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From Fantasy to Autonomy: A Spiral Model of Motivational Evolution Among Chinese University Students Learning French as a Second Foreign Language

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Abstract

While the L2 Motivational Self System effectively explains the initial language learning drive, it less adequately captures the dynamic, non-linear evolution of motivation through periods of crisis and resilience. This mixed-methods study, therefore, integrates Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to investigate the motivational trajectories of 50 Chinese university students learning French as an L2, through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 8 learners. Moving beyond linear models, our analysis reveals a four-phase spiral model: (1) Fantasy-Driven Initiation, propelled by the 'Ideal L2 Self'; (2) Reality Confrontation, where structural difficulties cause a motivational crisis; (3) Interest Reconstruction, through the personalized internalization of value; and (4) Autonomous Pursuit, characterized by self-regulated learning. Crucially, we posit that the engine of this spiral is the dialectic between the frustration and satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) outlined by SDT. Each cycle of "confrontation" and "reconstruction" fosters greater metacognitive awareness and strategic competence, leading to a qualitative advancement in motivational capacity. This study offers a nuanced theoretical framework for understanding L2 motivational development and provides pedagogical implications for fostering learner resilience throughout this dynamic process.

Keywords

L2 Motivation; French Language Learning; Motivational Trajectory; Self-Determination Theory; Spiral Model

1. Introduction

This study is theoretically anchored in Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, which powerfully explains the initial attraction to the L2 through the 'Ideal L2 Self'. However, to fully elucidate the dynamic process of motivational evolution—particularly the critical transitions through periods of crisis and reconstruction—this study also draws upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2020). This integrated approach responds to calls for a more dynamic, process-oriented understanding of L2 motivation that examines its evolution over time (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). SDT posits that the quality of human motivation is governed by the fulfillment of three

basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel volitional and self-endorsed in one's actions), competence (the need to feel effective in one's interactions with the environment), and relatedness (the need to feel connected and belonging). The theory describes a continuum of motivation, ranging from amotivation to various forms of extrinsic motivation (differing in their degree of internalization), and finally to intrinsic motivation.

While the L2 Motivational Self System excellently captures the initial, future-oriented attraction (the 'why'), SDT provides a robust framework for understanding the day-to-day 'how' of motivational sustenance and quality, and the potential for integrating these frameworks to provide a fuller picture of the L2 learning experience has been recognized (Al-Hoorie, 2018). We contend that student motivation is not a static trait but a dynamic, evolving process. However, existing models often depict linear stages, paying insufficient attention to the recurrent and cyclical nature of learning struggles driven by the ongoing satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs.

This research, by integrating questionnaire and in-depth interview data, seeks to address this gap through an integrative framework. We propose that the "Spiral Model" delineates the external, phenomenological trajectory of the learner, while the fulfillment or frustration of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000) serves as the underlying mechanism that propels the learner through this spiral. This study aims to explore this interplay by investigating the following questions:

a. What dynamic pattern characterizes the motivational evolution of Chinese students learning French as an L2, and how can it be modeled?

b. How can the principles of Self-Determination Theory explain the psychological transitions within this dynamic model?

c. What are the pedagogical implications derived from this integrated theoretical perspective?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano, 2018) was adopted to explore both the breadth and depth of learners' motivational trajectories. The study first collected and analyzed quantitative data via a structured questionnaire to identify general trends. These findings informed a subsequent qualitative phase involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This approach provided nuanced narrative insights into learners' emotional and cognitive transitions, complementing the quantitative data to yield a comprehensive understanding of motivational development.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants were English-major undergraduates from a Chinese university. A purposive sample of 50 students was drawn from two stages of the French curriculum: French I (beginner, n=25) and French III (intermediate, n=25), enabling cross-sectional comparison of motivation across proficiency levels. From this group, eight students (four from each level) were selected for qualitative interviews through purposive sampling. Selection aimed to maximize diversity in academic performance and self-reported motivational profiles (such as sustained motivation, notable decline, or recovery) to capture a broad range of experiences.

2.3 Data Collection and Instruments

a. Questionnaire Survey: A self-report questionnaire was developed based on the L2 Motivational Self System framework and Self-Determination Theory. The instrument contained 25 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) and three open-ended questions. Sample items included: "I learn French because I want to understand French films without subtitles" (Ideal L2 Self), "French pronunciation is much more difficult than I expected" (Perceived Difficulty), and "I feel I'm making good progress in French learning" (Perceived Competence). The questionnaire demonstrated good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. It was administered to 50 participants to assess initial attitudes, perceived difficulties (phonetics, grammar), strategy use, and motivational trajectories, establishing a baseline and quantifying common experiences.

b. Qualitative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students using a protocol developed from preliminary questionnaire analysis. The protocol included key questions such as: "Can you describe a turning point in your motivation to learn French?" "How did you overcome periods of low motivation?" and "What

personal meaning does learning French hold for you now?" Each 30-45-minute interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, producing approximately 120 pages of single-spaced text for analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0, with descriptive statistics identifying central tendencies and patterns in motivation and challenges. Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences between French I and French III groups in self-efficacy scores ($t=2.34$, $p<0.05$).

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The coding process was iterative: initial codes like "phonetic frustration" and "grammar confusion" were grouped into subthemes, which eventually coalesced into main themes such as "structural shock." To ensure reliability, two researchers independently coded 20% of the transcripts, reaching an inter-coder agreement of 88%. Data integration occurred at multiple levels: quantitative results helped identify participants for qualitative follow-up, while qualitative findings provided explanatory depth for statistical patterns. For instance, questionnaire data showing motivation decline was elucidated through interview accounts of specific learning difficulties.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Spiral Four-phase Motivational Trajectory Model

Through an in-depth, integrated analysis of the questionnaire data and interview transcripts, this study constructs and validates a spiral, four-phase motivational model (Figure 1). The model's core premise is that motivational development is not a simple linear progression but a process of winding ascent through cycles of "disillusionment" and "rebuilding." Learners experience recurrent cycles of "reality confrontation" and "interest reconstruction" at various learning junctures, particularly when facing new challenges. Crucially, each successful reconstruction signifies an advancement in cognitive strategies, metacognitive awareness, or value internalization, leading to an overall enhancement in the quality of motivation.

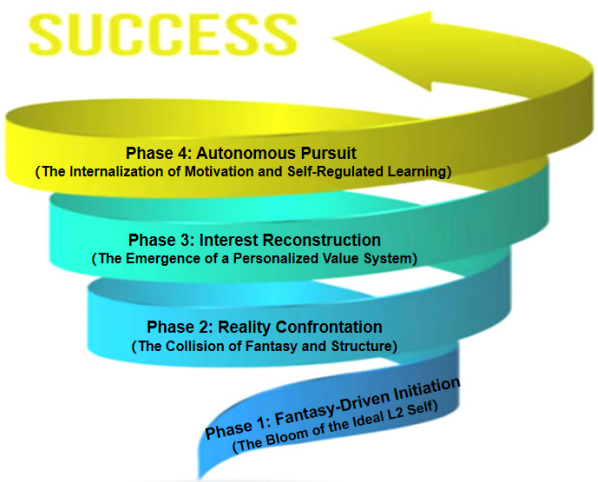

Figure 1. The Spiral Four-Phase Motivational Trajectory Model.

3.1.1 Phase 1: Fantasy-Driven Initiation—The Bloom of the Ideal L2 Self

Questionnaire data revealed strong initial enthusiasm, with 60% of French I students reporting "strong" or "very strong" interest in French. Open-ended responses frequently featured descriptors like "romantic", "elegant" and "artistic", reflecting a distinctly idealized perception of the language and culture.

Interview data provided a deeper emotional context, showing that cultural references served as primary motivators. Student F1-02 shared, "I'm a huge fan of French director Luc Besson's films... I dream of one day appreciating them without subtitles." Similarly, F1-07 expressed, "I imagined myself like the heroine in Amélie, reading poetry

in a Parisian café." These narratives align closely with Dörnyei's (2009) 'Ideal L2 Self,' demonstrating motivation driven by a compelling future self-image. At this stage, motivation remains largely fantasy-based, sustained more by appealing cultural symbols than by practical engagement.

3.1.2 Phase 2: Reality Confrontation—The Collision of Fantasy and Structure

Questionnaire results highlighted a sharp motivational decline: 80% of French I and 70% of French III students who reported waning enthusiasm attributed it to "excessive course difficulty." Grammar was perceived as "difficult" by nearly half of all learners, with no advanced students considering it "easy." This phase marks a critical transition, as learners' initial perceptual engagement collides with the language's complex structural demands.

Interviews vividly portrayed the ensuing "structural shock." Student F1-01 recounted, "Once we entered the phonetics phase—the uvular 'r', liaison—it completely overturned my understanding of speech... What seemed romantic now only brought frustration." Student F1-03 described verb conjugations as "a nightmare," noting, "My confidence plummeted when words I just memorized changed completely in a sentence." A retrospective reflection from F3-09 captured the phase succinctly: "The beautiful illusion was slowly shattered by complex rules." Characterized by a significant drop in self-efficacy, this stage reveals a growing disconnect between the idealized L2 self and the challenging reality of the learning process.

3.1.3 Phase 3: Interest Reconstruction—The Emergence of a Personalized Value System and the Beginning of Internalization

This phase represents a critical divergence in learners' trajectories, marked by the active construction of a more resilient and personalized motivational foundation. From an SDT perspective, it signifies the onset of internalization, where externally triggered motivations transform into personal values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Quantitatively, this shift was reflected in the restoration of competence: confidence in independently sounding out new words rose from 60% in French I to 80% in French III. This growing mastery provided a crucial platform of self-efficacy for psychological reconstruction.

Qualitative data revealed this reconstruction as a deeply personal process, ignited when learners discovered unique anchors satisfying their basic psychological needs. Two primary pathways emerged:

a. Affective and competence-based reconstruction: Motivation was rebuilt through authentic engagement and perceived competence, shifting regulation from external (e.g., grades) toward more identified or integrated forms. As Student F3-02 noted, recovering interest came from realizing "I can do this" through understanding simple sentences or songs, emphasizing competence and relatedness.

b. Strategic and metacognitive reconstruction: Learners took control of their learning process, finding motivation in self-improvement and understanding. This pathway fostered autonomy, exemplified by Student F3-12's use of error analysis: "Analyzing my own errors transformed them from failures into a personalized learning map... that itself became motivating."

3.1.4 Phase 4: Autonomous Pursuit—The Internalization of Motivation and Self-Regulated Learning

This final phase marks the culmination of the spiral ascent, where motivation becomes fully internalized and self-sustaining, aligning with the most self-determined end of the SDT spectrum. Learners no longer rely on external prompts but are driven by personal goals and deep-seated language values, satisfying autonomy and competence in integrated ways. Two distinct profiles of autonomous learners emerged:

a. Instrumentally autonomous learners align language learning with future-oriented goals, demonstrating integrated regulation. Student F3-01 illustrated this: "I learn French strategically for its utility... motivated by the concrete advantage it will give me."

b. Integratively autonomous learners find deep intellectual, aesthetic, or personal value in the language itself, exhibiting engagement akin to intrinsic motivation. Student F3-14 described reading Le Petit Prince in French as "accessing a world that only exists in French," satisfying autonomy, competence, and relatedness through direct cultural engagement.

3.2 Pedagogical Implications: Fostering Resilience for the Spiral Ascent

Based on this model, the core of pedagogy should shift from knowledge transmission to fostering students' resilience and capacity for continual self-reconstruction within the motivational spiral. The teacher's role must evolve

dynamically accordingly.

For Phases 1 & 2 (French I): Be the "Interest Guardian" and "Strategy Initiator." The key at this stage is to buffer the "structural shock" and help students navigate the first motivational trough safely. Instructors can use immersive, gamified teaching designs to protect the spark of interest. More importantly, they should provide timely, specific learning strategy guidance (e.g., phonetic memorization techniques, error log management), equipping students with a "basic toolbox" for future cyclical challenges, and normalizing the experience of confusion as a natural part of learning.

For Phases 3 & 4 (French III): Transition to "Capacity Coach" and "Resource Curator." For advanced students, teachers should transform from knowledge providers into methodology coaches and resource facilitators. The goal is to guide students from "learning" to "learning how to learn." Through project-based learning, seminars, etc., create contexts for deep language application, allowing students to experience the value of knowledge in practice, thereby solidifying their reconstructed, more robust motivation. Teachers should encourage students to view difficulties as stepping stones for advancement rather than insurmountable obstacles, thereby empowering them to confidently meet each new turn of the spiral ascent.

3.3 Discussion

The proposed Spiral Model finds a powerful explanatory mechanism in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The transitions between phases can be understood as driven by the dynamic interplay between basic psychological need satisfaction and frustration. The "structural shock" of Phase 2 (Reality Confrontation) represents a collective frustration of autonomy (feeling controlled by complex rules), competence (feeling ineffective), and relatedness (feeling disconnected from the idealized culture). The subsequent transition into Phase 3 (Interest Reconstruction) is, in essence, a period of psychological need restoration. Learners who navigate this successfully find ways to satisfy these needs—whether through micro-achievements that rebuild competence (F3-02) or through strategic self-management that reinstates autonomy (F3-12).

Furthermore, the spiral, non-linear nature of the model is consistent with SDT's conceptualization of internalization as a dynamic and often recurring process. Each encounter with a new, more complex challenge (e.g., moving from verb conjugations to literary analysis) can temporarily frustrate a learner's sense of competence and autonomy, potentially triggering a mini-cycle back to a "reconstruction" phase. However, as our data show, learners approach these new cycles with more refined internal resources and a stronger foundation of need satisfaction, leading to a spiral ascent in their motivational quality. Thus, the spiral is propelled by the ongoing dialectic between encountering challenges (need frustration) and developing personal and strategic resources to overcome them (need satisfaction), resulting in progressively more self-determined forms of motivation.

4. Conclusion

This study, through an integrated analysis of questionnaire and interview data, has delineated a spiral model of motivational evolution among Chinese university students learning French as an L2, thereby addressing the core research questions posed at the outset. The model captures a dynamic trajectory where learners progress from a Fantasy-Driven Initiation, through a phase of Reality Confrontation that triggers a motivational crisis, and onward to Interest Reconstruction and eventual Autonomous Pursuit. This path is not linear but advances through recurrent cycles of "confrontation" and "reconstruction," propelled by the dialectic between the frustration and satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—a mechanism powerfully explained by Self-Determination Theory.

The findings underscore that sustainable motivational growth is achieved not by avoiding challenges but through qualitative leaps enabled by navigating these cyclical struggles. Consequently, the paramount goal of L2 pedagogy should shift from merely transmitting knowledge or smoothing the learning path to systematically cultivating learners' mental resilience and strategic competence. Equipping students to confidently navigate the motivational spiral ensures they are prepared for a truly sustainable and personally meaningful journey of lifelong language learning.

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