EFL Learners' Motivational Dynamics in an Online Joint Class with Oversea Students

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Abstract

From the perspective of Dynamic Systems Theory (DST: e.g., de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007), this study investigated the dynamic, ever-changing nature of L2 motivation among EFL learners in an online joint class with oversea students. The purpose of this study was two-fold; (1) to examine if DST approaches can help capture three key aspects of motivational dynamics (i.e., *change*, *stability*, and *contextual dependency*) in the class and (2) to discuss conceptual issues associated with DST approaches. For the real-time assessment of their L2 motivation, this study used an instrument called Motometer (Waninge, Dörnyei, & de Bot, 2014) and video-recorded the joint class. The participants were 5 EFL learners who were enrolled in the joint intercultural communication class offered at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. The results showed that the DST approach employed in this study can be used to describe the three core aspects of motivational dynamics in the class. At the same time, however, the results also indicated the difficulty to interpret the resulting degree of motivation self-reported in Motometer, suggesting the necessity to reconsider the conceptual and operational definition of motivation for the real-time assessment of L2 motivation in actual classroom settings.

Keywords

L2 Motivation, Motivational Dynamics, Online Discussion, Intercultural Communication, Computer-Assisted Language Learning,

Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition, there has been a growing interest in new approaches to describe the ever-changing nature of learners' motivation in their second/foreign language learning (hereafter, L2 motivation). Using Dynamic Systems Theory (DST: e.g., de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007), for example, some of the previous studies have attempted to investigate the temporal change of L2 motivation among EFL learners during their school years (for details, see, Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015). Although there is no doubt that the findings in these studies have shed light on the methodological aspects of L2 motivation research, it should be pointed out that there still remain some conceptual issues that need to be further discussed (i.e., how to operationalize the concept). To provide a fundamental, conceptual basis for further discussion, therefore, the present study employed the theoretical framework of DST and conducted a real-time assessment of EFL learners' L2 motivation in an actual classroom setting where they had several online joint sessions with oversea students.

1   DST and L2 Motivation Research

In DST, the concepts to be investigated are assumed to comprise *a complex adaptive system* (e.g., Ellis, 2015). In other words, DST assumes the *interconnectedness* among the concepts (i.e., the components and agents) in a system and deals with *nonlinear relationships* among them rather than the so-called linear cause-effect relationships between variables, which have often been examined in traditional approaches (de Bot et al., 2007).

In response to the paradigm shift (i.e., dynamic shift) in the field of L2 motivation research (for details, see Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), DST has currently been used to investigate the temporal change of learners' L2 motivation in the process of their L2 learning in various settings, such as in a language classroom, during school years and so on (for details, see, Dörnyei et al., 2015).

2 Method

2.1 Research Questions

To examine if DST approaches can be used to capture the three core features of motivational dynamics, that is, *change*, *stability* and *contextual dependency*, this study adopted the method and research questions 1-3 from Waninge et al. (2014, p. 708) as in my previous surveys (Yoshida, 2016, 2017). RQ 4 was developed by the author to discuss the fundamental, conceptual issues associated with DST approaches for researching on motivational dynamics in actual classroom settings.

RQ1: Is there variability to be found in students' in-class motivation?
RQ2: Is there a detectable stable level, or attractor state, in students' in-class motivation?
RQ3: If there is variability and stability in students' motivation, can this be accounted for by the classroom context?
RQ4: Is the degree of perceived effort proportionate to that of enjoyment?

2.2 Participants

The participants were 3 Japanese EFL learners and 2 Asian EFL learners who were enrolled in a joint intercultural communication class offered at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. In the class, the students participated in several joint online chat sessions with oversea students and had a discussion on the topics related to media issues such as "social media" and "pop culture". For the sessions, the students were divided into some small groups.

2.3 Instruments

As an instrument, a slightly modified version of Motometer (Waninge et al., 2014) was used for the real-time assessment of L2 motivation in the class. Using this instrument, I asked the students to rate their motivation at 5-minute intervals, considering (1) how much effort they wanted to put into learning the material and (2) how much they enjoyed the discussion at that time. I also asked them to respond to 10-item questionnaire after each session so as to examine to what extent the students were satisfied with the discussion in each session.

2.4 Data Collection/Analysis Procedures

The Motometer surveys were conducted twice during the spring semester of 2017. The topics covered in the lessons were Country Images and Pop Culture, respectively. In this paper, I mainly focused on the results obtained in the second survey. The procedures for data collection and data analysis were the same as in Yoshida (2016, 2017): (1) Collecting the data with the slightly modified version of Motometer at 5-minute intervals in the class, (2) Video-recording the online discussion using the PCs in the classroom, (3) Coding the video data, (4) Summarizing both Motometer data and video data on Data Composite Charts (Waninge et al., 2014).

3 Results and Discussion

The results suggested that the DST approach employed in this study can be used to describe the three core aspects of motivational dynamics in the class. Indeed, the results showed (1) temporal changes and variabilities of L2 motivation between and within the participants, and (2) some stable levels of L2 motivation between and within the participants, and also indicated the possibility that (3) some of the above changes, variabilities and stabilities can be explained by the classroom context. At the same time, however, the results also indicated the difficulty to interpret the resulting degree of motivation self-reported in Motometer as the degree of effort and enjoyment, each of which was part of 'motivation', sometimes showed different patterns in their developmental process.

4 Conclusion

The results indicated that the DST approach employed in this study can be used to delineate EFL learners' motivational dynamics in the given classroom setting. Moreover, the results were found to be almost similar to those in the previous studies, further suggesting the applicability of DST approach to real-time assessment of L2 motivation. However, the results also indicated the difficulty to interpret the resulting degree of motivation reported in Motometer, suggesting the necessity to reconsider the conceptual and operational definition of motivation.

References Selected

Waninge, F., Dörnyei, Z., & de Bot, K. (2014). Motivational dynamics in language learning: Change, stability and context. *Modern Language Journal*, *98*(3), 704-723.