

A Grading System to Improve Motivation in Japanese University English Communication Classes

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This study focused on the viability of using the L2 Motivation Self System and the Japanese concepts of *Shidou* and *Wa* in a task-based grading system within the context of Japanese university English communication classes. The findings from the study were based on the qualitative data gathered from the researcher's personal teaching journal. The research was conducted over a two-year period and aims to introduce a grading system that could be implemented in classes where student motivation may be an issue.

INTRODUCTION

For learners of second languages (L2), motivation is one of the key factors that determines how successful they will be in a target language (Gardner, 1972). Motivation is also a highly complex phenomenon, not only in psychology, but in regard to L2 learning and pedagogy. Early L2 research on motivation had a tendency to view a learner's motivation as a static, fixed attribute, whereas more recent research views motivation in a more dynamic sense and attempts to explain why changes occur (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). During the early 1990s, more research was conducted to address these issues and resulted in a multitude of new theories including the social constructivist model, self-determination theory and autonomous learning theory. Since the turn of the century, L2 motivation research has produced many more theories and frameworks. This paper, however, will mainly focus on two different periods in L2 motivation research to help understand and define terms that are important in understanding the concepts within and or related to Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System theory. Several studies on L2 motivation research in Japan (Aubrey, 2014; Falout, 2003; Reed, 2018; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid & Papi, 2009) adhere to this particular framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instrumental and Integrative Motivation

From the 1960s up until 1990, referred to as the *social psychological period* by Dornyei (2011), the majority of L2 motivation research was conducted by two social psychologists, Wallace Lambert and Robert Gardner. Contemporary research

in the L2 motivation field is indebted to this pair of researchers who, in 1972, produced pioneering work which led to the terms “instrumental motivation” and “integrative motivation.” The former relates to goals for practical language gains, such as L2 learning to get a better job. The latter is seen as a counterpart to the former, relating to L2 learning for personal and cultural growth. Gardner (1985) also proposed that L2 motivation was made up of three key elements; motivational effort, desire to learn the L2, and attitude towards learning the L2. According to Gardner, only a learner who shows all three of the aforementioned components could be considered truly motivated.

In Gardner and Lambert’s model of motivation, the learner’s motivation is connected to an attitude towards an L2 community and the goals linked to acquiring a second language. They suggested that learners who possess integrative motivation could perform better than learners who are instrumentally motivated. This theoretical framework inspired a great deal of research which, although producing large amounts of empirical data, was inconsistent in terms of results. As a consequence, the original claim that integrative motivation was a better indicator of a learner being successful in L2 acquisition than an individual with instrumental motivation was disputed by other researchers. Both types of motivation, instrumental and integrative, have been considered to be predictors of success in learning second languages (Light & Spada, 1993).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

According to Dornyei (2011), one of the L2 motivation research frameworks that became a popular model to pursue was the self-determination theory. In the self-determination theory, motivation is split into two main groups, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation (IM) relates to an individual engaging in a behavior to experience some kind of personal pleasure, whereas extrinsic motivation (EM) is a behavior to get a reward or avoid a punishment. Classroom-based research done by Noels, Pelletier, Clement and Vallerand (2000) resulted in a theory that suggested intrinsic motivation factors such as enjoyment and interest may not be enough to encourage the development of an individual’s learning experience and that the personal value and importance placed on the learning of the L2 might be more important. The research conducted by Noels et al. also highlighted the importance of other factors specific to the social learning setting such as the teachers' communication or instructional style and how this offers opportunities for autonomy as opposed to being too rigid or controlling. Interestingly, this idea of the importance of autonomy to motivation and its positive affect has been questioned as being a construct defined from a Western individualist perspective. This cultural aspect of motivation will be further addressed later in the paper after first defining a few key models in the current literature alongside some concrete examples from this study.

Intrinsic Motivation

L2 learners who possess IM study for their own enjoyment and satisfaction, getting pleasure from the language learning experience and the activities in which they participate. The research of Noels, Pelletier, Clement and Vallerand (2000) organized IM into three subtypes:

1. *IM-Knowledge* is concerned with developing knowledge and investigating new ideas.
2. *IM-Accomplishment* is involved with task completion and goal achievement.
3. *IM-Stimulation* is linked to experiencing fun and enjoyable feelings created by performing tasks.

All three types of intrinsic motivation share the underlying theme motivation is gained by engaging in activities which are challenging and are started by oneself. However, intrinsic motivation is notoriously low among most of the student body in a Japanese university setting, creating a situation that can create problems for university instructors. (Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Reed, 2018).

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation relates to external factors, such as L2 learning to earn a reward or to avoid a punishment as opposed to L2 learning for personal enjoyment. The continuum for self-determination divides extrinsic motivation into four sub-categories, ranked from the lowest level (1) of self-determination to the highest level (4) (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2011).

1. *External regulation* comes from external sources including rewards or threats.
2. *Introjected regulation* is concerned with external rules which are followed in order for the learner to not feel guilty.
3. *Identified regulation* is linked to a learner participating in activities which they see as useful and can relate to their own personal interests.
4. *Integrated regulation* concerns the learner's behavior and how it incorporates the needs and identity of the learner.

It is possible to question the dichotomy of motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic. According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011), Deci and Ryan maintained that “different types of extrinsic motivation exist along a continuum that can classify the extent to which they are internalized as part of the self-concept” (p. 24). Thus, it can be observed that no social pressures are purely external to the individual as they interact with the individuals' feelings of motivation. For example, wanting to get a high score on the TOEIC test for career advancement is not purely a kind of social responsibility; it can also be viewed as a kind of accomplishment which allows the individual a sense of personal gratification. Therefore, this may be an example of integrated regulation which has been observed among Japanese L2 learners. However, at the university level, self-determination appears to be

generally low and there is a visible lack of more integrated forms of motivation (McVeigh, 2001). Thus, according to the above framework, the most common types of extrinsic motivation seen are external regulation (i.e. the threat of not passing the course) and introjected regulation (the guilt of disappointing the teacher).

The L2 Motivational Self System

The L2 Motivational Self System is a theoretical framework devised by Dornyei that is influenced by a combination of L2 motivation research and mainstream psychology. It has taken the concepts of the possible selves theory of Markus and Nurius (1986) and the ought-to selves theory of Higgins (1987) and adapted it for learners to encourage them to imagine themselves as a part of the L2 community. Dornyei's framework is made up of three components: *Ideal L2 Self*, *Ought-to L2 Self* and *L2 Learning Experience*.

1. *Ideal L2 Self* : Dornyei (2011) claims that this is a key component of the three, and is the future self that the learner would like to become. The learner has to imagine themselves in the future using the L2 in an attractive situation that they could envisage happening. Students can see the differences between their actual selves now, compare that with their future selves and figure out how to diminish the dissimilarities between the two selves.
2. *Ought-to L2 Self* : This is the future self that would like to prevent a negative outcome from happening, for instance, failing a test or course. External reasons, such as the learner's family, school or company, create a pressure for L2 learners to achieve a positive outcome. It must be noted however that if, for example, a student would like to achieve a high grade in a test for personal development, then it would have to be seen as a positive desire and would be categorized under the *Ideal L2 Self* instead of the *Ought-to L2 Self*.
3. *L2 Learning Experience*: This component is the only one of the three that is not based on the learner's imagined future selves. It is how the learner is affected by the immediate, day-to-day experiences from situations related to the L2 in the learning environment. The influence of the teacher, the learning atmosphere, the learning materials and the methods used in the classroom can all have positive or negative effects on student motivation.

All three components are regarded as powerful motivators in L2 language learning and teaching, and could be summarized as the learner's positive vision of themselves using the L2, the external social pressures, and a positive learning environment. Since Dornyei's model has been validated in a number of studies, it has become a common framework to pursue L2 motivation research (see Falout, 2003; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009).

Research using the L2 Motivational Self System has not only been used to validate and reinforce the applicability of the framework, but to also create, develop and expand the new theories that have emerged from it. The study by Taguchi, Magid and Papi (2009) based in Japan, Iran, and China, provided data to support the theory. Additionally, research by Ryan (2009) also revealed strong correlations between Dornyei's original data from Hungary and his own data collected in Japan. However, there seems to be a real difficulty with motivation in Japan, particularly at the university level. Yamashiro and McLaughlin (2000) have described Japan as a "black hole," devoid of motivation, which, while the metaphor may be a little extreme, is not altogether unfair as many teachers of English with experience in Japan will understand.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The continuing need to identify ways to help improve motivation, especially in low-ability L2 learners, guides this research. Therefore, based on the aforementioned literature, the following questions for this exploratory study were proposed:

1. What are the key motivating factors that influence L2 learner engagement?
2. What is the practicality of utilizing the L2 Motivational Self System in Japan?

METHODOLOGY

Implementation

The researcher used a qualitative approach to this study utilizing recorded notes over several classes in a personal teaching journal. Entries were created intermittently and were originally used as a way of recording general thoughts on classes. These were then used more systematically to document aspects of lessons that had worked well, as well as looking at areas for improvement in the future. This personal teaching journal has been used as the main source of data and has been treated as field notes.

Participants

The field notes were collected from observing 80 first-year participants in three separate Oral Communication classes over a two-year period from a private university in Japan. The classes were compulsory and none of the participants were English majors. Additionally, the majority of the participants were considered low-ability L2 learners with an average TOEIC score of 150.

DISCUSSION

Two concepts that are important to education within Japanese contexts are that of 指導 (*shidou*) which refers literally to “pointing the way” or guiding learners on the correct path of learning (McVeigh, 2002) and 和 (*wa*), which refers to social harmony (Spiller & Wolfgramm, 2015). These two concepts and how they affect motivation in a university context in Japan will be discussed below in further detail. These concepts could add a new cultural dimension to the study of motivation which has so far been conceptualized mainly from a Western perspective.

Shidou

Based on observation in the researcher’s own classroom, there tends to be a great reliance on teacher instruction in Japan, while self-determination and autonomy are important to the extent that learners must believe they possess the ability to execute the tasks in order to attempt them. In particular, L2 learners at low-ranking universities in Japan constantly require a guiding hand. On many

occasions, this researcher has found learners unresponsive to spoken or written tasks. An illustrative example from the researcher's own teaching journal reads as follows, "one student at the back of the class always has his head down and never does anything. I'll have to sort this out" (Personal Teaching Journal, September 2018).

Originally, it was presumed that this particular student was uncooperative and had no interest in being in the classroom. The researcher had begun to label him a "lazy troublemaker." However, after conversing with his colleagues who have a greater command of the Japanese language, the researcher began to consider the possibility that the student was unable to participate in class due to a lack of guidance on the researcher's part. We could say that this kind of student is especially low in self-determination and autonomy and perhaps a lack of confidence and self-esteem, particularly regarding EFL. Therefore, as an experiment, the researcher decided to offer him more personal guidance, or *shidou*, in the form of constantly monitoring his work and communicating as clearly as possible in Japanese to make sure he could understand the task sufficiently. Sure enough, the researcher discovered that what might be referred to pejoratively in Western cultures as a "micro-management" technique was actually extremely effective in re-engaging the student in the classes. His overall motivation improved and he showed a greater willingness to participate, to the extent that the researcher was able to spend less time on him in the coming weeks. Therefore, the researcher found that it was important not to take student comprehension for granted. Not only will students be reticent to ask when they do not understand, students with low motivation and self-determination will make a limited effort to understand challenging content. Teacher guidance is perhaps relied upon more than in Western settings, and this is something that this researcher has begun to take into account in his own classroom.

Wa

Wa refers to a sense of social harmony or balance and is not readily translatable to a direct English equivalent. Initially, as a novice instructor at the university level this researcher singled out learners to make contributions to class discussions and was generally met with silence. Furthermore, learners were offered the chance to work independently on creative tasks to promote autonomy, such as creating simple dialogues based on the target language in pairs or group conversations using question prompts. These kinds of tasks had the opposite effect intended. Subsequently, motivation decreased. As recorded in the researcher's teaching journal, "Tried group prompted convo [*sic*] with simple questions today. Almost all of them just stared at paper, heads down...need to scaffold more or something..." (Personal Teaching Journal, September 2018).

Initially, the researcher was at a loss as to why the participants did not take part in the task. Initially, the activity was perceived by the teacher to be modeled sufficiently and that most of the content was understood by the majority of the class and therefore, the learners should have had the tools they needed to participate autonomously. Following these early experiences, the researcher considered that there must be a cultural element to motivation that he had not yet uncovered

sufficiently in the motivation literature and the theoretical models discussed in this paper. Although it has been argued that the idea of Japanese social orientations and Western individual orientations is a little simplistic and stereotypical (Kubota, 1998), the researcher's own teaching experiences in England and Japan, although very different in nature, would tend to endorse this dichotomy to some extent. Japanese harbour a strong sense of social consideration, and perhaps because of this, very few participants seem to want to take the initiative in group work or in class discussions. McVeigh (2002) is skeptical about the idea of Japanese culture of "shyness" as an excuse for classroom "apathy," but one feels his view is a little unfair. This researcher has found greater success in approaching learners in smaller groups or one-on-one to elicit their thoughts and opinions, rather than either in front of the whole class, or in larger peer groups. The cultural obstacle of *wa*, not wanting to stand out and disturb social harmony is a relevant phenomenon to learner motivation in Japan (Spiller & Wolfgramm, 2015).

The researcher feels that the concepts of *shidou* and *wa* have been instructive to him as a teacher in Japan. Levels of guidance can be adjusted when one sees poorly motivated students. So, simply, more guidance provided by the teacher should activate more willingness and ability to participate in class and thus increase motivation of the students. Similarly, an attention to the classroom setting and atmosphere, from a perspective of *wa*, has allowed the researcher to avoid demotivational behaviors such as embarrassing participants by making them talk in front of the class, or putting them in large groups for discussion without clear guidelines that can reduce the responsibility of individuals to act creatively or independently. Of course, from a Western perspective, the researcher does value creative and critical thinking and believes that Japanese students are perfectly capable of this as well. In order to accomplish this, the researcher can begin by creating a classroom atmosphere that fosters independent action and critical thinking without overwhelming students with too many demands for culturally unfamiliar actions.

Incremental change in grading

No effort at all from almost all of them. Back to the drawing board? Couldn't do the reading. Only one girl seemed interested. (Personal Teaching Journal, June 2018)

Absolutely nothing from them today. Almost no output at all. (Personal Teaching Journal, July 2018)

Lots of heads down on desks after an hour. Maybe too content heavy? (Personal Teaching Journal, July 2018)

The tone of exasperation is clear from the above excerpts, and there are a multitude of other examples that could also be found in the personal teaching journal. After becoming familiar with the work of Dornyei, MacIntyre and Henry

(2014) and especially Dornyei's application of Larsen-Freeman's (1997) complex dynamic systems theory of motivation, the researcher began to perceive that motivation really was a dynamic and fluctuating phenomenon and could change not only across the term but across a single lesson itself. This led to a particularly effective incremental change in the course organization and classroom management approach. Having already learned the necessity of grading Japanese university students weekly on participation and task completion, the researcher further broke this down from evaluating participants on their performance in the class as a whole, to their performance every thirty minutes in a ninety-minute class. With a maximum number of three points available for task completion and no points for failure to complete the task, meaning that participants could get a maximum of nine points per lesson (see Appendix 1). The system seemed easy for the participants to understand and their willingness to participate greatly increased. Furthermore, if participants failed to satisfactorily complete one task, they would have further opportunities in the same class to participate in the other tasks. Thus, they were generally motivated to improve their performance to accomplish the other tasks in order to receive some points for the lesson.

Problem student actually did the work today. Giving a score in front of his face seemed to do the job. (Personal Teaching Journal, October 2018)

A couple of the boys weren't doing much at the start of class so gave them a zero. After that, they actually put in a bit of effort. (Personal Teaching Journal, December 2018)

The hard-working girls have been getting full points for all tasks pretty much. (Personal Teaching Journal, January 2019)

Initially, less motivated participants who failed to perform in the first task, were jolted into action after receiving a zero grade. After a few months of using this dynamic grading system, even previously poorly motivated learners were much more attentive and followed instructions better in order to ensure they could comply and receive task completion points. The participants who initially had issues with motivation in classes, despite not having a particular interest in the English language, put in much more effort in order to amass enough points to pass the course.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

The grading system can be used within the L2 Motivational Self System and should also be used with the concepts of *shidou* and *wa* in mind. The students who have realized their L2 ideal selves typically seem to want to get the maximum number of points for every task, while the students who do not want to fail the course and merely pass the semester, the grading system can be adapted and utilized in conjunction with their Ought-to- L2 Selves. Despite the positives in terms of

motivating students, negative aspects of this particular grading system are acknowledged, especially in regard to consuming time. Teachers are expected to give a participation grade every thirty minutes to each individual student, which could be problematic for larger classes, perhaps not even realistic. The researcher has used an Excel spreadsheet to calculate scores based on the results gathered from the participants grade cards at the end of every semester as well (see Appendix 2). This requires a lot of time inputting data outside regular working hours. Additionally, this paper has relied on the qualitative data of a personal teaching journal. Potential weaknesses of a qualitative approach include both the narrow scope of the data and the subjectivity involved in its interpretation (Dornyei, 2012). Further studies will be needed to test the effectiveness of this grading system by collecting more quantitative data, as well as further qualitative data, on a wider scale and replicating the study.

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APPENDIX 1: Grading Card for Recording Student Participation Scores

First Semester

1学期

Weekly Quiz Scores

3	4	5
6	7	8
9	10	11
12	13	14

Weekly Classwork Grades

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
10	11	12
13	14	15
