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MOTIVATION-IN-CONTEXT: A STUDY OF L2 IDENTITY FORMATION IN A DOMINANTLY L1 UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract
This study was conducted to identify the interplay between the formation of self-image and the perception of learners about their identity as Sri Lankan English speakers. Motivation in language learning has been associated with various factors (motives) that play a role in persuading the learners to learn a language. Recent research in motivation have picturised motivation as a crucial element in language learning which is affected by a host of other factors that are contextually unique. In Sri Lankan tertiary learning environment, the need for English language has been felt mostly in the higher education and employment of the graduates. Thus, I aimed at obtaining answer to the question whether and how the learning experiences learners gain in the university of Jaffna motivate them to accomplish their language goals. I wanted to examine the role of their perception of their identity English speakers since this realisation is significant in pushing a learner forward to achieve their language goals. I used mixed methods research and gathered data from forty participants using questionnaire and selected five among them for semi-structured interview. Results revealed that compared to their school learning experiences, university provided them with adequate opportunities to be in English speaking environment and factors like their self-confidence, social expectations, and socioeconomic background supported in this process. However, since most of these opportunities were provided outside their language classroom, they benefitted only a few learners. Therefore, it is recommended that language classrooms provide more such opportunities relevant to learners' proficiency.

Keywords: identity, language learning, motivation, self-image, tertiary education

Introduction

The term ‘motivation’ can be better explained via the answer to ‘what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action?’ (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 3). The questions may be simple at surface level; though the answers to this question has resulted in a wide range of theories in language related to motivation beginning with behaviourism to the more recent dynamic systems approach. Thus, motivation in language learning has been defined diversely owing to the perspectives and conceptualisations that were formed in

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during the respective periods related to different schools of thought in motivation theory.

The major components of motivation and their influence on learning have been dealt separately in the past (Dornyei, 2019; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1993, cited in Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011 p. 92; Dornyei & Otto, 1998). However, recent research has attempted to integrate the components and view motivation as a complex entity. "Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context-relational view and the notion of directed motivational currents reflect this shift (Dörnyei et al., 2016, as cited in Leung & Lamb, 2024)." Accordingly, context has become a crucial factor of interest that has been interconnected with motivation. According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) several factors amalgamate to form the complex concept of context in motivation "associated with situation-specific motives rooted in various aspects of language learning in a classroom setting." (p. 125)

Of these motives, my study attempts to investigate the interrelationship between the future-self of the learner and their identity. Pizzolato (2006, p. 59) provides a clear interpretation of self-guide: "The relation between what students want to become and what students actually become may be mediated by what students feel they are able to become." In this mediating process various learning experiences play a significant role like any other factor. I have studied their perception related to English language and their identity formation.

As Darwin and Evizariza (2024), in their study about identity, suggest, "in the context of education, language not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a means of shaping cultural, social and personal values." (p. 50) Identity, therefore, determines who a person is, where they are from and how they behave. All these elements are communicated through a language. At this context, it was interesting and enlightening to explore how the interconnection of identity and second language is perceived by a group of first language speakers. Language learning in schools not only teaches linguistic skills, but also facilitates the development of students' cultural, social and academic identities (Evans & Fisher, 2022; Sugianto, 2022). Language also plays a significant role in shaping social identity in the educational environment. In the classroom, students often use language to negotiate their social status, both through formal and informal language use. These language choices reflect their social standing among peers and teachers (Arman et al., 2023)

Learners from various educational backgrounds get admitted to the University of Jaffna to follow degree programmes in different subject areas. They could possibly possess differing levels of language proficiency owing to the factors that affected their learning in the school. Of them, my study prioritises their perception of whether their English proficiency is related to their identity formation. From past research (De Silva & Devendra 2014; Rameez, 2019; Ratwatte, 2012) it could be concluded that university undergraduates require English language competence for their higher studies and employment. However, the actual competence of the undergraduates does not seem to satisfy the employers (Rameez, 2019; Wijewardane et al., 2014). In the university of Jaffna such a study needs to be conducted with the general degree undergraduates of the faculty of arts as these undergraduates hail from various socioeconomic backgrounds with a salient common feature that their living environment is predominantly governed by Tamil

as the language of communication. Moreover, the context of their education is influenced by Tamil. These contextual specifications make it essential to investigate whether they consider English language as a determinant of their identity and thus take efforts to shape their proficiency accordingly.

As Wijewardane et al. (2014) write, "Good English proficiency will undoubtedly open up vistas and pave the way for graduate employability and better equip graduate performance in especially the service sector" (Wijewardane et al., 2014, p. 140). "Thus, manipulation and exploration are perceived as the primary purposes for which Sri Lankans require English, which has its origins in the time of the colonizers and continues to date" (Ratwatte, 2012, p.195). In this regard, an investigation into the interrelationship between identity and future-self would serve the purpose of determining whether and how the learners perceive their identity as a speaker of English and take steps to shape their future-self accordingly. Therefore, I felt the essence of conducting this study which could provide me insights into the perceptions of my participants about the opportunities they receive and their opinions for a reformation in the same.

Method

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the interrelationship between the ESL learning experiences in the university and learners' possible self. The Mixed Method Research (MMR) approach implicates merging or incorporating qualitative and quantitative research elements and data in a single study.

The study was conducted with second year undergraduates of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna. The Arts faculty alone was focused on since its context of language learning is distinct from the other faculties of the university.

I selected forty out of the hundred and twenty-five general degree undergraduates to administer the questionnaire and five for the interview. Both samples were selected using the random sampling method. Random sampling was chosen to ensure the inclusion of undergraduates from all the departments. Although there are learners who follow special degree programmes, my focus was on general degree undergraduates. A special degree undergraduate would focus on their selected course while a general degree undergraduate is expected to pay equal attention to all three courses they follow. Therefore, their opinions regarding their 'future-self' were felt to be more diverse than those of special degree students. As they do not major in a particular subject, their career choices, and higher education are open to various paths. Thus, these undergraduates could possibly have to think about the role of the English language in various circumstances as opposed to special degree undergraduates. To add to this information, all the five interviewees were from type 1C schools, (schools that offer education from grade one to eleven and only Arts and Commerce streams in Advanced Level) two of which are affected by the post-war scenario in the country. I included questions to gather data of their school and university learning experiences.

Initial data for the first question were collected via a questionnaire while the detailed answers to both questions were gathered via interviews. While the quantitative approach enabled the collection of data from a big sample, the qualitative approach provided in-depth data for the analysis of the research

problem. Utilising a mixed approach allowed the use of both quantitative and qualitative data which contributed to improving the validity of the findings.

Abbreviations

RA: Respondent A (respondents have been named as A, B, C, D, and E)
I1: Interview 1 (Interviews have been named as 1 and 2)

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Self-confidence and the 'future- self'

Research on motivation has shown that factors such as fear, anxiety, reluctance, and shyness amalgamate to shatter the confidence of a learner. A learner's fear of using the language might result in low self-confidence and vice versa. As Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) state "we can employ our most creative motivational ideas, but if students have basic doubts about themselves, they will be unable to 'bloom' as learners" (p. 120). Accordingly, my study has revealed certain significant instances of higher or lower self-confidence encountered by my participants.

Similar to other factors of this study I compared the influence of self–confidence during their schooling period as well as after their entrance to the university. According to Figure 1, I could conclude that my participants' self-confidence had been negatively influenced by the circumstances they faced in both their school and immediately after their graduation from school. Thus, they seemed to have not been confident enough to use English apart from their examination purposes.

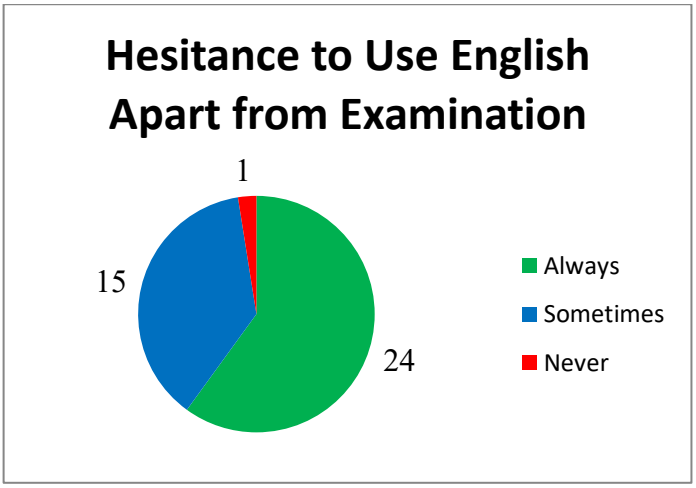


Figure 1. Hesitance to use English apart from examination

However, upon completing their school education and starting their 'actual' interaction with society, the participants have gradually stepped out of their comfort zones and begun to realise the significance of learning and using the language. Approaching private institutions to learn English is the common solution they seem to have found to develop their language proficiency and boost their confidence. This solution had more demerits than benefits as mentioned by the participants. In particular, more weightage on grammar than the four skills was one of the complaints made by the participants against these institutions. This calls for a

reformation at the core level. As identified by various scholars, (Premalal, 2004; Sumanasekera, 2010; Wijeskera, 2012) prioritising grammar over other aspects has been a problem from the past years. It needs to be resolved via proper means.

According to my findings I could conclude that the learning situation that prevails in the faculty of arts is more updated regarding the availability of opportunities to develop the language. From the interview sessions I identified that most of the opportunities students received in the university assisted them to develop their confidence. In particular the extra-curricular activities such as scouting which demanded communication skills in English, and which were initially unattainable to Participant A, was later attainable. He said, "earlier (initial days of university) I felt a sense of not belonging to that environment where the scouts programme was held……the communication was mostly in English....later I realised I should not miss these chances because of my poor English knowledge.... (RA2)" These words of the respondent seem to reveal that though he was late, he has realised the fact that not being proficient in English would deprive him of the opportunity to showcase his talent in the national arena. This realisation has taken place in the university learning environment where he received the opportunity of participating in extracurricular activities. Thus, unlike his school, the university learning environment appears to have facilitated him in perceiving the advantages of using English. Respondent C claimed, "Low confidence was there in my grade 8 and O/L. However, now I have confidence as I can search and study on my own. Confidence becomes low if we don't know something but now, I try to know everything on my own (RC2)." Upon joining the university he has initiated the process of self-learning. His words show that he appears to have understood (1) the availability of opportunities for self-learning (2) the interconnection between confidence and better knowledge of the language and (3) the consequence of not making efforts during his school times.

It seems that peers in ESL lectures and in the university have also played a role in boosting the self-confidence of the participants as participants D and E agreed that their fellow students' excellence pushed them to engage in self-evaluation and attempt to improve their English knowledge. However, a possible sense of inferiority stemming from the better levels of language proficiency possessed by their colleagues seems to continue from their school days. Since three out of the five interviewees commented on encountering this problem, it can be suggested that practitioners rethink the concept of grouping learners according to their proficiency level. Such a style of grouping could be more effective than the current one. The current grouping of the learners of the faculty of Arts is based on the fields they specialise: English for Humanities, English for Social Sciences, and English for General Purposes. On the contrary, a grouping based on the proficiency of the learners would be more beneficial.

Apart from these positive responses related to affective factors, I identified a different point of view regarding the interconnection between affective factors, self-confidence in particular, and 'future self-image'. Respondent D recorded "I partially agree with this question (are English and self-confidence connected?).... Language is a problem in many places especially in the workplace or abroad. At that time if we don't know English we may feel low but if we just want to end up as a labourer we don't have to worry about English." This statement implies that the choice of higher education/career affects whether and how the learner

approaches the English language. In this case, the learner is not likely to reap any benefit from the ESL course (if any) as they would not necessarily possess any 'future-self-image' that needs to be achieved. Although they recognise the place of English in their career, an in-depth understanding is lacking at this juncture as the respondent limits the English language to just one particular aspect—communication in the workplace. Therefore, although previous research (Aloysius, 2015; De Silva & Devendra, 2014; Ratwatte, 2012) has revealed that undergraduates relate English language proficiency to their future career and/or higher education, a scenario like this seems to suggest that some learners are willing to avoid learning the language if their career does not demand it.

However, in general, it could be concluded that the learning experiences in university, though worked variously for participants with different perspectives, have provided opportunities for the learners to understand the relationship between self-confidence and English language and motivated them to move forward to learn English.

Identity and the 'possible self'

Another determinant related to self-confidence is the identity of the learner. Proficiency in a language is perceived as a factor that makes the learner 'identify' him or her as a part of the related culture. As far as this study is taken into consideration, participants had mixed views regarding the interrelationship between their identity and English language. During the first phase of the interview, i.e. the school experiences, they did not connect English with their identity since their perception of the language seemed completely alien to the concept of identifying them as a part of English-speaking community. Instead, their perceptions were mostly limited to affective factors. In other words, a pass/fail in the subject was adequate for them to determine their 'prestige' or 'shamefulness' respectively. This clearly did not have any link with determining their participation in their English-speaking community of Sri Lanka.

In the second phase of the interview that covered the university experiences, majority of the participants agreed that in their societies their identity as a university undergraduate is mostly judged based on their English knowledge. After entering university, changes seem to have begun to take place, particularly in their approach towards English, which has been discussed in the previous paragraphs. Participant C agreed that communicating in English expresses his identity as a speaker of language in Sri Lanka. Three of the five interviewees admitted that in their society they faced situations where people asked them to assist in activities involving the English language because their people had a belief that university undergraduates would be proficient in English. Participant D added that "I don't want to say that I am an arts student so I can't help. I will help them and it builds up my identity (I 2)." This requires a discussion as there are multiple perspectives in this statement. In addition to the participant's own opinion that helping the people to do something in English brings her an identity, there underlies the expectation on the part of society that university undergraduates should be proficient in English. Thus, an individual's identity in relation to English seems to be co-constructed by him and the society he lives in.

Apart from these positive responses, there was a different opinion on identity as well. Participant B opposed the idea that speaking English was linked to her

identity in every way. It is interesting to note that the undergraduates who received similar learning experiences in the university express contradictory opinions regarding this concept of English and Identity. The impact of either society-related factors or personal factors or even teacher-related factors could have contributed to this response.

Social and economic background and the 'possible self'

Besides the determinants related to the emotions and the attitudes of the participants, the social and economic background of the participants were also identified to be exerting influence on learner's identity formation. This aspect was frequently discussed in the first phase of the interview, i.e., the learning experiences prior to the participants' entrance to the university, whereas it was rarely spoken about in the second phase of the interview—the university learning experiences. One reason for this could be the varying backgrounds students were in during their schooling. All the five participants are from five different districts, and their family background is also vastly different. There were two prominent variations related to the socio-economic background which emerged in the data namely the rural-urban difference and the societal expectations.

It was interesting to note that the participants connected English language proficiency with the environment they live in. According to Respondent A, teachers from urban areas could educate better about the language compared to those from remote areas. The living environment of the respondent did not help him to learn English. This was supported by Respondent D from a rural area as she mentioned the civil war and its after-effects as the cause behind the lack of teachers which hindered her learning. With rural background being the major factor, civil war conditions also seem to have contributed to a certain extent to the actual proficiency of the participants at the end of their schooling.

On the other hand, a couple of responses highlighted the major privileges enjoyed by students from urban schools: "students who followed English medium instruction from grade 1 to 5 did not put much effort to learn English in the classroom; yet they successfully got through it in the term examinations"; "mostly students from urban areas participate in the English language day competitions and win more places"; "in grade 6 when I moved to a school in an urban area, I met many students who were fluent in English and I was guilty as I couldn't manage to communicate with them." Research on the Sri Lankan context of learning has discussed this scenario (Perera, 2006; Premalal, 2004; Rameez, 2019; Sumanasekera, 2010; Wijeskera, 2012). These existing differences affect students mentally and play a significant role in demotivating the learners by evoking negative affective factors such as shame, inferiority complex, and lack of interest.

Besides the economic background, the expectations of the society have also exerted influence in determining the language learning motivation of learners during their school life. According to Participant D, her teachers were considerate about the expectations of society as they divided the learners into two groups—above-average and below-average and focused more on the former while totally ignoring the latter. This is a serious issue that needs to be prioritised among the immediate issues related to English language learning and motivation in the Sri Lankan context.

It was surprising to learn that the society judges an individual's English knowledge based on the study-stream they choose. Out of the five respondents, three possessed similar views about the connection between A/L Arts stream and English language. According to them, "English was not essential for the arts stream." This perspective has not been discussed in the previous research conducted with university students (Prasangani, 2014, 2018, 2019; Prasangani & Natarajan, 2015; Rameez, 2019; Wijeratne, 2015). However, from my data I could identify that this perspective existed at least in the regions of my participants. In the second phase of the interview, none of the respondents discussed societal expectations.

Thus, from the analysis of the learner related affective factors, self-confidence, identity, and socio-economic elements, I could identify that in the initial school-going phase these factors appear to have exerted a negative influence on my participants' motivation. On the contrary, a gradual positive change has taken place in these elements at the end of the participants' first academic year in the university.

Discussion

This research aimed at obtaining answers to two questions: (1) what perspectives learners have about their actual self and (2) whether and how the their identity as an English language speaker assist participants to move from their actual self to their future self-image. To answer the first question, I collected data on participants' perception about their 'actual self' or their current proficiency in English. From the learning experiences during the participants' journey of language learning prior to their university entrance, I found that their perception of their 'actual self' is negative. The causes behind this perception can be attributed to the challenges they encountered during their learning process in school and their perception about identity is one among them.

In particular, socio-economic factors need to be reshaped. According to Gunaratne et al. (2021) "schools with a high socio-economic status are equipped with smart boards, language laboratories, activity rooms, whereas socioeconomically disadvantaged schools lack those facilities" (p. 1214). Similar comments were given by my participants during the interview sessions. Economically backward schools being unable to provide resources (including teachers) for the students is a common scenario that has been prevalent for a long time (Aloysius, 2015; De Silva & Palihakkara, 2020; Gunaratne et al., 2021; Perera, 2001). Consequently, the students are unable to enjoy learning in a conducive environment.

Apart from that, learners' interest to learn the language is a distinct factor that seems to have an impact on the 'self' of a learner. My participants were not motivated simply because they did not consider English relevant to their lives in Sri Lanka. Thus, they were not ready to identify themselves as speakers of English in Sri Lanka. My lesson from this finding is to ponder on the means by which the idea that English is important in Sri Lanka could be cultivated while the learners are in school. They spend approximately 10 years learning English and that is adequate to cultivate this thought and make it grow in the correct direction. This could reduce the number of learners with a 'negative actual self' at the end of schooling. Another conclusion I could arrive at based on the findings is that the cultivation of this thought is possible only if various factors (such as teachers, methodology, socio-

economic elements, and materials) are made to function simultaneously and appropriately.

Moving on to the second and the crucial question "whether or not the influence of identity is felt in the university in their progress from their 'actual selves' towards their 'possible selves' I could conclude that most of the factors that had been negative during the school-learning-experience, were positive in the university. From their interview responses I could understand that the 'learning experiences' in the university have shaped their 'possible self' so that they could establish goals regarding language development and achieve them with the help of the ESL courses offered in the university.

In the faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna participants gain opportunities to use English academically only during their ESL lectures. Their main courses are offered in the Tamil Medium which is an apparent shortcoming in this faculty compared to the other faculties of the university. However, my interview sessions have provided me with significant insights into how the participants reap the optimum benefit from these ESL learning experiences and reflect it in the opportunities they receive to use English inside and outside the university.

Although participants were initially intimidated (by the weightage of the curriculum, Zoom lectures, and being forced to talk in class), their thoughts were reshaped gradually with the experiences they received: they met teachers who wanted everyone to unmute the mic and talk, they encountered situations where their peers too faced problems similar to theirs in communication, and they attended separate lectures for each skill. These initial positive changes sowed the seeds for them to set attainable 'self-goals' related to English language learning.

Interestingly, peers have been a greater supportive element in the shaping of my participants' 'future self.' Unlike school where there was a competitive environment, in the university the ESL learning environment facilitated learner motivation. Either the participant was motivated by the thought that there are many other learners with their proficiency level or the amazement created from looking at their more knowledgeable peers and aiming to reach that proficiency. When learners from various parts of the country with varied proficiency levels join with the aim of developing their language skills, it is highly beneficial that they motivate each other and progress together. This finding invites the ESL lecturers and curriculum designers of the Arts Faculty to consider restructuring the current grouping system and ensure that students of the same proficiency level are grouped together. A placement test can be conducted prior to the formal inauguration of the academic activities and learners can be grouped accordingly. It will be more beneficial if this grouping system is retained for all six semesters of ESL lectures. Moreover, this grouping system could also facilitate the process of identifying the learners who require remedial classes (those who missed the chances to learn the particular language aspects at the appropriate stages and are intimidated by the ESL lecture experience and unable to cope with the ESL lectures).

Apart from these elements that work during ESL lecture hours, certain other significant elements outside the class as well as outside the university have immensely contributed to the restructuring of the 'future-self-image' of the participants. The opportunities provided at the Gavel Club have introduced new 'role models' to the participants as revealed from their stories of learning English. Similarly, the chances to represent the faculty in the Student Union and other

associations have accelerated the exposure of language and made the participants realise themselves as speakers of English in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

Although majority of the participants revealed positive interconnection, there have been concerns in the other aspects, such as socially-fossilised views of learners. I found that the language identity of participants is co-constructed by their society as well. That a learner possesses opinions like "English is not necessary for Arts / English is not necessary to get a job as a labourer" questions the understanding of the learner about the language and eventually the 'self' formation process at large. Clinging on to such prejudices may decrease the learner's motivation to learn the language. To rectify this, the larger picture of the use of language needs to be introduced to the learner using proper means. This implies that, in addition to the currently-available opportunities, more job-oriented applications of the language should be offered to the undergraduates. Means by which English assists and eases the access to the knowledge of the professions, be it a white-collar job or a labourer, need to be exposed to the undergraduates.

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