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# Managing resistance and desire in language learning: a basic developmental and motivational process

*Stephen Scott BREWER & Anne-Laure DUBRAC*

MCFs

IMAGER (EA 3958), Université Paris-Est Créteil

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## Introduction

This paper reports on theoretical and empirical research that aims to help understand why students' individual language learning careers (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993) may evolve as diversely and, in some cases, problematically as they do over the course of years spent learning foreign languages in the classroom. Empirically, our study concerns the experiences of French-speaking undergraduate *Lansad*<sup>1</sup> law students who are required to study English as part of the prescribed curriculum. Theoretically, our objective is to propose an original lens through which to conceptualize the constructs of desire and resistance in foreign language (L2) learning, while calling attention to the fundamental role they play as jointly operating forces that strongly influence linguistic development and L2 learning motivation. We begin by building a heuristic model that articulates the “desire ↔ resistance relation” in language learning at two distinct levels. The first level is essentially cognitive, linguistic and disciplinary in nature, while the second is rooted in the broader social-psychological realities of L2 learning, having more to do with a learner's dynamic sense of self and identity as user-speaker of a new language. Drawing on Ushioda (2014), we incorporate into this heuristic model a developmental framework for exploring the emergence of desire in language learning as the product of motivational integration and internalization within the self. These processes are inseparable from the interactions between students and the socio-educational contexts in which they learn.

Data collected by means of ten semi-directive interviews with two groups of undergraduate *Lansad* students were analyzed in light of the proposed model and framework. The first group included students enrolled in a selective international program at the Law School in which half of the courses are taught in English. The second group was comprised of students who take all their law courses in French, but have a compulsory English course each semester. Such a sampling of students, although limited, should provide relevant data for this exploratory inquiry into

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<sup>1</sup> “*Lansad*” in the French university milieu is an acronym standing for “LANgues pour Spécialistes d’Autres Disciplines” or “languages for students majoring in other disciplines”.

diverse learning histories, characterized by different levels of ability as well as different beliefs, attitudes and behaviors in connection with English as an academic subject. It is important to note that participants were not selected to represent all students in their respective programs, but to provide insight into how different students have learned (or not) to manage obstacles and setbacks in their language learning in various contexts and situations. Based on these findings and our engagement with the proposed theoretical concepts and perspectives, we conclude with a discussion of some relevant issues for foreign language teaching and learning in the French education context. Our aim is not to claim scientific objectivity based on psychometric measures of proficiency, for example, but encourage further research into the subjective nature of students' language learning, an experience that necessarily involves more or less effective management of the “desire ↔ resistance relation”.

### **Towards a model of the “desire ↔ resistance relation” in language learning**

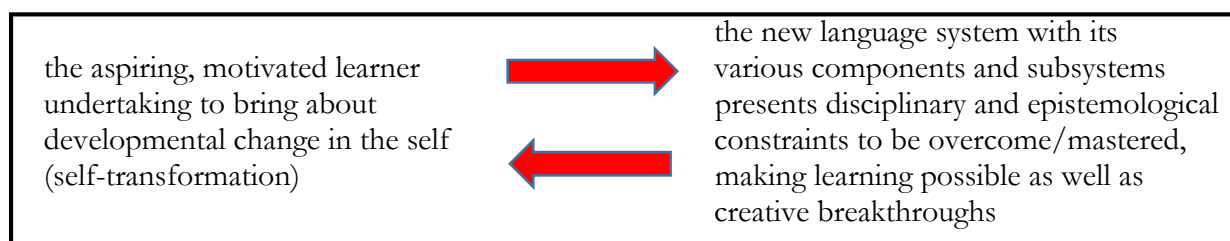
Contrary to common usage, we do not conceive of the construct of resistance as reluctance or refusal to learn. Rather, we consider it a fundamental, indispensable feature of the act of learning itself. Our conception of resistance *in* learning – as opposed *to* learning – is inspired by Lewin's theory of change (1947/1951, in Morgan, 1997), which states that any potential change in one direction is resisted by forces moving in an opposing direction. Authentic learning can be seen as a complex process of self-transformation that leads to durable change in an individual's knowledge and abilities. Viewed in this light, we posit that a learner's more or less self-endorsed desire to learn a new language constitutes a force towards developmental change that moves in a particular direction. In keeping with Lewin's theory, we consider that any learner's intent to bring about change within himself or herself through the acquisition of a new language necessarily encounters resistance – coming in the opposite direction, as it were – in the form of the new language system's inherent epistemological and disciplinary constraints. Such constraints offer resistance at the heart of the learning process to the extent that their genuine mastery extends, often quite painstakingly, over long periods of time (Gardner, 1991).

Following Giddens (1984), our take on resistance is rooted in the understanding that the structures and internal organization that make up language are what render it learnable, much like, for example, the rules of chess. While the rules of the game may strongly constrain the ways in which rooks, kings and queens can be moved, they are at the same time the very structures that allow the game to take place at all (van Lier, 1996). Similarly, languaging<sup>2</sup> (Bottineau, 2010: 295) immerses user-speakers in highly complex sets of codes, patterns and scripts that at once enable and constrain. Language enables by providing infinite opportunity and resources for

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<sup>2</sup> The verb “to language” has been introduced by researchers working in the enactive paradigm (Bottineau, 2010; Aden, 2017) to conceptualize human linguistic behavior as a dynamic, interactive sensorimotor experience. Language “is not an object; it cannot be acquired. The forming of personal languaging is part and parcel of the forming of the person, just as walking, jumping, or flying” (Bottineau, 2010: 295).

thinking and communicating creatively, while it constrains through the very structures and systems that constitute it (systems ranging from the phonological and morpho-syntactical to the lexical and sociopragmatic) that perforce impinge on the ways in which such creativity can be expressed. Thus, metaphorically speaking, language learning is seen here as a developmental process necessarily characterized by the “resistance” that emerges from the opposing forces of the aspiring, motivated learner, on the one hand, and the intricate interplay between constraints and resources inherent in the new language system, on the other (Fig. 1).



*Figure 1 – Change in one direction is resisted by forces moving in an opposing direction*

The second level of analysis concerns learners in their developing sense of who they are as people, and how that sense of self relates to the social groups and linguistic communities to which they belong and may aspire to belong. In addition to the disciplinary tensions that characterize L2 learning as a cognitive, mental process, there can also be much pull between desire and resistance at this more social and motivational level of functioning. What language learner has not experienced “deep longings [...] and identifications that are ambivalent, conflictual even, and that make it difficult to dissociate *Lust* (desire) from *Unlust* (reluctance), *Freude* (joy) from *Frust* (frustration) in the acquisition and use of language” (Kramsch, 2005: 211)? The ‘desire ↔ resistance relation’ at this second level underscores the centrality of the complex and close interrelation between the individual language learner and the multiple social contexts in which he or she manages to learn with varying degrees of recognition and support (Norton, 2000).

Instructed language learners around the world continually negotiate their sense of self as both young people and students through the social and interactive realities of their classrooms. Language learning has been described by Guiora (1983: 8) as “a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition”, while “perhaps the most widely studied affective reaction to L2 communication [in recent years has been] language anxiety” (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012: 103). Communicative language classrooms present learning episodes, often involving public performance of language skills and knowledge that students appraise and draw largely implicit inferences about in terms of desirable and undesirable outcomes. Such episodes offer students who are secure in their abilities the opportunity to demonstrate their competence. However, for less secure students, the language classroom may become a place that threatens them emotionally by obliging them to experience incompetence in front of their teacher and classmates. Thus, many language students may find themselves in classrooms caught between two conflicting basic priorities: the wish to learn and develop their

knowledge, skills and personal resources, on the one hand, and the wish to protect their integrity with respect to their surroundings and prevent damage to their self-worth, on the other (Covington, 1992; Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2000). Regulating behavior in terms of these priorities involves not only cognitive functioning, but perhaps more critically, affective and motivational functioning (Garcia, 1995). The “desire ↔ resistance model” highlights the interrelatedness of these dimensions of self-regulated learning.

In a unique line of inquiry into the nature of desire in language learning, Kramsch (2005: 209) takes issue with what she calls the “pragmatic notion” of motivation. She declares that most lines of research into motivation focus on reasons for wanting to learn a language that are rooted in “functional objectives often situated outside the self”. People are theorized as wanting to learn a foreign language in pursuit of “communicative success” or “happiness” or as finding pleasure in language learning through “language play and creativity (*ibid.*: 209). Yet as she points out, these pragmatic motives neglect the important view of language learning as constituting a “basic drive toward self-fulfillment [...] that touches the core of who we are” (*ibid.*: 101).

Kramsch posits that teenagers may be particularly sensitive to desire as it relates to identity formation in and through L2 learning. As a means for reaching out to wider worlds, a foreign language represents “a new mode of expression that enables [young people] to escape from the confines of their own grammar and culture [and] rebel against the limitations imposed [...] by the constraints of their social environment” (*ibid.*: 101). In this regard, the adolescent’s wish to learn a new language may be less about acquiring “a tool for the achievement of pragmatic goals” and more about the “need for identification with others” or the need for an “imagined identit[y] that [is] every bit as real as [that] imposed by society” (*ibid.*). Language learners who invest in their learning of languages not spoken in their immediate environment do not merely strive to adapt to the world around them, they seek to transcend it.

### **A developmental framework for understanding emergent desire**

To complete our theoretical approach, we needed a framework to help understand desire as a phenomenon that develops over time in the context of individuals’ L2 learning careers, particularly in school settings. Ushioda (2014) proposes a developmental framework comprised of two motivational theories that illuminate the processes whereby motivation to learn an L2 may become integrated within the self, thus generating, we would claim, desire. The two theories are Deci and Ryan’s (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System Theory (L2MSS). Both provide the conceptual means for understanding not only the processes whereby language learning motivation becomes (or does not become) an integral part of the learner’s sense of self, but also how such processes of integration and internalization relate to the interactions between the self and the surrounding social context. The two theories are also complementary from a time perspective: SDT focuses on past and

emergent experience, whereas L2MSS concerns the influence of imagined future self-states on current experience.

Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System highlights the importance of how people think about the future and reflect on the kind of person they would like to become and/or are afraid of becoming. Drawing on Markus & Nurius's (1986) Possible Selves theory, Dörnyei's work examines the imaginative power of language learners as people who believe more or less strongly in what the future holds regarding their L2 achievement. Over time students cultivate hopes, wishes and even fantasies about themselves as language speakers that are more or less desirable, attractive and personally valued. When, for example, an L2 learner has fully internalized a positive representation of himself or herself as someone whose desirable attributes include L2 proficiency, the learner is said to possess an *ideal L2 self* which serves to channel language learning motivation in pursuit of that idealized future self-state. Learners whose motivation is less internalized and more heavily influenced by the expectations of significant others (such as parents and teachers) are believed to possess an *ought-to L2 self*. Such students tend to prioritize compliance with social demands and avoid possible negative consequences in connection with their learning.

Yet as important as these future perspectives may be, understanding how and why students actually manage to internalize their motivation to learn within the self, we need to consider how things happen in the present and how social environments such as classrooms have mediated developmental changes in their motivation over time.

Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) assumes that human beings are innately driven toward psychological growth and self-actualization. However, this natural propensity can be supported or thwarted by particular social contexts. According to the theory, optimal human development occurs when three basic psychological needs are met: 1) *competence* (*i.e.*, to feel effective in one's interactions with the environment), 2) *autonomy* (*i.e.*, the sense that one's actions and behaviors are self-determined as an authentic expression of the self and the self's internal values, even when these actions, behaviors and values may be influenced by external sources), and 3) *relatedness* (*i.e.*, one's sense of belonging and connectedness with others, which entails alignment with, and integration of, relevant social influences and values [Ushioda, 2014: 135]). Research in the field of L2 motivation (Noels *et al.*, 1999; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008) has confirmed that language learners whose needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are satisfied are more likely to generate self-endorsed forms of motivation and regulate their own learning.

### **The two-dimensional desire ↔ resistance model in L2 learning**

One limiting characteristic of motivation and its role in second language acquisition is the marginalized position that the construct has continued to endure within the field over decades (Ushioda, 2010). While language teachers may readily acknowledge that their job is to develop their students' linguistic abilities, perhaps

the question of how to support healthy motivational development is much less obvious. In building this model, we have sought to offer a relatively straightforward heuristic that attempts to bridge this gap by allowing teachers and researchers to take into account both motivational and more linguistic (disciplinary) factors in a unified developmental framework.

A central premise of the model is that as part of the engaged learner's relationship to learning a new language, resistance is always present at both levels (cognitive and motivational), operating with desire in a “transductive” relation (Simondon, 1989). A transductive relation means that both entities exist only by virtue of their association; neither could exist independently of the other. Thus, what we are saying here is that, at both cognitive (psycholinguistic) and social psychological levels of functioning, desire to learn a new language could not exist without resistance, just as any form of resistance encountered in language learning requires the existence of desire.

In the model displayed in figure 2, the red arrows represent the “desire ↔ resistance relation” as it plays out at the two distinct levels of functioning. The developmental facet of the framework is located in the blue box where both Self-Determination Theory and L2 Motivational Self System Theory are shown in their role as tools to analyze desire as an emergent phenomenon.

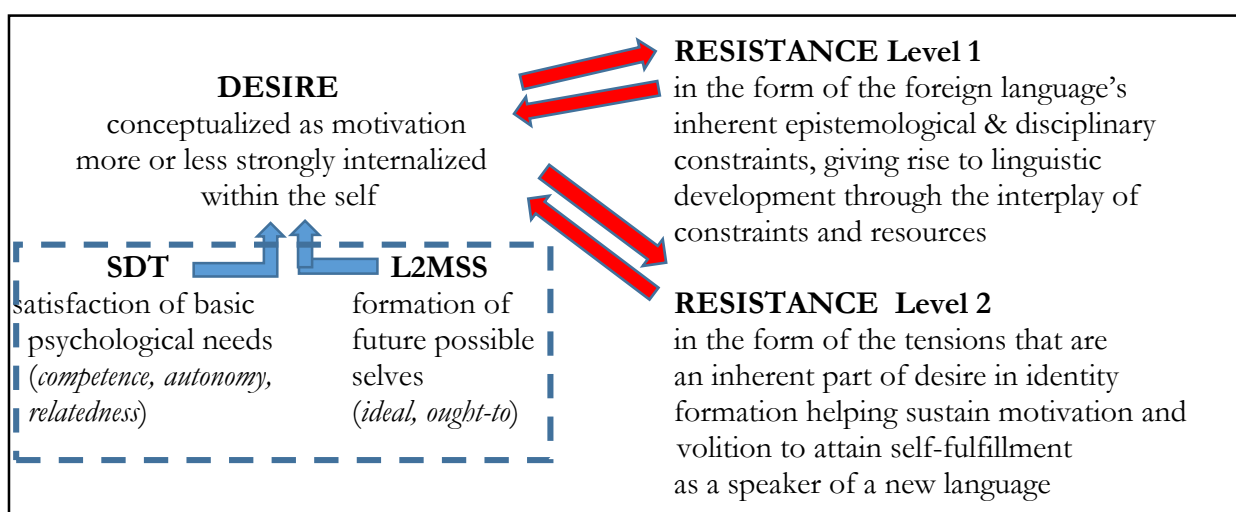


Figure 2 – The two-dimensional desire ↔ resistance model in L2 learning

Having conceptualized the model thus, we formulated the following two research questions to guide our empirical study.

- What can our sample of students, composed of two distinct subgroups, teach us about the diverse ways they have experienced managing the “desire ↔ resistance relation” in their own L2 learning?
- What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the analysis of these data?

## Methodology

The data collected for this exploratory study come from two rounds of semi-directive interviews conducted in June and November 2018 with 10 undergraduate UPEC<sup>3</sup> law students. The students were selected and groups made from two distinct populations of L2 learners at the Law School. The June group (Group A) was composed of six second- and third-year students who passed a competitive exam to gain admittance into an advanced program in British and US law with half of the courses offered in English. These students all attended an optional 15-hour English course, unique to this program, which focused on expanding their command of legal vocabulary and developing their fluency. In contrast, the November group (Group B) was made up of four second-year students enrolled in the ordinary Law School program whose instruction in English was limited to one compulsory 15-hour course per semester. Students were selected for our study on a volunteer basis, Group A students in the final months of academic year 2017-2018, Group B in the first months of academic year 2018-2019.

Background information concerning the participants is presented in Table 1 below. All group A participants had diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Whereas five of the six students had more than one first language, student A5 may not have spoken two languages as a child, but reported feeling part American as her father was from the US. In addition to two French monolingual students, Group B included two students with multilingual backgrounds different from those of Group A students: B1 grew up as a monolingual Italian speaker before moving to France as an adolescent and B2 spoke primarily French as a mother tongue with a rudimentary understanding of an Arabic dialect.

ST.	Gender	Age	Year	L1(s)	Level of proficiency speaking)(CEFR <sup>4</sup> ) <sup>5</sup>
A1	F	21	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Arabic	C1
A2	F	20	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Arabic	C1
A3	F	28	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French / dialect of Arabic	C1
A4	F	20	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French / dialect of Arabic	C1
A5	F	20	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French (English heard as toddler)	B2
A6	M	19	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French / Spanish	B2

B1	F	20	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Italian	B1
B2	M	20	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French / dialect of Arabic	A2-B1
B3	F	20	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French	A2-B1
B4	F	20	2 <sup>nd</sup>	French	A1-A2

Table 1 – Some relevant background information on participants in the study

<sup>3</sup> UPEC is the abbreviation for Université Paris-Est Créteil, a large public university in the east suburbs of Paris.

<sup>4</sup> CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the disputable nature of the data's validity, we have decided to include information regarding students' speaking proficiency based on their teacher's informal classroom assessment.



Interviews were conducted over the course of two days in June and one day in November. They lasted approximately 45 minutes and began by asking each individual student if he or she would accept being recorded. All the interviews were transcribed for the purpose of categorizing, ranking and analyzing thematic content (van Campenhoudt & Quivy, 2011). Seven topics were discussed: 1) students' language learning backgrounds and histories, 2) activities done on their own, 3) challenges encountered, 4) values associated with language learning, 5) their perception and evaluation of the academic setting, 6) their personal theories of language learning and 7) their beliefs about the roles that natural ability and hard work play in L2 learning. Each topic offered a unique angle from which to gain insight into how these students had striven more or less successfully to manage some of the tensions and challenges inherent in the "desire ↔ resistance relation" in L2 learning.

## **Presentation and initial analysis of data**

### *Group A: Students enrolled in the selective program*

All six students provided data indicating that their motivation to learn English had been strongly internalized within their sense of self. This was revealed in a number of ways in which students used English, in alignment with their personal values, to reach out to cultural communities outside France. For instance, A2 used English to access sources of information other than those broadcast on French channels. She belonged to several social networks such as *Twitter* and used English to exchange with the residents in a foreign country she was particularly interested in (Iran) in order to learn more about the political and social situation in that country.

I practice my English on social networks, Twitter, for instance. In countries such as Iran where people only speak Persian, there are some who can tweet on the situation in their country in English and exchange like that with the entire world.<sup>6</sup>

Four participants considered English a means to express themselves in personally significant ways beyond the limits of their home language and culture. They enjoyed singing songs, writing poems and stories in English. One interviewee (A4) explained that she belonged to a collaborative storytelling website that allowed her to participate in the writing of fictional books on the Internet with other writers from around the world. This same student mentioned that she found pleasure in reading, speaking and listening to English. She watched English language films only in the original version and did so because she found English sounds, rhythms and words more beautiful and more elaborate than in French. In sum, she seemed captivated by the aesthetic features of English and experienced great satisfaction each time she was in contact with the language.

For me, English is above all the pleasure of reading because I cannot read books in French anymore, I find them too simplistic. I'd rather read in English, even watch films in English. I go to the cinema when the film is in the original language. I find

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<sup>6</sup> All the quotations from student interviews are our translations from French.

English more beautiful than French and I like speaking, listening and watching films in English.

Other Group A students (A1 and A3) dreamed of being able to speak English like native speakers because they found it both exotic and trendy. A1 reported trying to imitate the voices of the actors she saw in American TV series and use those models to help find her own voice in English. According to these students' responses, language learning was much more than the mere acquisition of a linguistic system but rather represented a pathway for personal self-actualization (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In their view, learning English gave them additional symbolic resources through which they could expand their understanding of the world, explore new possibilities for the self, and be more creative. When asked how they saw their future in connection with English, the majority of them had clear images of how knowing English would positively influence their lives. Several imagined themselves living abroad, others working for an international law firm in France, while another still saw herself reading books in English to her own children and nieces and nephews so as to pass on her passion and enthusiasm. Thus, each in their own unique ways, these students shared in the benefits of possessing a highly-valued *ideal L2 self* which, in accordance with Dörnyei's (2009) theory, serves as a powerful channel for sustained motivation to learn.

These students regularly spent time practicing their English outside of class. They often went beyond the tasks assigned by their teachers and took personal initiatives in setting themselves "knowledge-building goals" to improve their level in English (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993: 160). Several sought out partners with whom they could practice conversing in English in order to reduce the gap between their current level of ability and the level they aspired to as part of their *ideal L2 self*. They also regulated and assessed their own learning, deciding, when necessary, to modify their behavior and adopt strategies that increased their chances of reaching goals that were important to them. For instance, A3 spoke of when she enrolled in her second year of law school and found the English-language legal documents more difficult than the previous year. By monitoring the situation, she realized she had to change her reading strategies and began using different colored pens to underline key words and expressions, and highlight vocabulary she felt she should know. She also set herself the goal of being able to use these new expressions as part of her active vocabulary in compositions of her own. In accordance with Bandura's (1999: 176) theory of self-regulation, she not only took initiatives to diminish the distance between her current and imagined future levels of competence (discrepancy reduction), but pro-actively took measures to increase that distance through setting new and more ambitious goals (discrepancy production). This student's use of discrepancy production is a prime example of how desire and resistance operate jointly to strengthen motivational engagement and promote linguistic development. She used the resistance inherent in the challenges she faced in reading comprehension to fuel her desire to go beyond these limits. By setting more demanding goals, she created more resistance-in-learning for herself to overcome while at the same time reinforcing her motivation and self-efficacy. Resistance and

desire operate together to create a virtuous circle at the heart of productive self-regulated learning.

Lastly, when asked about their personal theories of L2 learning and the role of effort, all six participants described foreign language learning as a necessarily long-term process, offering no quick-fixes and requiring time and investment over the long haul. A1 stated that “finding time to practice a language and pursue one’s learning is the most important thing. One needs to be consistent if one hopes to make progress”. Several Group A students also acknowledged the role that personal agency plays in their ability to continue making progress, even at high levels of achievement. When addressing the challenges they face, they spoke of ways in which they sought to influence their own thinking and motivation to learn. They related incidents where they succeeded in overcoming negative thoughts and supported themselves through challenges typical of advanced L2 learning when gains become slower and less tangible. Student A4, for example, felt she had exhausted most of her strategic options and resources (books, films, social networks). Yet she was still looking into new strategies to continue making progress such as finding an advanced learner of French as a foreign language and setting up an L2 learning tandem.

Whether in terms of time, investment or commitment, these students recognized and believed in the decisive role that “grit” (Duckworth, 2016) and perseverance play in the development of high-level proficiency. Though they all believed that talent may facilitate language learning, it was considered a factor that only goes so far and would not suffice to achieve genuine mastery of the language. Illustrating this, A4 recalled an experience that at the time was unpleasant, but with hindsight ended up building her character and inner resilience as a learner. In middle school (*collège*), she had a teacher who told her that she was hopeless at English and would never succeed. Rather than losing her self-confidence and giving up, she decided to work even harder to prove her teacher wrong. She attributed her resilience to two circumstances: First, she had a strong positive perception of her own ability as an autonomous, self-directed reader of books in English; and second, her older sister, whom she looked up to and who spoke fluent English, supported her, gave her advice and encouraged her to persevere. For all six interviewees, although they credited the instruction in English that they received in school as a contributing factor to their success, the factors that they singled out as most important originated from outside school. All claimed, in fact, that if they had only had the support of the school environment to count on, they would never have succeeded in mastering the language as well as they did. A5 said of her classroom experience:

I think that what makes the difference between students who have difficulty in English and those who do not is the external environment. The Institution alone, from middle school to university, does not suffice to give us the ability to speak English.

When asked to clarify what she meant by “external environment”, she cited her family support network and the fact that she started learning several languages at an early age and had been able to travel. It is interesting to note, however, that despite her relatively strong sense of agency as an L2 learner, this student seemed to imply

that, metaphorically speaking, fluency in a language was something that could be “given” to students.

*Group B: Students enrolled in the ordinary program*

As with group A, the four participants of the second group described language learning in highly subjective terms, linking their experiences if not to their personal identities as learner-speakers of English, then to their academic identities. These students all recounted experiences learning English in school that they believe had a rather negative influence on the development of their language skills as well as on their self-perceptions as language learners. Given the few opportunities they recall having to experience themselves first-hand as competent English-speakers – what Bandura (1997) calls “enactive mastery experiences” –, these students had fragile self-efficacy beliefs both as speakers and learners of the language. For example, B4 indicated that when she started learning English in her first year of middle school, many of her classmates had already had several years of English and spoke the language quite well (from her perspective as an 11-year-old), which made her feel inadequate by comparison. She felt she had no foundation to build on and was convinced she could not make progress because of the ability gap she perceived between herself and her classmates. Although, on the one hand, she wanted to know English, her fear of appearing incompetent and experiencing failure in that particular classroom, on the other, led her to choose protecting her sense of self-worth over taking the risk to learn (Covington, 1992). She subsequently sat through years of English classes feeling anxious and reluctant to participate. The mere thought of having to speak English in front of her classmates and teacher caused her to panic. The only time in her L2 learning career that she associated with less negative emotion was one isolated year in middle school when her teacher used collaborative learning methods that she found less threatening and even occasionally enjoyable.

Another difference we observed between the two groups was the degree of awareness they seem to have developed over the course of their learning careers concerning the role of personal agency and self-influence. The data suggest that the learning histories of the students were indeed complex, marked by many ebbs and flows in their motivation, largely in reaction to their learning contexts. Their attributions of success and failure often fluctuated between reasons “within the self” and reasons “of context”. For instance, all of these students alluded to the fact that if, in their opinion, their current ability level in English was less than satisfactory, this had at least in part to do with their personal responsibility. Yet they also systematically pointed out what they believed were the shortcomings of the education system, *e.g.*, boring courses, poor classroom atmosphere, ineffective teaching methods. This overlap of who and what are to “blame” for ultimate academic success (or lack thereof) is understandable as the question of who bears responsibility is anything but clear-cut, particularly when contrasting the primary school years with those of secondary education and beyond.

Not surprisingly, their evaluations of their school experiences were largely centered on how they perceived their teachers. In his interview, B3 declared:

In my last two years of middle school, I had a good teacher who knew how to get the students interested. I was invested in the class and only had difficulty in writing. Then, in high school, the two teachers I had did not have good teaching methods, the classroom was noisy and students were often expelled.

All Group B interviewees shared disheartening anecdotes about classrooms in which their teachers adopted problematic behaviors. These included spending excessive amounts of time talking about their personal lives, ignoring weaker students while preferring to interact exclusively with better students, or having students watch long films in English without supporting their understanding of the films or informing them about the purpose of the activity.

Concerning their personal “theories” of language learning, Group B also recognized that studying a foreign language required effort and dedication. However, the repertoire of strategies they learned to use in the classroom appeared more limited. Nor did it seem they had opportunities to assess the usefulness of those strategies, with or without the help of their teachers. For instance, B3 indicated that to help her stay focused in class, she would choose to participate more. Yet, as important as the quantity of her participation may have been, it revealed its limits to the extent that it did not help improve the quality of her oral expression. Due to a lack of vocabulary, she reported using a “circumvention strategy” that, communicatively speaking, was not effective and led her to make long and complicated sentences. It appears she never overcame this difficulty. She also said she spent a lot of time memorizing vocabulary and irregular verbs on her own, but with few opportunities to put that knowledge into practice.

Overall, group B students had the impression that the effort they had made over more than a decade of study had not “paid off”. As student B3 put it: “I studied English for many years, 12 years, and still can’t hold a simple conversation without making mistakes.” According to their accounts, their academic L2 learning careers had not been successful in enabling them to know and use English to a level they considered satisfactory. Consequently, they also developed weak self-efficacy in the discipline, tending to see obstacles as extremely difficult to overcome and believing there was little they could do to improve their situation. Although they may have possessed a vague sense of an *ideal L2 possible self* when they first started learning English, the data support the notion that these students now functioned largely in accordance with an *ought-to L2 self*. They invested time and effort in their learning, but primarily to satisfy the demands and expectations of the institution. While extrinsically motivated to pass their English courses, group B, in contrast to group A, appeared less engaged in a quest for personal self-fulfillment through their study and practice of the language.

## Discussion

The following discussion is organized in two sections that offer some tentative responses to our two research questions. The first focuses on our inquiry into the subjective nature of students’ experiences that they have undertaken, more or less deliberately, to manage the “desire ↔ resistance relation” in their own L2 learning.

The second section raises some issues regarding pedagogical practice that we feel deserve attention based on our analysis of the data.

Although our sample is small and cannot be taken as representative of *Lansad* students as a uniquely homogeneous population, we believe our data does shed some light on some of the reasons why the L2 learning careers of such students unfold as diversely and, in some instances, problematically, as they do. As emphasized in our model, these reasons may have as much to do with students' current experiences managing the two-tier "desire ↔ resistance relation" (synchronic analysis) as with how their past experiences have shaped their motivation and efforts to manage this relation over time (diachronic analysis).

### ***Research question 1***

#### *Group B: Students enrolled in the ordinary program*

We found that Group B seemed to be managing the "desire ↔ resistance relation" in learning English essentially as an academic subject. They engage with the language more in terms of its disciplinary constraints in carrying out various language tasks (level 1) than in active pursuit of an *ideal L2 self* (level 2). For example, one student (B2) reported on his investment in learning aimed primarily at academic success, with little implication for personal identity-related outcomes. Thus, pursuit of an *ought-to L2 self* (level 2) appeared to be more characteristic of Group B's L2 situation, motivating them above all to satisfy the language requirement and earn their law degrees honorably. Interestingly, one student in this group (B4) spoke of feeling torn between the need to pass her courses and taking the risks necessary to achieve that success. In such a case, her motivational concerns at the identity level have to do not only with academic achievement but also her self-worth as a student. When L2 motivation is rooted in an *ought-to L2 self*, there is greater likelihood that students' appraisals and negotiations of learning situations lead to the adoption of defensive motivational strategies in order to avoid the negative consequences of possible academic failure (Higgins, 1998).

Reflecting on the data from a developmental perspective, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) leads us to analyze the students' experiences learning English in terms of three basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness) and to ascertain to what extent these needs may have been met (or not) in the earlier phases of their L2 learning careers. It can be inferred from the data that these needs might not have been strongly met in the academic settings these students grew up in, and may even have been somewhat thwarted. Students recounted having few "mastery experiences" in using English to communicate meaningfully with others in the classroom, which appears to confirm a relatively unsatisfied need for competence (also evident in the weak self-efficacy they reported). They also spoke at length of completing typically scholastic tasks in order to demonstrate their ability to learn and remember, often through rote memorization, what they had been taught (*e.g.*, irregular verb forms, vocabulary lists, grammar rules, facts about texts studied in class). They appear to have been part of classrooms that did not particularly

emphasize the promotion of their feelings of control over their own learning or develop their skills as autonomous, self-regulated learners. Concerning relatedness, students' attitudes towards classroom learning are strongly influenced by their perceptions of the teacher. Their attitudes are also influenced by the quality of group dynamics in the classroom and their relationship to the language they are learning. Based on their accounts, these students seem to have experienced to some degree of consistency a number of problematic emotions (frustration, disappointment, anxiety) in connection with their language learning, whether such emotion stemmed from their negative assessment of the learning environment or their perceived lack of improvement from one year to the next.

Before closing our discussion of group B students, we return to the two-dimensional model in order to understand, albeit somewhat hypothetically, what may have been happening in these students' lives when they first encountered English as a school subject. At the same time as their relationship to the social learning environment was shaping their motivational development through what appears to have been tenuous satisfaction of their psychological needs (level 2), they were also coming to terms with the disciplinary constraints typical of learning English as an academic subject in school (level 1). As novice language learners, they were at the center of complex learning-teaching processes ideally aimed at helping them acquire well-organized and integrated knowledge (about English) and attain new levels of performance (*in* English). In the course of the interviews, students frequently mentioned various problems and difficulties they faced as young learners, problems that caused them frustration over time. They found it challenging to feel successful in their efforts to speak the new language and acquire its pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. They also spoke of becoming more aware of these "problems" as they entered their last two years of junior high school (*collège*). They stated, for example, that after spending several years learning the language, they not only realized that some of the hurdles they faced were indeed not easy to overcome, but they were also being expected (and expecting themselves) to be able to understand spoken English better, read more advanced texts in the language and communicate more easily. Some felt that their difficulties lay in weak foundations that they could not build on. Whereas students passed their courses and even earned above average marks on a regular basis, they still felt personally dissatisfied with their level of ability.

#### *Group A: Students enrolled in the selective program*

Group A students' language learning careers present quite different characteristics from those of their group B counterparts, both in terms of the "desire ↔ resistance relation" and the developmental processes that may explain their current L2 situation. In contrast to group B, group A are currently leading L2 learning careers in which desire and resistance in learning English have much to do with ways they use the language to engage authentically with the social world around them and express their own identities. English is strongly associated with visions they have of themselves in the future and a source of intrinsic interest and pleasure. In some instances, such functional proficiency appeared to be tempered occasionally by the

frustration of not feeling able to achieve the level of mastery one aspires to (*ideal L2 self*). Such occasional frustration, however, did not lead to the abandonment of aspirations. As we saw above, several of these students spoke of further challenges they adopted themselves (beyond tasks set by their teachers) in order to create new “resistances” to be mastered and sustain the desire to do what it takes to achieve that mastery. They consistently expended and regulated the effort necessary to achieve personally valued L2-related goals and were willing to try out new strategies to improve their performance outcomes. It is also interesting to note how both levels of the model blended together in the context of these students’ language learning careers, in the sense that becoming a more proficient speaker of English at the identity level was tightly bound with doing better at the linguistic level.

Developmentally speaking, the question of processes by which these students were able, over the course of years, to internalize their motivation to learn English within their sense of self is obviously complex. From the perspective of SDT, the data suggest that as young pupils, Group A students did not attend English classes or benefit from social-environmental conditions within the Institution that satisfied their basic psychological needs to any degree more significant than those of their Group B colleagues. What seems to have made a critical difference, however, were these students’ multicultural and multilingual backgrounds. In other words, given their home-based understanding of daily life as bilinguals (or, in some instances, plurilinguals), language learning in the classroom may somehow have been experienced, right from the start of their L2 learning careers in school, as a more relevant and integrated part of who they already saw themselves to be as youngsters. Such a perceived connection between the language classroom and life outside that classroom is hypothesized here to have influenced these students’ motivational development via factors related to the kinds of identities they had begun to value and wanted to pursue. From an L2MSS perspective (cf. above; Dörnyei, 2009), these students may already have begun to perceive proficiency in English as part of their *ideal* or *ought-to L2 self* at a young age. As mentioned above, all Group A students emphasized the powerful role that the “external environment” (outside school) must play if one is to learn to become a competent speaker of a new language.

In addition to the support and travel experiences that these students reported benefiting from as members of their families and communities, they also spoke of linguistic resources that they had acquired and could use to help them learn new languages. As Kramsch (2009: 124) writes, “[s]peakers who learn, speak or write more than one language have additional symbolic resources through which they give meaning to things, persons and events”. One Group A student spoke of the pleasure she finds in drawing parallels between the different languages she knows and is learning. For example, when she learned the English word *apricot*, she recalled associating it with the same word in three other languages she was familiar with: *abricot* (French); *albaricoque* (Spanish); and (*al-*)*barqūq* (Arabic and which now means *plum* rather than *apricot*). Another student reported using the languages she knew to help her learn an entirely new language (Farsi). The ability to analyze and draw meaningful analogies between different bodies of linguistic knowledge can be an



important resource for the aspiring language learner. We can see in this way how resources gained through social and cultural membership and interaction become individually internalized over time, enhancing learners' personal repertoire of cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies.

### ***Research question 2***

Turning now to our second research question, we ask what implications for teaching may be drawn from the above discussion of the data. Our view of the “desire ↔ resistance relation” in language learning as a multifaceted relation to be “managed” is rooted in an understanding of L2 learning as a complex problem-solving activity. As such, it calls upon students, with the help and guidance of their teachers, to develop the ability to think logically, observe keenly, make informed choices, self-motivate and deal effectively with the unexpected. A general finding from the data collected was not only how profoundly subjective the experience of learning English has been for these students as unique individuals, but the observation that across members of the two groups, there was similarity in terms of the kinds of problems they reported encountering in their learning. In this section, we use this finding to advance our understanding of language learner experience as a contributing factor for responsible and effective pedagogical interaction.

As we saw above, Group A students are leading English-as-an-L2 learning careers that could be described as relatively thriving. Yet as part of these students' long-term commitment to realizing their full potential in the domain, they continue to place demands on themselves, citing obstacles that still “resist” their efforts to achieve their ideal aspirations (in pursuit of an *ideal L2 self*). Somewhat surprisingly, the forms of resistance that still jointly operate with these advanced learners' desire to do better stem from cognitive-linguistic “obstacles” related to pronunciation (“perfecting one's accent”), grammar (“speaking and writing with as few grammatical errors as possible”) and vocabulary (“acquiring as wide a range of useful words and expressions as possible for professional and personal use”). Another challenge they spoke of concerned the limits they perceive in the metacognitive strategies they use to plan, regulate and direct their own learning, particularly in connection with the formidable obstacles just mentioned.

Group B students have a great deal in common when it comes to the kinds of problems they face in their learning of English. Generally speaking, their learning careers in the discipline have not resulted in their achieving a level of competence that they would describe as high. Nor have their careers enabled them to build strong self-confidence as language learners. While Group A participants share robust visions of the role English can and will play in their future lives, Group B students find it difficult to construct vivid images of themselves either as speaker-users of English or as active learners of the language. More in pursuit of an *ought-to L2 self*, these students' problems relate more to the short-term priority of completing tasks and demonstrating that they have successfully learned material required for their courses. Clearly, these students also contend with many forms of resistance afforded by various cognitive-linguistic challenges in L2 learning (skills-based or knowledge

acquisition). However, unlike their Group A counterparts, Group B students are not only confronted with the issue of strategy choice and use, they seem not to believe in (or even be aware of) the role their personal agency could play in at least partially determining the outcomes they attain. That said, agency beliefs have little functional significance if they do not pertain to a valued goal.

What do these observations suggest teachers and curriculum designers might do to better support students in their efforts to learn English and other foreign languages? Given the inherent arduousness of the foreign language learning process, students need every resource they can get to help them lead productive language learning careers and develop the various forms of desire that enable them to engage with and ultimately overcome the many kinds of resistance they encounter (Oxford, 2016). As depicted in the two-dimensional model, such resistance stems from L2 learning as both a powerfully constrained cognitive process and a particular kind of social act. Whenever students experience difficulty in their learning, there are always identifiable reasons to explain why that is the case. When students are young, they themselves are not in a position to know why they face the challenges they do. They trust their teachers and schools to help them identify the root causes of such challenges and to help them set meaningful learning goals and guide them towards achieving those goals.

However, what seems critical as students mature is that they receive effective, explicit instruction that enables them to assume greater responsibility in monitoring their own learning processes and efforts so that they, personally, can identify why they are not obtaining the results they want and make wise decisions about what they can do to solve the problem (cf. Griffiths, 2018). Students need their teachers to show them how they can have a hand in charting their own L2 learning journeys, both individually and collectively (Dam, 1995; Brewer, 2016). They need the L2 classroom to be a place that engages them subjectively in their own learning, a place that, although distinct, is not separate from real life outside school (Legenhausen, 1999). Ushioda (2011) stresses the importance of enabling students to “speak as themselves” by engaging their “transportable identities” (Richards, 2006) instead of positioning themselves merely as “scholastic language learners”. Another important implication concerns the development of students’ self-efficacy, which can be strengthened through mastery and plausible vicarious learning experiences as well as through effective forms of feedback from teachers (Puozzo-Capron, 2012). By cultivating students’ perceived efficacy as L2 learners, teachers can help them envision themselves projected into the future as skilled language users.

## Conclusion

Doing research and writing an article are acts of learning that require their own special management of the “desire ↔ resistance relation”. The scientific constraints that we encountered in conceptualizing unfamiliar constructs and in gathering and processing empirical data offered “resistance” that met our own “desire” to explore and broaden our understanding of L2 learning motivation. Although such constraints placed certain limitations on how the work was to be done, they also harbored

opportunities for learning and professional development. Through investment and commitment to valued goals, initial constraints were gradually and effortfully transformed into resources, making it possible to think creatively and feel increasingly motivated to push forward with the project.

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that *all* students, each in their own unique ways and embedded in the story of their own unique learning careers, are engaged in a process that is fundamentally similar to the one we experienced in conducting this research. Each student undertakes, more or less agentically, intentionally, strategically, to come to terms with the constraints they encounter and strive to turn them into resources, either for short-term success as scholastic learners or longer-term success as disciplinary experts. The latter seem to be on a path towards a future with English, the former much less so. Further research is needed to explore the subjective realities of other students' L2 learning careers (with English and other languages), particularly with young people who are at-risk academically or may be in the process of giving up on themselves as language learners.

Our inquiry into the question of why students' L2 learning careers evolve as diversely and sometimes problematically as they do is premised on the need to understand both learning and teaching in terms of the complex interplay between constraints and resources highlighted in the heuristic model. How teachers can learn to exploit certain types of constraints in helping their students learn (and *learn* to learn), while seeking to circumvent others may be a key skill for teacher educators to focus on in the future. The framework and empirical evidence we have provided suggest that if foreign language learning is to be successful, it requires an informed integration of how best to support learners' L2 cognitive and motivational development through the design of optimal language learning situations.

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