Learner motivation in project-based L2 classrooms

What this research was about and why it is important
In project-based classrooms, learners collaborate over an extended period of time to create a tangible output (e.g.: poster, film, newspapers). The focus is on the learning process more than the end product. As learners have to collaborate with each other and work toward a tangible goal, project-based learning has the potential to be more motivating for learners than traditional classrooms. This study looked at how project-based learning in L2 classroom influenced learner anxiety, self-efficacy (i.e.: learners’ perception of their competence), the ideal L2 self (i.e.: how learners picture themselves using the language in the future) and self-regulation (i.e.: in how far learners are actively involved in their own learning process). Understanding the links between project-based learning and motivation can inform L2 classroom practice. The researchers were interested in the motivational profile of L2 learners in project-based classrooms and how their motivation changed during different phases of the project.

What the researchers did
- Participants were 38 English language learners from Korea.
- Participants attended seven project-based lessons. Each lessons included vocabulary work (10 minutes), collaborative project work (25-30 min), project feedback & de-brief (5 min). For example, learners learned nouns and adjectives relating to geographical phenomena (e.g.: waterfall, volcano, steep, rocky, etc.) and completed a project with these.
- The idea was that learners learned vocabulary that was necessary to fulfill the project.
- Learners completed a stand-alone project at the end of each lesson. These were combined to one larger class project.
- Learners completed a motivational questionnaire on L2 anxiety, L2 self-efficacy, ideal L2 self and self-regulation before and after the teaching sessions.
- At the end of every class, learners submitted a reflective journal. They noted thoughts and feelings about the activities.
- Three learners also took part in interviews with the researchers.

What the researchers found
- Based on their answers to the questionnaires, learners could be divided into three distinct groups:
  - **MML Cluster**: learners had medium levels of L2 anxiety, medium L2 self-efficacy, and low ideal L2 self
  - **MMM Cluster**: learners had medium levels of L2 anxiety, L2 self-efficacy and ideal L2 self
  - **LHH Cluster**: learners had low L2 anxiety, high L2 self-efficacy and high ideal L2 self
- Learners in the MML cluster at first showed little interest in the class when compared to the other two groups. Their responses to the theme and group work were not positive and they voiced concerns about potential difficulties. As the class went on, their attitudes became more positive and more learners wanted to finish the class successfully. Learners participated more actively and saw themselves as part of a group of successful language learners.
- Six of seven learners transitioned from the MML to the MMM over the course of the project. One learner developed an entirely new profile (HMH). His L2 anxiety increased, self-efficacy decreased and ideal L2 self sky-rocketed.
- Learners in the MMM cluster reported that they liked learning languages and wanted to try collaborative learning. They had few negative feelings about group work and thought of solutions to possible problems. Of 18 participants, 14 remained in the MMM cluster after the project. Their L2 anxiety and ideal L2 self decreased slightly. The learners’ L2 self-efficacy increased slightly.
- Learners in the LHH cluster generated the most ideas about project-based learning and language learning in their journals. They anticipated some problems but were generally excited about the project. They expected to have a positive experience through collaborating with others. Twelve of 13 participants remained in this cluster after the project. Learners lowered their L2 anxiety. Their ideal L2 self and L2 self-efficacy remained the same.

Things to consider
- This study showed that project-based learning had a positive influence on learners’ motivational profiles. Learners were able to develop their ideal L2 selves, regulate their L2 anxiety and sustain their L2 self-efficacy.
- Some learners had high levels of L2 anxiety, moderate levels of L2 self-efficacy and a strong L2 self. This suggests that relatively high levels of L2 anxiety can be balanced out by a strong L2 ideal self and good self-efficacy.

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