

A Language Teacher's Reflection on Maladaptive Immunity, Possible Selves and Motivation

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Abstract

The concept of language teacher immunity as productive and maladaptive system has emerged in very recent years, although motivation has been incrementally studied in second language field. It is important to establish a relationship between language teacher immunity, possible selves and motivation. This study aimed to focus on a teacher's conception and views of adaptive skill, self and motivation while dealing with problems in a certain foreign language classroom environment. The case study was idiographic, longitudinal and phenomenographic. Semi-structured interview, diary and the students' online feedback tools were used to collect data. The relationship between the teacher's reflection on the class and the students' feedback was observed for 14 weeks. The results showed that the teacher showed maladaptive behaviors with low motivation with constant reflection on her previous experiences and possible ideal self and high self-efficacy in a classroom setting.

Keywords: teacher immunity, possible selves, motivation maladaptive system, self-organization

1. Introduction

Theoretical and applied studies on motivation have been accruing in second and foreign language settings since learning a foreign language may be secondary in culture and there exist a lot of variables that may affect learners' motivation. However, there seem fewer studies on teachers' motivation in the literature compared to those on learners' motivation. Therefore, the motivational path of teachers in classroom settings needs to be investigated. Another term coined by Hiver (2015) is language teacher immunity that refers to a protective mechanism striving to deal with negative experiences. Since teachers' self may be adversely influenced by ambiguity and conflicts experienced in classes, their motivation may also be lessened. Hiver (2015) mentions four stages for self-organization that can be defined as a regulatory system whose elements are dependent on each other and cannot be reduced to a simply single system (Fuchs, 2003). Agents produce a new system based on an old system or prior experiences. This self-organization system is dynamically complex and may behave in a distributed fashion. Therefore, it is difficult to predict behaviors of this system. In order for a new system to emerge, perturbation is needed (Hiver, 2015). However, causes and effects of these small or large disturbances are based on non-linearity. Once this system is launched, it attempts to choose one of alternative ways and is affected by inner conditions and mechanisms. This self-organizing system in language teaching may lead teachers to choose either productive or maladaptive system (Hiver, 2015). One of these systems determines how teachers will continue their profession and behave in classroom settings. This system is also closely related to self as any kind of disturbance may affect teachers' possible selves composed of the ideal self, the ought-self and the feared self (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). The ideal self refers to one's future desired self and contains positive properties. However, the ought-self, positive or negative, is extrinsically affected by others' judgments, expectations and impressions (Pizzolato, 2006). The feared self is negatively perceived and an entity that an individual tends to refrain from (Ogilvie, 1987). The effect of self-organizing system on possible selves may also affect motivation that has been investigated from various angles (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). Another important concept regarding evaluation of possible selves is self-efficacy that can be defined as one's beliefs to be able to fulfill the required or expected task. This definition behooves teachers to have the necessary belief to teach students effectively so that desired or expected aims can be achieved (Geving, 2007). Researchers have attempted to identify a relatively significant relationship between language teacher immunity, possible selves and motivation (Hiver, 2013, 2015; Hiver & Dörnyei, 2015).

It remains important to unravel the type of adaptive system as a function of immunity in language teaching and to establish a relationship between teacher immunity, possible selves and motivation because research into teacher immunity in language teaching has been hardly conducted. In addition, teachers' resistance to new approaches and methods and their habit of maintaining routines and repetitive tasks is regarded as a vital problem (Hiver, 2015; Hiver & Dörnyei, 2015; Kim, 2011). Since some teachers tend to resign from their teaching profession in the early years, it is critical to comprehend the nature of teacher immunity that refers to defensive and adaptive mechanisms. Teachers' give-up of their profession may not be attributed to only motivation. Therefore, other factors may be involved in this complicated process (Hiver, 2015; Kim, 2011; Wedell, 2009). Various concepts such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, beliefs, attitudes and motivation have been developed to understand teachers in a plight. However, teacher immunity, a new functional and practical concept has arisen as a result of interdisciplinary studies. Teacher immunity has been conceptualized within the framework of self-organization. Studies on teachers' negative experiences such as stress and burnout, resistance to new developments and getting used to the vicious circle of routines have been rarely performed within the scope of self-organization and teacher-immunity. In line with this rationale, this study intends to focus on a language teacher's immunity system, possible selves and motivational path under four stages composed of triggering, coupling, realignment and stabilization with a critical lens (Hiver, 2015). Triggering stage entails a perturbation so that the system can be commenced. This perturbation may mainly cause amplifying or damping force. The second stage, coupling, refers to coping behaviors followed by a certain disturbance. Realignment can be described as understanding, controlling and stabilizing a hard situation. In the last stage, stabilization is formed with the emergence of a newly solidified pattern.

1.1 Research Questions

This single case study was designed as qualitative using phenomenography which can be defined as a non-dichotomist paradigm seeking to understand individuals' personal constructs and understanding of the world or a given situation with certain categories (Marton, 1981, 1986). Therefore, it can be said that phenomenography incorporates both ontological and epistemological basis (Svensson, 1997). Phenomenography emphasizes that the basic nature of experience and conception of this experience are critical in understanding individuals (Marton & Pong, 2005). Referential and structural features of experiences that may be based on theories or theoretical categories can be useful in identifying a certain object or a category (Marton and Booth, 1997). In line with this qualitative research method, this study intends to unravel an experienced language teacher's immunity, possible selves and motivation. Therefore, the following research questions were formed:

Research Question 1: What kind of immunity did the participant develop as a result of perturbation?

Research Question 2: What possible selves emerged after the participant was exposed to some disturbing experiences?

Research Question 3: What motivational path did the participant follow within 14 weeks?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study included both case and phenomenography research tools. Case research refers to an in-depth investigation when a holistic analysis required (Yin, 1994). Case studies aim to examine authentic phenomena since real-life situations and events may be composed of multiple components and dimensions that render phenomena complicated (Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994). This study is based on an in-depth longitudinal examination of a single case. This case study was supported by tenets and principles of phenomenographic research that avoids binary distinctions and support continuum resting on individuals' personal constructs and understanding of a certain event, phenomena or experience in a real-life context (Marton, 1981). Partial generalizations of case studies are based on a certain theory or model rather than on populations (Yin, 1994). The theory behind this study is self-organization that has been widely discussed both in natural and social sciences.

2.2 Data Collection

The study included two research tools composed of diaries, semi-structured interviews and the students' feedback about the participant. Interviews were conducted once a week totaling 14 interviews. In addition, some guiding questions and prompts were formed to help the participant to keep the diary more regularly. The prompts included issues such as motivation, teacher-immunity, defense mechanism, adaptive approach, problems experiences and possible solutions. The participant was given detailed information about the aim and content of the study. Each question asked by the participant was answered before the study was conducted. The questions generally encompassed definitions of self-organization, teacher-immunity and motivation. The participant was

asked to keep the diary at least twice a week. Thus, the diary consisting of 30 pages was visited 28 times. The students were told to criticize the participant's performance, reactions, behaviors and attitudes. Their written texts on online google group discussion platform were also taken into consideration to categorize the data.

2.3 Participant

One foreign language teacher whose name is Ada, aged 40, participated in the study. The researcher wanted to study with this teacher since she had a 17 year experience and worked as a teacher both in private sector, public elementary school and university. She has been teaching English for 17 years. Her first years were spent at a private school teaching general English to adults. Afterwards, she started to teach at a public elementary school for 2 years. Lastly, she started to teach English as a lecturer at a public university upon completion of MA and PhD. She is a polyglot and has been to English speaking countries for several years.

2.4 Procedures

The study took 14 weeks, and Ada taught writing, listening and speaking skills to the same class for nine hours a week. The teaching of each skill lasted three hours. The purpose and detailed content of the study was explained to the participant. The participant was asked to keep a diary after each teaching session. Ada was visited 14 weeks from September to December to make in-depth interviews. Ada was also asked to obtain feedback from her students via online google group discussion forum. Thus, three instruments were used to analyze the data.

2.5 Data Analysis

Inductive content analysis method was used to examine the data. This qualitative analysis prioritizes the identification of key themes (Berg, 2001; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002). Themes based on the studies (Hiver, 2015; Hiver & Dörnyei, 2015) were identified. Three stages were followed to analyze the data. The first stage entailed the transcription and coding of the interview. In the next stage, the coding of the diary was fulfilled. In the third stage, the reviews written by the students about the participant were also coded and matched with the categories obtained from both the interview and the diary. The categories were formed by taking four stages of self-organization process into consideration. Two experienced researchers coded the sentences and placed these sentences into one of the categories under self-organization theory. In addition, the students' written feedback was analyzed and categorized.

3. Findings

This study examined the relationship between motivation and language immunity as well as the adaptive system of a language teacher. The overall findings show that the participant developed maladaptive immunity in the course of time since she was negatively affected by the students' responses. In addition, her motivation to teach and prepare for the class decreased substantially. The students' constant reaction to the teacher's heightened expectations about teaching each skill and lack of efficient peer interaction may have produced maladaptive immunity and low motivation. The findings were analyzed by taking four stages into consideration.

Four Stages of Self-Organization Process

Triggering Stage

The triggering stage refers to perturbation, disturbance or dissonance. In this study, the participant, initially, stepped into the class with high motivation. Ada stated that she often kept her high motivation sustained. However, some students began to send her some negative feedback since they did not do the homework assigned to them by Ada following the fourth week at the university. Ada describes the perturbing situation in one of the interviews as follows:

I gave them a TED talk lasting only 6 minutes one week in advance. However, only few of them watched and criticized it. The others did not watch it. They said that they had no time or did not like the video at all. I really got disappointed. In writing class, although I wrote a sample essay in the class and gave them homework seven days in advance, most of the class wrote almost nothing. They said that they could not learn it. I showed them a few sample essays. Nevertheless, similar behaviors continued in the following weeks. Therefore, I got negatively affected. My motivation was lowered to zero. I really did not want to step into the class at all.

The negative feedback given by the students was perceived as perturbing and unfair by the teacher since she thought that she had high motivation to teach them. She talked to them to understand their problem and situation more closely. This destabilizing factor triggered the teacher to take action. In addition to these student-based factors, the teacher also viewed the lack of efficient peer-interaction and department administration. The irresponsive behaviors of the students discouraged the participant from teaching with motivation and enthusiasm since perturbation was triggered by external factors.

Coupling Stage

In the coupling stage, a certain response or a coping strategy is developed so that the system can reconfigure itself to rule out the disturbing and destabilizing situation. In this stage, the teacher wants to re-stabilize the destabilized learning environment to teach more effectively and efficiently. Ada tends to make new decisions about the class by saying:

I felt that I needed to do something. This negative situation cannot continue in this way. Therefore, I decided to move back for a few days to come up with new ideas or solutions. I started to criticize myself. I asked questions to myself. What mistake did I make in the class? Did I address them in a wrong manner? Did I threaten them? Do I need to talk to them again and more? These questions were reverberating in my brain. I really feel restless and a little nervous. I cannot help being responsive to the situation I am in.

The statements clearly show that internal stability is insistently sought by the participant. In this way, the system strives to reach the state of equilibrium via interactive modifications. Although this second stage does not allow easy solutions, it can also be the questioning of a new coping strategy that may take a few days or weeks. The participant decides to revise her previous experiences to find a stabilizing solution.

Realignment Stage

This stage allows teachers to find a robust way and render the system functional and operational again. In the first two stages, a serious conflict and competition between the external and internal system is experienced. In the realignment stage, the participant used some strategies to operate the system and tried to find the best way to protect herself from the destabilized situation. The excerpt shows how Ada found some ways to stabilize the system:

After I moved back for two or three weeks, I decided to bring a strict system into the class so that I could be fairer and supervise each student's performance. First, I myself took the attendance in the class instead of giving them to take their own attendance. Second, after each hour I started to grade each student's performance. Third, in writing class, each paper was graded. If the students did not hand in the assignment on time, then the grade would be given immediately but no extension would be given to the students. In addition, any student who prefers not to speak or perform in the class would get zero at the end of the class. Besides, the class would end on time without teaching extra hours. By doing so, I wanted them to understand the system much better. I knew that this system would work out well or badly. However, this is not important to me. What mattered to me now is that there is a system now.

In this realignment stage, it can be seen that she established a system to protect herself from the negative situation. Development of the control system produced a more functional classroom for her. This stable situation, whether efficient, partially efficient or inefficient, created equilibrium. However, this equilibrium seemed to be fragile and temporary because equilibrium could be perturbed.

Stabilization Stage

This final stage refers to acquisition of a new aspect or dimension since a new pattern was put forward in the third stage. The participant developed a relatively strict system to lessen the intensity and effect of the perturbing situation in the classroom environment. This new pattern developed by Ada can also be interpreted as a protective shield against future disturbances. Thus, it can be said that Ada provided a stabilized system and is immune to any future perturbation. This immune system has developed as a result of a 17 year experience. The participant mentions this system and immunity as follows:

I had to develop a system in the class because my motivation was really low. I did not want to go into the class. However, to be honest, even if I do not like to teach the class, we have a system of rules that everybody has to comply with. At the beginning of the stage, I really felt very angry and nervous because I felt like cheated. I tried to help them. I talked to them. It was a kind of therapy for each of us. They preferred to be lazy and come to the class too late. Now there is a system. Now I feel stronger thanks to the system I came up with. I know that they do not like this system. However, they perceive it fairer and more functional, although it is less enjoyable. I know that they miss the loose system whose merit they could not understand but I cannot turn back to that system because it did not work well and functionally.

Possible Selves and Motivation

It is important to establish a relationship between the four stages of self-organizing system and possible selves since they are non-linearly interconnected. The data obtained from the interviews and the diary notes showed that Ada had an ideal self, although she chose to use maladaptive system in the class. Ada made the following

remarks:

I want to heighten my motivation again. I want to be better in the future. I just feel demotivated these days. I know that time may solve my problem. I cannot continue like this. I need to make a change. This new system that I produced for the class is not me. It does not explain me. I am different. I must be more different in the future. I do not know what happened to me. I am easily offended these days. My high expectations are really ruining me. I want to do a lot but I do a little in reality.

These statements indicate that Ada has a positive ideal self and high self-efficacy because her belief that she will perform better in the class in the future is strengthened by her ideal self. The participant is aware that she needs to make a change. However, the negative situation that she has been experiencing does not allow her to be flexible and to have a productive system. Since Ada seems to have a strong ideal-self and self-efficacy, it is likely that she will achieve her aims in her future classes. Her low motivation stems from the negative feedback she received from the students. Thus, it can be interpreted that Ada's low motivation, ideal-self and high self-efficacy are non-linearly related. The system endeavors to organize itself based on inner mechanisms. As a result of the initial disturbance, one element may affect another element in the system in an unpredictable way. However, Ada decides to establish a maladaptive system with low motivation, ideal-self and high self-efficacy. Ada is aware that this maladaptive system is temporary since she still preserves her possible ideal self and possible self-efficacy.

4. Limitations and Implications

Three instruments composed of semi-structured interviews; diary and the students' feedback on online google group discussion platform were used to collect data. Since the study was composed of a single case, generalization cannot be made. Besides, although self-organization system contains various elements and dimensions, only a few elements in self-organizing system were analyzed. In future studies, qualitative and quantitative methods can be mixed to reach more generalizable results.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Developing an immune system over time in teaching seems to be vital for teachers since this system may affect their future career in teaching positively or negatively. Expecting a pure stabilization in humans seems impossible since teachers encounter serious and unexpected problems inside and outside classroom settings (Pals, 2006). Therefore, Larsen- Freeman's (2012) interpretation of chaos and complexity in language teaching can be applied to Ada's experiences. In our present study, Ada did not reach equilibrium and a stable state as a result of external factors that caused perturbation. Her previous experiences led her to establish a system owing to the negative feedback obtained from the students' perception of Ada and her teaching. It is true that dynamic systems may entail equilibrium (Holland, 1995; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). However, the chaotic nature of the system may not end in producing an effective immunity system (Hiver, 2015). The participant of the study consciously developed maladaptive immunity because she refused to produce a new method or approach and decided to follow a mechanical system in the classroom. Ada in her journal was aware that the system which she created would not or might not last long. Therefore, she preferred to be indifferent and irresponsive to the students' needs. The participant's reactions to the perturbing situation were also similarly discussed in other studies (Hiver, 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Since each language teacher has a varying vulnerability degree, it seems unlikely to develop a unified system that may contribute to professional development of each teacher owing to the nature of immunity system complex in many ways and might be irreducible.

The idea that conflict is inherent to teaching can be understood from different perspectives (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). Teacher immunity does not always refer to positive outcomes. Teachers' cynical behaviors may take place if teachers and learners experience a severe conflicting situation (Hiver, 2015). This conflicting situation can be regarded as a game theory composed of various complex layers (Varoufakis, 2008). The system has to survive for both sides. However, what is more important is how and how long it will survive. Although Hiver and Dörnyei (2015) maintain that teachers with maladaptive immunity may not reflect on their practice, the participant of the study was a teacher who never ceased to approach disturbances critically. However, a teacher alone may not succeed in a certain environment and could develop maladaptive immunity for a short or long time. This adverse process might hinder teachers from sustaining their high motivation to teach certain skills to a certain environment. Ada in her interview said:

I tried the best for them. They are really aware of my efforts for them. I cannot be positive and hopeful forever. I wanted to do extra hours to teach those more and to bring them more materials, but they really preferred to be on another way. I talked to them about my feelings and reaction. I said that my mechanical attitude will continue. I

have been criticizing myself for a long time and trying to reflect on the things we have done in the classroom. These days I am really negative. I know that in time I may be positive again. However, I really need time that may last long.

These statements show that the participant continues to reflect on her practices. Therefore, it can be said that maladaptive immunity, temporary or long-lasting, can turn into productive immunity as a possible self because Ada aims to reach productive immunity as a possible self. However, her present situation does not allow her to develop productive immunity. It can be said that her self-organizing system reached a conclusion that supported maladaptive system whose nature can also be dynamic and complex (Fuchs, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2012). Since self-organizing system uses its own internal logic and elements, one of the most useful ways to understand this logic is autobiographical reasoning and narratives providing teachers' perceptions and conceptions of a perturbing case (Hiver and Dörnyei, 2015). Ada is a teacher who uses autobiographical reasoning quite fruitfully since this is the first time she has decided to survive with maladaptive system. This study shows that choosing maladaptive system might be a conscious preference over productive system for a while since a certain condition entails such a choice. What might be a disadvantage of this choice is well-put by the participant:

I chose this strict system in the class. I know that this system will damage some successful and responsive students. I wish I could have a very successful system with them all. However, this seems unlikely. I always find myself in conflict with some students, causing me to use more mechanical systems to feel more secure and confident. The students have to do what is assigned to them. There is no gap or niche for them to fill in. Each of them is equal. Their personal background and uniqueness is ignored. This system provides justice for each. I know that I use only external motivation that may be detrimental to their learning. A teacher cannot be guilty all the time. This is impossible. Learners are individuals. This system is functional for the time being, although I am not that kind of person who teaches in this way. I also have to live in this mechanical system and environment.

Maladaptive system may emerge from students' behaviors and attitudes perceived as perturbing by teachers. If teachers' efforts for the benefit of the class are degraded and ignored, then a system has to be established through self-organization to provide equilibrium (Dooley, 1997). Destabilization and constant disturbance cannot be maintained in classrooms for a long time. Therefore, a system, productive or maladaptive, may arise as a result of self-organization (Banzhaf, 2009). However, maladaptive system might be temporarily dormant and dynamically chaotic and complex (Fuchs, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2012). In our present study, Ada insistently emphasized that she continued to reflect on her previous and current systems used in classroom environment. Maladaptive system did not prevent her from thinking critically but was used as a suspension system. Therefore, it can also be added that maladaptive system might be used as an interim process to reach a productive system. In addition, strong autobiographical reasoning and narratives may help selves to reformulate themselves and to make choices about what kind of system they will use in classroom settings. Therefore, teacher immunity can be perceived as a highly complex system since social interaction, when compared to biological systems, is more complex (Fuchs, 2003). In addition, a productive system may convert into a maladaptive system in time and vice versa. These conscious choices may be temporary and even overlap with each other in the same class. Developing teacher immunity does not refer to a fixed stable or stabilized state. Rather, it may be triggered at any time by a stimulus. A teacher may have supported a productive system for years. However, this choice does not necessarily mean that this teacher will not develop any kind of maladaptive system to understand the system better so that s/he can acquire more dynamic teacher immunity. My interpretation is that maladaptive system should not always be regarded as negative and destructive. In contrast, it can be an opportunity for teachers to re-evaluate themselves to produce a better system since a maladaptive system may trigger questioning and critical thinking for teachers. Since a self-organizing system is composed of different elements and parts, this system also contains the fact that one of them is selection referring to the point of bifurcation and choice of one of alternatives (Fuchs, 2003). Therefore, teachers can choose one of these alternatives in their self-organizing system in which narratives play a critical role to understand their system (Hiver and Dörnyei, 2015). This complex system cannot be reduced to a simple system even if teachers make a choice of productive or maladaptive system since each of these systems also contains complexity. Henceforth, teacher immunity can be perceived as a useful metaphor only when it is viewed as a dynamic system rather than a completed one.

In future studies, transformation of each system into each other or separation of each system from each other can be examined. Teachers can be motivated to share their own narratives with each other by talking about how they have developed their productive or maladaptive system based on positive or negative feedback they have obtained from external agents. Hiver and Dörnyei (2015) note that awareness-raising can be applied in in-service training seminars and workshops by developing a culture of sharing. In addition, public or private school administration should motivate their teachers to attend interdisciplinary conferences, symposiums or seminars on

international settings so that they can have the opportunity to reflect on their teaching and develop new narratives to possibly modify their immunity system as language teachers. Besides, introducing language teacher immunity and self-organizing system may open a new perspective for teachers in that they can re-evaluate their current situations.

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