MA STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION AND AUTONOMY IN AN INTERNATIONAL LEARNING CONTEXT[1]

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Abstract: How motivated and autonomous are tertiary-level students of English? What role does their national cultural background play in their learner profiles? Research in these areas does not seem to abound. However, since advanced learners have relatively long foreign language learning histories, they could provide valuable insights into the phenomenon in focus. This article discusses the language learning motivation and learner autonomy of MA Applied Linguistics students in Barcelona originating from a variety of countries, including Spain, China, and Japan. Its theoretical framework rests on the process model of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). A small-scale qualitative study was carried out using retrospective interviews as an instrument for data collection. It was learned that MA students are highly motivated, committed to their goals, and possess significant learner autonomy. Different patterns emerged across the examined national cultural backgrounds in learning environment preference, management of time, concept of learner autonomy, and performance history attribution. Pedagogical implications include that university teachers of EFL should be prepared to teach in a multicultural class and promote intercultural skills.

Keywords: tertiary education, EFL, L2 motivation, learner autonomy, national cultural background

1 Introduction

Second or foreign language (L2) motivation is thought to be one of the most important individual difference variables in language learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Research in this field of second language acquisition has been ongoing for the past five decades. The major part of the research tends to focus on primary and secondary school learners, and little attention has been paid to university students regarding their L2 motivation or autonomy (Kormos & Csizér, 2014; Kormos, Csizér, Menyhárt, & Török, 2008; Ushioda, 2001). It is also important to mention along these lines that the majority of the research has been conducted in this area with the aim of testing various hypotheses about L2 motivation and reaching generalisable results using quantitative data (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), and much remains to be explored with regard to its dynamic nature, for which the insider's perspective needs to be looked at. With this in mind, several authors (Kormos & Csizér, 2014; Oxford, 2008; Ushioda, 2001) put forward the adoption of qualitative research dealing with L2 motivation and learner autonomy in various contextual settings.

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), the most important types of contextual influences on L2 motivation can be distinguished on a micro- and a macro-level: the former entailing the instructional setting, the latter referring to sociocultural aspects, such as religion,

ethnicity, class, gender, and so on. This paper considers the influence of society and culture, specifically, the national culture, on L2 learning, adopting a cross-cultural perspective. In so doing, it draws on Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) interpretation of culture as *mental programming*. That is, national cultures – through various socialisation processes – can be viewed as being responsible for shaping the mindset of people in a given culture, including patterns of cognition, feeling, and behaviour.

The idea of the present research evolved from studying and being part of a multicultural environment in Barcelona, in which students from various backgrounds took part. The aim of this study is to describe the L2 motivation and learner autonomy profiles of MA students coming from different national cultural backgrounds while attending a major university in Barcelona. Since the study aimed to shed light on the general language learning profiles of MA students of English and the kind of influence the contextual differences exert on their L2 motivation and autonomy, interviews were used to explore the students' views. Thus, the inquiry followed the qualitative research paradigm.

The present paper first discusses the theoretical background of the study, presenting the concepts of motivation and autonomy, followed by a review of the relevant empirical research. Then, a section dedicated to methodological issues is included, after which the results of the study are described and discussed. The final section of the paper includes some concluding remarks with pedagogical implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 L2 motivation

L2 motivation is a highly complex psychological phenomenon, which, as acknowledged generally in the field, could be defined by the collective presence of choice, persistence, and effort (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). That is to say, motivation is the answer as to "why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, how hard they are going to pursue it" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p.4). Generally, L2 motivation could be defined as "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised, and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out" (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998, p.64). This definition serves as the basic rationale for the present study due to its emphasis on dynamics and taking into account autonomous and self-regulatory behaviour as well.

To date, four phases can be distinguished in the history of L2 motivation research: social-psychological, the cognitive-situated, the process-oriented, and the socio-dynamic (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). On the one hand, this piece of research continues the tradition of the process-oriented phase, which looks at L2 motivation from a temporal perspective by recognising its dynamically changing nature and its pivotal role in motivational maintenance. On the other hand, the present work also draws on the socio-dynamic phase in acknowledging the impact of different social and contextual settings on L2 learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

2.1.1 The process model of L2 motivation

The process-oriented phase of L2 motivation is probably best known for Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model. It rests on the idea that L2 motivation is a dynamic phenomenon with constant fluctuation; therefore, it is divided into temporal segments, more specifically: *preactional stage*, *actional stage*, and *postactional stage* (also called *choice motivation*, *executive motivation*, and *retrospective motivation*, respectively). All these three stages display behavioural actions, and constitute the dimension of an *action sequence*. The other dimension of the process model, named *motivational influences*, stands for the "energy sources and motivational forces" (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998, p.47) that accompany the behavioural actions. Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model is innovative in that it aims to provide an exhaustive scheme of L2 motivation by drawing on the different strands of previous research (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

2.1.2 Choice, executive, and retrospective motivation

According to Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model, in the preactional stage of L2 motivation the following actions are carried out: *goal setting*, *intention formation*, and *initiation of intention enactment*. The act of goal setting is determined by three previous factors: wishes and hopes, desires, and opportunities, and it can be influenced by subjective values, external stimuli, instrumental motives, or integrative motives. The intention formation signifies that once a goal is formed, the individual has made a plan and committed himself towards it. This subphase can be influenced by factors such as expectancy of success (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived L2 competence, L2 anxiety), need for achievement and fear of failure, degree of self-determination, and so forth (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). The third subphase of the preactional phase, that is, initiation of intention enactment, means that intention is set, the individual has a planned time frame for the action as well as all the means and resources necessary to be able to carry it out. The realisation of these can depend on a person's orientation (state or action), how he perceives the quality of executing the behaviour, or "distracting influences and obstacles" (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998, p.56).

The individual will reach the actional stage only if he possesses the right amount of executive motivation and is able to generate and implement a subtask required by the desired goal. In this phase, one needs to constantly control and evaluate his actions in order to reach his goal. Executive motivational influences include the quality of learning experience, perceived progress, sense of autonomy, teacher's and parents' motivational influence, influence of learner group, or skills in using self-regulatory strategies (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998).

The final, postactional phase starts once the action has been achieved or ended and includes reflecting on the whole process and drawing conclusions for further actions (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). The instrument of the present study will intend to cover the three motivational stages by inquiring about and focusing on the participants' language learning histories mainly from the onset of their undergraduate studies.

2.2 Learner autonomy

Besides L2 motivation, the other focus of the present study is learner autonomy. According to Little (1999), learner autonomy is based on the "acceptance of responsibility for

one's own learning" (p.11). Consequently, an autonomous person is "one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions" (p.428), as Littlewood (1996) defines it. He cites ability and willingness as the chief elements of autonomy, the former entailing the knowledge and skills crucial for making choices, while the latter meaning the possession of motivation and confidence needed to be able to be responsible for one's choices.

An often-debated issue in relation to learner autonomy is the question whether it can be applied to persons of non-Western backgrounds without them being subjected to cultural imperialism (Little, 1999). As a solution for this, Little (1999) argues that autonomy is a universal human capacity developed by everyone from birth onwards through socialisation and acculturation, and "the purpose of education is to help learners to develop tools for critical reflection" (p.15). However, there may be variations between the different cultural contexts regarding what counts as the norm of the developmental process through which learner autonomy is achieved (Little, 1999). In other words, depending on the contextual setting, autonomy and autonomous behaviour can take different shapes due to the impact of sociocultural factors one is surrounded by.

Littlewood (1999) discusses three cultural continua – related to the concept of autonomy – that are believed to vary between Western European and East Asian contexts. According to his taxonomy, people from East Asia can be characterised by a collectivist nature. They can also be described as possessing the sensibility of *interdependent selves*, meaning that they perceive themselves to be inseparable from the group, as opposed to the Western-like *independent self*, which is characterised by the feeling of being separate from other people. In addition, East Asians accept power- and authority-based relationships and attribute effort and self-discipline to be the major sources of success. Western Europeans, on the other hand, tend to have a low acceptance of power and authority (Littlewood, 1999; 2001).

The interaction between L2 motivation and autonomy has been investigated and pointed out by several researchers in the last two decades: Dickinson (1995) was among the first to claim that there is a link between the two concepts, both sharing the characteristics of learner independence, learner responsibility, learner choice, and, on a deeper level, decision making, critical reflection, and detachment. Soon after, Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) listed promoting learner autonomy as one of the 'ten commandments' for motivating language learners. Later, Ushioda (2001) proposed integrating L2 motivation research with learner autonomy via *effective motivational thinking*. Based on her theory, this ability entails autonomy in that one takes control of one's learning by reflecting on one's learning experiences in a way that is favourable to the person. Thus, one is able to manage possible negative feelings, constantly regain one's motivation, and consequently persevere throughout the learning process (Ushioda, 2001).

2.3 Previous empirical research

Throughout the past few decades, only a limited number of studies has dealt with the L2 motivation and autonomy of university students. Ushioda's (2001) qualitative study examined the motivational profiles of Irish university students of French from a process-oriented perspective. It was found that evolution over time, that is, the degree of L2 development, determines whether one's L2 motivation derives from an individual's past learning experience (lower levels of development) or is aimed at future goals (higher levels). Furthermore, effective

motivational thinking proved to be defined by filtering out among past learning experiences: concentrating on the positive elements and downplaying the negative ones. Kormos et al.'s (2008) mixed-method study, similarly to the present one, applied Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of L2 motivation as a theoretical framework and examined the language learning motivation of Hungarian university students majoring in English. The researchers found that students tended not to use any learning strategies, hence, had a low level of autonomy, and lacked communicative skills in English, all of which can be attributed to the teacher-centred educational system in Hungary. Édes (2009) carried out qualitative research also in a Hungarian context with first-year university students of English. She found that, overall, university students were not open to autonomy and rather expected their teachers to provide them with knowledge instead of just assisting their progress. Also, in a recent paper, Kormos and Csizér (2014) investigated the interplay of motivation, self-regulatory strategies, and learner autonomy in a Hungarian context. The quantitative study found the independent use of learning resources and technology, international goal orientation, efficient management of time, and ability to overcome boredom all necessary to autonomous language learning.

The number of articles examining L2 motivation or autonomy of university students in Western European and East Asian contexts also seems to be scarce. Littlewood's (2001) large-scale cross-cultural study compared (mainly tertiary-level) students' language attitudes, motivation, and autonomy across eight Asian countries (including China and Japan) and three European ones (including Spain). He found L2 motivation to be more socially directed in East Asian than in European countries. In addition, the results confirmed that Asian students were more likely to acknowledge the "traditionally dominant role of the teacher" than their European counterparts and verified the stereotype of the "passive Asian learner" (p.21). However, there seems to be a change occurring among Asian students as suggested by the findings: Many now aspire to break away from the traditional or stereotypical picture and be more active and autonomous. Aliponga, Johnston, Koshiyama, Ries, and Rush (2013) investigated EFL Japanese university students' learner autonomy. The results revealed a collectivist nature valuing effort and self-discipline typical of East Asian contexts and "socially oriented motivation" (p.88), which means a shared goal the group can work towards with cooperation and harmony. Furthermore, it was discovered that the students see their teacher as an "authority figure" (p.88), who is responsible for their assessment, but not for sharing the knowledge – they think that they should obtain it on their own.

3 Methods

Based on the results of earlier studies introduced above, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(1) What characterises L2 motivation and learner autonomy of MA Applied Linguistics students?
(2) What role does national cultural background play on the L2 motivation and learner autonomy of MA Applied Linguistics students?

In order to answer the research questions and gain a better understanding of the complexities of the issues under investigation, semi structured interviews were conducted with eight MA Applied Linguistics students at a university in Barcelona in 2014-2015.

3.1 Participants

The eight participants of the study (one male and seven female) were chosen purposively: they were studying at the same university as the researcher and attending the same classes. From East Asia, a Japanese and a Chinese student were selected (the only ones coming from this background), from Western Europe, four Catalan and two Spanish ones were chosen. All of them showed willingness to participate and agreed to do the interview upon first approach. At the time of the research, they were doing the first semester of their MA studies in Applied Linguistics at a major university in Barcelona. The language of the instruction of the MA programme was English, which means that – although it was not measured for the current study – the interviewees' level of English was expected to be C1 on the CEFR scale (Council of Europe, 2001). The mean age of the participants was 27. Their age at the onset of English language learning varied from the age of 6 to 14. All of them possessed a BA degree (either in Philology, Translation, or Teaching), which everyone had done in their home countries. For more data on the interviewees, see Table 1.

Name[1]	Age	Gender[2]	Native language	Age of onset for English
Lin	25	F	Mandarin	6
Fumio	24	M	Japanese	14
María	22	F	Spanish	6
Elena	38	F	Catalan	12
Paula	23	F	Spanish	8
Carla	24	F	Catalan	7
Elsa	24	F	Catalan	6
Carmen	36	F	Catalan	9

[1] The interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

[2] F=female, M=male.

Table 1. Detailed list of participants

3.2 Data collection instrument

As an instrument to collect data, structured interviews were used. The interview protocol was developed on the basis of earlier research, particularly following Ushioda's (2001) and Kormos et al.'s (2008) studies, as well as Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of L2 motivation. Special emphasis was put on language learning experience, past and future stances, teacher influences, learner autonomy, and the use of learning strategies. Data elicitation relied on the interviewees' retrospective accounts of their language learning history. The first draft of the interview questions was reviewed by a university professor. Following that, some questions were rephrased so as to enhance the quality of the study. Subsequently, the research tool was piloted. The final interview schedule consisted of two parts: a preliminary phase eliciting background information and the main phase focussing on the students' language learning motivation and autonomy. The interview questions are presented in the Appendix.

3.3 Data collection procedures

Each interview was conducted on a separate day between October 24th, 2014 and January 15th, 2015. The dates were selected according to the schedules and availability of the

participants. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the aim of the research and were assured that the data will be kept confidential and they will be given a pseudonym. The interviews generally lasted around 30–40 minutes and were tape-recorded by the interviewer. They took place in a study room of a university campus in Barcelona. Because the interviews were carried out in English, that is, not in the mother tongue of the participants, the researcher decided to send the interview questions to the interviewees one day prior the sessions so as to give them some time to think as well as to enhance the fluency of the responses during the interview sessions. When presenting the results, the respondents' words are not corrected regarding the use of English and are transcribed verbatim.

3.4 Data analysis procedures

The interview responses were transcribed by the researcher almost immediately after the interviews took place. This also enabled the researcher to note down observations and comments still fresh in his memory. Using the constant comparative method (Dörnyei, 2007), the obtained data were coded, and emerging themes were gathered on the basis of Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of L2 motivation. Three major themes emerged and were labelled as the following: choice motivation, executive motivation, and retrospective motivation, based on and corresponding to Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of L2 motivation. Within the major themes, minor ones were also created due to their frequent occurrences in the interviews (see Table 2). The emerging themes along with the relevant quotations from each participant were entered into a Microsoft Excel file in order to get an organised view of the data. Finally, the findings were interpreted and are discussed in the next section.

Choice motivation	Executive motivation	Retrospective motivation
language attitudes	external motivational influences	self-reflection
instrumental motivation	self-regulatory strategies	self-evaluation
wishes and hopes	learning environment preference	performance history attribution
commitment	sense of autonomy	
perceived L2 competence	use of technology	

Table 2. Major and minor emerging themes

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Characteristics of the L2 motivation and learner autonomy of MA Applied linguistics students

To answer the first research question, the respondents' answers are discussed following the main emerging themes outlined above. Since learner autonomy was found to overlap mostly with executive motivation, the two are rendered under the same subsection.

4.1.1 Choice motivation

Language attitude emerged as one of the minor themes within choice motivation. It refers to the participants' general approach, opinion, and feelings as regards the English language both in the past and present. Language learning experiences, especially those the interviewees had abroad, were found to have a great impact on the formation of language attitudes. Overall, the

participants' attitudes towards the English language could be characterised by what Yashima (2002) termed as an *international posture*, entailing the acknowledgment of the effect of the globalised world we live in and the status of the language as a lingua franca (in line with the findings of Kormos et al., 2008). Some interviewees argued as follows:

> English is more than just a language, it's become compulsory everywhere. (Elsa)

> When going abroad, I love the feeling that I can connect with people. I am proud that I am able to talk to foreigners. (María)

> During my BA I was an exchange student in Berlin for a year. I went there with a very basic knowledge of German, but I knew that I would survive. Speaking English allowed me to make friends from a lot of countries and we still keep in touch. (Carla)

Prior to the interviews, six students had spent at least half a year in a foreign country. It is very likely that the participants' persistency and commitment to English had been fuelled by their experiences abroad where they had learned the advantages of being able to speak the language, which, in turn, had also contributed to shaping their language attitudes. This idea is supported by two participants' recalls as well:

> To tell the truth, I was very happy with my participation in a study program in America. It was good to experience that I could finally use in real life what I had learned before. (Fumio)

> When I was a child, I travelled to English-speaking countries during summertime. It helped me a lot in strengthening my relationship with the language, which I used to hate. (Elena)

> Perceived L2 competence also arose as a minor theme from the interview data representing one of the main initiative forces behind the interviewees' commitment to language learning. The participants' accounts revealed that their fluency in everyday topics was not as they would have liked it to be:

> I don't feel that comfortable to speak in English and I'm afraid of not being fluent enough, especially when I talk to someone who has a higher level. (Paula)

> I think I have a high level of English, but not a perfect one, especially when it comes to regular topics. (Elena)

This issue originates from the fact that, generally, the BA and MA classes only require the use of professional language, and the language of interaction among students in their free time is usually in their native language. However, the participants of this study were in a somewhat lucky position as the MA programme they were attending could be characterised by an international context having students from all over the world (even some native speakers), which requires oral communication and keeping in touch with other students as well as teachers in English, allowing the practice of the informal use of the language. In Kormos et al.'s (2008) study the undergraduate participants gave accounts of a lack of communicative skills, which could be attributed to the teacher-centred education. The present study shows that this problem continues to be an issue even at the MA level.

Considering the interviewees' position regarding their English proficiency, it comes as no surprise that their instrumental motivation principally covered improving their communicative and writing skills, in general (five students). Secondly, they expected that the MA programme would help them in their careers in one of the following ways: being able to help students learn English better (Lin, Elsa), getting a broader understanding of students (María), having more opportunities to work in the field (Carla), and reaching a higher position when applying for work (Elena).

The students proved to be highly committed and to possess attainable wishes and hopes. Three of them mentioned doing a PhD programme or carrying out scientific research as a future possibility, while the others noted wanting to continue teaching and working in the field either in their home countries or abroad. All of them agreed on continuing learning English and sustaining an interest in it either due to professional reasons or having reached a point at which it would be "irresponsible to stop or neglect it" (Carla).

4.1.2 Executive motivation and learner autonomy

The participants' accounts regarding external motivational influences – which mainly included teachers – were similar. All the students agreed on the importance of student-centred education (class discussions, group projects, etc.) as opposed to teacher-centeredness. To demonstrate:

> A good teacher should show me those parts of the language that I cannot discover by myself and take me to a point that's a little bit higher than my level, but not that much so I don't get frustrated. Also, he or she should communicate a lot, give me time to communicate and express myself. (Elsa)

> Someone who always talks in the target language, active, makes you want to really learn not just it being a compulsory thing, involve students, make them speak. Talking is very important in languages. (Carla)

They expected a good teacher to be able to motivate students, be passionate, enthusiastic, encouraging, and involve students with practical activities in every class. The significance of providing feedback, creating challenges, being approachable, original, and taking students into account individually also came up. Considering their language learning histories, generally, the participants were satisfied with their teachers.

The use of self-regulatory strategies appeared as an important aspect of learner autonomy (as well as executive motivation), showing a similar pattern in the various contexts (with the exception of time management). These strategies contributed to the participants' staying committed to their language learning-related goals. The students claimed that they avoided giving up their commitment by supportive self-talk and projecting positive future images or outcomes.

> I try to convince myself that the goal is to speak the language fluently and it will be useful for me. (Carla)

> I always think of the importance of being highly proficient and how it can contribute to meeting new people and my future career. (Fumio)

This supports Ushioda's (2001) theory in that having a relatively long language learning history and high L2 development implies concentrating on future goals rather than past experiences. The results regarding the presence of self-regulatory strategies in the interviewees' learning profiles also confirmed that one needs to possess certain learner autonomy to regulate one's L2 motivation.

As opposed to the findings of other research examining university students (Édes, 2009; Kormos et al., 2008), in the present study all the participants demonstrated a high awareness of learning strategies and reported using a wide array of them. Besides reading online articles, listening to the radio, and watching movies, vocabulary learning strategies (using post-it notes, seeking connections between languages), communicative strategies (making friends, participation in language exchange events), and summarising were mentioned.

Besides the use of self-regulatory strategies, technology use proved to be another area where autonomous behaviour surfaced. Generally, the interviewees reported that they used electronic resources a lot. Benson's (2008) argument about the inevitability of technology in the language learner's life was confirmed: Most participants agreed on the role of technology as a necessity in their lives when it comes to language learning; only the two Spanish participants admitted keeping some distance and not using their electronic devices all the time.

> I use technology a lot. I read all the required readings online and always do my homework on a computer. Besides, I also prefer online dictionaries and mobile applications. (Carla)

> It is basic. New technology has helped me a lot to get into contact with my mates and do the group works. (Elena)

4.1.3 Retrospective motivation

Looking back at their learning histories, all participants except one claimed that they learn more consciously now than before, meaning an active involvement in studying (e.g., forming their own opinions, evaluating, and analysing themselves). It goes without saying that at an MA-level these features are indispensable and required in order to succeed. To demonstrate the participants' accounts as regards self-reflection when it comes to language learning:

> I am always analysing myself; everything I do and how I do it. (Elena)

> I do it too much. My expectations are very high and when I see I am not getting to that point, it can be frustrating. (Elsa)

> Now, I am more conscious when studying. I pay more attention to those things like forming my own opinions or evaluating myself. During my BA this was not really the case. (Lin)

When asked to evaluate their learning histories, only two participants were satisfied with themselves. The others would have liked to dedicate more time to their studying or engage in conversations with foreigners more, that is, practise the language. Based on these findings, one

can state that the interviewed MA students are aware of their limitations, they are determined when it comes to studying, and practise self-reflection and self-evaluation, too.

All in all, concerning the L2 motivation and learner autonomy of MA Applied Linguistics students, it can be established that the present findings differ from Kormos et al.'s (2008) regarding choice motivation in that here all the learners were highly determined and had clear future goals. Having some work experience in the field can give a broader perspective on one's orientation, help forming clearer goals, and consequently, might explain the participants' strong motivational profile and commitment. Another reason that could support the difference between the results of the current study and the aforementioned one is that attending an MA programme requires more determination and dedication than an undergraduate one. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study resemble Kormos et al.'s (2008) in that the students had chosen studying English at university because they wanted to practise it and be more proficient, and they are all aware of the advantages of knowing English; hence, they possess an international posture.

With respect to executive motivation, the above presented findings suggest a different picture from the Hungarian context (Édes, 2009; Kormos et al., 2008). On the basis of the amount of self-regulatory strategies used, we can state that the participants of the present study exhibit more learner autonomy, are more active learners, and, in fact, expect their teachers to promote learner autonomy and autonomous behaviour. It is also apparent that the interviewed students think of teachers as facilitators of their learning process, persons who may teach less theory and rather focus on practice. Again, these differences between the present study and the aforementioned studies done in the Hungarian context could be explained by the different levels the students were at in their tertiary education, that is, BA or MA. Moreover, the results indicate that the presence of self-regulation and learner autonomy seem to play a central role in the process of language learning than learning experience (either good or bad). The interviewed learners did not seem to attribute much importance to or being influenced by their past learning experiences because they concentrated on positive attainment. This finding supports Ushioda's (2001) theories regarding the influence of L2 development on motivation over time and effective motivational thinking.

4.2 The impact of national cultural background on the L2 motivation and learner autonomy of MA Applied linguistics students

Learning environment preference emerged as one of the minor themes with a contextual difference. It entails the ideal surroundings one likes to dwell in and one needs for effective language learning to occur. The students from East Asia mostly preferred being around people when studying (e.g., in a library); besides, they proved to have a higher tolerance level and could endure even noisy environments (e.g., a café). The Catalan and Spanish learners, on the other hand, preferred studying on their own in calm and quiet places, such as their rooms or outdoors (e.g., a yard or a terrace). Littlewood's (1999) contextual distinction as regards the collectivist versus individualist disposition seems to be evident here. To illustrate with examples:

I like being around people and prefer a bit of noise. I always went to Starbucks in Japan. (Fumio)

> I cannot study in a library. I get distracted because of people. As years pass by, I need more and more silence. (Paula)

> I prefer studying at home and I like to have silence around me. (Elsa)

The concept of learner autonomy also showed differences concerning students' national cultural backgrounds. This theme covers the participants' beliefs and attitudes regarding learner autonomy as well as their willingness to modify their learning environment. The East Asian students attributed their autonomy mainly to seeking out English speakers and situations where they could practise the language. As other studies with participants of the same context have shown (Aliponga, Johnston, Koshiyama, Ries, & Rush, 2013; Littlewood, 2001), these traits stem from East Asian people's people general disposition toward collectivism and socially oriented motivation (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In contrast, all the Catalan and Spanish learners enumerated autonomous actions typical of an individualist or Western mindset (Hofstede et al., 2010). These included searching for answers by oneself, acquiring new words every day, solving one's own problems, not relying on classes to learn a language, or moving abroad:

> For me, it's being aware that you have to do it yourself; it's you who has to study, no one will do it for you. (Carla)

> A learner should take control of his or her own learning, try to look for opportunities to use the language independently, use the techniques that are adapted to him or her more, solve his or her problems, know how to solve them without the help of someone, try to guess the meaning of words. (Paula)

> My independence took me to pack my bags and live abroad to improve the language. (Elena)

As Kormos and Csizér (2014) proposed, efficient management of time plays a crucial part in learner autonomy, which was found to be true in the present study. All of the students claimed that they planned their time ahead when it came to studying; however, only those with East Asian backgrounds seemed to handle their time efficiently and be satisfied with themselves, while the Catalan and Spanish participants complained about internal as well as external factors:

> I do manage my time. I always try to think of the fact that it will be worth it. (Lin)

> I am very bad at this; I do plan ahead, but do otherwise every time. When I am not in the mood, I switch to other things and leave all my duties for the last minute. (María)

> To tell the truth, even though I try to plan ahead, I don't think that helps a lot because plans are always changing. So I have to do my best to adapt myself to new situations. I live stressed. (Elena)

As can be seen, the efficiency of self-regulation with regard to time seems to differ between the two groups, with the Asian students being more successful. Aliponga et al.'s (2013) finding on East Asian students' exemplary self-discipline seems to be relevant here. It also has to be noted that five participants worked as either part-time or full-time English language teachers while

doing the MA programme, which could explain the difficulty of organising their time when it came to studying.

It appeared that there was a clear divergence between the East Asian and the Western European group of participants as regards the attribution of successes and failures when asked about language learning experiences. The Asian students had a hard time defining or deciding on success, both of them claiming that they did not care about the results, but what really mattered for them was rather the actual experience of learning and making an effort (more precisely, the sincerity of your intention). The Chinese participant also conveyed this idea with a Chinese proverb: "Success is decided by gods, but efforts are done by men." This disinterestedness regarding the end point of an action can be connected to their original context, which is characterised by a collectivist mindset as Aliponga et al. (2013) also found in their study. As can be guessed from their views on success, for the Asian learners, failure did not mean much either, they looked at it in an optimistic way: "it can be interpreted in a good way" (Lin). The Catalan and Spanish participants, on the other hand, found defining language learning success and failure much easier. When talking about success, two respondents referred to parental or family support, which can be regarded as an example of external attribution of success. Two participants mentioned owing success to themselves, that is, working hard, which is internal attribution. Also, there was one learner who demonstrated having both orientations. All the Catalan and Spanish participants accepted failures in language learning and used supportive self-talk to persist. Here are some examples:

> I could say thanks to my father for taking me to English lessons, some teachers for being helpful, but most of the time it is because of dedicating lots of time. (Paula)

> I experience failures as a way of learning. (Elena)

> I tell myself that I can do it and that in the end it will be worth it. (María)

Considering the impact of the national environment where the participants originate and were socialized on their L2 motivation and autonomy, it was found to exert its influence on four domains. Concerning the participants' executive motivation, their learning environment preference and time management differed; while in regard to retrospective motivation success and failure attribution was divisible across the various national cultural background. The concept of autonomy was also seen differently. These dissimilarities could be mainly attributed to the collectivist versus individualist continuum (Littlewood, 1999). The present findings could be supported by previous empirical studies (Aliponga et al., 2013; Littlewood, 2001). The results suggest that one needs to be prepared to teach in a multicultural class as well as to teach intercultural skills consciously in order to avoid potential misunderstandings. It is important to recognise that learners vary both on a social and an individual level, making each of them unique.

5 Conclusion

This study investigated the L2 motivation and autonomy of MA students in an international environment. It was found that in some cases national cultural background could imply differences regarding student behaviour. All the learners demonstrated basically the same choice motivation, that is, the same instrumental motivation, commitment, wishes and hopes. Their executive motivation and learner autonomy showed some differences depending on their

national cultural background. As expected, the East Asian participants showed signs of collectivism and socially directed motivation as opposed to the Catalan and Spanish ones, who were more individualistic in various aspects. With respect to retrospective motivation, only performance history attribution, that is, defining language learning successes and failures, proved to be dependent on national cultures.

This study has several pedagogical implications. Nowadays, exchange programmes abound, which means that students with different national cultural backgrounds meet and study under one roof. This requires teachers to be aware of cultural differences and motivate students according to their individual needs, a task that can be achieved even with a larger class. At the beginning of the semester, preferably in the first class, teachers should ask their students to fill out a questionnaire with the help of which they could get a clearer picture of their L2 motivation and learner autonomy, expectations, and attitudes and tailor the tasks according to these. Moreover, the inclusion of learner training into classes could be useful to advance students' motivation, learner autonomy, as well as intercultural skills. Finally, promoting English as the general means of communication both within a student-student and a student-teacher interaction outside the classroom could help learners gain a higher proficiency in the non-academic domains of the language as well.

It has to be noted that the present study has several limitations. First of all, it is a small-scale study with eight participants, of which there were only two from an Asian context; therefore, it could be hard to see the overall picture. Second, the instrument used in the study relied on the retrospective accounts of the participants, which, owing to its intrinsic unreliability, could detract from the credibility of the findings. Third, as Littlewood (1999) and Oxford (2008) stress, generalisations with regard to the context-dependent nature of L2 motivation or autonomy should be only undertaken with the caveat that every context can be further divided into sub-contexts. Fourth, there might be more contextual differences in the L2 motivation and autonomy of the students, which did not come up in the interviews, but a deeper elaboration of the topics could have helped to pinpoint them; therefore, it would have been worth doing a second round of interviews.

Further research in the area is much needed. For instance, a longitudinal study with undergraduates, graduates, and postgraduates might yield a broader and clearer picture on the dynamics of L2 motivation and autonomy. The observation of other factors included in Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process model of L2 motivation that the present study did not manage to cover, such as the influence of the learner group, L2 anxiety, self-beliefs, or self-efficacy would also contribute to making a better sense of the relationship of L2 motivation and learner autonomy. Moreover, it would be interesting to continue investigating the topic qualitatively with more participants from more national cultural backgrounds from both Asia and Western Europe. Another worthy line of research could be to examine how the group dynamics of a class including students from different national cultural backgrounds work and change over the course of a degree programme.

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APPENDIX

Interview questions

Preliminary questions:

(1) How old are you?
(2) What is your mother tongue?
(3) How long have you been learning English?
(4) What other languages do you speak? What level?
(5) Tell me about your previous studies (BA).
(6) Where have you lived before?
(7) Do you have any work experience (related to your studies)?

Main interview questions:

(8) What characterises your relationship with the English language? How do you feel about it?
(9) How do you perceive your level of English?
(10) What is your opinion of language learning at university?
(11) Have you continued learning English since you started your university studies? Will you continue when you have finished your MA?
(12) How much energy do you invest into language learning? What do you do to improve your English? Please give me details.
(13) What motivated you to continue your studies after finishing your BA studies?
(14) What did you expect from your MA studies at the beginning?
(15) What are your future goals? What are your plans after finishing your MA studies?
(16) What do you expect from a good teacher? Describe your ideal teacher.
(17) How can a teacher influence the amount of energy you invest in language learning? Please give me specific examples about in what ways teachers could help you to invest more energy into learning.
(18) What makes a teacher bad for you? List the negative characteristics and give examples, please.
(19) Please reflect on your language learning experiences related to your higher studies in general.
 (19.1) How do you experience success?
 (19.2) To what or to whom do you owe your success?
 (19.3) How do you experience failures?
 (19.4) How do you overcome failures?
(20) How encouraging are/were your teachers (in general, BA, MA)?

(21) Has your approach to studying changed since you started university?

(22) Do you form your own opinions or evaluate yourself while studying?

(23) What kind of role does technology play in your life when it comes to language learning?

(24) Do you plan ahead and manage your time? How?

(25) How much time do you devote to studying? Do you think the invested energy is worth it?

(26) Describe the perfect learning environment for you when it comes to language learning. Can you create it? How?

(27) Do you use any learning tricks or techniques to enhance your learning results and performance? If so, which?

(28) How do you avoid giving up when it comes to language learning?

(29) How do you manage to overcome boredom, moodiness, or discouragement in language learning?

(30) What makes a learner independent for you?

(31) What role does independence play in your language learning? Has it changed since you started university? If so, in what ways?

(32) Is there something you would like to change about yourself regarding language learning?

(33) Is there something you would like to change about your BA or MA studies if you could/had the authority? (e.g., your courses, contents, or the program in general)