

Culture, communication and successful learning

Sarah Mercer finds that some learners are motivated by a different view of language

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Language teachers are repeatedly encouraged to consider the importance of the social and cultural dimensions of learning a language (see, e.g., Dörnyei, 2001). It is frequently stressed that in order to motivate language learners, teachers should emphasise the real world communication value of the language. For English in particular, its international role as a lingua franca can be highlighted, for some learners their passion can be ignited with links to the culture of various English-speaking countries and learners can be helped to develop a positive attitude towards the L2 and its speakers. Whilst these motivational strategies can doubtless be extremely powerful for many language learners, in my research and teaching I have also encountered a number of successful advanced learners who appear to have a different, but equally effective, motivation and relationship to language learning.

My recent research investigated the self-concepts of tertiary-level, advanced EFL learners in Austria. Thus, in the discussion that follows, it is important to note that the focus of the study was not on motivation or attitudes directly, so the findings I am reporting upon here can only be viewed as a tentative starting point for further consideration and investigation.

In my study, I collected various forms of written narrative and interview data. For illustrative purposes, I will focus on one particular dataset which was in the form of language learning autobiographies generated with 26 tertiary-level, advanced EFL learners who were near the end of their studies. When analysing the autobiographies on a case-by-case basis, it became clear that most of the texts tended to have one self-concept and related domain that was predominant throughout the entire texts. Although most texts referred to more than one domain and self-concept, it was still possible to categorise each text clearly according to one domain which served as the main recurrent theme throughout. Thus, some learners appeared to view themselves more in terms of a general languages self-concept, some of a foreign languages self-concept and others more specifically in terms of an EFL self-concept.

As expected, given the focus of the data generation method in an EFL course, the most dominant category included 12 texts in which the learners clearly defined themselves in terms of an EFL self-concept and referred largely specifically to the EFL domain. However, the particularly interesting aspect I wish to focus on here is that these 12 learner autobiographies can be further divided into one of two possible further categories, usually in a quite distinct, rather unambiguous way, even though, of course, there are examples of overlap. Nine of the 12 learners appeared to view English as a subject in an almost technical manner. For these learners, the language was viewed as a kind of linguistic system in which you like the sound and flow of the language itself, the feel of it when you speak it and the way in which words fit together. And for these learners, language learning appeared to have little, indeed if anything, to do with social communication or culture; for them, their passion and attitude towards English appeared to be concerned with the language itself as a subject; a system of words and sounds.

Even some of those who had been abroad for an extended period of time maintained an 'English-as-a-subject' approach. Indeed, the learner whose autobiography will be used to illustrate this point makes no reference at all in her text to any interest in culture, travel generally or a particular country per se, despite having spent a positive 10 months in Ireland. This extract from her response to her extended stay abroad is revealing of her approach to the language, and that of some other learners with the 'English-as-a-subject' approach,

which pays little or no attention to cultural aspects or travel or lingua franca factors but focuses on the language itself:

However, then I went to Ireland for ten months. This was probably the most important event in my language learning history. I realised several things. First, I started to understand why it is important to distinguish between voiced and voiceless consonants in English. For example, I talked to my Irish friend about jazz and because of my pronunciation she understood "chess" and was completely confused. Secondly, I became aware of the fact that though my academic English was, according to some lecturers, better than that of some of the Irish students, I lacked a lot of everyday vocabulary. I can still remember searching for words such as "shoe laces" and "salad bowl". Thirdly, I noticed that there is an enormous difference between the grammar I was taught at school and at university and the grammar that is actually used by native speakers. For example, most of the Irish say: "There is a lot of people in this room." Fourthly, it was interesting to experience that if I learn specific vocabulary in English, this does not mean that I know it in German as well. For example, I started kickboxing in Ireland and learned all the specific kickboxing words in English. When I came back to Austria, I could only talk about kickboxing by using the English words because I did not know the appropriate terms in German.

(A#24: 75 - 94)

In contrast to many approaches to language learning which emphasise the role of identifying with a particular country or culture or the role of English as a lingua franca (see, e.g., Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Doyé, 1999; Kramsch, 1993; Rubenfeld et al., 2006), the data of these learners appears to place a different emphasis. These learners seem to approach EFL learning primarily on a linguistic, language-as-a-subject basis. This clearly has implications for teaching approaches as it would appear that some learners may perceive of themselves and their approach to English learning in more linguistic terms, at least possibly for advanced tertiary-level learners such as those in this study.

Clearly, the findings here are extremely limited in scope given the small amount of data and primary focus on other research questions in the analysis of these data. However, accepting the variety and individuality across learner motivation and attitudes, it seems worth investigating whether some learners may be driven by none of the 'usual' or 'typical' motivational drives related to the social and cultural dimensions of language learning, but by a passion and love of a particular language as a system, as a subject, as a linguistic entity. It is not the intention of this short article in any way to diminish or call into question the key role in motivation played by approaches which acknowledge the important links between language and culture. Rather it suggests that more research is needed to explore the extent to which some learners may have motivations and attitudes which emphasise the nature of language as a linguistic system in an almost technical sense, as this 'type' of learner seems to have been somewhat overlooked by the focus of much research. Having observed this 'type' of learner in my data, I have also begun to notice it in the attitudes of some of my current students and on reflection in respect to my own language learning history. The purpose of this brief article is to ask readers whether they also know of successful, highly-motivated learners who do not seem to approach language learning through links to culture or communication, but who appear to be driven by a linguistic-based passion for the words and sounds of English. If so, I would be interested to hear from you and/or your learners.

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