

Optimizing Second Language Acquisition Pathways for University EFL Learners through the Lens of Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory

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Abstract: Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory posits that motivation constitutes a complex, adaptive system shaped by multi-factor interactions and environmental contingencies—transcending static analytical paradigms to generate novel theoretical trajectories for the research on the L2 Acquisition in university-level English education. Contemporary university EFL learners exhibit fragmented motivational structures, ephemeral persistence, and mono-dimensional engagement pathways—collectively compromising acquisition efficacy and impeding proficiency progression. Based on the fundamental principles of the Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory, this study explores the relationship between the motivational systems and the L2 Acquisition pathways in tertiary-level English teaching and in students' authentic L2 Acquisition process, identifies the primary challenges that hinder motivational dynamic development in current L2 Acquisition pathways and proposes actionable concrete improvement strategies to facilitate learners to establish an effective L2 Acquisition model, amplify their English application capabilities, and provide insights for the reform in university-level English education. Based on the fundamental principles of the Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory, this study explores the relationship between the motivational systems and the L2 Acquisition pathways in tertiary-level English teaching and in students' authentic L2 Acquisition process, identifies the primary challenges that hinder motivational dynamic development in current L2 Acquisition pathways and proposes actionable concrete improvement strategies to facilitate learners to establish an effective L2 Acquisition model, amplify their English application capabilities, and provide replicable insights for the reform in university-level English education.

Keywords: Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory; University-level English; Second Language Acquisition (L2 Acquisition); Pathway Optimization

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1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of university-level English teaching reform, the effectiveness of L2 Acquisition has become a hot topic. English is a language that embodies both instrumental and humanistic dimension. Its acquisition involves not merely knowledge input and output, but an ongoing process of active construction driven by motivation. Currently, most university-level English classroom instruction still adopt the traditional teaching method, which ignores the motivational changes of learners and the individual disparities, leading to some students' insufficient learning motivation, unclear objectives, and negative acquisition process. Even if they spend a lot of time studying, they still cannot achieve good results. The Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory views motivation as a dynamic equilibrium system composed of various factors such as internal needs, external environment, and personal cognitive dimensions. It holds that the motivational development, persistence, and enhancement are the results of multi-factor interactions and enable to change according to the learning contexts and affective appraisals. Applying this theory to the research on L2 Acquisition in university-level English education can accurately grasp the changes in learners' motivation, address current dilemmas and challenges, find methods suitable for the learners' own characteristics to improve efficiency, and make L2 Acquisition more goal-targeted and cognitively productive. This is also the significance of this study.

2. Core Principles of Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory and Its Inherent Affinities with L2 Acquisition

The Dynamic Motivational System Theory originated from the understanding of complex dynamic systems and the research on motivation psychology. It holds that motivation is not a fixed psychological trait but a complex synthesis composed of several interrelated and mutually influencing subsystems, including the intrinsic motivation subsystems, the extrinsic motivation subsystems, and the cognitive regulatory subsystems, etc. These subsystems form an organic whole through interactions, thereby determining the learning behavior and results of learners. Unlike traditional motivation theories, this theory places greater emphasis on the variability, interactivity and context-dependency of motivation. Building on this foundation, the motivation of second language learners is not static, but exhibits dynamic fluctuations influenced by multifaceted factors such as learning progression, classroom environment, and affective appraisals. These fluctuations, in turn, exert measurable impact on their learning strategies and outcomes [1].

A reciprocal embeddedness exists between dynamic motivational systems and university-level English L2 Acquisition—an interconnection that permeates and continuously reshapes the entire learning trajectory. From acquisition-initiation perspective, intrinsic motivators (e.g., fascination with English, self-actualization imperatives) and extrinsic motivators (e.g., gatekeeping academic requirements, career advancement pressures) collectively constitute the primary catalysts for L2 learning commencement, and equally determine learners' initial investment intensity and directional learning vector. Acquisition persistence process is dominated by the cognitive regulatory subsystems. During this period, learners will reflect on and summarize their own experience, set new objectives, and take corresponding measures to address the challenges and setbacks they encounter, thereby maintaining self-sustaining investment intensity and preempting motivational attrition manifested as waning engagement or learning abandonment. In the final consolidation and improvement stage, well-developed motivational systems facilitate learners' metamorphosis from passive knowledge receptacles into agentic explorers, concurrently elevating cognitive processing from rote memorization to applied comprehension. This further accelerates the speed of L2 acquisition and enhances its efficacy. In conclusion, the rationality of L2 Acquisition pathways directly determines motivational systems' equilibrium. Concurrently, stable motivation operations can provide strong support for the development of L2 Acquisition pathways, and the two dimensions complement each other and influence each other.

3. Current Status and Challenges in the L2 Acquisition Pathways of University EFL Learners

3.1 Ill-Defined Acquisition Objectives with Insufficient Motivational Orientation

Currently, most university EFL learners have a rather vague understanding of L2 acquisition objectives. Their learning objectives are predominantly to pass final exams or the CET-4 or CET-6, lacking clear, long-term and personalized objectives. Such utilitarian objectives make learners' external motivators dominant, while the internal motivators are severely suppressed, resulting in enduring difficulty of learners in sustaining volitional drive across acquisition phases. According to the perspectives of the dynamic motivational systems, ambiguous objectives fail to provide directional vectors for the motivational systems, thereby triggering dysfunctional couplings among intrinsic motivators, extrinsic motivators, and cognitive regulatory subsystems. This systemic misalignment culminates in learner demoralization and directional disorientation throughout the acquisition trajectory. For instance, some students merely make a frantic last-minute effort just before the tests, and then stop studying altogether after the exams. Their motivational systems remain in an unstable state of "brief activation and rapid decline", impeding second language learning [2].

3.2 Homogeneous Acquisition Pathways Neglecting Individual Motivational Disparities

Most university-level English teaching adopts a "one-size-fits-all" approach, lacking specificity in teaching content, methods, and assessment, resulting in homogenized L2 acquisition pathways. This homogenization disregards the personality traits of learners, especially the characteristics of their motivational systems - different

learners have different intrinsic needs and external pressures, as well as different cognitive level, concurrently with varying motivation focus and changing patterns. For instance, even though some students are interested in English culture, possessing strong intrinsic motivators, current teaching mainly focuses on imparting linguistic knowledge, failing to meet their personalized needs, thereby causing waning intrinsic motivators. For another example, some students need to enhance their English application capabilities due to their work, possessing a strong external motivator. However, curriculum offerings in their universities are disconnected from practical application, making it challenging to maintain their enthusiasm for learning. As a result, they deviate from the set objectives.

3.3 Passive Acquisition Processes Deficient in Reinforcement Mechanisms

Currently, the majority of university-level English second language learning is predominantly conducted through “teacher-centric lecturing”, and learners rarely have the opportunity to participate in it. The learning process is passive. In this situation, learners’ cognitive regulatory subsystems cannot be effectively activated, making it difficult for them to promptly adjust their state in terms of self-reflection and strategy modification to maintain the consistency of their motivators. Moreover, during the learning process, there are insufficient effective incentive measures. Whether it is teachers’ affirmation or negation, or the announcement of academic performance, none of these can provide learners with immediate positive emotional experience, thereby preventing them from perceiving the joy of success and a sense of collective belonging. For instance, when learners commit errors during English oral practice, they frequently encounter blame or neglect rather than constructive feedback or recognition. This pattern progressively fosters acquisition anxiety and motivational disequilibrium, ultimately culminating in disengagement from proactive English learning [3].

3.4 Monolithic Acquisition Contexts Lacking Motivational Interactivity

L2 acquisition refers to the process of applying language in real-life contexts. However, at present, the majority of university-level English L2 acquisition environment in China are rather limited, mainly confined to classrooms, and lack authentic language usage scenarios. Such monolithic learning environment constrains the exertion of motivational systems’ interaction efficacy—intrinsic motivation cannot be cultivated and developed through authentic language application, nor can extrinsic motivation align with pragmatic necessities. For instance, although students have mastered some English grammar and vocabulary, they still encounter problems when communicating with others, reading foreign materials or writing English papers—the learned content cannot be transformed into their own skills, which leads to waning learning motivation and impeding the acquisition process.

4. Optimization Strategies for the L2 Acquisition Pathways of University EFL Learners through the Lens of Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory

4.1 Defining Personalized Acquisition Objectives to Consolidate Motivational Orientation

Objectives serve as the core guides for the motivational systems. Specific and clear personalized learning objectives can ignite synergistic collaboration of all subsystems within the motivational systems, enabling synchronous development of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. University-level English teaching should guide students to set personalized L2 learning objectives based on their own needs, interests and development plans, break through the limitations of utilitarian objectives and align short-term objectives with long-term objectives. For instance, for students who are fond of the English culture, they set a long-term goal of “understanding the cultural customs of Anglophone countries and enabling to engage in simple cultural exchanges”, and short-term objectives, e.g. “reading an English cultural essay every week and memorizing five related words”. For students who have job-seeking needs, they can set short-term objectives such as “improving the comprehensive application capabilities of English in listening, speaking, reading and writing to meet the job requirements” and “completing an English resume every month and conducting two English oral practice”. During the learning process, they should constantly revise and improve their objectives to enhance their operability and targeted relevance, enabling the motivational systems to always operate effectively around the objectives [4].

4.2 Constructing Differentiated Acquisition Pathways Calibrated to Individual Motivational Profiles

Based on the principle of individual disparities in the Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory, university-level English teaching should abandon the “one-size-fits-all” homogenized teaching model and establish personalized L2 Acquisition pathways to meet the motivational characteristics of varying types of learners. On the one hand, in terms of course content, it is necessary to design rich and diverse teaching modules based on learners’ motivational orientations, including culture modules, application modules, and exam-oriented modules, etc., for students to freely choose. On the other hand, in terms of teaching methods, it is also necessary to make innovation, adopt diversified methodologies such as situational teaching method, group cooperative learning method, and inquiry-based learning method. For students with stronger intrinsic motivators, inquiry-based learning method can be implemented to guide them to actively discover the cultural connotations behind the language. For students with strong external drives, situational teaching methods and group cooperative learning approaches can be adopted to conduct linguistic practical activities in authentic contexts, thereby igniting their thirst for knowledge. Finally, the assessment mechanisms equally need to be changed, employing a combination of process-oriented evaluation and summative assessment rather than sole evaluation sole criterion—final written test scores, emphasizing the assessment of students’ motivational changes and improvement, enabling individuals with varying types of motivation all to be recognized, thereby maintaining stable learning motivation.

4.3 Activating Proactive Acquisition Consciousness Through Refined Reinforcement Mechanisms

Active acquisition is the primary pathway for L2 Acquisition and the cornerstone for maintaining the stability of the motivational systems. University-level English teaching should abandon the traditional “cramming” teaching method and fully leverage students’ agency in the learning process to activate their student-driven learning engagement, facilitating learners’ metamorphosis from passive knowledge receptacles into agentic participants in classroom activities. For example, the task-driven teaching method can be adopted, assigning some learning tasks of moderate difficulty before class, such as giving an English speech, conducting a group discussion, translating an article in a foreign language, etc., enabling students to autonomously apply the linguistic knowledge they have learned, improve their targeted skills during the process of fulfilling these tasks, and concurrently activate the cognitive regulatory systems, learning self-reflection and self-regulation methods. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on motivation-boosting measures. Teachers should promptly offer constructive feedback or recognition to students, even for the slightest progress, to instill in them a sense of fulfillment. When dealing with students’ problems, teachers should employ a gentle approach to correct them rather than constant criticism and condemnation, to avoid damaging their self-esteem and curiosity. Finally, an achievement presentation platform can be established for students to upload their English works or oral conversation videos, etc., empowering them to feel recognized, thereby enhancing their sense of collective honor and personal self-confidence, and further consolidating their learning motivation. Universities should keep pace with the times, update the course content, improve the organization and presentation forms of the course content, and emphasize intra-disciplinary knowledge integration and interdisciplinary integration. Based on the course content and according to the development level of core competencies, academic quality standards are proposed to guide and assist teachers in grasping the depth and breadth of instructional delivery. Guidance efficacy is enhanced through scaffolded academic requirements, pedagogical cues, and exemplar assessment cases.

4.4 Creating Diversified Acquisition Contexts with Enhanced Motivational Interactivity

Contexts are the important medium for the interactions of the motivational systems. Diverse acquisition contexts can ignite the effective cooperation of the intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and cognitive regulatory subsystems, amplifying motivational stability and persistence. Universities should transcend the traditional classroom learning model and create diverse and rich L2 Acquisition contexts, enhancing students’ proficiency and cultivating their motivation in real-world environment. For instance, teachers can leverage university

resources to organize activities such as English corners, English culture festivals, and foreign language film screenings to provide students with opportunities for speaking English and experiencing exotic cultural climate, use network platforms to build online learning groups on the internet, enabling students to study, communicate, and help each other at any time without temporal-spatial limitations, and strengthen school-enterprise cooperation to offer students internship opportunities, enabling them to use English in their work and align external motivation with personal needs to ignite learner agency. In addition, teachers equally need to guide students to actively apply the linguistic knowledge they have learned in varying environment, summarize and reflect on the problems that encounter during their learning process, and change their learning methods so as to achieve the effective articulation between the motivational systems and the acquisition methods.

5. Conclusion

Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory provides transformative reconceptualization and methodological innovation for optimizing second language acquisition pathways in university-level English education, namely, grasping the variability, interactivity and disparities of the motivational systems to empower the coordinated development of the motivational systems and the L2 Acquisition pathways. Currently, the L2 Acquisition pathways for university EFL learners suffer from challenges such as unclear objectives, homogenized pathways, negative learning process, and monotonous environment, seriously impeding the healthy development of the motivational systems and the second language learning efficacy. By setting personalized learning objectives, designing diverse learning pathways, igniting active and proactive learning intention, and creating rich and diverse learning environment, these methodologies can effectively address current challenges, effectively foster students' learning motivation and proactive engagement, and facilitate learners' metamorphosis from passive knowledge receptacles into agentic explorers, concurrently elevating cognitive processing from rote imitation to essence comprehension. University-level English teaching must adeptly absorb the core philosophy of the Dynamic Motivational Systems Theory, and integrate students' real-world learning situations and motivational characteristics to improve and perfect the L2 Acquisition methodologies, making them align more with students' development laws and needs, so as to facilitate students to enhance their English proficiency and cultivate applied talents with global horizons.

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