

Increasing Investment and Autonomy in Second-language Learners – an Empirical Study Looking for the L2 Self

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: August 26, 2019

Accepted: October 09, 2019

Published: November 30, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 6

Advance access: November 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Inspired by years of research into the areas of motivation and learner autonomy, this empirical study aimed at investigating ways of developing both of these dimensions in a Myanmar classroom; most current research output shows results of what has been done mostly in Western context or in countries with strong ties to Western culture, such as China, South Korea or Japan. To the best of my knowledge, none of the literature or studies related to Myanmar, a country that presents a very unique set of circumstances for English-language teachers: not only had English been banned in all of its forms for nearly 40 years after the military government came to power (closing down libraries, English-language publications and eradicating the English curriculum from schools), but the country follows a Confucian system of education, which places greater value in memorization than understanding and in strict obedience rather than the development of critical thought (Purdie et al 1996; Han and Yang, 2001). Because of the Confucian belief in the importance of unequal relations in education (Guo, 2016) students are not only discouraged from asking questions but according to their own testimony, even physically punished. With these considerations in mind, the purpose of this study was to investigate the degree to which both autonomy and intrinsic motivation could be developed in Burmese, thus breaking away from the educational model they have followed so far, and to ascertain whether or not such dimensions had an impact in their learning outcomes. Nineteen Intermediate-level Burmese students, enrolled in the General English program at the British Council Myanmar, worked for six weeks twice a week carrying out tasks designed to boost their intrinsic motivation and develop a greater sense of autonomy, to assess if these dimensions had an impact in the students' learning outcomes and to determine the degree and type of pedagogical interventions needed to facilitate that. Students answered three questionnaires, wrote three journal entries reflecting on their experience as learners and as subjects in the project, and engaged in a variety of tasks which will be described. Additionally, three students were interviewed in person to delve deeper into the issues described above. The first questionnaire was designed to help learners reflect on their own role as learners, The second one was based on Dörnyei's Ten Commandments for Motivating Language. The final questionnaire was a reflection on the entirety of the course and changes students had experienced throughout. It asked questions concerning motivation, autonomy and identity and it serves as the final data-collection instrument by which to ascertain if any changes occurred in their behaviour, attitude or thinking patterns.

Key words: Autonomy, Motivation, Identity, Self-directed Learning, Agency, Three Selves, Language Learning, Investment.

INTRODUCTION

The role of motivation in human behavior has been an area of keen interest in the field of education for the last 50 years, and in particular in language learning, as can be ascertained by the number of theories and studies since the late 1950s.

Studies on this subject began with Robert White (1959), who expanded his animal research into the field of human endeavor and later expanded from deCharms (1968) theory of Personal Causation to Deci and Ryan (1975) and their Self-Determination theory, which explains how

intrinsic motivation develops out of certain human needs. Interestingly, they were some of the first in making a connection between motivation and autonomy by putting forth the idea that being motivated was directly connected to the freedom to set goals and choose behaviors.

Current views on motivational theory have followed up on these studies and expanded on earlier definitions. For instance, in their work "Motivational Variables in Second Language Acquisition", Gardner & Wallace, (1959) put forth the idea that motivation was a trait that could be used to predict

learning. They suggested that integrativeness, attitudes towards learning and motivation combine to form what they called *Integrative Motivation*, and this in turn could be used as a predictor of learning outcomes (Gardner & Wallace, 1972; Gardner & Masgoret, 2003; Gardner, 2011). Others, such as Norton (2000, 2015) suggests that despite theorists assuming early on that motivation was a trait and that failure in a certain endeavor was directly related to lack of commitment, high levels of motivation did not translate, according to her own research, into ‘good language learning’ (p.24), at least from the point of view of accurate output. In her shared work with Zoltan Dörnyei, “Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self”, Ema Ushioda (2009) also diverges from earlier views connected with success and achievement and gives space for the recognition of non-achievement as well, thus asserting that motivation and achievement do not necessarily go hand in hand (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009).

A groundbreaking and influential turning point on motivational research in language learning was the work of Markus and Nurius (1986) concerning the ‘possible selves’ theory. Although technically within the realm of human psychology, their theory was explored later by language researchers in what has become an important theoretical and practical contribution in the field of L2 learning. The basic tenet is that these ‘possible selves’ (what one might become, would like to become and is afraid of becoming) shape the area of human learning, acting as (dis)incentives for certain behaviors and provide a fertile ground for self-knowledge.

Zoltan Dörnyei followed this up and his work on motivation research has been quite influential. His book “The Psychology of the Language Learner” draws on a large amount of motivation-related literature, and building upon existing theories, most importantly the ‘possible selves’ of Marcus and Nurius mentioned earlier, he posited the ‘L2 Motivational Self System’. This system is fundamentally a three-dimensional construct: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to self and the L2 learning experience. The ideal self can be defined as that which the person would ideally like to be or possess and is linked to intrinsically motivated factors whereas the ought-to self, which is extrinsically motivated, could be explained as the ‘representation of someone else’s duties, obligations and moral responsibilities’ (Dörnyei, 1998, 2005, 2011).

In spite of this seemingly clear distinction, there are those who do not consider such difference to be so straightforward, such as Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) who suggest that it is not always simple to ascertain if the ideal self was the student’s own or if it had been affected by external influences. They further defined this ideal self as a construct made up of a person’s aspirations, dreams and fantasies, fueled by passion and values. These elements seem particularly relevant in language learning, as well as in this study, the subjects of which have been isolated from the world for two generations and only just recently have been exposed to communities where a common language is needed. This desire to belong, this dream for a better tomorrow as part of a larger world is a key driving factor and one where the exploration of self gains particular importance., and I believed this to be worth

exploring. Could these dreams and desires lead to greater drive to engage in self-directed learning efforts?

The work of Ushioda on the subjects of motivation and autonomy, as well as their interactions, has also laid the groundwork for further study, and her work has been acclaimed by colleagues. Her ideas are somewhat of a diversion from the more purist view on motivation, which for years tended towards lumping groups together and drawing conclusions from collective research rather on individual differences. She views motivation as an organic process, resulting from a series of inter-relations and interactions, with a strong focus on the individual rather than the group (Ushioda, 2009, 2011).

The most current trends on motivation research (see Norton, 2013, 2015; Davin & Norton, 2015) seems to show consensus on the importance of motivation in language learning, not as a predictor of outcomes, but as a driving force that will help sustain the learners’ efforts towards the attainment of their individual goals, be it that they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.

Autonomy

Holec’s description of learning autonomy as ‘the capacity for taking charge of one’s own learning’ (1981, p.12)) is widely accepted as the foundational definition for such field.

This definition was provided in a report to the Council of Europe, as part of a project called ‘Council of Europe’s Modern Language Project’, which aimed at providing adults with opportunities for lifelong learning, and it concluded that autonomy was a natural product of self-directed learning. What followed was the creation of self-access platforms and centers, the first of which were based at the University of Cambridge and at the *Centre de Recherche et d’Applications en Langues* (CRAPEL), in 1982 and 1985 respectively; these centers’ goal was to foster this aforementioned students’ sense of control of their own learning.

Holec defined learner training as a process of discovery and trial and error, in which students are encouraged to find their own answers to the problems they face to the point where this becomes an inherent part of their learning behavior.

The advent of Communicative Language Teaching was instrumental in pushing research forward into this area; given the fact that at the core of this approach is the learner as the key agent in the learning process, many researchers looked into ways to give them more agency and turn language-teaching into a more student-centered endeavor. After all, underpinning the idea that language learning should be about learning to communicate is the theory that the learner and not the teacher should be at center of the process. This is where autonomy becomes a fundamental issue and it explains why it is important (see Nunan, 1996, 1997; Littlewood, 1996, 1997; Breen & Mann, 1997). It’s worth pointing out that neither CLT or learning autonomy are common in Myanmar, at least at school/college level.

A key element in researching learning autonomy is the fact that such autonomy is not an absolute and that its degree varies from one context to the next. Sweeney (1994), Sheerin

(1997) and Nunan (1997) all concurred in their assessment that there are degrees of autonomy and it should be treated as a relative term. This is also backed up by Benson (2011) in more recent research. He theorizes that learners show their autonomy in different ways, and the proliferation of research on this topic matches the proliferation of settings and teaching contexts, thus leading to multiple variations on the approaches to help develop a higher degree of self-regulated learning. It can be said then that the existing literature on this subject provides a working definition of what autonomy is ('taking charge of one's own learning'), information on what it's based on and why it has become important in the field of language learning, and finally some guidelines for teachers on how to help promote it.

A Note on Identity

In her seminal book 'Identity and Language Learning' from 2000, which describes her work with Canadian immigrants, Bonny Norton challenges existing ideas set forth by SLA theorists regarding the distinctions they make between the individual and the social. She argues that these distinctions are artificial and in fact contends that SLA researchers had hitherto failed to properly develop a theory that would establish an unbreakable connection between the learner and the world around them. Her research addressed questions concerning the relationship between the learners and the world at large, and it incorporated questions regarding gender, ethnicity, race and class, which she regarded as essential to her project and which are part of an individual's identity.

She concluded and suggested that in spite of the high level of motivation present in each of the research subjects, there were individual factors which influenced the degree of success in becoming a more integral part of their social groups, all of which boiled down to identity factors: individual goals, where and how they had been brought up, their role in their respective groups, economic factors and what learning English might represent in terms of gaining a new identity.

She further argues that the person's identity, combined with issues such as self-confidence, anxiety, fears, hopes can shape that person's motivational drive in language learning (Norton, 2001).

Further to Norton's research, Ushioda (2011) also suggests that identity and identity formation are influenced by motivational processes and Wigfield and Wagner (2005) state that identity development has important implications for the development of competence *and* motivation.

Then there is Zimmerman's (1998) theory of transportable identities and Richards' (2006) further exploration of that idea: the notion that there are certain identities a person can invoke in the course of a conversation and draw on for the purpose of social interaction, such as a teacher who is also a mother, or a person who is at one point a patient at a doctor's office. I found the concept of transportable identities of particular relevance within my teaching setting and especially within the context of my research; I had found students to be particularly afraid of making mistakes and constantly checking themselves before uttering their ideas for fear of being scolded and discouraged, partly because

they were always, as they entered the classroom, speaking from the identity of a student in the context of a classroom.

Other studies, taking the Three-Selves system mentioned earlier as a starting point, seem to agree on the role of link between identity and motivation. Lane Igoudin (2008) for instance, conducted a study in Southern California. His research was, much like Norton's, conducted on people who had migrated into the United States and who, logically, had to find their place in society through the discovery and development of their new identity of someone having to adjust to life in a foreign country. His study focused heavily on social identity and how this affected motivation. He suggests that a deficient sense of social self acted as a strong motivating factor which encouraged students to engage in further learning and practice. He also found a direct correlation in a successful social engagement and the degree of motivation in language learners, who felt spurred by their degree of success to seek further social contact to improve their English-speaking skills.

One important distinction to be made is that most studies I just mentioned were conducted with immigrants in an ESL setting where their social identities and motivation to learn differ greatly from the EFL context of which my students are part. Although there are shared elements to be considered that transcend the setting (the underlying principles of motivation and the L2 Three-Selves System, for instance), the theories put forth can not be taken at face value and require further exploration and study within each individual context. I have included both Norton and Igoudin because I believe that the distinctions between ESL and EFL are less distinct than they were years ago. For instance, and as I stated earlier, any of my learners attended international schools in Myanmar with students from non-English speaking countries and I believed these findings were still relevant and not to be discarded because of the setting research was conducted in.

METHODOLOGY

The three data-collection instruments I used were questionnaires, diaries and interviews.

Questionnaires

I used three questionnaires, which I now explain:

- a. The first one was based on a literature study of Deci & Ryan (1985), Markus & Nurius (1986), Higgins (1987, 1998), Higgins et al (1985), Oyserman & Markus (1990), Higgins et al (1994), Norton (2000), Dörnyei (2005, 2011), Hoyle & Sherrill (2006) and Ushioda (2009, 2011), all of which explored the idea of the self as a guiding principle in learning.

The aim of this questionnaire was to help learners reflect on their own role as learners and what their ideal L2 was, as well as to uncover where their motivation came from, their ideas on what they could do on their own to create further opportunities for learning and practicing, to get an idea of what their expectations were and they wanted to achieve by the end of the course, and the kind of external assistance they felt they needed in order to get there.

The questionnaire was made up of sixteen questions and was handed out on the first week of research. The information obtained was used to create a series of tasks designed to foster autonomy, boost confidence and aid in their sense of achievement. Every task designed forthwith took into consideration the information provided by the students themselves.

For instance, when asked about what they expected to achieve by the end of the course, several students mentioned “speak well” and “being able to speak to foreigners”; this gave me an inkling that they related success to their speaking skills more than others and I therefore ensured to allow enough class time for speaking practice: at the beginning of every class students were given 20-25 minutes to engage in tasks which promoted conversation: I additionally organized two sessions with foreigners from several different countries, some where English was not the mother tongue (Hungary, Peru, France, Czech Republic) and some where it was but had no imperialistic connotations (Ireland, Australia), as well as the UK. The foreign guests had been instructed to share their language learning experiences and students were encouraged to ask whatever they wanted. They then completed a survey to measure the success of the event, and most of them reported increased confidence and the realization that they could speak to other people using English as a common language, and be understood. One important point they made, however, was that they had mostly *listened* and if they were to repeat the activity they wanted to speak more about themselves. Hence a second session was organized and this time the guests had been instructed to ask as many questions as possible about the students’ lives and endeavors. When asked if they had thought the session had been better, the answer was a unanimous yes. Reportedly this activity had the highest impact in developing motivation and confidence.

- b. The second questionnaire was based in Dörnyei’s Ten Commandments for Motivating Learners, which I have detailed above in the ‘Introduction’ section of this study. I found the areas described there relevant to my teaching context and wanted to explore their workability with my own learners. The questions asked students to reflect on their classes, their classmates, their teacher and cultural factors that might cause them become more or less motivated to learn as the case may be. This questionnaire was handed out on week two of the study and the information gathered used to make adjustments and changes into the classroom setting and dynamics. For instance, one of the questions was “How confident are you?” followed by “What can the teacher do to help you improve your self-confidence?” In answer to the latter question, students wanted the instructor to share his own experience as a language learner, or treat them as family, or speak to them more about personal things, all of which I ended up doing to a certain extent. Both questionnaires A and B were attitudinal, in that they asked questions related to thoughts, ideas, beliefs and attitudes.

It has been argued that questionnaires offer the drawback of respondents ‘lying due to social desirability’ (McLeod, 2014, p.4). To minimize that factor I made both questionnaires anonymous and encouraged students to be as detailed as possible so the information gathered could be used for their benefit. Based on the comments received, I believed anonymity worked to a large extent in helping students feel safe about their responses. One student said she felt the class gave her headaches because of the effort required (which seem to have gone away after the completion of the project); another said “I think the teacher doesn’t like when I don’t speak” and another said “my relationship with the teacher is OK, but it could be better”. All answers reflected an attempt at honest responses and not at pleasing the instructor.

- c. The third questionnaire was given to students on the last day of the course, after the six weeks had concluded and asked students to reflect on the overall results of the study at a personal level, their feelings about themselves as learners, their sense of autonomy if any existed and their motivation to engage in further learning.

Diaries

“The diary is the document of life par excellence, chronicling as it does the immediately contemporaneous flow of public and private events that are significant to the diarist”. p.12.

Students were asked to fill three journal entries in the course of six weeks to reflect on any changes they had noticed in regards to their attitudes and feelings towards learning, the classroom, the tasks and themselves.

I chose to make this an event-contingent tool given the time that elapsed between classes, to give learners enough time to do things they could reflect on.

The information gathered after the first two entries was used to plan further tasks and activities that would boost motivation and help learners develop a greater sense of autonomy.

For instance, the first entry (two weeks into the course) asked learners to reflect on how helpful certain tasks had been in developing language skills, and which ones they had enjoyed or not. Based on the data collected, I pursued certain tasks (like impromptu conversations about topics of their choice), and dropped others (such as contrived board games, which some of them found irrelevant in their learning process).

The last journal entry asked students to reflect on their own identity and themselves as language learners and to comment on any changes they had noticed in themselves throughout the course, as well as to analyze how learning English fit into that identity.

Interviews

The third research tool I used was the use of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted on three of the nineteen participants at the conclusion of the study.

The participants were chosen based on my observation of a variety of behaviors: two of them had demonstrated a great deal of growth and maturity in the 10 weeks of the course (six of which were devoted to the study): when the term started, they both had shown difficulty socializing in class in class and followed instructions blindly without questioning anything I said. By the end of the course they were actually asking questions about the activities, directly telling me when they didn't understand something (something extremely unusual in a Myanmar classroom where students simply nod and then ask each other to clarify their doubts).

The reason for choosing to conduct interviews was to find more in depth what had occurred for each individual students and if and to what degree they felt they had achieved a greater degree of autonomy and motivation, and furthermore to what degree (if any) they felt they had moved towards a closer version of their L2 self, which was a concept they worked with throughout the study.

Because I interviewed four people and I needed to have a certain degree of comparability across participants, I chose to have a semi-structured interview. In reality, the questions were the same that I used in the final questionnaire and my aim was to ask follow-up questions based on the data students provided.

At the time of my research design, I felt my rationale for doing these interviews was solid. Motivation and autonomy are behavioral issues that happen first in the mind and then they reflect themselves in person's behavior. Thus it seemed natural to want to have a deeper insight into these phenomena from the students' point of view at the end of the course, once a relationship had been established with the teacher and learners could, allegedly, express their views in a non-threatening setting and with someone they saw as safe.

However, and in retrospect, although I believe the interviews yielded some relevant information that confirmed the data provided in the questionnaire, I think there is much room for improvement in their design and delivery. As I explained, I used the same questions I had previously asked in the final questionnaire and this would have been a good opportunity to have a less structured interview with the same goal in mind but using Patton's ideas for exploration of the subject's experiences and behaviours, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, sensory information (Patton, 2002).

A better way of doing them would have been to do three interviews with each learner at different intervals, as recommended by Dörnyei (2005). Such as it was, they were done right at the end of the course and there is no objective point of comparison.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Questionnaires

The first questionnaire was handed out on the first day of the study. It consisted of sixteen questions broken down as follows:

- Questions 1,2,3,4,7,8 and 12 dealt with *motivation*.

- Questions 5,9,10 and 11 dealt with the *L2 Motivational Self System*
 - Questions 6,13,14 and 15 dealt with *autonomy*.
- I will now analyze students' responses by area.

Analysis of questions regarding motivation

There were unexpected findings that challenged my original suppositions, which I now detail.

The first finding I found surprising relates to question 1, "Where does your motivation come from?". My original supposition was that learners were mostly motivated by external sources and were not necessarily engaged in language learning on their own volition. However, this is what I found:

They were given the following choices, and they could choose more than one option:

- a. Society
- b. School
- c. Your parents
- d. Yourself
- e. Other (please specify what)

41% of students answered 'D', 35% replied 'A' and the remaining 24% answered with two or more choices. This showed that my first assumption had not been entirely been accurate: in spite of external factors, such as their educational model or social or family pressure, there was a high degree of motivation to learn that came from the students themselves (although this did not have a direct impact in their degree of autonomy).

This finding was important because it showed that there was a high probability of success in recruiting students' engagement in self-directed learning efforts given their degree of existing motivation.

The second finding worthy of mention relates to question 4: "What would you like to be able to achieve as a learner of English? where most learners replied "to speak well", which is a logical response and why many people enroll in language courses in the first place. But the second most frequent response (27%) was 'to be able to speak to *foreigners*'. I highlight the fact that they said 'foreigners' and not 'native-speakers', 'westerners' or 'people from English-speaking countries'. Question 8 asked for the kind of English-speaking groups they would like to meet or communicate with, and the answers here did mention British people 'because of their involvement in the country', or 'native speakers'. I highlight this fact because in my previous teaching experience most learners had shown interest in speaking to native speakers. These learners, however, went beyond that and wanted to speak to foreigners regardless of their nationality.

A third finding came from question 7: "What external help or assistance do you feel you need in order to be a fluent English speaker?" and 80% of learners felt they needed help from their teacher in building their confidence, which was in alignment with question 11: "What is your ideal self as an English speaker?", all the participants, bar-none (although worded differently) expressed that it was 'someone able to confidently have conversations with different kinds of people about things as diverse as university life, relationship

issues and interests'. What this showed was that learners related their sense of achievement with their speaking skills, and that their confidence derived from their perceived skill to hold a conversation with English speakers from other countries.

Hence, I organized a thirty-minute session in which four foreign guests were invited to talk to students and share their experiences as language learners and have an otherwise unstructured conversation. I thought the idea of sharing the language-learning experience would be valuable to my learners given the fact that two of the guests had learned English later in life (one was 32-years old when he learned and other 24, and they both work as language teachers). The guests were from Peru, Hungary, Australia, England and Czech Republic; they were four teachers and a dancer. They all sat at different tables and took turns speaking to groups of students for 10 minutes at a time, with the conversation deriving largely from the students' own questions. They had prepared some questions based on information I had given them about the foreigners and the rest of the talk was completely unstructured.

When surveyed afterwards, most students felt their confidence had improved in varying degrees. It is worthy of note that the entirety of students valued the fact that they felt comfortable and not scared (I had chosen speakers I had assumed would be non-threatening in their personalities). Hence from the learners' point of view there is a clear connection between the level of comfort and how confident they feel when they need to speak. I find this to be a valuable finding for educators as well and in concordance with Dörnyei's following commandments:

1. Develop a good relationship with the learners
2. Increase learners' linguistic self-confidence
3. Make the language classes interesting
4. Promote learner autonomy
5. Personalize the learning process
6. Create a positive and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom

After the activity was completed, students were given a survey and asked if the experience had helped them feel more motivated about learning English and if their confidence had improved.

This is what they said in the aforementioned survey:

Student 1: *"Yes, it helped me feel more motivated about achieving that goal. Since my ideal self is someone able to speak confidently to foreigners, this experience was like a tester to my goal. I knew my weak points in communicating from this experience. Also, I didn't have enough confidence but after the experience I think my confidence improved a little"*

Student 2: *"I feel I got confident about 70% when speaking to them. I talked to them and they understood all my words. I was scared they wouldn't understand my words.*

And yes, I feel this experience helped me feel more motivated about achieving my ideal L2 self"

Student 3: *"I didn't feel very confident before speaking to them, but after the experience I feel my confidence improved. Some of them spoke very clearly and some very*

fast but I understood them well. Also I feel this experience helped feel more motivated and would like to repeat it. I can hear their lives, interests, hobbies and advice and it can also make us to have better social lives"

Student 4: *"I feel more confident than before, and I really want to repeat the experience. Yeap! It can help me because when I knew they also not expert in English at first, and that they were the same with us but now they become experts at English, I was very happy; I can also be an expert like that if I try like them."*

From the students' comments above there seems to be a consensus on the link between having gained greater confidence and achieving a higher degree of motivation. I mentioned Ushioda's research on the use of pedagogical interventions that are sometimes needed in order to improve learner outcomes, and given the nature of this research, a definite learning outcome of this intervention is the students' ability to communicate with less fear about things they considered relevant (Ushioda, 2011).

When asked about what changes they would make if they had the session again, the most common point that came was the desire to speak more about themselves and to have more time available for the session. Hence a second session was organized three weeks after the first one, and new guests were brought in, this time from Ireland, France and England (two of them). The guests were instructed beforehand to ask learners lots of questions to get them to talk about themselves, which they did. Students testimony after the task was favorable on this particular point. They were only asked if they felt satisfied about the time spent on the task and about the way it had been conducted, with the guests asking the questions. The entirety of the participants responded favorably to both questions.

Analysis of questions regarding autonomy

The most relevant finding in this area was the learners' own realization of their need for self-study, which they revealed in answering question 13, "What is your OWN role in meeting those expectations?" (related to their expectations of the course) and question 16 "What opportunities do you think you can create on your own to practice inside and outside the classroom?"

Most learners mentioned 'reading books', 'reading online', 'listening to songs' and 'speaking with friends'.

In order to assist learners in developing the necessary motivation to engage in these tasks on their own, I did two things: the first one was to give them a list of self-practice tasks based largely on Duncan Foord and Daniel Barber's website learnercoachingelt.wordpress.com, which is turn came as a further effort to their book "From English Teacher to Learner Coach" (Foord & Barber, 2014). The site, in its section 'Practising outside the classroom', provides six different tasks students can choose from in order to engage in self-directed learning efforts. I expanded on those tasks given and gave students the following choices:

- Listening to a song in English and write what you think the song is about.
- Watching a "HOW TO" video on YouTube and follow the instructions (a recipe, how to use or repair something, etc.)

- Participating in a chat or forum and post at least 3 comments
- Recording yourself speaking for 2-3 minutes (the recording is only for your personal use and for me to listen and give you feedback, not for playing it in class) – 2 times in one week
- Writing a movie review and post it on IMDB
- Writing a restaurant review (any restaurant is fine, including the cafeterias at the university or school)
- Writing a book review.
- Recording a 2-3-minute conversation with a friend having coffee, lunch, etc. The idea is to do the same as in the “Record yourself” activity. This is for your individual practice – 2 times in one week.
- Reading a text of your choice in English and write a summary of it.
- Reading and surf the Internet for 15 minutes every day, the only condition being that the websites must be in English. These can be any type of website (fun or instructional).

Participants were given the assignment of choosing one every week for the four following weeks, do it and write a report on what they did, why they chose it and what the final outcome was (i.e. how useful the task was and what benefits they had obtained from doing them). As it can be seen above, the tasks listed covered the range of activities mentioned by learners earlier and expanded on them.

The second task consisted in having students take on a 30-day challenge that involved English but did not necessarily relate to them as students.

Before learners chose their challenge, I planned and taught a lesson based on the TED talk by Matt Cutts titled “Try something new for thirty days”. After watching the talk, students discussed challenges they had taken on and others they might like to try in the future. They were given a blank 30-day calendar and told to find something they had always wanted to do or try, write it on the paper and use the calendar to mark it as done. The only condition for the challenge was that it had to involve the use of English. For example, one learner took the challenge of losing weight by following YouTube tutorials in English on dieting and exercise, which she achieved.

In their book “Learner Autonomy: A Guide to Developing Learner Responsibility”, Agota Scharle and Anita Szabo (2000), provide the following definition:

“In theory, we may define autonomy as the freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well. Responsibility may also be understood as being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one’s own actions. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement, and they are apparently very much interrelated.” (p.5)

Both of these tasks had the goal of giving students that freedom and ability to manage their own affairs. Although I do agree that ‘dealing with the consequences of one’s own actions’ – their meaning of responsibility – is certainly an intrinsic part of our lives as humans, I considered bringing this up as negative motivation based on fear (no matter how real)

and my aim was to help foster autonomy based on a positive approach to recruit student involvement.

In looking over at the results of such assignment in developing a greater sense of autonomy in learners, this is what they said when asked about the outcome of the tasks:

Student 1: *“As a person, I was able to motivate myself a lot and I felt more confident in communication with either native or foreigners.*

As a language learner, I’ve got many effective ways to do self-study. I also realized to keep in touch specially to study regularly languages. As I’m not only an English learner but also a Japanese language learner, I found much in common in learning both of them. But the most important is to study regularly, do practices and not to be ashamed of communicating with that language.”

Student 2: *“Eating at a restaurant, watching a movie and reading a book are easy but writing the reviews of them were a little hard for me. That’s why I want to try more something like that for the next time. For this time, I was not satisfied with my writings. That activity warned me not to be lazy at writing. From now on, I’ll try to do more writing activities.”*

Student 3: *“I feel happy when I know all the lyric as well as I feel confident in listening. I’ll make sure I’ll do this again and again not as a homework but as my hobby. Thanks to you, I’ve found a better way to improve my listening skill and I also learnt how to make progresses in English as a self-study”*

Student 4: *“The 30-day challenge helps me more motivated to study on my own.*

Doing one activity per week’ does the same. Among the activities, Listening and transcribing a song is the best one for me because I can remember more easily the new words in the song that the new words from others”

It should be noted that students were asked about this in an addendum to the last questionnaire. I realized that this information was missing so an addendum was added and e-mailed to them.

The second questionnaire was purely based on Dörnyei’s ten commandments for helping learners develop motivation, and the rationale behind doing it was the need to discover what I should be doing as a teacher to help learners achieve a greater level of motivation and what were the areas I should be focusing on to make this a reality.

The questionnaire revealed that students felt comfortable in class, had a good relationship with their instructor and for the most part enjoyed the tasks and the way the information was presented to them. There was no evidence that either the instructor, his demeanor or methodology, or the classroom atmosphere were an issue.

From a practical point of view it revealed students’ interest in learning more about cultures where English was spoken, be it music, literature or films.

Taking this into consideration, an activity was set up at the beginning of every class whereby I brought several books that had either been written in English or translated into English from other languages. Some of them were graded novels and some adaptations of movies that targeted their age group (comic-book or TV-show adaptations). Students came to class every morning, chose a book and after reading

for 10-15 minutes they shared and had conversations about what they had just read.

Since they were also interested in learning about culture through music, we did two tasks using songs. One song was an R&B song by Beyoncé (“If I were a boy”), and the other was a song by Elvis titled “Mary is the name (of his latest flame). The first song was used to learn new lexis as well as discuss gender issues, which are much more openly discussed in Western cultures and somewhat taboo in Myanmar. Students, however, engaged in a lively discussion about LGBT issues.

With the second song, which is about a love triangle, they discussed the differences in relationships and dating customs between Myanmar and the West.

Students were asked to reflect on the effect of these tasks in their motivation and desire to study on their own outside the classroom; these reflections were written down in their diaries, entries of which I will analyze further on in the ‘Diaries’ chapter of this dissertation.

Analysis of questions regarding the L2 motivational self system

There were two findings from the first questionnaire I believe to be worthy of mention, one that confirmed my initial suppositions and one that was unexpected.

The first concerned question 5, which linked to the idea of the ought-to self and fear/anxiety regarding not achieving it. The question was “What do you think might happen if you don’t reach your goals as a learner of English?”, and most students replied through different wordings they were afraid of not being able to study abroad or to speak to foreigners. One learner actually said if he didn’t learn English her life would be ruined.

I see a couple of implications here: one is importance of Ushioda and Pizzolatto’s suggestions for pedagogical interventions in helping learners reach their goals. It became evident that unless shown there are alternatives to their current teacher-led, grammar-based, fear-inducing learning system, Myanmar learners are unlikely to engage in self-directed efforts beyond what they find in their textbook.

The other implication is the need for schools to provide opportunities for language practice that go beyond the classroom experience. As I said, most learners emphasize their desire to engage in conversation with foreigners, and based on the students’ own testimony, there are no social clubs, language exchange sessions or other opportunities available for them to take advantage of, hence schools should help learners by providing such opportunities such as inviting foreigners for an informal chat, just like we did as part of this study.

The second surprising finding, which I have mentioned earlier but fits within this section of analysis as well, is the answer to question 11: “What is your ideal self as an English speaker?”. In different words, the majority of learners expressed it as someone who can speak confidently with people from around the world in conversations ranging from small talk to public speaking.

I found this surprising because with the exception of one student who mentioned that her ideal self is someone who can eventually write novels in English, the remaining

participants made no mention whatsoever of any other language skill besides speaking.

Although the course I delivered had an intensive reading component, (daily reading for 15 minutes), and a listening component with songs and video clips, and in spite of the fact that this resulted on a number of students expressing how reading and learning through songs had become enjoyable, there is no evidence pointing to the fact that it got them closer to their L2 self. There is enough evidence gathered though the study to support the claim that it helped them become more motivated and that this motivation resulted in autonomous learning efforts, but whether or not they got closer to their ideal L2 self cannot be ascertained at this point.

Analysis of Diary Entries

Learners were asked to write three entries in their diaries. The first two were done two and three weeks after the project had begun, respectively. They were:

Reflection 1:

“For the past two weeks, you have been thinking about your own role as a learner of English. You have also been doing different things in and out of class to continue with your practice. Think about those things and write your feelings and opinions. Are they helpful? Are they enjoyable? Are they helping you feel motivated as a student? Explain”.

Reflection 2:

For the past three weeks, you have been doing different things to help you become more motivated as a student.

Do you feel like these activities are helping you do that? Which ones?

Do you feel like you would like to try new things on your own outside the classroom?

Describe your feelings and thoughts as a student in this class. Do you enjoy learning?

The activities done thus far had been: listening to songs and discussing the issues presented therein, the first session with foreign guests, playing speaking games such as ‘half-minute topics’, creating their speaking tasks to do in class, choosing a book to read and also choosing from a lists of self-study tasks to do at the beginning of the lesson that ranged from listening to a song and transcribing it, reading online, reading a different book, or speaking to someone about a topic of their own choosing.

The most relevant finding relates to the level of enjoyment students reported.

These are some of the comments students made in their reflections

- *“I really enjoy participating in the activities”*,
- *“Getting to know your foreign friends was absolutely fantastic and the excitement I got was on a whole new level”*,
- *“It’s also enjoyable to be a student in this class because I can talk with my classmates freely and discuss whatever I want, so I enjoy learning”*,
- *“I really enjoy my class activities and I am really happy to attend class”*
- *“These activities are helping me to motivate as a student, and I enjoy learning”*.

Even though there was a question concerning their desire to engage in self-directed learning efforts at home, most students failed to answer the question and the very few who did, did so very superficially. Hence, I considered the information to be incomplete and thus, irrelevant.

The third entry asked students to reflect on their identity as learners and people. As I mentioned earlier, the literature study done in this project led to the exploration of learner identity. Most current research on motivation links it to autonomy and identity and there seems to be a consensus among researchers and educators on this issue. Thus, I asked students to write their reflection on the following, in an effort to uncover further data and deepen my research:

Reflection 3:

“Definition of identity: *the essential, distinguishing characteristics of someone; the unique personality or character of a person. This includes their ethnicity, gender, age, religion, membership of social groups, sexual orientation, family background, income, language.*

Think about your own identity. Write down as much as you can about yourself.

How does learning English fit into your identity? Do you feel it adds anything? If so, what?

Do you feel your identity changes when you are in the classroom? How? Are you more yourself? Less yourself? The same?

What would you like to do in the classroom that you feel it would help develop parts your identity?”

The answers were varied. It’s worthy of note that Myanmar is an extremely diverse country: there are three main ethnic groups, Chinese-Burmese, Indian-Burmese and Burmese. And among Burmese, there are dozens of other, smaller ethnic groups, each with their own dialects, costumes, food and traditions. Such diversity showed in their answers where very little in common was revealed except for the question that asked if their identity changed while in the classroom. The answers showed a development of their social skills and how that was having different degrees of impact:

Student 1: *“In class I am more or less myself, but I feel like I am becoming less awkward and more willing to socialize”*

Student 2: *“When I am in class, my identity changes a little. I need to be active and social in class. Now, I have a lot of friends and my mother couldn’t believe it! And she told me that I changed a lot. I enjoy doing group work, having conversations and playing games.”*

Student 3: *“My identity changes a little in the classroom. I become more social and friendly and I’ve gained more confidence”*

Student 4: *“Now I speak happily with everyone: strangers, teachers, my classmates, or someone I don’t like. Maybe I became like that after I studied English”*

Student 5: *“Although I prefer reading a book without speaking to anyone, I’m now willing to be very social”*

Student 6: *“I feel my identity changes when I’m in the classroom because of my friends. I always stayed alone in all the classes but I changed because of them. In this term I speak more and I’m really thankful”*

English (and any language, for that matter) is a medium of communication. And there are those who suggest that any such medium requires a social presence and in fact deem such presence as an inherent feature for achieving a richer level of communication. For instance, while researching the effectiveness of online learning environment versus the classroom experience, Karen Swan and Jennifer Richardson (2003) highlight the sense of connection that exists in a classroom setting. If one were to agree with such statement, it’s possible to see that the development of social skills could help students have a greater sense of achievement in their learning process.

Further to the above and more linked to this study, Eva Hjörne, Geerdina van der Aalsvoort and Guida de Abreu (2012) theorize that classroom learning is directly connected with interconnectedness, and that this is an issue that concerns students directly and not just the teacher. For instance, Myanmar is a country that has been beset with social, religious and ethnic conflict for the best part of 70 years. Classrooms are an eclectic mix of race, religion and ethnic background and they provide what they called a ‘multiplicity of cultural positions’. And these positions are an intrinsic part of their selves, their identities. Hence the importance of fostering a willingness to socialize (and *positively*, I might add), as this socialization and not their isolation, might help them achieve their ideal L2 self, which by their own description in most cases was someone ‘able to have conversations in English with anyone’. In other words, their active contribution in their instructional setting can help shape their identities further (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). This research then emphasizes the idea that physical socialization (such as what occurs in the classroom) can positively help shape a learner’s identity by developing their social skills, and that in such surroundings learners will tend to find a common medium of communication as a way to further connect with others.

Analysis of Interview Data

In listening to the interviews to uncover further data that would be useful in this research, I came across an unexpected finding and it had to do with the effect the community of the classroom had on the learners, both in their motivation and confidence (which in the case of these learners is clearly connected, as outlined earlier).

All three students interviewed agreed that their classmates had an important effect in them overcoming their shyness and becoming more sociable by honestly sharing life stories and helping them when they couldn’t find anything to say.

A second important finding relates to the link between motivation and autonomy in the students learning process. They highlighted the fact that English didn’t feel like an obligation anymore and that they were actively and happily engaging in learning activities at home which were helping them become a closer version of their ideal L2 selves.

For instance, one student stated that before the course she never read because she didn’t like it. During the course we did intensive reading and now she buys books and writes poems,

which her classmates help her with when she doesn't know a word (through their Facebook group). A second student didn't know how to use the Internet for learning purposes and after being directed to a self-directed learning website to do specific tasks from there, she felt she now can use online resources better and enjoys using the Internet to find news articles with information about the world). A third student, who was by and large the shyest of the participants, said she had changed a lot because of her interaction with her classmates and one in particular, who became a close friend. Her case is interesting in that she mentioned several times in the interview that she had definitely become more confident and sociable, she had more tools to study English on her own and that in fact she wanted to speak and learn the language to a good standard. However, all her reasons were extrinsic: she said her parents force her to speak, so she does. She also feels her classmates speak really well and even interact in English during break times, and this pushes her to learn and speak more.

So although she said she can speak better than before, can watch TV in English and understand more, as well as watch movies in other languages with English subtitles, she also expressed the feeling that she did not desire to engage in autonomous learning outside the classroom. Her testimony shows evidence of improved outcomes, higher engagement and positive social changes ("I'm more willing to speak, more sociable and more confident") brought about by pedagogical interventions, but not necessarily higher autonomy or intrinsic motivation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

I started this research as an attempt to investigate ways to boost autonomy and motivation in this particular group of Burmese learners, and to see if with the increase of both there was a change in learning outcomes. The study also attempted to determine what the role of the teacher was (if in fact there was any) in helping students develop an increased sense of motivation and learner autonomy.

Intrinsic motivation, which happens when something is inherently interesting and enjoyable, according to this study had a direct impact in the level of autonomy achieved and in certain learning outcomes, although both of these conditions in varying degrees and not as absolutes.

Learners reportedly felt by the end of the course they were more motivated to learn English, felt their confidence had increased and that this sense of enjoyment had resulted in greater willingness to study on their own. Many of them were actively engaging in self-directed learning efforts at home or outside the classroom, which ranged from listening to songs in English, watching English-speaking films or foreign films with English subtitles, writing poetry, reading, socializing outside the classroom, and using English in online communities (such as their self-created Facebook group, which was bilingual).

Implications for Eachers

In terms on the pedagogical interventions, my conclusion is that in the case of Myanmar students there is a definite

role for the teacher in terms of guidance and support. For instance, at the beginning of each lesson they were given 4-5 choices of self-practice tasks: listening to a song in English, do Internet Reading, have conversations with people, watch YouTube videos. At first, they were unsure of what to do and how to approach making such choice and did not do anything. Some of them asked me to choose for them, until I assured them it was totally OK for them to choose on their own. But once they made their choice, they focused on the task at hand and needed little to no supervision.

When engaged in their 30-day challenges, which they did at home, most students finished their task without the need for teacher intervention: I inquired weekly if they were doing their challenge and if they needed any help: they were, and they didn't. Most students (15 out of 19) completed such challenges. The remaining four did actually start and finish but skipped days in between. It was the same with the choice of self-directed tasks to be done over four weeks: once they got started, learners needed no extra help or supervision.

It should be noted that this confirms the notion that there are degrees of autonomy. The examination of the completion rate leads me to the conclusion that those learners who did not carry out the tasks fully needed further intervention on the teacher's part. One possible solution might have been a half-way survey to find out who needed assistance and what kind of help was needed: maybe choose a different, more feasible challenge, perhaps a different choice of task. Or find out if there were external factors affecting their English-learning time; I did not have the impression that students were unwilling, but the results show an area of further research and attention in terms of the type and degree if intervention needed to help those learners who were struggling with completing their tasks.

My conclusion is that there is a role for the teacher in helping learners develop the necessary degree of motivation that will result in greater autonomy, and that this role is well described by Dörnyei is that of developing strategies suitable to a particular set of learners that when put to use will result in more highly motivated students (Dörnyei, 1998). I believe the main point of this role is as a planner, organizer and provider of opportunities that take into consideration individual and general needs which can be easily gathered through questionnaires done at the beginning of the course.

In regards to whether or not higher motivation and greater autonomy resulted in improved learning outcomes ("description of skills, abilities and attitudes that students can perform or demonstrate upon completion of the program" (Parsons, 2011, p.12), this is what students said:

Student 1: "I can speak English fluently even though I make mistakes. I can use some grammar and patterns in speaking and writing and what's more, I've gained a lot of knowledge. I feel happy and can communicate with others easily"

Student 2: "I feel my language skills developed on this course a lot. All of the things have improved, like speaking, listening skills, grammar patterns and many vocabularies, a lot of general knowledge and communication with people"

Student 3: "I can now read without having to check so many unknown words very often. I'm able to write some recipes"

Student 4: “My language skills developed 70% compared to the old me. Because of this course I know what I want and what I have to do. My reading skills specially improved; before this course I hadn’t read any books and now they are part of my life. I can now also talk with anyone, anywhere”.

Student 5: “My listening skills have developed and I can speak to foreigners without hesitating. My grammar has also improved”

Student 6: “I noticed that my listening skills improved a lot on this course and that I am able to communicate better than before. I am also able to watch videos in English without subtitles”.

My first conclusion here based on students’ reports is that there was a definite improvement in learning outcomes if one is to look at the above definition.

Spady (1994) claims, however, that ‘knowledge of content, and not content alone’, must be manifested through a demonstration process of some kind. If we are to look at this aspect of learning outcomes, we can conclude that the results of this study are inconclusive. For one, as stated by Parson, outcomes should be measurable and in this case, they weren’t. To truly ascertain this knowledge of content, a test or questionnaire would be needed. Students expressed definite changes in attitude and reported improved skills and abilities, but it is also true that these are subjective interpretations and ones that should be further measured quantitatively through tests or comparative recorded output in order to gather more accurate, objective data. It should also be said that because of this lack of a more precise and objective measuring tool, it is not easy to ascertain whether or not these reported outcomes are in fact the result of the learners improved motivation and greater autonomy, or of something else (such as the content of the course or the tasks that were done). Therefore, further qualitative research tools should be used on this specific area in order to establish factual data, such as the ones suggested above. In conclusion, I believe this study confirms current research trends that there is a link between motivation and autonomy; that there is a role for the teacher in training learners in such way that it will result in motivation, and also in running a course empowering students more and more and encouraging a greater sense of self-agency; it is also my conclusion in regards to Myanmar learners that although Students responded well to the tasks being done and engaged willingly and that there were definite social changes that affected the way students approached their learning process, neither the development of autonomy or intrinsic motivation would have occurred naturally and hence the responsibility of instructors to become acquainted with motivation research and put that information to use.

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