

The Impact of Social Class and Culture on Directed Motivational Currents in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language in Erstwhile FATA, Pakistan

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Abstract: This research explores the effects of social class and cultural background on the experiences of English as a Foreign Language learners at FATA University in Pakistan who have gone through intensive motivational states i.e. Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs). It addresses a crucial gap in the literature concerning the relationship between sociocultural variables and DMCs. The research on DMCs has not considered the significant effect that motivational intensity might have when a students are from different cultures and social backgrounds. The researchers particularly wanted to know what effects? If any? the different pathways leading to DMCs might have when the sociocultural background of the learner is diverse and different from that of learners in predominantly Western cultures. The researcher employed a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 undergraduate EFL students from various tribal backgrounds. The students who were interviewed for this research are in the pathway to differing futures. They opened the door to a discussion about the different expressions of motivation that they experience in light of their diverse tribal cultures. They offered distinct and sometimes overlapping perspectives about the energy for their DMCs.

Keywords: Directed Motivational Currents, Social Class in English Language Learning, Culture and DMCs

Introduction

The nature of English language proficiency for academic achievement and professional success in Pakistan's growing globalized educational landscape cannot be ignored. For students of the federally administered tribal areas (FATA), the challenge and the opportunity presented by the acquisition of English as a foreign language are immense. They work with their teachers to understand the language's structures and vocabulary. In contexts where access to resources is almost nonexistent, they use every means available to learn and practice the language, stretching their imaginations to accommodate the few dictating devices and not-so-smart smartphones into the kind of lifelines that will allow them not just to survive but to thrive and, more crucially, to break the ties of poverty and hopelessness that bind them to their uniquely stratified and nearly inaccessible communities. The study intends to analyze motivational currents that help them push through the difficult work of acquiring EFL.. Though the term was first introduced in a 2015 book chapter by László L. T. Dörnyei and his colleagues, DMCs have received attention these days. By taking the theory of DMCs and extending it into the territories of social class and cultural background, this study offers some important critical insights that can serve as the foundation for a renovation of the pedagogical strategies that are employed to teach language.

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Research Objectives

1. To investigate the influence of social class differences among students from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), who are enrolled in universities, on the triggers, pathways, and sustainability of Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) in their learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).
2. To examine the influence (if any) of students' varied family, tribal, and religious backgrounds on their experiences of motivational surges.

Literature Review

Evolution of Motivation Theories in Second Language Acquisition

For several decades, motivation research in language learning has been steadily moving, shifting even, from social-psychological models toward more dynamic, nuanced ones. Gardner and Lambert's (1972) pioneering work established the distinction between integrative and instrumental orientations that early motivation research found very useful. Their social-psychological model positioned language learning within intergroup contexts and made clear the pathway from attitudes toward the target language community to motivation. This framework was groundbreaking, but it has been critiqued for having a very limited results in terms of what it can predict (Dörnyei, 2009). The 1990s saw what Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) called the 'educational shift' in motivation research, with a growing interest in classroom contexts and pedagogical implications. Dörnyei's (1994) educational framework laid out three levels of motivational factors: language level, learner level, and learning situation level. This attempt at a multidimensional approach began to acknowledge the complex interplay between individual psychology and learning contexts, but it still treated motivation mostly as an individual psychological construct.

With the introduction of self-theory to language learning motivation, a significant reconceptualization occurred. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System took the psychology of possible selves and integrated it with second language acquisition in a productive way. He proposed three primary components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. This framework emphasized the motivational power of forms of future self—mentally elaborated images of what one might, would like, or is afraid of becoming. Introduced by Dörnyei et al. (2015), DMCs are intense motivational surges that push individuals toward certain well-defined goals via action pathways. According to Dörnyei et al. (2015), three main features characterize DMCs: (1) They are oriented toward a vision or goal. The "current" is not boundless but is directed very clearly along a pathway toward a destination. (2) DMCs provide much more than just energy to get going; they are also structured in a way that channels this energy toward the outcome. (3) DMCs are experienced with positive emotions; not only is the kind of engagement that they necessitate but they also generate positive affect and feelings of excitement.

Social Class and Language Learning Motivation

The relationship between social class and language learning represents a complex area of research. Norton's (2013) influential work on language learning and social identity has highlighted how power relations and material conditions fundamentally shape language learning experiences. Through longitudinal case studies of immigrant women in Canada, Norton demonstrated how access to target language communities and opportunities for meaningful language use were structured by social class, gender, and race. Building on Norton's insights, a growing body of research has examined how the factors tied to our socioeconomic status influence language learning and the conditions in which it happens. Block (2014) argues that social class remains an "under-represented" variable in applied linguistics despite its profound influence on educational experiences. Specific mechanisms through which social class affects language learning motivation are only now being illuminated by empirical studies. One such study is Lamb's (2012) mixed-methods research on Indonesian adolescents. It correlates a demographic variable (socioeconomic status) with a powerful identity-related variable (L2 self). Lamb found that urban, middle-

class students had stronger visions of themselves as proficient English speakers than their rural counterparts. He proposed that this difference emerged from the unequal access that these two groups had to global cultural products—and the international people and institutions that could help them build such powerful visions. Butler (2014) seems to have built on Lamb's fine work. In her study of parental involvement in the English education of their children, she shows us that social class can affect not just the parent's but also the child's NEST (native English speaker) self as a vision that can power motivation. Few studies have really nailed down how social class might influence people's intense motivational states, like DMCs. Not sure why, but we seem more interested in general motivational dispositions than in the conditions that intensify or diminish motivation. Muir (2021) reinforces this point in the review of DMC research and makes the case that it is really needed to know how social class affects our capacity to experience and sustain these intense motivation states.

Cultural Background and Language Learning Motivation

The link between cultural background and language learning motivation has garnered considerable interest, but often from perspectives that run the risk of oversimplifying cultural differences. Early cross-cultural studies of motivation contrasted Western and Asian contexts, for instance, with Markus and Kitayama (1991) contrasting what they saw as typical orientations in those cultures—individualist versus collectivist—that seemed to set up very different types of motivational processes. In specifically educational investigations, Chen et al. (2005) looked at Chinese EFL learners and how Confucian values (and apparently over a thousand years of that cultural influence) shaped their orientation toward English learning. Taguchi et al. (2009), in their analysis of three different contexts—Japanese, Iranian, and Chinese—compared the motivational patterns at play in each context. Of course there is considerable variation within cultures and not all members of a culture will interpret these types of influences the same way, but Japan, for instance, has a group-oriented culture that places a high premium on learning behaviors and educational engagement with significant others.

In the context of DMC theory, limited attention has been paid to cultural dimensions. While Henry (2015) observed that project-based learning created conditions for DMC-like experiences among students in Sweden, and You and Chan (2015) documented kinds of goal-directed motivational surges among Chinese university students, few studies even hint at the proposition that cultural background might shape the formation, sustainability, and experience of DMCs. The context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning in Pakistan's tribal regions has rarely been explored; however, this field lacks adequate understanding even on the fundamental aspects of teaching and learning English in this area, such as who learns, why, and under what conditions. The little research that has been done suggests some severe and basic problems that permeate not just English teaching and learning, but also the learning of all subjects in schools in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Qualified teachers are a rare find in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) schools; textbooks and other instructional materials are nearly nonexistent, including the types of materials that would ordinarily be used to teach a language. The infrastructure of the schools, even in a physical sense, is abysmal; far from the temporary learning enclosures that may pass as classrooms in any standard sense, schools in FATA frequently lack even the most basic items that might make the conditions tolerable for any kind of classroom instruction.

Research Gap

Several critical research gaps emerge that the present study aims to address: Despite the growing body of research on DMCs, limited attention has been paid to how sociocultural factors influence these motivational phenomena. The specific mechanisms through which socioeconomic factors might shape intensive motivational episodes remain underexplored. Examinations of how specific cultural frameworks and values mediate motivational processes are needed, particularly in contexts where language learning might create tensions with cultural identity maintenance. Understanding how these contextual factors in FATA might shape motivational experiences is crucial for developing appropriate pedagogical approaches.

Research Method

This research study is qualitative in nature and "aims to obtain a deep understanding of the experiences of individuals with a particular phenomenon. The selection of a qualitative methodology aligns with calls from motivation researchers such as Ushioda ([2016](#)), who advocate for more context-sensitive approaches that can capture the dynamic, socially situated nature of language learning motivation.

Participants and Sampling

EFL undergraduate students (N = 25) from FATA University served as participants in this study. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. They were chosen based on two main criteria: (1) they had self-identified as having had an intense motivational experience in language learning that involved Directed Motivational Changes (DMCs) and (2) they were from various social class and cultural background segments that are typical of the tribal region. To find out who might fit these criteria, the researcher first gave a screening questionnaire to 150 students across several different departments. Those students then reported back to us. From the students who had reported these intense experiences, the final participants were selected making sure to select across social class and cultural background variations.

Data Collection and Analysis

The main method for collecting data involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews that extended from 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol was shaped by Dörnyei et al.'s ([2015](#)) DMC framework and also incorporated elements from Norton's ([2013](#)) work on identity and investment in language learning. The interviews questioned participants about their language learning histories, how they had been (or not) motivated, their social backgrounds, value systems, and cultures, and how they perceived all these factors interacting in their educational journeys.

The process for analyzing data followed Braun and Clarke's ([2006](#)) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, which provides a systematic yet flexible framework for identifying patterns across the dataset. The analysis proceeded through the following phases: 1. Familiarizing: All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times alongside field notes and participant journals to develop a comprehensive familiarity with the dataset. 2. Coding: The transcripts were coded using an open coding approach that picked out meaningful segments related to experiences of motivation, indicators of social class, and cultural references. 3. Theme searching: Initial codes were grouped into potential themes that reflected patterns in how social class and cultural background seemed to influence the DMC experiences of various participants.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This investigation is framed by a theoretical framework that integrates two complementary perspectives. One of these is the DMC theory of Dörnyei (Dörnyei et al., [2015](#)). The other is Norton's ([2013](#)) concept of investment and social identity in language learning.

The nature of the motivational surge has three key components:

1. A clear, personally meaningful vision or goal.
2. A pathway of engagement that is structured enough to provide a sense of progress.
3. Positive emotional loading that keeps the motivation surging over time.

Analysis

This section presents the data analysis and interpretation collected from 25 undergraduate EFL learners at FATA University. The data shows their experiences with what have been defined as Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs). DMCs are said to be occurring when particularly intense motivation in language learning occurs. The focus was on how these DMCs are influenced by the social class, language, and cultural background of the EFL learners from the villages and towns of the FATA region of Pakistan.

Differential Vision Formation Across Social Classes

One prominent theme that emerged from the data was the distinctive patterns in the way students from different social classes constructed their motivational visions—the imagined future states that sparked and sustained their DMCs. Participants with lower socioeconomic backgrounds consistently presented visions that were centered around concrete ideas of economic advancement and social mobility. For them, motivational surges were induced by the connections they had made between their English proficiency and specific kinds of professional opportunities. As one of our participants put it (LES-4): "When I realized that English could get me a government officer job, something changed in me. I saw myself in an office, respected, earning enough to support my family. This image stayed with me every day while I studied. For three months, I woke up at 4 am to memorize vocabulary before anyone else was awake." This kind of instrumental orientation was evident across all our participants with lower socioeconomic status, and was based on visions that more or less unvaryingly involved specific kinds of careers in either government service or multinational corporations.

Participants from middling socioeconomic backgrounds displayed diverse vision content, mixing instrumental goals with broader identity aspirations. Their DMCs incorporated elements of both professional and personal transformation, as shown in this reflection: "I suddenly saw myself as someone who could move between worlds—This wasn't just about getting a job; it was about becoming a different kind of person." (MES-7) By contrast, the vision-formation patterns among higher-socioeconomic-status participants revealed orientation toward not just identity but also global community integration. Their motivational surges came not just from personal development ideas but also from inspirations involving intercultural encounters, and media exposures that highlighted the role of English in accessing international opportunities: "After attending that conference in Islamabad, where I couldn't really participate in the discussions with international guests, I became obsessed with improving my English". (HES-2) Lower-socioeconomic participants needed a powerful but narrowly focused vision to work toward; and higher-socioeconomic-status participants had the luxury of thinking more broadly and more divergently about who they would become through language learning.

Cultural and DMC Pathways

The second major theme is about the cultural background, especially tribal values, family structure, and community expectations, that mediate the formation and sustainment of DMCs. The analysis revealed cultural reasons that explain both the good things that help achieve intense motivational episodes and the not so good things that constrain them. Participants from strongly traditional tribal backgrounds felt that the motivational surges they were experiencing were gaining strength and sustainment because they were aligned with the kinds of expectations that families and communities have: "When my uncle, who is a Malak, spoke about the importance of English education for our community's standing in a speech to people, I felt responsible for bringing honor to my family through my English achievements. This pushed me to study with an intensity I never had before." (MES-3) This DMC participant shows both the enabling and constraining conditions of DMCs. When language learning goals aligned with cultural values and family expectations.

A significant cultural factor mediating DMC experiences is gender. The female participants, particularly those from more conservative tribal backgrounds, described DMCs that were characterized by greater privacy and self-containment. In contrast to the boys, who often described collective study practices and public progress demonstrations, the female students' motivational surges frequently operated through more discreet channels: "I couldn't join the English speaking activities or practice with classmates after hours. So my motivation worked differently I practice at home, recording myself, creating dialogues in my head. The intensity was there, but it was hidden." (LES-7)

DMCs in culturally traditional contexts do not follow the strictly individualistic patterns assumed in some Western motivational research. Instead, they operate through complex interactions between personal goals and cultural values, often gaining strength when framed within culturally meaningful

narratives. This aligns with Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context relational view of motivation, demonstrating how motivational processes are embedded in social relationships and cultural systems of meaning.

Socioeconomic Factors and DMC Sustainability

The theme that is significant here is to know how sustainability of DMCs over time is influenced by the socioeconomic contexts. Patterns of influence emerged in the analysis, both at the level of the individual DMC and across the types of DMCs formed in the phenomenological work. Resource availability and type, mainly material resources, but also social and cognitive ones, were very influential. DMCs which had better access to resources, or the types of resources that were better suited to their structure (like being social resources for a more socially motivated individual), were much more likely to maintain their intensity in the paths they were on. DMCs that had access to learning environments (physically and virtually), at least to some kind of enrichment space, were likely to last longer because the individual was likely to bump into more motivational triggers in these spaces.

Participants from wealthier backgrounds had accounts of DMCs where they employed much more varied and diverse learning activities than their less-privileged peers. They said things like, "When my motivation was at its peak, I was combining different approaches—private tutoring twice weekly, English movies with subtitles, and practice with friends. When one activity became boring, I could switch to another" (HES-4). Middle and lower socioeconomic participants more frequently described networks of peers virtually identical to themselves, bound together by shared aspirations and by a level of incompetence in English that made them conversants in a club of sorts: "Four of us formed what we called our 'English group.' We pushed each other, competed, and motivated each other." (MES-11)

These findings illustrate how DMCs function within material and social constraints rather than existing as purely psychological phenomena. The data suggest that while intense motivation can temporarily overcome limited resources, the influence of socioeconomic conditions on the sustainability of DMCs is pronounced. This highlights the importance of pursuing educational strategies that take both the psychological and material dimensions of motivation into account.

Cultural Identity and Motivational Conflict

The final theme explores how participants present the relationship between language learning motivation and cultural identity. This theme was particularly significant among participants from more traditional tribal backgrounds, where English learning could be perceived as threatening to cultural continuity. Many participants described experiencing periods of motivational ambivalence or conflict during their DMCs, particularly when language learning triggered concerns about cultural authenticity or loyalty: "There were moments of doubt during my most motivated period. Was I becoming less Pashtun by embracing English? Would I lose connection with my elders, my traditions? These thoughts would come and disturbed me"(LES-5)

Analysis revealed strategies for resolving these conflicts and maintaining motivational momentum. One approach involved reframing English acquisition as a means of cultural preservation and representation rather than assimilation: "I realized I could use English to tell our stories to the world, to explain our traditions and values."(MES-1). Some participants incorporated cultural pride directly into their motivational structure, using it as a driving force rather than a source of conflict: "I became determined to speak perfect English precisely because people don't expect it from someone from our region. I wanted to show that our tribal background doesn't limit us, that we can master anything while staying true to our traditions."(MES-6). These findings agree with Norton's emphasis on the complex identity negotiations involved in language learning, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Norton's framework was useful for interpreting how traditional cultures navigate this conflict.

Conclusion

Integrating these thematic insights reveals how social class and cultural background create complex, intersecting influences on DMC experiences. Social class primarily shapes the content and orientation of motivational visions, as well as the material conditions for sustaining motivational surges. Cultural background influences how motivation is structured in relation to collective values, how potential identity conflicts are negotiated, and how language learning is given meaning within traditional value systems. Together, these factors create distinctive motivational landscapes for learners from different sociocultural positions. Lower socioeconomic status students from traditional tribal backgrounds typically experience DMCs characterized by powerful instrumental visions, collective framing, high vulnerability to resource constraints, and significant identity negotiation. Higher socioeconomic status students from more cosmopolitan backgrounds tend to experience DMCs driven by integrative orientations, supported by abundant resources, and involving less acute cultural identity negotiation. These patterns highlight the thoroughly social nature of what might appear to be individual psychological processes.

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