L2 motivation research 2005–2014: Understanding a publication surge and a changing landscape

Zann Boo [a], [*], [1], Zoltán Dörnyei [a], [1], Stephen Ryan [b], [2]

[a] University of Nottingham, United Kingdom
[b] Senshu University, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The study of L2 motivation has seen an unprecedented boom during the past decade, with the number of published studies in the area far exceeding not only the amount of work done in other domains of language learner characteristics but, in fact, most strands within the whole of SLA research. This study examines the origins and nature of this extraordinary surge by reviewing a large dataset of journal articles and book chapters published between 2005 and 2014 (N = 416) in terms of the broad quantitative patterns they display with respect to theoretical and research methodological trends. The results (a) provide insights on the changing landscape of the field and (b) allow for projections to be made about the directions in which the field is headed.

1. Introduction

The pursuit by researchers to better understand L2 motivation has traditionally been the most developed area in the study of the psychology of the language learner. Indeed, in their recent book-length overview of individual differences, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) noted that over the past decade, "[o]f all the constructs covered in this book, motivation is the one that has been subject to the most thorough theoretical overhaul" (p. 72). During their analysis of these developments, the authors also observed an unprecedented surge in the number of publications relating to L2 motivation from 2005 to 2014. Based on a preliminary analysis derived from a dataset containing over 200 published works, they not only identified some intriguing features of this boom, but also established that the publication trajectory was still on a significant incline, thereby confirming the unique status of the domain.

The current paper revisits Dörnyei and Ryan's preliminary study by making the selection of the relevant papers and book chapters on L2 motivation more systematic, with the aim for comprehensiveness, or as close to it as possible, within the sampling frame. We were surprised to see that our final dataset (N = 416) doubled Dörnyei and Ryan's original article pool, which allowed for a range of quantitative analyses of the patterns the studies displayed with respect to their underlying theoretical and research methodological trends. As a result, the findings help to outline the main features of a fascinating landscape shift that has been taking place in the study of L2 motivation with direct implications for the broader field of SLA. Furthermore, because of the longitudinal dataset that spans a whole decade, the results also allow for projections to be made about certain directions in which the field may take in the coming years.

* Corresponding author.
 E-mail addresses: zann.boo@nottingham.ac.uk (Z. Boo), zoltan.dornyei@nottingham.ac.uk (Z. Dörnyei), stephenryan@skcryan.net (S. Ryan).
[1] School of English, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, United Kingdom.
[2] School of Economics, Senshu University, Higashi Mita 2-1-1, Tama Ku, Kawasaki Shi, Kanagawa Ken, 214-8580, Japan.

Although we provide a brief overview of milestones in the development of L2 motivation theory and research (see Section 1.1), a point to be emphasised at this juncture is that this paper does not set out to be a detailed review of what language learning motivation involves or how the understanding of the construct has evolved over the years. There are several publications that offer comprehensive overviews of this sort (e.g. Csizér & Magid, 2014; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Lamb, in press; Ushioda, 2013). Rather, the focus in the following discussion will be on exploring the unparalleled publication surge that has taken place during the last ten years and the various trends and patterns that certain key quantitative (and in some cases quantified) descriptors of the published studies reflect. Simply put, this paper is intended to provide an empirical understanding of the observed landscape shift by investigating the salient features of the methodological and theoretical trends found in our dataset concerning the past decade.

1.1. Major milestones and stages in L2 motivation research

Standard accounts of the development of L2 motivation theory and research tend to identify three core historical phases (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011): an initial stage continuing into the early 1990s that was very much based on a social psychological perspective; a period of realignment, broadly speaking the 1990s, during which the field moved away from its social psychological origins to show a greater interest in concepts being developed in contemporary cognitive and educational psychology; finally, and roughly equivalent to the twenty-first century, a period in which scholarly interest has focused on contextual and dynamic aspects of learner motivation. Such broad historical brushstrokes can be valuable when outlining the big picture but these descriptions can also be lacking in vital details: periods overlap and theories are not simply replaced in the consecutive stages but are built on and modified, thereby causing subtle interactions.

According to the broad, three-phase outline, all of the research covered by the current study falls under the third stage, that is, under the umbrella of a broadly conceived socio-dynamic approach. However, consistent with the above qualification the reality we find is far more nuanced, with certain previous theories and research methodological approaches having lasting effects. Therefore, a primary interest of this paper lies in the interplay between the various theories and approaches within the post-2005 timeframe, with a special emphasis on examining (a) to what extent the main tenets of the social psychological period (namely, the dichotomy of integrative and instrumental motivation) are still featured in the current research agenda, (b) how the highly influential notions imported from cognitive and educational psychology during the 1990s (such as self-determination, attributions, and self-efficacy) fit in this shifting landscape, (c) how new theoretical concepts related to the L2 self have become established, and (d) how the evolution of research paradigms has been reflected in changes within the prevailing research practices.

The year 2005 was chosen as the starting point for our study because this was the year in which the currently dominant model of learner motivation, the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS; Dörnyei, 2005), was first proposed. Therefore, this starting date offered a useful landmark for observing the impact of the L2MSS on the overall research trajectory of the field, allowing us to observe how the new approach accommodated or perhaps side-lined other initiatives. While considering the evolution of the field over the past decade, we were also interested in the emergence of new ideas (e.g. the application of a complex dynamics systems approach) and how they established themselves on the research agenda. It is our belief that a broad overview such as the publication pattern analysis offered in this study is a worthwhile enterprise because as the field continues to expand — and we will illustrate the scale of this expansion numerically later in the paper — it becomes increasingly difficult for researchers to keep abreast of the changes. Analysing the anatomy of the extraordinary research surge in the area over the past decade may also be of interest beyond the immediate field of L2 motivation research, by offering lessons concerning the overall development of the field of SLA.

2. Methodology

2.1. Generating the article pool

A collection of papers — both empirical and conceptual — from databases and anthology chapters published between 2005 and 2014 was used to construct the dataset for this study. First, several keyword searches were conducted involving permutations of relevant terms such as 'motivation', 'language learning' and 'attitudes'.[3] This search procedure was conducted in four databases: Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), MLA International Bibliography (MLA), and PsychINFO, and new search parameters were added until we reached the point of saturation (i.e. new searches produced largely duplications only). Only publications focussing specifically on L2 motivation and written in English for an established journal were considered; that is, articles in working papers and university-specific publications were excluded even if they were available on the internet.

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[3] The keyword searches were restricted to only the title of the articles and included target word combinations such as a) 'language' and 'learning' and/or 'learner' and 'motivation' and/or 'motivating', b) 'L2 motivational self system', c) 'language' and 'learner' and/or 'learning' and 'vision', and d) 'language' and 'learning' and/or 'learner' and 'attitude'.