

Storytelling motivation: Creating role models with inspirational stories

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Abstract

Motivating students is an important concern for language teachers. One of the most direct ways to motivate students is for the teacher to talk them into it. This study investigates the effectiveness of narrating inspirational stories about successful role models on motivating a sample of Saudi university learners of English ($N = 270$). Teachers of the experimental group told their students motivational stories about famous people associated with the English culture as a warm-up activity for a period of about four weeks. Results of t -tests showed that the experimental group reported a significant reduction in anxiety ($d = 0.41$). However, there were no significant differences between the two groups in integrativeness, motivation, or attitudes toward the learning situation. The role of creating role models for language learners is discussed in light of the present results.

Keywords: storytelling, role models, anxiety, motivational stories

Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in the pedagogical implications of motivation principles to language classrooms (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Lamb, 2017). A parallel line of inquiry also interested in classroom application is found in evidence-based second language pedagogy (e.g., Sato & Loewen, 2019). However, as Sato and Csizér (in press) explain, these two lines of inquiry have tended to take separate paths with little cross-pollination. Motivation and language learning psychology more generally have tended to favor observational questionnaire-heavy designs (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Al-Hoorie et al., 2021). On the other hand, the tradition of evidence-based pedagogy has utilized intervention designs but with little attention to the psychological dimension of the learning process (e.g., DeKeyser & Prieto Botana, 2019).

There are at least three approaches for possible intersections uniting these two lines of inquiry (Sato & Csizér, in press). One approach is for learner psychology research to draw more from actual behavior rather than self-report questionnaires (Al-Hoorie, 2018; see also Baumeister et al., 2007). This allows researchers to observe actual behavior rather than having to infer it from learners' report. A second approach is to examine the characteristics of the learning environment, teacher practices, and their relation to learner motivation (Dewaele, 2020; Dörnyei, 2019). This type of investigation sheds light on what psychological factors can potentially help promote better learning. Finally, researchers could conduct interventions targeting motivation and other psychological variables (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020a; Lamb, 2017) in order to ascertain the effectiveness of these practices.

This paper reports a study that draws from the second and third approaches above. It reports a study on the relationship between pedagogical practice and learner motivation using an interventional research design. Teachers narrated motivational stories based on real individuals—serving as role models—associated with the target culture. This intervention took place at the beginning of the class as a warm-up activity for about four weeks. Little research has been conducted on the motivational aspect of warm-up activities at the beginning of the class, and therefore this study aims to fill in this gap and provide some evidence-based pedagogical recommendations.

Motivation and Role Models

One well-known strategy to promote human motivation, and language learning motivation more specifically, is creating role models. One process through which role models have an effect on motivation is vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Vicarious experience, or learning by observation more generally, is an essential process in learning whereby one learns a skill by watching models before engaging in the task firsthand. Similarly, role models can enhance the learner's motivation through providing information about one's capability of successfully performing the task in question prior to engaging in it. Indeed, "Role models in general have been found to be very influential on student motivation" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, p. 215).

In a large-scale international study, Muir et al. (in press) offer interesting insights into the role models of language learners. The researchers administered a survey to a sample of over 8,000 participants from 155 L1 backgrounds. Their results showed that about 68% of the respondents reported having an English language role model. The participants also reported four main dimensions that determined their role models: command of the language, paralinguistic features (e.g., personality, facial expressions), personal attributes (e.g., age, job), and language accent or variety. Furthermore, the majority of the participants reported having an English native speaking role model (about 64%) who is older than them (78%) and who is famous (i.e., not personally known to them; 55%). Most of these famous role models were

TV/film personalities, politicians, authors/poets, singers/musicians, and YouTubers/vloggers. Compared to females, male respondents were more likely to report role models with these characteristics (i.e., male, famous, and native speakers of English).

Based on these results, Muir et al. (in press) argue that their findings “lend strong support to the claim that role modelling is thoroughly deserving of more systematic and detailed investigation.” Role models may be peers, near-peers, and teachers; famous (i.e., not personally known) individuals; fictitious (e.g., animated) characters; or even imagined. If these role models are not acknowledged in language teaching, according to Pavlenko and Norton (2007), motivation may suffer. Acknowledging these role models may encourage greater investment and identity enactment by language learners. There is unanimous agreement among L2 scholars about the vital role of self and identity processes in successful language learning, regardless of their ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions (see Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2020; Noels & Giles, 2009).

To attempt to motivate learners with role models who are native speakers of the target language, as observed in Muir et al. (in press), might suggest that this strategy can additionally enhance integrativeness. Integrativeness refers to the learner’s “willingness or affective ability to take on characteristics of another cultural group” (Gardner, 2010, p. 9). However, intervention research in this regard has not been very successful. As reviewed by Gardner and Tremblay (1994), research that attempted to improve attitudes toward the L2 community through exposing students to aspects of the target culture has led to conflicting evidence. In a similar vein, Gardner et al. (2004) found that, in nine classes, there was significant variation in learners’ attitudes toward the learning situation, which can be attributed to the specific characteristics of each class (including the teacher). At the same time, integrativeness did not vary as much among these nine classes. This pattern suggests that integrativeness is more stable, and may perhaps be influenced by the home environment especially at a younger age (Gardner, 1985, 2007).

In sum, these findings suggest that creating role models may have the potential to improve language learners’ motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Muir et al., in press). At the same time, especially as learners grow older, role models might not have as much of an appreciable impact on their integrativeness or attitudes toward the target community—at least if not done in a systematic, long-term fashion.

Motivation and Storytelling

Storytelling has been a fascination for humankind throughout history. Humans seem to have a natural attraction to stories. People of all ages are attracted to storytelling because it requires no more than the ability to listen and imagine. Predating writing, storytelling has been used for as various reasons as entertainment, education, and conveying and preserving cultural heritage, values and mores. Nowadays, the ancient art of storytelling has its own World Storytelling Day as well as a Society for Storytelling. This art has also recently morphed into the business of motivational speaking, earning professional motivational speakers significant profits.

Language learning researchers have capitalized on the potential of stories (Ghanizadeh et al., 2020; Lucarevschi, 2016). Some research has compared the incorporation of storytelling in language teaching with traditional textbook teaching. The rationale of this research stems from the idea that storytelling is more enjoyable and engaging, which can make the material more memorable to learners and consequently lead to better language uptake (e.g., Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011; Isbell et al., 2004). Another line of research uses stories to promote social interaction and collaboration among students and with the teacher. The resulting interaction involves longer meaningful conversations and more student-initiated turn-taking, again

facilitating language development (e.g., Ko et al., 2003; Li & Seedhouse, 2010). These approaches treat storytelling largely as a teaching tool.

When it comes to using stories as a motivational tool, one approach draws from narrative stories as a means of professional development. Drawing from McAdams and Pals's (2006) framework, Dörnyei (2017) calls attention to the role of *narrative identity*, referring to reconstruction of one's own evolving life story. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) maintain that there is a dynamic interplay between the characteristics of particular situations, dispositional traits (i.e., relatively stable, decontextualized dimensions of individual differences, such as introversion), characteristic adaptations (more contextualized attributes, such as communication apprehension), and life narratives. Life narratives are thought to be at the center of this network due to its vital and malleable nature (see also Hiver et al., 2019; Hiver et al., 2020). In Dörnyei's (2017) words, "the way people shape their life narrative will shape their whole mindset" (p. 90).

Another approach drawing from the motivational effect of stories incorporates storytelling into the curriculum. Some of this research has provided evidence for the motivational effect of storytelling. In a year-long study, Yang and Wu (2012) found that when language learners were asked to collaboratively produce digital stories and share them with their peers, their motivation improved—as well as their critical thinking skills and their language achievement. In a similar vein, Castañeda (2013) reported that storytelling was an effective tool for language learners to communicate their emotions. Students formed personal investments and emotional connections to the stories because the task appeared authentic and meaningful to them. Parallel to this research is found in randomized controlled trials showing that storytelling might have the potential to reduce anxiety in patients (Sekhavatpour et al., 2019), an effect that might be especially salient when the control group receive no particular intervention (e.g., standard care or waitlist control; see Hartling et al., 2013).

However, from a practical perspective, it is not always possible to recast the lesson or the whole curriculum as a story, as some studies reviewed above have done. But it is relatively straightforward for the teacher to tell their students an inspirational story (e.g., before the lesson starts). According to Dörnyei (2001), teacher motivational strategies map onto one of four stages: creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive self-reflection. An inspirational story at the start of the lesson could be one way to generate initial motivation and prepare learners for the lesson to come. Motivational stories, especially those based on role models, may stimulate learners' attention and enhance their engagement. Aptly put by Murphey (1998), "heroines and heroes, intellectual and financial wizards, and people in high and low places in histories, stories and society inspire us throughout our lives with their deeds and ideas" (p. 201).

In short, the above review suggests that teacher use of inspirational stories could lead to more student enjoyment, motivation, and engagement (Hiver et al., 2021). This might be manifested in a more favorable evaluation of the teacher. This strategy might additionally reduce student anxiety since motivational stories based on role models could address uncertainties about the learner's self-efficacy and competence by providing positive analogies of accomplishment (Dörnyei, 1994, p. 281).

Theoretical Framework of the Present Study

This study adopts Gardner's (1979, 1985, 2010) socio-educational model. Although it has been claimed that this model loses its value in the context of global English in that the target community becomes less and less defined, as explained below, this argument does not seem to

do justice to this model. The socio-educational model has demonstrated its worth on multiple fronts.

Conceptually, integrativeness has never referred to any actual integration to a well-defined target group. As Gardner explained,

from the point of view of the socio-educational model, integrativeness has never meant “to integrate” into the other community. And I know in all of our investigations I never met a student who was learning the second language in order to integrate into the other community. This particular interpretation was made by other researchers who were reading meaning into the concept. (Gardner, 2010, p. 223)

The semantic baggage that the term *integrativeness* was taken to have also led Gardner (2007) to suggest an alternative term: “Because of the excess meanings that have become associated with the ‘integrative’ concept, I now sometimes refer to it as Openness, or Openness to Cultural Identification” (p. 15). This notion, Gardner (2007) continued, is comparable to other constructs such as international posture (Yashima, 2002).

In the context of globalization, one could argue that, with these nuanced refinements, integrativeness could therefore be reframed as openness toward an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983; Norton, 2000). Since most language learners in foreign language contexts typically have no direct interaction with native speakers, and since they have to rely on cultural artifacts, the media, and online communities, the target community for all practical purposes is imagined—created, recreated, and evolved within the learner’s mind. In Norton’s words,

in many language classrooms, the target language community may be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. (Norton, 2013, p. 3)

This is why different learners can form very different conceptions of the target community. From this perspective, therefore, the claim that globalization invalidates integrativeness (or openness to a target community) becomes problematic.

Empirically, the socio-educational model has been applied successfully to different contexts around the world, including Brazil, Croatia, Japan, Poland, Romania, and Spain (Gardner, 2007, 2010). Meta-analytic research has also shown that the model exhibits superior predictive validity compared with some other language motivation models (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; see also Claro, 2020). Indeed, findings by Muir et al. (in press) provide additional empirical support to the notion that a significant proportion of English language learners worldwide today still report role models that are native speakers of English or have native-like command of the language (see also Gearing & Roger, 2019, for a similar argument).

Psychometrically, the socio-educational model provides the most detailed measures in the language motivation field. These measures have undergone extensive psychometric validation (Gardner, 1985). They involve three main constructs, each further subdivided into subconstructs. *Motivation* consists of desire to learn the language, motivational intensity, and attitudes toward learning the language. *Integrativeness* represents attitudes toward the target community, interest in foreign languages, and integrative orientation. *Attitudes toward the learning situation* covers evaluation of the teacher and of the language course. Finally, Gardner (2010, p. 172) additionally argued that integratively motivated individuals are expected to express lower anxiety.

This level of detail in the socio-educational model makes it an ideal and comprehensive model to examine the effectiveness of motivational interventions. The present article reports

the results of an intervention study examining the effectiveness of motivational storytelling on student motivation. It combines the second and the third approaches recommended by Sato and Csizér (in press), namely an intervention targeting learner psychological variables.

Based on the literature review above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The treatment has no effect on the learners' integrativeness.

H2: The treatment has a positive effect on their motivation.

H3: The treatment has a positive effect on their attitudes toward the learning situation (the teacher and the course).

H4: The treatment leads to a reduction in the learners' anxiety.

Method

Participants

The participants ($N = 270$) were freshman language learners, with an age range of 18–20, studying at an all-male college in Saudi Arabia. They were in their first semester of the foundation year, after successful completion of which they qualify to proceed to their technical or business majors. The experimental group consisted of five intact classes ($n = 129$). The control group also came from five other classes ($n = 141$).

The students were taking intensive English classes full-time (24 hours a week). They had separate classes for grammar, reading and vocabulary, listening, and writing. Each class was typically taught by a different teacher. The teachers taking part in this study were the grammar teachers. They were experienced teachers with a minimum of 10 years of experience teaching English.

Instruments

Role models were selected based on the characteristics of role models that are commonly reported by learners (Muir et al., in press). The choice fell on 10 people: Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, Colonel Sanders, Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, Henry Ford, Roman Abramovich, John Baird, and John Griffin. Albert Einstein and Roman Abramovich are not native speakers of English, though the former lived in the United States until his death and the latter is the owner of a famous English football club. These 10 people, henceforth inspirational characters, were selected because they were successful either intellectually or financially. This was done in the hope that it would appeal to a wider range of students. On average, a two-page summary was prepared for each inspirational character from various internet sources and given to the participating instructors. The summary was based on the major achievements of each character and was organized in a chronological order.

At the end of the intervention, the participants responded to nine six-point Likert questionnaire scales adapted from Gardner (1985, 2010). These scales represented integrativeness (Integrative Orientation, Interest in Foreign Languages, and Attitudes toward the Target Community), motivation (Motivational Intensity, Attitudes toward Language Learning, and Desire to Learn the Language), attitudes toward the learning situation (Evaluation of the Language Teacher and Evaluation of the Language Course), and Anxiety. The reliabilities of these scales are presented in the Results section below.

Procedure

Five classes were randomly selected, along with five more control classes. The grammar teachers of the experimental group were asked to participate in the experiment, and they agreed. The researcher met with these teachers and explained the nature of the experiment. A workshop was held to discuss the use of storytelling to motivate language learners. The teachers brainstormed ideas and practiced storytelling while emphasizing the motivational aspects of the story.

The teachers were asked to spend two days on each of the 10 inspirational characters, narrating the story in English during the first 10–15 minutes of the class as a warm-up activity. The teachers completed the task in about four weeks. The intervention took place during the latter part of the semester. The participants completed the questionnaire during class time. The questionnaire was administered in Arabic to avoid language interference, and the researcher was present to answer any questions about it. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institution prior to the study.

Results

The reliabilities of the nine scales used in this study are found in Table 1. All scales showed adequate reliability, with the lowest being .62 for Desire to Learn the Language.

The results are presented in Table 2. The experimental and the control groups did not show any significant differences in most of the motivation measures at the end of the experiment. A clear exception was Anxiety. The experimental group showed significantly lower Anxiety with an effect size approaching medium ($d = 0.41$). The significance level of this comparison was smaller than the Bonferroni-adjusted value for nine comparisons ($\alpha = .006$).

The results additionally showed a borderline significant value for evaluation of the teacher. However, since it was larger than the Bonferroni-corrected significance level, caution must be exercised in its interpretation.

Table 1

Scales and their reliabilities

Scale	No. of Items	α
Integrativeness		
Integrative Orientation	5	.79
Interest in Foreign Languages	6	.77
Attitudes toward the Target Community	6	.83
Motivation		
Motivational Intensity	10	.81
Attitudes toward Language Learning	6	.77
Desire to Learn the Language	6	.62
Attitudes toward the learning situation		
Evaluation of the Language Teacher	6	.86
Evaluation of the Language Course	5	.80
Anxiety	5	.70

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of using inspirational stories based on real-life role models associated with the target language community. The intervention was applied during the first part of the lesson, the warm-up phase, which has received little attention from a motivational perspective. The following sections discuss the results in relation to the four hypotheses of this study.

Table 2

Results of t-tests

Scale	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Integrativeness						
Integrative Orientation	Experimental	5.03	0.78	0.98	.328	0.12
	Control	4.93	0.88			
Interest in Foreign Languages	Experimental	4.84	0.81	0.38	.707	0.04
	Control	4.81	0.85			
Attitudes toward the Target Community	Experimental	5.02	0.72	1.18	.237	0.14
	Control	4.90	0.95			
Motivation						
Motivational Intensity	Experimental	4.36	0.87	0.49	.626	0.06
	Control	4.31	0.75			
Attitudes toward Language Learning	Experimental	5.20	0.73	0.42	.673	0.05
	Control	5.16	0.73			
Desire to Learn the Language	Experimental	5.16	0.60	0.65	.517	0.07
	Control	5.20	0.58			
Attitudes toward the learning situation						
Evaluation of the Language Teacher	Experimental	4.34	0.95	1.97	.050	0.24
	Control	4.09	1.14			
Evaluation of the Language Course	Experimental	4.81	0.83	0.02	.988	0.00
	Control	4.81	0.96			
Anxiety	Experimental	2.53	0.84	3.36	.001	0.41
	Control	2.91	1.02			

Note. *df* = 268. Bonferroni-corrected significance level = .006

Integrativeness

As expected, the intervention showed no significant effect on the learners' integrativeness toward the target community. Following the socio-educational model, this construct was operationalized using three scales: integrative orientation, interest in foreign languages, and attitudes toward the target community. One explanation for the lack of a significant effect is that learners' value system is relatively established by the time they reach higher education. It seems rather ambitious to expect that narrating some stories before class would transform such well-developed intergroup attitudes. Furthermore, learning about a few role models may not necessarily have a direct and substantial impact on attitudes toward the community as a whole. Overall, this finding echoes Dörnyei's (2001) doubtful remark: "given that this system has developed through long years of exposure to varied world experiences, isn't it an illusion for us, teachers, to expect to be able to make lasting changes in it?" (p. 51).

This finding is also in line with those obtained by Gardner et al. (2004). The researchers examined the motivational change in different classes taught by different teachers. Their results showed that integrativeness-related variables exhibited the least change during a full academic year. They did find a significant change in attitudes toward foreign languages, which is the most generic dimension of integrativeness, though they still speculated whether this was a Type I error (p. 29) and called for further research on it. The results of the present study do not provide evidence that motivational storytelling improves interest in foreign languages.

An alternative perspective to look at this issue is whether it is ethical for language teachers to attempt to modify their students' attitudes toward other groups. Ushioda (in press) described this practice as a form of "social control." Certain roles of teachers as motivators raise complex ethical questions about power inequality, politics, and social control discourse—especially when it comes to intergroup relations. From this perspective, therefore, the fact that the present intervention did not show a significant effect on students' integrativeness may be seen as a favorable outcome.

Motivation

Contrary to the second hypothesis of this study, the intervention did not seem to have an impact on the learners' motivation. One explanation of this finding is the short duration of the study. The intervention took place over about four weeks only, a period that may not have been sufficient to effect substantial and durable changes in the motivation of the students. Furthermore, since motivation is a complex, multifaceted construct, it can be influenced by various factors and not only those within the classroom. Teacher use of a certain strategy is but one factor influencing motivation. This is due to the complexity of language learning motivation and its interaction with factors occurring outside the classroom and beyond the teacher's control (see Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016, 2020b). Further research should examine whether a more extended use of motivational stories can have a more tangible impact on student motivation (e.g., Hiver et al., 2019; Hiver et al., 2020).

Findings by Bernaus and Gardner (2008) may shed additional light on the present results. They report that, in the context of teacher use of motivational strategies, enjoyment of the learning environment (see also next section) does not always lead to higher motivation. Interestingly, class enjoyment—when it does not enhance motivation—may actually be associated with *negative* language achievement. In other words, students might enjoy certain innovative strategies wittily devised by the teacher—"story time" in the present case—but if that enjoyment is not associated with an increase in motivation, such strategies might backfire. This may be because students lose class time that could have been devoted to learning the language and to developing their skills in it. This possibility suggests that motivational strategies must be viewed as part of the overall picture of learning dynamics.

Attitudes Toward the Learning Situation

The results show a potential effect of the intervention on evaluation of the teacher. This may make sense considering that the inspirational stories were narrated by the teacher. The students apparently enjoyed the lessons more due to these stories and then rated the teacher more favorably. Nevertheless, the teachers participating in this intervention, as is commonly the case in language classes, were not the only class teachers. Instead, each class was taught by two or three other teachers as well, teaching different skills. The questionnaire asked students to evaluate their teachers in general not the teacher participating in the study specifically. This

was done to avoid potentially suggesting to the learners that they should rate the teacher favorably due to the effort they had put in, which could lead to a biased evaluation.

One mechanism for this potential effect on teacher evaluation is that inspirational stories may help create a pleasant and relaxing class atmosphere (see Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Teacher behavior is one of the most influential motivation tools, and therefore students' attitude and motivation will likely be colored by it. For example, it might enhance the learners' sense of teacher emotional support (Patrick & Ryan, 2005; Patrick et al., 2007), which is directly and indirectly associated with satisfaction of basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence), enhanced willingness to communicate, and higher language achievement (Dewaele et al., 2019; Joe et al., 2017).

In contrast to evaluation of the language teacher, there was no significant difference between the two groups in their evaluation of the course. This might be due to the fact that evaluation of the course requires a more comprehensive perspective. Simply introducing an inspirational story before the lesson may be unlikely to transform the whole learning environment into a favorable one. A similar pattern of results was obtained by Gardner et al. (2004), who found that although attitudes toward the language teacher changed over time, attitudes toward the language course were more resistant to change. Improving the learning situation likely requires recognizing what concerns students perceive and addressing these concerns effectively.

Anxiety

The intervention showed a clear effect on reducing anxiety. It had an effect size approaching medium ($d = 0.41$), a magnitude considered sufficient for judging educational outcomes and for justifying interventions. According to Hattie (2009), a magnitude of 0.40 “sets a level where the effects of innovation enhance achievement in such a way that we can notice real-world differences, and this should be a benchmark of such real-world change” (p. 17). From this perspective, therefore, the results of the present study suggest that inspirational stories may have a meaningful effect on language learners' anxiety.

It seems that motivating learners with role models can increase their expectancy of success and their confidence in their abilities to overcome obstacles (see Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Vicarious learning has long been known to help learners both acquire skills they need and develop confidence in their ability prior to engaging in the task (Bandura, 1977, 1997). The current results suggest that role models can help remove uncertainties about the learner's ability to learn the language. This finding is consistent with the argument by Muir et al. (in press) that role models “can exert considerable influence in shaping our values, attitudes, and beliefs.”

The results also point toward the role of using individuals associated with the target community as role models. In this intervention, role models were not limited to native speakers specifically (see also Muir et al., in press). There were two inspirational characters affiliated with the English community even though they were non-native speakers. Indeed, these role models were not originally selected based on their language ability per se, but based on their success stories in different life endeavors—intellectual and financial. These success stories were intended to inspire the students and enhance their confidence in their abilities to succeed in their learning goals.

The results of this study also underscore the value of capitalizing on learners' imagined communities (Norton, 2013). English, perhaps more so than other languages (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017), opens up doors to membership in imagined international communities. Learners

imagine and reimagine their memberships in such communities, mediating their agency, investment, and resistance to learning English (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019). English affords learners the possibility of becoming “citizens of the world,” thus increasing their learning motivation. The role models used in the present study offered more than simply mastering language skills. They demonstrated real-life, modern day success in invention, science, business, and sports. As Norton (2013) put it, “If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (p. 50).

Pedagogical Implications

Interventions targeting learner psychological variables may have an indirect effect on language learning (Sato & Csizér, in press). The intervention examined in the present study seems to have an effect on reducing anxiety. Implications of this finding are discussed in this section in relation to the flexibility of the motivational storytelling strategy, its impact on the lesson, and ways to enhance its effectiveness.

One benefit of using a motivational strategy based on storytelling is its ease and flexibility. Storytelling is considered one of the most ancient strategies used by our ancestors. Teachers are most likely going to be very familiar with it and most may only need minimal training to use storytelling as a motivational strategy. Unlike some other strategies, motivational storytelling may not lose its novelty with time since the sustainability of its impact may be maintained with new stories. This can additionally be facilitated by creating a “story pool” that teachers can contribute to and draw from.

This strategy also seems to be a low-cost technique. It requires little more than using the warm-up phase of the class more effectively. Even if the impact of motivational storytelling on reducing anxiety is not durable, teachers can continue using this strategy to maintain this low level of anxiety. To do so, teachers do not have to be limited to real role models. They can also draw from fictional characters and ask their students to suggest role models they themselves find motivating. Teachers may also encourage students to take part in reading, creating and narrating stories to their fellow students for additional engagement with this activity (e.g., Yang & Wu, 2012).

The use of this strategy at the beginning of the class may have an effect on the atmosphere of that lesson subsequently. The resulting reduction in anxiety may encourage students’ willingness to communicate during that class (see Dewaele, 2019). Teachers should therefore be ready to take advantage of this possible increase in willingness to communicate by introducing relevant communicative activities. In addition to the nature of class activities, learners with different anxiety levels seem to react differently to feedback. When their anxiety is low, language learners may benefit more from feedback (DeKeyser, 1993; Rassaei, 2015). Furthermore, learners with low anxiety levels may be more receptive to feedback through recasts (Sheen, 2008). Teachers should therefore expect different classroom dynamics during the class and different learning outcomes as a result.

The effect of this intervention can be viewed as the first part of a two- (or multi-) stage intervention. Introducing role models first lowers the learners’ anxiety, which is then followed by a different treatment aimed at amplifying another aspect such as attention or creativity. Research into motivational strategies has typically been limited to investigating the effect of individual techniques. However, it seems informative to also examine the possibility of *staggered interventions* that cascade into different effects for different purposes.

Finally, it is important for the teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy in their particular contexts. It is likely that how effective this strategy is would depend on various factors, including the nature of the course and the age of the students, their current motivation, and their proficiency levels. Indeed, “no motivational strategy has absolute and general value because such strategies are to be implemented in dynamically changing and very diverse learning contexts” (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, p. 224). Teachers should continuously assess that the presumed motivational effect is actually taking place (see Bernaus & Gardner, 2008). Consequently, the motivationally conscious teacher should regularly make sure that students, even if they are clearly enjoying the “story time” part of the lesson, are actually benefiting from these stories, such as with increased learning motivation or decreased anxiety.

Conclusion

This study examined the feasibility of using inspirational stories as a motivational strategy. The results revealed a statistically significant effect on reducing anxiety but not on the other variables in the study. As explained above, this might be due to the relatively short duration of this study, and therefore future research should investigate the impact of longer intervention durations and of more intense role modeling (i.e., not just the first 10 minutes of the class). Further research should also examine the durability of the anxiety reduction effect obtained in this study. It is possible that this effect may dissipate after interventions with a shorter timeframe than those with longer durations.

Utilizing this strategy seems a low-cost technique. It requires neither financial recourses nor a significant amount of class time. The only resource needed is a handy pool of inspirational stories. Although there is plenty of internet sources providing such stories, it might be more helpful to create a customized story pool that is relevant to the learners in one’s particular context.

One limitation of this study was that the way teachers performed storytelling during their classes was not tightly controlled. The researcher was not present to observe the activity, and the teachers had no specialized training beyond a workshop at the beginning of the study. In other words, the current study was concerned with the effects this strategy would have when performed by average teachers. Future research could systemically examine the effectiveness of specific role modeling techniques.

Finally, one methodological limitation of the present study was that motivation baseline was not measured due to the short duration of the study and the relatively long survey (approaching 60 items). The participants were taking intensive language classes, so the relatively short interval between the two questionnaire administrations could have led to tediousness and possibly participant attrition. Nevertheless, the likelihood that these randomly selected groups had a preexisting anxiety difference (and not in any other variable) that exceeded the Bonferroni-corrected significance level seems low. This strategy, therefore, seems a promising avenue for future research.

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Bio

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