

Investigating 'Interest' Development of Indonesian Students in an MA TEFL Programme in Learning English as an L2

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Abstract

This study contributes to the understanding of interest development in second language learning. It describes the conditions which trigger students' situational interest in learning English as a second language, and how temporary situational interest contributes to the development of more stable individual interest. The data are gathered from two Indonesian students on an MA Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) programme at a UK university, through the use of introspective, semi-structured interviews. The key findings are: significant conditions triggering interest in learning English as an L2 were associated with external factors which caused a highly emotional impact; and the person-oriented situational interest provided an ideal model, which maintained the learner's interest through every phase of interest development, and supported them through challenges and difficulties.

Keywords: situational interest, individual interest, second language learning, learning English, interest development

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Introduction

The term ‘interest’, sometimes a synonym for ‘intrinsic motivation’ or ‘inherent curiosity’ (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994a), has appeared in many discussions of second language (L2) learning over the last 20 years. It is widely used with regard to language teaching materials: for example, in making lessons interesting (Dörnyei, 2001), and choosing interesting texts for reading and learning the language (Macalister, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013). Nonetheless, more specific details, including the features of interesting lessons, how they vary according to numerous contexts, and how to help reluctant learners in learning L2 and performing various language learning activities which do not appear to interest them, are still required.

‘Interest’ is a source of intrinsic motivation for learning: students persist longer on tasks, spend more time, read more deeply, remember better, and obtain higher grades (Silvia, 2008). Proven to act as a powerful motivator as well as a key component in intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Green-Demers et al., 1998), it eventually results in more independent learning and in learners employing a greater variety of cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies (McWhaw & Abrami, 2001).

It can be seen, then, that ‘interest’ is an important construct which plays a significant role in learning L2. For that reason, the study of it can help educators understand and improve the teaching and learning of English as a second language: particularly in cases where English is a compulsory school subject, an educational requirement instead of a personal interest.

However, investigations into interest and its development in L2 research, as well as the literature on interest in applied linguistics, are still limited. How interest might be triggered, enhanced, and maintained is a question for further research. Moreover, although several research approaches have examined development processes, hardly any attempts have been made to integrate the empirical findings through a prevailing theory of interest development, and describe it from the perspective of the individual instead of the population (Krapp, 2002).

Accordingly, this study investigates the development of interest in learning English as a second language by focusing on the life experiences of two Indonesian students in an MA Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) programme at a UK university. It endeavours to understand the conditions which may trigger the students’ situational interest; and how short, situational interest contributes to relatively more stable individual interest in learning English as a second language.

Literature Review

The Role of ‘Interest’ in L2 Learning

In L2 language learning, ‘interest’ is not adequately conceptualised. It is often associated with ‘enjoyment’ (Dörnyei, 1998; Williams & Burden, 1999), ‘integrativeness’ (Dörnyei, 2005), ‘arousing curiosity’ (Guillauteaux & Dörnyei, 2008), and ‘desire’ (Kubota, 2011). That said, ‘interest’ is often used to refer to things instead of personal traits; and can generate knowledge-seeking behaviours which lead to knowledge and personal growth, lifelong learning, and life satisfaction (Tin, 2016; Ainley, 2013).

'Interest' is a source of intrinsic motivation with unique characteristics, which helps us understand students' complex language learning behaviour in a particular context (Del Favero et al., 2007; Dörnyei et al., 2006; Hidi, 2006). For example, it is used to explain students' engagement in a tedious task with reference to self-determination and self-regulation (Thoman et al., 2007; Sansone et al., 1992).

'Interest' in L2 learning is now viewed as dynamic. Learners' interest fluctuates according to the multi-faceted rapport between them, the objects, and the context. Sansone and Thoman (2005) report that interest is dynamic in nature: depending on the engagement of individuals with objects of interest, as well as adjacent contexts. Potential objects of interest for L2 learners to interact with include: (1) language content elements (grammar, vocabulary, and language skills); (2) non-language content varieties (topics and themes); (3) language learning tasks and real life activities. Contexts include in-class or out-of-class settings: the role of the teacher, peers, students' moods, time, and place (Tin, 2016).

Among various types of interest proposed (Krapp et al., 1992; Hidi & Anderson, 1992), situational interest and individual interest are the most popular categorizations. They differ in terms of perseverance about the objects of interest. Situational interest, often activated by attractive, fresh and thought-provoking elements of an object, is reasonably insecure, temporary, and context particular; while individual interest is more stable. Individual interest develops gradually from time to time, supported by situational interests: which constitute 'vehicles' for personal interest and enduring interest, both of which are vital in personal growth and self-directed learning (Tin, 2013).

Given the depictions above, this study conceptualises 'interest' as a dynamic construct which generates a feeling of craving for knowledge, and leads to the determined engagement of L2 learners with objects of interest. It promotes successful language learning, leads to knowledge and personal growth, and helps learners cope with a potentially unapproachable L2 learning experience. Both individual and situational interests play a significant role in the learning process. It affects, to a certain degree, what is learnt and how well it is learnt (Schraw and Lehman, 2001). In sum, 'interest' motivates learning and exploration, and helps people build broad knowledge and obtain skills and experiences.

The Development of 'Interest' in L2 Learning

The development of interest is explained in terms of developmental modifications in a person's patterns of interest. This is known as a four-phase model of interest development: triggered situational interest, maintained situational interest, emerging (less-developed) individual interest, and well-developed individual interest (Hidi and Renninger, 2006). Through continued engagement or support, interest endures and deepens (Renninger, 2000; Renninger & Hidi, 2002; Renninger et al., 2004). The first phase, which can last for a short or long period of time, may provide the basis for interest to connect to the second phase, when there is support from the environment. In the third phase, learners no longer rely upon explicit external support, and begin to engage with the object of interest; while in the last phase, learners continue to seek access to re-engage.

Yet a discussion on how ‘interest’ develops in L2 learning has not been elaborated on in the literature. A study that investigates ‘interest’ in L2 from a developmental perspective, in which ‘interest’ is seen as a process changing over time rather than as a static feature, is required. The development of interest covers the transition from situational to individual through several developmental stages and trajectories: in other words, how individual interest, an enduring long-term interest, might develop; and how short-term situational interest contributes to this. According to previous research, the experience of being interested in an actual learning situation is usually the result of an interaction between individual and situational features (Hidi & Baird, 1986; Bergin, 1999; Krapp et al., 1992). Situational interest is triggered primarily by external factors in a given learning environment, in order to develop an individual interest (Hidi, 1990; Krapp et al., 1992; Murphy & Alexander, 2001). Eventually, individual interest is integrated into the structure of the individual’s self-system, which results in firm intention (Krapp, 2002).

However, this is a multi-stage process which cannot adequately be described by both situational and individual interests. Thus a developmental continuum between the very beginning of a situational interest and a stabilised individual interest should be considered. To illustrate the developmental processes, a model representing the idea of such a multi-stage concept is provided in Figure 1. The stages begin with the generation of a situational interest triggered by external stimuli for the first time, move to a situational interest that lasts during a particular learning time through internalisation, before turning into an individual interest, which is relatively stable in terms of enduring engagement.

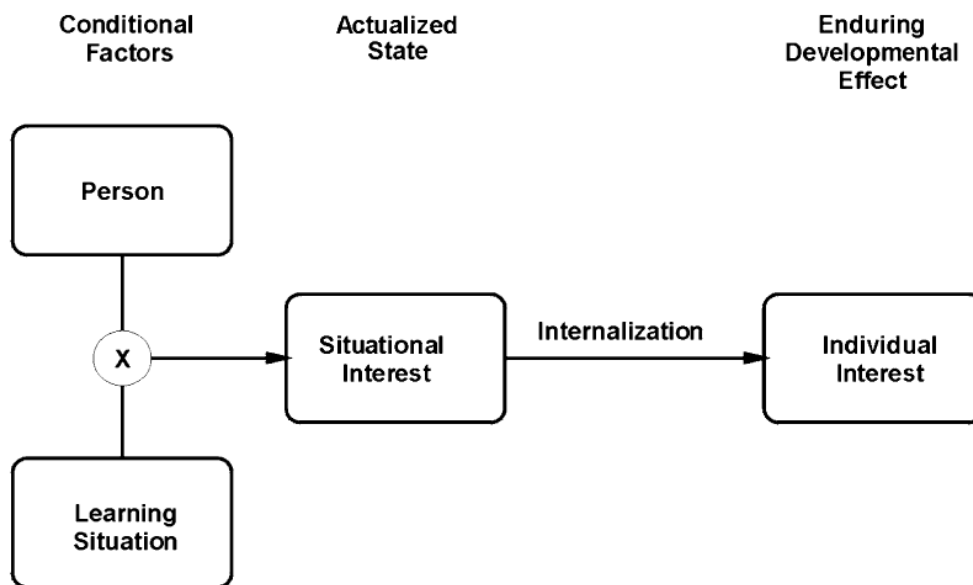


Figure 1: A model of transition from situational to individual interest (Krapp, 1998, p. 191).

Methodology

Context

The context of this study involves two Indonesian students on an MA Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) programme at a UK university. The study focuses on their English learning experiences: specifically, their interest in learning English as a second language. They are experienced English teachers with relevant educational backgrounds. They confirm that English is their object of personal interest.

Research Questions

1. What conditions trigger the students' situational interest in learning English as a second language?
2. How does their situational interest contribute to the development of individual interest?

Participants

This study uses critical case sampling (Dörnyei, 2007): relevant participants who best represent the phenomena are chosen. The participants are two Indonesian students on an MA Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) programme at a UK university. They are purposively selected because they have developed an interest in learning English as a second language, as proven by their educational backgrounds and experience in teaching English, based on my observations as part of the community.

As this research aimed to investigate the phenomena in a particular context, selection of the participants did not attempt to represent the entire population. As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) note, within complexity theory, the purpose of research is only to discover specific generalisations, not universal ones; albeit, the outcomes of one context might be relevant to other contexts. Similar findings from more than one context can be significant by way of discerning the possibility of connected results.

I contacted the participants, asked them about participating voluntarily, and informed them that the data would be kept confidential. They both agreed to take part. The participants were Jihan (32) and Tamara (28), who both started their full-time Master's in September 2016. Both began learning English at junior high school. Jihan graduated from her Bachelor's degree in English Literature, before teaching English at a private school for seven years. Meanwhile, Tamara, who is yet to become a teacher at a state junior high school, has taught for nine years, with English Education as her undergraduate major.

Method and Instrument

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews aimed at gaining deeper, more relevant information about the phenomena under investigation (Dörnyei, 2007). The in-depth retrospective interview was chosen, as it has proven to be a rich source of case material in research on interest involving adult learners (Barron, 2006;

Renninger & Hidi, 2011). The learners were asked to reflect on past critical moments. This concept has been used in qualitative research interviews to investigate such incidents (Finch, 2010). Although these reflections may not offer a directly mirrored image of the experience, they establish a basis for story-telling, enabling participants to revisit and make meaning of their lived experience through narratives.

The interview guide was adapted from Tin (2016), with some modifications. The questions have four parts: participants' background information; English language teaching and learning experiences in the past; other interests; and perceptions of interest in teaching and learning English. As the retrospective nature of the interview depends on participants' memory of past events, I focused on eliciting particular events and asking for specific examples (Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

The interview guide was prepared in two versions: one in English, and one in Bahasa Indonesia, the participants' first language (L1). The participants were able to choose whichever they preferred for the convenience of the interview. Jihan preferred to use Bahasa Indonesia, while Tamara chose English.

Data Analysis Procedure

First, the interviews were transcribed. Jihan's transcript was also translated into English. The transcripts were then read multiple times to familiarise the researcher with the data (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Episodes in which students talked about past critical moments which triggered their situational interest, as well as the possible relationship between situational interest and individual interest in learning English, were read particularly thoroughly: so as to categorise and identify the answers to the research questions.

Results And Discussion

Conditions Triggering Situational Interest in Learning English as an L2

The analysis suggests that significant conditions triggering interest in learning English as an L2 were associated with external factors, which caused a highly emotional impact: for example, coming into contact with an inspiring figure, or support from parents, close friends, and motivating teachers. Inspiring figures were clearly vital in generating interest. The learners' experience in encountering an attractive use of English made them realise what they had not noticed earlier. As Jihan put it, "It was just so cool".

Jihan: I liked English after graduating from senior high school. I was inspired by a news anchor. That news anchor delivered the news by using English, and it looked amazing. She looked very intelligent, very smart talking in English, in other people's language very fluently; it was just so cool.

Before Jihan observed the news anchor who so impressed her, she had never been interested in English and simply treated it in the same way as other subjects. She took English solely to achieve good academic scores. She had not yet appreciated that English is global and universal. However, after her discovery, she recognized the value of learning English and became interested. Her ignorance of English turned into

positive feelings, and she came to start learning the language seriously: “I would learn English seriously”.

Jihan: I think when I was in junior and senior high school, for example, when I watched English movies that (inaudible) like that; I was just amazed and didn't know that I would learn English seriously yet. It wasn't like that until I graduated and was inspired by that news anchor.

Jihan's interest, then, was triggered not only thanks to being inspired by a public, successful English user, but also by her realisation of the benefits of English. Its use by the news anchor triggered her desire to be like her: to be 'amazing, intelligent, smart, and cool'. When she appreciated the substantial advantages provided by English, this created the cognitive interest necessary to seek further knowledge and trigger positive feelings around learning the language.

As well the excitement unpredictably initiated by the stimulating individual in question, the contiguous environment could also trigger interest in learning English as an L2, even during early years. Unlike Jihan, whose interest began after high school, Tamara's interest was prompted when she was young, thanks to support from her family: especially her father, an English teacher. She has studied English since age five or six, and continued to learn it formally in junior high school; her father was her first English teacher there. Her interest seemed to increase at that point, both because of the way her father taught her English; and her friends, who joined her in practising the language. As Tamara says, “Until now he's my inspiration”.

Researcher: What made you become interested in learning English?

Tamara: My father. My father was my first English teacher in junior high school and the way he taught English was totally different even from mine now. It was so light, easy and ,you know, interesting. I don't know how he did it. Until now he's my inspiration.

Researcher: Could you remember the first time you became interested in English?

Tamara: Well, I remember when I was in junior high school, I had kind of many friends who liked to talk, to discuss, or to sing a simple English song. I think that moment would be the, you know, not really the first because I had studied it informally since I was really young. But it was the moment, I mean; it's around 14 years old.

How Situational Interest Contributes to the Development of Individual Interest

The two participants, Jihan and Tamara, developed individual interest: the characteristics of which (Krapp, 2002; Schraw & Lehman, 2001) include stable and persistent desire. Since their situational interest had been triggered by significant people they had encountered and admired, they had not lost their interest in learning English, despite the difficulties they had faced in their learning experiences.

Researcher: Have you ever lost interest in learning English?

Jihan: No. I'm still loving it.

Tamara: In learning English? I don't think so.

It appears that the sources of situational interest played a significant role in the sustainability process. As their situational interest triggered knowledge-seeking behaviour, the two learners ultimately enjoyed the learning process, even though they encountered difficulty in specific aspects (e.g. writing, linguistics, translation). They were aware of their constraints, but willing to work on them and improve. As long as the learners possessed situational interest, they were eager to solve these problems and improve their knowledge and competencies. The questions here, though, revolve around what happened in the process of attending to their individual interest, and how situational interest contributed to their development continuum.

In Tamara's case, her father – also her source of situational interest – contributed directly in further developing her interest by providing support. As well as encouraging her to experience performing English at a school event, he had helped her practise English at home since childhood.

Researcher: Did you practice your English with your father or other family members?

Tamara: Yeah, most of the time with my father, sometimes with my friends who like English just like me.

When, at senior high school, Tamara's teacher did not meet her expectations, her father gave her advice which helped her maintain her interest in spite of the circumstances.

Tamara: When I started senior high school, things changed, and I didn't really like my English teacher because the way he taught didn't stimulate me. I think because he ignored using English when he taught. It was kind of weird for me. But, it's not lively like my father, but my father said that 'because you already like it, you need to like it like more and more and do it by yourself because it will be useful for you one day'.

At a later stage, when she worked as an English teacher and faced problems in her workplace, she asked her father how she could be like him: someone who had taught successfully for many years.

Researcher: And how did you cope with that feeling [losing interest in teaching English]?

Tamara: Normally I cried. I always cried facing my problems. But it's kind of self-awareness or things like, okay it's the thing that I chose. I cannot simply give up. And you know, at that time, I also called my father, and I asked how could you survive thirty years of teaching? Even me in my third year, I gave up. I said something like that. And he told me that I needed to let it go like, I needed to, I cannot be really. Sometimes I liked saying to myself that I should do this and I should do this; I failed, and it was a difficult time. But I am not that way right now. I am kind of happier now.

All of which highlights Tamara's desire to be a successful English learner and teacher: just like her father, her basis of situational interest. In this case, person-oriented situational interest provided an ideal model, which maintained the learner's interest through every phase of interest development, as well as supporting them through challenges and difficulties.

This aligns closely with Jihan's case. The news anchor, her role model, unconsciously directed her to enjoy her Pronunciation course on her undergraduate degree. She was aware of its benefits and learnt it persistently by herself, supported by the teaching methods of the lecturer, which met her needs.

Jihan: In pronunciation, we were taught to speak language, some words in English, correctly. It was kind of challenging because the lecturer really motivated us to speak English correctly, although his motivation appeared not to be good, because it involved physical punishment - he brought a long ruler and anyone who couldn't manage good pronunciation would be hit by that ruler, so it was kind of challenging and also terrifying at the same time. But I still found it very useful for me, so that now I could know how to pronounce words in English in the correct way. Because pronunciation is important, if we spoke incorrectly, people would not understand. So if we intended to say a word but the way we pronounced it was wrong, then people wouldn't understand us.

I am learning by myself. Sometimes I like to talk to myself in front of the mirror, and repeat words like interesting words from the movie.

Conclusion And Pedagogical Implications

Conclusion

This study has sought to validate the theory of interest development of learning English as an L2 by integrating the empirical findings and describing the results from the perspective of the individual. The results help confirm the theory that conditions trigger learners' situational interest in learning English as an L2; and to the understanding of interest development by explaining the role played by situational interest in the development of individual interest. The research has also sought to widen current understandings of the complex phenomena of interest development in an L2.

Importantly, external factors such as an admired individual and/or supportive environment (e.g. parents, close friends, and inspiring teachers) appear to trigger situational interest, the basis of relatively stable individual interest. This person-oriented construction of situational interest contributes to the future development of interest, while ensuring its preservation by supporting learners in dealing with problems. Future research would be more vigorous and effective were it to be conducted via a long-term, longitudinal study, or for the purpose of generalisation. Conducting all interviews in English is also more likely to preserve reliability and validity, which may have been constrained somewhat by the need to translate one of the interviews in this study. However, despite these limitations, the findings have valuable implications for improving the English learning and teaching process: particularly in educational settings where English is obligatory, rather than a matter of personal interest.

Pedagogical Implications

It is common for students not to be interested in learning English as an L2; in such cases, they learn English merely to pass their courses. Inspiring teachers, the most important actors in learning environments, can help mitigate this problem. Indonesian students are interested in subjects taught by motivating, supportive teachers. Successful users of English, such as the news anchor highlighted by Jihan, can also attract students' attention and help them appreciate the benefits provided by English in specific, real life contexts. Such teachers and successful English users can provide a basis which helps trigger situational interest and lays a platform for enduring individual interest.

The ways in which situational interest contribute to interest development identified by this study strongly suggest that the teacher is the core focal point in facilitating students' learning of English. The teacher should provide students with the opportunity to appreciate the benefits of learning the language, and facilitate use of the language in ways which trigger emotional impact. Further, they could support development by helping students overcome problems. This means that if the teacher is unable to engender conditions which enable students to appreciate the attractiveness of English and the importance of learning it, this may leave learners unable to absorb sufficient knowledge and develop effective English language skills. Moreover, if the teacher is unable to support the development process, students will inevitably encounter difficulty and may not even obtain the individual interest integral to the successful learning of any language.

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