A Case Study on Cognitive and Emotional Elements of Second Language Learning Motivation—From the Perspective of Perezhivanie

Han Yu

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Abstract: Second language learners possess a wide range of learning experiences, which result in varying levels of motivation from both cognitive and emotional standpoints. Previous researches have predominantly centered on the Second Language Motivation Self System Theory or has examined motivation through an emotional lens. However, there is a notable gap in studies that investigate the factors influencing second language motivation using the concept of perezhivanie from sociocultural theory. To address this gap, this study employs perezhivanie as an analytical framework to delve into the motivational dynamics of a junior non-English major university student engaged in English language learning. Utilizing reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, the research elucidates the multifaceted influences on the student's motivation, including their family environment, interpersonal interactions, and the pressure of various exams. These factors are shown to impact the student's second language motivation in different ways, highlighting the complexity of motivational processes. By integrating the concept of perezhivanie, this study offers a fresh theoretical perspective to the field of motivation research. It also aims to contribute valuable insights to foreign language teaching practices, potentially enhancing educators' understanding of the diverse motivational factors at play in language learning contexts.

1. Introduction

Since the 1950s, second language learning motivation has been a central focus in language acquisition research. Most studies have examined emotions or individual differences, such as the impact of gender or emotional factors like enjoyment and anxiety. However, there is a notable absence of research from a sociocultural perspective. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the complex emotional experiences of learners in specific contexts, exploring how different learning experiences lead to variations in motivation and how these experiences interact. Dörnyei's stages of motivation research, from socio-psychological to sociodynamic, highlight the shift towards a more dynamic understanding. Perezhivanie, as an analytical unit, integrates both cognitive and emotional aspects of learning experiences, offering insights into how these experiences influence motivation.

Additionally, previous studies have mostly used middle and high school students as research

subjects to explore their English learning motivation, with few studies examining college students' second language learning motivation from the perspective of perezhivanie. Therefore, this paper focuses on a junior non-English major student at a university in Shandong, using reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews to primarily investigate which elements of their second language learning experience significantly impact their motivation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Perezhivanie in Motivation Research

Perezhivanie is a context-oriented motivation, perceived as the learner's current learning environment and past experiences, involving the entire learning process, such as experiences with classroom atmosphere, teacher teaching style, curriculum design, textbook use, peer influence, success or failure in second language learning, and the enjoyment of learning.

Since each individual's emotional experience varies, even if people have the same perezhivanie, their motivation will differ. Tae-Young (2021) suggests that emotional experiences—early English input, significant relationships with others, the synergistic effect of emotional experiences, and their positive evaluation—all influence second language learning motivation.[1] L2MSS (Second Language Motivational Self System) includes three key components: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and perezhivanie. Research indicates that the ideal L2 self is a key determinant in creating, maintaining, and strengthening L2 motivation levels, while the role of perezhivanie is often overlooked. Dörnyei (2019) believes that perezhivanie can be systematically measured through factors such as school background, curriculum and textbooks, learning tasks, and relationships with peers and teachers.[2] Pavelescu (2019) explored the interaction between language learning emotions and motivation among Romanian adolescents to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional dimension of students' language learning experiences.[3] The results show that learners' motivation and emotions are uniquely intertwined with their learning experiences. A love for English is the dominant emotion in the learning experiences of the participating students; another factor influencing students' motivation to learn English is their relationship and interaction with teachers. Wang Tingting (2023) suggests that research on high school students' second language learning motivation under the framework of the second language motivational self system indicates that the main factors influencing high school students' English learning motivation are divided into internal and external factors.[4] Internal factors include students' interest in learning English, self-efficacy, and future planning; external factors include school and family environments.

2.2 Perezhivanie in Sociocultural Theory

Perezhivanie presents the dialectical unity of individual cognition and emotion, capturing the subjective meaning of individuals' experiences in the sociocultural environment. It can be understood from two pairs of dialectical unities: the unity of emotion and cognition, and the unity of individual characteristics and environmental features—environment does not directly affect individuals but needs to be refracted through the prism of individuals' perezhivanie to have an impact, that is, individuals' perception, interpretation, and emotional connection to the environment they have experienced. Sociocultural theory posits that cognitive development and emotional emergence often occur simultaneously during social activities. Therefore, cognitive and emotional factors mutually influence and exist dialectically.

Different scholars have different focuses on the concept of perezhivanie. Some emphasize its emotional characteristics, focusing on the emotional content and development experienced by learners; others point out that perezhivanie, as a unity of emotion and cognition, is complex and

comprehensive, requiring attention to the interaction between emotion and cognition. Additionally, Qin Lili and Yao Lan (2022) pay special attention to the dialectical unity of emotion, cognition, and activity. As an emotional theory under the sociocultural perspective, perezhivanie emphasizes the unity of emotion and cognition, as well as the unity of the individual and the sociocultural environment.[5] Perezhivanie is not just emotion but also includes the evaluation and response to emotion. Different emotions can have different impacts on individuals, and the same environment can be subjectively interpreted differently by different individuals, leading to their own perezhivanie and resulting in different development trajectories. Due to the differences in perezhivanie among second language learners, even if they are in the same learning environment, the learning environment still has different impacts on their motivation because of their different perceptions and emotions towards the environment. Therefore, analyzing the environment with the concept of perezhivanie helps capture the personal and situational characteristics of motivation and reveals the dialectical relationship between the individual and the environment.

Vygotsky defines perezhivanie as "how a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to an event" (Qin L & Wei R 1994)[6]. Perezhivanie is not just an emotional experience but also a complex psychological phenomenon, a unity and connection of different psychological processes such as consciousness and interpretation. Therefore, investigating students' perezhivanie, exploring how they experience different environments, and how the environment affects their perezhivanie, thereby understanding the relationship between the two and finding a method for their ecological development, is of great significance. By investigating individuals' perezhivanie, various aspects of the social environment will be revealed and identified.

2.3 Second Language Learning Motivation Research under Perezhivanie

Researching second language learning motivation from the perspective of perezhivanie offers a unique approach. Perezhivanie captures the complex interplay between cognitive and emotional elements, providing insights into how these factors dynamically influence motivation. Li Shaopeng and Yang Lianrui (2015) highlight that the sociodynamic perspective considers the dynamic interactions between motivation and variables like cognition, emotion, time, and context. This approach reveals how motivation evolves in response to individual and situational complexities, offering a comprehensive understanding of its development.[7]

Zhang Xuan and Qin Lili (2022) emphasize that perezhivanie is a unity of cognition and emotion. Analyzing second language experiences through these dimensions helps uncover the processes by which experiences impact motivation.[8] Learning environments and personal experiences are crucial in shaping an individual's perezhivanie, which in turn affects their motivation to learn a second language. By examining these interactions, researchers can better understand the multifaceted nature of motivation and develop strategies to enhance language learning.

3. Research Methods

Given the study's aim to provide rich descriptive data and gain an in-depth understanding of the subject, a case study approach was chosen. Data were collected primarily through reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews. Reflective diaries allowed the researcher to observe factors influencing the learner's self-perception. Participants could introspect and reflect on their emotional experiences during the writing process, providing insights into their perezhivanie. Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility in exploring qualitative data, allowing the researcher to adjust questions based on the participant's responses.

The participant was a male junior majoring in Chinese Language and Literature at a university in Shandong. He had been learning English for 11 years, with a high school English score of 95 and a

CET-4 score of 464. He had not passed the CET-6 and was considered to have an average English proficiency. Transitioning from a high school exam-oriented learning environment to a university self-directed learning environment, his perezhivanie was investigated through diaries and interviews to explore its impact on his second language learning motivation.

Participants were asked to submit a reflective diary detailing their English learning experiences over three years of college. They described specific events influencing their interest in learning English and critically reflected on factors enhancing their motivation. The diary had no word or time limit, focusing on clarity. A 30-minute phone interview was conducted, recorded to ensure accuracy. Both the diary and interview were conducted in Chinese to facilitate authentic and fluent expression of the participant's perezhivanie. All data were used solely for research, with the participant's personal information kept confidential.

4. Discussion

Analysis revealed that family encouragement, interactions with teachers and peers, and various exams significantly influenced the participant's second language learning motivation.

4.1 Family Members

Researcher: Hello, student, I noticed in your reflection journal that your sister has been a great help in your English learning. Is that correct? Could you tell me specifically which aspects motivated you to learn English? And what changes have you made as a result?

Participant: Yes, after I started university, my sister knew that my English grades were not very good, so she would call me once a week to ask if I had any difficulties in my English classes or during my regular studies. Specifically, she would provide me with some English learning methods that she thought were effective. Then, I would try to apply them in my daily life.

Researcher: After following your sister's learning methods, did your English grades improve? You can refer to your university English final exam scores.

Participant: Well... regarding the university English final exam, I remember that in the second semester of my sophomore year, my English score was a few points higher than before, but it wasn't very significant. I think persistence is key, and it takes time to see results. Anyway, after my sister helped me clear up my doubts and gave me her advice, I became less resistant to English and a bit more interested in it.

Researcher: So, with your sister's help and influence, you have become more interested in English and are more proactive in learning it.

Despite his parents' inability to actively guide his studies, his sister, an English major, positively influenced him. Her encouragement and assistance enhanced his motivation to learn English. Her role as a role model and the learning methods she shared contributed to his increased interest and engagement in English learning.

4.2 Interactions with Teachers and Peers

The participant's diary and interview highlighted the significant role of teachers and peers in his motivation. Teachers' careful preparation of materials and engaging classroom activities increased his interest in English. Interactions with teachers and peers, along with tasks assigned outside of class, motivated him to learn. Teachers' emotional support, including positive feedback and encouragement, provided a safe environment for developing positive emotions, thereby strengthening his motivation.

4.3 Motivation from Exams

Researcher: Do you enjoy learning English, and how are your grades?

Participant: I like English, but my grades are around sixty to seventy points. I want to use it as a tool effectively.

Researcher: Do you explore English or related cultures outside of class?

Participant: No, I just complete assigned tasks and exercises.

Researcher: Why do you learn English in university besides it being required?

Participant: I'm preparing for postgraduate exams and CET-6, so I practice listening, reading, and writing with books and real exam questions.

Researcher: So, you mainly learn through school courses and self-study for exams?

Participant: Yes, that's right.

Exams played a significant role in his motivation to learn English. Although he had some interest in English, his motivation was primarily exam-oriented. He studied to pass final exams and prepare for the CET-6 and graduate school entrance exams. He did not explore foreign cultures deeply outside of class, focusing mainly on completing assignments and practicing exam questions.

5. Conclusion

This study, using reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews, analyzed the cognitive and emotional experiences of a second language learner's motivation from the perspective of perezhivanie, exploring the factors influencing his motivation during university years. The findings reveal that motivation is influenced by family background, interactions with others, and various English exams. However, the study's limitations include its reliance on qualitative data from one participant, which may not be universally applicable. Future research can address these limitations and continue to explore the influencing factors and mechanisms of second language learning motivation.

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