Motivation and its implications in tertiary Italian studies

Antonio Pagliaro (La Trobe University)

Abstract

Taking as its departure point studies on motivation in language learning, the paper examines their implications for tertiary Italian teaching in Australia. In the context of current government policies, maintenance of tertiary enrolment numbers is essential for the survival of the discipline. Accordingly, strategies which favour motivation need to be identified. These include taking steps to understand and consequently maintain value attributions by students, establishing clear goals in the short and long term and promoting student autonomy, and encouraging both direct contacts with contemporary Italy and those offered by modern media technology. Vague communicative goals may demotivate students, especially those not of Italian background.

1 Introduction

The enhanced importance of English as a world language seems to have been accompanied by a decline in second-language learning in English-speaking countries (Johnstone 2000:159). Under recent federal government policies in Australia there has been great emphasis on economies of scale and high priority has been given to vocational learning (that is, for vocations which seem not to include language qualifications). As is well known, in the Australian university system there is a strict link between government funding and student numbers. Furthermore, the large numbers of Italian students in lower secondary and primary schools – in 1997 more than 82,000 in Victoria alone (DEETYA 1998:30) – have not translated into high numbers of Italian students in the final secondary years or at university. In some instances, tertiary Italian courses are under threat, which makes optimisation and maintenance of enrolment numbers at all levels a necessity.

It is in this context that I consider the matter of motivation and examine what suggestions can be derived from research in the field. Since motivation is not a static force, as will be seen below, it will not survive bad teaching, and the issue of demotivation has been identified as an important area for future research (Dörnyei 2000:50-51).

The essence of motivated activity, according to Paris and Turner (1994:222) is the ability to choose how much effort should be expended for a particular purpose. Deci (1996) has suggested that the issue is not “How can people motivate others?” but “How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?”. Ultimately, fostering in the learners an accurate perception of themselves and the realisation of their own responsibilities in learning will contribute to motivation (Dickinson 1995).
2 Background

Under the influence of behaviourism, early twentieth-century interpretations saw motivation as exclusively deriving from rewards and punishments; later it was linked to unconscious or biological needs. Since the initial, almost exclusive, concentration on forces external to the individual, studies have increasingly recognised the important role of individual difference and conscious decision, and of individuals’ behaviour in society and in the classroom. We have moved from a view of motivation as an almost static condition to its interpretation as multifaceted, dynamic and diachronic.

It is an important premise of second-language (L2) motivation experts that language-learning motivation is different from that in other fields. The reason adduced for this is that the language learner is investing her/his personality in a way that learners of other subjects do not. Williams and Burden, for example, say:

There is no question that learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects, mainly because of the social status of such a venture. Language, after all, belongs to a person’s whole social being; it is a part of one’s identity, and is used to convey this identity to other people. The learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner (1997:115).

One factor that can be considered to support their case is the well-recognised and studied phenomenon of L2 learners’ anxiety.

Needless to say, consensus on a definition of motivation in relation to L2 learning has not been reached. In the mid-1990s, Oxford and Shearin (1994:13) had occasion to claim that the absence of such consensus was the first among four conditions impeding understanding of students’ motivation for L2 learning. The Appendix gives some current definitions.

The non-static qualities of motivation are worth emphasising. Whatever the initial reason for a student’s enrolment in a language subject, the maintenance and enhancement of her/his motivation depend greatly on subsequent events. In institutional education settings, the experience during the learning process is more influential in motivational terms than the motivating factors associated with the initial choice to enrol (Dörnyei 2000:523). As Julkunen points out, “[t]eaching and learning can be experienced either as motivating or demotivating. This is particularly important because teaching is the component that can easiest be modified” (2001:29).

An evident consequence of the distinction between initial motivation and sustained motivation is that at no stage can we count on a student’s desire to continue studying. Once, the prevailing format of year-long units at university meant that, after four or five months, potentially dissatisfied students had invested too much – in time, effort and other resources – to consider withdrawing from a subject altogether. Indeed, after an entire year, there were similar reasons for every full-time student not to change direction. The now prevailing semesterisation of studies provides the opportunity for students to abandon a subject without losing credit points and, in most circumstances, without lengthening their degree.
3 Attitudes towards the target-language community

A most influential point in the development of L2 motivation study was marked by Gardner’s *Social psychology and second language learning* (1985). Such qualities as “integrativeness”, that is, “a genuine interest in learning the language in order to come closer to the language community”, and “attitudes towards the learning situation” contribute to what he calls “integrative motivation” (Gardner 2001:5). Later researchers supported the idea that an “integrative orientation” creates persistence in foreign language students (Clément, Smythe & Gardner 1978:124).

To some extent, the substantial Italian presence in Melbourne and Sydney has led to a largely positive image of Italians in the Australian media, as a linguistic and cultural resource. This may assist in maintaining motivation in the period subsequent to enrolment, although, as we have seen, it does not seem to have created a motivational force to study Italian even into the later years of secondary schooling. Encouraging students to familiarise themselves with Italian through the local media may serve to maintain motivation via the study of something which is close to home, continuous and related to their immediate world. However, one occasionally encounters a vigorous rejection of the local presence of Italian culture, identified as pedestrian and unglamorous compared with the ‘real’ Italy.

On the other hand, modern technology makes available a large number of authentic resources, especially through the Internet. Lecturers can utilise a wide range of web pages on topical issues, starting from Italian news outlets, as a means of informing and maintaining motivation. Students can be encouraged to follow personal interests via regional and town web-sites and correspondence with Italians, or simply by discovering how a personal interest or hobby is represented in Italy.

In the early 1990s, claims were made, amid some lively polemics with Gardner, that the parameters he had established needed to be extended, in order to include new theories of motivational research which had been developing in more recent years outside the L2 field (Dörnyei 1994:273-284; Oxford & Shearin 1994:12-28). Principal among the theories new to L2 learning were those regarding expectancy value, goal setting and student autonomy. Consensus can now be said to exist on the significance of at least the first two of these. In the following sections I will describe them briefly, as well as their possible application in university language subjects.

4 Values, outcomes and needs

According to expectancy-value theories, the two key factors that generate motivation are: “the individual’s *expectancy of success* in a given task and the *value* the individual attaches to success in that task” (Dörnyei 1998:120). Value can be attributed to the pleasant nature of the learning experience or to accurate perceptions of measurable gains in language-oriented skills. The higher the value students attribute to the process of language learning, the more likely they are to persist in their efforts (Williams & Burden 1997:125). The needs-value theory suggests that attainable outcomes are demanded for tasks because success in turn enhances motivation, by heightening the need for achievement (Oxford & Shearin 1994).
The first practical strategy to be taken before planning syllabuses, classes and tasks is, presumably, to gain an understanding of at least some of the most common elements to which value in its various senses is attributed by students. A useful step, rarely taken, would be to survey students in order to determine their strength of vocabulary and idiom, command of linguistic terminology and personal interests. This should not be seen as the academic equivalent of a political opinion poll, by which to lead students into intellectual stasis for a semester or an entire degree. Rather, it can make the choice of materials an informed one. It is a way for the instructor to anticipate student response and to plan techniques and strategies.

The ‘expectancy’ part of the theory should not be forgotten. To be motivated, an average student needs to have a prospect of success in return for effort:

L2 learners must believe that they have some control over the outcomes (failure or success) because of their performance … However many L2 students do not have an initial belief in their own self-efficacy. … L2 teachers can help such students develop a sense of self-efficacy by providing meaningful tasks at which students can succeed and over which students can have a feeling of control (Oxford & Shearin 1994:21).

In the planning phase, subject coordinators need to assess why a student would want to undertake a given activity and why, once they have started, they would desire to continue it, as well as what they will ultimately gain from engaging in it. In the case of reading texts, for example, surveying preferences from among a range of genres and topics can only enhance the chances of maintaining motivation. A teacher should also have an informed idea of the precise lexical and syntactic difficulties that a text may present to an L2 learner. Preliminary trials based on sample pages from likely texts, aimed at identifying what proportion of the words or meaning is understood, would provide the basis for an assessment of the effort required, and whether or not students can form a realistic expectancy of success.

Conversation classes need careful planning and prior consultation with learners to ensure that value needs are met and that tasks and subject matter are accessible and pertinent to students’ interests. As Julkunen observes: “[f]ree conversation is notoriously ineffective” (2001:36). Linguistic gains need to be made evident, even within a single session. This is the path to an attribution of value, and is essential if a successful series of classes and a continuous chain of motivation is to be created.

5 Goal theories

Similarly, ‘chains of motivation’ can be associated with the setting or negotiation of a series of targets for learners to achieve. Goal-setting theory was largely developed by Locke and Latham, with frequent reference to workplace settings. According to their study, goals need to be set in order to create purpose and trigger effective human action. They must be specific, hard but achievable, accepted, and accompanied by feedback (1990:29). Various scholars – including Oxford and Shearin (1994), Dörnyei (1994) and Williams and Burden (1997) – have applied goal theory to the language-learning context, where it seems to have been embraced with enthusiasm, and for good reason. It offers measurable parameters and the possibility of autonomy for the student. However, there are clearly some differences in its application to the university context with respect to a workplace. It is one matter to prescribe or set goals in common with a workforce constrained by the necessity to earn its living, and hence to stay and perform; it is
another matter to do so with tertiary language students who are not subject to these needs.

There is “unambiguous” evidence that specific and difficult goals lead to better performance than specific and easy ones (Locke & Kristof 1996, cited in Dörnyei 1998:120). Dörnyei noted that “[g]oal-setting theory is compatible with expectancy-value theories in that commitment is seen to be enhanced when people believe that achieving the goal is possible … and important …” (1998:120). Given that mastery of the language is a distant objective, Dörnyei also suggests that the setting of short-term sub-goals, such as passing tests or fulfilling learning contracts, can have a powerful motivating effect, by providing incentive and evidence of progress (1998:120-121).

So, learners need to be able to aim for both short-term and long-term goals in L2 study. However, the setting of demanding but achievable goals is not a simple matter in the large university classes that economic stringencies have imposed on the Australian tertiary sector. What is a demanding task for some will be impossible for others. Academics must seek a difficult equilibrium between, on one hand, providing opportunity for the talented to achieve more, in order to avoid demotivating them; and, on the other, maintaining accessibility for willing lower achievers and sustaining their morale. The solution seems to lie in a degree of negotiability of goals: allowing choice among a number of tasks at graded levels, for example, with results dependent on the levels mastered.

The distinction between closed tasks (that is, those with a single correct answer) and open tasks (where each student may produce a response according to his/her specific competence) has implications for motivation:

Open tasks are low in risk because several right answers are available. However, it is difficult for the student to establish criteria of success/failure in an open task. … Moreover highly anxious students should benefit from structured (closed) tasks demanding little processing capacity (Julkunen 2001:36).

Creating a sequential structure of learning tasks within syllabuses is considered an important means of enhancing motivation (Julkunen 2001:36), as is the breaking down of longer tasks into sections. Students themselves can be aware of their progress and indeed choose between agreed parameters of learning.

While goals are clearly an essential factor in motivation, van Lier (1996:121) warns against an exclusive focus on them. Concentration only on future goals – especially the mastery of the language in the long-term – can distract a teacher’s attention from the fact that both intrinsic enjoyment and innate curiosity are vital sources of motivation.

6 Catering for students of differing backgrounds

Satisfying values and needs and establishing goals become particularly problematic when students of significantly different backgrounds are placed together within a single class. One of the common situations created by funding restrictions is the merging of beginner and advanced streams of students, with differing skills and abilities, when they reach later year levels. At La Trobe University, for example, students who have completed year 12 Italian at secondary school are largely taught together with those who have taken only one year of Italian at university after entering as absolute beginners.7
Typically, the advanced-stream students are of Italian background and are familiar with spoken Italian from their family environment. Their formal skills and active vocabulary are limited, but their oral-aural communication skills and passive vocabulary are more extensive than those of the recent beginners. The latter are weak in oral-aural skills and are not fluent, but in many cases are more accurate in formal terms and have better knowledge of noun and verb forms.

In these mixed-stream classes, the beginners frequently develop anxiety over oral performance, and cases of demotivation and withdrawal from such subjects are not uncommon. This situation needs to be faced by establishing clear goals. We must take into account the legitimate student expectation of success in assessment, provided that effort and effective study strategies have been deployed. Different assessment criteria for at least part of the subjects taught in parallel must be put into place. By underlining these to students and by taking even such simple measures as requiring them to indicate the stream to which they belong on tasks handed in for correction, we can provide an effective remedy against demotivation. Above all, progress needs to be measured by comparison of abilities at the commencement and conclusion of the subject. If possible, oral classes and/or activities should be conducted in separate groups, at least during early stages of merging.

In the broader context, part of the difficulty faced by university Italian courses is due to the notable discrepancies in learning processes and knowledge among the students coming to us after completing year 12 Italian at school. Unfortunately, present secondary school assessment in Victoria, in its pursuit of desirable communicative outcomes, demonstrates a complete absence of clear and measurable goals. Assessment is prevalently based on open communicative tasks, to which only the crudest and most subjective measuring tools can be applied. The final examination contains three randomly selected comprehension passages.

In this situation, many students with an Italian-speaking background tend towards linguistic stasis. They can frequently ‘communicate’ after a fashion, they could have performed well on the comprehension questions both before and after their study and they receive no indications of what is satisfactory. They are little informed as to the nature of Italian society and often labour under the misapprehension that an Italian which is substantially ungrammatical is socially acceptable in Italy. Secondary Italian programmes contain little incentive for these students to improve their linguistic and cultural attainments.

It is also a situation that demoralises conscientious students of non-Italian background. There is no way they can prepare, demonstrate their progress or see a return commensurate with their input. Interestingly, some basic elements of morphology are specified in the subject description: precisely the sort of material which a conscientious student with no family background in the language can learn. As these are not assessed, however, in many schools they are not treated as sub-goals endowed with value, either by teachers or students.

The risks entailed are discouragement of ‘outsiders’, ghettoisation of the subject at secondary level and, more significantly, the failure for students from either category – Italian background or otherwise – to achieve any meaningful progress. The legacy of this situation is felt strongly in the tertiary context.
7 Conclusion

The common misconception of motivation as a static phenomenon, something a learner either has or does not have, needs to be dispelled. Motivation cannot be considered as a force that will survive negative circumstances: the potential to enhance or diminish it is present at all moments during an undergraduate subject. Accordingly, in the planning phase, as far as is feasible, we must make an attempt to understand common student values. This certainly does not mean simply accepting the intellectual status quo, but implies exploring the manner in which new values, ideas and approaches would be best introduced.

Beyond this, progress, or the opportunity for progress, needs to be linked to each phase of the programme, and both long-term and short-term goals must be clear. The mixing of students from an Italian background with non-Italians who have had limited exposure to the spoken language imposes particular requirements in terms of the syllabus. Neglecting to establish and measure goals to be attained, or to tie assessment to what has been taught, will inevitably lead to the failure to recognise linguistic achievement, with negative consequences – to say the least – both for learning and for motivation.

Bibliography


Appendix

Three definitions of motivation

1. On the basis of his research, Gardner defined motivation as a:
   combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus
   favourable attitudes towards learning the language (1985:10).
   Aspects of this definition are discussed by Oxford and Shearin (1994:13-14).

2. Williams and Burden attempted to consider the difference in motivation from
   individual to individual and, at the same time, “the whole culture and context and
   the social situation, as well as significant other people and the individual’s
   interactions with these people”. Their “social constructivist approach” defines
   motivation as:
   • a state of cognitive and emotional arousal
   • which leads to a conscious decision to act
   • and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort
   • in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals) (1997:120).

3. In an attempt to synthesise static and dynamic conceptions of motivation, Dörnyei
   defined motivation as:
   A process whereby a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates an action, and
   persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate
   action, or until the planned outcome has been reached (1998:118).
1 See, for example, Professor Osborne, La Trobe University’s Vice-Chancellor, quoted in the *La Trobe University Bulletin*, August 2002, page 3: “I think that under current educational policies in Australia, there is a very serious danger that languages – even quite important languages such as Italian – are going to be put at risk because of the pressure on universities to increase the vocational and professional areas and to forsake fields of low student interest. A lot of languages have already become marginalised, and it’s very important that we arrest this decline”. La Trobe University closed its Italian Department in 1996, citing low enrolments as a reason, but rescinded the decision subsequent to community pressure.

2 van Lier attacks the tendency of some educators to resort to various gimmicks “such as putting on a show … providing stickers and grades, and a multitude of other superficial devices”, adding “….I cannot escape the thought that all such ‘motivating’ actions at best relate to learning in the way that the supermarket version of ‘have a nice day’ relates to wishing someone well… Education, in other words, is heavily polluted with surrogate motivation” (1996:121).

3 Williams and Burden (1997) give a usefully brief summary of the development of motivational psychology in general and its importation specifically into L2 motivation research. A detailed article on recent developments in L2 motivation studies is that by Dörnyei (1998).

4 The rather complex notion of “integrative orientation” has caused some confusion and is clarified by Oxford and Shearin (1994:16) and Gardner and Tremblay (1994:526).

5 Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) set out “Ten commandments for motivating language learners”, as follows:
   1 Set a personal example with your own behaviour
   2 Create a pleasant relaxed atmosphere in the classroom
   3 Present the task properly
   4 Develop a good relationship with the learners
   5 Increase the learners’ linguistic self-confidence
   6 Make the language classes interesting
   7 Promote learner autonomy
   8 Personalise the learning process
   9 Increase the learners’ goal-orientedness
   10 Familiarise learners with the target language culture.

In a prior article, Dörnyei (1994:281-282) made a list of thirty recommendations for language teachers on the basis of motivational research. While some of these were subsequently queried by Gardner as lacking experimental justification, by 1998 Dörnyei had completed some validatory surveys (1998:131).

6 “… based on our combined seventy-one years as students, teachers, supervisors, and consultants in L2 classrooms, we believe that few teachers are knowledgeable about their students’ true motivations for L2 learning. Rarely have we seen an L2 teacher administer a motivation survey or discuss students’ goals, even though this would take only one class period. Still less often have we found teachers tracking the changes in students’ motivations over several years” (Oxford & Shearin 1994:16).

7 The two groups are in the same class but under different subject names and with marginally different credit point weighting.

8 For example, the Victorian Study design for year 12 Italian, in the instructions for Unit 4, asks students to “analyse and use information from written texts, … respond to specific questions, messages or instructions, … in a journal entry, express feelings/reactions when accessing the *Global village*” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board 1999:50-51). The student may well ask “How am I to reply?”, or “How can I achieve success commensurate with effort?”.