

# SITUATED PERSPECTIVES ON THE MOTIVATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH IN RURAL VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** Despite the growing body of research on the complex and contextually contingent nature of language learning motivation, investigations into the motivation of English language learners in rural areas have remained limited. This study explores the motivational constructions of two high school students learning English in rural Southeast Vietnam from a situated perspective. The students, one female and one male, were in their first year at high school and had relatively low levels of English. Data gathering took approximately one and a half years and was based primarily on interviews drawing on a social practice approach and observations. Findings reveal that students developed diverse motivational trajectories resulting from a synergy of social and idiosyncratic elements pertinent to their own learning conditions, interpersonal relationships, and their agentic appraisals of language affordances and learning opportunities available within and across settings. The longitudinal and situated perspective of this study provides insights into the ways in which students' appraisals of affordances were shaped and reshaped by on-going interactions with significant others as well as by the sociocultural values permeating their agentic practices.

**Keywords:** L2 motivation, person-in-context, learners' appraisals, motivational trajectories

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research on L2 motivation has placed a stronger emphasis on language learning contexts, acknowledging the

role of learners' sociocultural and historical backgrounds, social relationships, and the complex and distinctive ways in which language is learned. Ushioda (2012) comments that "current research perspectives on L2 motivation have become even more strongly socio-contextually grounded" (p. 60). From a related perspective, Lamb (2004) notes that the interplay among individual learners, learning contexts and interpersonal relationships is salient in explicating the concept of motivation. Despite the high volume of contextually embedded research, there remains a paucity of studies that consider individual learners' L2 motivational trajectories within and across settings and relationships, especially emphasising the role of significant others such as parents, siblings, extended family members, private tuition teachers, and elements beyond school settings.

Further, the experiences of language learners in rural settings which may provide useful situated illustrations of the interplay between each individual and environmental factors contributing to shaping their socio-affective and cognitive development remain relatively underexplored. More importantly, each student's language studies take place within diverse sociocultural systems, values and relationships that underpin their learning practices and agentive appraisals of affordances, highlighting the role of context and the complexity of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The present study draws on the person-in-context relational view (Ushioda, 2009) and Beltman and Volet's (2007) model of learners' sustained motivation in order to obtain more in-depth insights into the workings of L2 motivation of students learning English in rural Vietnam.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Language Learning Motivation from A Situated Perspective**

Research on L2 motivation tends to treat language learners as a more or less homogenous group, suggesting that all learners have similar characteristics. Counteracting such depersonalised generalisation, Dufva and Aro (2014) argue that "learners are persons,

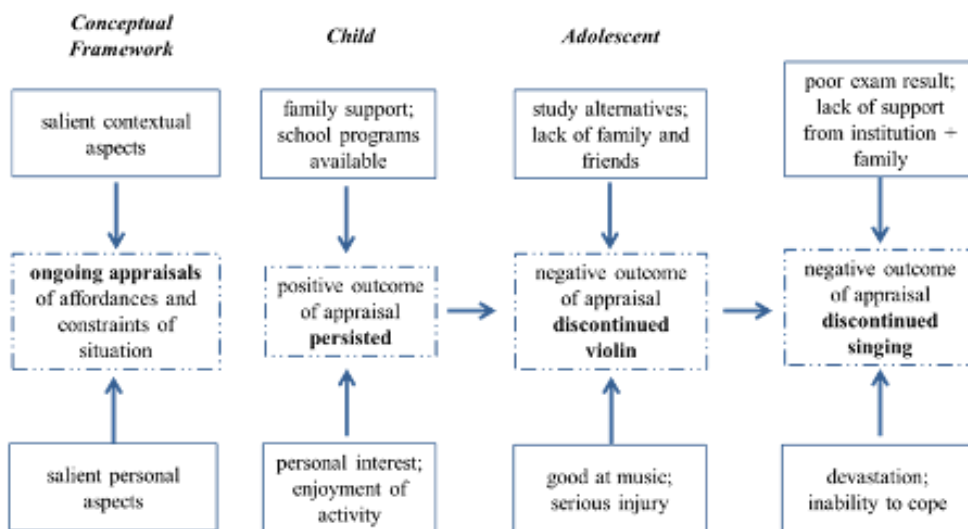
embodied beings with their own experiences and feelings that are also irrevocably interrelated with their environment and the Others therein" (pp. 49-50). Conceiving of language learners as real people rather than idealised abstractions takes into account "the unique individuality, agency, intentionality and reflective capacity of human beings as they engage in the process of language learning" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 76).

This focus on the idiosyncratic features of individual learners is shaped by a sociocultural perspective which emphasises learners' agency and active engagement in "constructing the terms and conditions of their learning" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145), and a view of language learning as occurring within "the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro and macro contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 209).

Drawing on cognitive-situative epistemological positions in educational psychology (Beltman & Volet, 2007; Pintrich, 2000; Volet, 2001a, 2001b), Ushioda (2009) develops a person-in-context relational view in order to highlight a complex system of personal, relational and sociocultural elements impacting on individual learners' motivational constructions. Ushioda's reconceptualisation of L2 motivation, despite its encompassing value in weaving the person and contexts together, appears to provide a general theoretical guideline rather than specific theoretical and analytical tools for exploring multifaceted dimensions of L2 motivation. She admits the necessity of adopting "theoretical and analytical frameworks which may usefully inform a more contextually embedded relation view of motivation" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220). For this reason, Beltman and Volet's (2007) model of sustained motivation (Figure 1) is utilised in this study to offer an analytical lens to explore learners' agentic appraisals of language affordances and their motivational trajectories within and across settings and relationships.

Contexts in which social relationships are established function as a major constituent leading to language learners' motivational

fluctuations over time. Understanding individual learners' motivational constructions across time and space could contribute to explaining the reasons behind their cognitive, affective and idiosyncratic appraisals of the values, affordances and other salient contextual elements along their learning trajectories.



**Figure 1** Part of Beltman and Volet's (2007) model of a case study participant's trajectory of sustained motivation (p. 319)

## METHOD

### Settings of the Study

The present study was part of a longitudinal research project that adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the motivational trajectories of high school students learning English in rural Southern Vietnam. It provides glimpses of two case study participants Phong and Hanh (pseudonyms), all aged 16 and in the second semester of their first year (Year Ten) at high school. They had been learning English at school for approximately five years and were at a pre-intermediate language level. Both of them attended Vision High, a long-established state high school in a rural district in Southeast Vietnam, approximately 20 kilometres from the provincial centre. The students learned English among other subjects in the

national curriculum, and sat the same tests and examinations as students in urban areas, administered by the provincial Department of Education. English lessons took place in the same classrooms as other school subjects, with fixed seating and limited resources for language learning. Language teaching at Vision High tended to be examination-oriented, aiming to help students, the majority of whom had relatively low levels of interest in learning English and low language proficiency, to achieve passing grades in the high school graduation examination. In the face of the constraints on language learning and teaching in rural areas, Phong and Hanh showed differing degrees of motivation to learn English depending on language affordances and learning opportunities within and across settings and relationships.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

This study utilised multiple research tools and data sources, including observations, interviews, researcher logs, document analyses, and informal and casual interactions with the participants. Data collection involved two phases comprising on-site activities spanning six months and follow-up online communication lasting approximately a year. As part of reciprocal strategies for establishing rapport with the participants and to compensate for their participation in this project, the author went to each student's home for one-on-one private English tutoring once a week.

Observations were conducted in various settings: at school through class observations and informal interactions during intervals, and at the participants' homes through one-one-one private tuition. Private tutoring offered great opportunities for observations of the students' language learning at home and for interactions with their family members, providing valuable insights into the role of the home ecosystems in shaping their motivational trajectories. Observational and interactional data were the basis for composing interview guides. Interviews drew on social practice approaches, emphasising the process and contextual elements constituting the interviews and the

co-construction of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee (Talmy, 2010).

There were eight rounds of interviews, four on-site and four on Skype. The sites for interviews varied case by case, aiming to make the students feel comfortable. Each interview started with broad questions relating to the students' daily activities and language learning issues and was then steered towards the points in the interview guides. Interviews were also conducted with the case study participants' parents and English language teachers.

Narratives were used as a means to interpret the data. In Bell's (2002) words, "narratives allow researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness" (p. 209). This approach aligns with interviews from social practice approaches in which data are presented as accounts rather than "stand-alone quotes" (Talmy, 2010, p. 136). More importantly, narratives offer detailed background information concerning the data, allow for situated interpretation of the data, and leave some aspects of the data for readers' interpretations (Barkhuizen, 2011; Pavlenko, 2009).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Case Study of Participant 1: Phong**

Phong had been living with his grandmother since secondary school. His parents had little money, so the grandmother was helping support the family by looking after Phong and paying his school expenses. Phong had a sister, Mai, who started secondary school at the beginning of his Year 11.

#### ***Phong's Parents' Background and Their Child Education Resolutions***

Being pre-literate themselves, Phong's parents experienced various difficulties in their lives. They did not have stable jobs and were working on a casual basis, leaving their family budget vulnerable and fostering their positive view of education: "We would support them until they cannot study any further ... . This is the responsibility of parents like us" (IPPhong). Concerns over his studies

also extended to the wider family setting. Phong's paternal grandmother agreed to accommodate him and take care of his studies as well as his daily well-being as she lived closer to the central district where Phong had easier access to learning opportunities and affordances.

The enthusiastic involvement of significant others in the home setting served as a strong incentive for Phong. Like other students who depended on their parents for living expenses and tuition fees, he came to terms with the fact he could do nothing except to expend efforts in his studies: "All I can do now is to study well so that I can have a good future to support my parents" (IPhong). Moving up the educational ladder, in his view, was the only way for him to return their emotional and financial support, and to fulfil filial duty. Filial obligations and a desire to fulfil their filial duties are one of the salient motivators for students in many Asian contexts (Chow, 2007; Luu, 2011; Phan, 2010; Phillipson, 2010).

### *Phong's View of Peer Learning and His Obstacles*

Phong was one of the few students at Vision High who developed peer approaches to learning English, varying from paired to group activities. He states: "An ideal learning environment is not with teachers but rather with my favourite peer group ... I feel more comfortable working with my friends. It would be easier for us to discuss and speak our minds" (IPhong). Phong's attempt to promote more English practice outside formal English sessions reflected his view of the value of peer learning to language development. However, these peer activities did not receive much support from his classmates and friends. In his words,

*I asked my classmates to study English together after class or on the weekend. I volunteered to be the group leader and prepare all necessary stuff for the group meetings. They laughed off the idea, asking me not to waste their time. They didn't show any interest in my suggestion. (IPhong)*

Students' lack of interest in learning English within and outside class hours was a common phenomenon in Phong's school. Most of his friends made fun of him when he tried to speak some English to them. Such uncompromising attitudes undermined Phong's motivation to summon his friends for group study: "My effort has gone to waste. There is no point in having such group meetings" (IPhong).

### ***Kindling His Sister's Love of Learning English***

Sibling tutoring was another activity that underlined Phong's awareness of the value of learning English. He viewed tutoring her as a good way of learning through teaching. In response to interview questions about his preparation for Mai's entry into a local secondary school, Phong talked about his plans as follows:

*I : What is your plan for tutoring Mai?*

*P : Well, I think the English programme for Year Six is quite distant to me now. What I have to do is read her textbook a few times. It is easy for me to recall the knowledge because I had already learned it. But to tutor her, I need to invest more time in revising my English. I love it this way anyhow. (IPhong)*

As an older brother, helping his sister with her studies also represented his willingness to fulfil filial obligations, especially in turn for his parents' financial and emotional involvement in his education.

### ***Placement in the Top Class in Year Eleven***

At the end of Year 10, Phong was transferred from a normal class (10A4) to the second top class in the following year. This change was a critical event in his learning curve, confronting him with challenges and pressure, as he says:

*In A2 [the second top class], they [the students in this class] are 'abnormal' people. I know some of them who study very*

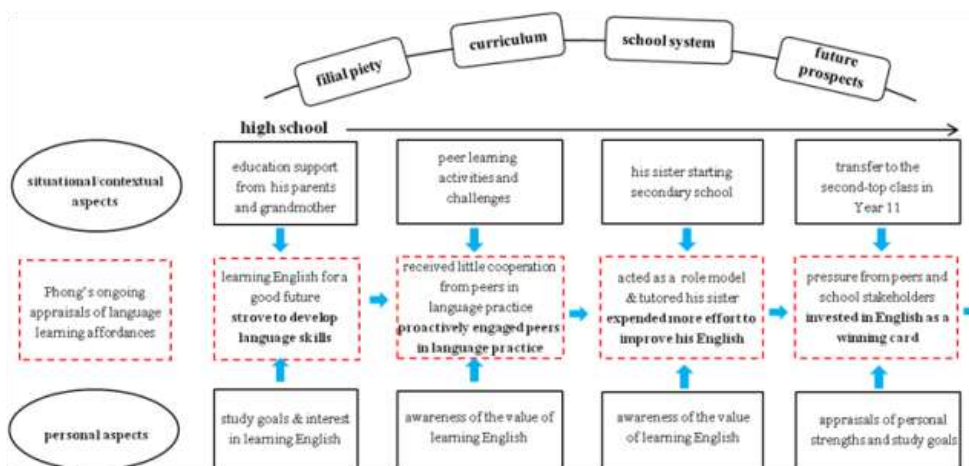


*hard and can solve many questions that I have absolutely no idea about ... . The learning atmosphere is very competitive and they are under a lot of pressure from the teachers and school. Of course, there will be more chance for passing the university entrance examination ... . (CSPhong040613)*

Becoming a student in the second top class and being able to enter a good university imposed a lot of pressure on Phong, including peer competition and academic requirements from teachers across disciplines and school stakeholders. As one of the strategies to deal with such challenges, Phong resolved to improve his language skills over the summer holiday before Year 11 as his winning card in the new class:

*I have more time for English during the summer. It is my only hope in A2. I know they [his new classmates] learn English very well but perhaps not much better than I do. I can't beat them in other subjects like Maths, or Chemistry, but I may excel over some in English. (ISPhong170613)*

This strategy came out of his observations that the majority of students in top classes were more concerned about natural sciences subjects and less competent at English than him. To this end, he invested more time and effort in learning English, suggesting his agentive appraisals of personal strengths. Drawing on Beltman and Volet's (2007, p. 319) trajectory model of sustained motivation, Figure 2 represents Phong's motivational trajectory within and across settings and relationships with significant others, and overarching sociocultural values.



**Figure 2** Phong's ongoing appraisals of language affordances and his motivational trajectory

### Case Study of Participant 2: Hanh

Hanh was born in a pre-literate migrant family who fled the central region for Southern Vietnam for better life opportunities. Due to the challenges in their lives, mainly as a result of having low educational backgrounds, her parents were deeply committed to supporting both her formal schooling and private tuition. Higher education and its rewards were highly valued within the cultural system of her parents' hometown.

#### *Previous English Learning Experiences at Secondary School*

Hanh's experiences in her English classes at secondary school became consistently negative and triggered a number of negative emotions and declining interest. She faced a number of difficulties in English lessons: "Every time I listened to a conversation on the cassette in class, it was like a duck listening to thunder. I was usually as quiet as a mouse in speaking sessions" (IHanh). Her metaphors implied that she performed very poorly in these skills, resulting in her fear of her English language teacher: "I always tried to avoid the English teacher's eyes in class. The scariest time was the lesson checking. When the teacher was browsing the class list, my heart would pound so strongly as if it would jump out of my breast"

(IHanh). Hanh's avoidance and anxiety soon developed into a degree of withdrawal from learning English: "After arriving home from my English classes, I would throw my school bag on the desk and that was all for the day. I wouldn't bother to review the lessons" (CHanh). This learning style as well as her rather negative appraisals of language learning made her transition to high school a challenge.

### *Hanh's Transition to High School*

In contrast to the "spoon-fed" teaching style at secondary school, with her teachers' frequent use of Vietnamese and tests as reflections of what had been taught in class, the high school setting required Hanh to drastically review her learning strategies. She said: "At secondary school, I only needed to memorise the vocabulary and structures from teachers' examples and could do well in tests. Now, tests are so difficult. The questions are completely different from the examples" (IHanh). Another problem Hanh encountered was the teaching approach and the lack of understanding of the local students of her high school teacher, Ms Quynh. In Hanh's words,

*Probably she [ms quynh] just graduated from the university in ho chi minh city [a big metropolitan city in vietnam] where english is more popular and she doesn't know that we do not use much english in class here. We are used to teachers speaking vietnamese. It is really hard to understand her explanations. (Ihanh)*

Hanh's low agentic adaptation to the new learning environment at high school and Ms Quynh's teaching approaches made it hard for her to stop relying on private English tuition, a common learning practice among high school students in Vietnam (Dang, 2013).

### *Taking a Private English Class*

With encouragement from her parents, Hanh gained access to private English tuition; she used the opportunity as she recognised her parents' financial investment. The private English class provided

language affordances for her to meet the requirements of her language studies at high school. However, she did not view this as a privilege but rather a means to compensate for her procrastination: “So far, my test scores have been relatively good. I can’t imagine what they [the scores] would be like without taking private classes. I am too lazy to study by myself” (CHanh). However, when asked about the effectiveness of taking the private English class in terms of her overall language development, she responded doubtfully:

*The private class helped me with grammar and reading skills. I need them to pass tests and examinations. I have been able to get quite good scores so far. That’s all. I don’t really like English. I don’t want to learn too much of it. Of course, if I want to learn English well, I have to make more effort in other language skills by myself. (Hanh, casual conversation)*

Hanh was fully aware that more effort was needed to improve other language skills, suggesting her appraisals of her own language abilities and the need for more autonomous learning.

### ***Attending Courses at a Foreign Language Centre***

Through workplace conversations, Hanh’s mother learned of the benefits of taking courses at a foreign language centre and decided to send her there. Comparing this learning environment with her language studies at school, she said:

*After going to the class for a while, I think I became quite keen on learning English. It was interesting. Even a shy student like me still wanted to open my mouth and talk in class. But then, when I went back to the formal class, the class atmosphere was worlds apart. I felt intimidated with the teacher’s approach and soon became bored with learning it. (IHanh)*

The changes in Hanh’s attitudes and emotions in learning English as she switched between the formal and private settings showed the situatedness of her L2 motivation. An additional benefit

from going to the foreign language centre was her realisation of the real importance of English through near-peer role models (defined as “peers who are close to the learners’ social, professional and/or age level, and whom the learners may respect and admire” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2004, p. 128)). Hanh said in an interview:

*I : Who are your classmates at the language centre?*

*H : There are many types. Some of them are secondary or high school students like me but most of them are working people who are much older than me. They have different occupations such as doctors, office workers, or tour guides.*

...

*I : What do you learn from their examples?*

*H : Uhm ... they are much older than me but they have to learn English and work very hard on it. I think I have more opportunities than them because I am still very young. I learned that English is very important now. I have to be more hard-working. (IHanh)*

These near peer classmates offered Hanh real-life examples of the values of English, contributing to fostering her positive attitudes towards learning the language. Hanh’s motivational trajectory within and across settings and relationships with significant others, and overarching sociocultural values is shown in Figure 3.

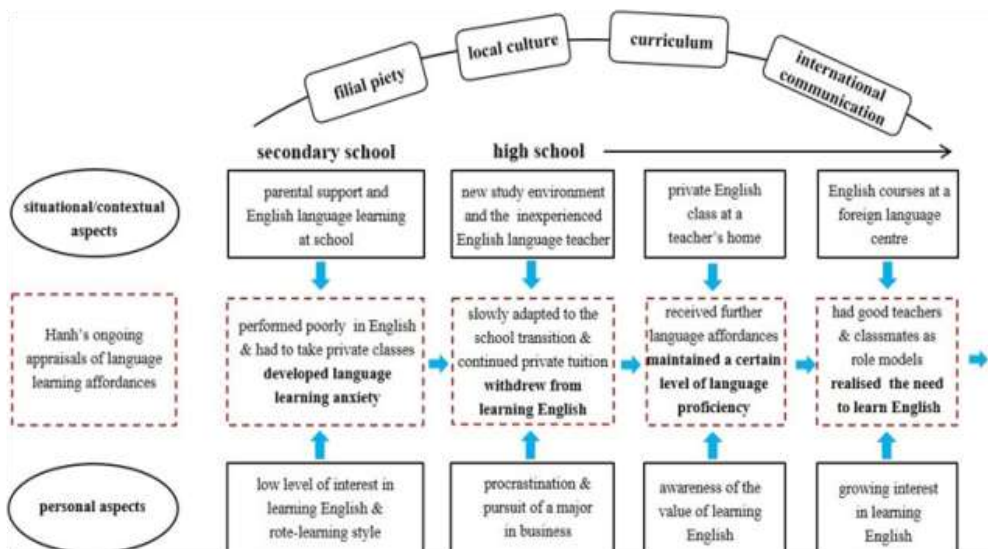


Figure 3: Hanh’s ongoing appraisals of language affordances and her motivational trajectory

Findings of this study illustrate that students’ personal constructions of L2 motivation are impacted by multiple learning settings, social relationships, and their agentive appraisals of available affordances for language learning. Each student has access to diverse affordances and learning opportunities through relationships with various significant others. Schools remain the major setting in rural areas in which students are exposed to language affordances (Lamb, 2002, 2013). However, as Thoms (2014) notes, “the value of an affordance is partly determined by how a participant perceives it, and this perception in turn affects his/her decision whether to make use of it or not at that particular moment” (p. 426).

While Phong strove to promote peer language practice, Hanh made slow progress in English and had to resort to private tuition. Within home settings, parental literacy and financial backgrounds contributed to determining the degree of support for children’s language learning (Butler, 2015; Gao, 2006, 2012; Kyriacou & Zhu, 2008). Also, affordances from significant others in extended families had certain motivational impacts on each student (Casanave, 2012;

Lamb, 2007; Palfreyman, 2006, 2011). Sociocultural elements such as filial piety, local norms and practices, English as a language for job applications and international communication contribute to shaping and reshaping each learner's L2 motivation.

## CONCLUSION

Although this study has a number of limitations, in particular the small population of participants and the context in which it was conducted, it provides in-depth insights into the affordances available for language learning in rural contexts in Vietnam and the ways in which each student constructs their L2 motivation within and across settings and relationships. This study also highlights the value of interpersonal approaches for working with students, teachers, and parents in rural contexts. The one-one-one private tutoring as indication of reciprocity was not only effective and efficient in establishing close relationships with the participants but also facilitated observations of students' language learning at home, interactions with students' family members, and understandings of their family culture.

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