

Book Review

*Lessons from exceptional language learners who have
achieved nativelike proficiency:
Motivation, cognition and identity*

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Let me start this review by saying that it is a huge privilege to be able to review the book co-authored by the late Zoltán Dörnyei, a scholar who not only managed to put the countries of Eastern and Central Europe on the map of research into individual difference (ID) factors in the realm of second language acquisition (SLA) but in many ways shaped and spearheaded the development of such research. It is only fitting that, together with Katarina Mentzelopoulos, he should have embarked on a research project that sought to shed light on why some second and foreign language (L2) learners succeed in the evidently formidable task of becoming nativelike in the target language (TL). After all, most of his numerous, influential, one could even say monumental, publications attempted to solve the immensely complex puzzle of how individual variation, with a particular emphasis on different facets of motivation, influences the process and product of L2 learning and teaching (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005, 2020; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015;

Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). The book *Lessons from Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency: Motivation, Cognition and Identity* fits perfectly into this line of inquiry. It could even be seen as the pinnacle of Zoltán's theoretical and empirical endeavors because it provides invaluable insights into how different ID factors need to interact with each other and form distinctive constellations, in a way that is unique to each individual, to ensure exceptionally high levels of success in L2 learning, understood as passing for a native speaker. As such, the volume represents a major extension of good language learner studies which were pioneered by Rubin (1975) and invariably continue to attract scholarly attention of researchers (e.g., Griffiths, 2008). It also builds on studies of exceptional language learners, or polyglots, touching more broadly on the fascinating issue of linguistic giftedness (cf. Biedroń & Pawlak, 2016), as well as empirical investigations into attainment of nativelike proficiency driven by the critical period hypothesis (CPH, cf. Hyltenstam et al., 2018), taking these lines of inquiry forward by inspecting the paths that take some L2 learners to the level when they are regarded as indistinguishable from native speakers in everyday situations. In fact, the interested readers have the opportunity to examine these trajectories in depth by delving into the intact success stories of the 30 participants of the study in the companion volume *Stories from Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency* (Katarina Mentzelopoulos & Zoltán Dörnyei, 2023).

The book under review starts with the introduction, where the authors comment on their motivation and rationale for undertaking what they describe as a “heart project,” also candidly explaining what they set out to achieve and why they wish to bypass the heated debates about the use of such apparently controversial terms as *native speaker* and *L2*. This is followed by 12 chapters that constitute the core of the volume. Chapter 1 provides a brief but admirably well-suited theoretical background to the research project, including an overview of research that has investigated different aspects of linguistic giftedness or examined issues related to ultimate TL attainment, typically in connection to the tenets of the CPH. In offering this overview, the authors convincingly show that their study is different from much of the previous research in that it primarily zooms in on the *process* underpinning achievement of nativelike proficiency rather than its *product*. Chapter 2 is devoted to the presentation of the methodology of the research project which involved 30 exceptional learners from different national backgrounds and walks of life, passing for native speakers of different L2s with no heritage links to the TL or serious opportunities for immersion prior to the age of 18. The data were collected through interviews accompanied by a checklist with specific points of interest which yielded a corpus in excess of 460,000 words that was subjected to several rounds of thematic analysis (Braun

& Clark, 2006). Although it includes excerpts from participants' narratives, Chapter 3, *Defining Nativelikeness*, does not in reality report findings related to the factors leading to an exceptional degree of success in L2 learning but, rather, is mainly intended as an argument for the choice of the term *native speaker* in describing this success, engaging with views that this label should not be used as a yardstick for measuring TL attainment. Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos (2023) embrace what they describe as a phenomenological approach and point out that "... one may argue that most language learners, even high-functioning ones, know perfectly well when they are speaking an L2 that is different from using their L1, which indirectly validates the two categories, regardless of the terminology we use to refer to them" (p. 40). The remaining nine chapters are dedicated to the main themes that emerged from the data. Specifically, Chapters 4-6 focus on initial conditions necessary for success, that is, a favorable set-up for L2 learning (Chapter 4), a unique bond with the TL and the different guises this bond can assume (Chapter 5) and a facilitative constellation of ID factors embracing cognition, motivation and personality (Chapter 6). Chapters 7-10 shift the focus to different aspects of the L2 learning process as such and sustaining commitment to this process, covering such issues as attention to pronunciation (Chapter 7), intensive effort and the employment of language learning strategies (Chapter 8), the importance of various relationships and social expectations (Chapter 9), and different facets of persistence in pursuing nativelike proficiency (Chapter 10). The last two chapters focus on participants' psychological states on reaching their intended destination, that is, becoming indistinguishable from native speakers, touching upon L2 confidence, comfort and ownership (Chapter 11), and the nature of L2 identity (Chapter 12). Finally, in the conclusion to the volume, Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos highlight selected points yielded by the analysis which they consider to be the "most memorable and forward-facing" (p. 170). These include: the absence of one-fit-all solutions, the dynamicity of the pathways to success and the factors shaping them, constant interaction between motivation and cognition, the motivating potential of the unique bond with the TL, the significance of mimicry ability and musicality, the importance of the emphasis on L2 pronunciation, a comfortable voice in the L2 and its ownership, and the link between first and second language identities.

On reading this book one is left with the overwhelming impression that it is as unique and exceptional as the participants of the research project and the individual trajectories which emerge from the narratives offered during the interviews. There are indeed numerous things for which Zoltán Dörnyei and Katarina Mentzelopoulos could be commended but, due to space limitations, I will confine my praise to issues which, in my subjective opinion, stand out as the most significant and have the potential to, on the one hand, move research on

IDs in SLA in new, promising directions and, on the other hand, serve as a sobering reminder to specialists that such research should accommodate a variety of views and approaches rather than leaning towards extremes of one kind or another. First and foremost, it is evident from the analysis of the participants' stories that there is no "silver bullet" or "magic key" that guarantees success in achieving natively-like proficiency. In other words, no single individual characteristic is in and of itself sufficient to achieve high levels of success but, rather, propitious constellations of such factors are needed, different for each learner and adjusted to the evolving circumstances of the process of L2 learning. As Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos elucidate ". . . the synergy of factors often displayed patterns that deviated considerably from each other, thereby evidencing that there are *multiple pathways* to accomplishing exceptional L2 learning success" (p. 170, the emphasis in original). While this by no means indicates that research into specific ID factors should be abandoned, it surely alerts us to the fact that the pedagogical implications based on such studies are limited and at the end of the day serious effort will need to be exerted to try to identify *complexes of ID factors* that could possibly help us identify largely similar groups of learners as a basis for better tailoring instructional practices to their needs. An equally important contribution of the book is the identification of factors that may contribute to successful learning but have been given no or very limited attention in existing research, such as, for example, the motivating potential of attraction towards specific aspects of the TL, the intriguing link between motivation and cognition, the emphasis that the participants placed on natively-like pronunciation, cosmopolitan orientation, role models (Muir et al., 2019), motivational pulls in the workplace, or the potential malleability of persistence or grit, perhaps as a function of the L2 being learnt (Pawlak et al., 2022).

In addition, I truly appreciate the decision to go against some growing but also limiting trends in the field and the willingness to confront the criticism that this might bring about. One area where this is visible is the use of the term *native speaker* despite the claims that it might be discriminatory or even toxic and therefore it should best be abandoned (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2021). Hopefully, the following quote will give the proponents of such extreme views food for thought: "Since teaching natively-likeness is a common objective for many, in this book we strive to illuminate both the journey towards this goal as well as what learners can expect at the end of this journey, while maintaining a sense of reality about the fact that climbing this linguistic Mount Everest is not an option for most learners" (p. 42). Another example of divergence from what is currently in vogue is the fact that although the authors stress the dynamicity of various factors that "wax and wane" on the pathway to success, they do not even once make an explicit reference to complex dynamic systems theory (Hiver et al, 2021)

which has started to be used to account for basically all processes involved in L2 learning and teaching, and there is no sign of the related terminological apparatus. I find this stance laudable for the simple reason that dynamicity can be explained in different ways, the fact that it is an obvious part of life does not automatically indicate that some methodological choices are superior to others, and it is perhaps pointless to convince anybody of the fact that L2 learning and teaching are complex without providing feasible advice on how to tackle such complexity. The final merit of the book that I would like to emphasize is that it is highly readable, a quality that stems from the fact that the authors know how to talk about difficult things in an accessible way. This is indeed a crucial skill that many researchers either do not possess or are reluctant to display perhaps for fear of not sounding academic enough.

While I wholeheartedly subscribe to the belief that reviews should not simply be puff pieces but present a balanced evaluation of any academic work, it is a tough call to find fault with this excellent publication. When I started reading it, I initially had the impression that it is not adequately grounded in SLA literature and that perhaps more space should be devoted to the presentation of relevant theories and empirical studies. As I started to dig deeper into the book, I quickly realized that such an approach represents one of its most important strengths. This is because the decision to first present the main themes illustrated with relevant excerpts and only later to interpret the findings in the light of existing empirical evidence piques readers' interest and makes the book highly approachable not only to theorists and researchers but also to students in BA, MA and PhD programs as well as in-service teachers. A more valid criticism is related to the marginal attention given to language learning strategies which may be logically assumed to play a pivotal role in attaining success but are summarized on little over three pages. While I am aware that this comment is reflective of my own research interests and the authors may have chosen to prioritize other aspects of the learning trajectories, I still believe that more examples of actions and thoughts that the participants drew upon to make the learning process more effective would have been invaluable for anyone involved in L2 learning and teaching. Obviously, this shortcoming, if it can even be described in such a way, is subjective and pales in comparison to all the merits of the book which offers invaluable insights into the intricate processes that allow L2 learners to achieve nativelike proficiency in different conditions. In my view, the volume constitutes an enduring legacy that Zoltán Dörnyei leaves with us, a legacy that will surely be carried on by his amazing co-author Katarina Mentzelopoulos and other SLA researchers who wish to unveil the profound mystery of highly successful L2 learning. Indeed, it is incumbent upon us to carry on with empirical investigations in this area not only to further advance our understanding

of this process but also to make L2 instruction in different contexts more effective. This need is so aptly expressed by the authors in the conclusion to the volume: "While this is yet a first foray into the psychological experiences of exceptional language learners, we believe that we have at least begun to pull back the curtain on advanced ultimate attainment for the benefit of learners, teachers, and researchers alike, and we hope to have sparked enough curiosity in the topic to inspire further research" (p. 173). I am sanguine that the SLA community will rise to the challenge and we will soon see many more forays into this still little-known territory and the paths to success in L2 learning as well as signposts along these paths will become more fully illuminated in the near future.

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