

# College English learners' discursive motivation construction in China

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## Abstract

There are abundant studies of second/foreign language learning motivation. However, there appears to be insufficient research into how language learners' discourses mediate the construction of their learning/motivation. This paper investigated the discursive construction of two English language learners' motivation in a comprehensive university in the People's Republic of China. Employing a critical discourse analysis framework, this paper illustrated how learner motivation was discursively constructed in the constant interaction between the individual and the social environment, and through a complex process involving learners' interpersonal relationships, their imaginative projections about the future, and an alignment with social discourses. The paper argues for more discourse-based studies that view motivation as a social and historical construct dynamically emerging from individual learners' interaction with contextual conditions and constructed in learners' language in use. This paper starts by locating this study within the L2 motivation literature and then provides an interpretation of the interview and diary study texts in light of the sociocultural context where the investigation occurred.

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## 1. Introduction

English language learning motivation, often assumed to be a vital factor in determining learning effect, constitutes an important topic for exploration in the context of Mainland China. China's Reform and Open Door policy propelled the country into an era of widespread English language learning and teaching, and its successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games and entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000 have fueled the English learning fever even further. Since the 1980s, China has been home to the largest number of English language learners in the world, a number now estimated at between 200 and 350 million, almost equal to the total number of English speakers in the USA (Yang, 2006). English has accelerated and strengthened

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the process of social reform and cultural assimilation; its spread and penetration into the Chinese context has been intimately linked to individuals' development and career prospects (Thøgersen, 2002; Zhang, 2003).

Second language learning motivation is believed to be one of the most important determinants in L2 learning. Motivation is viewed as a dynamic, situated and social construct (e.g., Dörnyei, 1998; Norton, 2000), and closely related to learners' identity construction (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 2000; Noels et al., 2001; Norton, 2000; Gao et al., 2007). Therefore, China, a country that has a national enthusiasm for learning English and is currently experiencing dramatic economic, social and cultural changes, becomes an ideal place in which to investigate the social and dynamic nature of English language learners' motivation and identity formation.

This paper draws on a qualitative case study of the English language learning experiences of two Chinese college students, and investigates how the learners construct their differing motivations as they interact with different levels of contexts such as the immediate learning community and the broader social milieu. A critical discourse analysis framework, founded upon "the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life", and cognizant of the fact that "social analysis and research always has to take account of language" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2), is utilized to explore the mediating role of language in motivation construction in this study. It is important to note that discourse, a notion widely used across different disciplines, in this paper refers to a "[way] of signifying experiences from a particular perspective" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138), and is an important form of social practice that "both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures" (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002, p. 65).

## 2. Literature review

Second language motivation has attracted much research effort. The social-psychological and cognitive approaches focus on the relationship between learners' individual traits or internal factors within L2 motivation and the learning outcomes (e.g., Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985, 2000, 2001; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993a,b; Noels et al., 2000). To establish the relationship between motivation and specific learning contexts, researchers working with situated approaches have examined the contextual influences of classroom language learning on motivation (e.g., Dörnyei, 1994, 2002; Dörnyei and Otto, 1998; Dörnyei and Csizer, 2002; Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Williams and Burden, 1997). In an effort to highlight the relationship between individual learners and the social context, sociocultural and poststructuralist researchers (e.g., Gu, 2008; Norton, 2000; Norton and Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko and Norton, 2007; Ushioda, 2001, 2007) have addressed the social influences on motivation and particularly the interaction between the individual and the social in learners' motivation development.

Norton (2000) argues that motivation needs to be understood with reference to the social context as well as learners' multiple and changing identities. Norton (2000) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). The notion of identity helps reveal the relationship between the language learner and the social world, and the learner's changing motivation in learning a second/foreign language. Drawing on the concept of 'imagination', researchers (Kanno and Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001) further argue that a language learner's imagined membership in the L2 community might produce a related imagined identity. According to Norton and Gao (2008, p. 114), L2 learners' imagined community not only "offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future", but may also be "a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships". Therefore, a learner's imagined communities and identities shadow his/her relationship with English and influence his/her motivation.

The above review indicates that some aspects in motivation research could be developed further. To compensate for the perceived weaknesses of the social psychological perspective, in which motivation is regarded as 'an individual trait' and the identified sub-components of motivation tested for their accuracy, correlations and causal relationships (e.g., Spolsky, 2000; Ushioda, 2001), researchers adopting sociocultural and post-structural approaches have made efforts to investigate the contextual and social dimensions of L2 learners' motivation. However, as a mechanism by which social and cultural factors impact individuals through language (Fairclough, 2003), the notion of discourse has not yet been given sufficient attention in motivation research. Kalaja and Leppänen's (1998) theoretical paper argues the case for a discursive social psychological

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