



The Case Study on the Core Features of Tertiary Non-English Majors' DMCs in China

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How to cite this paper: Wei, Q. (2022) The Case Study on the Core Features of Tertiary Non-English Majors' DMCs in China. *Open Access Library Journal*, 9: e9260. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1109260>

Received: August 27, 2022

Accepted: October 30, 2022

Published: November 2, 2022

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Abstract

As the latest one in the field of SLA/FLA motivational study, the theory of DMC(s) is of great significance both theoretically and pedagogically. This current paper aims at whether the core features of tertiary non-English majors' motivational behaviors in china are in line with those outlined in the theory of DMCs. The results disclose that when the participants experienced a DMC, their goals/visions as the driving force were directed, their learning behaviors with clear start points were recurring and self-propelling, and they were generally positive, though negative occasionally. Therefore, the effectiveness of the distinguishing components of a DMC has been tested and verified in Chinese EFL context, which offers valuable enlightenment to trigger and maintain high motivation for English study in the classroom.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

Core Features, DMCs, Non-English Majors, Chinese EFL Context

1. Introduction

With the development of the country, Chinese government has put forward new requirements for the cultivation of university talents. They should grow to be compound talents with international vision and cross-cultural communication ability. Therefore, the effectiveness of foreign language learning has once again become the focus of College foreign language pedagogy in China. Motivation, as one of the most important individual factors in second/foreign language teaching and learning, plays a direct impact on its effectiveness. Therefore, the research of for-

foreign language learning motivation has a stake in improving the effectiveness of College English teaching. Traditionally, theoretical research and practice have always promoted each other in the field of language learning. The proposal of a new theory provides a different and new perspective for language teaching and learning practice, while language teaching and learning practice tests the feasibility and effectiveness of the new language theories, and provides various feedbacks for improving the theories as well. Therefore, the theory of DMCs, as the latest progress in the theoretical research of motivation in second or foreign language acquisition (SLA/FLA), undoubtedly offers a new theoretical perspective. However, as the latest theory, the research on DMCS in the field of SLA/FLA still focuses more on the theoretical levels than the verification and feedback from the practical level. Therefore, the research on the effectiveness of the theory of DMCS for different learners in different contexts is in the beginning stage and a hot issue. In China's foreign language learning environment, the research on DMCs is still in the initial stage both in the theoretical and practical fields, especially the features of tertiary non-English majors' DMCs. Therefore, it is of great significance and value to study the features of foreign language learners' motivation with the guide of the theory of DMC(s).

Based on the above mentioned, the study aims to verify the main distinguishing features of DMCs in Chinese EFL context by analyzing the features of tertiary non-English majors' DMC. To this end, three research questions are put forward in the present study, which will adopt a qualitative methodology to collect and analyze the interview data: 1) what is the feature of the driving force to start the high motivation in a DMC? 2) What is the characteristic of the salient facilitative structure in a DMC? 3) What is the learners' emotional state when they are in motivational currents?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The theory of DMC

A DMC is "a prolonged process of engagement in a series of tasks which are rewarding primarily because they transport the individual towards a highly valued end" [1]. It is a super-motivational phenomenon individuals possess to achieve set goals for a specific period. Based on the theories of psychology, geography, pedagogy and previous second language motivation theories, the theory of DMCs emphasizes the unity of cognition, motivation and emotion, which makes the theory rich and unique. So it is of great significance and sheds light to the study of motivation theory in second language and foreign language acquisition, the optimization of second language and foreign language classroom teaching, and the promotion of students' language level.

According to Dornyei & Henry (2015) [2], three key elements that constitute the core components of the construct can be identified in all DMC-related phenomena: goal/vision-directedness, a salient facilitative structure and positive emotionality.

Goal/Vision-Directedness

Goal/vision-directedness means that a learner's behaviors occur and develop of his own volition, and follow a set track and move towards a set goal or vision. Moreover, only this clear goal or vision can condense his efforts, energy and time, and then his strong behavioral motivation can be triggered and he is able to achieve satisfactory learning results. Therefore, goal/vision orientation is the prerequisite for the generation of motivational currents and the most important feature of directional motivation flow. The theoretical source of the idea of goal orientation lies in goal setting theory [3]. The core idea of this theory is that human behavior is triggered by a number of goals they set. Goals determine behavior and achievement, and short-term/proximal goals are particularly important. Short-term goals are subgoals in the learning process (such as taking and passing examinations). They have a powerful driving function, because their realization marks progress, provides direct incentives and feedback, and thus leads to the generation of motivation currents.

The salient facilitative structure

This salient and facilitative structure is the second defining characteristic of a DMC, which is both the path of motivational flow and the result of motivational behavior. Like the ocean currents, the directional motivational current, once formed, follows a clear path in leaps and spirals. The structure, working as a perceptual road map, arranges the route toward the attainment of the goal. Three distinguishing elements that make up this unique structure are:

- 1) Sets of recurring behavioral routines performed without the exercise of volitional control, where a totality of effort is aligned toward goal achievement; a strong motivational system makes existing behavioral routine become "motivational autopilot", at which time motivational behaviors become internalized as a part of the motivational flow. It is no longer controlled by individual emotional states.
- 2) Processes of regular progress checks, where subgoals provide affirmative feedback. Motivational behavior takes the form of sub-goals, which are both a marker of the final goal and a label for evaluating and testing progress. The completion of each subgoal not only signals progress, but also triggers subsequent behavior. In other words, subgoals have a powerful motivating function, in that they mark progress and provide immediate feedback and incentives for continued learning.
- 3) A clear starting point with a particularly important role. Directed motivation flow is not formed naturally, but a conscious and explicit behavior initiated by learners for some special purpose. The engine system determines the life and force of the fluid, so a strong engine system is an important step to ensure the success of the directional motor flow.

Positive emotional energy

A third feature that distinguishes a DMC is the positive affective experience when a learner carries out his activities to transport him closer to the goal. In the process of pursuing established goals, the realization of graded goals one by one will make individuals feel a sense of achievement and joy, and generate positive

emotions. This positive emotion runs through the whole process of pursuing overall goals, continuously release positive energy to overcome interference factors, promote individuals to move towards goals, and maintain the intensity of directional motivation currents.

In the directed motivation flow, the task itself is not necessarily fun, and the best running experience is mainly obtained from the feeling of reaching the highly valued end state. The pleasure of learners in the process of action stems from the satisfaction of approaching the end state rather than the interest of the task itself. In the long-term process of second language learning, not every learning task is full of fun, and many tasks are boring. Therefore, compared with flow theory, directed motivation flow theory is more practical.

2.2. The Relevant Studies

Since Dornyei first put forward the concept of directed motivational currents, the theory has gradually matured from the bud. In particular, the publication of *Motivational Currents in Language Learning—Frameworks for Focused Interventions* marks the relative maturity of the DMCs theory [4]. The book not only comprehensively and deeply discusses the theoretical characteristics of directed motivation currents, but also illustrates the distinctive characteristics of motivation currents theory and its application value in second language classroom teaching through comparison. The maturity of theoretical exploration has laid a solid foundation for the follow-up empirical research. At present, the research on DMCs has turned from theoretical exploration to empirical research.

Up to now, an increasing number of papers with different foci have started to provide deeper insights into the theory of DMCs. When examining the previous studies, there are generally four strands: one is the validation of the three distinguishing characteristics of a DMC for individuals including tertiary students, immigrants and teachers. Another is about the more specific themes, such as the affective properties of a DMC, parameters for triggering a DMC, the context-related factors to influence the operation of a DMC in L2 classrooms [5]. The third is some studies on the relation of DMC-type motivation with sociodemographic features [6]. The fourth is about the studies of scales and questionnaires for DMCs. Besides, there is also some new research about the effects of the DMCs experiences on some psychological variables, such as language learners' self-concept, self-confidence, autonomy and so on [7]. In spite of the growing variety of studies on DMCs, the research is still in its beginning, especially for the empirical and validation research under different contexts. In view of the objective of this study, the previous and typical studies of the first group will be reviewed. Dornyei et al. believed that goal/vision-directedness, a salient facilitative structure and positive emotionality are three indispensable parts to constitute a complete directional motivational current experience. [8] Henry et al (2015) [8] for the first time confirmed the existence of motivation flow experience in second language learning through empirical research. In this study, three eligible

Swedish female immigrants, ranging in age from 26 to 35, were selected as participants. The research corpus was obtained through semi-structured interviews and retrospective interviews. The empirical results fully support the following conclusions: motivation flow does exist. It is a high-intensity and long-term form of motivation. It exists in the prominent promotion structure and is accompanied by positive emotions. This study not only makes up for the gap of directed motivation flow theory in the field of empirical research, but also confirms the existence of individual motivation flow in the process of second language learning. Ibrahim (2016b) [9] investigated the emotional dynamics of seven motivational flow Experiencers by using phenomenon-logical approach and semi-structured interview method, and pointed out that the directional motivational flow Experiencers mainly use positive emotions and occasionally use negative emotions to regulate emotional states to maintain learning engagement. Safdari and Maftoon (2017) [10] studied a middle-aged Iranian Italian learner whose mother tongue is Persian, traced the learning experience of the participants through three semi-structured interviews, collected the research corpus, and combed the data using thematic coding analysis. It is found that the three core characteristics of the directional motivation flow hypothesis can be clearly observed and confirmed in the participants' experience.

In short, the studies reviewed in the above offered great insights into our understanding of the theory of DMCs, but they also exposed their limitations including the context and the participants. The research on the validation of the theory of DMCs is still rare in EFL Chinese context. What's more, the participants are mostly second language learners or immigrants instead of Chinese tertiary non-English majors. Therefore there is still of great significance to validate the theory of DMCs in more various context with diverse participants.

3. Methodologies

3.1. Methods & Instruments

Due to the special features of DMCs that not each language learners can experience DMC-like energy, and they can be caught often when language learners' DMCs recede, the present study adopts the most acceptable method "the retrospective approach" to interview the participants with semi-structural questions based on the information of their Self-Assessed Motivational Trajectory graphs. Therefore the interview questions are designed to let participants recall their past English learning experience in the terms of their goals, driving forces, their behaviors, their emotional states and changes, and so on.

3.2. Participants

Not each second/foreign language learner with motivation can experience the DMCS. Therefore, according to the principles of the purposeful sampling, the author finally chose two third-year non-English majors in a Chinese private university to do the retrospective interview, for they said to have experienced

DMCs-like language learning very obviously.

For the participants, one is a female, the other a male, with the average age of 21. They both have passed CET-6 (College English Test Band Six) that is considered as the proof for high English proficiency for non-English majors in China, with a history of at least 10-year learning English since from 3rd grade in elementary school. Besides, neither of them has studied abroad.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Before interview, the participants were asked to draw the self-assessed Motivational Trajectory graphs simply during the past 6 semesters in university, for the graph has been widely accepted as an evocation tool in an array of retrospective interview studies centering on temporal change [2] [11]. It enables the participants to recall their motivational change when learning English. The individual semi-structured interviews occurred immediately based on their graphs and were conducted in Chinese with the face-to-face form. The whole process lasted about 15 minutes respectively, and only the participants' answers to the 5 interview questions were recorded by an audio app in the author's smartphone.

Before doing the analysis, the recorded audio materials were transcribed verbatim. The total transcriptions gave rise to a corpus of about 3700 Chinese characters. The thematic and inductive methods are both utilized to analyze the data.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Goals/Visions as the Driving Force: The Goal/Vision-Directedness

In order to verify and better explore one core feature of DMCs—Goal/Vision-Orientedness among the non-English majors in China, the EFL context, the participants were interviewed about two questions: what is the anticipation for your English study in the university? Based on their self-assessed motivational trajectory graph, what are the factors to make them enter into and maintain periods of high motivation for English study? The two participants both expressed clearly and quickly that they had their own goals or anticipation for their university English study, and likewise gave distinct account of their driving forces.

A DMC is always directional, moving onwards from a source toward a specific target destination [12]. In fact, a powerful and sustained DMC always launched with the presence of a salient purpose or a clear vision. Therefore, goals in motivational psychology are attached great significance, for a goal can add meaning and direction toward a specific activity. This is completely manifested in the two interviewees' answers.

According to Student A's report, the imagination of passing exams, self-improvement by further-study and taking English as prerequisite and a complementary tool to fulfill her other goals are the driving forces to work hard on English. However, when it comes to the factors contributing to her DMCs experience, she gave emphasis to the internal factor, to improve her English better so

as that English subject is not the weaker one compared with other subjects.

“My goal was to pass CET4 when I entered the university. After I passed CET-4, I aimed to get CET-6 certificate. Afterwards, I planned to prepare for the national entrance examination for postgraduates. Even if I didn’t study further after graduation, I still hope to study English further.”

“I think there are both internal and external factors that contribute to them. One is internal, for English course is my weakness compared with other subjects. Thus I am greatly eager to make it better from my inner heart. Therefore, I work harder to improve myself in English. When it comes to the external factors, one is the national entrance examination for postgraduates, and the other one is the interviews in job hunting. If my English is wonderful, I think it will be beneficial to my job hunting.”

Through the analysis of student B’s interview data, the vision of speaking English fluently in his social life, passing the tests, self-improvement and being better than others in competition has become the engine for him to study English with intense motivational energy:

“The very reason that I choose a university featured with foreign languages is that I want to communicate with foreigners in English, and my further goal is to communicate with them in English fluently. Then passing CET-4 and CET-6, and study English better and further are also my anticipation for English.”

“During those periods, everyone around me was studying English hard. I deemed I must do better since they were all competing, though I knew that my English had been always not bad. Therefore, I was more motivated to study it and decided to get an amazing result to compete against others.”

Based on the above extract and the transcription, there is something in common between the two interviewees that both mentioned the goals to pass English tests and to improve their English overall by further study. Passing tests can be achieved relatively in the short term while the overall improvement by further English learning will be obtained in a longer term. One hallmark of a DMC experience is the potent interplay between self-concordant goals (narrowly speaking they refer to the distal goals) and regular proximal subgoals (likewise they can be equal to short-term goals) [4]. Miller and Brickman (2004) [13] explained this further: the set and attainment of proximal subgoals or the short-term goals can bolster and reinforce the attainment of the valued future goals or the long-term goals.

Having goals and visions for the English study set the two participants into the stage of strong directed motivational currents. Just like Levin (2000) [14] said, vision is a vivid and colorful picture of success and fulfillment, where the future can be witnessed and experienced.

4.2. Self-Propelling and Recurring Behavioral Routines and Clear Start Points: A Facilitative Structure

Another distinguishing feature of a DMC in language acquisition lies in that there is a special and salient facilitative structure in the process of a DMC, which

can both channel the process towards the goal and play an active role in keeping the motivational current flowing. This kind of structure has three shaping constituents: a) regular behavioral routines without volitional control; b) non-conscious self-regulation or process of regular progress checks; c) evident start/end points. The analysis of the two participants' reports has identified this.

During the interview of student A, she mentioned that she recited the English words and phrases every day. Afterwards, she started learning English grammar systematically and read long and complex sentences every day. Besides, she also had a schedule to review what she learned on the basis of Ebbinghaus curve. Those regular activities she mentioned in the above started from the 6th semester, during which she had the strongest motivational values. What's more, studying English has become her regular behavioral routines.

In student B' answer, he said that during the period of preparing for CETs, he worked harder, had a schedule per week, and the planned tasks must be completed within a week. He also mentioned study activities during and out of the classroom.

According to the above extracts of two participants' data, their activities to study the foreign language are regular and autopilot finally, without the language learners' specific volitional control. In the previous relevant studies, the participants also said their second language learning routines became an integral part of their daily lives.

“Personally, I think my vocabulary is very scarce, so I do it regularly every day. For example, at the beginning of the winter vacation, the number of English words was learned every day, and then starts from March, Since March this year, I memorized words from Momo APP every day. During the whole March, I studied English grammar systematically every day. Afterwards, now I learn and memorize a long and complex sentence per day.”—Student A

“Generally speaking, I worked harder for CET-4 and CET-6. Then I paid close attention to the teacher's steps and studied with him in class. After class, I generally chose some reading materials conducive to English learning, or did some English related exercises to enhance my ability. I usually designed a plan and then must finish it every week. Of course, in addition to the plan, some other practices were also added according to my own interests to improve myself better.”—Student B

The goal-setting theory says that proximal goals or sub goals have a powerful motivating role, for they can mark the progress and give immediate feedback and incentives for continued learning [4]. In the interview, participant A said her vocabulary was very short; therefore, she started with English words and phrases. After persisting in vocabulary learning, she found that English learning was smoother. So, her first short-term and small goal to recite words and phrases was achieved successfully, and what's more, the attainment of the sub goal gave her motivation to learn more according to the plan, such as grammar, and sentences. Student B is not so elaborate in describing his activities as Student A,

thus there is no obvious evidence to support the component of regular progress checks in a facilitative structure of a DMC.

“Firstly, my English vocabulary is very scared, so I started to recite them. I recited English words from Hongbaoshu (an English vocabulary book with different versions), with a unit per day. But I still need to review what learned in the previous day. I do this according to Ebbinghaus curve (which is famous in the field of psychology and used to offer the help and feedback for memorizing sth.) ... now I have already finished all the words. And then I began English grammar in March. When completing grammar study, now I study long and complex sentences every day.”—Student A

A DMC in language learning is compared to an oceanic current, which has its geographical points of origin [4]. Similarly, there is also an obvious start point/turning point for a DMC, which is triggered by a specific event, or by a combination of individual factors. Student A mentioned a combination of factors that send her into a DMC-like stage. She claimed that both the internal and external factors played the role: she wanted to make myself perfect from inner heart. She also had a plan to study further and English test is a must. Besides, to perform better in future job interview in English drive her to study English harder. While for student B, he mentioned different kinds of factors that stimulated him to set foot in the process of strong motivational English learning: one is to pass the English tests of CET4/6, another is to communicate with foreigners fluently, and a third is the competing pressure from the people around in a special period.

4.3. The Unique Sense of Joy and Satisfaction: The Positive Emotional Loading

A significant and highly characteristic aspect of DMCs is the positive emotional tenor and unique sense of joy and satisfaction exhibited by those caught up in the current [4]. When it comes to the emotional states, both of them expressed the happy, positive, fulfilling and satisfied feelings when learning English within a DMC-like process. Especially in student A’s description, she used the words like very happy when getting achievements, more positive than negative because of great desire to do the thing well, and so on.

“It may also be inspired by an inner motivation. I will feel that I must do this thing well. Since I decide to do it, I will seriously complete it every day, so I feel that it is accumulated bit by bit. You complete this thing step by step every day, and then you will be much easier to recite words or grammar in a month or two, and you will be more happy, When you really achieve an achievement, you’re really happy, huh. When you really learn something, I think that little difficulty is nothing at all. You are happy and have a sense of achievement.”

In student B’s transcription, the expressions like feeling relaxed, being interesting, more active and optimistic appeared.

“When I study English, I actually feel very relaxed. I usually feel that English

is a language. Then after I study English, I can use it in other places and communicate with others. Moreover, English is also a culture. Learning this culture itself is also very interesting. I can understand some customs, things and artistic things in other countries, I think it is very interesting, very interesting. I am generally a little more motivated than learning other classes. After all, I still like English. Then, because it is also my interest, other classes give me the feeling that it is very rigid. English is a little more flexible, so I'll be more active in learning."

When a learner is in the process of DMCs, study and accomplishment can be considered as generating experiences of intense personal pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment that are very different from the more transient state of intrinsic pleasure generated, for example, from an isolated learning activity [4]. This can be clearly embodied in the two participants' self-accounts.

However, participants also referred to their sense of difficulty, irritation or disappointment. For example, student A said, *"At the beginning, I felt very difficult. I got irritated many times when I recited the English words."* Similarly, student B stated, *"I felt a little upset and disappointed when I failed CET-6."* For Chinese English learners, the anxiety for learning is quite common, even though they are experiencing DMCs. Based on the above analysis, a conclusion may be drawn that the emotional loading in a DMC is complex, including fulfillment and satisfaction as well as negative ones. This corresponds with the theory of complex systems.

Nonetheless, their positive emotions outweighed those negative ones, which guaranteed the students' learning activities to move towards the goal and maintain their DMCs. This is because individuals can effectively relieve this kind of negative emotions by enhancing their self-efficacy with the aid of positive emotions. The two participants' report testified to this: *"Occasionally, it may be difficult to recite words, but I still feel that I should not give up. At that time, it may be negative, which may only account for 10%, but it is more positive. If I want to do well, I will still treat it positively."* *"I felt a little depressed when I didn't pass it, but I think I'll pass it. Anyway, I worked so hard, right? In addition, I'm interested. I think I'll pass this. Generally, I'm optimistic."*

5. Conclusions and Implications

This paper adopts a case study design to interview and analyze the main characteristics of Chinese Non-English Majors' directed motivation flow in the context of English as a foreign language in China. The research results prove the existence of continuous incentive energy flow, and provide more empirical data support for the existence and operation characteristics of its three motivational characteristics. The goal/vision-orientation of the system, the prominent structural function with self-promotion and the positive emotional bearing are all permeated in the process of motivational behaviors. Therefore, it provides more support for the effectiveness of this construction in Chinese

EFL context. The main findings are as follows: 1) for Chinese non-English majors, the launch and maintenance of a DMC process are due to a fact that they have their specific goals to pass English tests and further vision to improve themselves with a higher English proficiency. The interplay of distal vision and proximal goal sets their English study into a directed current with strong motivations until achieving their goals. 2) Once foreign language learners enter motivational currents, their goal-oriented activities have a high degree of consistency, and recurring behavior routines are established. During this process, the positive feedback brought by the completion of short-term or sub goals is conducive to improving students' self-efficacy and helping to maintain motivation energy. Of course, there is a clear starting point for the entry of motivation flow. 3) When foreign language learners are in the motivation currents, the emotional state will be of some complexity. Although positive emotions dominate, negative ones can be sometimes seen. At this time, however, they can consciously use self-regulation strategies to avoid the behavior deviating from the track of directional goals.

In addition to providing empirical evidence for the development and improvement of DMCs theory, this study also provides the following implications for foreign language teaching from the perspective of dynamic motivation: first, in foreign language teaching, attention should be paid to the motivation effect of language learning goals or visions. Especially in English classes, teachers can learn from the six-step vision training method advocated by Dornyei and Kubanyiova (2014) [15] to help students plan their goals and visions. Secondly, in the process of students' English learning, teachers can help or guide foreign language learners to set multiple close-up sub goals, because the realization of sub goals one by one will make individuals a sense of achievement and joy, which will lead to positive emotions to overcome difficulties. Thirdly, teachers should give appropriate positive feedback to students. At the same time, it is more important to train students' practical application ability of self-regulation strategies in order to deal with the possible negative emotions in the learning process.

Acknowledgements

This paper is funded and a research achievement of Zhejiang Yuexiu University School-level educational reform project *The Actions Research on College English Teaching Aimed at the Cultivation of Students' Critical Abilities—Based on Curriculum's Ideology and Politics* (XJJG2103)¹. The paper is a stage outcome of the research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

¹Project information in Chinese: 本文系浙江越秀外国语学院 2021 年度校级教育教改课题“以‘关键能力’培养为目标的大学英语教学行动研究---基于课程思政背景”（XJJG2103）的结题成果。

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