Motivational Implications of Heritage Language Identity

for Heritage Language Learning

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Abstract

The article discusses the significance of elements of Italian identity (Italianità) for the language learning motivation of learners of Italian descent studying their heritage language (HL) by means of foreign language (FL) courses in Wellington, New Zealand. Adopting a social constructivist perspective on both second language learning and the motivational processes underlying it, the study utilizes qualitative data collected through waves of semi-structured interviews from five case-study participants to map the influence that their constructions of Italianità exert on their motivational trajectories over the course of several months of learning. The paper discusses a selection of data excerpts to show how motivational fluctuations are the result of the learners' own processing of and reaction to elements of their sociocultural context. In particular, an analysis of the learners' accounts of social exchanges and other crucial events involving the use of the HL outside the classroom will illustrate how these can support motivation by reinforcing the learners' perceptions of their Italianità, strengthening existing learning goals and/or prompting the formation of new ones.The article concludes with some remarks on the implications for teaching practices and extra-curricular activities that could benefit HL learners by increasing their exposure to the HL outside the classroom while validating and encouraging the personal identity constructions and ambitions at the basis of their learning.

Keywords: motivation, heritage language identity, heritage language, language
        learning

Background

While existing definitions of heritage language (henceforth HL) learner vary significantly with respect to the necessary and sufficient conditions that bear on this label or classification (Wiley, 2001), there is widespread recognition among experts that HL learners are different from foreign language (henceforth FL) learners and that wherever possible, the two groups should be placed in separate programs (Draper & Hicks, 2000). This separation is often advocated in view of the different language competencies that heritage and non-heritage learners might bring to the classroom (for a review of studies see Kondo-Brown, 2003), but more recently discrepancies in *language learning motivation* have also been proposed as a discerning factor between FL and HL learners and as a key to understanding the dynamics and challenges of mixed learning settings (Kagan, 2005), prompting calls for increased research efforts on this subject (Kagan, 2005; Lee, 2006; Lee & Kim, 2007; Weger-Guntharp, 2006). Nevertheless, research efforts on this subject remain scarce, with most of the existent studies utilizing theoretical paradigms that pose motivation as *reasons* or *goals* for studying the HL (Kagan, 2005; Lacorte & Canabal, 2003; Lee & Kim, 2007) and not including a consideration of how issues related to personal constructions of heritage identity can support or hinder motivation *throughout* the learning process, meaning that to date it has been difficult to discern the finer emotional, cognitive and social processes influencing the motivational trajectories of HL learners and of the specific factors and events in and outside the classroom that can influence their motivation.

The current article is based on a doctoral research project which explored the links between Italian identity (or *Italianità*) and language learning motivation in the self-reported experiences of five learners of Italian as a HL enrolled in traditional FL courses in Wellington, New Zealand (Berardi-Wiltshire, 2009). The term *Italianità*, which is used throughout the study to refer to the participants' personal understanding of their own Italian

identity, has been chosen to denote an aspect of the learners' self-concept which they construct as a result of their interactions with their external world, and in particular with Italian people and environments throughout their whole lives. Like all aspects of identity/self-concept, *Italianità* is fluid and changes over time in response to interactions with the external world. As Phinney explains, "ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity within the large (sociocultural) setting" (2003, p. 63).

When considering HL learning from this perspective, it is easy to see that while the language classroom might be the place where most of the actual learning takes place, it is only one of many settings that are significant to the students' learning trajectories, as social interactions outside the classroom can be crucial in influencing one's construction of *Italianità*, and so also one's motivation to learn Italian.

In order to shed light on the role that sociocultural elements outside the classroom can play in supporting the motivational processes underlying HL learning, the current paper discusses a selection of data excerpts to show how motivational fluctuations are the result of the learners' own processing of and reaction to elements of their sociocultural context. In particular, an analysis of the learners' accounts of social exchanges and other crucial events involving the use of the HL outside the classroom will illustrate how these can support motivation by reinforcing the learners' perceptions of their *Italianità*, strengthening existing learning goals and/or prompting the formation of new ones.

Following the literature review and some notes on the research methodology, a discussion of selected data from four participant case studies will illustrate how sociocultural factors outside the classroom are heavily implicated in the maintenance and shifts of the motivational states of the learners throughout their learning, supporting a socially mediated

view of language learning motivation in which motivational fluctuations are explained as the result of the learners' own processing of and reaction to elements of their context. Throughout the discussion, particular attention is paid to how motivation is reinforced as a result of the learners' own understanding of HL-related social environments outside the classroom and of their own places within them, with a focus on illustrating some of the specific cognitive, emotional and social processes by which contextual elements come to play a crucial role in the motivational trajectories of the participants to the study.

The article concludes with some remarks on the implications for teaching practices and extra-curricular activities that could benefit HL learners by increasing their exposure to the HL outside the classroom while validating and encouraging the personal identity constructions and ambitions at the basis of their learning.

Theoretical Framework

To illustrate the influence of critical events involving HL speakers on the development and sustenance of learners' interest and enthusiasm throughout their learning, the current paper advocates a conceptualisation of motivation within a social constructivist model (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 119) which allows for a cognitive investigation of "how students differ in the way they value and interpret goals and how such differences in motivational thinking might affect their involvement in learning" (Ushioda, 2001, p. 97), while at the same time taking into account social and contextual influences.

Within the field of educational psychology, Rueda and Moll (1994) have proposed a conceptualisation of motivation consistent with sociocultural, interactionist perspectives on cognitive abilities as distributed and socially constructed:

> Motivation is not located solely within the individual without reference to the social and cultural contexts within which individual action take place…. The key point, again, is the interconnectedness of social and cognitive activity, where

psychological characteristics, such as motivation, are not viewed as characteristics of the individual, but of the individual-in-action within specific contexts (Rueda and Moll, 1994, pp. 120-121).

More recently, Ushioda (2003), has proposed a view of L2 motivation as a "socially mediated process" (p. 90) by suggesting that if learning is about "mediated participation" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148), the motivation to learn must also socially and culturally mediated. According to this view, motivation in learning an L2 is developed through social interactions within society. The resulting view of L2 motivation is one that sees the impetus to learn as coming from within the learner, but which is developed as a function of their engagement in interaction with motivationally supportive or unsupportive significant others in and out of the classroom.

Such a view of motivation is clearly in harmony with the social constructivist approach taken in the study, which sees motivation arousal and above all maintenance as dependent on the mediating role of interactions with people within the learner's context.

In line with a view of *Italianità* as fluid and socially mediated, motivation is seen not only as a relatively stable psycho-emotional state observable at one particular point in time, but also as a dynamic entity that changes and evolves throughout the participants' learning experiences, and this involves conceptualising motivation as having a temporal dimension.

Williams and Burden (1997) see L2 motivation as a temporal process comprising three stages: "reasons for doing something", "deciding to do something" and "sustaining the effort, or persisting" (p. 121). In the model by Williams and Burden (1997), this stage is reached once learning has begun, the learner needs to sustain the effort required to achieve their goal(s) to their satisfaction. Their persistence is seen as making continuous decisions to act towards their goal(s), by investing time and effort in each stage of the journey, but also by monitoring and regulating levels of motivation in response to the occurrences of demotivation

that are inherent to the learning process. According to the model, persistence will depend on the degree to which the initial motivation is sustained, but also on the nature and frequency of new waves of arousal. The social constructivist perspective of the model is evident in the fact that internal and external factors are not simply seen as having a direct influence on the learner's motivation and hence behaviour, but as working in interaction with each other and with the learner's personal characteristics. The learner is therefore not seen as a separate entity subject to single influences, but as a co-constructor of motivation through his or her interactions with the external world:

> A constructivist view of motivation centres around the premise that each individual is motivated differently. People will make their own sense of the various external influences that surround them in ways that are personal to them, and they will act on their internal disposition and use their personal attributes in unique ways. … However an individual's motivation is also subject to social and contextual influences. These will include the whole culture and context and social situation, as well as significant other people and the individual's interactions with these people. (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 120)

In order to illustrate the role that sociocultural factors can play in the motivational trajectories of HL learners, the present work is primarily concerned with this third part of the model, and in particular with the elements of the learners' sociocultural context that favourably influence motivation by offering opportunities to use the HL to explore, perform and negotiate one's HL identity through social exchanges with native speakers of the HL.

Methods

The participants

The participants to the study were five New-Zealand-born adult learners of Italian as a HL enrolled in FL courses offered by either the local university (Wellesley University) or the

local Italian social club (Club Italia)[1]. All participants were second or third-generation descendants of Italian immigrants to New Zealand with varying degrees of HL competency prior to beginning learning. In particular, our discussion will centre on data from the following learners:

(1) Marianne began the study of her HL in her early thirties through a beginners' course offered by the Club Italia. She had no previous knowledge of the language except for a few vocabulary items she learned at home from her farther and her Italian grandmother.

(2) Francesco grew up speaking Venetian[2] until the age of five, when under a teacher's recommendation, his family switched to English in order to support his education. Francesco was in his forties when he joined the Italian night classes at the Club Italia.

(3) Livia was born to Italian parents and she learned Neapolitan[3] at home. She left home at nineteen to attend Wellesley University, where she studied Italian among other subjects.

(4) Esther is the granddaughter of one of the very first Italian settlers in New Zealand; at sixty-five, she is also the president of the Club Italia. She first joined the club as a student of Italian in 1992, and she has been learning her HL ever since.

Instruments and procedures

Qualitative data was collected longitudinally through an average of five semi-structured interviews and participant observations in the classroom setting over the period of about eighteen months of learning. Data was analyzed inductively by putting to practice the

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[1] All names of institutions and people in this article are pseudonyms. These were chosen to reflect the ethnic origins of the real names, so that if the real name is an Italian name, the pseudonym is too.

[2] The dialect of Italian spoken in the area around Venice.

[3] The dialect of Italian spoken in the area around Naples.

general principles of a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as "flexible heuristic strategies" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259) to form a system of longitudinal cyclic analysis. After the first round of interviews, each interview guide included a number of questions common to all participants (aimed at eliciting data about individual motivational influences), as well as questions emerging from the analysis of data previously collected, allowing for the mapping of the influence that personal and changing constructions of *Italianità* exerted on individual motivational trajectories over time. Ultimately the system meant that each round of interviews simultaneously extended and deepened the pool of data while also revealing a number of new and potentially fertile paths of enquiry. In practical terms this gave rise to highly personalized interview guides while ensuring that all respondents were offered the opportunity to offer information on the same basic areas.

Discussion of findings

The following sub-sections discuss findings relating to cases in which the learners' motivation is intensified as a result of critical events involving linguistic exchanges with Italian speakers. In each case the discussion will highlight the significance that the event holds for the learners' understanding of their own Italian identity, as well as its consequences on aspects of their motivation to learn HL.

Contacts with speakers

An example of one such event is found in Francesco's story, when during one of the social gatherings organised by the local Italian Club, he meets Cecilia, a recent Italian immigrant to New Zealand. During the exchange that follows, Francesco makes a conscious decision to continue speaking Italian to Cecilia even though he knows they could use English instead.

A: You were on a high last time

F: Was I? I am actually on another one at the moment. At the night of the show

there were many different people and there was a lady, Cecilia that owns that

restaurant… Well she turned up and I was talking to her and it was very

interesting. I mean she was obviously very accommodating in the way she

spoke, but I actually really felt we had a reasonably… You know we were

both talking about the same thing for a little while, you know? (*laughs*) And

so that was quite a high, and as I said she was being very sympathetic with

me, but equally, we had a chat about all sorts of things… So I felt really good

after that.

The significance of the event for Francesco's motivation become evident when we

consider that he often likens his HL motivation to a "rollercoaster" during which moments of

discouragement and low energy ("lows") alternate with times whenhe feels good about his

abilities, satisfied with his progress, and eager to engage in further learning ("highs"). The

encounter with Cecilia proves to be important for Francesco's perception of his own Italian

skills, leading him to experience one of the emotional "highs" that he considers at the basis of

his motivation and even suggesting new venues for his learning:

I might write to the university and to the Italian Embassy and say I am a student

of Italian and I would like to meet some Italian people. You know I have heard

of people overseas doing that, where you take them out, buy them lunch, go to

the museum… Pay their admission, you say today I'd like to talk about…

something, and buy them lunch and give them ten, fifteen dollars, for an hour.

And using it more.

Ultimately, the event positively influences Francesco's motivation by broadening his

understanding of the social uses of his HL and injecting a much needed dose of enthusiasm in

his language learning, leading him to take active steps in finding native speakers of Italian

with whom to practise his newly discovered language skills. As a result of these, Francesco comes into contact with more native speakers. One relationship which proves particularly significant is the one Francesco establishes online with a man who lives in the Italian village where his family originates:

F: I found a website for the little village where my grandmother came from. (…) I wrote to the webmaster and said my grandmother came from the village, I am learning Italian, I have found this easy to read and interesting and so he wrote back and you see I wrote in Italian and he said oh no, you are doing ok, so that's been quite nice, but he said to me, a lot of the website is about migration and he said please tell me about your family 'cause I am very interested, plus I actually met one of his relatives, she was my grandmother's very good friend when they were very young girls, so I started to get together some dates and names from my family and some photos to show him who they were and so that's going out to him soon, and he's sending me the newsletter, apparently the title is in dialect but the text is in Italian, and it's written very simply, so I understand that well.

The on-going online friendship Francesco develops with this native speaker of Italian proves significant in terms of learning, as Francesco must engage with the language in order to communicate, but also crucial in terms of motivation, as Francesco's Italian friend offers him the practical means to reconstruct part of his family's history in Italy. For Francesco, whose main aim in learning his HL was to regain a sense of his personal connection to Italy and family-related aspects of his Italian identity, the opportunity to better his competence while learning about his Italian roots is highly exciting and deeply motivating.

Contact with relatives in Italy

Livia experiences a similar motivational boost when she receives an unexpected phone call from Italy and is forced to use her Italian to communicate with a relative who cannot speak English:

> L: Last time I was at home I was at home by myself and one of dad's cousins from Genova called, and I managed to talk to them for about ten minutes on the phone just blah blah blah, like it was really good and yeah she was saying how good I was at speaking Italian and I was like oh sweet…
>
> A: How did that feel?
>
> L: Yeah it felt good because (…) I didn't have a choice, I had to speak Italian. Anyway they kind of got what I was meaning and I spoke to my auntie, she's quite old and she knew what I was talking about… So it felt real good.

We can only fully appreciate the effect the exchange has on Livia's motivation when we consider that the phone call takes place towards the end of a three-year university degree in Italian during which Livia's negative reaction to elements of classroom learning and high levels of performance anxiety have dramatically reduced her HL learning motivation. For what is probably the first time since the beginning of her HL studies, Livia is able to overcome her self-consciousness and to carry out an entire exchange with a native speaker of Italian, even receiving compliments for her fluency. The successful interaction restores Livia's confidence in her own language abilities and as a result of it she renews her commitment to learning Italian, however this time she resolves to do it in a way which she feels better suited to her learning needs, namely by travelling to Italy and learning to speak by total immersion.

> That's why I need to go there, and be just put in a situation where no people can speak English, not even my parents or anyone and then I'd just speak it.

I am going pack up and go; yeah I am dying to go over there.

Yeah that's why I want to go, without mum, so I'll be forced to do it.

I can't wait to go to there.

I really want to go there and like without my mum even because I know that if

she's there I'll just rely on her to speak. I need to be quite in a situation where I

have to do it.

Livia's decision is not accidental: the way Livia has coped with the phone call has made her realise she finds it easier to speak Italian when she is free from the constraints she has been experiencing in the classroom and, above all, in situations where she has "no choice" but to speak Italian. The above excerpts illustrates how the exchange was crucial in helping Livia become aware her own learning needs and motivational preferences, and in using this knowledge to make decisions about her future language learning.

Other Critical On-Time Events Involving the HL

For Esther, whose years of HL learning have gone hand in hand with her ongoing involvement with the local Italian social club and community, a significant renewal of her commitment to learning Italian also comes as the result of a critical social event involving the HL. Esther is awarded the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity, a prestigious decoration from the Italian Government for services to Italian language and culture. Receiving the award is motivating in that Esther will have to deliver an acceptance speech in Italian in front of many influential native speakers (including the Ambassador of Italy to New Zealand), which impel her to spend hours writing and rehearsing it, but also because it strengthens her resolve to achieve fluency:

E: The most important thing for me was getting the *Cavaliere*[4]… Because what it did was it actually meant to me that blimey, now I feel like I should match that with my own knowledge.

A: Do you think that getting the *Cavaliere* made you stronger in your resolve to want to finish?

E: Oh yes, it has. It has made me realise that I have to do it now. I *must* do it.

To Esther, the award represents the ultimate public recognition of her accomplishments as an official spokesperson for the Wellington Italian community, and as such it fuels her motivation, as she feels that to be truly worthy of such recognition she must be able to speak Italian. However, it is important to note that Esther also sees speaking Italian as a necessary practical tool for the maintenance of healthy relationships with the community members, which she also perceives as her duty as a Centro official:

I think learning Italian is also necessary for me because when I need to speak in Italian with people, it's very important to be able to speak in Italian to the older people, a lot of them don't… They do speak English but they don't like it, when they are in the Club they actually want to speak Italian, so that is another thing that motivates me strongly, is to be able to converse with them.

This point is particularly telling in terms of how Esther's relationship with the community has changed throughout the years and with it, the drive behind learning her HL: from a tool to make contact with and learn from other Italians, to a symbol of solidarity for being accepted, to a necessary skill in maintain relationships that are key to her role within the community.

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[4]Italian for 'knighthood'. Esther was awarded the medal of the Order for the Star of Italian Solidarity, which confers the title of *Cavalieredella Repubblica* or 'Knight of the Republic'.

Ongoing Relationships with Speakers of HL

The last excerpt from Esther points to the fact that not all motivationally significant contacts with Italian speakers found in the participants' stories involve one-time momentous events. For some learners important motivational sources are embedded in their ongoing relationships with the communities of Italian speakers around them.

For Marianne, for example, every opportunity to use her heritage language in her everyday life represents a form of motivational support, as each contact with Italians around her acts as a reminder of her own *Italianità*, thus strengthening her connection to her heritage and her resolve to develop such connection though her learning of the language:

> A: Do you think that your Italian ancestry played a role throughout your studies in terms of inspiring you or motivating you?
>
> M: Definitely, it's totally motivational because little bits of it will encourage me to keep going, for example going to Italy this time to see family again and things like that, that's a motivation because is tied in with learning language, or when things happen overseas to my Italian family, like my dad's cousin died so being able to write a card in Italian and things like that… So it's a constant reminder… I'd take up an Italian cooking book you know, and my Italian will come in handy, I got a lot of my grandmother's cookbooks that are all in Italian… So no things like that happen all the time to me… And other things too, like John is playing soccer for the Italia Club on Labour weekend in October, so no we constantly have things that… Like those external things, like being involved with the club, or soccer or the Italian people here as well as family overseas.

Particularly interesting is that in the case of Marianne, the motivational significance of the participants' contacts with speakers of Italian does not lie in the linguistic requirements

that these present. In some cases, such exchanges simply act as opportunities to realise and develop her *Italianità* through positive interactions with other Italians, and hence to strengthen the personal sense of Italian identity which lays at the basis of her motivation. Marianne's data show that if the single, unexpected opportunities to negotiate one's *Italianità* in exchanges with Italian speakers can have positive repercussions on one's motivation (as in the cases of Francesco and Livia), motivational benefits can also result from repeated ongoing relationships with native speakers, which over time come to mould and reinforce leaner's HL identity through constant positive reinforcement.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings suggested that personal constructions of *Italianità* are heavily implicated in the maintenance of the motivational states of the participants throughout their learning, supporting a socially mediated view of L2 motivation in which motivational fluctuations are explained as the result of the learners' own processing of and reaction to elements of their context, including critical events involving native speakers of the HL outside the classroom. In general terms, the motivational benefits of such contacts are that they offer an opportunity to perform and assert their Italian identity and to gain linguistic confidence at the same time. For some participants in the study, the necessity to speak Italian outside the classroom offered a chance to be free of the constraints of their learning setting and to use the language on their own terms, while for others, it helped them explore new and exciting communicative situations and to feel in control of their language learning and skills. Always it seems, the inspiration and enthusiasm that resulted from even fortuitous encounters with Italian speakers represented momentous events that helped the learners validate and reinforce their sense of *Italianità* and so positively impacted their motivation, often leading to a fresh wave of interest in the language and to the beginning of a new phase of their learning.

The main implication drawn from such findings is that all heritage language learners could potentially benefit from consciously attempting to maximise their contacts with speakers of their heritage language and with these their opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. Of course this is often more easily said than done, as access to heritage language speakers might be limited by many factors that lie outside the learners' control: HL-speaking relations might not exist, or be too far removed to represent a real chance to speak the language. A local community of speakers may not be a reality, or if it is, the process of joining it to find potential interlocutors might be too intimidating, time consuming or otherwise problematic to even attempt. Even in cases where potential contacts might be available through family and/or community networks, these might prove to be unsuitable for various reasons: they might speak varieties of the heritage language that are different from the one learned in class, or might be unwilling to speak the language.

When contacts with local heritage language speakers are not available, it might be possible for learners to access virtual communities of speakers using various online tools, from pre-structured online learning facilities such as tandem-learning and other learner-matching systems, to more adventurous (but potentially very rewarding) participation in discussion forums, chat rooms and blogs in the heritage language. The main advantage of virtual contacts with heritage language speakers is that they tend to bypass the practical inconveniences and the potential face-threatening situations that direct contact might entail, hence representing, in many ways, an easier, more learner-centred and self-directed way to reap the benefits of practising the language in social exchanges with more experienced speakers.

The findings also suggested that a strong, continuing sense of personal heritage identity is the most important factor in supporting HL learners' motivation, and because of this, validating a learner's claims to the heritage identity and offering recognition of their

special relationship to the language that lies at the basis of their motivation should be an important prerogative of the supportive teacher, and one that could easily be achieved by making this the occasional focus of positive attention and feedback. The aim for teachers in these cases should not be to provide ongoing individualised teaching, but to encourage HL learners to develop a sense of ownership of their learning experience, supporting them in gaining the confidence to pursue their own interests, encouraging the use of the existing course as a support structure for their own individual learning and promoting contacts with HL speakers both inside and outside the classroom as a way to foster the personal identity constructions and ambitions that underlie their motivation to learn.

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