Factors affecting tertiary English learners' persistence in the self-directed language learning journey

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to identify the factors that influence tertiary students' continuation and completion of a self-directed English learning scheme at a university in Hong Kong. The study collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data based on 76 students' attendance records provided by language advisors, 27 completed online questionnaires, and seven interviews with purposively selected students. The findings revealed some factors that influenced students' engagement in independent language learning. They indicated that despite students' increasing wish to become proficient in English, their efforts to engage in language learning decreased over the course of the semester. Students' busy study schedules and the tough requirements of the scheme were identified as the major causes of demotivation among the participants. In contrast, continuous advisor and peer support and evidence of progress contributed to student persistence in the learning process. Another factor that distinguished motivated learners from less motivated learners was their level of autonomous behavior. Some recommendations are made to support teaching and learning in similar language support schemes in higher education to help sustain and promote students' interest in self-directed language learning.

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1. Introduction

Motivation in learning a foreign or second language (L2) has been an area of investigation, particularly in the context of independent language learning, as it can determine a language learner's success and failure in language acquisition. Theories of motivation in psychology and L2 learning have approached the issue from multiple perspectives, ranging from learners' learning goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gardner, 1985), cultural values and learning context (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), social and family influence (Butler, 2015; Zsolnai, 2010) to self-concept (Dörnyei, 2005; Kormos, Kiddle & Csizér, 2011). The subject of motivation that has been widely discussed over the years across many fields, including psychology, philosophy and education, has deepened our understanding of its nature and some ways to tackle motivational problems, particularly among learners during the learning process. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) define *motivation* as "[w]hat moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action" (p. 3). Following this line of thought, there have been studies researching and suggesting ways to motivate L2 learners through engagement in self-directed learning activities

or programmes both within and beyond the curriculum (Benson, 2011; Lai, Shum, & Tian, 2016; Magid & Chan, 2012). In spite of teacher and institutional effort, language learners often have difficulty sustaining motivation over time and some may give up in the midst of learning. In contrast to the enthusiastic discussion about motivation and the attrition problem, little is known about the factors that motivate and demotivate students in self-directed language learning programmes. While a growing body of research has emerged concerning the causes of demotivation among language learners in the classroom (Busse & Walter, 2013; Ikeno, 2002; Kikuchi, 2015), limited research has been undertaken to identify the factors that negatively affect learners' engagement with language learning outside of the classroom setting. Consequently, as many studies have shown, student attrition is and continues to be a problem in self-directed language learning programmes, including self-access programmes in tertiary education (e.g., Gardner & Yung, 2015; Reinders, 2005, 2007; Voller, Martyn, & Pickard, 1999).

This paper explores and discusses the factors affecting continuation and discontinuation of English language study with reference to a group of tertiary language learners who enrolled in a Self-directed Language Learning Scheme (SDLLS) in an English-medium university in Hong Kong. With a view to situating the study, the paper first reviews the literature of motivation for second language learning, demotivation and student attribution problems in self-directed language learning. Then it presents the background information of the SDLLS implemented in the university. Third, it summarizes the method of study and reports the quantitative and qualitative findings collected from multiple sources − students' attendance records, surveys and in-depth interviews. Finally, it discusses the factors affecting language learners' persistence in the self-directed language learning scheme. Some possible ways to support learning and teaching in similar language support schemes to better meet the needs of individuals and to improve retention and success rates are recommended.

2. Literature review

2.1. Motivation for L2 learning

Studying language learners' motivation is a way to reveal the secret of both success and failure in learning. Learning motivation is a complex process influenced by a myriad of personal, cultural, social and contextual factors (Dörnyei, 2001). A commonly used framework for understanding L2 motivation is Gardner's (1985) proposed integrative and instrumental motivation model that stresses the value of goals as the reasons for individual learners' successes or failures. Another model is the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy of self-determination theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). This theory emphasizes that a learner's learning goals can be influenced by pleasure, external rewards and even the feeling of regulation. Supplementing the concept of goal setting, Dörnyei and Ottó's process model (1998) describes the sequence of motivation from formation to enactment of intention. A decade later, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) introduced the L2 motivational self-system to further explain learners' motivated behaviors and performances from a social psychology perspective. In short, L2 learners' motives, goals, and how they see themselves or think what others want them to be can influence their learning objectives and methods, and participation inside or outside the classroom. Some of the motivated L2 learners may take the initiative and responsibility to look for ways to learn outside the classroom through some self-directed language learning programmes, and this will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

2.2. Demotivation and student attrition in the self-directed language learning context

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has emerged concerning the causes of demotivation among language learners in the classroom (Busse & Walter, 2013; Ikeno, 2002; Kikuchi, 2015), college courses, and voluntary programmes (Gillies, 2010; Heyman, 2010; Sitzmann, 2012). Causes are known to vary between situations. There has, however, been less research exploring the factors that negatively affect learners' motivation beyond the classroom setting, for instance, in a self-directed language learning context. Self-determination theory posits that "autonomous learners become more highly motivated and that autonomy leads to better, more effective work" (Dickinson, 1995, p. 165), but many scholars have reported high student attrition rates in language support programmes offered by a number of tertiary level self-access centres (SAC) (e.g., Mozzon-McPherson, 2007; Reinders, 2005, 2007).

Voller et al. (1999), for instance, reported that eighty-seven percent of the students who registered in a self-directed English language programme at a tertiary level SAC in Hong Kong dropped out during its first year of operation. Half of the students either did not attend, or attended only one language advisory session, while only 13% of the learners completed the programme, attending five or more sessions. The dropout rate improved in the following year after changes were made based on the feedback of learners in the previous year, but Voller and his colleagues felt that the dropout rate was still high (70%) despite intervention attempts. They concluded that further research was needed to determine whether the causes of attrition were structural or related to the nature of the programme.

Low retention rates among independent language learners in English language support programmes were also reported in more recent studies by Mozzon-McPherson (2007) and Reinders (2007). In line with Voller et al.'s (1999) findings, Mozzon-McPherson (2007) indicated that more than half of the students who attended the language advisory sessions at a tertiary level SAC in England were single-visit users (i.e. students who only came for one meeting) although more than a thousand students came to use the service each year. Only a quarter of the students were noted to have used the service at least twice, and only 10% were reported to have used the service more than three times. Her study did not identify the reasons for the