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L2 Motivation within the Ecology of Language Learning in Rural Settings

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of two high school students learning English in rural Vietnam through the lens of ecological systems theory. It also aims to gain in-depth insights into learners' constructions of motivation within the nexus of personal and ecological elements. Data gathering spanned approximately 18 months and was based primarily on interviews, observations, and written and visual reflections. The analytical procedures drew on deductive category application in which pre-formulated theoretical constructs were used for content analysis. Findings show that given the constraints of rural context, the learning experiences of the two participants were vividly unfolded through their dynamic role in perceiving and evaluating language resources, support and learning opportunities, and their ongoing interaction with elements within and across ecosystems. Such processes contributed to shaping the ways in which these learners constructed their L2 motivation against the challenges in their lifeworld. The study reiterates the importance of examining motivation in context, incorporating both personal and ecological aspects underpinning language learning at both micro and macro levels. It calls for dialogues, discussions and negotiation among various educational stakeholders in creating language environments and opportunities for learners in rural settings.

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1. Introduction

Language learning motivation (L2 motivation) has been found to provide "the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force" that maintains learners' resilience through the ups and downs in their lifeworld (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 72). L2 motivation is one of the elements distinguishing one learner from another and ultimately contributes to their success in language learning (Dörnyei, 2009; Lamb, 2002; Wang et al., 2021). Learners' differing levels of motivation are contingent on their personal attributes, social relationships and learning conditions as "learning does not occur in a sociocultural vacuum, but rather it is a social process in which culturally and historically situated individuals are in active pursuit of both linguistic and non-linguistic objectives" (Hajar, 2018, p. 417). These views account for the varying degrees of motivation exhibited in different settings and conditions, and underline the importance of sociocultural context and relationships in examining L2 motivation.

The global status of English and its compulsory nature as a component of almost all school programs in countries where it is used as a second or foreign language (Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012) both provide opportunities for language learners and pose formidable challenges for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite recent attempts to portray more balanced landscapes of language learning and L2 motivation in diverse settings (e.g. Butler, 2015a; Gao, 2013; Lamb, 2012; You et al., 2016), there is still a need for more holistic accounts of the constraints and efforts in learning English in rural contexts. The lifeworld of learners in rural areas would offer rich insights into how those in challenging conditions progress in their language studies and how their motivation is construed and constructed. The main objective of this study is to explore the experiences of high school students learning English in rural areas in Vietnam by focusing on the interplay between motivation and context through an ecological lens. The research question guiding this study is "How is the L2 motivation of Vietnamese high school learners of English constructed within the ecology of language education in rural Vietnam?".

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Education in Rural Areas

Despite the differences in national approaches to tackling pertinent issues, the

landscapes of language education in rural areas across the globe are contingent on the way in which rurality is viewed and defined (Gardiner, 2008; Hayes, 2010; Omidire, 2019). The notion of rurality covers a wide range of aspects including geographical features, population density, local incomes, poverty rate, and access to social public services (Coady, 2019; Irvin et al., 2011). In defining rurality, there is a tendency to use "rural" and "urban" as mutually excluding terms that may somewhat be misleading because they are not amenable to a single definition (Isserman, 2005; Pateman, 2011). This accounts for the complexities in conceptualising rurality for more concise depiction of language education in rural contexts (Coady, 2019). John and Ford (2017, p. 13) therefore argue that "Instead of thinking about places as fixed and static entities, … we should turn our attention to *social processes*, to the way in which we live, work, play, desire, and, hopefully, cooperate" (italics in the original). This article is based on this view of rurality as "social processes" which acknowledges the importance to inquire into the social lives and experiences of individuals in order to shed light on language teaching and learning in rural settings.

Language education in rural areas is typically characterised as disadvantaged due to its constraints in terms of infrastructure, financial funding, and resources for learning and teaching (Butler, 2015a; Coady, 2019; Hayes, 2010). Such contextual limitations impact on the overall operation of language programs, language attitudes, the quality of language teaching and learning, and ultimately the learning outcomes (Butler, 2015a; Kubota & Mckay, 2009; Lamb, 2013). In her study with teenage students from rural South Africa, for example, Omidire (2019) finds that the difficulties in daily lives such as the shortage of running water, electricity, and transport, and the home-school distance were major hindrances for students' access to proper language instruction. Such life circumstances are further challenged by the fact that South African students residing in rural areas lack exposure to social networks whereby they attached "no tangible value in the teaching and learning materials with an urban content that do not represent their significance" (Malebese & Tlali, 2019, p. 2). This policy of adopting the same language program nationwide irrespective of learners' socio-economic and regional background is not only specific to South Africa but also rather common in other countries such as China, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam (Butler, 2015a; Hayes, 2010; Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011; Nguyen, 2003; Zulkefly & Razali, 2019), where it is equally problematic. For instance, English is a mandatory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 12 in the national curriculum in

Vietnam which is implemented consistently all over the country with the same statement of learning outcomes, time frames, and evaluation procedures (Albright, 2019). Such practice has given rise to educational inequality that substantially widens the rural-urban gaps in terms of language literacy, achievement and retention rate (Butler, 2015a; Hamid & Baldauf Jr, 2011; Lamb, 2012; Malebese & Tlali, 2019; Nguyen, 2012). The uniform nature of the language curriculum poses conspicuous obstacles for teachers, learners and other stakeholders in rural communities as they lack access to dedicated facilities, an immediate environment for language practice and use (Byram, 2008; Kam & Wong, 2003; Kubota & Mckay, 2009; Malebese & Tlali, 2019). These issues underscore the need for in-depth insights into the ways in which such experiences in rural areas contribute to shaping learners' motivation in language learning within the intricate nexus of personal and contextual elements.

## 2.2. Social Dimensions of L2 Motivation and Ecological Systems Theory

Contemporary research on L2 motivation has transcended from a mere focus on the learner to more consideration of the interplay between the learner and the learning context, and the complex relationships arising from their ongoing interaction (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Boo et al., 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ushioda, 2015). The special attention to context and social relationships in L2 motivation research aligns with the "social turn" in second language acquisition (Block, 2003; Ortega, 2011). Ushioda (2012) emphasises that "current research perspectives on L2 motivation have become even more strongly socio-contextually grounded" (p. 60) to concur with the idea that "nothing is 'decontextualised' despite efforts to make it so" (Turner, 2001, p. 85). The mounting importance of social parameters in L2 motivation research has been marked by a number of recent theoretical reconceptualisations of L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gao, 2012; Kozaki & Ross, 2011; Ushioda, 2009), which propose various contextually situated perspectives to explore the complex relationships between the learner and the context in which learning takes place as a response to the common concern as to "whether any knowledge (or motivation) is either individually or socially constructed" (Turner, 2001, p. 87).

It is evident that current views of L2 motivation acknowledge language

learning as a complex socio-cognitive process that occurs within an intricate nexus of interconnected social and contextual relationships (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Larsen-Freeman, 2012; Menezes, 2013; Mercer, 2016; Ushioda, 2009, 2015), and, therefore, "cannot be separated from the social contexts in which it occurs and is inextricably linked to ecology" (Borrero & Yeh, 2010, p. 571). In this light, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecological systems theory can provide significant insights into the patterning and interrelationships among environmental elements associated with language learning and thus L2 motivation. An important element of the theory, is the active role it ascribes to learners, as Bronfenbrenner (1979) notes, "the developing person is viewed not merely as a tabula rasa on which the environment makes its impact, but as a growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides" (p. 21). Learners are part of the environment but concurrently respond to its influences and contribute to shaping and reshaping it. The dynamic interplay between learners and the environment and the interconnectedness of the relationships emerging from their ongoing social interaction are the foundation for their socio-cognitive development. Within ecological systems theory, the environment is characterised as a set of nested ecosystems, each of which has its own agents, cultural materials, patterns of operations, and linkages, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Visual Representation of Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Systems Theory
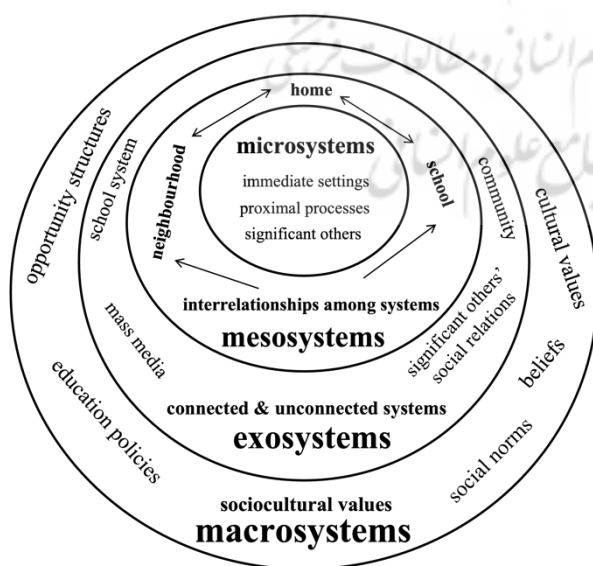
At the innermost level, the microsystem includes activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships in a specific setting. This system encompasses the proximal processes taking place between the learner and close social others, such as teachers, parents, and peers, and the resulting relationships conducive to learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). At the next level, the mesosystem concerns the synergistic effects of different social relationships on learners and includes the connections between and among different microsystems. In the life of a learner, a new mesosystem will be formed when they enter a new setting with new environmental elements and relationships. The linkages between microsystems and their synergistic effects represent the heart of nested ecosystems model (van Lier, 2004). At a further outer level, the exosystem highlights the links between settings in which learners do not actively participate and their immediate ones. For example, learners' experiences at home may be affected by their parents' workplace interaction. The second-hand knowledge gathered from environmental elements not directly related to them may also be crucial for their development, highlighting the significance of complex social relationships in which knowledge and experience might be shared either directly or indirectly. Finally, as an overarching level, the macrosystem embraces the sociocultural values, norms, beliefs, and the educational policies.

Overall, research utilising ecological systems theory has provided corroborating evidence of the value of considering language learning as nested within ecosystems to explain the interplay among the learner, social others, resulting relationships and the overarching socio-cultural conventions. For example, based on Bronfenbrenner's model, Iruka et al. (2019) examine the ways in which ecological systems impact on children's early learning experiences. Their study relies on the perceptions of different stakeholders in ten rural school districts in Nebraska (the US) using data from interviews and focus groups. Findings highlight the diversity in rural children's ecological systems, with different degrees of parental involvement in education and access to learning resources depending on family income and community-level poverty. This study also addresses the need for more school and teacher support to ensure educational quality in rural areas, children's learning opportunities and long-term learning outcomes.

Also adopting the same theoretical framework, Peng (2012) investigates ecological factors influencing willingness to communicate (WTC) in language

classrooms in southern China. Peng collected data from forty university students through semi-structured interviews, learning journals recorded by the students, and classroom observations over a period of seven months. Her study shows that the students' WTC was synergistically affected by a range of individual and environmental factors entailing their past learning experiences, the classroom environment, the curriculum, course evaluation criteria and the rising importance of English.

In a similar study, Khajavy et al. (2016) explored the interrelationships among six variables within the microsystem of language classrooms including learners' WTC, L2 confidence, motivation, attitudes toward learning English, English language achievement, and classroom environment. A total of 243 English-major university students in Iran participated in a questionnaire survey. The results reveal differing levels of influence that these variables exert on their WTC with the classroom environment being the strongest direct predictor while motivation indirectly affects WTC through communication confidence. One limitation of this study is that it merely investigates the correlation among elements in the innermost level of the ecosystem, thus failing to capture the synergistic effects of different ecological elements within and across settings and relationships on learners' WTC, attitudes and motivational constructions.

The interplay between the environment and learners, particularly the role of ecological factors in shaping their L2 motivation, is evidently substantiated in contemporary research. Such processes occur not only in learners' immediate learning settings but at varying levels whereby Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory offers a rigorous analytical tool.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Settings and Participants

Drawing on a longitudinal research project with high school students learning English in rural Vietnam, this study provides detailed accounts of two case study participants (pseudonyms were used), Manh aged 16 and in the second semester of his first year of high school (Grade Ten) and Diem aged 17 and in the second semester of her second year of high school (Grade Eleven). Both of them went to Que Huong High School in a rural district in Southeast Vietnam. The discrepancy in age and grade between the two participants contributes to providing a more

holistic perspective on language learning and the levels of motivation exhibited at different stages in their studies at high school.

Vietnamese students start to learn English as a mandatory and core subject in the national curriculum from Grade Three. English is mandated as one of the core subjects in the high school graduation exam. There are three English lessons per week, each lasting 45 minutes and occurring in the same classrooms as other school subjects.

3.2. Data Collection

Data collection spanned one year and a half and included two phases. In Phase 1 (on-site) which lasted six months, being a local in the district and fluent in both English and Vietnamese, I worked with the participants directly at the research site. The research tools used in this phase included observations, interviews, and participants' written and visual reflections. In Phase 2 (online) which lasted approximately one year, I worked with them online through Skype (I covered all the costs associated with online communication). The tools used during this phase included online interviews. The participants went to my house or internet café for Skype meetings with prior appointments at the times that were convenient for them.

Observations were conducted in various settings: during English lessons at school, during lesson intervals, and at the participants' houses. Observational data, recorded as researcher logs, were the basis for composing interview guides. Interviews drew on a social practice approach which emphasises the process and contextual elements constituting the interview and meaning co-construction between the interviewer and interviewee (Talmy, 2010). This involves the interviewer's positioning him/herself in ways that account for the interviewee's role in meaning negotiation. As such, "data are conceptualised as accounts of phenomena, jointly produced by interviewer and interviewee" (Talmy, 2010, pp. 139-140). In working with the participants, I predicted a number of challenges that required me to perform different roles and develop different strategies. In Gobo's (2008) words, "the researcher's roles and identities are constantly constructed during the research process, regardless of his or her intentions or efforts" (p. 122). I spent plenty of time getting to know the participants, establishing certain relationships with them and winning their trust through one-on-one language tuition following a reciprocal approach (Rossman & Rallis,

2017). Each interview started with socialising questions about their academic progress, school activities and family life, and were then steered towards the points in the interview guides. During the interviews, the participants not only responded to the interview questions but also had the opportunities to raise their language learning concerns as a point of departure for further discussions.

3.3. Data Analysis

All data types were in Vietnamese and I transcribed and translated them into English. Data analysis was based on deductive category application for content analysis which "works with prior formulated, theoretical derived aspects of analysis, bringing them in connection with the text" (Mayring, 2000, para. 13). The analytical procedures involved developing theoretical categories and defining them, working through the data, identifying excerpts of the data corresponding to the pre-defined categories, and assigning the excerpts to the categories.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Case of Manh

4.1.1. Profile

Manh was an only child in a low-income family living in the local district, about one kilometer from his school. His father had once aspired to become an English language teacher but diverted his career to another field under difficult economic circumstances. At the time of this study, Manh's father was a marine worker. Manh's mother, who differently from his father had not completed secondary school education, was a housewife.

4.1.2. Home-Based Experience with English

On my first visit to Manh's home for our tuition session, I noticed an English dictionary, an item rarely in the possession of Vietnamese families living in rural areas:

The first thing I could see from the threshold was an antique wooden bookshelf in the corner of the living room. It was half stacked with miscellaneous CDs and household stuff. Standing alone on one desolated side of the shelf was a dog-

eared, browned-paper, monolingual English dictionary. (Manh, researcher log)

The dictionary was a gift Manh's father received from an American teacher at college for his academic excellence. Through my casual conversations with the father, I learned that he had once trained to become an English teacher. However, in those days, Russian was a much more popular language due to the influences of the Soviet Union on Vietnam's socioeconomic and political development. While teachers of Russian prospered, English teaching was poorly remunerated (Do, 2006; Wright, 2002) and Manh's father was forced to abandon his plan. He still retained a passion for the language, which ultimately became the main impetus for him to encourage Manh to learn English. When asked to reflect on his father's account, Manh stated:

I: Have you heard about your dad's story at college?

M: Yes, he's told me several times.

I: What do you think about this?

M: Dad wants me to do well in English. He liked it but he couldn't pursue it to a high level of education. I want him to feel happy with my language studies. I am doing my best. (Manh, interview)

The dictionary represented a language resource for Manh in his immediate learning setting - an aspect of the microsystem - connecting his father's unfulfilled dream with his proactive involvement in Manh's language learning.

Manh's father past experiences, dictated by macrosystemic elements, impacted on his attitudes toward education and ultimately on Manh's learning experiences representing the exosystemic effects of the home environment. Manh revealed that although both he and his father had limited linguistic command of English, "*It has become a natural reaction. When it came to that particular situation, I would speak English to Dad*" (Manh, interview). Through this, Manh showed his decision to pursue his father's dream and construed his home as a microsystemic setting for language practice. While parental functions as initiators of L2 motivation and conversational partners for language practice are not uncommon in other Asian contexts (Butler, 2015b; Gao, 2012; Lamb, 2012; You & Nguyen, 2011; Zulkefly & Razali, 2019), the language support provided by Manh's father is rather rare and unique in rural Vietnam (Nguyen & Fahey, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2016). His father also took an important role in igniting and fostering his L2 motivation.

4.1.3. The Mediating Role of an Extended Family Member

Another social other in the microsystem of family who was significant in sustaining Manh's L2 motivation was his cousin Duyen, who had studied in the United Kingdom and then settled in Australia. On her visit to Vietnam, Duyen gave Manh her used laptop and offered to pay for a monthly Internet subscription to facilitate his studies. He justified this special gift in the following:

She [Duyen] said I might not be mature enough to know of the importance of English. She told me how hard she had to struggle with her daily life and studies due to her poor English when she first went to the UK. (Manh, interview)

Duyen introduced exosystemic elements involving the challenges confronting her in her daily life and studies overseas as illustrations of the utility value of English. This finding aligns with a number of studies demonstrating the role of family members such as siblings and cousins in relation to L2 motivation (Benson, 2011; Lamb, 2007; Palfreyman, 2006, 2011). Such gifting also illustrated the microsystemic concern from Manh's extended family over his language studies and the globally dispersed nature of learning opportunities. During one of our one-on-one meeting, Manh shared his plan of using the laptop:

It has been pretty handy for me to learn English. The video clips on the Internet help me to improve my pronunciation and speaking. I also read English news online to increase my vocabulary. Before, every time I came across a new word I had to look it up in the dictionary and it took quite a while. Now, everything is much easier and faster. (Manh, interview)

It is clear that Manh could immediately identify the learning opportunities and resources afforded by the laptop which connected him to another microsystem of online learning. Unlike other teenagers who might have used it for gaming or entertainment, he conceived of this artefact as source of L2 motivation.

4.1.4. Language Learning at School and Teacher-Student Relationships

A significant contributor to sustaining Manh's motivation occurred when he started working with Mr. Trung in Grade Eleven. The data presented here were extracted from an interview that took place about one month after the start of the new academic year:

I: What is special about his class?

M: Mr Trung addressed us as "thầy - con". I feel very warm because of this. He is very patient. My friends and I make a lot of mistakes in speaking but he tries to help us. He always encourages rather than criticises us. In the beginning, we were afraid of making mistakes and thus did want to say anything but now we are absolutely comfortable with that. (Manh, interview)

In Vietnamese culture, teachers may refer to themselves as "thầy" (teacher) and address their students using the term of endearment "con" (child) in the same way as older family members such as parents, uncles or aunts call their children, nephews or nieces respectively. In Manh's view, Mr. Trung's approach promoted the unique intimacy that he had not felt with other teachers. Mr. Trung thus created a new microsystem within the school setting that was different from Manh's prior experiences. He could overcome his fear of making mistakes in speaking English through the facilitation of his teacher. This corroborates the effects of positive teacher-student relationships on learners' classroom engagement and L2 motivation (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Pishghadam et al., 2021).

In the context of his class where most students performed rather poorly in English, Mr Trung provided Manh with more challenging tasks for his own practice either in class or at home. Manh viewed this preferential support as a source of motivation as in the following:

I: Do you feel overloaded with the tasks he gave you?

M: No, they are good for me. I don't want to disappoint my teacher (Manh, interview)

Manh's effort to complete the tasks revealed his perceptions of the learning value emerging from this relationship in the microsystem of school lessons. This commitment also stemmed from a Vietnamese cultural obligation in which students are expected not to disappoint their teachers (Doan, 2005), representing the macrosystemic element permeating his L2 motivation. The following reflection (Figure 2) offers an overall account of Manh's motivational constructions under within his language learning ecology:

Figure 2
Manh's Written Reflection on His Language Learning

The reflection incorporated a host of ecological elements related to Manh's language studies. Within the home microsystem, his father took an important shaping role and inculcated L2 motivation. During school lessons, he utilized different learning strategies for classroom debates and essay writing, bringing his father's words into the realities of learning in the classroom. He also aspired to the

exosystemic prospects of his future career with a good income to support his parents, showing the operation of family and cultural values of the macrosystem.

4.2. The Case of Diem

4.2.1. Profile

Diem's family lived in a rural commune adjacent to the district where the school was situated, about eight kilometers away. Diem's parents were Cambodian-Vietnamese who had fled their home country to Vietnam due to poverty and political instability. Diem's parents, far older than those of other children her age, did not complete primary school education. Her father was a salt farmer and her mother was a housewife.

4.2.2. The Perceived Value of Language Education

Parents' educational background is a salient element in determining their approaches to child education (Chevalier et al., 2013; Lamb, 2013). In the case of Diem, her parents did not put much academic pressure on her, but regularly reminded her with a common Vietnamese saying: *khôn thì con nhờ, dại thì con chịu* (on your own head, be it) (Diem, interview). Her parents left her to decide on her own studies and future, unlike the scaffolding role of Manh's parents. After I had a quick conversation with Diem's mother about her view on education (Diem was there during our conversation), I proceeded to conduct an interview with Diem as in the following:

I: What are you going to do for your parents?

D: I hope I can earn a lot of money to help my family and achieve my ambitions.

I: Your mom told me she didn't expect any return from her children. Do you think helping your family is your duty or your desire?

D: Both. My parents have brought me up and taken care of me, so I should do the same to them when they get old. If I have good living conditions, they must have the same. That is my biggest wish because now we are poor and my parents have to work hard. I really want my family to be better in the future so that they won't have to live in financial difficulties.

I: What is the biggest motivation to you?

D: My family circumstances. My parents are poor, so I have experienced more disadvantages than my classmates in many aspects of life. I have to study hard to escape poverty and help my family. (Diem, interview)

Having lived in poverty since childhood, Diem was highly motivated to make her way up the academic and professional ladder, a vision commonly identified among students who live in challenging situations (Hajar, 2018; Lamb, 2013). Her perceptions of the limited resources and support within the microsystemic setting of her family and her aspirations all converged in her commitment to learning English as a way to realise her ambitions. Family socioeconomic statuses have been found to have a key role in shaping children's L2 motivation and the amount of effort they expend in their studies (Butler, 2015b; Lamb, 2012; Sadiman, 2004; Shim, 2013). Her future projections were imbued with a mixture of personal aspirations and filial piety, which represents a collision of personal elements and macrosystemic cultural norms. This also shows her firm belief in the life-changing power of education which fostered her L2 motivation. Unlike her cousins and relatives, who came to terms with their low-paid manual work, she decided to pursue higher education:

I: Do you have any relatives living around here?

D: Yes, most of them.

I: Do they study well?

D: No. In my extended family, I am the best student.

I: Do your aunts, uncles, and parents usually talk about children's education?

D: Not much. They do not pay much attention to it. Most of them are peasants so they don't care much about our study. My cousins have taken up different jobs like factory workers, bricklayers, drivers, or mechanics since they graduated from high school. None of them have gone to university.

I: So you are among the few who want to go to university?

D: Yes. (Diem, interview)

By referring to her relatives as "peasants", Diem did not mean to denigrate them, but rather to show their different perspective on education: Their limited social knowledge and immediate household concerns undermined their beliefs in the long-

term rewards of education. Here, different microsystemic and mesosystemic elements impacted on her motivation to pursue higher education including the relationships in her extended family, their perspectives on child education, their present life conditions, and their career choice compared to her own.

4.2.3. The Pressure at School

Upon entering Que Huong High School, Diem was eligible to study in the first top class for her high score in the entrance examination. This placement offered her a number of academic privileges and learning opportunities such as scholarships and working with experienced teachers; yet, it did not relate much to her aspired major in English language:

All teachers assume that we are all excellent students in the subjects they teach. ... The majority of my classmates are not so good at English because it is not their subject of specialty. . . The teachers only follow the majority. They teach very fast and give very difficult questions, assuming that students already have the basic knowledge in their area. Sometimes I feel I am drowning in their classes. ... They also expect us to gain high scores. It is the school's pressure on the teachers, which is passed on to us eventually. (Diem, interview)

As Chong (2007) points out, "East Asian students in collectivistic yet achievement-oriented societies may be motivated more by the fear of failure" (p. 63), Diem found herself in a similar situation. Different ecosystems had synergistic impacts on her perseverance in this pressurising environment. At the macrosystemic level, the school culture placed an emphasis on academic achievement thus impacting on the approaches adopted by her teachers. These mesosystemic relationships were translated into the high level of academic demands in each school subject, resulting in Diem's sense of pressure within the microsystemic setting of the top class. This is an inevitable reality as language learning does not take place in isolation but is "embedded in the complex tapestry of other activities" at school (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 86). While her English teacher did not cater for her language needs - which were different from the majority of her class - Diem had to put in more effort within and beyond the school setting, showing her resilience against the challenging conditions of her language studies.

4.2.4. Private Teacher's Generosity

To prepare for the university entrance examination in her final year, Diem joined a private English class offered by Mr Hung, a local English teacher working in another high school. She knew of him through the introduction of school alumni who had successful examination results with his support. She described the private class as follows:

It is more like a study group than an English class. There are around ten of us who are interested in learning English and will sit for the university entrance English examination. For each class, Mr Hung assigns us with some tasks, usually in the form of multiple-choice questions. My classmates and I work on the questions; he provides us with the answer keys and explanations once we finish them. We mainly learn grammar, vocabulary, reading, and other language aspects necessary for the university entrance examination. Generally, we learn those points that are not taught in class. (Diem, interview)

Her account suggests the teacher's very traditional approach to language teaching which was highly exam-oriented but was necessary for her at that stage. Aware of Diem's financial background, I raised her mother's concern about the tuition fees in an earlier conversation as a further topic for the following interview:

I: You take private classes for three subjects. Do your parents have any difficulty paying for them?

D: Yes. My mom sometimes complains. She said she did not pay that much for my elder brother when he was at high school. But, in fact, I only have to pay for two subjects. Mr Hung gave me a fee waiver for his class.

I: What do you think about this?

D: I think he is very kind. He is a very enthusiastic teacher as well. I didn't tell him about my family background. He heard it from my study group. One day after class, he summoned me and said I didn't have to pay for the tuition. I felt very happy but there was something hard to say.

I: What's that?

D: I felt like I owed him something. I have to study well to deserve his good deed. I always prepare homework and other things very well before going to his class. I think I have to double my effort. If I fail the university entrance

examination this time, I will not dare to see him again. (Diem, interview)

Diem viewed the teacher's preferential treatment as an act of benevolence in the face of which she had to study harder. Her serious attitude towards learning English was the only possible way through which Diem could show her gratitude to the private teacher. While the fee exemption partly relieved her parents' financial burden, she felt the relational obligation to respond to Mr. Hung's good will, an indication of the macrosystemic cultural norms in the lifeworld of Vietnamese that motivated her to expend further effort (Doan, 2005; Tran, 2006).

Since I did not want to distract Diem from her studies - she was close to final stages at high school, I formulated a word cloud based on the interview data and researcher logs to illustrate her language learning strategies and ecological elements impacting on her L2 motivation. I presented it to her and together we made modifications. Image 1 is the revised version incorporating her feedback:

Figure 3
Diem's Language Learning Strategies and Her Ambitions

This visual illustration embraces different sets of values, linkages among ecosystems and emerging language support and learning opportunities attributable to Diem's L2 motivational constructions. Macrosystemic elements include the filial obligations to her parents and gratitude to the private teacher, social mobility, and other utility values of English. They interacted with one another and converged in her career ambitions and visions of the possibilities of responding to the social obligations arising from her interpersonal relationships.

5. Conclusion

In response to the research question, this study has provided in-depth insights into the two learners' motivational constructions within the ecology of language learning in rural areas. Their L2 motivation is shaped and reshaped by the ongoing interactions between personal and ecological elements through which they perceived the value of emerging learning opportunities and relationships. These processes are crucial as "learning must be viewed holistically with as much emphasis being placed on relationships and interactions as on the participants" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 190). This is evident in the distinct ways in which the two learners developed their own strategies for utilising the language artefacts, resources and support derived from their own settings, personal relationships and the linkages among ecosystems. Such ecological elements and interconnectedness synergistically impact on L2 motivation and the amount of effort they expend in their learning. This theoretical framework for examining motivation aptly responds to Volet's (2001) emphasis on "the need for multi-level conceptualisations and multi-level analyses of motivation in context" (p. 326).

The present study also provides glimpses of the lifeworld of the two learners in rural settings and the struggles they tackled in their language pursuit. Their L2 motivation was sustained on the basis of their aspirations for a change in their socio-economic circumstances and the rewards that language proficiency could bring about. These findings substantially align with those in research on language learning in rural settings whereby the financial constraints of learners' present life and upwards social mobility were among the primary impetus for unflinching efforts in language learning (Hajar, 2018; Lamb, 2013; Omidire, 2019; Zulkefly & Razali, 2019). A relatively unique aspect central to the rural context in this study is teachers' sympathy for learners' challenging conditions through the act of exempting private tuition fees. This contributed significantly to fostering learners' L2 motivation and resilience.

Understandings of L2 motivation from an ecological systems perspective offer a heuristic framework for examining the individual and contextual elements, social relationships and the synergistic effects of these ecological elements on language learning. Multiple learning settings from the school to home and beyond, and diverse social relationships provide learners with not only language artefacts and learning opportunities but also relational aspects that lead to learning. By recognizing the situated nature of L2 motivation in various

ecosystems, language teachers can raise learners' awareness of their active role in identifying and utilizing language resources available either explicitly or implicitly in their learning settings. Further, the insights into learning conditions in rural areas and the linkages among different ecosystems could inform discussions and negotiations between language teachers and social others, such as parents and other educational stakeholders, in terms of parenting styles, home intervention and support, curriculum design, educational policies, and funding on both local and national scales. Frequent home-school dialogues help pinpoint problems confronting rural learners in their language studies and also serve as a means to involve parents further, thus promoting their shared responsibility in language education (Linse et al., 2014). This would drastically reduce the inequities that exist between rural learners and those in other more advantageous contexts. Given the intricate nexus of personal and social relationships emerging within learners' language ecology, further research into the realm of L2 motivation may observe their motivational trajectories over a more extended period of time to explore how learners' motivation traverses across time and space. Alternatively, investigations into the interaction or correlation among ecological elements, particularly integration of local variables such as family, peers, social mobility and language learning experiences, using quantitative tools are also rich research avenues.

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