Using Personalized Narratives as Motivational Strategies

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Abstract

Over the last few decades motivation has become recognized as an important factor in language learning success. In addition, researchers have begun to analyze how motivation theories can be applied to in the L2 classroom. This has led to the development of motivational strategies that teachers can employ to improve the levels of motivation in their classes. Dörnyei's (2001) comprehensive model of motivational teaching practice provides teachers with an invaluable guide on how to implement these strategies. This paper will explain how this framework was used to develop entertaining and motivating stories for second language (L2) learners at university level in Japan. The paper will then report and discuss findings from a study conducted with Japanese university students. The paper will conclude that personal narratives could be used by teachers looking to develop a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere.

Key Words: motivation, motivational strategies, personal narratives

What can foreign language teachers do to improve their students' motivation? Ford (1992, p. 202) states, "there are no magical buttons that can be pushed to 'make' people want to learn, work hard, and act in a responsible manner" (as cited in Dörnyei, 2001, p. 25). Theories of motivation have sought to explain why people select, perform, and continue certain activities.   Researchers have applied these theories to classroom practice and have developed frameworks for teachers to use as guides for implementing motivational strategies in their classes. This paper seeks to show how teachers can use one particular framework, Dörnyei's (2001) model of motivational teaching practice, to develop personal narratives to help motivate learners. First, a brief review of the literature will be presented, followed by an introduction to motivational strategies and Dörnyei's (2001) model. The paper will then show how this model can be used to develop personalized stories. Finally, the paper will report data from an open-ended questionnaire administered to a class of students who were exposed to a series of personal narratives.

What is Motivation?

In simple terms, motivation determines the extent of someone's desire to do an activity. In psychology, the definition of motivation is the process that starts, guides and maintains goal-oriented behaviors, or

according to Ryan & Deci (2000) , "to be motivated is *to be moved* to do something" (p. 54). However, further extrapolations of the concept of motivation have proved difficult, and despite the vast amount of research conducted in the area, little consensus has been reached with few concrete answers given (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 3). The concept of motivation is a highly complicated one that has divided researchers' opinions. Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011) state that one of the only things that researchers seem to agree on is motivation appears to be "responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, how hard they are going to pursue it" (2011 p. 4). The term motivation is a complex concept and cannot be simplified into a single definition.

In recent years it has become accepted that motivation is one of the main determinants in the success of second or foreign language learners. Oxford and Shearin (1994) explain that motivation can have a direct influence on how frequently students use L2 learning strategies, how much interaction with native speakers they have, the amount of target language input they are likely to receive, test performance, proficiency, and how long they continue learning the L2 after their language study is complete (p. 12). It is evident that motivation is a major factor in terms of language learning achievement and, for this reason a considerable amount of research has recently been conducted into discovering why people make the decision to study a language, or engage and persist in learning it.

Motivation in the L2 field is more complicated than in other school subjects because language cannot just be learned by memorizing rules and words. It is a method of communication between people of different cultures which means the learner needs to allow "elements of another culture into one's own lifespace" (Gardner, 1979 p. 193). Much of the research into the motivation of L2 learning was initiated and inspired by two psychologists, Gardner and Lambert (Dörnyei, 1994a p. 273). They formed the concept of motivation from a social psychological perspective recognizing that language learning is a social event with the L2 acting as intermediary between different linguistic communities. In particular, they established that the attitude towards the L2 community is likely to determine the success or failure of the L2 learning process. This research was ground breaking because previous research in the field had concentrated on cognitive factors and opportunities to learn. Gardner and Lambert categorized learners' goals as either, *integrative orientations or instrumental orientations*. *Integrative orientations* reflect a positive disposition towards the L2 community. In other words, it involved their willingness to integrate with that community. Gardner (1985) defines this as "motivation to learn a second language because of positive feelings towards the community that speaks the language" (p. 82-3). *Instrumental orientations* are where a language is learned for more pragmatic reasons such as getting a job or earning more money. Here the language is seen as an instrument to aid self-improvement. Perhaps the most prevalent aspect of Gardner's research is the concept of *the integrative motive* (Dörnyei, 2001 p. 16). This construct has three main components:

- *integrativeness*, which includes interest in foreign languages and attitudes towards the L2 community.
- *attitudes towards the learning environment*, which includes attitudes towards the teacher and course.
- *motivation*, which includes the will and desire to learn the L2, and the attitude towards learning the language (Dörnyei, 2001 p. 16).

Gardner's social psychological approach emphasizing integrative and instrumental orientations received widespread acceptance. However, during the 1990s scholars in the L2 field started to suggest that the theory didn't cover all L2 learning motivation. This was shown by the number of papers calling for less focus on the social aspects of motivation and an exploration of other aspects of L2 learning motivation (For example Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994b; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). One concern with Gardner's theory was that it didn't provide assistance to language teachers looking to improve motivation in their classrooms. Another concern was that theory didn't fully take into account learners in a foreign language situation.

The years since have seen constructs promoting the cognitive aspects of motivation. Dörnyei's model (1994) established a framework with three distinct levels.

- The language level
- The learner level
- The learning situation

The language level comprises of integrative and instrumental subsystems. The learner level involves learner characteristics including the need for achievement and self-confidence and the learning situation level contains course, teacher and group-specific components. This framework has the benefit of including cognitive aspects of motivation, integrating theories of psychology such as goal setting theory and attribution theory, and it focuses on situational factors that can be applied to the classroom (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007 p.154). This cognitive approach "places the focus on how the individual's conscious attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and interpretation of events influence their behaviour" (Dörnyei, 2001 p.8). Currently there are many different competing motivation theories in psychology. For a comprehensive review, please see Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011).

Motivational Strategies

Over recent years, researchers have started to analyze how research into motivation can be applied to the L2 classroom. This has led to the development of techniques that can be employed by teachers to improve the levels of motivation in their classes, and these are generally known as *motivational strategies*. One book in particular that deals with motivating students in a foreign language classroom situation is Dörnyei's *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom* (2001). This book provides a comprehensive model for motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom which describes motivational strategies and advises teachers on how to implement them. The model for motivational L2 teaching practice consists of four main aspects:

- Creating the basic motivational conditions.
- Generating initial motivation.
- Maintaining and protecting motivation.
- Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation.

Dörnyei (2001) states that "certain preconditions must be in place before any further attempts to generate motivation can be effective" (p. 31) and once these are in place then the teacher can work on developing initial motivation. During the third phase motivation needs to be protected and "actively nurtured" (p. 71). The final stage in the process model is where the teacher helps "learners to consider their own achievement in a positive light" (p. 117). Figure 1 below presents the model with macro-strategies included in each category. For further information on the techniques please refer to Dörnyei's book on motivational strategies (2001). The model and the macro-strategies provide the theoretical basis for development of the personalized narratives described in the section below.
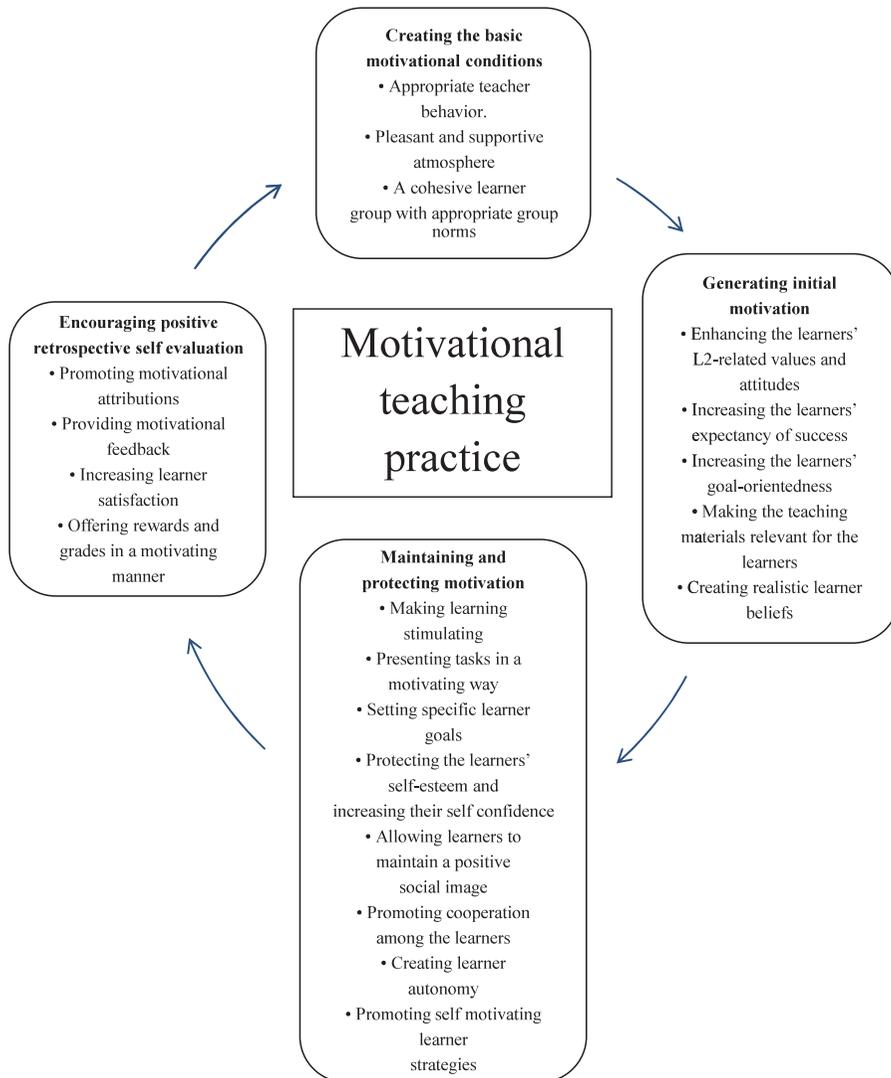
Creating the basic motivational conditions
• Appropriate teacher behavior.
• Pleasant and supportive atmosphere
• A cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms

Encouraging positive retrospective self evaluation
• Promoting motivational attributions
• Providing motivational feedback
• Increasing learner satisfaction
• Offering rewards and grades in a motivating manner

Motivational teaching practice

Generating initial motivation
• Enhancing the learners' L2-related values and attitudes
• Increasing the learners' expectancy of success
• Increasing the learners' goal-orientedness
• Making the teaching materials relevant for the learners
• Creating realistic learner beliefs

Maintaining and protecting motivation
• Making learning stimulating
• Presenting tasks in a motivating way
• Setting specific learner goals
• Protecting the learners' self-esteem and increasing their self confidence
• Allowing learners to maintain a positive social image
• Promoting cooperation among the learners
• Creating learner autonomy
• Promoting self motivating learner strategies

Figure 1. The components of motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 29)

Developing Narratives based on Motivational Strategies

Given the important role that motivation can play in the success or failure of L2 learners it appears advisable for teachers to employ motivational strategies in their classrooms. One method of introducing motivational strategies to students might be through personalized narratives. Narratives, in the form of stories, have been an important form of entertainment and information transfer in all cultures. It is proposed that personalized stories could be used as a method for developing relationships with students and to introduce some of the macro-strategies described above. This section will outline how this can be done.

Dörnyei's model (figure 1) can be used as a guide for selecting strategies the teacher considers important for his or her own context. Dörnyei (2001) suggests that these strategies are not "golden rules, but rather suggestions that may work with one teacher or group better than another, and which may work better today than tomorrow" (p. 30). The teacher is therefore advised to select a strategy which they think is appropriate for their students. Once the teacher has decided on a strategy that they would like to implement into their classroom he or she can begin the process of developing a personal story that will reflect this strategy. It should be noted that the story does not have to be based on facts or real events the teacher has experienced, but it should be presented to the students in the form of a real personal story. The stories that were used in this study were not all based on true events but are an amalgamation of actual events or facts, personal experience, stories told by friends, and fictional stories heard in other contexts. However, it is important to note that the story should be interesting, relevant and told using language that can be easily understood by the students. To help facilitate understanding, images or pictures could be used. Personal photographs are usually welcomed by students but images from the Internet could also be used. In contexts where the Internet is not widely available, simple drawings could be equally effective. Finally, how the story is told will be instrumental in how interesting or enjoyable the students will find it. A story teller that uses gestures and is animated is more likely to engage the students and therefore assist in presenting the motivational strategy.

In summary, the following procedures are recommended in creating a personalized narrative based on a motivational strategy.

- Identify the strategy to be introduced;
- Develop a story relating to that strategy;
- Find pictures, images or realia to use when telling the story;
- Tell the story in an animated fashion using actions and gestures where possible.

Aims of the Study

The aim of this study was to shed light on students' feelings towards the use of personalized narratives in the classroom. The main objective behind this study therefore was to discover whether personalized stories could be used as a method for developing the basic motivational conditions in an L2 learning classroom. The basic motivational conditions being; appropriate teacher behavior, a pleasant and supportive atmosphere and a cohesive learner group.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 21 Japanese university students aged between 18 and 21. All the participants were Japanese and were taking this class as part of their English credit requirements. This particular class was chosen because the majority of the students were repeating this course because they had failed to meet the class requirements in previous semesters. In other words, they were not considered to be a class of highly motivated L2 learners.

Procedure

Over the period of one semester the author used a total of 10 different stories with a class of Japanese university students, each one related to a different motivational strategy. The first five of these stories were told during the first half of the semester and were all relating to strategies intended to create the basic motivational conditions. After five narratives had been told an open-ended questionnaire was administered to the group.

Data Collection Method

As part of a course reflection survey during week eight of the semester students were given an open-ended questionnaire to elicit feelings towards the course in general and opinions towards the personal narratives. Following the advice of Dörnyei (2007) the items were not left completely open, but participants were given short answer questions which were worded in a way that could be answered succinctly with a short answer (p. 107).

Analysis

As the data collected in this study was in the form of open-ended answers to questions, the data was examined using the principles of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following the advice of Richards (2005) the data was read and reflected upon before comments were added to help establish themes. Then during the coding process the data was read multiple times and data relevant to the motivational strategies referred to above was highlighted.

Findings and Discussion

The following section combines the findings from the open-ended questionnaire with a discussion of these findings. It begins by discussing the findings relating to the first basic motivational condition referred to above; appropriate teacher behavior. The paper then highlights data relating to a pleasant and supportive atmosphere.

Dörnyei (2001) states that in order to have appropriate behavior teachers should show and talk about

their enthusiasm for the course material (p. 33), "take the students' learning very seriously" (p. 36), and also encourages teachers to "develop a personal relationship with your students" (p. 39). In order to discover participants' feelings towards the teacher's attitude toward their L2 learning the group were asked to comment on whether the stories gave any indications of the teacher's attitude towards the class. The data showed multiple references to the narratives and how they reflected the teacher's positive attitude towards the class. One participant commented that "the teacher told us a story about how he wanted to be successful. It seems he is determined I succeed". Another noted "the stories are positive and that makes me positive too". Surprisingly, over half of the comments were relating to the teachers attitude whilst telling the stories. Comments included "the teacher is smiling and it makes us smile" and "the teacher is funny when he tells a story". In order to gain insight into whether the participants felt the stories allowed them to develop a good relationship with the teacher they were asked "how would you describe your relationship with the teacher?" Eight of the 21 participants made a reference to the narratives when responding to this item. Most of these comments referred to developing a relationship due to having more knowledge about the teacher because of the stories. One student wrote "I know more about the teacher and it makes me feel comfortable". The other comments referred to liking aspects of the teacher's personality. One example of this was "the stories make me laugh so I like the teacher".

The data reported above indicates that the personal narratives might be a tool that to show enthusiasm and commitment to learners and to assist in developing a personal relationship with students. It appears evident that the stories and how they are told can allow the teacher to display a level of enthusiasm, and this is noticeable to the students. One might speculate that perhaps the fact that the stories are not connected to the curriculum or related to any assessments makes the atmosphere of the class more relaxing. Unfortunately the data does not allow for speculation on the extent to which the narratives affected motivated behaviour. In addition the data does not account for the remaining time in class when these particular strategies were not being employed.

To create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere Dörnyei (2001) suggests the teacher should encourage risk-taking, and allow mistakes to become "accepted as a natural part of learning". In addition Dörnyei advises the teacher to "bring in and encourage humour" (p. 42). The data in this study indicated that the students found the stories humorous and one particular story encouraged students to take risks when speaking in class. Almost all the participants in this study mentioned the fact that the stories were "funny" or made them "laugh". Others described the stories as "cheerful" and "interesting". One story in particular seemed to resonate with the learners with many references to it in the data and how it made them feel "relaxed", less "nervous" and more willing to "participate" in class. One participant commented; "the teacher told us a story about how he made a big mistake. It was funny and now I'm less afraid of making mistakes when I speak English in class". Another added how after listening to that story they were more willing to raise their hand in class and try to answer questions even when they were not 100% sure their answer was correct.

The data reported above suggests that personalized narratives can have a big part to play in creating the right kind of atmosphere in the classroom. The story which made the participant "less afraid of making mistakes" was a story that allowed the teacher to display a little self-mockery and humility. It is a story in

which the teacher reports a funny mistake he has made whilst taking a train journey. The aim of the story is to highlight to students that making mistakes in the classroom is completely acceptable and expected, therefore hopefully reducing language anxiety in the classroom. It appears from the data that this kind of story can encourage learners to take more risks, and allows the teacher to bring humor into the classroom.

Conclusion

Motivation is one of the main determinants in the success of students learning a second or foreign language, and recent research into motivational strategies allows teachers more freedom to apply strategies to their particular context. In particular, Dörnyei's (2001) model of motivational teaching practice is an invaluable tool for teachers hoping to improve the motivation levels in their classrooms. The results of this study indicate that the stories told in this particular context might be considered a useful tool for teachers to use to show their enthusiasm and commitment to learners, and they might assist in developing a personal relationship with students. In addition, the findings reveal that personalized narratives could have a role to play in creating a pleasant classroom atmosphere. There are several limitations to this study regarding the method of data collection. The data collected was in the form of an open-ended questionnaire which was chosen for efficiency in terms of time, but this kind of data probably only revealed a rather 'thin' description of the feelings towards the use of personalized narratives in the classroom (Dörnyei 2007 p. 115). An ethnographic approach would be recommended for further studies in this area to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives. In addition to this, it is difficult to ascertain whether the data collected regarding appropriate teacher behavior were attributable to the narratives. Other factors beyond the scope of this study could have contributed to the participants feelings towards the behavior of the teacher. Finally, the data showed no evidence of the narratives helping to create a cohesive learner group which is seen as important in creating the basic motivational conditions. Despite these limitations it appears evident that motivational strategies through personal narratives might be worthy of consideration in particular for teachers looking to create a pleasant classroom atmosphere.

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