

**Book Review: Multilingual selves
and motivations for learning
languages other than English in
Asian contexts, edited by Anas
Hajar and Syed Abdul Manan
(2024), 238 Pages. £25.00 (eBook),
£34.95 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-1-
80041-721-2, Multilingual Matters.**

Reviewed by:

Shi Chengjie

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

Correspondence

Email: 1155204825@link.cuhk.edu.hk

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 17 March 2024

Revised: 10 October 2024

Accepted: 16 December 2024

Despite typological differences, children invariably attain fluency in their native languages. Foreign language learners, however, show a great degree of variation in terms of ultimate attainment even in the same learning conditions. This intriguing inter-learner variation has been a subject of academic interest since Skehan's (1989) seminal work *Individual Differences in Second Language Learning*, which to a large extent laid the foundation for further investigation into factors such as aptitude and motivation as important contributors to success in mastering a foreign language (Dörnyei, 2005). Today, it is a fact beyond dispute that motivation plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of additional languages (Dörnyei, 2005), yet the preponderance of academic literature seems to focus on English learners only, leaving many lacunae to be filled. This book is an attempt to fill one of them by studying learners of languages other than English in a particular context, namely, Asia.

This book represents, as Gao writes in the Foreword, the first he is aware of to explore language learners' motivations for learning languages other than English (LOTEs) in a variety of Asian contexts. In motivation research, there has long been a monolingual bias mainly due to the dominance of English on the global linguistic scene. As a result, there is a dearth of research on motivations for learning other languages. With the multilingual turn in second language acquisition (SLA), however, it is now imperative that researchers 'take a critical look at the largely uncharted area of motivation to learn languages other than English' (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). This book is, in a sense, a trailblazer that intrepidly ventures into a terra incognita.

The first chapter is a brief introduction to the topic of motivation to learn LOTEs, providing the rationale behind this project and its theoretical background, starting with the premise that motivation research in SLA is moving in more multilingually-attuned directions. In Chapter 2, Henry describes four concepts related to the experience of language learning, which are, a *monolingual self*, a *contentedly bilingual self*, an *ideal multilingual self* and an *ought-to multilingual self*. Among them, the *contentedly bilingual self* and the *ideal multilingual self* are referred to as higher-order self-guides which Henry uses interview data from his previous research to illustrate. He also references Liu's (2022) study to account for the *ought-to multilingual self*, which in Liu's words is the product of interactions between three different levels: language ideology at the macro level, the social and linguistic environment of the learner and individual internal factors. Right before he ends the chapter, he reminds the reader of the obstacles that stand in the way of motivation researchers.

Chapter 3 and 4 are devoted to Chinese university students learning LOTEs. Chapter 3 is a case study of Arabic learners while Chapter 4 examines the construction of ought-to multilingual selves while learning German. Both studies approach their questions qualitatively, heavily relying on interviews and the participants' narrative accounts. In Chapter 3, An and Zheng find that learning Arabic enabled the participants to enhance their agentive selves, which were flexible and diverse and recommend that greater attention be paid to what circumscribed Arabic teaching and learning in China, including the lack of pedagogical resources, an immature proficiency assessment system and the marginalised status of the language. In Chapter 4, Wang identifies a particular reason for learning German among beginners, which is the fear of losing their competitiveness in the workplace since nowadays more and more job-seekers are bilingual and it is only through learning a third language that they can remain competitive. As they progress, those learners begin to develop more personal motives for learning the language. By comparing the divergent and evolving motivational trajectories of the two learners Xiaoyue and Ling, Wang concludes that ought-to multilingual selves are crucial to sustaining LOTE motivation.

Chapters 5 and 6 take the reader to China's neighbouring country, Japan. In Chapter 5, case study is again employed. Takahashi finds that students have quite different

trajectories of learning motivation, which echoes the finding of Wang in the previous chapter. In this study there is one student that quit learning the LOTE, while the others persisted in LOTE learning. Takahashi urges policymakers to strike a balance between English and LOTEs in Japan and suggests that positive LOTE learning experiences can help sustain motivation. In Chapter 6, Umino analyses multimodal language learning histories (MLLHs) to argue that the consumption of pop culture is conducive to LOTE learning as it keeps learners intrinsically motivated. She also highlights the potential of multimodal data in studying LOTE learning experiences.

The six chapters that follow present studies on LOTE learning motivations in countries other than China and Japan, which have received the most academic attention. Those countries range from Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, to Syria, Pakistan and Kazakhstan, countries whose cultural landscapes and sociopolitical circumstances differ significantly with those of their East Asian and Southeast Asian counterparts. In Chapter 7, the modelling effect of near peer role models (NPRMs) is emphasised and the importance of learners' international citizenship identity in sustaining motivation is noted. Chapter 8 shows how positive attitudes to the Portuguese language and culture can be achieved with classroom activities, using a sample of Indonesian students, whose native language is heavily influenced by Portuguese. Chapter 9 demonstrates a connection between multilingual profiles and motivation in language majors in Malaysia. Chapter 10 adopts a Bourdieusian approach to studying motivations for learning Chinese among Pakistani students, revealing how the increasing linguistic capital of Chinese is related to the concomitant increase in motivation to learn the language in Pakistan. Chapter 11 is unique in that it explores multilingual selves in war-torn regions. The study identifies language learning as a stepping stone to cultural vocational enrichment and one of its major implications is that teachers should integrate peace-building competencies into their skillset. Finally, in Chapter 12, Han applies the self-discrepancy theory of psychology to language learning and quantitatively analyses the influence of self-discrepancy on emotional experiences, lending a fresh perspective to the topic.

I particularly enjoy the case studies in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 as they provide in-depth insights into what motivates learners to learn a new language when, in most contexts, their native languages and English would suffice. The findings can shed light on Asian countries' language education policies which, at present, focus almost exclusively on English. Another strength I would like to highlight is the extensive applications of the self system approach throughout this book, which reflect the ontological shifts in motivation research. As the studies in the book consistently examine individual cases and groups of learners within this theoretical framework, showing the full extent of its malleability in different settings, even novice researchers will likely know enough about how to scrutinise motivation trajectories and multilingual selves through the same lens after reading the studies showcased in the

volume.

On the other hand, this book does have some limitations. Although it is laudable that this groundbreaking work has filled a research gap long overlooked by eurocentric scholars, many parts of Asia, with their multilingual populations, remain understudied. Due to the heterogeneity of Asia and the prodigious number of LOTE learners there, it would be too ambitious, and indeed impractical, to include all the Asian countries in a single volume, a fact that makes this limitation almost inevitable. Another drawback is that the majority of the participants in the studies included are university-educated learners provided with much explicit instruction, with the internally displaced Syrians in Chapter 11 being the only exception. This book may benefit from a second volume that looks beyond the university classroom and traverses the barren deserts, lush forests and snowy plateaus where less visible LOTE learners live.

As for methodology, most of the studies in this book use a qualitative approach, which can provide a contextual understanding of the topic and rich, subjective insights. Indeed, if what the researcher aims for is individual experiences and beliefs, interactive elicitation makes perhaps the best choice. On the other hand, if depth instead of breadth is the priority, case studies are likely to outperform any quantitative alternative. Still, future research might consider using a mixed-method approach for triangulation and greater validity. Some studies also fail to take into consideration the influence of the participants' significant others on their multilingual selves and motivation. For example, a learner may be particularly motivated because he adores a speaker of the target language. This drawback should be remedied in future studies. Finally, although the editors include teachers, students and policymakers in the intended audience of the book, it is very likely that those people would struggle with the complex terminology it contains, and since most of the discussions are highly theoretical, teachers may be disappointed at the general lack of practical implications that can guide their pedagogical practices.

In conclusion, this book would be a useful read for researchers interested in motivation and the role of self-guides in language learning, and it deserves accolades for filling a major research gap with an interdisciplinary approach, its contribution to language learning motivation studies undeniable. However, this book is unlikely to appeal to the general reader due to its abstruse nature. Some of the studies also have obvious limitations and as a result, it is unclear how the findings obtained from those largely qualitative investigations may generalise to other contexts and types of learners other than university students. To make an analogy, this book only provides a substructure. To build this nascent field into a grand edifice, more academic endeavours must be made to provide it with a superstructure.

ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1840-6519>

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

Rights and Permissions

Open Access

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which grants permission to use, share, adapt, distribute and reproduce in any medium or format provided that proper credit is given to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if any changes were made.

www.EUROKD.com

References

- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in Second language acquisition*. Routledge.
- Hajar, A., & Manan, S. A. (Eds.). (2024). *Multilingual selves and motivations for learning languages other than English in Asian contexts*. Multilingual Matters.
- Liu, M. (2022). *Multilingual future self-guides: A mixed-methods study of learners of multiple foreign languages in China* [Apollo - University of Cambridge Repository]. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.87020>
- Skehan, P. (1989). *Individual differences in second-language learning*. Arnold.
- Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2017). Beyond global English: Motivation to learn languages in a multicultural world: Introduction to the special issue. *The Modern Language Journal*, 101(3), 451–454. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12407>