

Perspectives on Motivation in Second Language Acquisition: Lessons from the Ryoanji Garden

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*My hands were steady, my eyes were clear and bright
My walk had purpose, my steps were quick and light
And I held firmly, to what I felt was right
Like a rock.*

(from Bob Segar's song "Like a Rock," 1986)

1. A guiding metaphor from the Ryoanji temple

The importance of contemplating perspectives can be illustrated by a famous garden at the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan.¹ Built in the late 1400s, the garden has 15 simple stones laid in meticulously raked white gravel. A veranda allows visitors to view the layout of the stones and pause for a moment of reflection. The positioning of the stones is fascinating; from any vantage point an observer will see 14 stones, never all 15. Shifting one's gaze in the direction of the 15th stone always will cause another stone to slip out of view. Visiting the garden is a powerful experience. Contemplating the meaning of the garden at Ryoanji raised for us a two-part question: what does it mean to take a perspective and how can those lessons be applied to the study of motivation in second language acquisition (SLA)? In the pages that follow we will discuss research into motivation in SLA, along with methodological issues and their corresponding epistemological concerns. We join authors such as Dörnyei (2007) in advocating a research approach for this area that moves beyond the tired quantitative-qualitative divide, and even beyond a simple call for mixed methods. We will conclude with lessons based on the garden at Ryoanji.

2. Perspectives on motivation

There is currently no single dominant paradigm in SLA research. The study of motivation in SLA is now approached from a number of different perspectives, using a number of different methodologies. This state of the art is not unique to motivation in SLA; it also characterizes the study of motivation in general. Grand theories of motivation have been centered on psychological needs, drives, will, reinforcement conditions, or cognition, which have taken their turn as a dominant perspective (Reeve, 2009). However, in addition to these research foci there has been an underlying thread of humanism, interest in emotion and physiology, concern for the self, and study of other processes that have been present in the study of motivation in psychology.

It has been argued (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994) that motivation in SLA previously had a dominant perspective, the socio-educational (SE) model (Gardner, 1985, 2001). The origins of the SE model emerged 50 years ago with the publication of Gardner and Lambert's (1959) paper. The nascent ideas developed and grew into the SE model, which is still being used today (Gardner, 2009). This model reflects a social science perspective. When research began on the model, survey methods

¹ The official web site for this beautiful garden can be found at <http://www.ryoanji.jp/>

were adopted because they were deemed to be better for studying individuals within natural settings (e.g., language classrooms) than experimental methods confined to the laboratory, which was the method that characterized motivation research in psychology.² It is important to consider what a social science perspective means: The “social” aspect places value on understanding peoples’ experience with each other as they live their lives. The “science” aspect underscores the need to use reliable and valid measures to systematically observe people and test research hypotheses. In one sense, these values were the rocks on which the SE model, and indeed the study of motivation in SLA, rested.

However, it was argued that other rocks were being ignored in the process; the SE model has been considered possibly too dominant in the sense that it may have contributed to limited thinking in the area and led to other ideas not being seriously considered (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). In a landmark volume of the *Modern Language Journal*, Dörnyei (1994) called for an expansion of the study of motivation to include more explicitly educational themes. Oxford and Shearin (1994) proposed the expansion of motivation to include a long list of concepts that have become prominent in psychology but which are not reflected in the SE model. Moreover, with the social turn in SLA (cf. Block, 2003), many other researchers have become interested in exploring alternative understandings of “motivation,” “integrativeness,” and so on (e.g., Dewaele, 2009; Norton, 2001; Pavlenko, 2002). As the result of these and other efforts (for overviews, see Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), the study of motivation in SLA currently has a variety of perspectives.

3. Examples of concepts and methodologies currently used in SLA

Some of the perspectives on motivation in SLA are presented in Table 1. The scholars who made these diverse contributions developed their ideas using a variety of methodological and analytic strategies from brain-based neuroimaging to critical theoretical synthesis; the literature as a whole features quite a diverse mixture of methodological approaches. Each of these concepts adds new foundational conceptual rocks to our garden. Survey methods certainly are common, but many other methodological approaches are used as well, including neuroscience methods, longitudinal methods looking at motivational processes and the dynamics of learning specific tasks; case studies and interviews; ethnographies and other types of observational studies; textual approaches, including diary studies, collective stories, and so on. The analytic strategies include multivariate regression-based analyses of quantitative data; thematic analysis of qualitative information; conversation and/or discursive analysis; the analysis of secondary data, and many more approaches to research. Although we might offer a typical methodology for each of these approaches, doing so could mistakenly tie the theoretical development to a single method when there are diverse methods underlying most of the concepts.

Table 1. *Fifteen Key Motivational Concepts: Rocks in SLA*

| Concept | Example |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Acculturation | Schumann, 1978 |
| Action control | Kuhl, 1994 |
| Complex, dynamic systems | Larsen-Freeman, 2007 |
| Ethnolinguistic vitality | Giles and Byrne, 1982 |
| Integrative motivation | Gardner, 1985 |
| International posture | Yashima et al., 2004 |
| Investment | Norton, 2001 |
| L2 motivational self system | Dörnyei, 2005 |

² Although qualitative methods might also be used to examine people’s experience, they were not widely used in social psychology in these years, in part because of the rising interest in developing “objective” quantitative methods.

Table 1. *Fifteen Key Motivational Concepts: Rocks in SLA (continued)*

| Concept | Example |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Learner autonomy | Ushioda, 2001 |
| Physiological approaches | Schumann et al., 2004 |
| Process Model | Dörnyei & Otto, 1998 |
| Self-determination | Noels, 2001 |
| Self-confidence | Clément, 1986 |
| Task motivation | Julkunen, 2001 |
| Willingness to communicate | MacIntyre, 2007 |

4. The problem with rocks

Although we can stand on them, look at them, admire their enduring and unflinching strength, it is also the case that every mother will caution her child about the danger of rocks, or more specifically, the danger of throwing them. Unfortunately, embedded in the wealth of perspectives on L2 motivation, we sometimes encounter a dismissive or combative attitude towards other people's points of view—even well-educated scholars occasionally throw rocks at each other. We sometimes see this in representations of other's work that are overly simplified or startlingly inaccurate, or in the use of straw man arguments—an example is the not uncommon portrayal of Gardner's (1985) notion of the integrative orientation as incompatible with an instrumental orientation. As a rhetorical strategy, this is quite effective: one sets up an implausibly simple version of an opposing theory against which is contrasted a nuanced discussion of a preferred theory. A theoretical “win” is virtually assured.

At times, drawing contrasts can usefully serve to better articulate one's own point of view. Unfortunately, even if this is the goal, there is often a tendency to adopt a polemic stance and dismiss the other point of view more-or-less completely. The tone may range from dismissive to confrontational. We believe that this tactic causes unintended difficulty in terms of developing the field of study in motivation in SLA. This negative undertone pits one theoretical approach against another; it is as if they both cannot have value. Scholars then choose between approaches; the loser must be set aside and the winning entry adopted. But one has to ask the pragmatic question whether it is necessary that one position must be dismissed because another is valid (Dörnyei, 2007). Need there be only one valid point of view?

Among the areas of concern emerging from this observation is a form of gatekeeping. When association leaders, conference organizers, research funders, journal editors, manuscript reviewers, and others decide that only certain perspectives are valid for examining SLA phenomenon, other ways of thinking are precluded. New students, especially at the graduate level, are taught to endorse particular perspectives; the possibilities for developing new avenues or merging different perspectives are thereby constrained (see Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). This practice arguably reflects what Kuhn (1970, p. 10) has called “normal science.” We believe, however, that the dismissive or confrontational tone serves to shut down the possibility of dialogue and discovery of how one perspective may inform the other.

As a summary of the argument presented thus far, we would like to illustrate two assumptions that we believe limit thinking in the field. Both assumptions show up, largely implicitly, as scholars write about competing perspectives. The first might be stated, *to adopt a new perspective, one must denigrate the former perspective*. This implies that the new perspective is more favorable than the old one, often simply because it is new. We should not assume that new is going to be better. If we do this, we may lose an old perspective, which is essentially “throwing the baby out with the bath water” (see MacIntyre, MacKinnon & Clément, 2009, for an extended version of this argument).

The second assumption might be stated, *only one perspective can be appropriate*. In conducting research, it is a truism that scholars must take a perspective. They often imply that their perspective is the single best way of approaching a certain topic of study. They might make note of the diversity of issues and methodologies, giving lip service to other theoretical models, but explicitly or by their actions argue only one perspective is really appropriate. When this happens only a small part of the

phenomenological garden is revealed; only the rocks from a limited theoretical perspective will be visible. This indeed limits our thinking. For example, if we focus on themes of interpersonal and intergroup power and conflict, we may lose sight of the role of affiliation and nurturance in SLA. If we focus on language learning as a more or less “fun” activity, we may lose sight of how the types of social capital that language provides help us to understand why people invest in learning the languages they do. If we focus on dynamic changes in identity that come about as we learn and use new languages, we may lose sight of how a sense of self-consistency anchors a person in the learning process. In sum, then, when we look for something from a particular vantage point we are likely to find it, but we will miss something else in the process.

It is the nature of perspective-taking itself that is at issue. Let us make clear the irony brought to mind in contemplating this issue within our metaphor of the Ryoanji garden. The garden teaches us that by focusing on one idea we *will* lose sight of another. Every perspective we adopt will limit our thinking. The irony of the garden’s metaphor is that to see any rocks at all we must adopt a perspective; we must stand somewhere. But by doing so, by taking any perspective, we simultaneously lose sight of something else.

5. Spaces between the rocks

Theoretical approaches all have their necessary and inherent limitations. As researchers we choose a line of sight. But if we were to look at the Ryoanji garden from many different angles, we will see all of the rocks and more, we would see the interesting spaces between them. In addition to looking at what our theories and methods tell us, we argue that researchers should more actively contemplate the limits of our methods and the assumptions that create boundaries for our theories. That is, what are the interesting spaces between our theoretical and methodological rocks? A triangulation of methods allows us to see more than what any one method can reveal on its own, but that in itself is not enough. We applaud the increasing use of mixed methodologies, where qualitative and quantitative approaches are combined in the same study; this approach has the potential to lead to innovative combinations of theories and methods. In advocating mixed methods research, Creswell and Clark (2007, p. 9-10) list several advantages of such designs. Qualitative and quantitative approaches have complementary strengths, each compensating to some extent for the weakness of the other. Mixed designs allow both for increased comprehensiveness within a single study and a broader set of research questions that can be addressed across a series of research projects. By fostering collaboration across disciplines, mixed methods take advantage of multiple worldviews. Finally, Creswell and Clark note the simple practicality of mixed methods. We can agree with all of these but we argue that it is not enough to simply add a quantitative dimension to a qualitative study, or vice versa. There is one more advantage to be had, and a bit more work to be done.

Researchers have a responsibility to actively consider what it is their perspectives do and do not, can and cannot reveal. For example, the qualitative part of a study will reveal certain observations and miss others. Qualitative research often is adept at rich descriptions of specific individual circumstances, but is not appropriate for identifying trends and regularities in a population. Researchers might wish to consider how individual cases inform understanding of a phenomena where an unusual situation may stand out as a most insightful occurrence. But the specific instance cannot be assumed to be a general trend; it may be interesting *because* it is unusual. As a result, qualitative research is often viewed as subjective and claims of objectivity create skepticism (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

In quantitative research all of the interesting exceptions to the norm are lost, and the truly exceptional are thrown away as “outliers.” Such research may point to a general tendency or rule, but individuality is dismissed as experimental error, a mathematical process that is inherent in correlation and ANOVA procedures. Teachers, for example, are sometimes frustrated by the statistician’s claim that aggregate results cannot be applied to individuals. Perhaps this is contributing to the more frequent use of mixed methods, where broad trends can be identified along with individual cases. Certainly mixed methods are appropriate in SLA, but there is one more step to the process. The researcher must be very active in considering what ontological and epistemological stance they are using is *not* revealing. The complexity of SLA requires many perspectives to appreciate its richness (van Geert, 2008).

We must be able to employ methods that will reveal information about interactions among phenomena, not just the behavior of components (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Motivation in SLA is a dynamic, complex phenomenon involving many intertwining contexts (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). For this reason, it cannot fully be explained by simple relationships derived from one or two research approaches. Considering this, and the rock garden metaphor, we recognize the necessity of comprehensive research methods involving multiple perspectives if we are to reveal strong explanatory findings in SLA studies. In other words, if we lose sight of some rocks by standing at a certain point, then we need to stand at a number of different points in order to view all of the rocks within the garden. That is the only way we can know that there are 15 rocks in the Ryoanji Temple's garden.

6. A research agenda

The first dimension of our proposed research agenda concerns methodology. We suggest that researchers should have basic facility in multiple methods and that undergraduate and graduate level research training should routinely expose students to in-depth discussions of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Without this capacity, the field will be limited in what we can do with any research topic because there is no choice among methods to be made. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) suggest that quantitative and qualitative methods actually are more similar than they are different. As Sandelowski (1986) explains, both types of methods address research questions by making use of observations, and researchers introduce safeguards to their studies as a means to reduce sources of invalidity, such as confirmation bias (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Moreover, both ultimately rely on the interpretive abilities of the researcher in order for any observations to make sense. Considering that both types of methods share some similar features and also compensate for the other's shortcomings, mixing methods may be advantageous. We hasten to add that to do so successfully, researchers must have developed an appropriate level of expertise in all of the methods they are using, a task more difficult than developing expertise with a single paradigm (Dörnyei, 2007).

With this in mind, we need to think more in terms of research programs rather than in terms of single projects. As well, we need to think more in terms of collaborative research teams and not just individual scholars. It is perhaps not feasible for a single scholar to become skilled in every possible methodology, and hence we need to be more open to collaborative activities that include scholars from a variety of perspectives. In the process of developing these skills, we need to read and understand each other's work. This certainly requires a critical perspective, but it is important to recognize that a true critique can only be arrived at once one has deeply understood the work of others. Part of this understanding means recognizing what might be strengths of that perspective, not only its weaknesses. As a step in the research process, perspective-broadening cannot be done in isolation; it requires collegial support and a willingness to mentor others who strive to extend their understanding of SLA by learning about new perspectives. It certainly cannot be accomplished if we show disrespect toward others' current perspectives, thereby alienating them and precluding the possibility of dialogue. And we should approach our own work with a similar critical perspective.

The second dimension of our proposed agenda focuses on theory development. In developing a broader understanding of SLA, it is not sufficient to simply acquaint ourselves with the many perspectives out there. We need to do more than name the rocks. The addition of new perspectives is not the full answer either—although they may be useful in many ways, we need to do more than throw a few more rocks into the garden. Instead we must actively seek out multiple perspectives for understanding the phenomenon of interest, and explicitly ask what is learned when one shifts from one perspective to another.

6.1. *Two illustrative examples*

The question then arises of what research involving an integration of theories and methods would look like. Certainly the usual practice of studies involving only one theoretical method linked with one specific method is problematic. But as de Bot (2008) points out in his discussion of SLA as involving complex, dynamic systems, problems can arise not only from utilizing designs that do not take several

viewpoints into consideration, but also when a project's focus becomes too broad. We need to combine multiple theoretical perspectives and mixed methods research in a way that provides both comprehensiveness and clarity.

So then, how can this broad agenda be accomplished? A study by Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) provides an example that highlights the contributions of multiple perspectives on a theoretical level. To better understand teacher identity, these researchers attempted to “juxtapose alternative theoretical approaches to see how different underlying assumptions alter our perception both of what is interesting and of what the research reveals to us” (p. 24). The researchers pooled their individual knowledge by contrasting and comparing the three theoretical positions of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the “identity as image-text” approach (Simon, 1995). Their analysis underscores that:

- A consideration of teacher identity from a social identity perspective highlights the fact that teachers often have multiple identities that are linked to specific groups and roles. It provides a concrete way of conceptualizing the unequal power relations that can exist between groups and hence between identities. It misses, however, the performance and developmental aspects that are discussed in the other two theories.
- A consideration of teacher identity from the situated learning perspective emphasizes the co-constructed nature of identity, as well as the idea that learning involves a social process of acquiring an identity. This perspective is less able to explain an individual's experience identity and agency, and does not underscore the importance of power and status as well as social identity theory does.
- A consideration of teacher identity through the notion of image-text focuses on how identities emerge in discourse. It stresses that others construct images of us that they use to “read” who we are. It emphasizes that we are cognizant of the fact that we are being “read” by others and hence construct our image in light of this awareness, although there is no guarantee that our efforts will achieve the image we attempt to portray. This discursive theory, however, may offer less in the way of practical advice to teachers to improve their practice.

By shifting perspectives, this analysis gives the reader a rich sense of the experiences of language teachers and their sense of identity. Each theory enlightens the other, and together they more effectively capture the complexity of the issue at hand. Although such an analysis also draws attention to the relative weaknesses and limitations of each theory, it leaves room to appreciate the insight that each theory provides. Moreover, through this process of comparing and contrasting theories, Varghese and her colleagues arrive at the kind of insight that comes from considering the “spaces between the rocks,” specifically an articulation of teacher identity that includes both how identities are constructed through discourse and how the pressures in the social context influence teacher self concept. We do not mean to suggest that every individual study must include such theoretical triangulation, but such an exercise in perspective-taking would be useful and important to incorporate at the level of the research program.

A second example focused on using multiple methodological perspectives to gain new insights into SLA, might be the work of MacIntyre and Legatto (2009). In reviewing the literature on willingness to communicate (WTC) in the second language, the authors noted that studies based on survey methods show that higher WTC is associated with increased language proficiency. However, they argue that these results do not show the dynamic changes in WTC within a communication event. They propose an “idiodynamic” methodology that combines the quantitative rating of WTC on the fly with the qualitative explanations offered by the respondent, complemented by the observations of the interlocutor who ran the experiment. This method combines qualitative and quantitative methods, each as a reaction to the limitations of the other. Many qualitative studies are retrospective, sometimes months or years later. Although they can be understood to describe how a respondent is making sense of her or his experience, the accuracy of these recollections is subject to numerous memory and reporting biases (e.g., autobiographical memory bias). The quantitative rating of WTC, made on the basis of watching a videotape of the communication event immediately after it occurs, is less subject to long term memory biases. Self-ratings, however, remain subject to other biases (e.g., self-enhancement bias). In considering a similar issue within another context, Funder (2001) argued that an external observer (in this case, the interlocutor) might provide a less self-serving account, though the external

observer lacks the introspective capacity of the speaker reporting on his or her felt experience. The idiodynamic method produces a vast amount of data and has been used only with small sample sizes. Although this limits its generalizability, the data can be compared with larger sample studies that better describe general trends and tendencies.

In examining the space between the methodological rocks, MacIntyre and Legatto (2009) commented specifically on the relationship between anxiety and WTC. In previous survey data, there is a rock-solid, negative correlation obtained between WTC and anxiety. However, in the idiodynamic data, there appeared to be a highly inconsistent, unpredictable relation between anxiety and WTC in data captured moment-to-moment. Thinking about the reasons for the divergent conclusions between the types of data, as well as what the qualitative and quantitative data can reveal, led to a novel explanation, based on a timescale issue: WTC and anxiety appear to fluctuate at different rates within a communication event. If only the idiodynamic data were available, one might conclude that there is no relation between anxiety and WTC. If only survey data were contemplated, one might conclude that there is a straightforward connection such that WTC and anxiety rise and fall in lockstep. Going beyond these observations, if the authors had assumed that one method and its conclusion were correct, and that the other should be disregarded or denigrated, the issue of differing process timescales might have been lost. Future research into the time-related dynamics of WTC and anxiety would not be possible without “looking between the rocks,” explicitly accounting for the strengths and limitations of the various methods.

7. Conclusion: Lessons from the Ryoanji garden

A recent paper by Noels and Giles (2009, p. 664) addresses the central argument in the present essay:

[the] combination of methods and models offers great potential for the generation of new ideas, new knowledge, and new practices in the study of language learning and motivation.... To our mind, the most worrisome impediment to such a prospect is not the incommensurability of different ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies as much as the confrontational discourse that runs through some of the scholarship in the area.

Confrontational discourse on one end of the spectrum, and dismissive discourse on the other end, creates unnecessary problems, pitting one research tradition against another, and establishing walls within the garden. Removing these artificial barriers and actively considering the space between the rocks is a difficult, but ultimately worthwhile, goal. As a discipline, we require methodological rigor and strong theoretical foundations. But as a discipline without a single dominant paradigm, we stand to gain most by actively contemplating what is learned by adopting different perspectives, what is learned during the shift in perspective, and explicitly commenting upon the strengths and limitations of each perspective.

We have argued that to see any of the processes involved in language learning or use, one must take a theoretical and methodological perspective. That is, in order to see any of the rocks in the garden, one must stand on the veranda, thereby creating a perspective, a particular viewpoint. To look at motivation at all is to adopt a particular viewpoint. However, any perspective that one might take will simultaneously reveal some of the processes and some of the phenomena that are involved in second language learning, while concealing other processes and other phenomena. Without unusual enlightenment, it is not possible to examine everything simultaneously. Therefore, a multiplicity of perspectives is required to fully describe the motivational processes involved in SLA. In presenting results and drawing conclusions, we must discuss the limits of our particular perspective and consider the types of questions that alternative perspectives can address.

Whenever the conclusions drawn from one method are different than the conclusions drawn from another method, scholars should avoid the temptation to ask “which one is correct?” and instead ask themselves “why are the conclusions different?” This leads to questioning how the methodologies and theories themselves influence the thinking that led to those conclusions. By examining what each line of thought is missing we better understand the spaces between the rocks. In light of all this, it is evident that in order to more fully interpret ideas or phenomena, researchers would be advised to use a

combination of diverse approaches to see as many “rocks” as possible, while paying special attention to the interesting spaces between them.

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