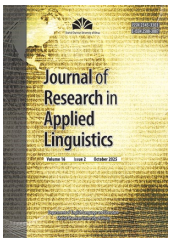
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Research Article

Engaging With L2 Motivation: Towards a Language-Based Interpretation of Learner Motivation. Part I: The Inter-Organism Perspective

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Abstract

This article is the first in a three-part series in which we explore second language (L2) learner motivation through the lens of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), including its theoretical foundations, language descriptions, and educational applications. In Part I, we examine L2 learner motivation through the inter-organism perspective of SFL, providing a fresh perspective that complements the predominantly intra-organism, cognitive and psychological approaches that have dominated L2 motivation research since the 1990s. Although recent L2 motivation studies have moved towards dynamic and socially situated models, they largely maintain an intra-organism focus on individual cognition. In contrast, we foreground an inter-organism perspective, conceptualising motivation as a semiotic phenomenon enacted through language, centrally situated in interaction within social and cultural contexts. In this social semiotic perspective, learner motivation is interpreted intersubjectively, with language—rather than cognition—positioned as the central construct. We argue that SFL offers a holistic theory of language in context, emphasising the significance of registers (functional varieties of language) and meaning potential in shaping learners' motivation and identity development. We suggest that motivation should be understood in relation to learners' access to diverse L2 registers, which expand their meaning-making capacity and strengthen their engagement with language. Responding to recent critiques regarding the limited practical impact of L2 motivation research, we suggest that SFL's detailed, contextually grounded descriptions of language can bridge theory and practice across diverse linguistic settings. By integrating SFL with sociocultural and complexity theories, this approach enriches our understanding of L2 motivation by highlighting learner empowerment through meaningful language use in authentic contexts. The arguments presented offer one possible line of approach towards a language-based interpretation of learner motivation.

Keywords: L2 Learner Motivation; Language-Based Theory of Learning/Teaching; Inter-Organism Perspective; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Semiotic Selves; Motivation as a Semiotic Construct; Learners as Meaners.

1. Introduction

In this article, drawing upon foundational work in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), we examine key features of second language (L2) learner motivation as explored in the steadily growing body of research since the 1990s (e.g., Dörnyei, 2020; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Lamb et al., 2019; Norton Pierce, 1995). L2 motivation research has become a highly specialised domain of enquiry, concerned with understanding the dynamic interplay of psychological, contextual, and temporal factors that shape learners' aspirations, agency, volition, and sustained effort in language learning. Building on pioneering research in Canada in the 1960s, the field has evolved significantly, moving from static trait-based models towards more dynamic, situated, and socially embedded perspectives (Dörnyei, 2020; Ushioda, 2019). Despite this progress, important questions remain about how motivation is shaped by learners' lived experiences and mediated through language and context.

Specifically, we suggest that SFL offers powerful conceptual and methodological resources that can enrich this discussion. As a theory of language that foregrounds meaning-making within social contexts, SFL provides a nuanced

account of how language both reflects and constructs human experience, including motivational states and identities. Its emphasis on the metafunctional organisation of language—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—makes it particularly suitable for examining how motivation is semiotically enacted and negotiated in discourse. Moreover, SFL's interdisciplinary reach and its appliability to authentic, contextually grounded data make it a promising framework for addressing persistent gaps in the L2 motivation literature (e.g., Al-Hoorie et al., 2021).

As part of recent critical contributions to the L2 motivation literature, Al-Hoorie et al. (2021), for example, have characterised an 'identity crisis' in language learning motivation research and highlighted the importance of revisiting sociocultural theory and adopting complexity theory to address this crisis. They suggest that examining motivation from a sociocultural perspective helps capture the ever-changing and context-specific nature of learners' experiences and identities. By applying complexity theory, scholars can view motivation as a dynamic, interconnected, and situated factor rather than a static attribute (Hiver & Papi, 2019). While we agree with the diagnosis of this identity crisis, we argue that little of the existing motivation scholarship has deeply engaged with language—particularly when viewed through the lens of the 'inter-organism perspective' articulated by Halliday (1978a) and if the goal is to give language, theories of language, and descriptions of particular languages a central role in language learning. To address this gap—namely, the limited engagement with language and the insufficient focus on empowering language learners—we extend our enquiry to examine how motivation is shaped by learners' lived experiences and mediated through language in context, and how persistent methodological limitations continue to constrain L2 motivation research.

This article constitutes the first in a series of three thematically connected yet analytically distinct articles collectively entitled *Engaging With L2 Motivation: Towards a Language-Based Interpretation of Learner Motivation.* Each article is designed to stand independently while contributing to a broader, cohesive argument. In this first article, we argue that SFL offers a valuable theoretical and analytical framework for addressing identity-related challenges in L2 motivation research. This framework is particularly relevant for scholars working within sociocultural and complexity theory paradigms. We propose that integrating SFL into motivation studies not only complements existing approaches but also opens new pathways for understanding how motivation is dynamically and interactively constructed through language use in real-world contexts, addressing the 'identity crisis' mentioned above.

Part I introduces an inter-organism perspective that foregrounds the social and semiotic dimensions of motivation. This includes how identity is constructed, how collective meaning is made, and how motivation functions as a distributed phenomenon across groups and contexts. Part II further develops this perspective by offering a semiotic interpretation of learner motivation, examining how social selves and repertoires of meaning potential are enacted through interactions within diverse groups and contexts. Part III reconceptualises motivation through an ordered typology of systems—physical, biological, social, and semiotic—connecting motivation to broader meaning-making processes and to how learners' language experiences are construed. Together, these three articles advance a comprehensive, theoretically grounded approach to understanding learner motivation from a language-based, inter-organism perspective.

1.1. Perspectives: Intra-Organism and Inter-Organism

In Halliday's (1978a) framework, the *intra-organism* and *inter-organism* perspectives describe two distinct aspects of language—one focused on internal processes of an individual and the other on external interactions among individuals playing different roles in different groups. The intra-organism view centres on the individual's internalisation of language. It focuses on the mechanisms that are conceptualised as cognitive—mechanisms through which a speaker processes and organises linguistic structures to create meaning. Halliday (1978a) suggests that language serves as a resource for self-expression, enabling individuals to construe their experiences, thoughts, and emotions internally as meaning and to enact their personae in varied and complementary role networks as meaning. This perspective highlights the mental and psychological processes that underpin meaning-making, emphasising that language is not just a communicative tool but also a resource for organising and interpreting the world and for enacting our identities within our societies.

In contrast, the inter-organism perspective deals with how language is a resource for exchanging meanings among individuals taking on different and varied roles in different groups. This approach underscores the social nature of language, focusing on how meaning is co-constructed by interactants in real-time interactions. This perspective has also informed subsequent theories that conceptualise learning as situated and social (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mynard et

al., 2020; Wenger, 1998a, 1998b). Language, from this perspective, is viewed as a resource for negotiating, influencing, and exchanging meanings between people within particular social and cultural contexts (Halliday, 1978a). It is concerned with the external dimensions of making meaning, such as relationships, power dynamics, and cultural norms. As Matthiessen and Teruya (2024) explain, the intra-organism perspective views language as knowledge, and the inter-organism perspective theorises language as meaning, and by another step, as behaviour. Overall, Halliday's (1978a) distinction between the intra-organism and inter-organism perspectives emphasises that language is a resource for internal cognition and a means for social interaction.

It is important to note that the intra-organism and inter-organism perspectives are complementary because they address different yet interconnected aspects of meaning and behaving. In fact, according to Halliday (1978a), the intra-organism perspective focuses on internal processes within an individual, such as cognition and emotions, shaping how one behaves. The inter-organism perspective, on the other hand, examines interactions between individuals, emphasising social, communicative, and environmental influences. These perspectives complement each other by showing how internal states influence social interactions, while external interactions, in turn, affect internal processes. Together, they provide a more comprehensive understanding of behaviour, integrating both individual and social dimensions (Halliday, 1973).

Halliday (1978a) drew a distinction between these two perspectives on language at a time when the intra-organism view was gaining ascendancy, embedded within the broader macro-discipline of cognitive science, whose roots trace back to the 1950s. Despite the growing dominance of this perspective as part of cognitive science's ascendancy, Halliday's (1978a) formulation of the inter-organism perspective sparked an increasingly productive cross-disciplinary programme of social semiotics (e.g., Andersen et al., 2015; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Matthiessen, 2017; van Leeuwen, 2005). While social semiotics continued as a thematic strand of theoretical development, the inter-organism orientation proved valuable and drew contributors from around the globe—precisely because it addressed a gap in academic research and application, offering an alternative to scholars and practitioners who did not feel at home within the constraints of mainstream cognitive science.

We will suggest that while contributions to L2 learner motivation research have diversified since the 1990s to include new considerations, the foundational basis has remained rooted primarily in (educational) psychology and cognitive approaches. Typically, the perspective adopted has been an intra-organism one rather than an inter-organism orientation. Although there have been insightful developments calling for more social and situated interpretations of 'motivation,' the starting point has generally remained the individual student viewed through an intra-organism lens (e.g., Al-Hoorie et al., 2021; Ushioda, 2009, 2015, 2020). This focus is hardly surprising, given its resonance with the dominant orientation in the human sciences during the latter half of the 20th century: the past seventy years have increasingly been framed within the macro-discipline of cognitive science (McCabe, 2021). Furthermore, learning theories have been largely dominated by psychology, with limited input from sociology and linguistics (Halliday, 1993).

It is important to note that the concept of motivation is fundamentally grounded in English—or more broadly, in what B. L. Whorf (1956) referred to as 'Standard Average European languages.' Motivation is construed through the lexicogrammatical resources of English and related languages, thus brought into existence as an object of study. In other words, just as Barrett (e.g., 2017) has shown, colour concepts are not universal but are constructed differently by languages within their cultural contexts—a constructivist account (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006). Similarly, motivation is not a universally invariable experience. Treating it as such risks committing what Levisen (2024, p. 157) refers to as the 'Anglo-for-human fallacy':

> As a consequence of the naturalization of Anglo English as the default metalanguage in the global discourses of psychology, a bias has emerged which we can call the "Anglo-for-human fallacy". In this bias, one particular linguaculture, "modern Anglo", with its particular order of knowledge ("the Anglo order of knowledge") has gained dominance over other linguacultures, metalinguistic traditions, and orders of knowledge, to the point where a de facto synonymy between Anglo and Human has been achieved.

This is a very serious fundamental problem. We will explore it in Part III.

There appears to be a notable gap in the literature: while research in educational psychology and related disciplines significantly informs L2 motivation studies, it rarely engages with linguistic diversity or with *linguistic*

relativity—the idea that languages, shaped by their cultural contexts, offer distinct ways of construing human experience as meaning. In contrast, fields such as anthropology, descriptive linguistics, and language typology have long documented substantial cross-linguistic variation in how concepts like colour, space, time, and perception are represented. This work includes influential accounts of culturally specific folk psychologies, such as D'Andrade's (1987) pioneering study of folk theories of mind. Yet, no systematic research programme has explored how the very concept of *motivation* is construed in English and comparable languages in similar cultural contexts (Whorf's SAE languages). In current L2 motivation theories, the concept is largely shaped by its formulation in English: an abstract, metaphorically rich construct embedded within the broader Anglo-Western model of the mind (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006), which draws on metaphorical schemas of desire, volition, and intentionality. While cross-cultural studies of learning (e.g., Alqarni, 2022; Habók et al., 2021; Hu, 2002; Xie et al., 2023) have begun to illuminate culturally contingent approaches to education, they often do not foreground the role of language in shaping these differences—particularly in how languages differently construe the experiential domain encapsulated by English *motivation*. However, the cultural variation these studies uncover may in fact reflect deeper linguistic differences in how processes of sensing—such as wanting, hoping, or planning—are conceptualised across languages. Addressing this linguistic dimension more directly could enrich our understanding of L2 motivation and open new pathways for theory development grounded in greater cross-linguistic and cross-cultural sensitivity.

As an addition to the academic contributions to investigations of learner motivation, we foreground an alternative—more precisely, a complementary—perspective: an inter-organism approach. This perspective interprets student motivation *intersubjectively* rather than solely subjectively, positioning *language*, rather than cognition, as the central construct (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006). Thus, our approach is fundamentally *language-based*. Specifically, the focus is on meaning generated through language instead of knowledge constructed by cognition, although meaning and knowledge represent complementary perspectives on the same phenomena. To clarify what we mean by 'language-based,' we draw on Halliday's (1993, pp. 93–94) work on a language-based theory of learning:

> Most theories of learning, including those that take account of language learning, come from outside the study of language. They tend either to ignore language development, or to treat it as just one learning domain; and sometimes they take on board preconceptions about the nature and history of language that are quite remote from reality. If we try to translate such theories into practice, into activities in which language is involved (and these include all educational activities), we may seriously miss the mark. Language is not a **domain** of human knowledge (except in the special context of linguistics, where it becomes an object of scientific study); language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience **becomes** knowledge.
>
> With this in mind, I would like to suggest an alternative: that we might explore approaches to learning theory that are based on consideration of language. In other words, we might interpret learning as something that is inherently a semiotic process. And this in my opinion imposes certain constraints. One is that the theory would be based on natural data rather than experimental data: that is, on language that is unconscious, not self-monitored; in context, not in a vacuum; observed, not elicited. The reason for this is that, of all forms of human activity, language is perhaps the one that is most perturbed by being performed under attention-not surprisingly, because all other learning depends on the learner not having constantly to attend to the way experience is being construed. Another constraint is that the theory would not dissociate the **system** from the **instance:** language from text, *langue* from *parole*, competence from performance, or other related oppositional pairs.

Halliday then goes on to identify and describe 21 features that he believes need to be part of the foundation of a language-based theory of learning. These features are derived from naturalistic, empirical studies of first language development, what Halliday (1975) conceptualises as 'learning how to mean', but they are also relevant to formulating a language-based approach to learning how to mean in an L2 in general and to the exploration of what motivates students to begin to learn and to keep learning L2s. We will return to the central issue of research methodology in Table 2, contrasting the preferred research methodology in L2 learner motivation studies based on elicited data with the naturalistic approach in SFL.

This language-based inter-organism approach is particularly relevant because it focuses on students' motivation to learn a particular second or foreign language. Accordingly, we need to relate their motivation to the aspects of the L2 they encounter and are taught—most critically, the registers (functional varieties of language used in different contexts; e.g., Halliday, 1978a; Halliday et al., 1964; Matthiessen, 2015) they will encounter and master, as well as the sequence

in which these registers are introduced within the curriculum (Byrnes et al., 2010). Put differently, we argue that student motivation should be understood in relation to the opportunities learners have to access the various registers of the L2 they are learning, such as text types and discourse genres. Each additional register expands the language's meaning potential and offers new ways for learners to use the L2—most importantly, to learn subject matter or disciplinary content through it.

Therefore, investigations of motivation cannot be separated from the broader question of how learners of a second language gradually become empowered to use the L2 as a resource for making meaning, and what factors influence their success—questions with clear implications for curriculum design and pedagogy. At the same time, we argue that motivation itself needs to be critically reexamined as an abstract, indeed virtual, construct. Specifically, we suggest that the concept of motivation, as commonly used in L2 research, has been shaped through grammatical metaphor (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006): that is, through linguistic practices that turn dynamic processes such as wanting, striving, or engaging into abstract nouns like motivation. This shift allows researchers to treat motivation as a measurable *thing*, rather than as a set of socially and contextually embedded behaviours. In this sense, motivation is not simply something learners have or lack; it is a conceptual tool shaped by discourse within the research community. To explore this further, we propose an ordered typology of systems operating across four phenomenal realms: physical, biological, social, and semiotic (see Part III). Drawing on Halliday's (1993) framework, in which learning language, learning through language, and learning about language are fundamentally interconnected as aspects of learning, we relate the concept of motivation to all three dimensions of language learning.

Exploring the two complementary contributions by adopting an inter-organism perspective is timely, given the identity crisis in language motivation research recently identified, characterised, and addressed by Al-Hoorie et al. (2021). We will return to their diagnosis and proposed treatment in terms of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Swain, 2020) and complex dynamic systems theory (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016). Specifically, we note that their proposed treatment could also, or alternatively, draw on systemic functional linguistics, as it treats language in context and other semiotic systems as complex adaptive systems within an ordered typology of systems operating in different phenomenal realms. SFL also provides insights aligned with those identified in sociocultural theory by Al-Hoorie et al. (2021). Very importantly, SFL embodies a holistic theory of language in context and has supported the development of a growing number of comprehensive, meaning-oriented, and text-based descriptions of particular languages.

1.2. That Elusive Quality, 'Motivation'

Over six decades ago, when the field of applied linguistics was still developing intellectually, academically, and institutionally (cf. de Bot, 2015), Halliday and his colleagues made a seminal contribution to the dialogue between language teaching and linguistic sciences (Halliday et al., 1964, pp. 181–182). They observed that motivation is an *elusive* phenomenon in language education and raised the critical question: "What are the propitious circumstances that can favour language learning?" Their partial response—emphasised here and subsequently synthesised in the diagram presented in Figure 1—provides foundational insights that continue to inform contemporary research into motivational dynamics:

> One is youth, as we have already seen. The earlier the learning begins, the better. Another is the amount of experience received by the learner, provided that this experience is meaningful. In other words, learning takes place more readily if the language is encountered in active use rather than if it is seen or heard only as a set of disembodied utterances or exercises.
>
> […]
>
> Another favourable factor is **that elusive quality, motivation**. Human beings, whether they are children or adults, ***learn more readily and effectively if they have reason for doing so***. ***The reason may not be consciously known to the learner***; it may be simply another feature of the ***social pressures*** that impinge on every individual in a community and impel him to develop as he does. Or it may be ***a deliberate wish or intention*** to acquire a particular skill and ability. The converse is also true: a child who has been antagonized in some way towards a skill or a subject learns with only the greatest difficulty, indeed he learns at all. Acquiring a positive reason for learning a language will thus help a pupil learn it, while a negative motivation may make it impossible for a pupil to learn at all effectively. (Incidentally, popular superstitions such as the English cannot learn languages may act as just such a negative motivation.)

> […]
>
> When it comes to learning any secondary language, on the other hand, the reasons for doing so are often less obvious. For the majority of children the only motivation for learning French or German or any other language is in order to make up the right number of examination subjects, if indeed the matter is consciously considered at all. It has commonly been remarked in the past that more people tend to learn languages more effectively in those countries which depend to a great extent on commercial and political intercourse with a large number of different language communities. The motivation is there, in fact, on ***a national scale***, and there is a precedent too: there is ***a national language-learning habit***. It seems certain that developments such as the entry of Britain into the Common Market would produce a rapid increase in national motivation towards the more effective learning of languages.

Such observations about a student's motivation to learn a language refer to reasons, wishes, or intentions, both conscious and unconscious, and range from the individual to the national scale (see Figure 1). These observations are still valid and relevant to the L2 motivation field. However, six decades ago, Halliday et al. (1964) were only able to offer a sketchy outline. Over the past three decades, numerous aspects of language motivation have been extensively elaborated, including the development of sophisticated taxonomies and themes (for a recent overview, see Dörnyei, 2020; Lamb et al., 2019) that reflect the distinct theoretical 'turns' identified within L2 learner motivation research.

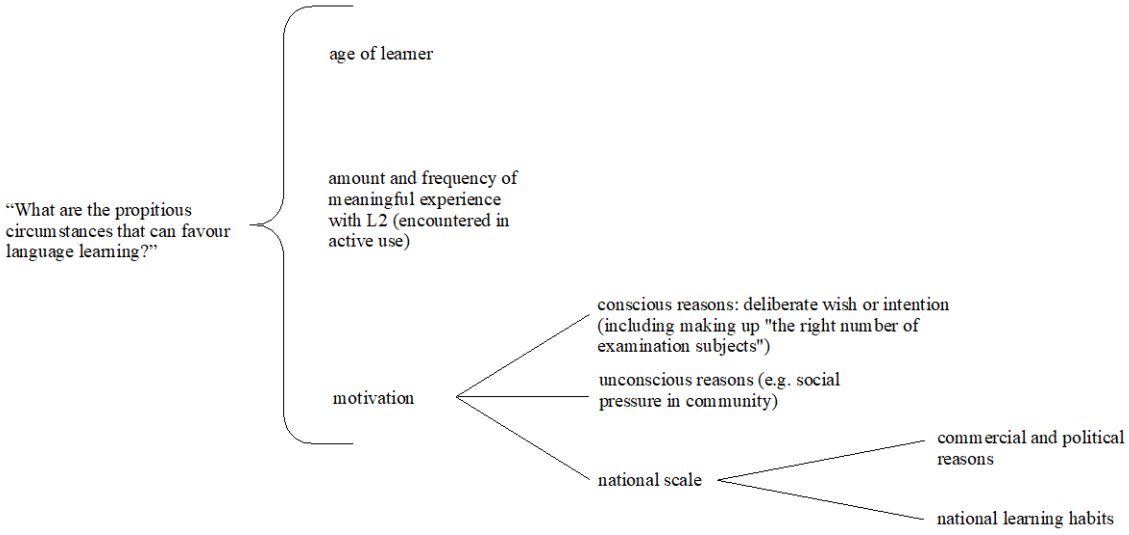


Figure 1. Halliday et al.'s (1964) Propitious Circumstances Favouring Language Learning

2. Turns in L2 Motivation Research

Specialists in L2 motivation have identified a small number of phases or 'turns' in the history of L2 motivation research (e.g., Al-Hoorie, 2017; Dörnyei, 2019, 2020; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), which we have summarised in Table 1. The development of various fields of investigation in terms of turns is a familiar phenomenon; successions of turns can be observed in different areas where some aspect of language is the focus (e.g., for the bilingual turn in SLA, see Ortega, 2010). Ryan (2019) notes that "Applied linguistics seems to be a discipline prone to turns" (p. 174). In our view, such turns tend to dominate in fields of study where the starting point has not been holistic—i.e., not characterised by systems thinking, and therefore lacking comprehensive frameworks that would enable us to view and articulate the complementarity of these turns, rather than treating them as successions of competing alternatives.

Table 1. *Major Phases in L2 Motivation Research*

Phase	Years	Focus and Concepts	Key Contributors	Key Models/Theories
Social-Psychological Phase	1959–1990	Integrative/instrumental motivation; attitudes towards L2 community; motivation as a stable trait	Robert C. Gardner and Wallace E. Lambert	Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, 1985)

Cognitive-Situated Phase or Educational Turn	1990–2000	Learner autonomy; motivational strategies; classroom context (e.g., Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Oxford & Shearin, 1994); application of cognitive theories of motivation (e.g., Noels et al., 2000)	Zoltán Dörnyei, Rebecca L. Oxford and Susan Shearin, Kimberly Noels; Graham Crookes and Richard W. Schmidt	Self-Determination Theory, Goal Theory, Attribution Theory Motivational Orientations (e.g., Noels, 2001)
Process-Oriented Phase	1997–2005	Motivation as dynamic and fluctuating over time; temporal dimension, phases of motivation	Zoltán Dörnyei and István Ottó	Process Model of L2 Motivation (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998)
Sociocultural & Identity Phase	1995–2010	Investment linked to identity, power, agency; imagined communities; relational and poststructural views on motivation and identity, language learning as social practice	Bonny Norton, Ema Ushioda, Aneta Pavlenko, Claire Kramsch	Investment (Norton Pierce, 1995, Norton, 2000) Person-in-Context Relational View (Ushioda, 2009); Social Identity Theories
Socio-Dynamic & Transdisciplinary Phase	2005–Present	L2 self and motivational self system (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009); complex dynamic systems; individual differences; emotional and cognitive integration; dynamics of self-images in multilingual and plurilingual contexts (Busse, 2017; Henry, 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2018a); L2 vision and imagery enhancement (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014); directed motivational currents; critical perspectives; small lens studies (Ushioda, 2016); integration of sociocultural theory and complexity theory (Al-Hoorie et al., 2021); motivational teaching practice and student-teacher performance (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019; Lamb, 2017, 2019)	Zoltán Dörnyei, Ema Ushioda, Alastair Henry, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Stephen Ryan, Bonny Norton, Aneta Pavlenko, Peter D. MacIntyre, Christine Muir, Sarah Mercer, Ali H. Al-Hoorie, Phil Hiver, Mostafa Papi, Ron Darvin, Magdalena Kubanyiova	L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009a) Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Hiver & Papi, 2019) Directed Motivational Currents (Dörnyei et al., 2016) Extended Model of Investment that integrates identity, ideology, and capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013) The Language-Mindset Meaning System (Lou & Noels, 2019)

As shown in Table 1, motivation has, of course, never been treated in isolation. Instead, it can be understood as a node within a network of interrelated concepts and themes. In addition to the topics mentioned briefly in Table 1, work has begun to explore a wide range of topics that are of interest to L2 motivation researchers, including sociological explorations of the relationship between learner identity, investment, and language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013), ecological research linking motivation to learners' life stories and classroom realities (Consoli, 2021), motivation for learning languages other than English (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Li, 2025; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017), student engagement (e.g., Hiver et al., 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), unconscious motivation (Al-Hoorie, 2016a, 2016b, 2019), language mindsets (Lou & Noels, 2017, 2019), the inseparability of emotion and cognition (Lantolf & Swain, 2020; Swain, 2013), and complex dynamic systems theory (Hiver & Papi, 2019). This network can, we suggest, be considerably expanded and viewed more ecologically if we also adopt the inter-organism perspective (see Sections 4 and 5).

A significant advancement in the study of language learning motivation has been the increasing application of complex dynamic systems theory (Dörnyei, 2020). Originating in the natural sciences and systems thinking (e.g., Capra & Luisi, 2014), complexity theory has progressively shaped language education by offering a dynamic framework to explain the unfolding process of language learning (Hiver & Papi, 2019). In contrast to traditional linear models that portray language acquisition as a predictable and sequential process, complexity theory highlights the nonlinear, interconnected, and emergent characteristics of language development (Dörnyei et al., 2015). It conceptualises learners as active agents operating within a dynamic system in which cognitive, social, emotional, and environmental factors interact continuously over time (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). In this view, motivation is not a fixed trait or a series of stages but a fluctuating, context-dependent system shaped by both internal and external influences such as self-efficacy, classroom climate, peer interactions, and social identity (Dörnyei, 2009b; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Larsen-Freeman &

Cameron, 2008). This perspective challenges the notion that motivation, proficiency, and other learner attributes evolve independently or follow fixed trajectories. Rather, it suggests that these elements constitute a developing system, where even minor changes—such as a classroom interaction or emotional response—can lead to substantial and sometimes unpredictable shifts in motivation and learning outcomes (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

In the first decade of the 21st century, the 'L2 Self' (deriving from studies of the self in psychology) emerged in studies of L2 motivation that examined learners' dispositions towards Global English and global identity development, prompting scholars to reconceptualise and retheorise language learning motivation (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). From a systemic functional standpoint, this meant that motivation was re-examined in terms of the *tenor* parameter of context. Tenor is one of three parameters alongside *field* and *mode* (see, e.g., Butt et al., 2021; Doran et al., 2025; Matthiessen et al., 2005). It also involved the insight that the self is a person consisting of a repertoire of personae: roles played in interaction with others within different role networks (e.g., Butt, 1991; Doran et al., 2025; Firth, 1950; Halliday, 1978a; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006; Lemke, 1995). Having been added to the linguistic research agenda in Britain by Firth (1950), this conception of the 'self' has been central in systemic functional studies of language development since the 1970s; the repertoire of personae expands as part of ontogenesis (Halliday, 1975, 2003; McCabe, 2021). We will address this line of interpretation in Part II.

Furthermore, systematic reviews have shown that Dörnyei's (2005, 2009a) L2 Motivational Self System has become a leading motivational framework in the field of L2 motivation research (Boo et al., 2015; Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2022). As Ushioda (2013, p. 3764) succinctly explains:

> Its central concept is the *ideal self*, signifying the attributes that one would ideally like to possess (i.e., a representation of personal hopes, aspirations, or desires). A complementary concept is the *ought-to self*, signifying the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., a representation of someone else's sense of duty, obligations or responsibilities).

In terms of context, the most immediately relevant parameter is again tenor. In terms of language, we can interpret these two selves—the 'ideal self' and the 'ought-to self'—as reflections of two kinds of modulation within the system of modality in English (e.g., Halliday, 1970; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), as shown in Figure 2.

modality: modulation (modality of proposals)

inclination—the 'ideal self' (attributes that one would really like to possess)

obligation—the 'ought-to self' (attributes that one believes one ought to possess, representing duty, obligations or responsibilities)

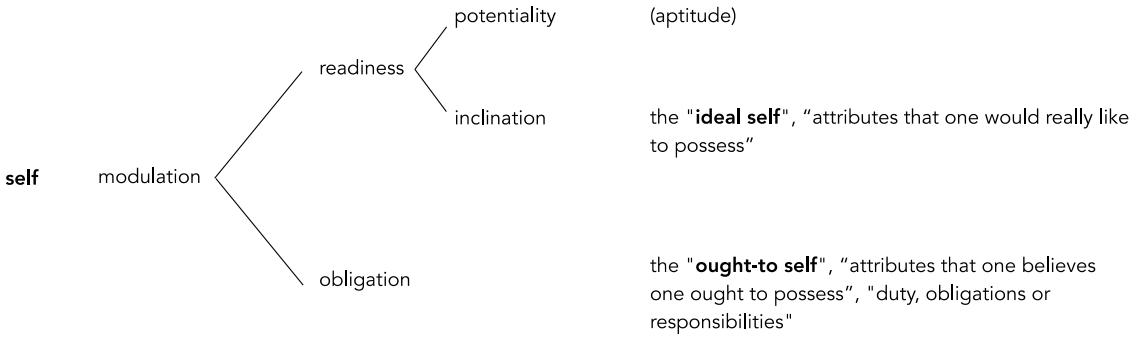


Figure 2. The English System of Modality: 'Modulation' and the Selves in the L2 Motivational Self System Framework

We can note that traditionally, the 'ought-to self' is based on externally imposed obligation: some higher authority requires students to learn their L2, which may still be the case in educational systems operating in various cultural contexts (e.g., Pishghadam et al., 2020). Thus, we might suggest that the conception of the two selves reflects the folk or commonsense model embodied in the system of modality, specifically the subtype of modulation related to the actualisation of processes. Following this line of exploration, we find that the system introduces one more consideration: the 'potentiality' option, which has been theorised as 'aptitude,' alongside but distinct from 'motivation' (e.g., the

relationship between desideration—where *the teacher motivates students to learn*—and conation—where *the teacher enables students to learn*). Therefore, perhaps the conception of the self that has been offered is implicitly drawn from the folk view embodied in the system of modality.

Although work within the intra-organism perspective has expanded beyond a focus on the organism—the 'self'—it increasingly engages with issues central to the inter-organism perspective. However, the conception of language continues to be predominantly understood as a matter of knowledge and competence, as reflected, for example, in Lamb et al.'s (2019, p. 4) overview of motivation for language learning:

> In the era of communicative language teaching, language development is no longer conceived solely in terms of accumulating knowledge of structures, rules and lexis. Rather, language development involves acquiring a set of competences. It involves the deployment of the four skills, with their own sub-skills and strategies, which in turn rely on the acquisition of pragmatic, sociolinguistic, textual, and grammatical knowledge that is difficult for teachers to convey even when linguists have managed to accurately describe it.

Interestingly, the passage reflects a long-established view of language that distinguishes between knowledge and competence (Hymes, 1972). While such perspectives marked a significant shift from earlier structuralist models, they continue to conceptualise knowledge in terms of rule-based systems that can be accumulated and internalised. This stands in contrast to the inter-organism perspective found in systemic functional linguistics, where language is theorised not as a system to be acquired, but as a resource for making meaning, or a meaning potential (e.g., Halliday, 1973; for comments on communicative competence, see Halliday, 1978a, pp. 37–38; McCabe, 2021, pp. 155–158). Halliday (2023) further suggests that this functional approach remains highly relevant for language education and has informed countless educational programmes based on SFL since the 1960s.

Since 2010, L2 motivation scholars have introduced another process—nominalisation—to complement motivation: *engagement*—the active involvement of language learners (e.g., Dörnyei, 2018; Hiver et al., 2021; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021, p. 100) succinctly characterise this concept as follows:

> If we want to truly involve our students, we must ensure that their motivation is *realised in action*. This is where the notion of "engagement" comes into the picture: if learners are engaged, it means that their initial motivation has been successfully transformed into action despite the multitude of distractions. Thus, "student engagement" can be seen as "motivation plus", with the "plus" element referring to active participation in class.

Dörnyei (2018) summarised the concept with the formula: Engagement = Motivation + Implementation. He further notes that student engagement "offers a crucial advantage over the notion of motivation, namely its direct link to concrete classroom behaviours" (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 60). In systemic functional linguistics, engaging students both collectively and individually in learning tasks is achieved and reinforced through the teaching–learning cycle, first developed in the 1980s based on Jerome Bruner's work on scaffolding (e.g., Accurso & Marr, 2024; McCabe, 2021; Martin, 2015; Rose & Martin, 2012, see further, Section 4.2). Martin and Matthiessen (2014, p. 137) argue in this respect that parents and teachers can "serve as mentors for learners by modelling meaning for them in dialogic interaction"—a process that extends from home through school to working life.

3. The 'Identity Crisis' in L2 Motivation Research

Taking stock of research on language motivation, Al-Hoorie et al. (2021) suggest that the field is experiencing an identity crisis, which they attribute to its location at the intersection of applied linguistics, education, and psychology. They argue that this positioning requires broader training and more rigorous transdisciplinary work, and they propose solutions drawn from Vygotskian sociocultural theory and complexity theory. While we concur with their diagnosis of an identity crisis, we approach this issue from a different angle. Specifically, we highlight a fundamental concern that Al-Hoorie et al. (2021) do not foreground: the field's limited engagement with language itself—as a semiotic system, in its diverse context-specific forms, and in the richly varied particular languages spoken around the world. In our view, this conceptual gap points to a deeper disciplinary tension, one that affects how motivation is theorised in relation to the actual linguistic resources learners are developing. Although Al-Hoorie et al. (2021) raise the question of whether motivation in language learning differs from motivation in other academic subjects, this remains underexplored in relation to the nature of language and particular languages. Our exploration, therefore, reorients the identity crisis around this missing linguistic

dimension and calls for a reconceptualisation of motivation that brings language back into focus—drawing on Halliday's (1993) functional linguistic theory as a framework for doing so.

As an example of practical motivation strategies, let us consider Renandya (2014). As we will see, the strategies he proposes do not engage with features of language in any deep or specific way. He emphasises that research on motivation shows how the classroom environment, our behaviour and actions, relationships with students, teaching methods, lesson structure, and assessment practices all have significant effects on student motivation. Renandya identifies five classroom-specific factors—referred to as 'the 5 Ts of motivation': Teacher, Teaching Methodology, Text, Task, and Test (for a journal article describing 'the 5 Ts', see Renandya, 2015).

The characteristics expected of good *teachers* relate to the tenor parameter in the educational context: they are enthusiastic, friendly, caring, humorous, fair, encouraging, and patient.

The *teaching methodology* includes two main aspects: (1) instructional skills, which involve formulating the lesson objectives, selecting and organising learning activities, and evaluating how well the lesson went; and (2) maintaining high student motivation by offering students choices, varying teaching methods, introducing novelty—which can enliven motivation—and engaging students' curiosity.

The *text* refers to instructional materials, which should be both interesting and motivating. Key considerations include whether the materials are pitched at the right linguistic level, contain language items that attract students' attention, are appropriate and emotionally stimulating, and make personally meaningful connections to the students' own lives.

Tasks are more engaging when they provide an "optimal challenge," are interesting, offer "optimal learner involvement," foster "healthy competition," and have a "clear and tangible outcome."

Tests can provide teachers with valuable information about their students' achievements, learning progress, weaknesses, and ability levels. However, Renandya cautions that these benefits often come at the expense of good teaching and warns against overly "examination-oriented" classrooms.

While these '5 Ts of motivation' make sense across many educational cultures, they do not appear to be grounded in detailed findings from L2 motivation research conducted since the early 1990s. Although there are some references to language—such as the idea that tasks should "stretch students' linguistic knowledge to a new level of sophistication" and that teaching methodologies should enable students to "work out the rules [of grammar] for themselves" because "people are naturally curious"—these references are quite general and could apply to any subject area.

Importantly, there exists a wide range of strategies that engage directly with language itself. For example, approaches based on systemic functional linguistics organise curricula and classroom teaching around registers (functional varieties of languages) or genres, sequencing them so learners can gradually expand their L2 meaning potentials. A detailed presentation of this genre-based approach to L2 education is provided by Byrnes et al. (2010), who report a successful implementation in the Department of German at Georgetown University (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2).

In their textbook *Teaching and Researching Motivation*, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) offer a valuable discussion of motivational strategies for the language classroom. However, as with 'the 5 Ts of motivation' proposed by Renandya (2014, 2015), it is striking—particularly from a systemic functional point of view—that the strategies they describe, while entirely sensible, do not engage with language itself, whether L1 or L2, in any detailed or strategic way. For the most part, these strategies could be applied to teaching any subject. While this general applicability is a strength, it also represents a significant missed opportunity for L2 education, specifically, the opportunity to draw on the unique nature of language learning and to recognise that learning language differs fundamentally from learning other subjects (e.g., Halliday, 1993). It raises the important question of whether decades of L2 motivation research since the 1990s have yielded any findings that can be meaningfully *translated* into L2-specific strategies for classroom use.

Many, or perhaps even most, of the strategies proposed by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) focus on the tenor parameter of the classroom context—and the broader educational environment—by emphasising the importance of rapport, positive teacher-student relationships, and boosting students' self-image and confidence (Henry & Thorsen, 2018b; see also Estaji et al., 2023). These relate to socio-metric roles (affect) and valorisation within the tenor dimension of context. Unsurprisingly, similar considerations appear in studies of communication in healthcare (e.g., Rider et al.,

2014, on the International Charter for Human Values in Healthcare), which could be adapted to education (Slade et al., 2015). In healthcare communication, there has been a shift over the past six decades from doctor-centred to patient-centred care and, where possible (such as in long-term care), to *relationship-centred* care (Matthiessen, 2012). Drawing parallels, we can see that it would be highly productive to link desirable tenor settings to the linguistic resources of the L2 being taught (and also the L1)—specifically, the interpersonal metafunction used to enact different kinds of appraisal (e.g., Martin & White, 2005). For example, what semantic strategies exist in the L2 for evaluating someone's work or appreciating their performance? This could be integrated into the curriculum, teaching materials, and classroom activities alongside tenor considerations—such as cultural differences between L1 and L2 regarding face-threatening behaviours and politeness strategies (e.g., Dreyfus & Li, 2021; Hashemian, 2021; Izadi & Jalilifar, 2022; Rahimi Domakani et al., 2013). This is just one example among many possibilities for using language to enhance motivational strategies grounded in L2 teaching (for a pioneering compendium, see Dörnyei, 2001). Explicitly teaching L2 learners the linguistic resources they need to recognise and express their own motivation would also empower them, helping them to construe and enact their experience of being motivated (Gebhard & Graham, 2018; Gebhard et al., 2011, see Section 4).

Let us now return to Al-Hoorie et al.'s (2021) solutions. From our point of view, grounded in SFL, they seem very promising. Vygotskian sociocultural theory resonates with SFL in key areas, as noted by Wells (1994) and highlighted in various contributions since then (e.g., Bartlett, 2017; Byrnes, 2006; Foley, 1991; Hasan, 2005; Jeung & Kellogg, 2019; Shrestha, 2020). Halliday (1992, 2002b, p. 254) expressed this alignment clearly:

> We have often pointed out that it takes two to mean; but we still tend to refer to consciousness as if it was an individual phenomenon, with the social as an add-on feature. I would prefer the Vygotskyan perspective, whereby consciousness is itself a social mode of being.

While general complexity theory has been developed within strands in applied linguistics that have not drawn on SFL (e.g., Beckner et al., 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), SFL itself has, since the 1960s, adopted an approach to language, context, and other semiotic systems as part of a universe of systems of different orders of complexity (see further in Part III). This approach aligns closely with the complexity theory presented by Capra (1996) and Capra and Luisi (2014), and is reflected in the work of Halliday (2005), Halliday and Matthiessen (2006), Lemke and Sabelli (2008), and Matthiessen (2009, 2023, in press).

4. The Complementarity of the Intra-Organism and Inter-Organism Perspectives

One way to address the inherent challenges in motivation research and the identity crisis described by Al-Hoorie et al. (2021) is, we argue, to complement the intra-organism perspective on students learning second or foreign languages with the *inter-organism* perspective. To provide context for the discussion throughout this article, we offer a provisional comparison of these two perspectives as they appear in L2 motivation research and systemic functional educational linguistics. In Table 2, we identify some key differences between the intra- and inter-organism perspectives, aiming to assist future scholars and practitioners in understanding and developing these perspectives as complementary approaches.

Table 2. *Some Key Differences between the Intra-Organism Perspective and the Inter-Organism Perspective*

Aspect	Intra-organism Perspective (L2 Motivation Research)	Inter-organism Perspective (Systemic Functional Educational Linguistics)
Central focus	motivation and recently engagement	empowerment of learners and teachers; democracy and equity; diagnosis of educational failure and development of strategies for avoiding it (Accurso & Marr, 2024; Gebhard & Accurso, 2023; Harman, 2018)
Prominence of language	backgrounded—learning theory based on (educational) psychology	foregrounded—towards language-based learning theory (Halliday, 1993), with language interpreted as a social semiotic; development of comprehensive descriptions of particular languages as a foundation for L2 education
Conception of language	rule and competencies	resource: a meaning potential
Theory of language	—	holistic theory (such as versions of general systems theory, network science)

Description of particular languages	—	comprehensive descriptions (meaning-oriented, text-based, coverage of registerial ranges)
Compatibility with complex dynamic systems approaches	(roughly since 2000)	holistic approach from the start in the 1960s, contrasting with Cartesian Analysis (cf. Halliday (2002b) on the 'monolithic Cartesian culture' in linguistics)
Linguistic analysis of discourses of education	—	(including in the present context, the construal in English of motivation as an abstract metaphoric notion)
Research methodology	predominantly elicited data: questionnaires and self-reports	predominantly naturally occurring authentic data: texts in contexts in classrooms, group work, textbooks—emphasis on longitudinal studies where possible
Curricular organisation	—	sequence of selection of 'genres' (registers in institutional settings): spiral sequencing
Key pedagogic model	—	the teaching–learning cycle (centrally involving scaffolding learners, raising awareness of ideology and power)
Researchers: disciplinary training	(applied) linguistics, language departments	very often: degree in education + PhD in SFL; MA in applied linguistics informed by SFL

Considering Al-Hoorie et al.'s (2021) comments on the identity crisis in language motivation research, we believe it is essential to elaborate on the disciplinary backgrounds and training of systemic functional linguists, who have been the driving force behind the development of systemic functional educational linguistics. One of the key contributors to SFL's development, Michael Halliday spent 13 years as an L2 teacher, instructing students from diverse backgrounds in Chinese and Russian (e.g., Halliday, 2014), before turning to what he called 'the much easier task of teaching about language, i.e., teaching linguistics'. When we examine the next generation of systemic functional linguists who have led the development of educational SFL (i.e., educational linguistics empowered by SFL), we find that virtually all had strong academic backgrounds in education and extensive experience as professional educators before pursuing a PhD in SFL to further develop their educational expertise. This generation can therefore be described as bi-metalingual speakers.

This multidisciplinary trend in SFL has continued, thanks to MA programmes around the world: a growing number of departments worldwide now offer MAs in applied linguistics informed by SFL. Importantly, students—often experienced teachers—are taught not only how to use existing comprehensive functional descriptions of particular languages but also how to analyse and interpret educationally relevant texts in context, such as textbooks, teaching materials, and students' spoken and written output. As a result, there are global communities of teachers equipped with the skills to undertake systemic text analysis informed by these descriptions and to apply both the descriptions and their analyses in their teaching. This kind of empowerment has also been observed in pre-service contexts, where SFL has been shown to enhance student-teachers' metalinguistic and pedagogical knowledge (for an insightful study, see Banegas, 2021). In this respect, teachers have been empowered to operate as autonomous educators. This level of engagement with language is remarkable. It enables educators to intervene to solve problems based on their linguistic expertise and to develop their own materials—an approach that is quite possibly unique to MA programmes in applied linguistics informed and empowered by SFL. Many students from these programmes have subsequently gone on to earn PhDs in SFL.

From an SFL point of view, this empowerment of educators through critical language awareness and the ability to analyse discourse can be seen as a form of motivation in itself (e.g., Gebhard & Graham, 2018). Rather than being conceived as an internal psychological trait or drive, motivation in the SFL tradition is construed as socially-situated and semiotically mediated, a response to meaning-making demands within particular educational, institutional, and cultural contexts (Christie, 2005; Schleppegrell, 2004). In this view, learners and teachers are motivated when they can see the value of their linguistic work in relation to broader social and semiotic goals, and when they are equipped with the semiotic resources to act effectively. Thus, the multilingual and multidisciplinary nature of these MA programmes does not simply reflect diversity in background, but fosters a functional orientation to language that reframes motivation as the capacity to make meaning in powerful ways. This is consistent with the inter-organism perspective outlined in Table 2, where motivation is not backgrounded but embedded in acts of linguistic empowerment, equity, and participation (Gebhard & Accurso, 2023); concerns that have been on the agenda developed by Halliday and his collaborators since the 1950s (cf.

Halliday, 2015). Such concerns have increasingly been highlighted and acted upon in (applied) linguistics informed by the focus on the Global South and versions of Southern Theory (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013).

4.1. Motivation and Engagement in Classroom-Based SFL Studies

As noted in Table 2, a growing body of SFL-informed classroom research offers concrete illustrations of how motivation and engagement are realised inter-organismically in authentic educational settings (e.g., Accurso & Marr, 2024; Gebhard & Accurso, 2023; Harman, 2018). These studies go beyond treating motivation as an internal state, showing how it emerges through dialogic meaning-making and through teachers' and students' joint participation in disciplinary literacy practices. In these classroom-based investigations, motivation is not an antecedent of learning but an interactional accomplishment achieved through language, scaffolding, and shared goals.

For example, Harman (2018) documents collaborative projects in bilingual classrooms where critical SFL pedagogy was used to address social equity and power relations. Her case studies show how motivation is closely linked to students' sense of agency as legitimate participants in academic discourse. When bilingual students are invited to analyse and produce disciplinary genres, such as scientific explanations or argumentative essay, they come to view language as a resource for identity construction and social action. This aligns closely with the inter-organism perspective advanced here: motivation is construed as the drive to mean in contexts that recognise one's semiotic and cultural resources.

Similarly, Gebhard and Accurso (2023) present a series of teacher action research projects in multilingual U.S. classrooms in which teachers, drawing on SFL genre pedagogy, designed cycles of interaction that provided multilingual learners with authentic audiences and purposes for their writing. Students were encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires when constructing disciplinary texts, while teachers modelled the field, tenor, and mode of those genres. Motivation, in these accounts, was fostered through *tenor*, which involved building solidarity and trust within multilingual classrooms; through *field*, which entailed explicit support for developing disciplinary knowledge; and through *mode*, which referred to the scaffolding of learners' control of cohesive and coherent written texts. The resulting engagement was therefore semiotically mediated and socially distributed rather than purely individual.

Accurso and Marr (2024) further extend this line of work by refining the expanded teaching–learning cycle, emphasising recursive scaffolding, genre modelling, and explicit metalinguistic dialogue between teachers and students (see also Williams, 2004, 2005, on the high value of the metalanguage of grammar, 'grammatic', as a pedagogic resource). In their analysis of classroom discourse, engagement is visible in the ways students take up teachers' language, negotiate meanings, and jointly construct texts for real audiences. These findings illustrate how SFL-informed pedagogy operationalises motivation through interactional contingencies—learners are motivated because they are apprenticed into meaningful semiotic practices that matter in their immediate social worlds.

Taken together, these case studies substantiate the inter-organism interpretation of motivation proposed in this study. They demonstrate that motivation is best understood as *emergent participation* in meaning-making communities, dynamically enacted through the pedagogic register and through the tenor relationships that constitute equitable classroom discourse. By enabling multilingual learners to use all their linguistic and cultural resources to achieve authentic communicative purposes, SFL-informed approaches transform 'motivation and engagement' from abstract constructs into observable semiotic practices. They exemplify how language-based educational linguistics can operationalise empowerment—the key concern of the inter-organism perspective—by reconfiguring classroom interaction as a site of collaborative meaning-making and social inclusion.

4.2. The Teaching–Learning Cycle as a Motivational Framework

Building on the inter-organism perspective outlined in Table 2, the teaching–learning cycle (TLC) represents one of the most significant pedagogical realisations of SFL-informed educational linguistics. Originating in the 1980s within the Sydney School (Martin, 1999; Rothery, 1996) and later expanded internationally (Rose & Martin, 2012; Accurso & Marr, 2024), the TLC operationalises key SFL principles—including the contextual parameters of field, tenor, and mode—to scaffold learners' participation in meaning-making and to help learners engage with increasingly complex disciplinary genres. In SFL terms, it provides a means of transforming motivation from an abstract psychological construct into a semiotic process of apprenticeship into disciplinary discourse.

At its core, the TLC is designed as a recursive pedagogic cycle that guides teachers and multilingual learners through four overlapping stages: building the field, modelling and deconstructing texts, joint construction, and independent construction. Each stage activates different dimensions of the context of situation:

Field is foregrounded as teachers and students co-construct disciplinary knowledge through guided exploration of authentic content;

Tenor is developed through dialogic interaction and mutual trust, motivating students by situating them as legitimate participants in the classroom discourse community; and

Mode is scaffolded through explicit attention to the language resources needed to produce coherent and cohesive texts.

This cycle directly nurtures learners as meaners, or semiotic agents. As Martin (2015) and Rose and Martin (2012) emphasise, motivation and engagement are sustained when learners are empowered to recognise the goals, audiences, and linguistic patterns that define powerful disciplinary genres. The TLC thus supports the movement from intersubjective participation to independent control of language as meaning potential, a trajectory that mirrors the ontogenesis of motivation described by Halliday (1975, 1993).

Recent studies have extended and diversified the TLC in ways that explicitly target multilingual learners' motivation. Gebhard (2019) and Gebhard and Accurso (2023) demonstrate how genre-based cycles implemented through collaborative enquiry projects can help multilingual students draw on their full linguistic and cultural repertoires. These pedagogical interventions foster a sense of belonging and competence by aligning classroom discourse with authentic communicative goals—such as writing scientific explanations for public audiences or constructing persuasive essays addressing local issues. Similarly, Harman (2018) has shown that when the TLC is adapted for critical and bilingual education, it enables learners to explore tenor-based issues of identity, power, and equity, making motivation inseparable from social participation and empowerment.

Accurso and Marr (2024) have recently reconceptualised the TLC as an expanded and recursive process, incorporating reflective cycles in which teachers and students co-analyse classroom discourse and adapt scaffolding strategies. This expansion highlights engagement as an ongoing negotiation rather than a linear progression, thereby strengthening the cycle's alignment with complex dynamic systems perspectives on learning and motivation (Dörnyei, 2020; Hiver & Papi, 2019). Within this framework, motivation emerges through cycles of shared meaning-making, rather than being an antecedent condition.

From an SFL standpoint, the TLC provides an exemplary model of motivational pedagogy because it situates learning within authentic social contexts and systematically links linguistic resources to disciplinary needs and goals. It transforms the classroom into a dynamic ecology of intersubjective interaction, where students' linguistic development and motivational engagement grow together. In this sense, the TLC exemplifies the inter-organism principle of learning to mean with others, a process through which multilingual learners become empowered participants in their disciplinary and community discourses (e.g., Macnaught, 2024).

We can therefore understand the nature of SFL and its practitioners within the broader framework of SFL as an appliable kind of linguistics (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2022; Halliday, 2002a, 2008, 2015). Halliday formulated appliable linguistics as an approach to bridge the widening divide between theoretical linguistics and applied linguistics, emphasising that linguistic theory must be a resource that is powerful enough to be applied to address problems that arise throughout our communities. Currently, it is difficult to identify any other linguistic school or tradition as equally engaged in both applied linguistics and theoretical linguistics (Matthiessen & Yousefi, 2022). Nearly a quarter-century into the 21st century, SFL is arguably unique in providing a bridge between theoretical-descriptive and applied engagements with language: theoretical-descriptive contributions tend to be located at a considerable distance from applied concerns, and applied linguistic contributions tend not to be grounded in linguistic theory and descriptions of particular languages (Gebhard & Accurso, 2020). For educational linguists passionately engaged with issues of L2 motivation, it may not be immediately obvious that rich, comprehensive, meaning-oriented, text-based descriptions of both L1 and L2 are essential—yet they are (e.g., Arús-Hita et al., 2024; Mickan & Lopez, 2017). Only when equipped with such descriptions can language educators effectively incorporate language into their efforts to motivate students. Similarly, for descriptive linguists dedicated to the careful, sensitive documentation of an increasingly wide range of particular languages (often

working against time to document endangered languages), educational applications may not seem central to their research agenda (though they certainly can be). However, in the contexts of language preservation and revitalisation, such applications become central to descriptive concerns.

5. Inter-Organism Perspective: Aspects of Learning Foregrounded

After outlining the complementarity of the intra-organism and inter-organism perspectives, we now turn to the inter-organism perspective, focusing in particular on the aspects emphasised in systemic functional linguistics. While systemic functional educational linguistic scholarship since the 1960s (e.g., McCabe, 2021) has not focused on motivation in language education, nor in language and education more broadly, scholars and practitioners have been centrally concerned with issues that are part of the overall complex network of factors involved in students' successful learning—particularly the issue of educational failure and the goal of *empowering* both students and teachers (see Table 2). Halliday (2007, p. 212) notes that linguistic power involves two aspects: "Developing language is developing the power that consists in knowledge and in control; and learning a second language is adding to this power".

As noted by Halliday (1978a), the inter-organism perspective complements the intra-organism perspective. Engaging with this complementary viewpoint is valuable because the intra-organism perspective has dominated the macro-discipline of cognitive science. Meanwhile, the inter-organism perspective is important as it foregrounds aspects of L2 motivation that are crucial for an overall understanding of motivation and learner engagement. These aspects, which we will discuss in greater detail in Parts II and III, include the following:

- **Semiotic interpretation (1):** Language is understood as resource rather than as rule—more specifically, a resource for making meaning (e.g., Halliday, 1973, 1977, 1978a, 2023). This represents a meaning potential, or more precisely, a multilingual meaning potential situated within cultural contexts. Since cultures are richly varied, this perspective inherently acknowledges cultural diversity, including considerable variation in L2 learning and meaning styles. As noted by Halliday (1978b), this means that learner and teacher motivation will also vary widely across different cultures and languages (e.g., Wong & Liem, 2023). Furthermore, the construal of 'motivation' as a conceptual phenomenon in L2 motivation studies—often based on the lexicogrammar of English—will differ across languages, just as emotions have been shown to vary significantly across languages and cultures (Barrett, 2017). Therefore, we need to problematise Anglo-centric conceptions of motivation: we referred in Section 1.1 to what Levisen (2024) calls the 'Anglo-for-human fallacy' (cf. Part III, where we discuss how motivation has been construed in English as an abstract, metaphoric phenomenon in L2 motivation studies). In L2 motivation research, considerations of cultural variation are particularly prominent in the literature on motivation strategies, including global surveys of motivational differences, as highlighted in Lamb's (2019) overview. Variation also occurs within individual cultures, such as differences in styles of meaning explored as differences in coding orientation by Basil Bernstein and his team (Atkinson, 1985). This work initially aimed to explain educational failure—specifically, why certain groups of students tend to fail while others succeed (Bernstein & Henderson, 1973; Halliday, 1994). Cultural differences can reveal how social interactions and relational dynamics shape learners' motivation. For example, learners from collectivist cultures often experience motivation as a shared, co-constructed process emphasising group goals and social harmony, whereas individualistic societies foreground personal aspirations and autonomy (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Kim & Lawrie, 2019). Therefore, the inter-organism perspective in SFL acknowledges cultural variation by emphasising that language use and interaction are deeply embedded in and shaped by cultural contexts, which influence the meanings that individuals negotiate in communication (Halliday, 1978a).

- **Society—community—meaning group—person** [meaner] as an aggregate or bundle of personae in different roles (originating with Firth, 1950; followed up in SFL by Halliday, 1978a, and later by Butt, 1991; Lemke, 1995). Motivation is *enacted* within these different levels of groups; it is not merely individual but also inheres in meaning groups, communities, and societies (Halliday et al., 1964). Individuals become persons (and meaners) through their interaction with meaning groups, and so on—this is the process of individuation and personalisation.

- **Intersubjectivity** (e.g., Trevarthen, 1979, 1987, 2009, 2011) serves as a framework for interpreting subjectivity. This concept is closely tied to understanding the individual as a person—and as a meaner—who develops

through interaction with others in meaning groups. Therefore, motivation should be interpreted not only subjectively but also intersubjectively.

- **Ontogenesis:** Learners as emergent users of language (learning how to mean), a process extending from the first year of a person's life throughout their entire lifespan, including the addition of second or foreign languages as they learn to mean in L2s (McCabe, 2021). They gradually master different uses of the L2—that is, they increase their repertoires of L2 registers (Matthiessen, 2006, 2009; Matthiessen & Xuan, 2025).
- **Semiotic interpretation (2):** Language in context, alongside other semiotic systems, is located within an ordered typology of systems (e.g., Halliday, 2005; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006; Matthiessen, 2007), namely: 1st-order systems—physical systems; 2nd-order systems—physical systems plus life, i.e., biological systems; 3rd-order systems—biological systems plus value, i.e., social systems; and 4th-order systems—social systems plus meaning, i.e., semiotic systems (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2024). Thus, motivation as a semiotic construct is enacted within social systems and embodied within biological systems, with different properties across these systemic orders. For example, at the biological level, we must recognise unconscious motivation alongside conscious motivation—only the latter of which can be directly accessed through questionnaires and other self-reports. We return to this point in more detail in Part III.

These different aspects combine in various ways, of course. Importantly, based on semiotic interpretation (1)—meaning potential and the movement between society and person—we arrive at the notion of multilingual persons or meaners, comparable to the concept of the 'ideal multilingual self' in the L2 motivation literature (e.g., Henry, 2017; Ushioda, 2017). When we combine the conception of persons as meaners playing a variety of roles within different role networks characteristic of the various institutions that together constitute a culture, we are invited to consider the complementarity of formal prescribed role networks and informal emergent ones, involving different communities of practice and communities of practitioners, as conceived and developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998a, 1998b) as part of their account of situated learning. Capra and Luisi (2014, pp. 315–320) emphasise the central role such informal networks play in driving organisational change. This insight has been further developed in accounts of social learning and L2 motivation research, particularly through the lens of communities of practice (e.g., Hooper, 2020), although this framework is not explicitly referenced by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021). An early contribution in this direction is Haneda (1997). Related studies that resonate with this perspective, though without directly invoking the communities of practice framework, include Henry and Liu (2024) and Tanaka (2025).

In SFL, extensive research over the past decades has provided empirical substance to the concept of multilingual meaners. On the one hand, systemic functional linguists have produced meaning-oriented, text-based descriptions of languages designed as resources for their communities of speakers (e.g., Caffarel et al., 2004; Kashyap, 2019; Martin et al., 2023; Matthiessen et al., 2025; Teruya & Matthiessen, 2015). On the other hand, they have developed the theoretical conception of a 'multilingual meaning potential' and its representation through multilingual system networks (e.g., Bateman et al., 1999; Matthiessen, 2018). Comprehensive, meaning-oriented, text-based systemic functional descriptions certainly include major languages; importantly, however, systemic functional linguists are also developing descriptions of smaller languages, some from Global North regions, such as Danish, but increasingly from various regions of the Global South, including Akan, Bajjika, Dagaare, Oko, and Pitjantjatjara.

Thus, when systemic functional linguists work with language in education generally, and with language education specifically, they are equipped with comprehensive, meaning-oriented, text-based descriptions. They engage with these descriptions by incorporating aspects of them into curricula, teaching materials, and pedagogy. The significance of this approach may not be immediately apparent to scholars from the tradition of L2 motivation studies, but it is in fact fundamental. This is amply documented in the growing number of SFL L2 education studies (e.g., McCabe, 2021). For example, in an insightful review, Ryshina-Pankova (2018) demonstrates how uses of SFL descriptions have played a significant role in advanced L2 education. From the SFL point of view, it seems extremely difficult, virtually inconceivable, to conduct any L2 education research without being informed and empowered by rich, comprehensive, meaning-oriented, text-based descriptions of the languages involved (Matthiessen et al., 2025).

Rounding off our discussion of the inter-organism perspective, we should note that in SFL this perspective has been organically linked to the conception of linguistics as appliable linguistics since the 1950s (Halliday, 2002a, 2008,

2015), as well as to the emphasis placed on *social accountability* (Halliday, 1984; Matthiessen, 2012). Social accountability means including and embracing the needs, goals and concerns of professionals and students serving in institutional roles in a wide variety of institutions (Gebhard & Accurso, 2023). This not only naturally includes institutions of education, but also obviously implicates the tenor parameter of the contexts in the institutions in focus, and centrally takes members of the public into account (in their institutional roles as clients, students, patients, etc.). In the fields of language and education more broadly, and L2 education in particular, the appliable nature of SFL has been demonstrated through close interaction between research and practical applications in curricula, textbooks, and classroom pedagogy, beginning with work in the 1960s emerging from the Nuffield Project, such as *Breakthrough to Literacy* (e.g., Mackay et al., 1970; Pearce et al., 1989) and *Language in Use* (Doughty et al., 1971). Since then, SFL scholars and educators have developed numerous additional strands of interaction between SFL and education, some of which have grown into collaborative global endeavors (e.g., Acevedo et al., 2023; Rose & Martin, 2012). Social accountability involves including and embracing the needs, goals, and concerns of professionals serving in institutional roles across a wide variety of settings. This naturally encompasses educational institutions but also directly implicates the tenor parameter of institutional contexts, centrally considering members of the public in their institutional roles as clients, students, patients, and so forth.

6. Conclusion

One of the central issues in L2 motivation research is the relationship between research and its practical applications: to what extent have findings since the 1990s been *translated* into frameworks that empower L2 teachers to motivate learners in the classroom? Ushioda (2020, p. 202) summarises the gap between the language teaching and research professions, which often pursue 'different interests' regarding the notion of motivation, as follows:

> For the language teaching profession, motivation is of interest because it is usually a practical problem in the classroom, where teachers are often faced with the challenge of motivating students and keeping them motivated. For SLA researchers, in contrast, motivation is of interest not because it presents a problem but rather because it is one of the variables that can help to explain why some language learners are more successful than others.

Similarly, in their critical reflection on the growing body of literature on motivation, Al-Hoorie et al. (2021, pp. 137–139) argue forcefully that language motivation research has not significantly informed teaching practice, and they set out to probe why research "has been hampered from making genuine direct contributions to teaching." In this respect, they note that the contribution has been *negligible* and elaborate on two main reasons: "The first is related to an identity crisis in the language motivation field, falling at the intersection of applied linguistics, education, and psychology; the second is the marginalization of the role of context" (p. 136). It is important to note that the ongoing dialogue between theory and application has always been a key feature of systemic functional linguistics since its genesis, embodied in Halliday's (2002a, 2008, 2015) framing of SFL as appliable linguistics.

Having referred to recent book-length analyses such as Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) and reviewed Renandya's (2014) practical advice in the form of 'the 5 Ts of motivation', we have noted the need to focus on the tenor parameter within context—that is, various aspects of a positive relationship between teacher and students, along with different forms of student support. As we observed, while the recommendations make good common sense and would likely be endorsed by experienced teachers and their students, they do not seem to be derived from specific research findings. At the same time, they do not engage with the processes of L2 teaching and learning in specific and deep ways; rather, they constitute good advice that could be given to teachers of any subject or discipline. In other words, they do not draw on language or the particular properties of any given L2 as a source of L2 motivation.

As we have noted, Al-Hoorie et al. (2021) recognise and characterise an identity crisis in language motivation research. This crisis is the central problem they diagnose, and their proposed treatment is to turn to sociocultural theory and complexity theory. While this is a sensible treatment, we have argued that SFL can provide a more powerful and precise kind of treatment. We have shown that SFL aligns with both sociocultural and complexity theories but, importantly, unlike these valuable frameworks, it provides a holistic theory of language in context—alongside other semiotic systems—and offers a growing number of comprehensive, rich, meaning-oriented descriptions of particular languages. These extend beyond the major languages that have dominated L2 motivation studies, which tend to focus on English and a small set of major LOTEs (languages other than English). Furthermore, SFL has been successfully applied

in educational and professional development settings, often combined with the 'Genre Model' developed over many years by J.R. Martin and his group (e.g., Rose & Martin, 2012), which emphasises literacy practices, scaffolding, learner and teacher empowerment, and the development of meaning-making potential (Gebhard, 2019; Gebhard & Accurso, 2023; Gebhard et al., 2013; Harman, 2018; Schleppegrell et al., 2025).

In short, SFL could offer a complementary approach enriched by extensive accounts of not only major languages but also an increasing number of minor ones. However, this alternative treatment based on SFL might face resistance, as it has the potential to shift the research agenda from focusing on the often 'abstract' and 'elusive' concept of motivation to a core concern in SFL: the *empowerment* of people worldwide. One challenge here is that empowerment requires deep engagement with the diverse languages involved, grounded in comprehensive and appliable meaning-oriented text-based descriptions of these languages. Such descriptions include registers within their institutional contexts relevant to L2 learners—registers that may be vital to their projections of their future selves by expanding their evolving L2 meaning potentials (Matthiessen, 2015). Ultimately, this empowers L2 learners to do much more with their languages in their everyday lives.

In Part II, we will elaborate on the key aspects of the inter-organism perspective: semiotic interpretation, intersubjectivity, and the users and uses of language. In Part III, we will locate motivation within a typology of systems and discuss how the concept of motivation has been construed as an abstract, virtual phenomenon within the discourse of L2 motivation studies.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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