

INTRODUCTION

The ever-changing landscape of language learning motivation research

'Motivation' as a technical term has been introduced in the social sciences to refer to the psychological foundation of any human behaviour or thought, subsuming all the factors that shape what we do or think. The notion is a prime candidate for a discussion within the current series on *Innovations and Challenges*, because, as will be shown in the following chapters, challenges in the domain abound, resulting in an ongoing succession of creative innovations both in mainstream psychology and in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The most fundamental of the challenges concerns the conceptualisation of motivation itself, questioning whether the notion is meaningful at all: because human behaviour is influenced by a very wide range of factors – from external motives, such as rewards and punishments (the 'carrot' and the 'stick'), to various types of internal needs, beliefs, interests and desires – one may rightly wonder whether the term has too many meanings and is therefore not very useful in a scientific sense; in fact, according to Walker and Symons (1997), there was indeed a point when the American Psychological Association considered replacing the word as a search term in its main psychological database, *Psychological Abstracts*, for this very reason.

We can easily see the psychologists' dilemma: does it make sense to have a single notion associated with as disparate targets as one's love of food, money, work, family, freedom or faith, to mention only a few? And can indeed a single notion explain acts that we do out of fear, out of duty, out of joy or out of conviction? One wonders. Yet, there is something compelling about the concept of motivation, and we can mention at least three reasons why it was never abandoned in psychology: (a) it has definite *intuitive appeal*: people use it widely in a variety of everyday and professional contexts without the slightest hint that there should be a problem with its meaning; (b) it is not an abstract notion but a *tangible* and *discernible phenomenon*: people simply know and feel when they are motivated and also when they are not (a topic that will be discussed further in Chapter 1); (c) when we observe

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people, the *difference* between the motivated and the unmotivated is *obvious*. Thus, motivation appears to have profound relevance to human experiences and affairs, and as Richard Ryan (2012) explains, it is also a distinguishing feature of research conducted in the social sciences in contrast to investigations in the natural sciences:

Motivation is a problem unique to life scientists. Indeed it is the organized nature of actions that separates the life sciences from the physical sciences, where organized, purposive, behaviour does not occur, and where entropy is the dominant force. Instead, in the life sciences, and in the understanding of human behaviour, the core interest is in discovering the bases of the neg-entropic, coherent, and integrated efforts of individuals as they pursue specific goals and outcomes.

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Within the social sciences, motivation has specific relevance for educators, because an area where the impact of motivation – or the lack of it – is particularly salient is *student learning*. In fact, according to Danziger (1997), it was the expansion and rationalisation of educational systems in Europe and the US at the beginning of the twentieth century that gave a large push to interest in motivational matters. At that time, in order to understand individual differences between more and less successful students, scholars first turned to the notion of intelligence – producing as a result the first instrument in this area, the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale, as early as 1905 – but it was soon realised that student underachievement cannot always be blamed on cognitive abilities, as some of its antecedents are related to the learners' lack of commitment. In accordance with this observation, as Danziger explains, the first book to have 'motivation' in its title was Wilson and Wilson's (1916) *The Motivation of School Work*, and in the Preface of this volume the authors stated:

The most difficult phase of teaching is not acquiring the necessary information nor controlling the class, but it is discovering problems and motives for the work that will make it appeal to and interest the pupils. This book is designed to furnish concrete help of a fundamental kind in solving this daily problem of every teacher.

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Thus, over the past century the notion of motivation has proved to be indispensable and it is therefore here to stay. This, however, raises the question of how such a multi-faceted notion should be conceptualised to meet scientific criteria. The first three chapters of the current book ("Fundamental challenges 1–3") address this issue by presenting 11 basic challenges concerning the notion of motivation, accompanied by 'innovations', that is, attempts in the field to respond to these challenges. Then, the second half of the book will zoom in on three specific areas that I believe are particularly topical at the current stage of development of our field – unconscious versus conscious motivation; long-term motivation and

perseverance; and vision – with a chapter devoted to each (“Research frontiers 1–3”). The discussion of most of the topics is relatively self-contained (and possible links and cross-references are marked), which allows for selective reading, skipping some less relevant parts when time is at a premium (as it so often is).

References

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