TRACING THE MOTIVATIONAL DYNAMICS OF L3 LEARNERS: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF FOUR HIGH- AND LOW-PROFICIENCY UNDERGRADUATES IN THE UK

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Introduction

The literature base for second language acquisition viewed through the lens of complex dynamic systems theory has grown in recent decades. A series of landmark studies has driven a paradigm shift in the understanding of second language learning motivation, from a static and linear process with a direct causal relationship, to a complex dynamic system that delves into the dynamic and changeable nature of motivation (e.g., Campbell & Storch, 2011; Dörnyei, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2012). While L2 learners' motivation has received much attention, there is a paucity of research that prioritises third language (L3) learners. Thus, underpinned by the cutting-edge methodology retrodictive qualitative modelling (RQM), the current study probes the motivational dynamics in a L3 context.

Objectives

The overarching aim of this research is to trace the motivational dynamics of high- and low-proficiency L3 learners. In particular, it prioritises the signature dynamics, that is, the “main underlying dynamic patterns” of their motivation (Dörnyei, 2014, p. 87). Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- To uncover the learner archetypes, that is, the typical learner types in a classroom of high and low-proficiency L3 learners;
- To explore how these learners construct and rationalise their motivational trajectories through L3 learning experience and then distil the signature dynamics of their L3 motivation;
- To probe the variations and commonalities of the motivational dynamics between high and low-proficiency L3 learners and the factors that affect them.
- To map feasible methods to ameliorate each type of L3 learners' motivation
- To further examine the empirical practice of RQM by discussing to what extent the teacher-identified archetypes vary from the actual learner types self-identified by the students

Methodology

The research is framed as a qualitative multiple case study. It targets four high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners who have studied Spanish as an L3 for almost two years in UK tertiary education. Following the template of RQM (see Figure 1), data were collected from a four-fold instrument over an approximate eight-week period: interviews (focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews), background information forms, Motometer sheets and self-reported journals. Through a retrospective investigation into the participants' two-year L3 learning experience and a real-time eight-week longitudinal trace, the research examines how these four individuals interpret the ebbs and flows of their motivational evolution.

Drawn from the participants' interviews and journals, oral and written data were analysed in four phases coinciding with the final step of RQM: i) data preparation; ii) thematic coding; iii) within-case analysis; and iv) cross-case analysis.

Figure 1 Data collection procedure

Results

Findings demonstrated that the participants' motivation fluctuated dynamically throughout the learning process. Moreover, four motivational signature dynamics incorporating dynamic equilibrium, periodic loop, shift from one attractor state to another and a repetitive cycle were identified to reveal the intricacies of motivation, adding three original dynamic patterns to the existing literature (see Figure 2). The study also unearthed effective ways to boost the motivation of L3 learners, especially low-proficiency ones, by uncovering the multi-dimensional factors that affected their motivational dynamics.

Conclusion

By fathoming the underlying dynamic patterns of four Spanish learners' motivation systems, the study unveils the dynamic essence of language learning motivation. Challenging the traditional ideologies which view it as fixed, static and universal, the research argues for changes to understand languages other than English (LOTE) as L3 motivation from dynamic systems approaches to meet the idiosyncratic learning needs of students in different prototypes, particularly via the nourishment of their environment.

The findings will provide benefits to L3 and LOTE educational practitioners, researchers and policy makers, by arousing their attention to the complexity of LLM in various types of students, especially regarding low-proficiency learners. In this sense, the present study contributes to move the sphere of applied linguistics forward in this increasingly diverse and inclusive world.

Figure 2 Tightly motivational trajectory example

References

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