

영어교육, 60권 4호 2005년 겨울

Reconceptualizing L2 Motivation Theory: Vygotskian Activity Theory Approach*

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Kim, Tae-Young. (2005). Reconceptualizing L2 motivation theory: Vygotskian activity theory approach. *English Teaching* 60(4), 299-322.

This position paper explores the possibility of integrating Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT) into second language (L2) motivation research. Previous literature in this area has presented three shortcomings: conceptual inconsistencies, paradigmatic conflicts, and methodological limitations. AT is presented as an alternative framework to remedy the current situation in L2 motivation theories whereby reductionistic paradigms are still preferred. It is argued that this theoretical framework allows for contextual specificities and the dynamically evolving nature of L2 motivation to be sufficiently investigated. Exemplary research from AT perspectives is presented in order to reconceptualize L2 motivation as a socially mediated artefact (Sivan, 1986; Ushioda, 2003) rather than merely an individual psychological phenomenon.

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this position paper is to critically analyze previous second language (L2) motivation research and identify three main limitations of the lines of thought therein: conceptual inconsistencies, paradigmatic limitations, and methodological pitfalls. Further, Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT) framework will be presented as a tool that provides a viable alternative to analyze L2 motivation. The relevance of using AT to L2 motivation will be expounded. Finally, L2 motivation research from AT perspectives will be presented. It is proposed that by following the theoretical advances in L2 motivation research, the importance of L2 motivation in Second Language Education (SLE) will be demonstrated.

* I would like to thank Louis Chen, Sarah Cohen, Mila Glavinic, Dr. Penny Kinnear, Prof. Sharon Lapkin, Kim MacDonald, Amir Soheili-Mehr, Wataru Suzuki, and Prof. Merrill Swain at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) for providing constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. I also appreciate three reviewers' valuable comments on this draft. This is an expanded version of the paper presented at the 2004 Second Language Research Forum at the Pennsylvania State University in October 2004.

As Skehan (1989) mentions, previous SLE research has largely focused on “establishing how learners are *similar*, and what processes of learning are *universal*” (p. 1, emphasis original). Indeed, in order to establish an L2 theory at a macro level, “statistically significant” results have been considered useful data, whereas outlying data has been relegated to an insignificant status (e.g., Porte, 2002). By overlooking these outliers, researchers have long ignored the fact that there are drastic differences among L2 learners in terms of their language proficiency even with the same teaching methodology and in the same context. In addition, language education theory has made a rapid move from teacher-centered to learner-centered with advances in the Humanistic Approach (e.g., Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1969). Following this trend, L2 learners’ individual differences were to be attended to carefully, not minimized.

Recently, L2 motivation research has been vigorously conducted in the SLE field on the assumption that L2 motivation can be enhanced by proper instruction (Dörnyei, 2001a). Among individual factors, while there is little possibility of changing language aptitude and verbal intelligence, L2 motivation has been assumed to be generated and maintained by L2 learners (Dörnyei, 2001c, 2005; Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). Moreover, research findings from educational psychology show that learner motivation is directly influenced by school teachers (Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham, 1995) and environmental factors (Meece, 1997).

However, in retrospect, the above-mentioned dynamics in L2 motivation have not been sufficiently investigated. This could be attributed to the domination of educational psychology. The paradigm in previous literature is based upon a positivistic assumption¹, which says “in order to conduct coherent investigations, it is necessary to simplify and select from the infinite variety of the real world” (van Lier, 2000, p. 245). In accordance, a large set of quantitative data has typically been collected from participants. Nonetheless, L2 learners are not merely research subjects but living individuals with a past history and culture. Research on L2 motivation needs to take the diverse experiences of L2 learners into account.

Activity Theory (AT) provides an alternative paradigm to the current reductionistic conceptualizations of L2 motivation. AT addresses the dynamic and mediational nature of L2 motivation through a more integrated and comprehensive framework. It also provides ways of clarifying operational definitions of L2 motivation and escaping the current circularity in the definitions which are based upon a positivistic Cartesian paradigm.

As Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) and Block (2003) mention, SLE is often presented

¹ According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 24), “positivism asserts that objective accounts of the world can be given.” Similarly, Jordan (2004) states that “positivism refers to a particular form of empiricism, and the positivists were always ... primarily concerned with the issue of reliable knowledge” (p. 27).

as a relatively recent academic discipline, and the studies on L2 motivation have been strongly influenced by other disciplines, especially educational psychology. In this regard, in the next section, I will outline Gardner's (1985) psychological model in L2 motivation and discuss recent developments since the 1990s.

II. PREVIOUS L2 MOTIVATION RESEARCH

1. Psychological Perspectives in L2 Motivation

For three decades (i.e., from 1959 to 1988²), Gardner and his colleagues' (Gardner, 1985, 1988; Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972; Gardner & Smyth, 1975) research gained gradual academic prominence in L2 motivation studies. Among the extensive bibliography by Gardner and his associates, his 1985 book, *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*, is often counted as the major work for his proposal termed *the socio-educational model* (Gardner, 1985, 1988). The model can be summarized as follows: 1) L2 learning motivation can be largely divided into integrative and instrumental motivation (later termed orientation); 2) a crucial factor of L2 learners' proficiency is not instrumental motivation but integrative motivation; and 3) the attitudes toward the target language community and L2 native speakers are incorporated into the umbrella concept of motivation. His model appeared to explain the complex relationships among many learner-internal factors (e.g., Skehan, 1989, 1992) wherein the major focus was placed on *integrativeness* and language learning outcomes.

However, as Oxford and Shearin (1994) criticized, Gardner et al.'s research had been overly emphasized for more than thirty years, and as a corollary, it had overshadowed other types of research on motivation (e.g., Sivan, 1986; Ushioda, 2003). In addition, the importance of culture-embedded and situation-sensitive motivation, which may be operative when a learner faces a new context (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003), was generally disregarded in the last century.

Furthermore, despite Gardner's (1985) nomenclature, "socio-educational model," L2 motivation is still conceptualized as a phenomenon occurring in an individual learner's mind. The main focus was an individual's L2 motivation or attitudes. Little attention was paid to social interaction with other L2 users, the learner's host family, language school, and local communities, nor to the influences of culture and norms of L2 communities. Other than a sketchy description of the loose interconnectedness between individual L2

² In this paper, the period was set from 1959, which year witnessed the publication of Gardner and Lambert's (1959) first major work, to 1988, the year Au (1988) criticized limitations of Gardner's previous research in the journal *Language Learning*.

learners and their respective social contexts, the dynamics of the L2 motivation process was not sufficiently illustrated in Gardner's model (Dörnyei, 2001c, 2003a, 2005).

2. A Recent Development in L2 Motivation Theories

After the early 1990s, there followed a series of studies which urged a new theoretical framework (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1990, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). They did not nest in the conventional dichotomy of integrative and instrumental motivations. Responding to increasing demands for modification of the socio-educational model, Tremblay and Gardner (1995) tried to incorporate recent advances in social psychology. They hypothesized two distinctive motivational constructs: observable *motivational behaviors* and unobservable *motivational antecedents*, and combined Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1992), and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1993).

Undoubtedly, it would have been a viable academic experiment to incorporate theoretical advances from neighboring schools of psychology into L2 motivation research. However, it is not clear why social contexts, which were given so much importance in the previous version of the socio-educational model in 1985, were not investigated further in the modified version in 1995. In the 1985 model, four broad conceptual areas (i.e., social milieu, individual differences, language acquisition contexts, and outcomes) were illustrated (Gardner, 1985), whereas the 1995 model did not consider these (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995)³. In this regard, the 1995 socio-educational model might be counted as a degeneration in the sense that the complexity of sociocultural factors, though not entirely absent, were not explained.

Among the many proposals in L2 motivation made since the 1990s, Dörnyei et al.'s (1994, 1996, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2003a) studies are of particular importance due to his effort to establish a comprehensive model for second language and foreign language motivation. For instance, Dörnyei (1996) proposed three levels of motivation: the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level. What he considered important was situation-specific motivation, which encompasses diverse learning contexts. His proposal was schematized as *the Motivation-Learning Outcome Chain* (Dörnyei, 1996), wherein L2 motivation affected L2 learners' learning behavioral patterns, and with the cognitive learning process, the learning behavior constituted language learning strategies.

The motivation-learning outcome chain was theoretically expanded in Dörnyei and Ottó

³ One of the reviewers commented that this was due to their change in research focus from a social to cognitive perspective. Although I agree with the reviewer, this cannot justify the neglected social aspects in Gardner and Tremblay's (1995) revised model. It seems not valid to choose either a social or cognitive perspective.

(1998) and Dörnyei's (2001b, 2001c, 2003a, 2005) more recent model – *the process model of L2 motivation*. Inspired by two German psychologists, Heinz Heckhausen and Julius Kuhl (e.g., Heckhausen, 1991; Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985; Kuhl, 1987), Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) hypothesized three distinct stages: *preactional*, *actional*, and *postactional* stages, each of which was also divided into two sequences: motivational influences and action sequence.

Vis-à-vis the previous models, the process model seems to make great advances since it attempts to capture longitudinal aspects of motivation and incorporates actual language learning strategies in an action sequence that L2 learners can readily adopt. However, in comparison with its theoretical clarity, the applicability for actual L2 classrooms does not seem straightforward. Specifically, the three preactional, actional, and postactional stages seem too general to be applied in L2 teaching and learning contexts. It is obvious that L2 learners would have multiple motivations. For instance, an L2 learner can formulate motivation in order to obtain external rewards and also to be assimilated into the L2 community. In this case, these two motivations might belong to distinctive motivational stages⁴. Considering L2 learning contexts, this becomes more problematic because learning an L2 “happens through and over time” (Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005, p. 26). Different types of L2 motivation can be generated, maintained, and terminated depending on learners' diverse L2 learning experiences over time.

Furthermore, the conceptual vagueness is not resolved even when trying to understand an individual L2 learner's motivational changes; the three stages posed cannot always be uni-directional, or from preactional to postactional, by any means. Failure to maintain L2 motivation in the execution stage might induce L2 learners' demotivation, which is defined as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of behavioral intention or an ongoing action” (Dörnyei, 2001c, p. 143). In this case, the motivation needs to be re-generated in the preactional stage. In sum, Dörnyei et al.'s (1998, 2001b, 2001c, 2003a, 2005) process model seems to explain the case of successfully executed L2 motivation. However, insufficient attention was given to unsuccessful L2 learning experiences and their subsequent demotivation in this model.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations in the process model, it is noteworthy that motivation is conceptualized as a sequential process and accordingly regarded as a dynamically evolving concept. However, to date, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Inbar, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Shohamy, 2001; Ushioda, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1999), longitudinal investigations are still academic rarities in the field of L2 motivation, if not SLE in general. As Ortega and

⁴ In his recent book, Dörnyei (2005, pp. 86-87) acknowledges similar shortcomings in his process model.

Iberri-Shea (2005, p. 42) reiterate, “ultimately, longitudinal findings can have a central place in advancing our SLA theories and research programs,” and L2 motivation research is no exception. As is well noted, the serious limitation in the cross-sectional research design is that we can hardly capture the dynamics of L2 motivation. In addition, the possibility exists that learners who initially show an extreme lack of motivation (i.e., amotivation⁵) might later become highly motivated students in language learning or vice versa.

Ushioda’s (2001) study, in this sense, is worth mentioning. Using open-ended and semi-structured interviews, she conducted a three-year longitudinal study in Dublin, Ireland. The participants were undergraduate students whose major was French language, and as their proficiency in French increased, their motivational constructs also showed a gradual change: from motivation deriving from experience (e.g., positive L2-learning experience, intrinsic-affective rewards, and positive L2-related experience) to motivation directed toward future goals (e.g., personal goals, short-term goals/incentives, and language-intrinsic goals). Ushioda’s (2001) study explores the possibility of using longitudinal interview data in the field of L2 motivation wherein cross-sectional quantitative methods are prevalent.

Another new trend in L2 motivation research will be the integration of macro sociological perspectives. Norton [Peirce]’s (1993, 1995, 2000) works are exemplary. Her research shows the influences of Bourdieu’s (1977, 1991) social-economics metaphor, *investment*. Investigating five female ESL immigrants in Toronto, Norton focuses on the invisible social barriers between the non-immigrant, native English speaking population and the recent immigrant, non-native English speaking population. Norton argues that English learning is a huge personal investment which, in her participants’ belief, is the key for social success and entry into mainstream host county. The term “investment” deserves academic attention because, by using the term, the domain in L2 motivation research can be expanded to include legitimate sociopolitical aspects in L2 learning⁶.

III. LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT L2 MOTIVATION STUDIES

1. Conceptual Inconsistencies

Historically, the first L2 motivation studies were highly influenced by general psychological theories (e.g., Maslow, 1954; Skinner, 1953); they were soon followed by

⁵ Dörnyei (2001c, p. 143) defines amotivation as “a lack of motivation caused by the realisation that ‘there is no point ...’ or ‘it’s beyond me...’”

⁶ The problems in Norton [Peirce]’s (1993, 1995, 2000) works will be pointed out in section V.

studies within the psychometric tradition represented by Gardner. Currently, the literature is experiencing a post-Gardnerian transitional period. Each theory has its own validity within the contexts it was developed. However, we can observe inconsistencies of ostensibly similar components in L2 motivation research.

Since the 1990s, increasing interdisciplinary academic exchanges between L2 researchers and educational psychologists along with other social scientists have led L2 researchers to propose alternative L2 motivation models. For example, in order to explain foreign language learning behavior and competencies, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994) added the construct of self-confidence and the appraisal of the classroom environment to their model. Likewise, Gardner modified his previous socio-educational model to include persistence, attention, goal specificity, and causal attribution in his motivational constructs (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

MacIntyre (2002) showcased differences in motivational concepts in studies by Dörnyei (1994), Crookes and Schmidt (1991), and Oxford and Shearin (1994): goal-setting was identified as one of motivational factors only in Crookes and Schmidt (1991); need for achievement was only in Oxford and Shearin (1994). Regarding these inconsistencies, MacIntyre (2002) cautiously predicted that “studying the variables [identified as motivational subcomponents] would keep the [L2 motivation] field busy for a very long time” (p. 55). We can provide our own “operational” definition of L2 motivation, but by doing so, we are facing the danger of differentiating, if not excluding, other definitions provided by other researchers.

Adding to the confusion, these slightly different motivational definitions and subcomponents have infiltrated L2 motivation theories without sincere consideration to their educational relevance. Although the renewed efforts since the 1990s of researchers to adequately conceive of a framework for motivation are worthwhile, without an inclusion of refined criteria based on educational implications, it would be nearly impossible for us to escape the influx of definitions and concepts in L2 motivation theories. The more we try to understand, if not memorize, the operational definitions of L2 motivation, the less possibility we have for understanding what L2 motivation really is. In other words, understanding L2 motivation should not be equated with adding up novel theories in related disciplines to existing L2 motivation theories. Instead, we need a paradigm shift in L2 motivation theory construction, which will be elaborated in the following subsection.

2. Paradigmatic Limitations

Another limitation of previous L2 motivation research is that the dynamics of L2 motivation cannot be adequately captured by using current L2 motivation paradigms. The

cross-sectional and quantitative orientations⁷ in the current paradigms pose inherent limitations from the inception of the theories of L2 motivation. A positivistic or Cartesian approach in current L2 motivation research is based upon a series of assumptions: 1) inquiry into the human mind is no different from inquiry into nature, and 2) linear causal relationships will be found in human societies.

The current inauspicious situation in L2 motivation research can also be attributed to Western epistemology⁸. Integrating many components into one L2 theory, so as to expand its realm, results in the exclusion of other factors not explicitly mentioned. However, since virtually all social, historical, and cultural factors collaborate to formulate the human mind, without considering related factors, cogent understandings of L2 motivation will be necessarily superficial. A new paradigm that focuses on interrelationships among factors rather than on isolated variables, could serve to remedy the current confusion in the area.

Defining a paradigm as essentially a collection of beliefs shared by scientists or a set of agreements about how problems are to be understood, Kuhn (1970) schematizes the development of the scientific revolution. First, he distinguishes three phases of science: the pre-scientific phase where many quasi- or potential scientific theories vie for hegemony; the scientific phase where one of the theories gains hegemony and becomes a dominant paradigm in that period; and the post-scientific phase where the governance of the previous paradigm is gradually threatened by newly rising theories. The three phases are successive in nature. That is, an old cycle finishes and a new cycle begins.

L2 motivation research has undergone drastic changes from Gardner et al. (1959, 1972, 1985, 1988) to many alternatives in the last decade in the 20th century. Using a Kuhnian analogy, the period before Gardner's socio-educational model can be largely equated with the pre-scientific period since many behavioristic theories vied for paradigmatic status at that time. The Kuhnian scientific phase in L2 motivation research culminated when Gardner proposed *the socio-educational model* in 1985. Nonetheless, before long, many L2 practitioners increasingly argued for a new model, and Tremblay and Gardner (1995) responded to these only with modifications including psychological concepts such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993, 1997) and goal-setting (Locke & Latham, 1990).

However, making successive modifications to the previous socio-educational model cannot form the basis for an alternative paradigm in conceptualizing L2 motivation (MacIntyre, 2002). Even if we have the ability to understand and incorporate relatively new concepts taken from other disciplines into our current L2 motivation model, it will

⁷ Gardner et al.'s (2004) recent work investigated longitudinal changes of L2 motivation using questionnaires. However, merely having students complete Likert-type questionnaires within 20 minutes would not yield in-depth data, which does not alter L2 learners' specificity. Therefore, this study's orientation still seems psychometric and positivistic.

⁸ According to Kvale (1996, p. 14), epistemology means "theories of knowledge."

eventually become outdated as time elapses, and dissatisfaction among L2 motivation researchers will increase. In order to not let it become obsolete, anyone who proposed the previous model might modify it by adding new concepts as Tremblay and Gardner (1995) did in their updated socio-educational model. However, this process is a vicious circle and will perpetuate in L2 motivation research if we rely on the current positivistic paradigms in L2 motivation theories. Whatever potential concepts are included in the current L2 motivation paradigm would have inherent limitations from the start.

3. Methodological Pitfalls

Most of the previous L2 motivation literature tended to use large-scale numeric data based on questionnaire surveys collected from participants (Dörnyei, 2003b). The data were processed with computer statistics packages, and L2 motivational researchers relied upon correlation, factor analysis, regression analysis, path analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling to investigate the statistical significance of the data collected. It was hypothesized that these quantitative methods could provide clues to understanding human motivation. The underlying assumption of these statistical treatments is that phenomena in the human world can be divided into small, manageable parts; through the sum of the manageable bits of objective information, we might come to understand the ultimate truth of the phenomena. Thus viewed, the assumption does not differ much from the basis of the 'hard sciences' such as physics and chemistry (Gould, 1996; Lantolf, 1996).

In retrospect, since prior research on L2 motivation owed much to psychology, the vogue for quantitative methodology might be an afterthought of Skinnerian behaviorism. Behaviorists in the 1940s and 1950s argued against introspective explanations in German Gestalt psychology (Hogg & Cooper, 2003). The positivistic view has much in common with Cartesian dualism or reductionism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; van Lier, 2000). It seems that L2 motivation research has developed in part by further refining manageable subcomponents or by chunking pre-analyzed parts into a bigger system in a rather mechanical manner. In many cases, whenever necessary, a novel component from other related disciplines was readily incorporated into the existing set of components making up L2 motivation theory.

Although it is certainly legitimate to delve into the interconnection among cognitive and affective factors in L2 motivation using quantitative research methodology, as Dörnyei (2001c) and Ushioda (1994, 1997) reiterate, an in-depth investigation in L2 motivation cannot be achieved solely through a quantitative orientation. Rich interpretive data that allows for *thick descriptions* (Geertz, 1988) firmly contextualized in a learner's current situation is therefore required.

IV. VYGOTSKIAN ACTIVITY THEORY

In the above section, the limitations of prior L2 motivation studies were illustrated. In this section, I propose an alternative theoretical framework and elaborate its difference from the current Cartesian dualistic frameworks.

Among many theories currently being advanced in the field of SLE such as schema theory, frame theory, and script theory (Foley & Thompson, 2003), Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT) seems to be the most viable for the study of L2 motivation. While the former adopt microscopic perspectives that do not give equal attention to external sociocultural factors proximal to individuals, AT takes both macro and micro perspectives in order to understand human world as an open-system.⁹ In other words, “the individual and the cultural should be conceived of as mutually formative elements of a single, interacting system” (Daniels, 2001, p. 84).

The Russian psychologist and semiotician, Vygotsky (1978, 1979a, 1979b) is generally considered to have initiated AT, but due to his premature death, theoretical refinement was conducted by his former students and collaborators. Leont’ev (1979), one of originators of AT, differentiates three levels of analysis: 1) that of activity and motive, 2) that of action and goal, and 3) that of operation and conditions (Leont’ev, 1979; Wertsch, 1985b). In these hierarchical levels, activity is the broadest concept whereas operation is the narrowest. Accordingly, even though the activity is the same, the actions and operations whereby the activity is actualized take on tremendously diverse forms.

Wertsch (1979) summarizes the system of activity as follows. First, the three different units of analysis (i.e., activity¹⁰, action, operation) are based on functional consideration, and these functional classifications “result in the fact that one of the actions involved in an activity in one situation may be considered to be an entire activity in another situation” (p. 19). Second, it involves the concept of goal at the action level. Due to this aspect, only goal-directed intentional physical or psychological human behaviors are regarded as activity. Third, symbolic or material mediational tools (e.g., verbal and sign language, music, and numbers) mediate activity. Fourth, AT traces back the history of development and explains the activity in connection with macro- and micro-genetic analyses. Finally, it

⁹ Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model seems to take the social aspects into account. However, the psychometric tradition has resulted in sacrificing individual participants’ specificity and in establishing “generalizable” models by relying on sophisticated statistical measures. The paradox is the ingeneralizability of such generalized models. The generalizability of such models is still confined within specific time and locations. Then the focus of future L2 motivation research, if not SLE in general, seems to be “particularization” not “generalization” (e.g., van Lier, 2005). In this regard, AT provides significant insights into particularized research sensitive to L2 learners.

¹⁰ Block (2003, p. 101) asserts that this term in the three levels is a misnomer, “as it actually refers to the general motive or deriving force behind actions.” Similarly, Tae-Young Kim (2004) mentions the problem in translating Russian word, *deyatel’nost* into English, *activity*.

argues that human activity is successfully executed through social interaction.

Overall, the Activity Theory approach is different from other Western theories in the sense that it attempts to transcend the arbitrary distinctions of Cartesian dualism and understand goal-directed human activity with reference to its cultural, historical, and social contexts. AT framework adopts a genetic explanation, which assumes “psychological phenomena can be understood only by examining *the genesis of complete living units of functioning*” (Wertsch, 1985a, p. 5, emphasis original). Furthermore, its functional emphasis and distinction among the levels of activity, action, and operation provide us with a relativistic view on epistemology.

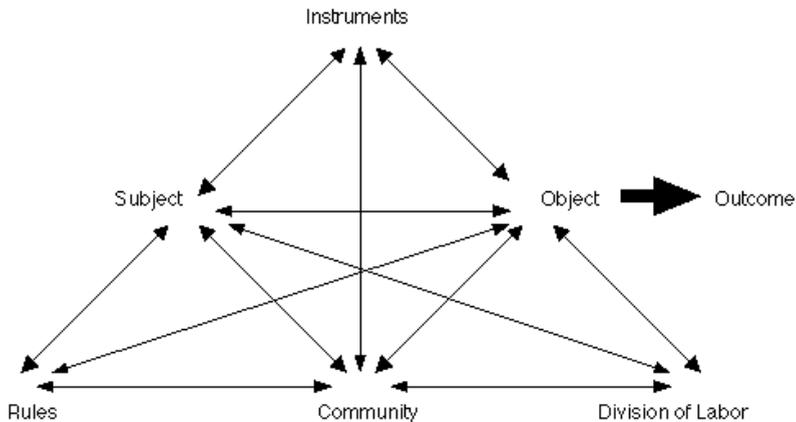
Mainly due to the collapse of the former Soviet Union, in the 1990s, academe on AT has witnessed drastic changes. Consequently, many original works by Vygotsky, Leont’ev, and Luria were uncovered, translated and analyzed with renewed academic vigor. Thenceforth, the work of a group of Finnish AT scholars (Engeström, 1987, 1991, 1999; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Miettinen, 2005) has gradually drawn academic attention. Even though the fundamental principles in AT were laid out by Vygotsky (1978; 1979a; 1979b) and Leont’ev (1979), Engeström and Miettinen (1999) clarify what was not explicitly mentioned in their predecessor’s works. For instance, acknowledging dynamic interactions of human activity, they hold that “a single network, though interconnected with a number of other networks, typically still in no way represents any general or lawful development in society” (*ibid.*, p. 8), and “individuals act in collective practices, communities, and institutions. Such collective practices are not reducible to sums of individual action” (p. 11).

As Engeström (1999) reiterates, “to break down the Cartesian wall that isolates the individual mind from culture and society” (p. 29), we need to delve more into the concept of mediation. Mediation is given utmost importance in filling the gap between “me” (agent) and “object” of the activity, and accordingly results in “outcome(s).” This triadic representation, nevertheless, does not explain the agent’s historical and societal characteristics to a full extent. For this, Engeström (1999) proposes a complex model of an activity system, or the activity triangle model (see Figure 1). This model includes the essential elements of human activity: subject, object, instruments or mediating artefacts, rules, community, and division of labor.

Not until considered together with other elements in Engeström’s activity triangle does each element have a specific meaning. This is what Cole (1996) terms a *relational view*, which explains that one factor classified as one element in one activity system can simultaneously belong to different elements in other activity theoretic analyses. In L2 classroom contexts, for instance, a native L2 teacher can use the L2 for the medium of instruction, in which case, the L2 can be classified as an instrument or artefact. At the same time, from the L2 learners’ viewpoint, the L2 can be perceived as the object or the desired

learning goal to be mastered within a limited time span. In sum, factors belonging to one element in one situated activity system might belong to other elements in other activity systems. The constitution of each element is constantly evolving and redefined in reference to other elements through longitudinal time lines.

FIGURE 1
A complex model of an activity system (Engeström, 1999)



However, this highly structured model by Engeström still presents shortcomings. This model does not fully account for interactions between multiple agents and their perspectives. Since a group of participants is not simply an aggregate of individuals, the qualitatively different group dynamics call for further investigation (e.g., Wells, 1999, 2000, 2002).

In response to this criticism, Daniels (2001) distinguishes three generations of AT. That is, Leont'ev's (1979) original works, focusing on three conceptual strata (i.e., activity, action, and operation), were classified as the first generation whereas Engeström's single triangular model was categorized as the second generation. The third generation of AT considers two or more agents' multivoicedness or dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981), and given this, it is a theoretical expansion of above-mentioned single triangular model. Moreover, the artefact-mediated activity is not only created by the interaction between the individual (i.e., subject in the AT model) and other related elements such as community, rules, and division of labor but it is also created by the intersubjective spaces between two or more agents. Likewise, in the third generation model, two or more objects or proximal goals are constantly being negotiated and as a result can be redefined as another object.

In general, even though the third generation model considers the multivoicedness of multiple participants of an activity system, group dynamics needs to be elaborated within

this frame. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) mention, L2 teachers take the visible and invisible classroom phenomena into their considerations. Different from private tutoring, in the L2 classroom, teachers usually have to deal with 20 or more students with different degrees of L2 motivation. Language teachers should not only pay attention to each L2 student but also understand the students as a power group. As Shamim (1996) describes, students sometimes resist methodologies that do not match with their expectations.

V. THE RELEVANCE OF USING ACTIVITY THEORY IN L2 MOTIVATION RESEARCH

As discussed above, previous research on L2 motivation adopted psychological perspectives whereby motivation per se was conceived as an individual phenomenon, and conventional research methods were quantitative statistics such as factor analysis, regression analysis, path analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (e.g., Gardner, 1985). However, from the mid 1980s, some educators (e.g., Sivan, 1986; Rueda & Moll, 1994; Ushioda, 2003) started to conceptualize motivation as a sociocultural phenomenon.

The numerous previous L2 motivation studies, whose theoretical framework can generally be classified into Cartesian reductionism, have contributed to the expansion of the concept of motivation. Nonetheless, delving into the psychological investigation of L2 motivation has produced a plethora of operational definitions and distinctive approaches¹¹. As a result, Walker and Symons (1997) aptly mentioned that at one time, the American Psychological Association (APA) had considered removing the term, motivation, from search wordlists in the main psychological database, *Psychological Abstracts*. From a plenitude of definitions, however, one general assumption seems to be made: *Motivation is an internal mental phenomenon*. For example, Reeve (1996) defines motivation as an “internal process that gives behavior its energy and direction,” a definition typically found in educational psychology and general psychology.

Attempts to define L2 motivation have resulted in similar characterizations. Brown (1994) described L2 motivation as an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action (p. 152). Similarly, Gardner (1985) defined it as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p. 10). The individualistic propensity for L2 motivation is also found in dictionaries in applied linguistics: it is defined as “a psychological trait which leads people to achieve some goal” (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, pp. 219-220) or “the

¹¹ Regarding this, Dörnyei (2001a, pp. 10-11) provides a useful summary table. Also Williams and Burden's (1997) book chapter (Chap. 6, pp. 111-142) surveys the arena from language teachers' perspectives.

factors that determine a person's desire to do something" (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 185).

All these definitions of L2 motivation seem precise and scientific at first glance. But a paradox quickly appears. We must define the terms within the definition to more adequately define L2 motivation. For instance, what do *goal* or *attitudes* mean in Gardner's (1985) definition? Trying to define the definition itself produces a severe theoretical dilemma, if not a vicious circularity. The more explanations or definitions that are introduced, the less confident we become in grasping the very essence of the concept, which may be so syntactic that it might become almost meaningless within such microscopic and parochial definitions.

Given this conundrum, the use of AT in L2 motivation research enables us to remedy the confusions in operational definitions and will eventually provide a robust theoretical paradigm conceptualizing L2 motivation as a socioculturally mediated artefact (Sivan, 1986). Indeed concrete constructs of L2 motivation begin to be created through the interplay between individual learners and their proximal social, cultural, and historical factors. AT provides a frame that enables research to capture these constructs.

However, the AT approach in L2 motivation should not be understood as a simple macro approach because it will mislead us into "upward reductionism" (Lantolf & Thorne, in press). Discussing the applicability of Vygotskian approach to SLE research, Lantolf and Thorne (in press) warn us of the danger of reductionisms widespread in SLE. They identify two different paths of reductionism: downward reductionism and upward reductionism. For example, in L2 motivation research, Gardner et al.'s (1959, 1972, 1985, 1988, 2004) approach can be exemplary of downward reductionism in the sense that they operationalized L2 motivation into manageable units of investigation. In contrast, the type of sociologically oriented research by Norton [Peirce] (1993, 1995, 2000) can be considered as upward reductionism because the L2 learners' motivation is attributed to the result of macro social structures such as unequal distribution of social, symbolic, or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). By using the AT framework (see Figure 1), we can pay equal attention to the individual and the related components such as community, division of labor, and rule. By focusing on the multidimensional, bi-directional, and mediational process emphasized in AT, we can gain the momentum to overcome the two different types of reductionism.

AT enables us to understand the comprehensive and dynamic aspects of L2 motivation. Furthermore, van Lier (2004, p. 211) mentions that "it is particularly useful for showing inherent contradictions and tensions between different influences in the setting." For instance, from the framework of the second generation AT model (Engeström, 1987, 1999), L2 learners can be viewed as subjects with their own agency; L2 teachers can be understood as mediational artefacts since through them, L2 learners expedite L2 learning,

in which case, L2 teachers act as instruments mediating L2 learners (subject) and the L2 (object). At the same time, teachers can be important collaborators in the division of labor since learners' L2 motivation will be influenced by the role distribution in the L2 classroom. This distribution is related to both teacher and learners beliefs about desirable roles of teachers and learners in a given context. In this sense, L2 teachers can be a positive catalyst for L2 learners' motivation. Mentioning this, however, does not imply a rigid directionality from teacher to learner. L2 teachers, as mature agents, also possess L2 teaching motivation, which can be facilitated or suffer as the result of L2 learners' classroom behavior. The motivational process in the L2 classroom appears to be bi-directional, and the use of AT framework seems to have the potential to capture these mutual relationships.

Other elements in the second generation AT model (Figure 1) also affect L2 learners' motivation. For example, teaching methodology and techniques influence L2 learners' verbal and behavioral performance in the L2 classroom, and in this sense, they act like rules in AT. As Lantolf and Genung (2002) illustrated, for example, when an L2 learner perceives the tension or contradiction between his or her L2 teacher's teaching methodology and what the L2 learner considers ideal for his or her L2 learning, the learner's initial L2 motivation can drastically decrease, and as a consequence, L2 learning goals are subject to adjustment. Community, another element in AT, also wields influences on L2 learners. Through a series of interactions, the community can be either a strong facilitator for learning an L2 or an inhibitor. A recent study by Tae-Young Kim (2005) reports on the cases of five Korean ESL students in Toronto. The students' motivation to learn English in ESL contexts dynamically changes depending on their participation in a variety of communities such as homestay and ESL schools. Both Lantolf and Genung's (2002) and Tae-Young Kim's (2005) studies can be synthesized within the AT framework which focuses on the tension and the dynamism inherent in L2 learners' language learning experiences.

However, except for a few studies including Lantolf and Genung (2002) and Tae-Young Kim (2005), the intricate interrelationships in L2 motivation have not been fully described nor analyzed in previous literature. To date, in most cases, individual L2 learners' idiosyncratic motivations were transformed into numeric or ordinal data and processed with quantitative statistics. Through these processes of mechanic quantification, L2 learners' specificity has not been highlighted enough. In order to balance the current research trends and to establish ecological validity (van Lier, 2004), we need to consider an alternative framework. The AT framework enables us to embrace the diversity and the symbiotic dynamics between L2 learners and their sociocultural contexts while still retaining the rigor of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1988) of each L2 learner's language learning experiences.

VI. MOTIVATION RESEARCH FROM VYGOTSKIAN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVES

After the mid 1980s, we can intermittently find motivation research whose orientation is drastically different from those mentioned above. I will review the research by Sivan (1986), Rueda and Moll (1994), Rueda and Dembo (1995), Ushioda (2003), and Tae-Young Kim (2005). These studies were selected since their research orientation might be broadly termed as sociocultural or social constructivistic, which is based on a different world view from that of the modern Cartesian, or dualistic reductionism.

Sivan's (1986) work is the first article directly associating motivation and sociocultural theory. She criticized previous studies on motivation on the basis that they were individual-oriented and viewed motivational outcome as the product of the individual (p. 210). Sivan (1986) underscored that "motivation, as a way people think, feel, and act, can be seen as a product of the culture" (p. 217). This point needs to be emphasized since the use of motivation in our daily lives presupposes a consensus on its nature and how it is displayed. For example, in a general sense, in North American culture, when L2 students do not raise their hands or are not actively involved in the class discussion, teachers tend to think of them as demotivated students, whereas in East Asian educational contexts, the same behavior is regarded as a sign of respect on the part of the students toward their teacher. In this regard, teachers, as members of society, already have a set of appropriate student behavior in their mind, and they interpret students' behavior as motivated or not based on their expectations or norms. In other words, "motivation can be considered as a cultural norm" (Sivan, 1986, p. 217).

In sum, Sivan (1986) argued for the reconceptualization of motivation from an individual cognitive concept to a socially-mediated and context-sensitive artefact. Given the fact that trends in motivation research have not changed much from psychometric orientations, Sivan's (1986) argument, made two decades ago, still has valuable theoretical implications for L2 motivation research.

However, it was not until the mid-1990s that empirical studies were conducted from sociocultural theoretic perspectives. Citing Latino students' academic progress in elementary school in the U.S., Rueda and Moll (1994) stressed that school work composed of diverse academic tasks can be regarded as activities, and the activities, which use appropriate mediation within the zone of proximal development, could provide the Latino students with a powerful tool for maintaining, if not enhancing, their motivation in the classroom. In another study, Rueda and Dembo (1995) analyzed the same classroom incident from two different viewpoints: cognitive and sociocultural perspectives. They held that Vygotskian perspectives reiterated cultural, historical, and societal factors that each individual is exposed to "without discarding the notion of the child as an active agent in his

or her own development” (p. 269).

In SLE, a similar proposal was made by Ushioda (2003). She characterizes L2 motivation not as an individual phenomenon but as the result of “interactions among persons, tasks, and the larger environmental contexts” (p. 92). Moreover, she argues for the expansion of the unit of analysis, which should go beyond individual L2 learners “to embrace the interactions between the individual and the social learning setting” (p. 92).

Tae-Young Kim’s (2005) study reflects Ushioda’s (2003) proposal for the inclusion of Vygotskian approach into L2 motivation research. He investigated five adult Korean ESL students’ L2 motivation in Toronto. Using longitudinal semi-structured interviews, he holds that participants’ extrinsic motivation, which is evident in the resonant expressions of concern about job opportunity, remains stable throughout their stay in the ESL context, whereas intrinsic motivation generated from their life experiences shows constant changes depending on the participants’ perceived sociocultural milieux.

VII. CONCLUSION

After the 1990s, even though a series of new L2 motivation research was proposed in order to remedy the shortcomings of Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model, the paradigm for understanding L2 motivation remained fundamentally the same: individualistic, cross-sectional, and psychometric perspectives. L2 motivation has been regarded as a stable characteristic, and the dynamic and evolving aspects of L2 motivation have been largely neglected.

However, L2 motivation viewed from Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT) creates remarkably different perspectives. The concept of motivation per se results from the interplay between individuals and their environments. Motivation is understood as a socially-generated and mediated artefact (Sivan, 1986). Thus, from Vygotskian perspectives, L2 motivation is considered not as a cause of learning the L2 but as “an orienting meaning that may become significant for the learner as a result of participating in properly organized instructional activity” (Negueruela, 2003, p. 102). Furthermore, L2 learners formulate different motivations depending on their previous history and social relationships. These complexities cannot be captured using previous models of L2 motivation, which are mainly concerned with creating general L2 theory. We need to investigate L2 motivation as it is seen through a Vygotskian sociocultural theoretic lens.

Philosophically, the differences between the old and alternative paradigms in theorizing L2 motivation seem attributable to the epistemology of Western sciences. That is, the Cartesian tradition has assumed the central role of “self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), focusing on distinguishing one factor from another. The phenomenological problem of

defining the relationship between self and others has been the most critical issue in Western philosophy. Vygotskian AT, which pays equal attention to the role of society as well as an isolated individual, should be introduced in L2 motivation research (Sivan, 1986; Ushioda, 2003) in order to remedy the “dualistic (i.e., self and others) determinism” (Gould, 1996) and the inconsistencies in L2 motivation research.

To date, there has been only a few research (e.g., Tae-Young Kim, 2005; Ushioda, 2003) which has embraced Vygotskian sociocultural theory in this area. In the future, vigorous attempts need to be exerted in investigating dynamically evolving longitudinal aspects of L2 motivation from broad sociocultural theoretic perspectives in order to overcome theoretical inconsistencies and to establish a grounded theory. AT in L2 motivation research is relevant for two reasons. First, we can understand the role of society, often represented as “community” in Engeström’s (1987, 1999) activity system model, in initiating, sustaining, or sometimes terminating L2 learning motivation. Second, the dynamically changing nature of L2 motivation and the tensions and contractions therein, which has been generally disregarded in previous literature, can be appropriately investigated from AT perspectives.

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Applicable levels: secondary education, tertiary education

Key words: ESL motivation, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, Activity Theory

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Received in August, 2005

Reviewed in September, 2005

Revised version received in November, 2005