher's attitude is very important. (Daniela)

Similarly, the students also discussed the importance that a classroom environment which is conducive to learning has on increasing or decreasing their motivation. They appeared to attribute the responsibility for the generation of such an environment to the teacher. The students felt that the teachers' ability to create a pleasant learning atmosphere was of paramount importance in generating and maintaining learners' motivation as the following extracts from the focus group show:

[W] ell, the teacher is the one that has to do [...] break the ice between students, 'cause if she cannot even do that with students the class is going to be all silent, some people may want to work and maybe others won't. I mean, if there's not even harmony among students we won't get anywhere. (Carlos)

Carlos' comment was supported by Marcos and Valeria:

Marcos: Teachers shouldn't be so strict, they should be more dynamic and... Valeria: Right... Marcos: so that the class is happy and comfortable... Valeria: yeah, and we can feel confident enough to learn... Marcos: the class must be able to find a motive to learn.

These comments would seem to suggest that the students felt that there is a close relationship between a comfortable classroom environment and their willingness to

communicate, and perhaps to want to learn. Dörnyei (2003) has argued that there is a relationship between motivation and willingness to communicate (WTC). This finding appears to support this claim. However, what is still not clear is the extent to which WTC leads to the development of communicative competence as Dörnyei suggests. We believe that this is an issue that deserves further research and debate.

The comments made by the students above referred to 'external' aspects of teaching such as teacher's rapport with the students and presence or general style. However, as the focus group developed, the students went on to discuss a wide range of pedagogic and planning issues such as discipline, establishment of clear teaching objectives, use of supplementary materials, and adaptation of textbook activities to students' needs. For example, Raul referred to classroom management and teacher preparation as two important aspects to not only sustain motivation but also to achieve good language learning outcomes. The following quotation shows this point:

I believe that for learning to take place the teacher must have control of the group. She must also be sure of what she's teaching, she must know the topic well, give enough examples in order to clear up everyone else's doubts. (Raúl)

Similarly, Daniela stressed the negative impact that the lack of lesson planning can have on learners' motivation. Lesson planning becomes even more important when the lesson takes place only once a week. Students have the option to study Saturdays from 9 to 13 hours. Students studying in this schedule normally do it because they have a busy week; and they normally come to their English class with an enthusiastic attitude and high expectations of their English course. In this context, the teacher plays an important role in sustaining or hindering motivation, as the following extract clearly suggests:

Well, I think that something that is also very important is for the teacher to plan her class. I lived this in a course that I did on Saturdays. Every week the teacher arrived and she didn't even know what we had done before, it was very evident that she hadn't planned her class. If you don't plan your class your students will notice it and they will be demotivated. You start to think "I'd better leave" or you say "If she teaches me again [next term], I won't come to class anymore." (Daniela)

In a similar vein, Valeria highlighted the way in which the classroom activities planned by the teacher impact learners' motivation:

That's true, and if we have a book and we follow step by step what the book says I feel terribly bored. It's OK, let's use it, but there are some activities that the book suggests just to review or recycle. I believe that there are additional activities that are more important than continue to do what the book says. The teacher must look for activities that make the students feel interested and in that way we will learn more. (Valeria)

Motivation variation seemed to depend on how successfully the activities implemented by the teacher were tailored to students' interests and needs. This issue is closely related to lesson planning also. We believe that those teachers who do not have the time, energy or motivation to plan their lessons tend to teach just following the textbook form cover to cover. However, more research needs to be done on the relationship of lesson planning and learner motivation.

5.1.2 Fellow students

Participants' accounts revealed that their classmates also play a very important role in their language learning motivation and WTC. The issue that they discussed more widely was the identity-related difference that exists among them and their younger peers. Participants mentioned that their younger peers –who outnumbered university students in most of the classes - had very different expectations and goals from their own. This had a negative impact on participants' language learning motivation since the communication with their peers was continuously hampered by their differing personal values and personal development projects. The following extract from the focus group illustrates this point:

Raúl: Uhm, well [...] their age, the younger ones [...]

Verónica: The way we think is very different.

Daniela: Many times we talk about a topic and they know nothing about it. They talk about what they know and many times we talk about more complex issues and they go like "Uh, what are they saying?"

Verónica: They do not have the interest to learn, they are more worried about things like music, fashion, things that are more [...]

Marcos: Superficial [...]

Verónica: Right! Superficial, we see things differently because we already know what we want and we have a clearer idea of what our interests are. We see things differently

because the University context demands from us to do so; teachers treat you differently when you're in high school than when you're at university. This motivates you to learn a little bit more about culture, about life, news...

This problematic issue has been previously identified in this same setting by one of the authors of the present study. Mora (2008) conducted a piece of research into the EFL students' constructions of morality and found that the divergent identities of students belonging to different age groups hindered the development of class cohesion and learners' motivation. He emphasized the idea that the presence of younger students with low levels of motivation in EFL classrooms prevented other students from making the most of the learning opportunities available in class and their motivational levels started to decrease gradually as a consequence.

In a similar vein, Kormos and Csizér (2008) conducted a study in Hungary about age-related variations concerning attitudinal and motivational dispositions of language learners within a single language environment. They studied three different language learner populations: secondary school students, university students and adult learners. One of their findings was that adults and university learners were willing to invest more effort in language learning, they persisted longer, and language learning itself was more important in their lives than secondary school students. This finding resembles participants' views regarding the contrasting attitudes and dispositions toward language learning between these two student populations.

5.2 Societal and cultural forces

The influence that the social and cultural contexts exert on the motivation of the participants became more evident when they discussed issues related to their future professional and academic plans. Participants' accounts of their English language learning motivations appeared to be linked to the prevailing discourses of successful people in Mexico. English is portrayed as a tool that facilitates the achievement of academic and professional success.

Marcos, for example, seemed to have a clear idea of the kind of professional he wanted to become and envisioned a second language, perhaps English, as one of the prerequisites to achieve it:

The thing is that each one of us has their own interests and we have a clearer idea of what we are going to need. For example, I want to study tourism apart from studying business and management and that's why I'm going to need English and probably French, because of the kinds of people with whom I am going to talk. (Marcos).

Marcos' comment was echoed by Veronica. However, Veronica places a stronger emphasis on the usefulness of English to meet one of the growing demands of the labor market:

Verónica: I think that the needs and objectives that we have work as a catalyst to do more things. For example, I really don't like English, but I want to be a successful professional. I know that nowadays a first degree is not enough, it's not like it used to be before. Now you really need more, a Master's and a foreign language. That is what makes you walk more pathways, to continue learning, at least in my case.

While these comments seem to suggest that the participants have a more instrumental L2 learning motivation, we believe that this motivation might be influenced by the prevailing social discourse where the lack of good job opportunities is continuously highlighted in educational contexts and the media. A second type of discourse that might have influenced participants' decision to study English is that of the State government publicity campaign. Participants' accounts reflect how the current social discourse influenced their motivation to continue to learn English. They believe that knowing a second language might broaden their possibilities of becoming successful in order to satisfy their individual needs and achieve professional goals.

5.2.1 The pursuit of subject-specialist knowledge

Traditionally, language learning motivation has been studied in isolation. Most studies focus only on what happens inside the language classroom, without considering that the language classroom is also part of the wider society. What might have been overlooked is that the language learner conceives motivation to learn a second language as intimately related to other areas of learning (Ushioda, 1998). Participants' motivation to learn English was in many cases related to the opportunity to gain access to knowledge of their subject specialist areas. One of the participants described how his access to the most recent knowledge related to technological advancements was to a certain extent dependent on his knowledge of English.

I think that learning English gives me the chance to study a little bit more about computers and technology. CISCO [a company that designs and sells networking and communications

technology] here at the university only offers courses in English and since I like everything related to computers I wanted to learn more. All the advanced computing courses are taught by British or American teachers. I think that I was limited because I didn't know English and that's why I'm studying it. (Raúl)

Embedded in this comment are two important issues. One has to do with the perceptions that the students have with regard to the demands that the labor market presents them with. The students seem to believe that the academic preparation provided by their undergraduate programs will not suffice to meet these demands. Therefore, they think that they need to look for ways to strengthen their academic and professional prospects by engaging in training programs offered by internationally recognized, rather than just locally recognized, institutions.

The second issue, which is closely related to the first one, is that the participant suggests that certain (specialized) knowledge is frequently unavailable to them in their mother tongue. Therefore, participants understand English learning as necessary to have access to that privileged subject specialist knowledge. They also seem to think that this in turn enables them to become more competitive for the (perhaps few) job opportunities available in their context. Valeria, for her part, has learned to continuously use English in order to arrive at better understandings of the subject-specialist knowledge normally presented to her in her mother tongue. During her undergraduate studies in psychology she has found out that when comparing the original psychological tests (normally written in English) to the Spanish translations, the latter many times do not correspond to the intended meaning of the original tests.

Valeria: I do, because for example there are a lot of psychological tests in my field of study. But the interpretation that the translations [of the tests] present is sometimes too vague. [Sometimes] I better read it [in English] and I interpret it myself. Sometimes I don't understand a 100% but I do get a clearer idea. Right now we're still studying many things in Spanish, but later all the psychological tests are going to be in English. That's why I also study it [English] and learn it.

According to Valeria, each of these tests provides a diagnosis of specific psychological constructs depending on the general score of the test. She has observed that the diagnosis in

the translated documents frequently does not provide either accurate or complete descriptions of the construct under evaluation and therefore professionals who do not know English have to rely on "too vague" professional literature.

5.2.2 Socio-economic forces

As the focus group interview with the participating students developed, the influence of socio-economic forces on motivation started to feature in their discourse. When they were asked to provide an explanation of their main motivations for studying English, they characterized it as a universal language and described the ways in which socio-economic issues have put a great deal of pressure on them to learn it:

It is just that English has become a universal language. We need it, not only to become someone, but it opens many doors. You generate your opportunities, but if you have tools like knowing another language like English, it is better for you as a professional (Valeria).

The comment made by Valeria reflects the influential role that the English language plays in people's lives at the international level. However, students' accounts also reveal the pressure they think they have to learn English if they are to compete for the few jobs available in the domestic market. Mexico is a third world country and is going through a difficult financial situation. Therefore, many people do not necessarily view English learning as something "attractive", but as something necessary to improve their employability profile, as the following excerpt shows:

Researcher: What is it that attracts you [about learning English]?

Mario: Mmmhh it isn't anything special that attracts me, but here in Mexico we see that job opportunities are very limited for many people.

Researcher: How about you?

Yadira: Me too. I know I need English for everything; finding a job or [earning] a higher salary.

These findings seem to suggest that this aspect participants' motivation is characterized by an integrated regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This means that, even though they do not conceive learning English as a pleasurable activity which is in itself motivating, they do see English as necessary to overcome the difficulties that the current socio-economic status of Mexico presents to them.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we want to highlight some key issues which have emerged from the data analysis of the focus group with the participating students. First of all, we recognize that our study has some limitations which need to be acknowledged. One is that the results are based only on one focus group which may have left the examination of several issues only at the surface level. Therefore, the results are, by no means, generalizable to other contexts. Similarly, we are also aware that the participants in our research were all highly motivated and committed students. Perhaps, not all the learners in the context where this study took place are as motivated as the participants (and obviously more research is needed in this respect).

Nonetheless, we believe that the evidence provided here is revealing. It provides good insights into ways in which social and learning context factors interplay to influence language learning motivation. For example, we found that even though participants' motivation may have been impacted negatively by some teachers' attitudes and fellow students' differing identities, the prevailing (and dominant) discourses of their social and learning context exerted a powerful influence on their desire to continue learning a second language. This gives additional support to the argument for the need to study L2 learning motivation from a wider perspective, acknowledging that language classrooms (and language schools) are also part of the wider society (see Ushioda, 2001).

The second related issue revolves around the real or perceived reasons that students seem to have for learning a second language. Some of the participants made clear that they did not necessarily study English for intrinsic reasons. That is, they chose to study it for a variety of reasons ranging from meeting the imagined demands of potential employers to having access to what they believe are reliable and updated sources of knowledge. This poses an additional challenge for second language educators at the university level. This would seem to suggest that they need to look for ways to transform L2 learners' extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation so it is more likely to be sustained for longer periods of time.

Finally, the evidence presented here suggests that there are some age-related differences regarding language learning motivation. Unlike teenaged students, university learners claimed that they had clearly defined short and long-term goals in life, and they viewed

English as an important tool to achieving these goals. This generated sharp contrasts in the ways they approached language learning inside the classroom. According to participants in the study, while younger learners' top priorities were to have fun and socialize in class, university learners were more interested in engaging with class work to increase their English proficiency level.

These aspects point to the need for language program administrators to offer training programs intended to help teachers develop the skills needed to deal with heterogeneous classes, especially those with students belonging to differing age groups. Such programs should place a strong emphasis on the need for teachers to employ a variety of motivational strategies in class that meet the diversity of learners' projects of ideal selves.

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