

Motivation, Vision and Life Narratives

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"We are not doing science, we are doing the difficult stuff. Science was developed for the physical world. We deal with the symbolic world of abstract conceptualizations such as motivation, intention, goals, rewards, wishes, imagined futures. So we don't do science; we explore phenomena of interest. Sometimes we use techniques that are also employed in scientific investigation, and sometimes we listen carefully to the stories that learners tell us about their second language learning. And we realize the stories are complex and fascinating and can't be constrained by experimental procedures." (John Schumann, personal communication, 22nd April 2014)

I. DEFINITIONS

- A **vision** is a “mental image of what the future will or could be like” (Oxford Dictionary). As a motivational term, it can be understood as a **personalised goal** that the learner has made his/her own by adding to it the imagined reality of the actual **goal experience**.
 - E.g. the vision to become a doctor involves the cognitive goal to become a doctor and the sensory experience of being a doctor (i.e. envisaging oneself receiving the degree at the graduation ceremony or successfully working in a hospital).
- A **narrative** is a “spoken or written account of connected events; a story” (Oxford Dictionary).
 - It is used in this talk mainly in the sense of an **autobiographical life story**.

II. VISION

- What is the relationship between motivation and vision?
 - Human behaviour is multi-faceted and the range of potential motives that can affect it is vast. Various motivation theories highlight different clusters of these motives in order to explain certain specific behavioural domains under focus.
 - The day-to-day reality of one's L2 learning experience is the function of multiple motivating (or demotivating) factors related to the L2, the learning environment or the learner's personal life as well as motivational strategies consciously employed by the teacher (see Dörnyei, 2001).
 - **Vision** represents one of the highest-order motivational forces, one that is particularly fitting to explain the long-term, and often lifelong, process of mastering a second language. It offers a useful broad lens to focus on the bigger picture, the overall persistence that is necessary to lead one to ultimate language attainment. The vision of who one would like to become as L2 users seems to be one of the most reliable predictors of long-term intended effort (see Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Dörnyei, 2014).
- **How does vision motivate?** This is explained through the concept of actual and ideal L2 selves: if the person we would like to become (i.e. our envisaged ideal self) speaks an L2 (e.g. the person we would like to become is associated with travelling or doing business internationally), we can talk about an **ideal L2 self**, which is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the gap between the L2 images of the actual and ideal selves (see Dörnyei, 2009).

III. NARRATIVES

"All of us create and share stories. This is something we start from a young age, in our earliest social interactions, and continue throughout our lives. One of the key stories that follows us over the course of that lifespan is the story we tell to ourselves: the story of the self. This story affects how we interpret our pasts, how we see ourselves now and the paths we envision for our futures... In order to tell this story, we need to be able to create and project images of ourselves beyond our actual experience or environment, a uniquely human quality." (Ryan & Irie 2014, p. 109)

- *Narratives* are not new in SLA – narrative inquiry as a research method has been promoted for over a decade (e.g. Barkhuizen, 2013; Mercer, 2013; Pavlenko, 2007) and narratives/stories have also been recognised as efficient tools for language learning and teaching (e.g. Kalaja, Menezes & Barcelos, 2008; Wright, 2009).
- **‘Narrative turn’ in the social sciences:** An increased emphasis emerged as a result of three complementary sources (see e.g. Hyvärinen, 2010):
 - an interest in *narrative theory*
 - a recognition of *narrative inquiry* as a potent research method
 - an explicit *narrative identity* concept

IV. NARRATIVE IDENTITY

“To be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to be a story.” (Kenyon & Randall (1997, p. 1)

- In a seminal paper that has foregrounded the role of narratives in the social sciences, American psychologist **Jerome Bruner** (1987) argued:
 - “We seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative” (p. 12)
 - Therefore, “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told – or more bluntly, a life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (p. 31).
 - “In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 15).
- People seem to organise and understand their experiences and memories in the form of various narratives, such as stories, excuses, myths or explanations, and in this way, their autobiographical stories become the foundations of their selves – they narrate themselves into the person they become.
- “*Narrative identity* is a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose” (McAdams & McLean, 2013: 233).
- Shaping life experiences into a meaningful storied form facilitates psychological growth, development, coping and well-being; a constructive narrative can also have a ‘redemptive’ impact on difficult or negative experiences, for example when the narrator describes (McAdams, 2009):
 - the death of a family member as bringing the family closer together
 - the loneliness of childhood as forming a more resilient adult
 - severe criticism at work as making someone a better employee

IV. McADAMS’ THREE-TIERED FRAMEWORK OF PERSONALITY

- McAdams (1995; cf. also McAdams & Pals, 2006) has suggested that personality can be best captured by a three-tiered framework:
 - Level 1. Dispositional traits** – relatively stable and decontextualised, broad dimensions of individual differences such as extraversion, friendliness, dutifulness, depressiveness and neuroticism.
 - Level 2. Characteristic adaptations** – “a wide range of motivational, social-cognitive and developmental adaptations, contextualized in time, place, and/or social role” (McAdams & Pals, 2006, p. 208), including “motives, goals, plans, strivings, strategies, values, virtues, schemas, self-images, mental representations of significant others, developmental tasks, and many other aspects of human individuality” (ibid).
 - Level 3. Integrative life narratives** – “internalized and evolving life stories that reconstruct the past and imagine the future to provide a person’s life with identity (unity, purpose, meaning)” (p. 212); that is, they constitute people’s narrative identity that helps them to make sense of their lives in the complexity of the world.

V. LIFE NARRATIVES AND VISION

- Narratives have the power to ‘draw people in’, that is, to *transport* people into the *world of the narrative* (cf. Green & Donahue, 2009).
- There is an in-built human imaginative capacity to turn narratives into *imagery* (cf. Paivio, 1986) – this is the basis, for example, of *guided imagery tasks*, which involve reading out scripts that direct people in controlled daydreaming.
- Thus, narratives can transport people into a world of imagery (cf. the ‘Transportation-Image Model’ in Green & Donahue, 2009), and if the specific narrative is a personalised, goal-specific story that concerns the future, it can connect people with the realm of their *vision* in a powerful way.

VI. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

“The events of one’s life can be read from different perspectives, and they are amenable to various kinds of emplotment.” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 155)

Two approaches to use narratives to shape vision involve (a) adding a future dimension to one’s narrative identity and (b) harmonising one’s life narrative with one’s future vision.

- **ADDING A FUTURE DIMENSION TO ONE’S NARRATIVE IDENTITY** involves extending the life narrative into the imaginary future (adapted from Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014):
 - *Writing an autobiographical story about the future* – In order to help students to develop and strengthen their vision, ask them to engage in what experts call ‘concept-focused autobiographical writing’. They should imagine themselves a few years into the future as competent L2 users and recount their language learning story starting with the present situation and leading up to successful mastery in the future – all written in the past tense as a recollection!
 - *Building up a ‘back to the future’ portfolio* – An effective way of strengthening the students’ vision is to ask them to revisit their imaginary language learning history (see above) from time to time in order to embroider it further, that is, to extend it by adding various details through additional tasks, such as *writing a letter* to themselves from the future. There is a variety of things they might want to share with their past selves: what it is like to have made it; how they got there; some useful advice; things they have learnt during the journey; or simply just some small stories and personal bits and pieces that often make up letters.
- **HARMONISING ONE’S LIFE NARRATIVE WITH ONE’S FUTURE VISION** involves retelling one’s life story in a way that it sheds a positive light on one’s autobiographical memories, thereby creating a positive mental environment for one’s future vision (adapted from Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014):
 - *‘Restorying’ the past in a positive light* – Ask students to write a composition by putting a ‘positive spin’ on the negative events in their past language learning history, showing how it contained the foundations of spectacular future success. This interpretation – entitled *Who Would Have Believed It...?* – should sum up the roots of their powerful motivation to continue to study the L2 and to make a success of it. A successful story of this kind does not avoid past failures, disappointments or traumatic experiences, but addresses these head-on while also offering ‘redemptive’ interpretations that translate these difficult life moments into fully elaborated stories with a constructive, positive edge (e.g. the way by which a salutary experience works).
 - *Team task*: The re-harmonising task can be further developed into a small group activity whereby students ‘restory their lives together’, perhaps as part of a PR team (Kenyon & Randall, 1997. p. 120).

VII. CONCLUSION

- Research on *traits* (Level 1 of personality) and *characteristic adaptations* (Level 2) has been far more advanced than the study of *narrative identity* (Level 3), but this trend has started to change: an increasing number of scholars now view narratives as the ‘*root metaphor*’ of psychology (for a recent discussion, see Singer *et al.*, 2012).
- Narratives can be used for many purposes, from literary theory to research methodology, and this paper tried to demonstrate that they also have a *significant role* in the psychology of language learning.
- The inherent link between *goal-specific narratives* and *vision* establishes narratives firmly as potential targets on motivational research agendas; as John Schumann summarised in the motto of this paper, “*Sometimes we use techniques that are also employed in scientific investigation, and sometimes we listen carefully to the stories that learners tell us about their second language learning.*”

VIII. REFERENCES

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