

# Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning

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# **Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning**

Edited by  
Garold Murray, Xuesong (Andy) Gao  
and Terry Lamb

**MULTILINGUAL MATTERS**

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning / Edited by  
Garold Murray, Xuesong (Andy) Gao and Terry Lamb.

Second Language Acquisition: 54

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Second language acquisition. 2. Language and languages—Study and teaching.

I. Murray, Garold, 1952- II. Gao, Xuesong. III. Lamb, Terry (Terry E.)

P118.2.I34 2011

418.0071—dc22 2011000718

### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-373-0 (hbk)

ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-372-3 (pbk)

### **Multilingual Matters**

UK: St Nicholas House, 31–34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.

USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.

Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

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Typeset by Datapage International Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Short Run Press Ltd.

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## Chapter 1

# ***Exploring Links between Identity, Motivation and Autonomy***

XUESONG GAO and TERRY LAMB

### **Introduction**

Motivation, identity and autonomy have been subjects of intensive research in recent years. In autonomy research, it has been acknowledged that motivation is crucial in learners' autonomous learning, while identity is also seen as a goal or a product of their autonomous learning (Benson, 2007). As researchers increasingly see motivation, identity and autonomy as interrelated, a more convergent approach to exploring these issues may help 'lend some coherence to an increasingly fractious research agenda' caused by 'a proliferation of concepts' (Van Lier, 2010: xvi). To this end, in this edited volume we aim to synergise findings from the three distinctive areas into a concerted pursuit of a better understanding of the role that motivation, identity and autonomy plays in the language learning process.

This book is divided into three sections and includes studies from a variety of contexts, including Brazil, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, the Middle East, and the UK. The first section has four chapters, advancing different theoretical perspectives that could be used to explore the links between motivation, identity and autonomy. The second section contains a selection of empirical research conducted in self-access centres (SACs) and distance education contexts, while studies in the third section are primarily concerned with autonomous language learning in particular cultural contexts. In section 2 and 3, we include studies related to the professional development of in-service and pre-service English language teachers or manager-teachers in SACs so that the teachers' side of the story can also be presented.

### **Emerging Theoretical Perspectives**

The first section starts with Ema Ushioda's chapter, entitled 'Motivating Learners to Speak as Themselves'. In this chapter, Ushioda contends that

insights from autonomy theory and practice can usefully inform our analysis of motivation, theory and practice. In particular, she explores how processes of engaging, constructing and negotiating identities are central to this analysis. Theorising language learners as fully rounded persons with social identities situated in particular contexts, she argues that such conceptualisation of language learners contrasts sharply with those projected in writings underpinned by psychometric traditions of 'individual difference' research, which ironically rather overlooks learner individuality. She further notices that such motivation research, in pursuing rule-governed patterns linking thought and behaviour, has depersonalised learners. For this reason, she maintains that motivation theory and practice must address the individuality of learners as self-reflective agents, who bring unique identities, personalities, histories, motives and intentions to the social learning context (Ushioda, 2009).

Xuesong (Andy) Gao and Lawrence Jun Zhang's chapter draws attention to the debate over the role of agency and metacognition in autonomy research, which often sees the two concepts as two worlds apart (see Palfreyman, 2003; Wenden, 2002). As the field of autonomy research expands, they believe in the necessity to explore the interrelatedness of the two concepts. In the chapter, they argue that the division of agency as a sociological/sociocultural construct and metacognition as a cognitive construct is unnecessary as each strand of research leads to findings concerning different aspects of learners' autonomous learning. Therefore, research into learner autonomy can capitalise on both areas in order to synergise our understanding of learners' autonomous learning and inform our support for their learning efforts. To illustrate this convergent approach towards agency and metacognition, they analyse a set of data from a longitudinal enquiry into mainland Chinese undergraduates' language learning in Hong Kong. Through interpretations of the data from both perspectives, they advance a view that metacognition and agency be considered complementary to each other in revealing the process and goals of autonomous learning.

In the third chapter, Liliane Assis Sade notes that the increasing interaction among individuals and societies in the contemporary world, and the ever-growing access to new discourses have been contributing to generate a fluid, dynamic, unstable and unpredictable character to human relations. Consequently, certain phenomena, be they physical, biological or social, can no longer be attributed to general laws and simple cause/effect explanations. The positivist paradigm is also no longer appropriate to deal with the complexity of today's world. To achieve a better understanding of such interrelationships, Sade argues

that a new paradigm is needed to offer new ways of seeing the same phenomena through a different lens. This new paradigm, as argued by the chapter, focuses on dynamicity and change, not on stability; and on emergence, not on single fixed elements. In this direction, the theoretical framework provided by complexity theory has proved to be useful for a deeper understanding of the complexity that characterises human relations in the global society (Holland, 1995; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This chapter also contends that the participation of the individual in social practices contributes to a process of ‘fractalisation’ of the self, and at the same time it constructs a sense of wholeness that is achieved from the interactions established among the several emergent social selves. This process, in turn, affects and is affected by language learning.

Vera Lúcia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva’s chapter further develops the argument that theories of dynamic systems and complexity offer better understandings of language learning. In this chapter, language is understood as a non-linear dynamic system, made up of interrelated bio-cognitive, sociocultural, historical and political elements, which enable us to think and act in society. As a consequence, second language acquisition (SLA) will also be treated as a dynamic system, made up of several elements, including identity, motivation and autonomy. In this new theoretical perspective, any change in an element of the SLA system can affect all the other elements. Having these assumptions as starting points, Menezes examines a *corpus* of language learning narratives written by Japanese and Brazilian English learners. She compares the ‘initial conditions’ of their language learning to see what motivates the SLA system’s set-up processes, and how identity construction and autonomy influence their trajectories and changes. In the analysis, she places special emphasis on identity, motivation and autonomy as interconnected agents in the process of language acquisition. In her view, minimal differences in identity, motivation and autonomy, among other factors, can cause very different results in the acquisition outcomes.

## **Independent Learning Settings**

The second section has four chapters about language learners and teachers in independent learning settings, such as SACs, and distance education. Garold Murray’s chapter explores the potential of second language (L2) pedagogies that foster the development and realisation of learners’ ideal L2 selves (see Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Ushioda, 2009) by reporting on a research project investigating the experiences of Japanese

first-year university students studying English in a self-directed learning course. In accordance with Holec's (1981) model, the learners in the course determined their own goals and subsequently devised and carried out learning plans designed to help them meet these goals. In a preliminary analysis of the data, Murray identified the role that imagination played in the participants' language learning experiences. Employing the combined theoretical perspectives of possible selves and imagined communities, this chapter illustrates how imagination mediated the role of possible selves and imagined communities in the daily learning experiences of the participants in this study, thereby demonstrating the potential of this mode of learning as a pedagogical intervention capable of fostering learners' visions of L2 selves and enabling them to work towards the realisation of this ideal self.

Desirée Castillo Zaragoza's chapter examines the relationship between multilingualism and learners in SACs. In this chapter, SACs are considered multilingual by virtue of the languages they offer, thereby providing opportunities for researchers to explore the link between multilingualism/plurilingualism and language learner autonomy. Castillo Zaragoza notes that the research literature on SACs usually takes a monolingual posture even though language learners usually have access to a variety of resources, such as materials, advisors, other learners and native speakers as well as other languages. To address this missing link in autonomy research, Castillo Zaragoza reports on a study on Mexican learners who learn up to five languages using the classroom and/or SACs, despite the fact that Mexico is a *de facto* monolingual country and has no explicit policy on multilingualism. Based on 33 interviews in two Mexican public universities, this exploratory inquiry reveals how learners have seen the importance of developing their plurilingual identity, have high intrinsic motivation and use their agency in a context that does not explicitly encourage multilingualism.

Linda Murphy's chapter deals with a critical question concerning distance language learners who are generally responsible for scheduling their study time and are increasingly expected to manage their own learning progress and maintain their motivation within a programme framework that may offer more or less guidance and structure. Given that self-motivation is crucial in distance learning, how do these language learners keep going when the going gets tough? After outlining the key issues in relation to autonomy and motivation within the context of distance language learning, this chapter considers how theories play out in practice by examining the experiences of adult distance learners of French, German and Spanish, who logged anything that negatively

affected their motivation, how they handled setbacks and what inspired or motivated them during a period of seven months while studying with the Open University (UK). This chapter reports on the findings emerging from the analysis of these language learners' experiences in light of research on self-regulation, autonomy and Dörnyei's (2005) motivational self-system. It also concludes by suggesting how these experiences could be used to enhance distance language learning programmes.

The fourth chapter by Hayo Reinders and Noemí Lázaro reports on a large-scale investigation that delved into teachers' roles as agents in the learning process and, in particular, their roles as facilitators of autonomous learning in SACs. The study, in which extensive interviews were held with manager-teachers of 46 SACs in five countries, aimed to (1) elicit teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in self-access contexts, (2) identify conflicts between teachers' beliefs about autonomy and students' (self-access) language learning behaviour, and (3) identify conflicts between teachers' beliefs and institutional constraints. As reported in this chapter, the inquiry revealed a complex and sometimes conflicting interaction between the managers' beliefs and their everyday roles, which shows that the concept of agency cannot be separated from those of motivation and identity. A particular area of tension emerged (both negatively as frustration and positively as challenge) from the relationship between teachers' beliefs and learners' beliefs about autonomy and the roles of teachers and learners in the learning process, as well as the perceived need to reconcile those beliefs.

## **Cultures and Contexts**

Following the chapters on language learners and teachers in independent learning settings, the third section contains six chapters, four concerning language learners' experiences in various contexts and two concerning teachers' perspectives on classroom motivation practices and pre-service teachers' autonomy development.

In their chapter, Alice Chik and Stephan Breidbach report on a comparative study on two groups of language learners' language learning experiences (German postgraduates in Berlin and Chinese undergraduates in Hong Kong). Both groups of learners are learning English as a second language with the Hong Kong students majoring in English while their German counterparts are preparing for their future careers as English teachers. In the study, these learners wrote and shared their multimodal language learning histories through course wikis, and asynchronous responses were also posted. By doing so, learners from