Motivation as a Passport for Immigrants' Life: A Different Perspective for English Teachers

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Abstract

Motivation is one of the main elements that affect SLA (second language acquisition) and the process that the students face when learning the target language. Normally, the factors that influence the amount of motivation of the learners are not controlled due to the fact that these latter are in distinct sociocultural contexts, educational settings, among others. In this study, the factors that affect motivation in immigrant learners are investigated as an issue that SLA teachers must consider in order to transform the educational settings into an inclusive environment in such field.

Keywords: sociocultural context, external factors, motivation, educational settings, amotivation, acculturation model, identity.

1. Introduction

Learning a language is a process that requires different components. Generally, people who want to learn a L2 (second language) may hear that some of the strategies to acquire it is to be surrounded by the target language (Culhane, 2004, as cited in Zaker, 2016), such as living in a country where people speak it, or adapt it to their own context, among others. Nonetheless, learning a language as L2 is not a straightforward process because students face challenges that might not allow them to have an accurate and fluency output of the language. These challenges are the cultural differences, the influence of the L1 (first language) into the L2, pronunciation, new grammatical structures, vocabulary (Rajini & Krishnamoorthy, 2020) and more other aspects.

In this paper, motivation will be used to explore the amount of influence that determined factors affect the learning process English as L2 in the field of SLA by considering Mexican immigrants as the main subject of the study and their sociocultural contexts. This study will consider these learners' experiences by expressing the challenges they might have faced when learning English in the Unites States of America.

In order to guide the study and the analysis, I will first explain a literature review section that is compounded of key terms such as motivation, amotivation, external factors and the acculturation model. Second, the methodology section will be discussed where the research question is explained. Third, the context of the participants is described. Next, the data collection process will be provided. Finally, the discussion and analysis of the study will be expounded.

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2. Literature review

In this section, some concepts will be discussed. These are important for the presented study. The terms that integrate the section of theoretical framework of this paper are the following: Motivation vs amotivation, factors and their effects in SLA, and acculturation model.

2.1 *Motivation vs amotivation*

The acquisition of a L2 can be presented in different contexts, such as classrooms with formal instruction, educational or natural settings, among others. Nevertheless, motivation is faced, experienced and presented by all the learners in these different conditions. Additionally, in this study motivation will be referred as the aspect that impacts the individuals' objectives of success when people are learning a second language (Gardner, 2010).

On the other hand, the concept of amotivation is considered in this study too. This concept and motivation do not mean the same, since amotivation refers to the non-appearance of motivation which is not generated by a lack of interest but it is caused by the person who is encountering feelings of incompetence and impotence (Deci & Ryan, 1985, as cited in Yan, 2009).

This latter concept was included in the presented study since the participants are in a sociocultural context where they face different problems related to economy, identity, culture shock and communication that may affect their motivation when learning a L2 in a country where people use it as a main mediator for conveying information.

2.2 *Factors and their effects in SLA*

In the field of SLA there are factors that are presented in or by the students when learning a language. These factors are divided into two categories; internal and external. According to Ellis (1994) these external factors are age, ethnic identity, social class and sex.

On one hand, according to Ellis (1994) the social class is measured by considering the incomes, the level of education and jobs people have. There are four different social class or levels; lower, working, lower-middle and upper-middle (Ellis, 1994). This may influence in what resources immigrants have in order to learn properly and in good conditions the target language.

On the other hand, there is the ethnic identity factor. According to Schumann (1978, as cited in Zaker, 2016) identifying with a group or community is an important condition for SLA. This leads to the acculturation model since the identity is an important aspect of the presented model.

2.3 *Acculturation model*

According to Ellis (1994) the acculturation model was initiated to consider the acquisition of a second language done by immigrants in a particular language setting or context. This model is important in this study since both, the study and model, exclude the students that are obtaining a formal language instruction (Ellis, 1994).

The term acculturation refers to the cultural and psychological processes that a person goes through when is in contact between two or more cultural groups and the independent members of it (Berry, 2015). On the other hand, Schumann (1986, as cited in Zaker, 2016) defines the acculturation model as the social and psychological incorporation of the student with the group of the target language.

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This also considers the use of words such as intercultural contact and cultural change. These terms can be presented for the following reasons; colonization, migration or even military invasion (Berry, 2015).

In this study the term of adaptation is also important because the culture has an influence when learning a second language (Zaker, 2016). In addition, the acculturation model is important and essential in this paper because it allows to understand in deep analysis other circumstances in which immigrants may be learning English apart from educational settings.

3. Methodology

In this section the methodology that was applied to carry out this study will be described. First, the research design will be explained where the use of a qualitative approach was made. Second, the research question that conducted this study is going to be mentioned.

3.1 *Research design*

This study will make use of the qualitative research approach. According to Hollstein (2011) this approach highlights meaning and this meaning will depend on what is being analyzed. There are six areas in which this approach is acceptable and worthy. They consider the subjects' experiences and what they believe (Mann, 2011, as cited in Alsaawi, 2014). According to Hollstein (2011) inside of this approach and method there are different tools such as interviews and observation. In addition, the qualitative approach tends to recreate the understanding.

In this study this approach was used in order to be able to understand and analyze the answers that were provided by the participants by considering their experiences in order to collect the data with a profound scanning. On the other hand, the given answers were examined in order to consider and solve social problems (Ashley & Boyd, 2006) such as taking into consideration immigrants as part of SLA students who also have needs when learning. This study was carried out by making use of an interview.

On the other hand, the qualitative approach in the field of SLA considers and highlights the role that plays the sociocultural environment where the learning of the target language is happening (Davis, 1995, as cited in Adams et al., 2005). This research contemplated the environment as one of the main contexts where these students are learning English.

3.2 *Research question*

The objective of this study is to explore what factors influence in the motivation of a particular type of learners and how amount of influence these factors have in a specific sociocultural context. Therefore, the research question that conducted this study is the following:

(1) To what extent do factors affect the motivation in Mexican adult immigrants who currently live in the USA when they started learning English as L2?

4. Context

In this section, the context of the participants who were part of this study will be explained. First, a brief description of them will be provided. Second, information about their cultural and linguistic background will be described.

4.1 *Participants*

The participants that form part of this study involve three Mexican adults. Two men and one woman between the ages of 40 to 50 years old. All of the participants were born and raised in different parts of the state of Guanajuato and Sonora, Mexico.

All of them moved to the USA when they were in their 20's and 30's. Currently, they live and work in the state of California, particularly in the area of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Orange County. They have lived in the USA for a period of 15 to 20 years now where some of them formed a family or live alone.

4.2 *Language and culture*

The participants keep communication with their family in Mexico through technological devices, such as phone and social media, but some of them do not have the opportunity to travel at least one time at a year. Nevertheless, some of them see their family more often than others due to elements such as economical, legal and formalities. This means that they are constantly spending more time with their L2 which is English, and C2 (second culture) which is American.

On the other hand, some of them have more closeness with their L1 and C1 (first culture) in the USA due to the area where they presently live and work. In addition, all of the participants have in common their mother tongue and culture. All of them speak Spanish as L1 and they share Mexican culture.

They officially started to learn English once they moved to the USA and they did not know English. Nevertheless, some of them learned few and basic things in Mexico when they were studying at the high school or primary level. The participators lived in Mexico for an extensive term of time. They migrated for economic reasons and to seek for a better life for them and their future family since in Mexico they did not find enough opportunities.

5. Data collection

In this section the procedure of collecting the data for this study will be described where it will be explained what instrument was used through the three steps that were followed.

5.1 *Interviews*

First, previous days before starting the interview a consent letter was sent to the participants in order to show formality and to inform that their identity and answers were going to be used only for the purpose of this study, and that they will be protected.

Second, in order to collect the data of this research, a set of ten open-ended questions were asked to the interviewees. These questions allowed the researcher to collect experiences (Mann, 2011, as cited in Alsaawi, 2014) as the qualitative approach requires and as was previously mentioned in the methodology section.

Third, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to analyze them and to present the participants' answers as exact as possible. In this stage some platforms were used, such as google meet, teams and zoom. In order to protect the identity and names of the participants, a set of pseudonyms were used and given to each of them.

6. Analysis and discussion of the results

In this section, the interpretation and discussion of the results that were obtained in the data collection step are going to be described. First, an explanation of the two topics that were mainly found in this study will be provided. Second, an analysis of the results will be discussed and the research question is going to be answered.

6.1 *Themes*

In order to answer the question that conducted this study, at the moment of collecting the data, it was observed that two main external factors influenced the learning process of the target language and its motivation. These factors are the Ethnic identity and the social class.

The factors were presented by all of the participants when they were learning English. In addition, these will be organized based on its importance and as how much they influenced in the learning process of English. Bearing this in mind, the first factor is social class and the second is ethnic identity.

6.1.1 *Social class*

First, it is important to define the term of social class. According to Bradley (1996) it is a categorization that refers to connections that are surrounded by social systems of production, interchange and utilization. It also includes more a social view such as lifestyle, educational settings (Bradley, 1996), among others.

This term is important in the sociocultural contexts of the participants and their process of second language acquisition since it may affect to what extent the materials are at the students' disposition in order to be able to learn the target language and how their motivation may be affected for the reason that it is something that they cannot control directly. This motivation may not be directly related to the lack of interest of the learners (Deci & Ryan, 1985, as cited in Yan, 2009).

Mariana, one of the participants, recalls that one of the factors that affected directly her motivation while learning English was the aspect of "time":

> "When I came to the USA, I did not know anything about English, but I started to go for over a year to a school that is for adults and to read books. That is how I began to speak it until I started to have experience in my jobs, but the problem is that USA is a country where you really need to work really hard and it was impossible for me to keep going to school, because I was tired most of the time and there was not any time left to go or any interest because of factors that I could not control."[1]

On the other hand, Hugo, another participant, mentions that the time is one of the main factors that affected his motivation too. He supports the argument that the social class and its levels are important and affects the SLA learning when he says:

> "What affected my motivation when I was learning English was the time, because in this country you have to work most of the time to get ahead, to have support and to be able to take care of your family. Most of the times the schedule is not adequate because you work many hours."

This shows that people who do not belong to an upper or upper-middle level (Ellis, 1994) do not have the opportunity to study the language since they dedicate most of their day to

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[1] The interviews were originally done in Spanish. These were translated by the author of the presented study.

work and to get incomes that support an adequate and an acceptable level of economy in this country. Furthermore, the economy and environments in Mexico differ from how people usually live in the USA.

In the latter there are more economical resources, and the immigrants are provided with more tools, such as teachers who are prepared in the area, materials and appropriate environments to learn the target language. On the other hand, in Mexico, this is not a common possibility since there is not support for immigrants or people from communities in Mexico whose first language is not Spanish. Nevertheless, this lifestyle and educational settings are due to the social production in order to have acceptable social and political conditions (Block, 2012).

Mariana supports this when she explains:

> "The materials and books are in good conditions. They are free and some classes are free too. Also, you can see everywhere the language, like in the bus station. Actually, the teachers are really good too because they are always available and they are always waiting for people from other countries to go and learn English."

On the other hand, Daniel another participant, maintains that Mexico does not provide resources, even for the formal students with formal instruction, that have the same good quality as the USA when he mentions that:

> "USA provides materials like books and free classes for adults that are available and easy to access for any person, but for me it is difficult to access to them due to the lack of time. Actually, taking English classes in Mexico and USA was different, because in Mexico teachers use all the time Spanish and not English, they do not make use of a more natural language that people here speak and that lows the quality of the materials and classes, but in the USA, the teachers speak English all the time because there are people from different parts of the world."

Additionally, one of the motivations to learn the target language of Daniel makes reference to the social class and the access that people of upper-level class have. He says the following:

> "What motivated me to learn English is where I live, I get to meet people from different parts of the world at many levels. I work in the accounting area and I have to be working with people who have and belong to a high level of education, this is how it is in the USA, and they really have a good level of English, so I want to be at their level too and learn from them."

As Block (2017) mentions it is also important the access that the students have to learn the target language. This access also includes the opportunities that the second language students have to practice the four skills (read, write, listen, and speak) in the target language. On the other hand, some of the social classes have more opportunities to pay for exclusive teaching while other do not have the resources to support this (Block, 2017).

6.1.2 *Ethnic identity*

According to Cheryan and Tsai (2007) the ethnic identity is the level in which people identify with their ancestral origin country. Nevertheless, it can be understood beyond this and can be considered as the closeness one person feels to their cultural heritages (Cheryan & Tsai, 2007). Including those cultural heritages that are not based on one's country were the person is originally (Cheryan & Tsai, 2007). In addition, the ethnic identity can also be defined as the level of which a person feels being part of a group (Cheryan & Tsai, 2007).

Mariana states the following:

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"I am really proud of being Mexican and I will never forget my Mexican culture, all the time it is in my heart because I always remember the important dates. That is something that I would never change. It is an important part of me which I am very proud of and that makes me feel very secure about adopting another culture without betraying mine. That is what allows me to feel happy about being part of both cultures."

Daniel makes reference of the closeness he has with his heritage culture. Nevertheless, he feels that familiarity with his C2 too by adopting new manners of lifestyle based on the American culture. He maintains the following:

"I love my culture. Actually, I keep in contact with my Mexican culture and Spanish because most of the time I talk to my Latino friends who speak this language all the time. Also, in my house I have my catrinas, alebrijes and Aztec calendars, but I would never consider going back to Mexico. I have really adapted to the American culture because I am already acquiring and adapting to the way they live, like be always on time."

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, identifying with a group or community is an important condition for SLA (Schumann, 1978, as cited in Zaker, 2016). This leads to another important concept, and it is the acculturation model. This model refers to the level to which a person has already adapted to a particular group (Cheryan & Tsai, 2007). In addition, it has its attention on actual practices and behaviors (Cheryan & Tsai, 2007).

In Mariana's answer it can be observed a clear example of this model and how it is applied. Mariana states the following:

"Recently I am working at the kitchen area of a supermarket, and there I keep contact with my culture because usually Latinos are the ones that do this work. For me the first 10 years it was really hard to adapt to the American culture, but with the time it got easier because my daughter was born and raised here. The fact that she was constantly celebrating their customs made me adopt them. Now I feel part of it and I celebrate both cultures, before I used to say that thanksgiving was not for us, but now I really like to celebrate it and other American holidays too."

On the other hand, Hugo, maintains the following:

"It never crossed my mind going back to Mexico, but I adapted very well to the American culture and the country. If I have to put it into a number, I would say that I have adapted in an 85 to 90% I really like this country because I enjoy exploring other cultures. Of course, I still like my Mexican culture and I am constantly in contact with it by talking to my family."

6.2 *Extent to which the external factors affect the motivation in immigrant students who are in a determined sociocultural context when learning English as L2*

The main goal of the participants to start learning English was to be able to have the "American dream" which is a concept that animates people to achieve success in the United States of America (Hochschild, 1995) and this consists in having a proper lifestyle. This is the principal reason that motivated the learners to move to this country and to begin with the learning process of the target language since they needed it in order to communicate and obtain a job that pays better and allowed them to live there.

Nevertheless, this motivation was decreasing or increasing for different reasons that they could not control. As formerly discussed, the two principal factors that influenced in the motivation of the participants were the social class and the ethnic identity. These affected in how

motivated the learners were and their decision to continue or to stop learning the target language. Other factors influenced too, such as the family support, job, friends, among others. However, these do not impact in a direct manner.

6.2.1 *Social class*

All of the participants were highly motivated at the beginning of their learning process. This can be noticed because they decided to assist to adult schools and have formal instruction lessons; nevertheless, they stopped assisting and they started to acquire the target language in a naturalistic setting where they were surrounded by an environment where the target language is the principal linguistic mediator to maintain communication (Block, 2007). After the participants paused having formal instruction, they made use of strategies such as reading books and dictionaries, listening to the conversations of the native speakers, playing games and using flashcards, repeating and drilling new vocabulary.

This leads to unexpected results that were also found in this study. As discussed by Al-Kendi and Khattab (2021) in SLA environments the age of learning (AoL) is normally considered since it is believed that there is a critical period hypothesis (CPH) (Al-Kendi & Khattab, 2021) when a person is acquiring a language. These participants do not belong to the average age that is considered for this hypothesis because they are adults; however, they were acquiring English in a naturalistic setting. This happened for the following reasons.

First, all of the participants provided similar answers to the fact that their motivation was mainly affected for the reason of not having enough time to go to school because of their full-time job. They lost interest in going to the school and to learn by themselves too even if they had free access to lessons and materials, such as grammatical books, among others. Mainly, this motivation and interest was lost because they do not belong to an upper or upper-middle level (Ellis, 1994) and they dedicated most of their day to work in order to survive in a country that demands an adequate and appropriate economy lifestyle.

However, one of the participants mentions that the high educational level that citizens have in the USA impacted in his perception of learning the language and this increased his motivation. Considering the information formerly presented, the social class is an external factor that predominantly decreases the motivation of learners to the extent of conducting the students to have a lack of interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985, as cited in Yan, 2009) in learning a language due to factors that they cannot control. Additionally, this do not provide enough opportunities to have a more conscious knowledge of the target language.

6.2.2 *Ethnic identity*

The present sociocultural context of these learners differs from the context they used to live in when they were younger. As formerly mentioned, they were born and raised in Mexico for a long period of time. Mexican traditions and daily lifestyle were an important part in their life in order to construct their individual identity; however, this identity is not apart from the rest of the society (Norton, 2012).

As stated in the previous section, the majority of these students were unmotivated to continue learning English with a formal instruction due to the social class factor. Nevertheless, this motivation ascended as a consequence of the ethnic identity external factor for the following reasons.

First, the participants were interested in continue learning the target language in order to know and to adapt to the C2. They celebrate their C1 and there is a Heritage Language

Maintenance (HLM) where they intend to have a connection with the language instead of proficiency (Fishman, 1991, as cited in Kung, 2013) in the different environments they communicate since some of the learners want to be understood with the English level they have, given that they considered themselves as bilinguals; nevertheless, they are adopting new traditions and how to view the world through another different culture.

Second, these learners are constantly having a learning process where they are practicing the target language in a system that consists in error and practice where they are incrementing a desire for learning (Norton, 2012). These learners are constructing their identity and negotiating every time they have contact with their L2 in an oral or written form (Norton, 2012) with anglophones.

7. Conclusions

The results of this study conclude that the social class factor presented a descent in the learners' motivation and this did not allow them to continue learning English. This led to learn by using a naturalistic approach through having contact with the C2, job experience and the use of the linguistic landscapes of their current sociocultural context.

On the other hand, the ethnic identity increased the level of motivation to the extent of encouraging them to learn English while they were connecting with the American culture in a sociocultural environment where they have the opportunity to maintain and celebrate their C1 and L1 while getting input in the target language.

In conclusion, the motivation of SLA learners may be influenced by different factors that they cannot control. Therefore, it is important that teachers consider that this group of learners exist in the SLA field and the importance of providing tools to them in order to encourage the students to be autonomous in their learning process if they cannot assist to formal instructional settings. In addition, this study intends to encourage teachers to develop a more inclusive educational environment where the learners have different needs and they come from distinct realities and sociocultural circumstances.

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