L2 Learner Individual Differences:
An Integrative and Contextualist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the literature of learner characteristics in applied linguistics, learning attitudes, strategies and motivation have received most attention. These learner individual difference variables have usually been seen as background learner variables that modify and personalize the overall trajectory of the language acquisition processes (Dörnyei, 2009). Embedded within a mainly psycholinguistic perspective on L2 acquisition, previous research on these background learner variables tended to examine one variable independently of other variables, and of the learning contexts in which L2 learners are situated (Ellis, 2004). For example, early studies on good language learners focused largely on learning strategies. Consequently much less attention has been given to the interplay between various individual difference factors as well as interaction between learner individual and contextual factors. This case study set out to investigate how the contextualized learner learning attitudes, strategies, and motivation might differentiate successful and less successful ESL learners. Data were collected through interviews, diaries, and follow-up email correspondence with both successful and less successful second-year university ESL students. Analysis of the data suggests that learners' psychological relation to the English language learning process depends in large measure upon the social, institutional, and interpersonal contexts "in which individuals find themselves, the purposes for their being there, and their personal biographies" (Duff & Uchida, 1997, p. 452). Learners' investment in English language learning and different levels of success as ESL learners could thus be the outcome of dynamic interactions of different learner factors situated in the particular learning contexts. Implications of the results for how institutions and teachers may empower ESL students in their investment in learning the target language are discussed.

It has been observed that there is a particularly wide variation among L2 learners in terms of the overall trajectory of acquisition process and the level of ultimate success in mastering a second language (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). In fact, awareness of this variation in second language attainment success has made individual differences one of the most thoroughly studied areas of second language acquisition (SLA) for the past several decades. Early research studies on good language learners mainly aimed at identifying strategies used by successful language learners. For example, the well-known study of Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern,

and Todesco (1978) noted that adult good language learners appeared to use five significant strategies: (a) taking an active approach to the task of language learning, (b) recognizing and exploiting the systematic nature of language, (c) using the language they were learning for communication and interaction, (d) managing their own affective difficulties with language learning, and (e) monitoring their language learning performance. Such early good language learner research aims at unearthing "the secrets of such learners, with the implicit assumption that if these secrets became more widely known, they could be shared with or transplanted to less successful language learners" (Oxford & Lee, 2008, p. 306).

Continuing Naiman et al.'s research work, various other researchers explored the relationships between reported strategy use and language learning outcomes to identify the range and nature of learning strategies employed by good, successful or effective language learners. Using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Green and Oxford (1995) studied the language learning strategy use of students at three different university course levels. They found significantly greater overall use of language learning strategies among more successful students. However, as Griffiths (2008) points out, learning strategies tend to interact with many other learner or learning variables in patterns of great complexity, "making any attempts at cause and effect generalizations difficult to justify" (Griffiths, 2008, p. 94). Other studies (e.g., Cotterall, 1999) demonstrate that students' self-directed language learning outside class plays a crucial role in their success as language learners. Self-directed learning strategies are considered to include not only those involving the internal, cognitive aspects of learning but also those involving the metacognitive control exerted by the learners themselves with regard to the purpose, agency, and instrumentality of their learning. The situations in which self-directed language learning occurs range from those in which the learner benefits from more or less substantial technical assistance in quantitative and qualitative terms to those in which the learner is completely self-taught (Holec, 1996). Meanwhile research studies devoted to the investigation of learning strategies and self-regulation revealed that good language learners develop insights into beliefs about language learning processes (White, 2008).

Research into learner autonomy, in particular, has shown that learning behavior may be influenced by how one conceptualizes language learning in general (Pennington, 1999). Drawing attention to the importance of attitudes in effective language learning, Wenden (1991) argues that language learning attitudes comprise cognitive and affective components. The cognitive component involves beliefs or perceptions about the objects or situations related to the attitude. The affective component is the degree of like or dislike, approval or disapproval associated with the attitudinal object, such as the teacher and the class. McCombs (1990) further suggests that attitudes about the learning environment can influence the effort students put forth in pursuit of learning tasks on a self-directed basis. Similarly, how learners conceptualize the language learning process may influence how they actually approach the task of learning the language. Consequently, language learning attitudes or beliefs are the basis of how learners approach their learning, the strategies they employ, and their success in language learning (Oxford & Lee, 2008; Riley, 1996).

Another learner identifying characteristic which has been recognized as playing a critical role in mediating learners' target language learning behaviour is motivation. The traditionally well-known constructs concerning motivation for second language learning are integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner, 1985). Gardner defines second language learning motivation as "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (Gardner, 1985, p. 10). The focus of this traditional L2 motivation theory has been on general motivational dispositions and influences in relation to global learning outcomes and behaviors. A new orientation to the study of motivation (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003), however, is more interested in examining learners' motivational patterns in a given sociocultural or educational environment, adopting an approach that emphasizes how students construe the situation, interpret events in the situation, and process information about the situation (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

In contrast to a cognitive orientation in defining and researching the learner and learning, socioculturally informed studies regard learners' participation in the kinds of activities our everyday lives comprise as both the product and the process of learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Norton (1995) also notes that the traditional concept of motivation connotes some monolithic inner quality that a learner may summon in varying amounts (see also Mckay & Wong, 1996). Norton thus prefers to use the term "investment", which captures the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world (Norton, 1995, p. 17). This view of the language learner as having a complex social identity and multiple desires may help us answer the question why some language learners seem to act counter-productively, using strategies that subvert the language performance expectations of the situation rather than fulfill them (Mckay & Wong, 1996). Even learner individual difference researchers would now generally agree that the role of learner characteristics can only be evaluated with regard to their interaction with specific environmental factors or conditions (Dörnyei, 2009).

Given the fact that early good language learner studies have largely focused on conscious learning strategies in classroom settings, and inspired by an increased interest in conceptualizing L2 learners as complex social beings and investigating how different L2 learners exploit their learning environments (Lantolf, 2000a; Mckay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000), this case study looks closely at three important learner individual difference factors that significantly contribute to a learner identity (Oxford & Lee, 2008), i.e., attitudes, strategies, and motivation. Specifically, this study examines the role of attitudes, motivation, and strategies that may differentiate successful and less successful learners, and how these individual difference factors interact with the learners' social, institutional, and interpersonal contexts.

This study

Participants

Nine successful and nine less successful[1] second-year university ESL students in Hong Kong participated in this study (see Table 1). Selection of these two types of students was based on their teacher's perception of their performance in the university English courses and their university entrance examination grades, i.e., their grades in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. For successful students, their performance in the regular English classes should put them among the top 10% of the class based on their teacher's perception; for less successful students, their performance in the regular English classes should put them among the bottom 10% of the class based on their teacher's perception. For successful students, their university entrance examination grades for the English language subject should be *B* or above, whereas for less successful students, their grades should be *D* or below. Admittedly, it might be a weakness to use university entrance examination grades as a criterion for selecting the study participants since these grades might not well reflect students' learning achievements at university. However, these grades are still relevant in the sense that this investigation involves the students recalling their English learning experiences both at secondary school and at the tertiary level. Moreover, previous empirical L2 testing studies show that the proficiency students start with at university is the most constant indicator of

Table 1
Participants' Personal Data

Student/Gender		Age	Class performance	University entrance exam grade	Major
1	Female	20	Top 10%	B	Business
2	Female	20	Top 10%	B	Literature
3	Female	19	Top 10%	B	Chemistry
4	Female	21	Top 10%	B	Business
5	Female	19	Top 10%	B	Chemistry
6	Female	20	Top 10%	B	Business
7	Female	20	Top 10%	B	Accountancy
8	Female	20	Top 10%	B	Accountancy
9	Female	19	Top 10%	B	Business
10	Female	19	Bottom 10%	E	Engineering
11	Male	21	Bottom 10%	D	Engineering
12	Female	21	Bottom 10%	E	Engineering
13	Male	20	Bottom 10%	E	Electronics
14	Male	21	Bottom 10%	E	Engineering
15	Male	20	Bottom 10%	E	Engineering
16	Male	20	Bottom 10%	E	Radiography
17	Male	20	Bottom 10%	E	Business
18	Male	20	Bottom 10%	E	Business

[1] In the SLA literature, good, successful, or effective language learners are generally understood to mean those learners who perform well on tests or examinations, or who are rated as such by their teachers. Hence these terms are often used interchangeably by SLA researchers.

how far they are likely to "travel", and is thus powerful in shaping their self image and predictions about their future progress as well as the kinds of educational goals they set themselves (e.g., Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003, p. 226).

The data

The data for this study consist of interviews, diaries, and follow-up emails. I conducted the first interview with the study participants at the beginning of the first semester of their second year at university. This first interview with each participant which was conducted in their mother tongue, Cantonese, focused on their attitudes towards English learning, their preferred activities and strategies, the main sources of their motivation for English learning, and how studying English at university differs from studying English at secondary school (see Appendix A). At the end of the interview which lasted about 40 minutes, each participant was asked to keep a two-month diary in Chinese describing or reflecting on his/her language learning feelings, preferences and experiences, in or outside class. The participants were given guidelines on how to keep a language learning diary (see Appendix B). Later these participants were contacted regularly by e-mail for their feelings or any difficulties in keeping the diary. At the time the diaries were collected from the participants, the author conducted the second interview with each of them. The second interview which was also conducted in Chinese and also lasted about 40 minutes focused on how the participant had been learning English. The participants were also asked whether they had a theory about English language learning. Follow-up email correspondence with the participants was also used to probe further some points that emerged while the interviews were being transcribed and translated.

The analysis

Following the traditions of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I read students' responses and writings, labeled and listed specific descriptive phrases, and then clustered all these labeled descriptive phrases into broader ideational categories—what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call "thematic units" and "core categories" respectively. The categorization of descriptive phrases followed the guidelines of explicitness and "best fit" suggested by Pidgeon and Henwood (1997, p. 261). The ideational categories were then organized according to a framework of three dimensions: attitudinal differences, learning strategies, and motivational discourses.

Results

Attitudinal differences between successful and less successful ESL learners

Successful learners

The majority of the successful students in this study mentioned that learning English well entails a good learning environment. Overall, they referred to two

types of English learning environment. The first type, described as a sort of "school culture" at secondary school, emerged repeatedly in the responses of most successful students, as in:

> **Extract 1**
> "I think my education at secondary school helped me a lot. It is an English-medium school and we had to learn most subjects in English. Also our school pays much attention to language, not just the science part. Some students fail because they are not trained in an environment that emphasizes English." (ss)

Comments like this implied a great appreciation of the secondary school education which these students thought really facilitated their English learning. Aspects of such "school culture" constantly referred to were, among others things, English-medium instruction, or the extracurricular English learning activities, or the responsive and responsible attitudes of their English teachers. Explicitly, these successful students regarded such "school culture" as being crucial for building a solid foundation in English. In their view, a "school culture" will influence not only English learning outcomes but also motivation to learn: "English is my school's best known subject, that is, my school is famous for its English atmosphere. … Students having no motivation to learn English at all should be related to their school culture". (ss)

The second type of English learning environment was the native English speaking context mentioned by two successful students. One of them expressed a desire to achieve native-like oral fluency in English:

> **Extract 2**
> "I want to speak more fluently, more foreign-like, I mean like a native speaker. … So I think I will, if possible, I think I will go on an exchange program. If you are in an English speaking country, everyday you have to speak English." (ss)

Explicit in this remark is the obvious thought that studying or living some time overseas would make a difference in terms of oral English fluency. Another successful student, noting that the biggest difference between her and her classmates who had their secondary school education overseas was in oral fluency and intonation, commented: "they are just like native speakers. Even though I tried hard to practise my English, I can't speak as fast as a native speaker". It seemed to her that pursuit of native-like fluency and intonation could be best achieved in native English speaking environment.

Besides the notion of learning environments, a second commonly expressed view among the successful students was that reading is perhaps the most effective way to learn English in an ESL context like Hong Kong, as one of them said: "if you want to improve your oral skills, you have to find somebody to talk to, and watch a lot to improve your oral and listening skills, this kind of activity in my opinion is not so great in Hong Kong, so the main thing I do to improve my English is reading." In the case of this student, conceptualization of reading as "the main thing I do to improve my English" was thus based on her perception of a learning context which could not provide satisfying oral and listening

opportunities. Nearly all successful students seemed to believe that so long as one keeps reading, one will learn vocabulary unconsciously rather than through memorization, as is illustrated in one diary entry: "I think reading is better, because you expose yourself to a large number of English words. During the English lessons, how much are you exposed to? If you read English materials every day, you keep refreshing your memory, and you'll never forget it".

Drawing on both secondary school and university English learning contexts, most of the successful students admitted that they did a lot of memorization at secondary school, but little at university. Overall, they regarded memorization as necessary and effective to master English vocabulary in the early stages of English learning, and emphasized that different stages of English learning entail an adjustment of learning strategies such as memorization, as in "when I was young (i.e., at secondary school), I would memorize a lot. Memory is important in learning a second language initially. When you have learned English for a long time, you don't have to memorize much". Hilton (2007) argues that the greatest problem facing novice language learners is the sheer volume of new information to be memorized, i.e., tens of thousands of words and formulaic expressions. In Hilton's view, memorization leads to the automatization of new articulatory, morphological, and syntactic procedures. The voices of the successful students in this study appear to lend some support to Hilton's arguments.

Talking about English learning at university, most of the successful students expressed an overall satisfaction with the university English courses. They noted that the university English teaching was more interactive, and that the teacher could attend more to individual needs; whereas at secondary school the teacher spoke a lot, the students just listened, and there were not many opportunities for everyone to speak English in the class because of the large class size. Participant Four mentioned in her diary that in her university English classes, there were role plays and case studies which were interesting and provided a chance for students to think, and what they learned was no longer the exam-type English that was common in the English classes at secondary school. Another successful student, Participant 5 commented that the university English course brought about not only progress in her language competence but also development in her social skills:

Extract 3
"I like it because we are doing our own work. We set our own topic, work in a group on our own topic, and the tutor tried to improve our English, so we've got a balance. I did quite well in that course and I got an A. I become a pen-friend of the tutor and we write e-mails to each other. So I have plenty of chances to practice my oral English, express my ideas clearly so all the classmates can understand. I feel that I have advanced in stating my opinions that is different from the others without annoying them. I think this can be regarded as improvement in the 'use and choice of words', but the factors of improvement in 'social skill' could not be excluded." (ss)

Less successful learners

Among the majority of the less successful students, a most often mentioned aspect of English language learning was English grammar. Because of the grammar trouble, some less successful students reported feeling a need to study English grammar systematically at university. One of them recalled that when he was in Form Five (Grade 10), he did not even know what is subject or object in the English language. He attributed his grammar problems to the ineffectiveness of English teaching style at secondary school. Interestingly, except one of them who attributed the grammar problem to lack of her own persistent efforts, the rest of the less successful students generally agreed that this grammar problem resulted from the teaching and learning context at secondary school in Hong Kong, as is suggested in the following extract:

> Extract 4
> "… Hong Kong students are not very good at English grammar; grammar is very boring. If they are required to sit in a room studying those grammar materials, they will feel uncomfortable. They are used to things that are stimulating…." (ls).

Like successful students, some less successful students also referred to the notion of language learning environment. Three less successful students reported that they found it hard to find an opportunity to practise English themselves, and that consequently, they had little exposure to English outside class. One of these three students reacted to this problem rather emotionally: "The English learning environment my university provides is very bad. I think if all of us will have a semester or a year for overseas study, we must gain much improvement in our English, both in listening and speaking". Another less successful student, Participant 10 also remarked:

> Extract 5
> "Actually I learned nearly nothing from the university English classes. I did not learn new things there. In the class, the teacher just encouraged us to talk more. It's boring and useless because in the class I can't improve my oral skills" (ls).

Apparently these less successful students tended to attribute their English learning problems to the institutional environment. Meanwhile, their remarks also revealed that they themselves might not have made good use of the learning resources and opportunities already available to them, and might even have lost confidence about any improvement in their English.

In contrast to successful students who viewed memorization as a successful means of "stockpiling" language materials for use, less successful students tended to treat it as something they were compelled to do at secondary school. Most of them held rather negative attitudes about this method of learning English vocabulary either because they kept forgetting the words they had memorized or they could not use these words communicatively. Participant 12 used to be good at mathematics and science at secondary school, and his learning habits in those two subjects prompted him to think: "We need not memorize many things in these two subjects (i.e., mathematics and physics). The main point is

not memorizing, the main problem is that even if, e.g., you memorize all the English words, it doesn't ensure you can write a good essay". In a later e-mail follow-up, his doubts about usefulness of memorization were displayed again:

> **Extract 6**
> "If I see a new word, I write it down, I find the meaning from the dictionary, but actually even though I write down, I forget it, even though I try to memorize it a second or third time, if I don't use it, I still forget it…. " (ls)

Differences in use of learning strategies between successful and less successful ESL learners

Successful learners

"Learning strategy" in this article refers to "processes" consciously selected by language learners to enhance the learning and/or use of a second language (Cohen, 1998). Taken as a group, the learning activities reported by successful students covered all the common four areas of English language skills, i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The strategies for listening and speaking range *from* attending a summer course in English in the UK, talking to foreigners whenever there was a chance available, watching movies (in the case of difficult colloquial language, referring to the English subtitles), joining English clubs or discussion groups, *to* talking to themselves in English. Reading strategies included reading English magazines, reading English newspapers, reading novels, reading academic journal articles related to one's specialized areas (during reading they might write down new or useful words/phrases, trying to remember new or useful words/phrases, guessing the meaning of new words/phrases), and reading aloud. The strategies for writing included writing e-mail in English, writing English novels and essays, writing project reports (while writing they may have a dictionary at hand for double checking the difficult word one is going to use).

Most impressively, half of the successful students appeared to be characterized by a combined use of several types of strategies, as illustrated in the following diary entry:

> **Extract 7**
> "The thing I do most often is to read books, to read English books…. So this is the main input. Sometimes I discuss with my friends how to do the essays and so on, so through this interaction I can understand more thoughtfully about the terms as well as improving my English because they can always stimulate my ideas…. The English Language Centre or Career Centre sometimes offers some courses in English, for example they have courses on free discussion on some sort of social issues or topics for us to discuss. We can go to such kind of discussion groups, it's a lot of fun." (ss)

In terms of the individual learning activity, reading was the most commonly mentioned learning activity among these successful students. The following extract from the interview with Participant 2 is particularly illustrative of the importance of and benefits from reading as a means of achieving a higher level of proficiency and generating a passion to learn:

Extract 8

"I read mostly novels, magazines and fictions. I read nothing academic, because they should all be done in school time, not leisure time. Maybe reading makes someone more creative, and after some time, they accumulate enough experience and feelings to start their own writing. This is true in my case. Reading continuously and extensively contributes to both my interest in writing as well as my writing ability." (ss)

In terms of metacognitive or self-management learning strategies, almost all the successful students agreed that that there were many self-study opportunities for students to explore at university. Participant 8 commented in the interview: "Sometimes if you are lazy, then maybe you will not make very good progress on your English. We need to learn mostly on our own, be the active ones. And you have to find a lot of reference books, and know your level". Some successful students admitted that outside class learning was actually the main part of their English learning. One of them reported that she was the only one in her class who subscribed to South China Morning Post, and she had to do her reading in the bus every day due to an extremely busy schedule of coursework for engineering students at university. "I am feeling if I just can't read for one hour (a day), my English will surely become poor", she happily told the researcher.

Less successful learners

Unlike successful students, less successful students reported some English learning activities like reading English newspapers or watching English movies on a random basis. Three less successful students reported virtually no English learning activities at all outside class. While the majority of the less successful students expressed the wish to further improve their English proficiency at university, their wish did not often turn into actual self-directed language learning behavior. These less successful students rarely engaged in self-initiated language learning. For example, due to his weak performance in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), one of them reported that he was referred to his university's independent language learning centre for some additional learning of grammar and vocabulary for several hours a month on a compulsory basis. He commented in the interview that such additional learning activity was useless to him. Two other less successful students also complained in their diaries that English was too difficult to learn, and thus they never arrived at a functioning mode that enabled them to see any tangible progress. These two students revealed the impression that they were not capable of learning English well and seemed to feel much frustrated about English learning, as in "learning English is just too difficult, I hate spelling. I'm not good at this. I think grammar is difficult too". Finally, about half of the less successful students seemed to find it a daunting task to survive the academic studies in other subject areas because of their weakness in English. It could be true that coping with daily academic studies might have consumed most of their available time and energy, and has eroded their potential investment in English learning.

In contrast to the successful students who appeared to be able to determine their learning goals and manage their own learning, some of the less successful

students admitted that they did not know how to improve their English at university although they realized a need to do so, like "maybe I have no idea of how to learn vocabulary in the reading comprehension"; "I'm not so good in time management". These students could thus be described as learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning or review their accomplishments and future learning directions (Anderson, 2008). In other words, they lack the metacognitive strategies that empower language learners and enable them to make conscious decisions about what they can do to improve their learning, as can be seen in the following comment in the interview with a less successful student:

> Extract 9
> "I know English is important, but I can't find the way to improve my English…. What's the meaning of having a good ability in English now? For some students, they can perform the five papers well in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. Actually I don't know why they can perform well in all these five papers. I just can't evaluate myself." (ls)

Differences in motivational discourses between successful and less successful ESL learners

Successful learners

In this study, both successful and less successful students shared the perception of a need to further improve their English as a result of perceiving classroom learning as being inadequate. One successful student commented in her diary that some instructors did not always use English though they were supposed to do so. Inadequate input of English inside the class thus prompted her to practise her English language skills outside the class. According to Dörnyei (2001), "some of the motivational sources are situation-specific, that is, they are rooted in the students' immediate learning environment" (p. 399). In this case, students' awareness of inadequacy of regular classroom instruction was an echo of Dörnyei's argument. In addition, successful students reported that they also felt a need to improve their English as this might help them live a better life or find a good career.

In contrast to instrumental motivational orientations, the integrative motivational orientations in Gardner's motivation theory "reflect a sincere and personal interest in the target language, people, and culture" (Ushioda, 2008, p. 20). Illustrating integrative motivation, Gardner and Lambert (1972) said that learning a second language entails much more than acquiring knowledge of the formal elements of language and developing specific language skills such as reading and writing. Most importantly, the learner should be willing to identify with members of another ethnolinguistic group in terms of their distinctive style of speech and their language. Here in this study, somewhat related to such integrative motivation construct is the successful students' desire "to become a member of the academic community that speaks the language" as they emphasized a need to maintain a good level of English just because "you have to do everything in English at university".

Besides the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation in Gardner's social-psychological model of language learning, the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction in mainstream motivational psychology is also pertinent to the present study participants' motivational discourses. Nearly all the successful students reported that they liked English. Such a fondness for English seemed to be unique to these successful students. They claimed that such a liking largely stemmed from their satisfying English learning experiences at secondary school, which represents a classic example of intrinsic motivation, i.e., "doing something as an end in itself, for its own self-sustaining pleasurable rewards of enjoyment and interest" (Ushioda, 2008, p. 21). This type of motivational discourse rightly echoes the argument that study of the language creates motivation. In other words, motivation develops as a result of past positive experiences with the target language.

Dörnyei and Schmidt (2001) observe that "significant others" (e.g., peer influences) can also be strong motivators. An example of the motivational influence of "significant others" in this study is that one successful student said that she was inspired to catch up with her classmates through greater effort in English when she found that her classmates who had a secondary school education overseas were "just like the native English speakers".

Less successful learners

Like successful students, less successful students in this study also perceived English as an important tool for educational and socioeconomic advancement in Hong Kong as implied in this remark of a less successful student: "when I come to society, people are expecting me to know English well. If you have a good command of English you may have a better job". Such recognition of the usefulness of English in relation to their life apparently identifies with the 'instrumental' motivations in Gardner's (1985) traditional L2 motivation theory, demonstrating university students' general awareness of the potential linkage between one's learning investment and the coveted material and social returns (Norton, 2000) in a highly competitive society like Hong Kong.

Unlike successful students, however, most of the less successful students mentioned repeatedly that they were forced to learn at secondary school. Implicit in this remark is that less successful students' English learning at secondary school could be essentially motivated by examinations, and they themselves had little choice. In other words, their English learning at secondary school was largely mediated by external factors or forces. It goes without saying that the extrinsic goal of doing well in examinations was equally highly valued by the successful students. But the difference between them and the less successful students, as documented above, is that some self-sustaining elements such as an intrinsic interest in English were lacking in the latter's motivational discourses. This lack of self-sustaining elements can be further illustrated in the following extract from an interview in which a less successful student described how she and her classmates coped with their EAP course assignment:

Extract 10

"Hong Kong students think lessons are something to be coped with. While the deadline for assignment is approaching, several of us gather together and work out the quickest way to complete the assignment. Spending much time earlier doing the assignment is a waste of time". (ls)

Such motivational discourse might suggest that the students lacked a genuine concern with their academic performance, which would be detrimental to their investment in improving their English. Another pattern of motivational thinking and self-perceptions unique to less successful students in this study is that they held rather negative attitudes about their teachers and classroom-based learning, with detrimental consequences for their motivation. For example, they tended to regard their secondary school teachers as unenthusiastic and not genuinely concerned about their learning needs and problems. Moreover, they were particularly strongly dissatisfied with English teaching at university, as evidenced in their very critical comments about university English classes (e.g., "It is useless", "No improvement in my English", "The teacher just wants to finish her job").

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate how learner language learning attitudes, strategies and motivation might differentiate successful and less successful learners, how these learner factors might interact with each other, and be mediated by the social, institutional and interpersonal contexts in which the participants were situated.

In terms of language learning attitudes, the successful students in this study tended to stress the importance of memorization in laying down a solid foundation in early stages of learning English as a second language. This seems to make sense given the role of memory in language learning recently emphasized by psycholinguists (see Ding, 2007). Once a foundation was established, these students appeared to rely more on reading to maintain and further develop their English proficiency so as to be able to function effectively in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Clearly, the successful students demonstrated an awareness of how they could capitalize on an ESL learning environment like Hong Kong, which resulted in a commitment to obtaining resources (e.g., "school culture", tutor's help, peer group collaboration, and exchange program) and participating fully in the classroom or in the world outside the classroom. Given their considerably sophisticated conceptualizations of English language learning in a particular context like Hong Kong, it is not difficult to understand that successful students' language learning strategies appeared to be characterized by engagement in intentional, goal-directed, meaningful activities (Lantolf, 2000b), which in turn might lead to the development of more sophisticated conceptualizations concerning English language learning.

The less successful students, however, seemed to be more concerned with basics of English, for example, grammar knowledge, suggesting that they had been uncomfortable about and thus have been struggling with the "lower-level" aspects of L2 expertise (Johnson, 2005). For some less successful students, memorization

was something that particularly bothered them, which could be an important source of their English learning problems. Most impressively, their view of English learning environment tended to be that learning facilities or resources available around them would not be helpful at all as they thought they could only be forced to learn in native English speaking environment. Some of them suffered from negative feelings such as low self-efficacy and frustration as a result of the failure to see tangible progress in their English learning. What seems clear is that less successful students apparently failed to develop learning attitudes that would allow them to feel competent, valued or appreciated as English language learners (Ushioda, 2008). In this case, it is no surprise that their strategies were largely characterized by coping with examinations or assignments, and that they rarely engaged in any self-directed language learning.

Another prime difference between the successful and less successful students observed in this study concerns learners' exercise of metacognitive or self-regulatory mechanisms (Dörnyei, 2005; Wenden, 2002). The successful students seemed more capable of self-regulating their English learning than did the less successful students. For example, the successful students actively searched for and created learning and use opportunities beyond the classroom as evidenced in their thinking that outside-class learning should be the main part of their English learning since this could enable them to be exposed to a far greater amount of English than the normal English classes could provide. In addition, some of the successful students were characterized by a combined use of learning activities and strategies, which is well in line with their conceptualization of the university environment as offering various types of English learning opportunities. In the case of the less successful students, some appeared to be unable to determine their own learning goals, to tackle their learning problems flexibly through exploiting the language learning resources available to them. Some of them seemed to know where their English problems were, but had no plan or did not want to expend effort, to deal with these problems. It is thus no surprise that their investment in English learning was basically limited to attending the compulsory English classes. Consequently, there appeared a general failure among the less successful students to recognize themselves as agents in taking charge of their own language learning.

The traditional motivational dichotomies (i.e., integrative versus instrumental, intrinsic versus extrinsic) seem useful in helping me derive a general picture of the motivational differences between the two groups of students in this study. The majority of the successful students expressed a satisfaction about the strong "English atmosphere" in their secondary school, and about the English learning and use opportunities they fruitfully exploited at university. This positive feeling, as an internal driving force, "gives rise to … sustained intellectual and/or physical effort" in the language learning process (Williams & Burden 1997, p. 120). Thus their investment in English tended to be consistent and on a regular basis. In contrast, the data projected generally negative feelings on the part of the less successful students towards their teachers and English classes both in secondary school and at university. They generally did not share the intrinsic characteristics of the successful students. For them, utilitarian purposes appeared to be the

only criterion of judging whether or not investment in English was worthwhile. In this case, the less successful students could be trapped in a vicious cycle of negative learning attitudes, lack of self-sustaining internal motive, limited or little investment in learning, failure to see tangible progress, and feelings of disappointment which in turn further demotivate their learning effort (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004).

Language study is a socially complex undertaking that often generates different feelings among different students. Each of the above traditional SLA motivational categories obviously assumes a static identity and a singular desire on the part of the L2 learners, and thus may fall short in representing multiple desires and accounting for the ambivalence that L2 learners sometimes feel in the process of learning the target language (Norton, 1995; Ullman, 1997). From a sociocultural perspective, the origins of cognitive functioning are primarily social. In other words, higher cognitive processes (e.g., planning, monitoring or self-regulating one's learning behaviour) are externally mediated activities whose source is the interaction that occurs between community members (Swain, 2001). In line with this perspective, L2 learning can be seen as resulting from socialization as a student in a particular sociocultural setting (Haneda, 2006). Consequently, different levels of success as an L2 learner depend on the type of mediation they receive and the specific goals for which they use the language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It could be seen that the multiple desires and the specific goals underlying the successful students' investment in learning English (e.g., desire to go on an exchange program, desire to speak like a native speaker, desire to be a writer, desire to catch up with classmates, and desire to accumulate enough experience and feelings to start writing like others, desire to be a member of the community) in this study were rooted in their connections with the outside world.

In the case of less successful students, they appeared to understand the practical benefits of English learning and also wished to learn English well, yet there was almost no proactive investment on their part that was essential in the fulfillment of their wishes. This lack of investment should have to do with their 'sense of themselves in relation to others (e.g., "Hong Kong students are not very good at English grammar", "I don't know why they can perform well in all these five papers", "I have learned nothing from the university English classes", "Hong Kong students think lessons are something to be coped with"). Most of them made the case that the EAP course did not benefit their English language development. Normally, in each university in Hong Kong, students whose performance on EAP is weak will be required to carry out some mandatory remedial language training. The reaction of one less successful student towards such remedial learning activity was particularly noteworthy. His comments that additional learning of grammar and vocabulary for several hours a month seemed useless to him showed that such kind of teaching practice did not have a desirable pedagogical effect, at least as far as this student was concerned. While the intention behind the mandatory remedial language training was to help the students to improve their English, one might wonder to what extent several hours of remedial work a month could help solve their problems with English. As might have already been reflected with this student, the "outcomes" of this kind of mandatory remedial language training,

might allow for reinforcement of the label for these students as "weak" in the English language (Hunter, 1997). It could thus be argued that this practice might not do justice to the complexity of learner identities (Norton, 1997). There was therefore a need for the teachers to understand these students' expectations, earlier language learning experiences, and their interactions with the outside world.

Implications

This case study indicates that learners' psychological relation to the English language learning process depends in large measure upon the social, institutional and interpersonal contexts "in which individuals find themselves, the purposes for their being there, and their personal biographies" (Duff & Uchida, 1997, p. 452). Learners' investment in English learning and different levels of success as ESL learners could thus be the outcome of dynamic interaction of different learner factors situated in the particular learning contexts. In other words, the question of who learned what, and how much, could be essentially a question of how the students were positioned in specific personal, institutional and social contexts.

Current learner training programs tend to focus on training students in certain types of learning strategies. However, development of learner autonomy in L2 learning is not simply a matter of teaching strategies (Sinclair, Ian, & Lamb, 2000). Lave and Wenger (1996) also argue that learning involves the whole person and the constructions of identities, and we need to help students in developing their abilities to manage their own learning and help them achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. Current means of providing support for a range of different learner behaviors thus need to address their unique learning attitudes, expectations, motivations, and experiences (Cotterall, 2008). In other words, "an autonomy-fostering approach to language learning is therefore likely to focus first on individual learners' psychological relation to the language learning process, and only then on the strategies they adopt" (Cotterall, 2008, p. 119). In this case, developing students' awareness of metacognitive processes will give them ways to continually "nourish" themselves throughout their learning (Block, 1992).

McKay and Wong (1996) make the case that if educators are to understand success and failure in English language learning, they must move on from only product and process orientations to take what they term a contextualist perspective. While this article does not want to be seen as problematizing particular institutions' or teachers' pedagogical practices, the study indicates a need for these institutions and teachers *to ask*, consistently, how their practices relate to students' anticipated visions about English language learning, *to provide* students with the opportunity to critically examine their experiences, and *to develop* students' resources for identifying and solving their own learning problems. Most importantly, the institutions and teachers need to help students learn how to participate more fully both in the classroom and in the world outside the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Appendix A

Interview: Key Questions

1. How did you feel about learning English at your secondary school?
2. How do you feel about university English courses?
3. Do you have any English language learning activities outside class?
4. In your view, how would you say that studying English differs from studying other subjects?
5. In your view, how would you say that studying English at university differs from studying English at secondary school?
6. How would you describe your present motivation for learning English?
7. Do you have a theory about English language learning?
8. What will you tell a friend who has just entered into university and asks you for advice about learning English at university?

Appendix B

Diary Guidelines

Dear Friend,

Thank you very much for your help with our research, which aims to investigate how university students study English. Here are some suggestions on how to approach the writing of your diary.

(a) I prefer you to write in Chinese. Do not worry about grammar or organization if you are writing in English.

(b) Carry a small notebook with you so you can make notes about your English language learning experience whenever you wish.

(c) Support your insights with examples.

(d) Write your thoughts or feelings on the following topics:
- your own English language learning activities after class
- teaching or learning activities in the classroom
- how English should be learned
- reflections on your problems and progress in learning English