Taking a ‘small lens approach’ to researching L2 motivation

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Overview of talk

- Three ‘problems’ with L2 motivation research
  - Need for a more sharply focused research lens
- Some suggested approaches to researching L2 motivation ‘through a small lens’
- Based on
Three ‘problems’ with L2 motivation research

1. Limitations of motivation research in SLA
2. Popularity of motivation as a student dissertation topic
3. Shortage of classroom-based practitioner research on motivation
Problem 1

Limitations of motivation research in SLA
Importance of motivation in SLA

- ‘given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data’ (Corder 1967: 164)
- Motivation is widely recognized as a significant individual difference variable in L2 learning
- A key factor that distinguishes L2 learning from L1 learning
- Substantial body of research over 50 years, predating the ‘birth’ of SLA field in 1960s (see Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011 for overview)
But ...

- ‘the study of L2 motivation research continues to lie outside mainstream SLA’ (Ellis 2008: 690)
- Motivation has remained somewhat isolated from the core linguistic traditions of the SLA field (Ushioda 2010)
Why?

- Analysis of motivation and its role in L2 learning has mostly been at the level of global learning behaviours and achievement.
- Motivation research has tended not to address fine-grained processes of language acquisition or linguistic development.
Motivation research sheds little light on core SLA concerns ...

- How does motivation shape particular psycholinguistic processes or stages of L2 development?
- How does motivation relate to the acquisition of specific features of the target language?
  - E.g. pronunciation or accent (Segalowitz, Gatbonton & Trofimovich 2009)
- Need for a sharper focus or smaller lens?
Problem 2

Popularity of motivation as a student dissertation topic
Some thoughts from ...  

Paul Meara  
(speaking at EUROSLA conference in Cork, Ireland, 2009)
Protypical motivation study at Masters level ...

- Develop/adapt a motivation questionnaire
- Collect and analyse data
- Summarize findings (descriptive statistics)
- Possibly examine statistical relationships with other variables (e.g. achievement)
- Possibly integrate some interview data (mixed methods, triangulation)
- Draw (anticipated) conclusions
Such dissertations ... 

- Tend to be rather boring and predictable
- May be bland and superficial
- Often lack a tight focus or deep engagement with a research issue
- May offer few interesting insights

Desirability of a more sharply focused lens to suit the scope of a Masters project?
Problem 3

Shortage of classroom-based practitioner research on L2 motivation
Most empirical research on L2 motivation in classrooms ...

- Has been conducted by researchers who are external to the classroom settings, teachers and learners under focus.
- Has characterized classroom settings in rather general terms only (e.g. cultural context, school type, proficiency level).
Few published studies of L2 motivation ...

- Have been grounded in specific contexts of practice
- Have focused on the needs and experiences of particular learners and teachers in particular classrooms
- Have been shaped by teachers’ own pedagogically-oriented research inquiry (e.g. action research)
Why?

- Teachers may feel that collecting self-report data on motivation from their own students may not yield reliable data.
- Teachers may worry that their attempts to research their own students’ motivation may end up influencing and changing their motivation and so ‘contaminate’ their data.
Addressing these issues by ...

- Integrating (rather than separating) teaching and researching objectives (Ushioda 2013)

- Developing motivation ‘research’ tools that function also (or primarily) as ‘pedagogical’ tools to enhance students’ voice and involvement in learning
So, lack of classroom-based research on L2 motivation means ...

- Need for more sharply focused lens on
  - How processes of motivation evolve through particular interactions and events in the classroom
  - How teachers can work responsively and adaptively to shape these interactions and events in motivationally constructive ways
Three problems in summary:

1. Limitations of motivation research in SLA
2. Popularity of motivation as a student dissertation topic
3. Shortage of classroom-based practitioner research on motivation

- Towards a more sharply focused or contextualized angle of inquiry
- Researching motivation ‘through a small lens’
Possible ‘small lens’ approaches to researching L2 motivation

- Motivation
  - Noticing/attention in SLA
  - Metacognition
  - Critical events in a lesson
Noticing and attention in SLA

- Schmidt and Frota (1986)
- Research on visual input enhancement techniques for directing L2 learners’ attention to particular target features in a text
  - E.g. Underlining, CAPITALISATION, bold font
  - See Simard (2009) for review
Role of motivation in noticing?

- Does motivation play a role in whether learners notice and pay attention to certain language features, especially when input enhancement is not provided?
- Experimental research in psychology suggests that what people notice may partly depend on their motivation (Newsome 1986)
Role of motivation in noticing?

- Does motivation play a role in whether learners notice and pay attention to certain language features, especially when input enhancement is not provided?
- Experimental research in psychology suggests that what people notice may partly depend on their motivation (Newsome 1986)
- Test yourselves:
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4)
Motivation and noticing in SLA

- Potential link between motivation and noticing in SLA highlighted by Crookes & Schmidt (1991)
  - But little empirical research to date
  - In contrast with research on noticing and attention in SLA in relation to other individual difference factors such as aptitude or working memory (e.g. Robinson 1997, 2002)
Takahashi 2005

- Motivation and noticing of pragmalinguistic features of L2 input
- Research focus on request strategies:
  - complex bi-clausal request forms (e.g. *I was wondering if you could VP; Do you think you could VP? Would it be possible for you to VP?*)
1. Wrong

HELP!

2. Right

Excuse me, Sir. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you would mind helping me a moment, as long as it's no trouble, of course.
Takahashi 2005

- Motivation and noticing of pragmalinguistic features of L2 input
- Research focus on request strategies:
  - complex bi-clausal request forms (e.g. I was wondering if you could VP; Do you think you could VP? Would it be possible for you to VP?)
  - idiomatic expressions (e.g. This has to do with ...; How ya doing?)
  - non-idiomatic expressions (e.g. I live next door)
  - discourse markers (e.g. well, you know, maybe)
Research design

- Participants (Japanese EFL university students)
  - completed a motivation questionnaire and English proficiency measure
  - read transcripts of role-plays of request scenarios (NS-NS and NS-NNS role-plays)
  - completed an awareness retrospection questionnaire to identify expressions and features of language use in the role-plays perceived to be distinctively ‘native English’ usage
Results

- Participants classified as strongly intrinsically motivated to learn English were found to be particularly attentive to complex bi-clausal request forms and idiomatic expressions in the input, irrespective of their levels of English proficiency.
- Intrinsic motivation to develop communication skills may help direct learners’ attention to pragmalinguistic features perceived as important for effective communication.
Implications

- A ‘small lens approach’ can shed light on how motivation interacts with learners’ attentional focus and resources.
- Possibilities of replicating Takahashi’s research or extending it to other target L2 features (e.g. phonology, prosody, lexis, syntax ...)
- How differences in motivation may contribute to different patterns of linguistic and communicative proficiency.
Motivation and metacognition

- How motivation interacts with attention may also connect with metacognitive processes – i.e. processes of directing and regulating one’s cognitive resources
An international student is talking about his motivation to develop his English vocabulary and how he uses the strategy of paying close attention to words and phrases in his interlocutor’s speech ... nicely demonstrated during the actual research interview:

**Interv:** Okay, so your main focus is on expression and vocabulary?

**S016:** Exactly. See now I didn’t have the word ‘expression’ in me. So I learnt from you now.
Motivation and metacognition

Metacognitive skills and strategic thinking and learning processes

will and skill
(McCombs & Marzano 1990)

Motivation or willingness to apply and control thinking processes
‘Will and skill’ research in SLA

- Tends to focus on associations between motivation and strategy use (quantity, frequency, type)
- But how does motivation (‘will’) to control strategic thinking (‘skill’) develop?
- How can a teacher scaffold and support this process in her interactions with students?

⇒ Taking a ‘small lens’ approach ...
Vygotskian perspectives


- Analytical focus on:
  - microgenesis of individual strategic thinking
  - and, by extension, of individual motivation to control and shape this thinking
  - through problem-focused interactions between teacher and learner (or between learners)
Possible research questions

- How do teachers motivate language learners to think through problems and difficulties in their learning?
- How do learners co-construct their motivation to think through problems and challenges in collaborative language tasks?
Possibilities for teacher research

- Action research focusing on how to plan and structure the pedagogical dialogue with learners to motivate strategic thinking
- Experiment with different questioning techniques and forms of encouragement (e.g. Diaz et al. 1990 on ‘relinquishing strategies’)
- Analysis of recorded teacher–learner or learner–learner interactions
- Stimulated recall interviews with learners
Motivation and ‘critical events’ in a lesson

- Problem-focused learning difficulties represent one set of events where motivation may be implicated.
- Possible other ‘critical events’ during a lesson affecting and affected by individual and social processes of motivation.

- Unexpected interruptions
- Heated exchanges
- Silence in response to teacher questions
Critical incident analysis

- Important tool of qualitative inquiry in teacher development (Tripp 1993) and other fields of professional practice (e.g. nursing, social work, organisational learning)
- See Butterfield et al. 2005 for historical overview of critical incident technique
- However, identifying ‘critical incidents’ is not straightforward
Critical events in the classroom

- Focusing on a critical event provides a tightly bound contextual framework for analysing how motivation evolves among ‘persons-in-context’ (Ushioda 2009)
- While the critical event constitutes the immediate focus (‘small lens’), the analysis will have wider contextual perspectives (shared history of previous interactions, subsequent interactions and events)
- May yield insights into how processes of motivation evolve cumulatively among teacher and learners in a particular classroom
Possible research inquiry

- Investigate the motivations of teacher and learners during ‘critical events’ in a lesson
- How to define ‘critical events’?
  - Events that cause us to wonder why people are behaving in a particular way?
  - Involve learners in identifying critical events where issues of motivation have surfaced?
Research approach

- Multiple perspectives on the critical event (research-observer; teacher; students)
- Or particularly suited to teacher research and especially Exploratory Practice (EP)
  - Allwright 2003; Allwright & Hanks 2009; Hanks 2017
  - Research inquiry grounded in teacher’s own practice and shaped by pedagogical principles
  - Desire to understand and enhance quality of classroom life
  - Involving learners as co-researchers
  - Congruence between pedagogical and research tools
Concluding remarks

- L2 motivation research would benefit from a richer and sharper focus on the local and particular, rather than the general.
- These locally situated understandings of motivation can have wider resonance and contribute to informing theory and practice more broadly.

Thank you!