

## The Nature of Motivation in Saudi EFL Context: An Overview

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### Abstract

This article reviews past research done on English as a foreign language learning motivation in Saudi Arabian universities from the last twenty years, in order to evaluate its impact on learning process and to find out the nature of motivation of EFL learners. It focuses on the studies of psychological theories of motivation which were tested in FL classrooms for their validation in Saudi universities. It has been observed that there are significant changes in EFL learners' learning level of motivation at different times in different contexts. Additionally, this review emphasizes the complexities seen in the relationships between teaching and learner motivation. Eventually, an attempt is made to clarify certain emerging truths and point out the most promising research directions.

**Keywords:** Motivation; EFL learning process; Saudi Arabian universities

**DOI:** 10.7176/JLLL/98-05

**Publication date:** September 30<sup>th</sup> 2023

### 1. Introduction

Motivation is significant because it impacts the degree to which other elements play a role in FL acquisition. It is seen as a key factor in the success of any endeavor. Motivation is important in the learning process because it provides meaning and energy to a particular action allowing it to be continued and the intended outcomes to be achieved. As a result, any aim must be preceded by a desire or want that gives this action the required resources for implementation and completion (Gardner, 1985). Since Gardner and his colleagues pioneered second/foreign language learning motivation research in the 1950s, it has maintained its importance in the literature of second/foreign language acquisition. This research period is referred to as "the social psychological period" by Dornyei in 2009. It established the widely accepted difference between the two types of motivation. The first is "integrative motivation," which refers to learning a language with the goal of achieving high levels of integration and assimilation into the target language group (Dornyei, 2009). The second is the "instrumental motivation" in which a learner learns a language to gain some benefit (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The next phase has been characterized by the focus on conceptualizing motivation in terms of its time element. This concept stems from a process-oriented approach to motivation that emphasizes motivation's dynamic character.

In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language, and it is the only foreign language learning in the whole kingdom (Al-Shammary, 1984). Al-Shammary (1984) adds that English as a subject was first introduced in Saudi Arabia in the late 1950s. He also added that in the context of commerce English was introduced in the 1930s after the discovery of oil, but the government did not make it a compulsory subject until

the 1950s (Al-Shammary, 1984). Despite the Saudi government's efforts to improve English teaching and learning, students' English competence is still inadequate and falls short of expectations (Fareh, 2010). According to Farah (2010) despite spending many years studying English, the majority of students graduate with a low level of English proficiency. It is duly noted that when the students enter universities, most of them face problems in learning the English language and the main cause for their low competence is the lack of motivation (Khan, 2011).

The aim of this article is to find out the research on the nature of motivation from the last twenty years, done in Saudi Arabia universities focusing on both students and teaching strategies, teachers' approaches for purposefully increasing learner motivation. The themes of the research focus on the theories used by different researchers for motivation research.

The review's second theme is to summarize the key lessons learned so far, to inform language teacher training and education, and to direct researchers to interesting areas for further research.

## **2. Research on EFL Motivation in the Saudi Context**

According to Al-Zayid (2005), in the Saudi educational context, L2 motivation research got less attention than it deserves. Despite the pervasive apathy about L2 motivation in the Saudi educational system, several researchers have attempted to address the issue, providing useful guidelines for dealing with this critical part of language acquisition (Al-Zayid, 2005).

Motivation has widely been researched by different researchers in relation to other variables, like attitude towards learning, anxiety, gender, teaching strategies, interest, etc. (Gardner, 1985, 2006; Dornyei, 2005, 2009; Ngumbang & Mahamod, 2017; Zulkifli & Bakar, 2016). Different researchers used psychological theories to find out the differences and relationships between motivation and other variables. Robert Gardner and William Lambert's work found the social psychological perspectives of motivation. Their works were more concerned with integrative instrumental motives. Integrative motivation, according to Gardner and Lambert (1972), refers to a personal interest in the people and culture of the target language, whereas instrumental motivation refers to a desire to acquire the L2 for a specific reason, such as acquiring a job or meeting educational requirements. In Saudi Arabian context, a study conducted by Alotaibi (2004), stated the relationship among learners' learning strategies, language proficiency level, gender, and motivation. The questionnaire used for motivation was divided into integrative and instrumental motivation, and the effort to learn and desire to learn the language. According to the findings, the participants indicated a high level of instrumental motivation, followed by integrative motivation, and a lesser level of effort and desire to use the language.

With the shift of L2 motivation to a more education-oriented approach, situation-specific motivational concepts were the focus of research (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). As a result of this transition, situational-specific concepts like extrinsic and intrinsic motivations appeared. Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Pintrich and Schunk (2002), is the desire to study for the sake of learning without regard for external rewards. Based on this concept, Moskovsky and Alrabai (2009), conducted an experimental study in Saudi Arabia to quantify intrinsic motivation in EFL students. The conclusions of this study revealed that the Saudi students who took part in it have significant reserves of motivation, which might be used to create higher learning outcomes given more favourable circumstances and showed a positive attitude towards learning English.

These studies showed that Saudi EFL students' motivation level is high and have the potential to learn the English language. They are instrumentally highly motivated which means they learn the English language because of the need for a job or a reward. Also, in a given context when it is favourable for them to learn the English language, the EFL learners show a positive attitude towards learning the English language.

## **3. Psychological Theories in Motivation Research in Saudi Arabian Context**

Dornyei (2005) developed the 'L2 Motivational Self System'. The ideal self is its key concept, which refers to the portrayal of a Theoretical Overview quality that someone would like to have. The ought-to self is a complimentary self-guide that refers to the qualities that one believes one should have. A core concept is that if learning the target language is part of one's ideal or ought-to self, it will serve as a powerful motivator to learn the language due to our psychological desire to narrow the gap between our current and possible future selves. Al-Shahrani (2016) researched to see if the motivational L2 self-system can explain the L2 motivational behaviors of a group of Saudi university-level EFL students in southern Saudi Arabia. The findings confirmed the validity and relevance of the L2 Self System model's basic components of Ideal L2, Ought-to L2, and English learning experiences in the Saudi setting. The results showed that the Ideal L2 and Language Learning Experiences made significant contributions to the learners' stated efforts in learning English as the criteria measure.

Another study based on Dornyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self system was done by Al-Talib (2019). The study aimed to find out the L2 motivation of Saudi university students in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EGP (English for General Purposes) courses. The findings revealed a link between learners'

motivation and the number of English classes they attended. In comparison to the EGP group, the ESP group exhibited higher ideal L2 selves and more positive attitudes on the L2 learning experience, while the ought-to L2 selves were not substantially different. A multiple regression model was also developed, which revealed that the two self-constructs had a positive or negative impact on participants' L2 achievement. Eusafzi (2013), conducted a study on Dornyei's 'L2 Motivational Self System' in western coastal city Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, focuses on the EFL learning motivation of preparatory year learners. The result showed that the strongest predictors of motivation were attitude towards learning English and instrumentality-promotion. The study's findings can be used to better understand students' motivational selves, as well as the internalized and external elements that influence their L2 motivational selves. However, we cannot generalize this research as the sampling technique was convenience sampling, and also the research is only quantitative in nature.

According to Gardner (1985), L2 is defined as "the extent to which individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (p. 10). Motivation is an effective variable that is "often seen as the key learner variable because without it nothing happens" (Cohen & Dornyei, 2002, p.172). Based on these definitions, Al-Maiman (2005), carried out research to assess Saudi students' motivation to learn English as a foreign language before and after being exposed to the language in a formal classroom setting. He used Garner's socio-educational model for his research. The data was collected through a questionnaire. The study showed that before they had the opportunity to learn English formally, Saudi students had high motivation to learn it. It also proved that the students were highly motivated after attending formal English language classes for one year.

Among the theories used by different researchers, Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System is the most commonly used in Saudi Arabian context. Following are some other aspects of research done in the field of motivation in the context of Saudi Arabia.

#### **4. Motivational Techniques**

Foreign language motivation developed and turned to a student-oriented approach which resulted in different techniques to generate FL learners' motivation in the class (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007). According to Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008), Motivational techniques are the instructional interventions used by teachers to elicit and stimulate student motivation. Motivational Teaching Practice was established by Dörnyei in 2001 as a systematic framework of L2 motivational strategies. These techniques are used to increase FL learners' motivation, satisfaction about foreign language learning, to give them motivational feedback about their performance, and to encourage learners by giving them incentives. In Saudi Arabian FL context, Alsheri (2017), investigated motivational techniques as perceived by EFL teachers and students in the Saudi Arabian EFL setting, intending to identify potential incompatibilities. The findings show that both teachers and students value the role of teachers in inspiring students in EFL classrooms. On the other hand, they differ in their views on how students should be motivated. Teachers are convinced that techniques that aid in achieving academic goals are the most effective motivators for students. Students, on the other hand, seem to be more motivated by tactics that relate to the actual learning process and encourage social components of learning such as participation and engagement.

Moskovsky, Alrabai, Paolini & Ratcheva (2013), used a longitudinal pre-and post-treatment quasi-experimental design to conduct a methodologically controlled investigation into the effects of ten preselected teachers' motivational techniques, which were implemented in an experimental group throughout an eight-week teaching program. The findings of this study showed that employing motivational strategies in Saudi EFL classes resulted in a considerable increase in learner motivation, as well as a positive causal relationship between instructor motivation and learner's motivation. The study's findings have a key limitation, that is how the use of motivational techniques would affect learner's real achievement. Alrabai (2014), conducted another study to assess motivating teaching methods in Saudi EFL classes by looking into teachers' attitudes and students' opinions of these techniques. According to the research, teachers rarely employ motivational approaches to motivate students. EFL students have a favourable attitude toward their lecturers and have high levels of instrumental and integrative motivation.

Based on the above research, EFL learners and teachers have a significant increase in their motivation level by using different motivational techniques. However, the limitation is the actual achievement of the EFL learners. Little research has focused on the impact of the use of motivational techniques on the real performance of the students.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This review concluded that research on the role of motivation in the EFL learning process remains the topic of interest in the Saudi Arabian context. The researchers in the Saudi Arabian context focused on analysing the role of psychological theories and the changing level of motivation across different locations. Dornyei's 'Ideals L2 self-system' is used by most of the researchers to compare the difference between ideal L2 self, ought to L2 self, and attitude towards FL learning. On the other hand, the level of motivation is apparently seen having

changes according to different stages of learning and learning context. Moreover, the learners showed a high level of instrumental motivation as compared to integrative motivation. In motivational techniques, academic goals-oriented techniques have positive effects on the EFL learning process.

However, motivation has been ignored concerning its relationship with other individual differences. EFL learners' motivation has been investigated at one time and needs to be investigated at different times. Moreover, to generalize the outcomes of future studies, a bigger and more representative sample of the population needs to be included.

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