

# Boys will be boys: motivational theory and its implications for young male EFL learners

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## I Introduction

The classroom in a broad sense presents the failures of positivism within social research perhaps most succinctly. Here, problems of human behavior intermingle with social phenomena, at the nexus of epistemological and indeed ontological realities as the transfer/construction of knowledge happen in the face of both being and becoming (Cohen et al., 2007). With that said, Guba and Lincoln contend that the recent rise of more interpretivist methods within the social sciences at large has brought with it an ongoing paradigmatic debate in which the fundamental assumptions underlying research are addressed. Methodology, they claim, is “inevitably interwoven with and emerges from the nature of particular disciplines” (2008, pp. 256), however, they later add that the boundaries between the various methodologies “are fluid [and] keep[s] altering, [and] enlarging”. (2008, pp. 264)

These ideas will be addressed within the context of the following question: What is the best way to understand and, ideally, foster motivation among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students; particularly boys? This article will first provide a brief overview of the history of second language (L2) motivational research, situating the question within. Following will be an exploration of how the problem might be investigated from three different methodological perspectives, weighing their strengths and weaknesses, along with notes on how these approaches might guide professional practice throughout.

## II History of L2 Motivational Research

Motivational research in L2 learning has a long history which can be divided into 3 distinct historical segments starting with the social psychological period, the cognitive-situated period and finally the process-oriented period (Ellis, 2008; Dornyei, 2005). The social psychological period, the genesis of which is credited to Gardner and Lampert (1972), is defined by its rejection of the idea that there is a language learning “aptitude” that some learners possess, and rather a confluence of factors including integrativeness, attitude towards the learning situation, anxiety and motivation. Later in the 1990s, situation specific factors took the stage, such as language learning specific to the classroom etc., and more recently the process-oriented view of motivation has emerged which emphasizes the dynamic nature of motivation, specifically its temporal variation (Ellis, 2008).

Interestingly, of these three theoretical epochs, very few views have been outright rejected or replaced despite the emergence of so many over the years. Gardner and Lampert’s notion of integrative motivation for example, is still referenced in more recent research (Ellis, 2008). Their concept of integrating into the target L2’s culture gave birth to the concept of *instrumental* motivation in which learners view the L2 as a mere tool. Although instrumental motivation is generally considered inferior to integrative motivation, in cultures where access to the target culture/language is limited (such as Japan) it is a far more powerful construct (Ellis, 2008), making it to-date a still-contested dichotomy (Noels et al., 2000).

Dornyei suggests that the “subjective reasons we attribute to past successes and failures considerably shape our motivational disposition underlying future action” (2005, pp. 79), which was the next idea to emerge in motivational research’s history. It is here that the first methodological cracks in positivist L2 motivation research may be traced; cracks which when viewed across the spectrum of social science research contribute to the eventual five-pronged schism outlined by Guba and Lincoln (2008). Dornyei (2001 a, as

cited in Ellis 2008) argues that the research thus far has been too focused on quantitative research; specifically surveys. This spurred a host of research employing much more qualitative methods involving more probing interviews and a focus on the more “experiential dimension to motivational learning” (pp. 686).

Ryan and Deci then proposed Self-Determination Theory (1985); a theoretical model which stems from the psychological need for competence and autonomy. They further maintain that when these needs are met, and the relevance of the subject material is simultaneously illustrated for students, the result is – the ideal – intrinsic motivation; a natural self-rewarding human curiosity to learn. This stands in contrast to extrinsic motivation which is a motivation to learn based on external rewards such as positive feedback, or even the drive to avoid negative feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Noels et al., 2000).

Dornyei (2003) also adds to the list of theoretical shifts in L2 motivational research that of the neurobiological dimension. In the 1990s, Schumann promised that emerging brain imaging technology promised to “revolutionize” the field (pp. 10) as it was thought to be able to add much-needed empirical evidence. Despite its ability to fulfil its promise, methodological hurdles have remained obstinate in that the focus of many of the experiments has been on the more physiological, ignoring the multi-dimensional social realities inherent to motivation. Indeed, it would seem Shumann’s prescription for more empirical evidence is easily relatable to positivist critiques of constructivism in general, pitting the experimental method as the hierarchical ‘king’ (Moses & Knutsen, 2007). Much of this research reads as epistemologically sound, but methodologically myopic and misguided in light of motivation’s inherently social dimensions (see Schmidt et al., 2012).

As previously mentioned, one of the valuable developments in L2 motivational research has been its recognition that it is a dynamic construct subject to change over time. Williams and Burden (1997) distinguished three motiva-

tional phases – later adapted by Dornyei (2003) – as preactional (choosing to learn an L 2), actional (sustaining the desire to learn), and postactional (retrospection on the part of the learner, determining their motivation to continue). According to Ellis (2008) this model is far superior to the more static models which have dominated research to date and, furthermore, is capable of integrating a variety of pre-existing models.

Finally, the most recent theoretical development in L2 motivational research is that of the ‘ideal self’. Here motivation is conceptualized as the desire to minimize the gap between one’s *actual* and *ideal* selves. Integrativeness, then, is reconceptualized as a part of one’s L2 self (Dornyei, 2003). In his final comment on the matter, Ellis (2008) notes that one of the most noteworthy developments in the field today is the attention being paid to how teachers can foster motivation in their students.

Several studies have shown that girls outperform boys in L2 learning, and the reasons for this are complex (Ellis, 2008). However Mori and Gobel (2006) found that the only area in which there is significant difference between boys and girls (within the Japanese context), is in their desire to integrate into foreign cultures, with girls possessing a greater desire. Building on these findings, and in light of Ryan’s (2009) assertion of the importance of one’s notion of one’s L2 self, this paper will consider both i) how to foster motivation within students at large, and more specifically, ii) probe deeper into the reasons why boys possess a weaker desire to integrate.

### III Participatory Culture and Feminism

Intuitively, the gendered nature of this research question points towards a feminist perspective as feminism “acknowledges the pervasive influence of gender as a category of analysis and organization” (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 34).

However, contrary to feminism’s traditional emancipatory leanings – “[Feminist] research must empower women” (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 36) – here there is a situation in which *boys* are the disadvantaged demographic,

as boys across the board do worse in L2 learning than girls (Mori & Gobel, 2006; Ellis, 2008). The focus on emancipation, power relations and outright rejection of positivist research due to positivism's "[inability] to abide by its own principles of objectivity" (Gillies & Alldred 2002, as cited in Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 37) makes it a slightly awkward fit out of the gate. Indeed, motivational research has been somewhat of a late-comer to social science's broad shift to more constructivist methodologies and consequently many of its theoretical axioms are based on more positivist research.<sup>1</sup>

At any rate, a feminist approach would involve some clearly defined characteristics. First, in the interest of the participants obtaining equal status with the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007) strident efforts would have to be made to combat the Confucian "sage on the stage" view participants would have of the authors – as teachers, researchers *and* seniors – fostering a reciprocal relationship. This might constitute one of the biggest challenges to research in this regard as well-defined hierarchy is the cornerstone of most, if not all, Japanese relationships, evidenced by both personal observation and Japan's high Power Distance Index rating (Hofstede, n.d.).

If feminist research is defined by a constant move to emancipate, empower and give voice to women, as well as an overall mandate for change in general (Cohen et al., 2007), then there are other challenges that will inevitably surface within the Japanese context as well. According to Hofstede (n.d.) Japan has startlingly entrenched gender roles (second only to the Slovak Republic) with a masculinity rating of 95. Almost as high is their uncertainty avoidance rating at 92 (ibid, n.d.) which, in tandem with the masculinity rating, might even suggest a culture-wide preference for the more conservative situation evident. Finally, the individuality index (ibid, n.d.) in Japan is rela-

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, one may go as far as to argue that the binary nature of gender itself (as a category) lends itself to more quantitative research methods (Yukhymenko, 2016, personal communication). However, so as not to get bogged down in philosophical semantics, or lost in a methodological wilderness, this paper will assume that feminism acknowledges the disadvantage the male gender faces in the language learning classroom, seeking to rectify this as best as is possible in the interest of social justice (Cohen et al., 2007)

tively low, which might fly in the face of the feminism's encouragement of multiple views. Indeed, despite Lather's assertion of the importance of bringing to surface multiple views, (as cited in Drake, 2011), there simply may not be such a wide variety of views to be uncovered.

At any rate, these factors would need to be taken into account if a feminist methodology were to be implemented, or it would be difficult to imagine any real change occurring. A good first step might be to explicitly ask participants what they feel is the best way to go about this; this would align with participatory self-awareness (Guba & Lincoln, 2008) and the feminist rejection of hierarchy (Cohen et al., 2007).

The limitation of this methodology is the emancipatory aspect, which might best be ignored owing both to Drake's warning that "research that seeks to 'empower participants' should be regarded with caution" (2011, pp. 44) as well as the more general admission that oppression seems an ill fit with boys and L2 learning. With that said, there are efforts being made with regards to women's lack of participation/performance within STEM subjects fuelled by feminist methodologies (Sommers, 2013), so over and above the fitting symmetry, it could be argued that it would be ethically dubious to ignore boys in this regard.

As far as guiding practice in the L2 classroom, obviously there is very little that can be done where generalisability is concerned. With that said, the very conversations necessary to conduct the research might provide stimulating material and, if conducted in students' L2, would provide material for the lessons themselves. (More on guiding practice later.)

#### IV Constructivism/Critical Theory

According to Guba and Lincoln (2008), the question as to whether commensurability between paradigms is possible, garners a cautious 'yes', and it is in light of this cautious yes that reconciliation of the two paradigms will be at-

tempted while simultaneously convincing the reader of their validity within the Japanese context.

Critical theory, sitting adjacent to constructivism on Guba and Lincoln's methodological continuum, renders much of its epistemological basis in historical insights. Under *Nature of knowledge*, *Knowledge accumulation* and *Goodness or quality criteria*, a focus on history is paramount. Here, the authors suggest this criteria could foster a necessary cultural-positional understanding for students; that is, they could come to know some of the challenges located at the nexus of language learning/motivation/gender and Japanese culture which they – as the “transformative intellectual(s)” could “reveal” (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, pp. 261). Once, via reflection, many of these challenges have become clear, a consciously-driven paradigmatic shift would occur. Control would shift from the “transformative intellectual” researcher, to the participants, where the researcher becomes a “passionate participant” (ibid, pp. 261) within the conversation.

This approach is feasible for a number of reasons. First, the two paradigms rest comfortably under what Moses and Knutsen would deem a constructivist methodology along what can be viewed as a imaginary “continuum” (2007, pp. 7) or what Dornyei would label more broadly qualitative research (2007). Secondly, armed with the knowledge that Japanese boys generally do not care to integrate with foreign cultures as much as girls, we would be in an ideal position to have a conversation as to why this is; begin a process of understanding (Taylor et al., 2016). Certainly a measure of reflexivity would be necessary, but in light of the question of integrativeness, perhaps beginning with an understanding as to what students on an individual level find attractive about both their own culture and foreign L2 cultures would be an interesting place to start.

At any rate, it must be noted that any insights garnered via this method could not be generalized, but would instead contribute to a more holistic understanding (Taylor et al., 2016); preserving the integrity of the situation to a

degree beyond the reach of positivism (Cohen et al., 2007). Certainly the extent to which results might guide practice would depend on the results, but obviously if it could be found that – for example – materials and/or subjects covered in class could be geared to stoke an integrative interest in boys without being too costly in regards to girls integrative interest/notion of L2 self, then steps would be taken in that regard. Ideally however, it would be a case of a “rising tide lifting all boats”.

## V Postpositivism/ Mixed Methods

Despite social science’s general shift away from positivist methodologies over the years, the main tool in the L2 motivational researcher’s toolbox has continued to be the attitude questionnaire (Dornyei, 2007). To my mind this would pit this method in a postpositivist methodological position, in that it is clearly quantitative, but also cognisant of more subjective epistemological factors or *phenoumena* (Moses & Knutsen, 2007). At any rate, there is further something to be said for the undeniable popularity of them within the L2 motivational research community, and in light the fact that as of late, more positivist positions have fallen out of fashion (Dornyei, 2007), questionnaires can be equipped with open-ended questions, perhaps giving them a methodological nudge back into favour. At any rate, attitude questionnaires continuously form the basis of motivational research as they are able to accurately – and invaluablely – stratify participants into motivational categories (Dornyei, 2007; Lalonde & Gardener, 1985) for – in this case – further more qualitative investigation.

With this in mind – and unlike the other two approaches – a hypothesis would guide and inform a questionnaire which could then be designed and administered to students. This would serve to firstly confirm or dismiss the hypothesis as well as stratify students into their respective motivational levels, linking them to gender, perhaps even offering insight into other variables such as types of motivational constructs underlying their behaviour (intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, etc.). With two gendered lists of students, each



stratified from least to most motivated, students could be called in for follow-up interviews which would further investigate the attitudes indicated on the questionnaires. Perhaps most and least motivated boys would serve an ideal starting point, but other demographics could serve as interesting contrast. This constitutes what Dornyei would call a mixed-methods approach, which he deems the *ideal* method in the “understanding of [L2] phenomen[a]” (2007, pp. 47). As well, Johnson et al. assert that its popularity stems from a pragmatic recognition that knowledge is “both socially constructed *and* based on the reality of the world we experience.” (as cited in Gray 2014, pp. 195, italics in original).

It is worth noting that despite Dornyei’s advocacy of the mixed methods approach, Bryman (2007 b, as cited in Gray, 2014) points to a lack of well-known exemplars/scholars advocating the methodology. Further, despite its ‘best of both worlds’ reputation, it can suffer from semantic confusion resulting from the methodological ill fit between the two methods. Finally, commonalities between the two methods also risk being misinterpreted due to fundamental phenomenological differences (Gray, 2014).

The extent to which this “quantitative then qualitative” (Gray, 2014) perspective could guide practice or decision-making would hinge – like the other approaches – on the results garnered, however the quantitative methods applied in the first half of the study would naturally constitute more generalisable results. Particularly if a reliable and much-used questionnaire such as Gardener’s Attitude/Motivational Test Battery (AMTB) were used, across the board comparisons could be made, bolstering or challenging the field of L2 motivational research in perhaps a cultural context, as well as adding perspective to my study. Naturally the more qualitative investigation would – at the expense of external validity – offer what Geertz (1973, as cited in Bloor & Wood, 2006) termed “thick[er] description”.

## VI A Concluding Note on Factors Which Might Inform or Guide Practice.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the often overlooked fundamental political realities underpinning the reasons for this research. As Drake (2011) points out, power relations affect virtually every level of social research, and upon reflection there are at least two factors which could muddy this research.

First, there is the social and cultural background of the authors and their own political beliefs. Neither could be described as feminist, however loosely that term is interpreted. As such, it is possible that any research conducted employing the methods outlined above could be challenged or dismissed outright by those who do identify as feminist. One author in particular, coming from a low SES background, suspects that his upbringing, at least in part, has nurtured his interest in researching this topic and helping similarly challenged young male learners. Unfortunately (research-wise) Japan's thriving middle-class doesn't afford very fertile ground in an SES capacity, but at any rate, personal experience has undeniably informed research interest, and therefore potentially the results.

Adding to the introspective challenge to objectivity, is the challenge of – as alluded to before – interpreting boys as a disadvantaged demographic. As Sommers points out, higher education writ large is currently rife with feminist ideology, (2013) which could present numerous challenges from funding to publishing to even taking action in helping those affected, as this research question contradicts an accepted narrative of female oppression.

Indeed, due to often unnoticeable political realities and entrenched personal views or niches, research can never be “clean, neutral or objective” (Drake, 2011, pp. 35), however as Pallas (2001) points out, participation and reification in communities of practice (Wegner, 1998, as cited in Pallas, 2001) is a fruitful way to sidestep these difficulties. Perhaps engaging with the feminist community at large, listening to and sharing experiences can contribute to an understanding of sorts. In light of the fact that at a visceral level, underpinning

both the authors' and feminist motivations is a drive towards social justice, this is at least theoretically possible.

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