

# Exploring L2 Motivation Through Dynamic Systems Theory: A Critical Analysis and Implications for ELT Practices

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**How to cite this paper:** Yichen Liu. (2024). Exploring L2 Motivation Through Dynamic Systems Theory: A Critical Analysis and Implications for ELT Practices. *The Educational Review, USA*, 8(4), 647-651.

DOI: 10.26855/er.2024.04.028

**Received:** March 27, 2024

**Accepted:** April 24, 2024

**Published:** May 22, 2024

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## Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a shift in Second Language (L2) motivation theory towards a more culturally dynamic approach. This transition underscores the interaction of various factors that make the L2 motivational landscape complicated with a series of mechanisms. By critically evaluating the usefulness and limitations of integrativeness as a theoretical instrument in facilitating successful Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and revisiting Dörnyei's L2 motivation framework through the lens of Dynamic Systems Theory (DST), this paper argues that in current global contexts, the utility of integrativeness in bolstering L2 motivation is considerably constrained. Additionally, it analyzes the compatibility between L2 learning motivation and DST, incorporating insights from Dörnyei's motivational framework in conjunction with DST to enhance the understanding of L2 motivation that reflects its complex and dynamic nature. This perspective aims to help L2 language learners identify improvement strategies and offers implications for promoting effective L2 instruction in English Language Teaching (ELT) practices.

## Keywords

Integrativeness, learning motivation, Dynamic Systems Theory, Second Language Acquisition

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## 1. Introduction

In the dynamic domain of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), motivation stands as an essential factor, in fostering and supporting L2 learning. It compensates for limitations in capabilities and learning conditions throughout the SLA trajectory from the starting point to sustained involvement (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The absence of motivation may hinder even gifted individuals in achieving their long-range SLA objectives (Rajab et al., 2012). One of the L2 motivation theories is Gardner's (1988) socio-educational model, proposing the notion of integrativeness for promoting L2 learning, which however, faces challenges in the context of global English and digital communication. These advancements demand a critical reassessment of integrativeness' definition and applicability, considering the contemporary realities of globalisation, changing linguistic dynamics, and varied learning contexts. This paper seeks to deepen the understanding of L2 motivation in a globally interconnected context, offering educators valuable insights into ELT methodologies, thereby enhancing more effective L2 teaching.

## 2. Exploring integrativeness

### 2.1 The usefulness of integrativeness

Central to Gardner's socio-educational model, integrativeness aims to investigate how individual differences affect L2 learning (Gardner, 1988). It is defined as the desire to integrate into the L2-speaker community, fostering more successful SLA through an open and accepting mindset towards other cultures, less anxiety towards L2, persistence in learning L2, and increased opportunities for practice (Gardner, 2001). This notion acknowledges that L2 learning is influenced by interrelated factors, covering learners' abilities of language and cognition, and their social, emotional, cultural, and moral identities (Kramsch, 2001). Ellis (2008) reinforces the utility of integrativeness, illustrating that learners with integrativeness are more self-motivated, exert greater efforts, present more persistence in long-range SLA, and ultimately achieve better outcomes. Thus, Gardner's model posits that all else being equal, learners with integrativeness are likely to experience more effective SLA than others without such motivation.

### 2.2 The limitations of integrativeness

Gardner's L2 motivation model, while impactful, was inevitable to criticism, particularly when international languages are phenomenally spread in globalised contexts, the motivation to identify with the L2 community loses its explanatory relevance in varied language learning environments.

#### 2.2.1 Ambiguities in definition

The vague definition of integrativeness diminishes its role in studying L2 motivation. The concept, integrativeness, has been interchangeably utilised with integrative orientation and motivation (Dörnyei, 1990), with its meaning—originally about learners' interest in SLA for communication or cultural knowledge (Gardner & Smythe, 1975)—leading to mixed interpretations as it appears that the aspire to learn L2 is not economic or practical can be identified as integrativeness (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983). For instance, activities such as travelling, forming friends with L2 speakers, or exploring L2 culture may be categorised as either instrumental or integrative according to different researchers' perspectives (Lukmani, 1972; Burstall et al., 1974). Gardner and Lambert (1972) note that the essence of integrativeness lies in the desire to assimilate with the L2 community, which is possibly overlooked by some studies, suggesting that motivations relevant to community affiliation could indeed fall under integrativeness.

Gardner (2001) also realised the ambiguous nature of the term among researchers and refined its definition to mitigate confusion. He described integrativeness as the aspiration to learn L2 to become closer to the L2 community, which involves both a general appreciation for different cultures and at the extreme, a wish to be completely integrated with the L2 community, potentially forsaking their origins. Despite this, Gardner and Lambert (1972) proposed that intellectual or manipulative orientations might exist, suggesting that the definition of integrativeness could be explored further in experimental contexts to clarify the confusion and distinguish it from other orientations (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983).

#### 2.2.2 Limited usefulness globalised context

Globalisation has also diminished the utility of integrativeness in L2 motivation, as it blurs the boundaries between speakers from different language communities, especially in the case of English. Lamb (2004) and Warschauer (2000) point out that English is increasingly viewed as not belonging to any specific geographically-defined and cultural community but as a Lingua Franca (ELF) used in international groups. This transits the emphasis from learning English to identify with a given English-speaking community to using English as part of a global culture. Consequently, the traditional notion of integrativeness, which focuses on the distinct possession of English by a given community, may not be suitable for English learning in contemporary globalised contexts, where English is moving away from being relevant to a local or particular cultural identity, and instead becoming part of a broader global culture (Dörnyei et al., 2006).

In the era of ELF, Warschauer (2000) observes that English transcends traditional native-speaking countries, being widely utilised in countries where English is not the primary language, including China, Japan, and other nations in East Asia. Localised English in regions such as Singapore, the Philippines, India, and Malaysia further illustrates its global reach (Lai, 2013). In such context, challenges lie in associating English with a well-defined linguistic culture or community, especially in contexts where it is viewed as a fundamental instrument for education (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), suggesting that learners need to focus on international communication rather than emulating native speakers' language, culture and norms to align with an English-speaking community (Mackenzie, 2014). Meanwhile, Smith (1983) echoes this, stating that English is a medium for conveying one's identity, culture, and beliefs globally, thus appreciating the culture of an English-speaking country is not essential for English proficiency. This transition in language use is also appropriate to other international

languages that have transcended geographic and cultural borders, making it more and more difficult to attribute L2 to a distinct community that own the target language. Consequently, Al-Ghamdi (2014) argues for a re-evaluation of integrativeness, as the language is no longer the sole property of specific speaker groups. Learners may pursue English not for traditional integrativeness but to engage with a broader international community, diminishing the usefulness of integrativeness in globalised contexts.

### 2.2.3 Limited relevance in diverse learning contexts

Gardner (1988) defines SLA contexts as learning environments characterised by the number of languages spoken in the field, the ethnolinguistic vitality of the L2 learners, the cultural and social contexts, the presence of other communities in the locality, and others. In settings where L2 is predominant like North America, integrativeness can foster learners' motivation and perseverance in achieving L2 proficiency by cultivating a desire to be identified with the L2 community (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). This concept proves especially beneficial in bilingual or multilingual societies where multiple languages are officially recognised. For instance, Canada's bilingual policy, adopting both English and French as official languages in educational and societal contexts (Dörnyei, 1990), may inspire an L2 learner in Canada to strive to be recognised as part of the L2 community. This, in turn, reinforces the role of integrativeness in stimulating an individual's motivation to embark on L2 learning and sustain their dedication to it.

However, in bilingual or bi-cultural contexts, particularly where English is viewed as a Foreign Language (EFL) or as a Second Language (ESL), like in China, Japan, and South Africa, the situation differs from that in North America. According to Chen et al. (2005), EFL or ESL learners in these regions seldom have opportunities to use English outside of educational settings, nor do they have easy access to authentic English media or literature, reducing their motivation since they do not see themselves becoming part of the English-speaking community. These learners are also less likely to engage in real conversational practices or authentic target community culture experiences, which restricts their openness and acceptance of other communities and cultures (Ortega, 2014). Take China as an example, where English is mainly learned and used in class. Students may discuss English topics outside the class, like Harry Potter books and idols, but only in Chinese, and they can even understand aspects of global culture without necessarily employing English (Chen et al., 2005). In countries like China, the primary motivation for learning English is commonly tied to enhancing future career prospects, similar to instrumental motivation. Thus, integrativeness plays a diminished role in EFL or ESL contexts and countries with a single official language, due to a lack of opportunities for immersion into a different community or interaction with L2 speakers (Ellis, 2008).

## 3. Revisiting Dörnyei's framework of L2 motivation

### 3.1 Overview of Dörnyei's Theory

Dörnyei (1994), recognising the complexities of language learning motivation, evolved beyond the limitations of integrativeness. He proposed a dynamic framework of L2 motivation, framing integrativeness and instrumentality as context-dependent subsystems, and spanning three tiers: the Language Level, Learner Level, and Learning Situational Level (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). This framework acknowledges the value of Gardner's emphasis on cultural identification but critiques the limited focus on integration with an L2 community, arguing for a broader embrace of the cultural and intellectual values of the language (Dörnyei, 1990).

Dörnyei further refined his view on the L2 Motivation Self System to address integrativeness's limited global validity, which comprises three hypotheses: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The Ideal L2 Self, where integrativeness is situated, represents the learner's aspirational future self, fluent in L2 and capable of effective communication with native speakers. This ideal identity motivates learners to minimise the gap between current and ideal selves (Papi, 2010), echoing integrative motivation but with a broader, more inclusive layer. Dörnyei's Motivational Self System expanded Gardner's model by introducing the Ideal L2 Self to motivate learners across diverse contexts, even without direct communication with native speakers (Dörnyei, 2005). This concept is particularly relevant in globalised setting, where learners may aspire to communicate in international languages among non-native speakers. The Ideal L2 Self also encourages learners to envision an ideal speaker they aim to be, fostering motivation regardless of the specific target language community. Rajab (2012) affirms the effectiveness of the concept in explaining learners' intentional efforts and the role as a pivotal predictor of successful SLA. The L2 Learning Experience is also considered, which accounts for the impact of both previously successful and failing language learning experiences; and the Ought-to L2 Self, which reflects the L2 learner's perceived obligations and commitments (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011)—for example, passing high-pressure and important exam. The Motivation Self System incorporates more dynamic and varied aspects of motivation, compensating for limitations in Gardner's model.

### 3.2 Critique and Expansion

Although Dörnyei's framework provides value in understanding of L2 motivation, it is immune to criticism and further development. The focus on individual self-conceptualisation may not be relevant in the collective cultural identities, calling for reevaluating the system to better illustrate the community values and collective experiences for learners with diverse cultural backgrounds (Nguyen, 2017). What's more, the burgeoning use of digital communication, particularly the impact of social media, suggests that this system might not fully account for ever-evolving motivational factors introduced by newly-engineered technologies. It would be conducive for future expansions of the framework to explore how digital platforms and media factors influence the envision of the Ideal L2 Self and, in turn, affect L2 learner motivation (Sockalingam, 2019; Lamb, 2020).

### 3.3 Dynamic Systems Theory (DST)

DST provides a new direction for L2 teaching research by recognising motivation as an open and dynamically-functional system rather than a traditional static factor limited to individual influence on SLA. Given the complexities of L2 motivation, this perspective is compatible with language motivation in the following three aspects. First, nonlinear development and change are noticeable, with all influencing factors being interconnected and interdependent (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007). Second, individual differences are emphasised, as motivational changes are affected by individual factors, making DST suitable for exploring changes caused by individual differences. Third, DST provides a direction to understand the comprehensive connectivity among ideal self, ought-to self, and learning experiences, which are key factors affecting L2 learners' consciousness and capabilities (Ushioda, 2009), as DST focuses on the influence of multiple factors. Although DST offers valuable explanations for dynamics and development of motivation, bringing new directions to motivation research, its complexity has led to relatively limited empirical studies. Nonetheless, integrating motivation analysis with DST can guide educators towards more effective pedagogical practices, strengthening L2 learners' acquisition outcomes. Educators can deepen their understanding of L2 motivation, better reflecting the complexities of SLA in a contemporary globalised and ever-changing world.

### 4. Implications for English Language Teaching (ELT)

Considering the above exploration into integrativeness and the evolving feature of motivation theory, it is imperative for educators to adopt a more context-sensitive approach to motivation in ELT classrooms. In the current Internet-based teaching context for English, learners are available to favourable conditions and materials for L2 learning, including extensive access to linguistic and cultural information. Teachers can fully utilise online resources, social media, and authentic English media content to cultivate students' integrativeness towards English learning, sparking their interest in the language and its culture. Embracing a dynamic systems theory approach to motivation is also crucial for teachers to better stimulate students' desire, potential, and perseverance to achieve L2 proficiency. This perspective encourages ongoing evaluation and adjustment of motivational strategies to reflect the ever-changing needs and contexts of learners (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), helping teachers foster learners' interests in learning itself and intrinsic motivation to engage with learning activities.

### 5. Conclusion

The utility of integrativeness in motivating L2 learners today is less convincing due to its ambiguous definition, limited relevance with globalisation, and varied learning contexts. Further, by critically examining Dörnyei's theory under Dynamic Systems Theory, this paper emphasises that teaching practices should be tailored to individual motivations and diverse contexts to achieve effective L2 proficiency. It advocates for more flexible and reflective approaches to actively intrigue students' L2 motivation, and proactively incorporate insights from various theoretical views to support learners' needs. Although this paper extends the understanding of integrativeness and Dörnyei's framework, it recognises the complicated and dynamic nature of L2 motivation that needs further investigation to explore a broader range of sociocultural factors and how they influence L2 motivation.

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