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2010

# “I Want to be More Perfect Than Others”: a Case of ESL Motivation.

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## Publication Details

Beath, O., “I Want to be More Perfect Than Others”: a Case of ESL Motivation, Paper presented at the Faculty of Education and IERI HDR Conference, University of Wollongong, 12 November 2010.

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**“I Want to be More Perfect Than Others”: a Case of ESL Motivation.**

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**Abstract**

Language learning motivation is an important concept in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research as it has been significantly linked to achievement. Theoretically, the concept of motivation has moved from being viewed as a static learner trait to a complex, dynamic factor that changes over time. This paper reports on a single case study of a female Indonesian language learner; specifically the change in her language learning behaviours and motivation over the course of learning English from adolescence to adulthood and international postgraduate study. This paper will draw on Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination framework to describe changes in the learner's motivation including, at different times, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. This case study contributes to understanding of an important individual learner variable that impacts on second language learning.

Motivation in language learning has been a strong area of research interest for the past four decades and it has proved to have an important impact on learning success in both classroom and naturalistic learning environments. Second language learning is a challenging cognitive, affective and social undertaking where learners acquire a new system of communication within the context of complex and dynamic language learning environments. Motivation provides the impetus to undertake and engage with language learning opportunities which in turn determine the rate and success of second language learning. Indeed, a strong correlation between motivation and achievement has been shown (Masgoret & Gardner 2003). However, motivation is a complex, multi-faceted construct and the conceptualisation of motivation is still being shaped and redefined as it is applied to different groups of learners.

Recent work such as Csizer et. al (2010) emphasises the dynamic nature of motivation. “Motivation not only changes through the different phases of language learning, but it can also fluctuate within a relatively short time interval due to the influence of external and internal factors” (Csizer et. al 2010, p473). While many studies have examined motivation as a learner trait at one point in time (e.g. Chen et. al. 2005, Bernaus & Gardner 2008, Dornyei & Kormos 2000), few studies (e.g. Dornyei & Csizer 2002 & Gao 2008) have examined changes in motivation over time.

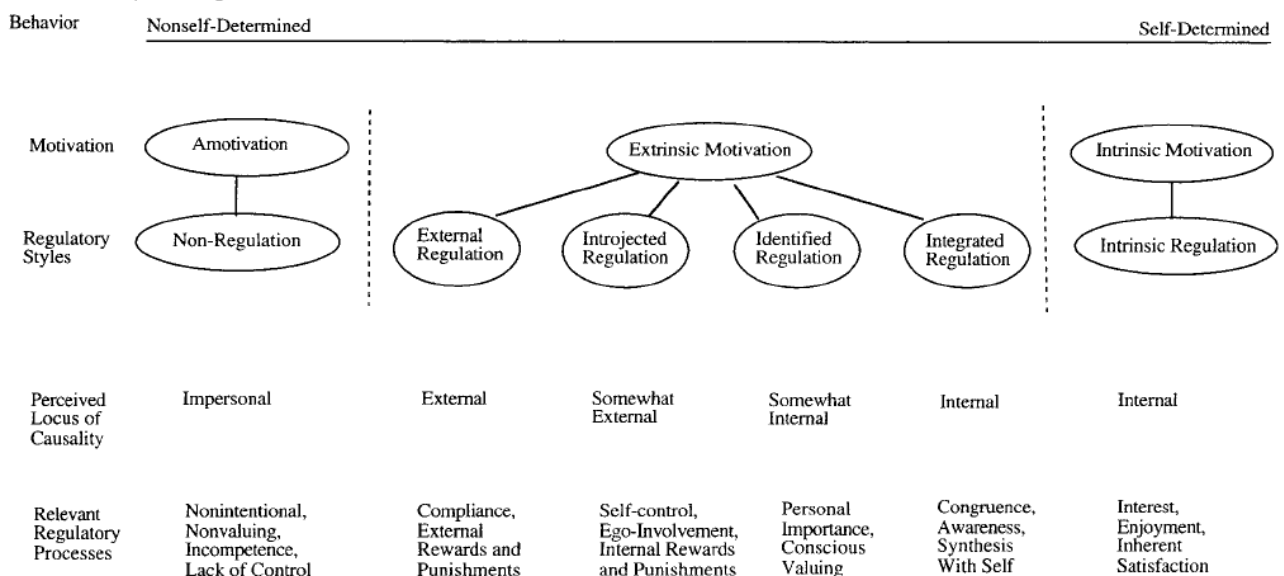
Additionally, a body of work has emerged which examines situated, specific motives in order to understand specific learners' behaviours (Chen et. al. 2005, Dornyei & Kormos 2000, Sayadian & Lashkarian 2010) even though some studies in the area of motivation have intentionally limited

themselves to examining stable and general motives (e.g. Csizer & Dornyei 2005). Csizer et. al (2010) take the view that a number of context specific external influences as well as individual internal factors exert their effect on motivated behaviour. “These internal and external factors are in constant interaction with each other and cause fluctuation in the learner’s motivated behaviour and language learning attitudes” (Csizer et. al 2010, p473). Therefore, this study has aimed to capture the dynamic nature of motivation through an analysis of specific internal and contextual factors.

A specific approach that considers the importance of social-contextual conditions and individual factors that facilitate or forestall self-motivation is Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci 2000). This theory acknowledges that people are innately curious, vital, and self-motivated but “social contexts catalyse both within- and between-person differences in motivation and personal growth, resulting in people being more self-motivated, energized, and integrated in some situations, domains, and cultures than in others” (Ryan & Deci 2000, p68).

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci 2000) is a useful framework with which to study the motivation of second language (L2) learners. SDT supports a dynamic view of motivation and is able to represent the different states of L2 learner motivation as a result of changes in a variety of internal and external factors. It supplies a differentiated approach to motivation by asking what kind of motivation is being exhibited at any given time and provides a set of principles concerning how each type of motivation is developed and sustained, or forestalled and undermined. For this case study, the SDT framework has been used to identify the motivations behind a language learner’s behaviours, to discuss the consequences for her language learning and demonstrate how her motivation for learning English changed over time as a result of internal and external factors.

**Figure 1**  
*The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation With Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes*



(Ryan & Deci 2000)

Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT framework classifies different types of motivation on a continuum (Figure 1) according to the extent to which the motivation is self-determined and internalised within the learner. Each type of motivation is then categorised by its regulatory style, perceived locus of causality and relevant regulatory processes. First on this framework is **amotivation** which Ryan and Deci (2000) define as "the state of lacking intention to act" (p72). Amotivated learners are the least self-determined and see no relation between their actions and the consequences of those actions. In a language learning context, these would be learners who do not value language learning and feel they are wasting their time studying it (Vandergrift 2005). They do not feel competent to do it and do not expect to be successful.

Next along the continuum of self-determination is **extrinsic motivation** which is dependent on some kind of external factor such as a reward, compliance, self-control or ego-involvement. Extrinsic motivation can be divided into four subtypes based on the extent to which their regulation is autonomous: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation. Lastly on this continuum is **intrinsic motivation** which refers to motivation stemming from internal factors such as interest, enjoyment and satisfaction. Learners here are the most self-determined.

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination framework has been chosen to inform this case study because it considers the perceived forces that move a person to act and the specific consequences of these actions for learning. "Many theorists have treated motivation as a unitary concept" however SDT "describes theoretically, experientially and functionally distinct types of motivation" (Ryan & Deci 2000, p72). This description of motivation is made richer through the framework's consideration of regulatory style, locus of causality and regulatory process.

### **The study**

The aim of this study is to investigate the contextual and internal motivations behind the language learning behaviours exhibited by one language learner. Specifically:

1. What motivations lie behind the language learning behaviours of one learner acquiring English as second or other language? and
2. How can language learning behaviours be described using Self-Determination Theory?

The focus of this case study is a 31 year old non-native speaker of English who has been learning English for 18 years. Rania grew up on the island of Java, Indonesia and spoke Javanese at home with her family and her community. Upon starting school Rania had to learn Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, and then started learning English at the age of 13. Now Rania is studying in English at a postgraduate level in Australia. The participant was chosen for this case study because her language learning journey involved language development in a number of different contexts with a variety of language learning activities. These behaviours were as a result of

motivations which varied depending on internal and external factors. The non-linearity and multiplicity of her learning experiences make this an interesting case study.

## **Methodology**

The data in this case study was collected through two interviews and email correspondence. The initial meeting with Rania took the form of a semi-structured interview with open ended questions with the purpose of finding out about her background and activities involved in her language development. The data from this interview was initially analysed by establishing a chronological account of her life and breaking it into phases. Data related to her behaviours and motivations at each phase were grouped together and initially related to the theoretical framework.

Then, a second meeting was arranged to probe further into the motivations behind Rania's language learning behaviours. Rania was then asked questions in order to be able to determine which types of motivation were in action at each phase of her language development, specifically their place in the SDT framework (Ryan & Deci 2000). Data from this interview were also organised into the chronological phases and used to clarify and expand on the existing data. Finally, the participant clarified any last issues via email correspondence.

## **Analysis of the Findings**

The process of Rania's English language acquisition journey can be grouped into phases and is presented here as a chronological account. Analysis of her behaviour, motivation and the implications of these for her language development will be discussed within each phase. Sentences or phrases in italics are direct quotes from the interviews or email correspondence with Rania.

### Junior high school

Rania began learning English at the age of 13 when it became a compulsory school subject for her. *When I was a teenage (around 13 years old), my motivation was only to fulfil school's requirement, it was only for passing the exam.* She recalls that the English class was only once a week for two hours, there were 40 students in the class and the teachers' English levels were low. *Most of students did not like English, because the teachers themselves did not have any good English skills.* These classes focussed on reading, writing and grammar and there were few opportunities for speaking and listening, conversation or interaction. *The teacher just taught me some readings and grammatical things in the class. There was no conversation or interactive discussion.* As a result, few of the students, including Rania, enjoyed learning English. Lamb (2002), in his study of English language students in provincial Indonesia, found a similar situation to Rania's. "In educational institutions, morale may be low, resources for individual or collective study may be scarce, and teachers themselves may lack the language skills and methodological awareness to improve their pupils' English" (Lamb 2002, p35).

Additionally while Rania was in high school, there were limited books in English and few other English sources of input, particularly stimulating or enjoyable ones such as movies or music. *I did not have many exposures when I was studying English in the school. There were limited English books and movies.* It is no surprise that Rania found no enjoyment in learning English under these conditions. *I did not really like English... most of students did not like English.* This comment is supported by the finding of Lamb (2007) who found increasing complaints about English in Junior High School by Indonesian students.

Ryan & Deci (2000, p71) note that the intrinsic motivation for interesting and enjoyable activities that is inherent in childhood “is increasingly curtailed by social pressures to do activities that are not interesting and to assume a variety of new responsibilities.” At this point, it seems that school learning curtailed Rania’s intrinsic curiosity and motivation to learn. In the SDT framework (Ryan & Deci 2000) Rania was situated on the border of amotivation and extrinsic motivation. Her motivation at this time was of a purely external nature as she was studying to comply with the school curriculum. The locus of causality was external to her as she studied English for no other reason that someone else (the school) told her she had to.

### Senior High School

Towards the end of high school, Rania began to see the value in having good English language proficiency. She saw the opportunities that it provided for work and her future. *I thought English could help me get a good job.* As a result of this change in attitude, Rania chose to study an English degree at an Indonesian University. At this point, Rania was still extrinsically motivated to study English, however the perceived locus of causality moved from external to “somewhat internal” (Ryan & Deci 2000, p72). As Rania saw the rewards and benefits that were possible from learning English, she accepted them as her own goals of personal importance and conscious value. Therefore, Rania experienced regulation through identification, a more autonomous and self-determined form of extrinsic motivation.

### University

However, once at University, Rania’s attitude toward, and motivation for, learning English altered dramatically which impacted on her learning behaviours and future achievement. *I had a very strong intrinsic motivation to learn more about English. I liked music and English movie. I had to understand the meaning of the lyric and the movie dialogue, so I tried to study English.* At this time, Rania sought out English language movies and music and developed a strong interest in them. This led her to watch, listen and study the language closely. Rania would try and understand the movie dialogue and lyrics in the music and spent time translating and studying these. Her motivation here was intrinsic, arising from her curiosity and enjoyment in the task of interacting with the English language in these forms. *I like listening song then translate the meaning into Indonesian language.* When intrinsically motivated “simply undertaking the task is its own reward”

(Krause et al. 2003, p220) and is regulated by interest, enjoyment and inherent satisfaction (Ryan & Deci 2000).

Ryan & Deci (2000) view intrinsic motivation as a natural human inclination, but this inherent propensity requires supportive conditions. In Rania's case, the supportive conditions included access to English language movies and music. However, Ryan and Deci (2000) point out that for intrinsic motivation to be in evidence, two factors have to be present: the feeling of competence or efficacy, and a perception that their behaviour is self-determined from an internal locus of causality. These two conditions appeared to be present for Rania: she was successful and capable in these activities e.g. translating songs; and her consistent reference to the independence of the activities indicates that it was a personal, self-determined activity e.g. *I looked for many English resources myself*. Furthermore, if tangible rewards, threats, deadlines, directives or imposed goals are present, intrinsic motivation is diminished because the locus of causality is moved towards the external. In this case, the locus of causality was totally internal and she was operating at the far, highly self-determined end of the continuum. The idea for these activities and the carrying out of the activities were Rania's. There were no directives, imposed goals or tangible rewards for her. Therefore, at this time, intrinsic motivation was present.

The types of learning activities as described above which were intrinsically motivated provided Rania with more time interacting with the language (practice), exposure to more diverse language forms and the beginnings of a connection with the societies and cultures that created the films and music. What began as an instrumental orientation to language learning at school then moved to an integrative orientation where language learning is undertaken in order to come closer to the other language community (Lamb 2003).

At this time, Rania also undertook many other language learning strategies outside of the University classroom. *I watched movies, MTV channel, Australian program from radio and TV, read many English stories, magazines and postcards and searched some materials from internet*. These types of activities provided her with contextualised, authentic input of varying genres. Additionally through these strategies, Rania was able to get the listening input that was not available to her through her high school grammar and reading based program.

Whilst still studying her undergraduate degree, Rania enrolled in a six month English course. A major exam was approaching and she felt that she needed extra tuition. This action by Rania was extrinsically motivated by her need to succeed in her exam. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) framework, Rania was externally regulated as the result of the potential external reward of exam success with the locus of causality totally external. The goal of the course was to improve her English to a sufficient level to obtain a good mark, an instrumental goal which was met.

Half-way through University, Rania joined an English club which was to positively impact on her language learning. *I had many new friends that support me to learn English more. I was so active to discuss, to read and to study grammar etc. in the club.* Importantly, joining the club was a result of being intrinsically motivated to learn the language and learn about the language and the culture that is embedded within. Furthermore it seems that this motivation was amplified upon joining the club. Rania seems to have been buoyed by making new friends and having the opportunity to learn and meet social needs that are important for all people. Lamb (2002) suggests that the value of these clubs lies not only in the language practice they offer, but in their ability to help sustain the motivation of the members through providing for social needs.

Additionally, this club finally provided her with the opportunities to participate in discussions and conversations and negotiate meaning which, until this point, Rania had had few opportunities for. Interactionists argue that “conversational interaction is an essential, if not sufficient, condition for second language acquisition” (Lightbown & Spada 2006, p43). If this view is taken, it is therefore likely that the interactions in this club significantly pushed forward Rania’s language development. In support of this are the findings of Lamb (2002) who found that only the high-achieving participants in his study had joined an English club whilst at University.

#### International Postgraduate Study

It was at this time (whilst active in her English club) that Rania first developed a dream to study English overseas. *Since that time, I had a dream to study abroad.* Her enjoyment of learning English, her interest in learning about western culture and the prestige and advantage of having an international post-graduate qualification motivated Rania to explore the opportunity of living and studying overseas. Part of Rania’s motivation was intrinsic, stemming from her enjoyment of learning the language and part of it was extrinsic. The value of obtaining a degree from another country was an externally regulated motivation, and personally valuing an understanding of the people and culture surrounding the English language represents identified regulation. The result of this motivation was that Rania enrolled in the Master of Education (TESOL) program at an Australian University. Living in Australia provided Rania with many benefits for her language learning: exposure to contextualised, authentic language; purposeful communicative experiences; cultural immersion; and endless opportunities for practice and development in academic and general language situations.

Finally, Rania’s current goal for learning English is reflected in her statement that she wants to be more perfect than others when she returns to Indonesia. *Because I am (will be) teaching language I want to be more perfect than others who studied in other linguistic environments.* She obviously places a strong value on having a high level of English language competence and having such a goal appears to motivate Rania to keep practising, learning and improving. Rania is motivated by a performance goal or “a personal objective to perform well in an area of achievement” (Krause et



al. 2003, p220). Within the SDT framework, this language learning goal demonstrates that Rania is extrinsically motivated and regulated through identification (Ryan & Deci 2000). "Identification reflects a conscious valuing of a behavioural goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important (Ryan & Deci 2000, p72). Rania's goal is somewhat internally driven. It is suggested by Zimmerman & Kitsantas (as discussed in Krause et al 2003) that learners require these goals in order to maintain interest once the basic skill is acquired. This idea is supported by the learner in this case who continues to maintain interest in learning English even though she has adequate competence for her needs.

## **Discussion**

This case study illustrates that motivation is not a stable learner trait but a dynamic, changeable concept. Also it is something that is influenced by a combination of external factors such as context and internal factors such as language learning goals.

### External factor: Context

Context was highly influential in affecting changes in Rania's language learning motivation. Initially, the conditions surrounding her junior high school English learning were unfavourable, resulting in externally regulated extrinsic motivation. On the other hand, joining an English club provided a supportive and exciting environment for Rania to pursue language learning activities. In contrast to the externally regulated motivation during her junior high school phase, her motivation during this time was the result of natural, inherent intrinsic motivation that is internally regulated.

This case illustrates how motivation in one learner can move along the self-determination continuum and be motivated by different sources at any given time. People "can relatively readily internalize a new behavioural regulation at any point along this continuum depending on both prior experiences and current situational factors" (Ryan & Deci 2000, p73). Additionally, this case shows that motivation is both affected by the environment and affects the environment e.g. poor classroom learning conditions affected Rania's motivation which in turn made her learning conditions worse through low morale and negative attitudes.

### Internal Factor: Goals

Language learning goals also emerged as important aspects of Rania's motivation. During Senior High School, Rania saw pragmatic or instrumental benefits to acquiring English as a second language and had instrumental language learning goals. Over time, Rania also developed an integrative orientation as she began to identify with the language community. Later too, Rania pursued an instrumental goal when she enrolled in an English language course in order to improve to pass an exam. Finally, it was a combination of integrative and instrumental goals that led her to pursue a postgraduate qualification in an English speaking country. These changes in Rania's goals demonstrate how changes in internal factors can move a person along the SDT continuum between less self-determined forms of motivation and strongly self-determined ones.

## **Implications**

This case study has demonstrated the impact that motivation can have on English language acquisition and has implications for teaching and learning. It has demonstrated the importance of providing the right conditions to allow intrinsic motivation to flourish. Initially Rania was extrinsically motivated and externally regulated due to the language learning conditions that she was exposed to. The result was little effort exerted. On the other hand, when Rania was intrinsically motivated, she expended much time and effort interacting with the language. However, “people will be intrinsically motivated only for activities that hold intrinsic interest for them, activities that have the appeal of novelty, challenge or aesthetic value” (Ryan & Deci 2000, p71). Additionally, Ryan & Deci (2000, p73) report on education studies “that have shown that more autonomous extrinsic motivation was associated with more engagement, better performance, lower dropout, higher quality learning and better teacher ratings among other outcomes.” As a result, attention needs to be given as to how to promote the more self-determined types of extrinsic motivation.

Ryan & Deci (2000) suggest that feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy can support this type of motivation. Learners will be more likely to have more self-determined extrinsic motivation if they feel connected, belong and are cared for by their teachers; experience success; and have independence and self-regulation in their learning. Strategies which promote these outcomes will help increase self-determined learner motivation.

Other teaching and learning strategies are suggested by this case study. Once Rania developed interest and enjoyment of the English language, intrinsic motivation propelled her language learning forward. Therefore, exposing students to more playful aspects of the language such as songs, stories, games, jokes and movies has the potential to arouse interest and promote language learning. Additionally, exposing learners to the global contexts of English language use (e.g. popular culture, sport, travel and technology) will allow the learners to see the language as relevant, useful and desirable for them. Learners will then be motivated to study the language for integrative reasons i.e. to be closer to the language community, and over time it has the potential to become part of their identity. Therefore, lesson content should seek to illustrate the functions and social roles that English fulfils in a broad range of contexts.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, although this case study represents only one person in a world full of English language learners, it demonstrates that motivation is a dynamic factor which is continuously evolving (Vandergrift 2005). It also demonstrates that motivation to learn language is not fixed and stable as was previously viewed by early research. Ryan & Deci’s (2000) self determination theory provided a clear framework with which to analyse the motivations behind Rania’s language learning behaviours. The discussion showed that Rania exhibited a range of motivations along the self determination continuum from externally regulated extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation.

Context proved to be an influential external factor on her motivation. Also, instrumental and integrative goals were important internal factors that influenced the effort exerted by Rania and the choices that she made in regards to her language learning. In light of these findings, knowing that change is possible, English language educators should work towards positively influencing self-determined motivation in their learners.

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