Family dynamics: A neglected motivational factor in English language programs?

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ABSTRACT
When designing and teaching English language courses, it is desirable to understand and respond fully to the needs of students. Hence, curriculum developers need to know why students enter courses, what personal factors affect their learning, and how learning English impacts on their lives.

An ongoing case study of eight adult migrant students and their families is being undertaken to try to identify aspects of the students’ home lives that impact on their English language learning. The student participants, from China, Korea and Japan, were studying English at an upper-intermediate level in a tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand.

This paper reports on one particular aspect from Phase One of the study. A motivation generated by the dynamics of family relationships emerged as a significant factor in several of the case studies. This motivational factor has not been reported in the literature and warrants further investigation. The paper also discusses possible responses to this finding by ESOL program designers and practitioners.

Introduction
Despite teaching English language to adult immigrants to New Zealand for many years, I am reminded on a regular basis of the sacrifices and hardships our students endure in their attempts to make a better life for themselves and their families in a new country. I have noticed in students’ anecdotal evidence, and in their diaries, that while they are English language students, their dreams for a better life are a long way from being fulfilled. Often the student’s whole family undergoes a high degree of stress, and the student must be highly motivated to complete our courses successfully. To inform our analyses of students’ needs and curriculum planning, we need to understand what motivates our students and the factors which affect their ability to study under different cultural conditions. It is only then that we will be able to bridge the gap between their needs and our programs.

This paper draws on an ongoing study of eight adult English language
students from China, Korea and Japan, and their families. The study was designed to explore the relationship between the personal lives of some adult Asian immigrant students and current English language provision in a New Zealand tertiary institution, in order to better understand the impact that their learning has on their lives. This paper reports on one particular aspect of the findings from Phase One of the study: the emergence of an unexpected motivation which course designers need to consider.

First, the paper gives a brief background to the New Zealand immigration context, particularly for Asian migrants, then some of the literature on motivational factors affecting second language (L2) learning is considered. The study is described and then aspects of the students’ motivations are discussed. Finally, the paper suggests the implications of these motivations and some of the ways in which the planners and practitioners of English language courses for immigrants might respond.

**New Zealand Asian immigration**

In order to place the families in this study into a broader context, it is useful to look briefly at some information about current Asian immigration to New Zealand. Statistics from the New Zealand Immigration Service (2002) show that in recent years the number of immigrants from Asian countries has increased significantly. The total Asian population is projected to rise from 5 per cent of the total population in 1996 to 9 per cent in 2016 (Statistics New Zealand 2002).

In the year 2000–2001, 54 per cent of immigrants came to New Zealand under the General Skills immigration category (Statistics New Zealand 2002). To qualify in this category, potential immigrants need to gain a certain number of points which are allocated for education, qualifications, work experience, and age (New Zealand Immigration Service 2002). Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the English language students in the higher-level programs in my institution have had a tertiary education in their home countries. Furthermore, many have worked in their professional field for some years and are people with valuable skills and considerable experience.

However, these immigrants from Asia are a highly mobile population and many of them move on to other countries or return to their homeland because they find it difficult to become part of the New Zealand society or fail to find satisfying work (Ho and Leung 2000; Collins 2001). The New Zealand Immigration Service considers that ‘English is a key to successful settlement’ (1995: 10) and there is little doubt that well-planned English language programs can play an important role in helping these students settle in New Zealand and fulfil their potential.
Motivation

Successful language learning can only take place if the learner has goals, and an inner drive to achieve these goals (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). As a major factor in language learning, motivation (more recently referred to as orientation) has been well researched (for example, Gardner and Lambert 1972; Gardner 1985; Skehan 1989; Brown 1994; McGroarty 1996; Tudor 1996; Dornyei and Schmidt 2001). Research has largely focused on the two models postulated by Gardner and Lambert (1972): instrumental and integrative motivation.

Instrumental motivation refers to the need to acquire a language as a means for attaining goals such as career advancement or successful further study. Integrative motivation refers to the desire to learn a language in order to become closer to the culture and society of the target language group (Gardner and Lambert 1972). An illustration of these models is presented in Horwitz and Young’s (1990) study, which found that instrumental motivation was more predictive than integrative motivation for language learning success in the Philippines where people wanted English for career advancement. However, integrative motivation was a better predictor of success for English-speaking Canadians who were learning French to become closer to the French-speaking Canadian population (Scarcella and Oxford 1992).

Graham (1984) makes the further distinction between integrative and assimilative motivation. He maintains that assimilative motivation ‘is the drive to become an indistinguishable member of a speech community’ (cited in Brown 1994: 155). This requires many years of contact with the target language culture.

Yet another dimension of the motivation construct is the degree to which learners are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. Deci (1975) describes extrinsically motivated behaviour as operating in the anticipation of an outside reward (in a similar way to the instrumental model), while intrinsic motivation stems from the satisfaction of the activity itself, that is, there are no obvious rewards. Noels (2001: 45) states that ‘intrinsic orientations refer to reasons for L2 learning that are derived from one’s inherent pleasure and interest in the activity’. According to Brown (1994), research on motivation strongly favours intrinsic orientations especially for long-term retention. This is supported by Noels (2001: 50) who suggests that ‘people who have an intrinsic or self-determined orientation are likely to feel positively about the activity and put in more effort over a longer period of time’. This extrinsic/intrinsic dimension does not exactly match the postulated instrumental/integrative dimension. Each model focuses on a particular aspect of motivation. Later work creates even more complicated models which cross these dimensions.

McGroarty (1996: 8) refers to a study by Gardner (1985), who suggests that motivation may be an indirect rather than direct influence on achievement, and
operates in combination with other factors to affect language learning. Clearly motivation for second-language learning is a ‘complex of constructs’ (Noels 2001: 44). In recent years a number of different frameworks have been proposed to describe this complexity. Current thinking seems to be summed up by Dornyei and Clement (2001), who suggest a synthesis of the constituents of these different constructs into seven dimensions.

1. **Affective/integrative dimension**, referring to a general affective ‘core’ of the L2 motivation complex related to attitudes, beliefs and values associated with the process, the target and the outcome of learning, including variables such as ‘interactiveness,’ ‘affective motive,’ ‘language attitudes,’ ‘intrinsic motivation,’ ‘attitudes toward L2 learning,’ ‘enjoyment’ and ‘interest;’

2. **Instrumental/pragmatic dimension**, referring to extrinsic, largely utilitarian factors such as financial benefits;

3. **Macro-context-related dimension**, referring to broad, societal and sociocultural factors such as multicultural, intergroup and ethnolinguistic relations;

4. **Self-concept-related dimension**, referring to learner-specific variables such as self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety and need for achievement;

5. **Goal-related dimension**, involving various goal characteristics;

6. **Educational context-related dimension**, referring to the characteristics and appraisal of the immediate learning environment (that is, classroom) and the school context; and

7. **Significant others-related dimension**, referring to the motivational influence of parents, family, and friends.

Dornyei and Clement (2001: 400)

There is little doubt that motivation is recognised as an important factor in the language-learning process and that different kinds of motivations, as illustrated above, are important to language-learning success, depending on the circumstances. Program planners need to discover what major motivating factors drive their students, and they need to utilise this knowledge in program design.

**The case study**

A case study of eight adult students and their families is being carried out in two stages amongst New Zealand immigrant learners of English at a tertiary institution: the first stage during their study, and the second stage a year after completion of the course. During the first stage of data gathering in early 2001, the researcher found evidence from some students of an unexpected motivation that could not easily be categorised in the models of motivation developed in the literature.
The students in the study were enrolled in a one-year diploma program that caters for international and immigrant learners at an upper-intermediate to advanced English language proficiency level. The minimum entrance requirement for the program is a score of Band 5.0 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or 525 in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). At the time of data gathering, there were 130 students in the program, of whom 70 per cent were immigrants. The others were international, fee-paying students. All students in three classes were informed of the project, and immigrant students from these classes were invited to volunteer for the study provided they anticipated being available for a follow-up interview in a year’s time.

The data for the first stage of the study were gathered using different questionnaires for the student participants and their family members. This was followed by audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes with each of the students and, in some cases, family members. Topics raised related to the practical problems of studying; the benefits of study; support from the family; confidence and the sense of social identity; motivation for learning, and future aspirations. Seven of the eight interviews were conducted in the institution and one was conducted in a participant’s home. Notes were taken from the recorded interviews and the data were analysed using a grounded approach. Three notable findings emerged: a motivation internal to family relationships; the strength of feelings about power and social identity; and the role of English classes in inadvertently limiting outside language opportunities. This paper is based on the data that emerged about a motivation internal to family relationships.

**Participants**

In the study 13 people representing eight families answered the questionnaires and were interviewed. (See Table 1.) The New Zealand wife of the Korean student completed a questionnaire but was not interviewed.

The participants were accustomed to working for goals. Seven of the eight students interviewed had successfully completed university studies in their own countries. Five held bachelor degrees, one was a medical doctor, and one was a professor of engineering holding a PhD. With one exception, all partners of the students and the one son interviewed, held degrees.

These students were not recent arrivals. Seven out of the eight students had been in New Zealand for a period of time ranging from three to six years, and prior to their emigration all had been working in their chosen profession. Their partners had also been working in their chosen fields. However, despite the length of time they had been residing in New Zealand, no one, at the time of
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Table 1: Details of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity and gender of student surveyed and interviewed</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Previous occupation</th>
<th>Length of time in NZ</th>
<th>Family members also surveyed and/or interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (M)</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Engineering professor</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (F)</td>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Electronic engineer</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (F)</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>3 yrs 10 mths</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean (F)</td>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>Lecturer communications</td>
<td>1 yr 9 mths</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean (F)</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Florist</td>
<td>5 yrs 6 mths</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean (F)</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Teacher English Lit.</td>
<td>6 tears</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean (M)</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Writer and film director</td>
<td>5 yrs 6 mths</td>
<td>Wife (NZ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese (F)</td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Sports administrator</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Husband (NZ)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview, with the exception of the New Zealand-born architect, was working in their professional field.

The participants gave similar reasons for immigrating. They came to New Zealand to improve the quality of their lives in a healthier environment; they wanted a challenge, and they wanted a better education system for their children. They had heard from friends and contacts that ‘New Zealand was a so good country to live and grow children’ (female Korean student).

All of the students had studied English for varying periods of time in their home countries. However, despite the fact that each family had lived in New Zealand for some years, only two of the students had previously attended formal English language classes and two had attended some informal conversation classes in their local community centres. When asked about this, most students said that they had been too busy with their families and trying to adjust to their new lives. It seems, with these students, that English language classes were not initially considered a top priority.

**The students’ motivations**

There is no doubt that instrumental and goal-related motivations, that is, the desire to learn a language in order to achieve a goal such as academic or occupational success (dimensions two and five in Dornyei and Clement’s 2001 model above), played a large part in the language-learning attitudes of these students. All of the student participants said that they had career or study goals
of some kind and were aware of the need to improve their English if they wanted to pursue them.

One student wanted to become a translator of Korean books for the New Zealand market and needed a high IELTS score to enter the translation course. Another wanted to help her husband with his furniture-making business and to become an interior designer, a field that needs good communication skills. The Korean film director, married to a New Zealander, wanted to write and direct movies in New Zealand, and fully realised how important his English proficiency would be to achieve this particular goal.

The professor who came to New Zealand as a university research fellow wanted to continue his academic career. His experience of working in the academic world in New Zealand had highlighted the necessity of taking English language classes. In his job at Auckland University he had had unlimited opportunities to speak English both in a social and professional context. However, although he could read and write English, he had seldom spoken it before coming to New Zealand, so when he ventured into the staff room he was not confident enough to speak with anyone and would take his tea back to his office. He said that he felt isolated, was unable to present his own research and had to rely on his colleagues to do this for him. When his fellowship expired, other departments at the university did not want to employ him because of his lack of English language skills, but they told him they would have a lot of work for him to do if he had better English.

Some students recognised that they would not be able to resume their previous careers and were studying English in order to access courses leading to New Zealand qualifications. A doctor from China was willing to work as a nurse aide in the short term and eventually to train as an occupational therapist. The student whose husband still worked in China was a qualified electrical engineer, but said that she would like to study for a New Zealand qualification in business or accounting with the goal of eventually setting up a business here with her husband. Another student, an older Korean woman who had taught communications in Korea, wanted to improve her English so that she could work as a volunteer. The Japanese woman married to a New Zealand architect did not want to rely on her husband to teach her English. She initially came to New Zealand to learn English because, as a manager for a women’s professional soccer team, she was often frustrated when she could not communicate with members of the international teams. She wanted to speak fluently to her husband and to work as a professional in the New Zealand sports world.

It is clear that these learners’ motivations had strong instrumental/pragmatic and goal-related dimensions. The interviews also produced evidence of the affective/integrative dimension (dimension one in Dornyei and Clement’s 2001...
model). Students indicated that powerful factors driving their language learning were their desire to communicate comfortably with New Zealanders, to make friends within their host society and to understand the culture of New Zealand. Six of the students said that they wanted to become ‘good’ or ‘real’ New Zealanders. One participant said that he had made a real effort to learn about ‘Kiwi culture’ and he had ‘studied rugby’, which he previously knew nothing about. Despite their length of time in New Zealand, their desire to become an integral part of their host society was proving an elusive goal, and social participation had been largely restricted to the family domain. Research suggests that institutional support in the early stages of settlement is essential to help new settlers move into jobs and society, otherwise migrants stay in the family domain indefinitely (Henderson, Watts and Trlin 2000). This appeared to be the case with these students, with the exception of the two students married to New Zealanders. A Korean student said ‘I want to live New Zealand forever until I die’, and that it was ‘important to make friends’ but her lack of English was a ‘barrier’. Five of the participants said that they had no Kiwi friends, and it appeared that most of the students had experienced little success in becoming part of the wider community. They perceived this as a language problem. The Chinese professor wanted to ‘move a big block’ in his communication, ‘to let my open my mouth, expand my range of touching people and feel so intense my confidence’. Throughout his interview he commented on his lack of ability to converse and that ‘culture, confidence, relationship, friendship with Kiwis – are all related to English’. Several of the students commented that ‘the problem will be solved after my English improve’ (Engineering professor).

No students mentioned anything that could be interpreted as purely intrinsic motivation or the joy of learning English, although questions related to intrinsic motivation were not directly asked. Nor did Dornyei and Clement’s (2001) dimensions three (broad, societal and sociocultural factors) or six (immediate learning environment) feature highly.

In this study, however, a further motivation emerged. A motivation internal to family relationships was established as a reason for starting and persisting with English language study. Four of the five couples who each had young bilingual children said that they wanted to learn English, or wanted their partner to learn English, in order to maintain good communication between the generations. It was established from the interviews that, as their children had become more integrated with their New Zealand peers and their English language proficiency had improved, they had become less willing to converse with anyone in their native language.

This perceived language barrier was not only a negative aspect of immigration but also an unexpected one. These parents were concerned that their
children’s growing preference for speaking English was going to hinder communication within the family unless their own English became more proficient. ‘I have improved my English since I started English classes. I can understand more when my children speak to me in English. It help me, our close relationships. I supported for my husband sometimes … I can share my children’s life better.’ Both the Korean student who said this, and her husband, recognised the need for at least one parent to speak English well enough to keep the lines of communication open with their children. The husband commented that, as he was working in his own business, there was no opportunity for him to improve his English in a formal way, so improvement in his wife’s English was important for them all.

These students were motivated in their English language learning by the need to improve and preserve communication within the family. This dimension of motivation emerging from the dynamics of family relationships is distinguishable from Dornyei and Clement’s (2001) dimension seven, which refers to family members’ encouragement of the student, not a motivation arising from family dynamics. It does not appear to be described in the literature, and deserves further research on a wider scale to investigate its strength and frequency, to uncover its characteristics and relationship to successful language learning, and to explore how it may be used in language programs.

**Implications for ESOL programs**

A research project of eight case studies cannot produce generalisable conclusions, but it can indicate areas that warrant further investigation and it can suggest actions that can be trialled.

The description of an additional dimension of motivation coming from the dynamics of the family provides English language practitioners with important information they can feed into needs analyses and curriculum planning. As well as ensuring that topics and tasks are relevant to students’ goals of integration with their host society and to the task of finding satisfying jobs, it may be effective to draw resources directly from the students’ family lives. For instance, homework exercises could be set that require adult students to communicate with their children. They could discover teenage vocabulary that could be brought back to the classroom for further exploitation, or write dialogues for a family occasion involving an English-language speaker. Students could ask their children to contribute problems they have encountered at school for group discussion, and school counsellors could be invited into the classroom to answer questions prepared by the students in consultation with their children and partners. Personalising the learning content of the tasks will increase the intrinsic interest students have in their learning. Tudor (1996: 85) maintains that if we
help learners to personalise the content of what they are learning, their motivation will increase. For those students whose prime aim lies elsewhere, these family motivational contexts may add an extra dimension to their language.

**Conclusion**

An unexpected motivational construct which is internal to family relationships has been identified: communication in English within the family was recognised as essential for maintaining good relationships with young bilingual children. Although this conflicted with the desire of some parents for their children to maintain the first language, it appeared to be a driving force behind much of the learning for four of the eight students in a case study investigation. Since this type of motivation has been identified only in the group of respondents in this study, further research is required. If confirmed by future studies, it opens up new opportunities for aligning English language programs with student needs.

The relationship between the personal lives of our students and their public lives as language learners is a symbiotic partnership creating both problems and opportunities. Education providers have a responsibility to recognise and respond to their needs, minimise their problems and take an active professional role in helping students make use of their opportunities. One aspect of this is to develop knowledge of the various motivations of the students, to utilise these motivations fully, and to build the students’ desire to continue English language study. By bridging the gap between their desires and our programs, we will help our learners achieve the dreams they and their families came here to find.

**REFERENCES**


