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978-1-107-60664-7 - *Motivating Learners, Motivating Teachers: Building Vision in the Language Classroom*

Zoltán Dörnyei and Magdalena Kubanyiova

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In order to offer a brief introduction to this book, we would like to start out by answering five key questions: (1) Why write a book about vision in language education? (2) Why focus on both learners and teachers in the same book? (3) What is the point of mixing the terms ‘vision’ and ‘motivation’? (4) What is this book intended to offer? (5) Who are we, the authors, and how have we come to write this book?

### Why write a book about vision in language education?

There is a straightforward answer to this question: because vision matters a lot. This has been recognised by many for a long time (see e.g. Levin 2000; van der Helm 2009); for example, in one of the best-known biblical proverbs that talks about prophetic vision, we are told, ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’ (Proverbs 29:18), and John Dewey, the eminent American philosopher and educational reformer (1859–1952), stated as early as 1897 in his famous *My Pedagogic Creed* that the central issue in education is vision-building, or as he termed it, *image-formation*:

I believe that the image is the great instrument of instruction. What a child gets out of any subject presented to him is simply the images which he himself forms with regard to it.

I believe that if nine-tenths of the energy at present directed towards making the child learn certain things, were spent in seeing to it that the child was forming proper images, the work of instruction would be indefinitely facilitated.

I believe that much of the time and attention now given to the preparation and presentation of lessons might be more wisely and profitably expended in training the child’s power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite, vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experience.

(Dewey 1897: 79–80)

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In keeping with his view, we have come to believe that vision is one of the single most important factors within the domain of language learning: where there is a vision, there is a way. The main objective of this book is therefore to explain what exactly is involved in the vision to learn a foreign/second language (L2), where the significance of this vision lies and in what ways it can be generated and nurtured consciously by the teacher. When we talk about motivating learners in the following chapters, we do not necessarily mean providing them with entertainment and laughter (although those can often, but not always, be very welcome ingredients of the classroom learning process). Instead, what we mean by *motivating* in this book is to help students to ‘see’ themselves as potentially competent L2 users, to become excited about the value of knowing a foreign language in their own lives and, subsequently, to take action. This action will sometimes be genuinely enjoyable and seemingly effortless, as witnessed by students who are absorbed in watching a gripping foreign language movie, browsing foreign language websites or competing with other teams in a classroom language quiz. At other times, however, the going may get tougher, and even though such low points are inevitable in any sustained activity, too many learners abandon the study of an L2 as a result of their diminishing motivation. Along with the researchers, practitioners and materials writers whose work we will cite and discuss in this book, we believe that such demotivation is not inevitable, as many people are ready to invest effort in difficult tasks when they have a clear vision of where the process can take them. This vision is what our book is about.

**Illustration: The power of vision: ‘I have a dream!’**

On 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr gave a speech in Washington DC about racial equality and an end to discrimination. This speech has been seen as a defining moment of the American Civil Rights Movement. At the end of the speech, he departed from his prepared text and finished with describing an extended vision of a brighter future, punctuated with eight occurrences of the now legendary phrase, ‘I have a dream ...’:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ ...

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ...

The power of this vision has been evidenced by history.

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The answer to this question has to do with how classrooms work. We are interested in transforming classrooms into learning environments that truly facilitate the study of foreign languages. Such a transformation of classroom practice has to begin with the teachers, because they are the people in the best position to shape classroom life. As evidenced by so many inspiring examples around the world, teachers *can* become transformational leaders, and the engine of this transformational drive is the teacher's vision for change and improvement. The good news about this vision is that it is highly contagious: it has the potential to infect the students and generate an attractive vision for language learning in them. Therefore, the rationale for combining the topics of teacher and student motivation in one book is actually quite simple: the two are inextricably linked because the former is needed for the latter to blossom.

**What is the point of mixing the terms 'vision' and 'motivation'?**

This is an important question, and in fact we could even go one step further and ask: should a vision-based approach replace previous motivational frameworks?<sup>1</sup> The answer is no. The plurality of motivational constructs has to do with the multi-faceted nature of human behaviour and with the various levels of abstraction that we can approach it from. The undeniable fact is that the range of potential motives that can affect human behaviour is vast: people might decide to do something for as diverse reasons as physical needs, financial benefits, moral or faith convictions, cognitive curiosity or because they fancy someone who already does it – the list is virtually endless. Various motivation theories highlight different clusters of these motives in order to explain certain specific behavioural domains under focus, such as, for example, voting, mating, learning or working behaviours. Zoltán's earlier book in the Cambridge Language Teaching Library series – *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom* (Dörnyei 2001) – surveyed a wide selection of diverse motives that are relevant to sustained learning behaviours in foreign language classes, and the approach offered in the current book does not replace or invalidate the motivational strategies presented there.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of different approaches to understanding motivation in language education, see Dörnyei (2001, 2014) and Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011).

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So, what is the point in shifting the attention to vision? The reason for doing so is that we understand ‘vision’ to be one of the highest-order motivational forces, one that is particularly fitting to explain the long-term, and often lifelong, process of mastering a second language. While the day-to-day realities of one’s L2 learning experience are the function of multiple factors related to diverse aspects of the learning environment or the learner’s personal life, the concept of vision offers a useful, broad lens to focus on the bigger picture, the overall persistence that is necessary to lead one to ultimate language attainment. In other words, while individuals pursue languages for a variety of purposes, and an equally wide array of reasons keep their motivation alive, the vision of who they would like to become as second language users seems to be one of the most reliable predictors of their long-term intended effort.

In sum, we are firm believers in the ultimate motivational potential of vision, and therefore in the following chapters we shall explore how this vision can be generated and under what conditions it can work best. If it is true that vision can have a substantial impact on motivation and action – and a massive body of research from across a wide range of scientific disciplines suggests that it can – then why not explore this potential in our language classrooms?

### **What is this book intended to offer?**

We hope to provide an accessible discussion that avoids too much jargon and that is not theorising for its own sake but rather serves practical purposes. We have found in our own experience that when teachers genuinely care for student learning, they need some solid framework to understand the key parameters of their professional work in order to make the most of it. The analysis of vision lends itself to this purpose: the nine chapters of this book are intended to present a firm foundation which those teachers wishing to establish a motivational practice in their language classes can build upon. The theoretical principles will be accompanied by a wide range of illustrations from research practice, interviews, anecdotes and celebrity quotes in order to bring the topic alive; we hope to be persuasive and engaging enough to generate real zeal and conviction in our readers so that their excitement, in turn, can be transmitted to their students. This book, then, is a platform to present our own vision about the subject and a call to readers to join us in our visionary journey towards making language learning more engaging and rewarding for our learners.

In our discussion of the pedagogic implications of vision, we will present a number of ideas for classroom activities, with the caveat that this

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is not a ‘recipe book’ whose main aim is to provide teaching resources. Instead, as stated above, our chief objective is to offer insights, clarity and explanation about a fascinating subject in the hope that this will enrich our classroom colleagues’ creative work with their students. Thus, we genuinely agree with the well-known social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1952: 169), who concluded: ‘There is nothing more practical than a good theory.’ (Practical resources concerning vision in language education can be found in two recipe books: Arnold, Puchta and Rinvoluceri 2007 and Hadfield and Dörnyei 2013.)

### **Who are we and how have we come to write this book?**

Interestingly, we both come from Central Europe and were born only a few hours’ drive away from each other – Zoltán in Hungary, Maggie in Slovakia – but it wasn’t until we were both in England that we met, when Maggie started her PhD studies at the School of English, Nottingham University, where Zoltán was teaching. Zoltán began his career as a language teacher and teacher trainer in Budapest, and moved to Nottingham, where his wife comes from, at the end of the 1990s. By that time he had more or less turned into a full-time researcher of L2 applied linguistics, with his main specialisation area being the motivational background of second language acquisition. He was interested in undertaking Maggie’s supervision because she shared his belief in the capacity of good scholarship to make tangible differences in the actual practice of real classrooms, and as part of the first phase of Maggie’s PhD research, we launched an innovative in-service teacher-training course in Slovakia. As will be explained in more detail in Part III, this course was a mixed success. On the one hand, the participants – teachers working in various sectors of the Slovakian educational system – loved it and engaged with it meaningfully, covering a lot of ground and producing excellent course evaluation feedback. On the other hand, however, Maggie’s subsequent research revealed very little evidence that the participants would try to incorporate the newly learnt knowledge and skills in their actual teaching practice. This puzzling experience led to a major turn in Maggie’s PhD research in order to understand the anatomy of teacher-training failure, and the outcome of this work has been summarised in her recent book, *Teacher Development in Action: Understanding Language Teachers’ Conceptual Change* (Kubanyiova 2012).

Interestingly, the original idea for this book was not related to this book at all: it concerned our preparing together the second edition of Zoltán’s *Motivational Strategies* book (Dörnyei 2001). Yet, it soon

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became clear that we were both interested in more than merely updating an existing collection of motivational techniques: we wanted to explore our more general ideas about transforming language teaching practice by generating a constructive vision of change. At this point we also realised that our research interests – Zoltán focusing primarily on students, Maggie on teachers – were conveniently complementary, which suggested the structure of this book. Accordingly, we rewrote our original book proposal for Cambridge University Press, and to our delight, the editors of the Cambridge Language Teaching Library series – Jane Walsh, Anna Linthe and Jo Garbutt – embraced the project right from the beginning.

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# **Part I**

## **Theoretical overview**

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## 1 The role of vision in motivating human behaviour

You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

*Mark Twain (1835–1910)*

Let us start our exploration of the nature of vision and its role in human behaviour with an extraordinary story about how far and (literally) how high vision can take us; the following is a true story adapted from Philippe Petit's (2002) autobiography:<sup>2</sup>

It is winter, 1968, and a young, eighteen-year-old Frenchman, Philippe Petit, is sitting with a toothache in the waiting room of a dentist in Paris. Philippe has been practising wire walking for a few months and as he is waiting for his turn to be seen by the dentist, he is looking at some newspapers when suddenly he freezes: *'I am staring at an illustration and reading over and over a short article about a fantastic building whose twin towers, 110 stories tall, will rise over New York City in a few years and "tickle the clouds"'* (p. 4). At this point the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center only exist in an architect's imagination, but a powerful seed has been sown in Philippe's mind: *'So it is as a reflex that I take the pencil from behind my ear to trace a line between the two rooftops – a wire, but no wirewalker'* (pp. 4–6).

Four years later, in 1972, Philippe comes across another article, this time in the French Magazine *Paris Match*; as he recounts, *'It tells of two pillars already towering above lower Manhattan. A full-page aerial shot portrays the towers as if they were already out of reach. I can hear the cranes bustling to complete the structure on schedule. I can smell the smoke, feel the incessant activity, the urgency ... The article is so disturbing that I throw it into the large red box labelled PROJECTS and try to forget about it. I cannot. The towers keep erupting in my conversations, my thoughts, my dreams'* (p. 8).

The rest is history: two years later, in 1974, Philippe illegally rigged a tightrope between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and on Wednesday, 7 August, shortly after 7:15 am, he stepped off the South Tower and walked the steel cable a quarter of a mile above the street

<sup>2</sup>In the summary of Philippe's story, italics indicate literal quotes from his autobiography. Philippe's remarkable adventure has also been made into an Oscar-winning documentary film, *Man on Wire* (2008).



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level for over 40 minutes, making eight crossings between the towers as well as spending some time sitting and lying on the wire and giving knee salutes. The vision that was originally planted in a Paris dentist's waiting room six years earlier had borne fruit and had become fully realised.

Philippe's extraordinary story raises the question of what the secret of a 'vision' is: how can it suddenly appear out of nothing and then assume such astonishing power that it can drive someone like Philippe Petit to do such an incredibly risky thing as to walk on a steel wire a quarter of a mile above the streets of Manhattan?

**1.1 What is 'vision' and why does it matter?**

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a vision is 'the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination' or 'a vivid mental image, especially a fanciful one of the future'. The term has been used widely both in the media and in a variety of diverse contexts in everyday life, so much so that van der Helm (2009) actually talks about 'the vision phenomenon' to cover 'the ensemble of claims and products which are called "visions" or could be called as such' (p. 96). In his insightful analysis, he distinguishes between seven different types of vision: religious, political, humanistic, business/organisational, community, public policy and personal visions. Within these contexts, he argues, the actual meaning of vision is fairly homogeneous, capturing three defining aspects: (1) the *future*, (2) the *ideal* and (3) the *desire for deliberate change*.

Our interest in this book concerns *personal vision*, which has to do with 'giving meaning to one's life, with helping to make shifts in professional careers and with coaching yourself in realising a personal dream' (van der Helm 2009: 98). This is the understanding of the term *vision* that is implied, for example, in self-help manuals (i.e. all the *How to ...* books sold at airport bookshops), and we have selected it to be the central theme of this book because it captures a core feature of modern theories of L2 motivation: the emphasis on the learner's desire to approximate a preferred future state, the sort of ideal self a language learner might envision for him-/herself. It is this directional nature of the vision, the *pull towards* an imagined future state, that makes the concept useful within the context of human motivation, because the attractive visionary target mobilises present potential in order to move in the preferred future direction, that is, to change in order to appropriate the future.

A key question we need to address in order to understand the exact nature of vision is in what way it is dissimilar to a 'goal' – after all, a goal

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also represents directional intentions to reach future states. There is one fundamental difference between the two concepts: unlike an abstract, cognitive goal, a vision includes a strong *sensory element*: it involves tangible images related to achieving the goal. Thus, for example, the vision of becoming a doctor exceeds the abstract goal of earning a medical degree in that the vision involves the individual's actually seeing him-/herself receiving the degree certificate or practising as a qualified doctor. That is, the vision to become a doctor also involves the sensory experience of *being* a doctor. More generally, the main feature of a vision is that it subsumes both a desired goal and a representation of how the individual approaches or realises that goal. In this sense, a vision can be understood as a *personalised goal* (Markus and Ruvolo 1989) that the learner has made his/her own by adding to it the imagined reality of the actual goal experience. Talking about the vision of an organisation, Ira Levin (2000: 95) articulates this sensory element when she says that effective visions 'should outline a rich and textual picture of what success looks like and feels like'. She goes on to say that a vision 'should be so vivid as to enable the listener or reader to transport himself or herself to the future, so to speak, to witness it and experience it'. Vision, thus, has significant motivational capacity; as Taylor and his colleagues (1998) argued in their seminal paper 'Harnessing the Imagination', adding sensory information to a desired future goal enhances people's motivation to achieve it (see ILLUSTRATION 1.1 for an L2 learning-related example). As we shall see later, this aspect of vision has been systematically utilised in several disciplines, most notably in sport psychology, where generating a powerful vision in an athlete can make the difference between a good and a gold-medal-winning performance.

**Illustration 1.1** 'When I think about my vision ...' (from Magid 2011: 214)

Extract from an interview with a learner of English:

When I think about my vision, I feel excited and I have a strong desire to make it come true. The feeling of excitement motivates me to learn English. I realised that I need to put more time and effort into learning English to achieve my vision. That's the way that my vision encourages me!

In the following sections we explore in more detail the motivational capacity of vision, first by looking at one specific motivation theory in psychology – possible selves theory – that is particularly relevant in this context, and then by examining the implications of this theory for language learning contexts both for learners and for teachers.