AUTONOMY AND MOTIVATION
A LITERATURE REVIEW

LESLEY DICKINSON

King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand

A common theme in justifications for autonomy, especially in general education but also in language learning, is that autonomous learners become more highly motivated and that autonomy leads to better, more effective work. Knowles' claim is illustrative: "... there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (pro-active learners) learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners) ... They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation" (1975: p. 14). What is the link between autonomy and motivation? The writing on motivation in relation to language learning over the past several years has been dominated by the social-psychological approach to motivation of Gardner and his associates, which gives little help in attempts to link autonomy and motivation. To find such links it is necessary to turn to the literature on motivation in general education, and especially the literature on cognitive motivation. This paper will review the literature on motivation and suggest that there is an important link between autonomy and some educational theories of motivation which could account for the claimed power of autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

In recommending autonomy to learners, we are making the assumption that taking an active, independent attitude to learning and independently undertaking a learning task, is beneficial to learning; that somehow, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. This is not a universal view. Some teachers and researchers either articulate or demonstrate beliefs which are in conflict with those concerning learner autonomy. Thus the claims of the desirability and effectiveness of learner autonomy need to be justified through convincing arguments.

What arguments might be offered? One would be to argue that a measure of individual involvement in decision making in one's own learning enhances motivation to learn, and it is this link between autonomy and motivation that is investigated in the present paper. Cognitive motivation is the most promising model of motivation for this purpose, but there has been little published research into language learning and cognitive motivation. Consequently, this paper will review research from general education and will show that there is evidence that learners' active and independent involvement in their own learning (autonomy) increases motivation to learn and consequently increases learning effectiveness.
OVERVIEW

The paper begins by describing autonomy as both an attitude towards learning and a capacity for independent learning. Cognitive motivation is then defined and two theories of motivation are reviewed. The first, the intrinsic/extrinsic motivation theory of Deci and Ryan (1985) claims that learners who are interested in learning tasks and outcomes for their own sake (intrinsic) rather than for rewards are likely to become more effective learners. Two important conditions for the development of intrinsic motivation are: first, that learners perceive the learning environment to be “informational” rather than “controlling”—that is that the environment supports the learner through informative rather than evaluative feedback. The second is that the learning context is autonomy supporting in that it facilitates self-determination on the part of the learner.

The second theory reviewed—the attribution theory of motivation—relates motivation to the reasons the learner believes are responsible for her success or failure. There is evidence to suggest that those learners who believe that success or failure results from “fixed” causes such as ability, or causes which the learner sees as external to her, such as task difficulty, tend not to persist when they fail and so overall are less successful than they might be. By contrast, people who believe that success or failure results from their own efforts tend to take responsibility for their own learning and persist after failure. Not surprisingly, such learners tend to be more effective than those who assume that success derives from fixed ability (either you have it or you do not). Furthermore, it seems to be the case that learning success strengthens the learning confidence only of those who accept responsibility for their own success.

This raises the question of the relationship between success in learning and motivation. Does high motivation lead to success or does success enhance motivation, or is there a synergistic relationship—motivation leads to success which leads to increased motivation which leads to greater success . . . ? Research in this area will be reviewed.

Finally, what scope is there for influencing motivation in individuals? The Carnegie Project (deCharms, 1984) claims that motivation can be enhanced through encouraging learners to exert personal control over their learning and to take responsibility for it. The means used by the Carnegie Project to enhance motivation are very similar to aspects of learner preparation for autonomy, and so such preparation may serve to enhance learners’ motivation for learning.

Each of these theories presents evidence that learning autonomy increases motivation and consequently increases learning effectiveness.

AUTONOMY

The adoption by language teachers of the additional objective of helping learners to attain some measure of autonomy is frequently justified in the literature by variations on one or more of three arguments; the formulation given below is taken from Little (1991) but similar arguments can be found in, for example, Holec (1981) and Dickinson (1987):

- because the learner sets the agenda, learning should be more focused and more purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term;
• because responsibility for the learning process lies with the learner, the barriers between
learning and living that are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures should not
arise;

• if there are no barriers between learning and living, learners should have little difficulty in
transferring their capacity for autonomous behaviour to all other areas of their lives, and this should
make them more useful members of society and more effective participants in the democratic process.
(p. 8)

In general education the claim that (some measure of) autonomy is linked with more effective
learning is often expressed more strongly. Wang and Peverly (1986), for example, review
findings of strategy research (in subjects other than language learning) and conclude that
independent or autonomous learners are those who have the capacity for being active and
independent in the learning process; they can identify goals, formulate their own goals, and can
change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests; they are able to use learning strategies,
and to monitor their own learning.

In the applied linguistics literature autonomy is also seen as a capacity for active, independent
learning. Little (1991), for example, sees autonomy as a “capacity—for detachment, critical
reflection, decision making and independent action” (p. 4). Holec (1985) also sees autonomy as
a capacity; Holec writes of “autonomization” as “a matter of acquiring those capacities which are
necessary to carry out a self-directed learning programme” (p. 180). Autonomous learners have
a capacity for critical reflection and decision making, as well as the skills necessary to carry out
a self-directed learning programme, i.e. the ability to define objectives, define contents and so on

In addition, autonomy can be seen as an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared
to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning. To take responsibility for one’s own learning
essentially concerns decision making about one’s own learning (Dickinson, 1993: p. 330). The
understanding of autonomy as a capacity or attitude rather than as overt action (where, for
example, the autonomous learner is seen as one who necessarily implements the decisions
referred to above), is important since we want to be able to conceive of learners maintaining learning
autonomy in a teacher-directed classroom setting as well as in settings such as self-access
learning centres.

MOTIVATION

There is a curious scarcity of reported research into motivation in language education, and such
research that is reported may be felt to lack “validity in that it is not well-grounded in the real world
domain of the SL classroom, nor is it well-connected to other related educational research . . .”
(Crookes and Schmidt, 1991: p. 470). The area of motivation in language learning over the past
20 years or so has been dominated by the social-psychological approach of Gardner and his
associates (see, for example, Gardner, 1985, Gardner and MacIntyre, 1992). As is well known,
the socio-psychological approach links motivation with attitudes towards the community of
speakers of the target language, and claims that learners with an interest in interacting with such
speakers—integrative motivation—are likely to be more successful in learning the target language
than those who are doing so for instrumental reasons.
The justification for positing a distinct motivational model for language learning is that such learning is different in kind from other educational endeavours. Au (1988: p. 75) quotes Gardner as asserting that “The learning of a second (or foreign) language in the school situation is often viewed as an educational phenomenon . . . such a perception is categorically wrong . . .” in that it demands the acquisition of “symbolic elements of a different ethnolinguistic community”. However, other theories of language learning emphasize the similarities of the conscious (or semi-conscious) learning processes of language learning with learning in other subjects. There are, for example, a number of theories based on cognitive learning theory, which underpins much of the work on language learning strategies (McLaughlin, 1987; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990). One can recognize the special nature of language learning—the need to acquire symbolic elements of a different culture and the probability of an innate language capacity—without denying that a great deal of the process of languages learning, especially in the early stages, has much in common with the learning of other subjects, and that consequently educational theories of motivation may be relevant to language learning. Furthermore, it seems possible to reinterpret Gardner’s distinction between integrative and instrumental attitudes to the target language in terms of the more general distinction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This possibility will be explored briefly below.

Definitions of motivation

The general model of motivation considered in this paper is frequently referred to in the educational literature as “cognitive motivation”. Definitions of cognitive motivation are concerned inter alia with what learners are prepared to learn—the topic, and with how much effort they are prepared to exert in order to learn it. Two snappy definitions quoted by Wang and Palincsar (1989) touch on these factors: “The skill and will to learn” (Paris and Oka, 1986) and “Purposeful striving” (Snow and Farr, 1983), while Keller’s definition captures these factors clearly: “Motivation refers to the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect” (Keller in Crookes and Schmidt, 1991: p. 389).

LINKS BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND MOTIVATION

Let us now relate autonomy to accounts of motivation in an attempt to support the claims made about the efficacy of learning autonomy. Several areas of research into motivation in general education suggest that motivation to learn and learning effectiveness can be increased in learners who take responsibility for their own learning, who understand and accept that their learning success is a result of effort, and that failure can be overtaken with greater effort and better use of strategies (Wang and Palincsar, 1989). Similarly, motivation tends to be higher in learners who are interested in the learning tasks and the learning outcomes for their own sake rather than for rewards that result from success (Deci and Ryan, 1985); and who focus on learning outcomes rather than performance outcomes (Dweck, 1986). Many of these concepts are also central in discussions of learner autonomy. If we refer back to the brief definitions of learner autonomy. If we refer back to the brief definitions of learner autonomy which I quoted above, we will see that they all share certain key concepts. These are learner independence, learner responsibility and learner choice. Incorporated within these, or entailed by them are other concepts such as decision making, critical reflection and detachment, all of which are important in cognitive motivation.
Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

A strong link between motivation and autonomy can be perceived in the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) into intrinsic motivation. They distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; people who are intrinsically motivated in doing an activity are doing it for its own sake rather than because of external pressure or promise of reward for doing it. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to learning situations where the reason for doing a task is something other than an interest in the task (or broader learning endeavour) itself. In addition, undertaking the task may be something the person feels pressured to do rather than genuinely wants to do (Deci and Ryan, 1985: p. 35). An illustration may help.

Mary is a language learner who is taking classes in the target language; part of the class concerns pronunciation. Before each class lesson she focuses on the need to practise, and the thought of not practising invokes in her a sense of guilt and anticipatory anxiety. These feelings lead her to practise before each lesson and when she finishes practising she is relieved and experiences satisfaction at being prepared. However, if she fails to practise, the guilt and bad feelings are exacerbated, and these feelings are made worse by her knowledge that the teacher expects the students to practise and can be quite sharp with those who have not done so. For Mary, both her own feelings and the class environment constitute “controlling” structures, and her motivation is extrinsic.

Mary’s classmate, Susan, also practises before each lesson, but she focuses on the satisfaction which will accrue from improving her pronunciation. In reflecting on her homework in practising pronunciation it is not the thought that she should practise which motivates her, but rather the anticipation of mastering a new sound contrast and improving her communication skills. Even though practising is not always intrinsically enjoyable, Susan is self-determined in it because she personally values improving her pronunciation. Furthermore, she is able to perceive the teacher’s feedback as “informational”, helping her to judge how well she has mastered the target objectives.

When the vacation comes, the students are free to do as they please since the teacher has left no homework to be done. Mary experiences relief from the tension and burden she feels before each class and takes a break from practising. By contrast, Susan, who is intrinsically motivated, has not felt any particular tension and continues to be motivated to practise. (Adapted from Deci and Ryan, 1985: pp. 106–7)

Deci and Ryan claim that intrinsic motivation leads to more effective learning and that it is promoted in circumstances in which the learner has a measure of self-determination and where the locus of control is clearly with the learner. They review many of their own studies and those of other researchers which support this view and then conclude that when conditions are created that facilitate intrinsic motivation, in particular those that are autonomy supporting, students’ learning, especially conceptual learning and creative thinking, increases dramatically relative to that of students in settings that foster extrinsically oriented learning (p. 261).

The theory which they have developed on the basis of these studies is that the promotion of more effective learning is achieved both through learners being intrinsically motivated and through the learners operating in “autonomy supporting and informational conditions”, and that these conditions will themselves enhance intrinsic motivation. The key argument in Deci and Ryan’s theory is that self-determination leads to intrinsic motivation. Self-determination is where the locus of causality for behaviour is internal to the learner, and can be seen as related to the applied linguistic concept of autonomy (noted above) in its sense of a capacity for and an attitude towards learning. Related to self-determination, and a condition of it, is that learners operate in informational structures and experience informational events rather than controlling structures and events. Informational
structures are those that facilitate independence in learning, offering the learner opportunities for choice and decision making and in general promoting his self-determining status. Informational events occur when, for example, the teacher’s class management strategies and feedback offer the students opportunities to exercise a degree of autonomy. By contrast, controlling structures are those in which the locus of control rests with someone other than the learner, most likely the teacher. Controlling events are such things as grades, rewards and so on. Feedback may also be given in a controlling way as when it is proffered judgementally: “That wasn’t very good...”; “you are capable of better work...”; “You really must try harder...”; or when it is related to extrinsic motivational factors: “That wasn’t very good. You don’t have a chance of passing the examination with work of that standard.” Even when the feedback is positive it may still be controlling: “That was excellent work—the best in the class.” Feedback can, of course, be informational: “Adjectives usually come before rather than after the noun in English, for example the blue book” or “the large car.”

A curious, though significant, research finding related to these concepts is that offering rewards to learners who were previously intrinsically motivated can have the effect of reducing intrinsic motivation (and thereby perhaps diminishing the effectiveness of learning) (deCharms, 1984: p. 279; Deci and Ryan, 1985: p. 90). Consequently doubt is cast on the efficacy of using frequent testing and grades to encourage learning.

However, Deci and Ryan recognize, as we all must, that there are frequently circumstances, especially in the education of children, when extrinsic motivation is the predominant possibility, as when children are being introduced to learning knowledge and skills which they have no intrinsic wish to learn. In introductory foreign language learning in formal settings, for example, it is usually necessary to use extrinsic incentives and controlling events to coerce children to learn sufficient of the language to develop intrinsic motivation.

The effect of tests, grades and feedback devices generally appears to depend on how they are perceived by individual learners. Some learners (probably those who are primarily focused on learning and learning objectives) are able to perceive grades and feedback as informational events, that is, these learners do not perceive them as threatening their self-determination and regard them as providing useful information for further decision making. Others (probably those who are focused on demonstrating achievements—valuing high grades for the status rather than as an indication of the learning achieved) perceive tests and grades as controlling, shifting the locus of control to the teacher and reducing the learners’ self-determination (Grolnick and Ryan, 1985; Elison and Milton, 1981; both in Deci and Ryan, 1985). This distinction between these two broad categories of learner is developed in attribution theory.

Gardner and his associates’ constructs of integrative and instrumental attitudes to the target language can be related to the more general distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Integrative attitudes (or motivation), with its emphasis on learning the target language because one wishes to associate with or integrate with the speakers of the language, can be perceived as a subject-specific example of intrinsic motivation. Learners with an integrative attitude have a compelling purpose for learning which is intrinsic to the target language. Similarly, instrumental attitude (or motivation) with its emphasis on “rewards” such as improved career prospects, university entry, or certification has apparent links with extrinsic motivation, with its emphasis on rewards for achievement.
As we have seen the intrinsic/extrinsic theory of motivation explicitly relates motivation to autonomy. Intrinsic motivation (which leads to greater learning effectiveness) is promoted and enhanced in circumstances in which learners have the opportunity to take responsibility for learning (self-determination). This is facilitated in instructional settings offering informational structures, where, for example, the class management and even, perhaps, the learning mode, encourage learner independence.

**Attribution theory**

In order to take responsibility for our own learning we must believe that we have control over learning success and failure, and consequently attribution theory has important implications for the promotion of autonomy. The central tenet of attribution theory is the learner's perception of the cause of his or her success or failure and the influence this has on perceptions of future performance. Four possible causes have emerged from projects concerned with asking learners for their opinions on the reasons for success and failure, and these are usually categorized according to stability (i.e. whether it can be changed or not), internal or external to the learner, and whether the learner can control it. The four causes are:

- **Ability** (internal and stable)
- **Task difficulty** (external and stable)
- **Effort** (internal, changeable and under the learner’s control)
- **Luck** (external, changeable but not under the learner’s control)

According to Child’s (1994) account, pupils who attribute their failure to stable causes tend not to persist when they fail, but those who believe that their failure is due to unstable or internal causes—particularly effort, tend to persist in the face of failure. Furthermore, this view that failure is the result of not trying hard enough tends to carry over to future tasks, and so these learners are seen as the more highly motivated. In addition, they tend to achieve more than those who believe success or failure is outside their control (See also Skehan, 1989; Crookes and Schmidt, 1991). There is also evidence to suggest that for those learners who accept responsibility for success, that is, who attribute their success to effort, learning success enhances their self-perception of competence. This success leads to enhanced motivation, which increases the possibility of success. However, this is not the case for those who believe that their success is the result of factors outside their control (Wang and Palincsar, 1989). One way, then, of improving the learning effectiveness of some learners would be to help them to recognize that factors within their control may be responsible for their success or failure. (There have been several attempts to “train” motivation in this way, and one—the Carnegie Project—is described below, under Motivational Enhancement).

Success in learning, then, appears to lead to greater motivation only for those students who accept responsibility for their own learning success, that is, who recognize that success arises from personal effort, rather than simply from ability or chance. Personal effort, unlike ability and chance is within the control of the student. Furthermore, success enhances motivation only in children who are focused on learning goals—that is, who are intrinsically motivated.

Childrens’ views on the stability of intelligence—a variation on attribution of success and failure—appears to have important effects on their learning. Dweck (1986) reviews relevant literature and concludes that childrens’ theories of intelligence orientate them towards different goals. Children who believe that intelligence level is fixed tend to be concerned with getting favourable judgements
of performance—performance goals, while children who believe that intelligence can be changed and increased tend to be concerned with learning and learning goals. The particular goals that children have tend to affect their learning behaviour. When offered the choice between easy or challenging tasks children with learning goals tend to opt for personally challenging tasks since they are willing to display ignorance in order to acquire new knowledge and skills. Conversely, children with performance goals, that is those who are concerned with getting favourable judgements of their performance, will only choose challenging tasks if they are confident that their ability is high. Otherwise they will choose very easy tasks in which they can be sure of succeeding, or very difficult ones which they can then blame for their failure.

Attribution theory relates to learning autonomy in that it provides evidence to show that learners who believe that they have control over their learning—that by accepting new challenges they can increase their ability to perform learning tasks and so increase their intelligence—tend to be more successful than others.

**Success and motivation**

There is some discussion in the motivational literature on the causal relationship between success in learning and motivation. Ellis (1985) comments that “we do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning or successful learning that enhances motivation” (p. 119). Skehan (1989) reviews research into the relationship between success and the psycho-sociological model of motivation and concludes that the balance of the evidence is slightly in favour of the view that motivation produces successful learning rather than vice versa.

From within an educational perspective of motivation, as concerned with “the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect” (Keller, *op. cit.*) the resolution of the problem may be clearer. As noted above, Wang and Palincsar (1989) assert that for learners who accept responsibility for their own learning successes and failures, success enhances their own self-perception of competence, and so enhances their motivation. Deci and Ryan (1985) quote Harter and Connell (1984) in suggesting that “improved learning will have the additional effect of further enhancing intrinsic motivation, thereby creating a kind of positively synergistic effect”. These researchers, then, argue that success in learning enhances motivation and this in turn increases the likelihood of further success.

Dweck (1986) stresses that learning success alone is not enough to create and/or enhance productive motivational attitudes. The important issue is whether the learners are striving after performance goals or learning goals. Learners who achieve continued success on even personally difficult tasks, but within a performance framework—that is, striving after high grades, gold stars, or peer and teacher acclaim, tend not to develop stable confidence, a challenge-seeking attitude and persistence. Indeed she reports research which indicates that the effect is sometimes to lower learners’ confidence in their ability. In order to develop and enhance productive motivation, learners require procedures which “incorporate challenge, and even failure, within a learning-orientated context”. In addition they require procedures that are concerned with underlying causes of motivation. For example, teaching children to attribute their failures to effort or strategy instead of ability has been shown to produce sizeable changes in persistence in the face of failure (Dweck 1986: p. 1046).
Thus, there appears to be a reciprocal reinforcement between success and motivation for learners who take responsibility for their own learning and for those who are concerned with learning objectives.

**Motivational enhancement**

Dweck’s suggestion that learners with less successful motivations—and who are consequently less successful than they might be—could be trained to adopt a more effective model of motivation has been the aim of a number of schemes. One which claims a great deal of success was the Carnegie Project, directed by deCharms (McClelland, 1972; deCharms, 1984). The aim of the Carnegie Project was to enhance the motivation of low income, black, elementary school children in St. Louis, USA. Measures of motivation and academic achievement were obtained on the pupils at the end of each school year for four years from the fifth to eight grades. The experimental treatment involved training teachers in motivation who then taught the children in the sixth and seventh grades and used motivation-enhancing exercises in their classrooms. The experimental group (N = 57) received motivational training in their classrooms and the regular curriculum throughout the year from their own teachers who had been trained in motivation. The controls (N = 50) received only the regular curriculum from teachers who were not trained in motivation.

The motivational model used by deCharms in the Carnegie Project had similarities to Deci and Ryan’s (1985) intrinsic/extrinsic model and attribution theory. deCharms argues that successful learners are those who perceive themselves to be in control of their learning. Learners who tended to exert personal control of their learning were dubbed origins, “because of the strong sense of origination of our own actions”, and those who tended to respond to external causation—to be externally pushed around—were dubbed pawns. (deCharms stresses that we are all origins some of the time and pawns some of the time) (deCharms 1984: p. 278).

The motivational training aimed to help the children to reduce their pawn behaviour and build up their origin behaviour through developing realistic goal setting, planning, personal responsibility, feelings of personal causation and self-confidence and by making children aware of negative feelings associated with being pushed around. There was a marked improvement in origin measures for the experimental group and no improvement for the controls. The improvement in origin/pawn scores for the experimental group was maintained for at least a year after the project. The experimental group also made significant improvements in measures of academic achievement.

The similarities between origins and autonomous learners are so evident as to imply that two different labels are being used to name the same individual learner characteristics. In both cases, the individuals are concerned to control their own learning and to take responsibility for it. The similarities between the goals of the motivational enhancement training in the Carnegie Project and learner training for language learners are also striking. Each adopts the aims of realistic goal setting, planning, persuading learners to adopt personal responsibility for their learning, and each attempts to encourage feelings of personal causation and self-confidence. (See, for language learner training, e.g. Holec, 1985, Dickinson, 1992, Wenden, 1991).

**SUMMARY**

This review of a selection of the literature on research into motivation set out to seek a justification for the promotion of learner autonomy among language learners. It has been shown that there is
substantial evidence from cognitive motivational studies that learning success and enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning successes or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control. Each of these conditions is a characteristics of learner autonomy as it is described in applied linguistics.

NOTES

¹ This is an oversimplification. Controlling structures and events may also be internal to the learner, as illustrated in the example of Mary above.

REFERENCES


