

*Towards a Conceptualization of the Construct 'Sense of Progress' in L2 Learning*

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*Nothing succeeds like success.*  
Alexandre Dumas

L2 learner perceptions may comprise a multiplicity of aspects related to their learning experiences such as opinions about instructors, judgment on classroom activities and pedagogical approaches, and manifestations of satisfaction with their progress in language learning (Tse, 2000). The latter aspect – satisfaction with learning progress – if often acknowledged by practitioners in the field as a crucial motivational element that needs to be fostered in students. It is commonly assumed that, if learners are not satisfied with their language learning accomplishments, their motivation to persist in the learning enterprise will be negatively affected. This assumption is not exclusive of the language learning domain – it can also be detected in other achievement domains such as sports and the corporate milieu.

Notwithstanding its perceived motivational value, students' sense of progress in L2 language learning is a construct that – as of today - has not received extensive theoretical consideration in the field of second language acquisition. Such consideration is imperative in view of the fact that it could inform teachers who wish to develop a constructive and effective sense of progress in their learners. This development can be attained more successfully if teachers have a profound and insightful understanding of the aspects the concept sense of progress might entail.

A theoretical analysis of these aspects will be undertaken in this paper in an attempt to propose a conceptualization of the construct sense of progress in language learning. In order to accomplish this endeavor, the aspects will be introduced in the next section and scrutinized in the following sections of the paper. Subsequently, they will be brought together for a second time in the last part of the paper in order to propose a tentative theoretical definition for the construct.

**Aspects of a Sense of Progress**

Following extensive research of relevant literature in the fields of applied linguistics, education and psychology, the author of this paper identified key aspects that might contribute towards a theoretical description of the construct sense of progress in language learning. It is essential at this point to elucidate the tentative nature of this theoretical speculation that will not make any claims about the “absolute truth” of the ideas proposed. The identification and analysis of the aspects below is merely a first step towards a delineation of the construct given that the scope of this paper does not allow for the establishment of a comprehensive theory. The author acknowledges the fact that a much larger amount of theoretical construction and research are needed if one ventures to elaborate a comprehensive model of sense of progress in language learning.

Given the perspective presented above, it will be proposed that sense of progress in language learning:

- may be viewed as L2 learners’ metacognitive knowledge;
- is a component of the broader construct motivation in L2 learning;
- is determined by individuals’ definitions of successes and failures in L2 learning;
- is determined by attributions that individuals make for their perceived successes and failures in L2 learning;
- must be contemplated in face of L2 learners’ goals;
- is fundamental in fostering in L2 learners a feeling of personal control over their learning.

For the purpose of organization, the following sections will be numbered, ordered and labeled in accordance with the enumeration proposed above.

*1. Sense of Progress as Metacognitive Knowledge*

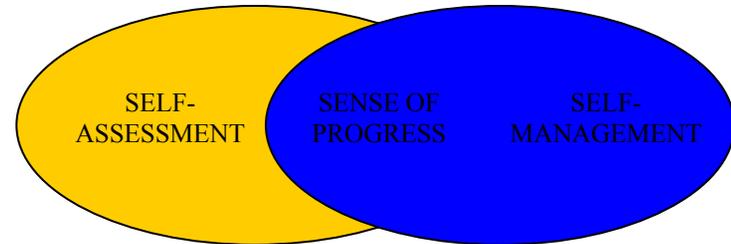
Cognitive abilities that language learners bring to the undertaking of acquiring another language have received special attention in the field of applied linguistics since the 1970s. These abilities are related to what learners understand about their own learning development (Wenden, 1986). Regarding metacognition about the learning process, Wenden (1986) indicates that two dimensions are commonly recognized in the literature on cognitive development. The first dimension - knowledge about cognition - consists of “relatively stable information that human thinkers have about their own cognitive processes and those of others” (Wenden, 1986). The second dimension - regulation of cognition - involves processes used to

control and administer learning (i.e. planning, monitoring and checking learning outcomes). It could be tentatively postulated that sense of progress in L2 learning is more closely associated with the regulatory dimension of metacognition since it encompasses students' own assessment of their learning outcomes.

Wenden draws attention to the danger of looking at information on cognition – the first metacognitive dimension aforementioned - as a source of information on the authentic functioning of the dimension of regulation of cognition. This danger stems from the failure of such procedure in informing researchers whether and how learners employ information on cognition during the actual process of learning. According to her, “to gain insight into this second dimension of metacognition would require a method of data collection that could tap as closely as possible learners' ‘on-line’ answers, i.e. their monitoring of the here and now in a direct immediate fashion” (Wenden, 1986).

Rivers (2001) endorses a metacognitive dimensional classification distinct from Wenden's. He supports the claim that metacognition is discrete from cognition and consists of two categories of behavior: self-assessment and self-management. Self-assessment comprises the individual's capacity to evaluate his/her own cognition. Self-management, in turn, involves the individual's capacity to manage his/her further cognitive advancement. As maintained by him, self-assessment is a more crucial skill than self-management for two reasons. First, research has demonstrated that students with superior self-assessment abilities usually perform better in self-regulated language learning. Second, self-assessment is a behavior that emerges prior to self-management, that is, the latter cannot occur without the first.

In relation to the second metacognitive dimensional classification scheme presented above, self-assessment could be identified as a crucial factor in promoting a sense of progress in L2. Once L2 students possess effective self-evaluation skills, they might become capable of assessing their own language learning progress more accurately and realistically. This assessment, in turn, might facilitate self-management and control of students' performance activities by themselves. Under this perspective sense of progress could be viewed as a mediating metacognitive factor located between the metacognitive dimensions of self-assessment and self-management, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1: Self-assessment, Self-management and Sense of Progress**

It could be suggested therefore that L2 learners' sense of progress is a component of metacognitive knowledge in the sense that it may be a resulting element of the metacognitive skill of "monitoring and evaluating the success of learning activities" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) as well as a prerequisite to the development of learners' metacognitive skill of regulating their own behaviors in the learning process.

## *2. Motivation and Sense of Progress*

The concept of L2 learning motivation has become a pivotal element of several theories of second language acquisition (Gardner & Tremblay, 1995). As indicated by Oxford & Shearin (1994), motivation is regarded by many to be one of the major determining factors in success in acquiring an L2 for the reason that "it determines the extent of active and personal involvement in L2 learning" (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). It was brought up in the previous sections of this paper that sense of progress in L2 learning might represent a component located within the wide-ranging construct motivation in language learning. The main goal of the present section is to contemplate the nature of the relationship between sense of progress and motivation in L2 learning taking as a springboard the assumption that the latter might be affected by the first.

Skehan (1989) calls attention to the fact that "the definition and study of L2 learning motivation have not been without its problems due to the great difficulty in demonstrating its effects" (Skehan 1989). This difficulty undoubtedly also constitutes a theoretical hindrance when attempting to speculate about the relationship between motivation and sense of progress. In an attempt to tackle this shortcoming, the next three subsections of this paper will examine major models of motivation in L2 learning that have been proposed and recognized in the literature in the last decades. This examination is in keeping with the position that there is no

particular motivational theory that allows for an understanding of all the aspects involved in motivational behavior (Landy & Becker, quoted in Gardner & Tremblay, 1995, p. 505).

### 2.1. Gardner's Model of Motivation

The work done by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert involving motivation specific to language study is perhaps the most recognized in the field, having originated a vast amount of research (Skehan, 1989). In the early 1970s, they established the well-known twofold classification for L2 learning motivational orientations - integrative vs. instrumental orientation. An integrative motivational orientation is possessed by people who identify positively with the foreign people and culture and want to be able to participate in it. Gardner & Lambert claimed that integrative orientation is a crucial motivational source for two reasons. First, it is strongly rooted on the personality of the learner. Second, it exercises its influence over an extended time interval to maintain learning efforts that are required to achieve language learning success (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Instrumental motivational orientation, in turn, derives from the rewards that can be obtained if a language is known, such as professional and academic advancement. Gardner & Lambert hypothesized that an instrumental orientation is less helpful because it is not based on the personality of the learner and consequently is more dependent on external pressures – as a result the learner is less prone to employ effort to attain cumulative progress (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). It is important to point out that, in his most recent works on motivation, Gardner no longer views the predominance of integrative orientation as vital or meaningful (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). In 1985, Gardner proposed a definition of motivation to learn an L2 as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (Gardner, 1985). The components of this definition can be represented by the following equation:

$$\text{Motivation} = \text{Effort} + \text{Desire to achieve a goal} + \text{Attitudes}$$

The first component – effort – refers to the amount of energy expended on the language learning enterprise and may include several aspects that do not relate specifically to learning a language such as compulsiveness, desire to please a teacher or parent, a high need to achieve, good study habits, etc. Gardner indicates the need to investigate the elements that direct this effort. The second component – desire to achieve a goal – involves the particular goal of learning a language. Finally, the third component – attitudes – represents “an evaluative response to some referent or attitude object,

inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent" (Gardner, 1985). Gardner adds that the accumulated research substantiation in the area of second language acquisition indicates that attitudes are associated with behavior, but not necessarily directly. In 1995, Gardner proposed an expansion of his motivational model that included new measures derived from the general psychological literature. These measures are related to individual characteristics that reflect motivation and were labeled by Gardner motivational antecedents. The motivational antecedents examined by him were expectancy and self-efficacy, valence, causal attributions and goal-setting (Gardner & Tremblay, 1995). Some of these antecedents will be discussed in the remainder of this paper. For the time being it will be proposed that the construct sense of progress could be regarded as an additional motivational antecedent within Gardner's expanded motivational model. Similarly to the motivational antecedents aforementioned, it is an individual characteristic – individual learners develop unique perceptions about their learning progress – and it might have an effect on learners' motivation to learn the language – as was already suggested in previous sections of this paper.

## 2.2. Williams & Burden's Model of Motivation

Williams & Burden (1997) advocate a cognitive perspective on the study of motivation that revolves around individuals' decision-making about their own actions. This perspective implies that individuals are not at the mercy of outside forces over which they have no power. Within this cognitive standpoint, the aspect of choice is of fundamental importance since it presupposes that "people have choice over the way they behave and, therefore, have control over their actions" (Williams & Burden, 1997). Motivation is thus believed to be related to reasons why people choose to operate in particular ways and what elements have bearing on the choices they make.

Nonetheless, Williams & Burden recognize the constraints that arise from the exclusive adoption of the cognitive approach in the study of motivation. They claim that it might fail to include affective factors or social and contextual influences. For this reason, they deem it necessary to broaden this perspective by means of the adoption of a social constructivist view of motivation. This view focuses on the premise that each individual is differently motivated and makes his/her own sense of surrounding influences in ways that are particular to them. Additionally, it presupposes that an individual's motivation is dependent on social and contextual influences such as culture, context, social situation, significant other people and the individual's interaction with these people (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Under this perspective, Williams & Burden present a definition of motivation that is fundamentally cognitive but fits within a social constructivist framework. They define motivation as “a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal or goals” (Williams & Burden, 1997). This definition was the basis for William & Burden’s model of motivation that separated three phases of the motivation process alongside a continuum:

“Reasons for doing something” → “Deciding to do something” →  
“Sustaining the effort, or persisting” (Williams & Burden, 1997).

As they claimed, the first two stages entailed initiating motivation whereas the third stage entailed sustaining motivation.

The decision to act component of William & Burden’s model of motivation is argued to be influenced by a combination of both internal and external factors. Internal factors include intrinsic interest of activity, perceived value of activity, sense of agency, mastery, self-concept, attitudes, affective states, developmental age and stage and gender (Williams & Burden, 1997). According to them these internal factors intermingle with each other in a dynamic, non-linear fashion and the value that individuals ascribe to them will affect the level and extent of their motivation to carry out an activity. Besides affecting each other, internal factors are subject to the influences of external factors. Some critical external factors listed by Williams & Burden include significant others, the nature of interaction with significant others, the learning environment, and the broader context (Williams & Burden, 1997).

In light of Williams & Burden’s model of motivation, sense of progress could be seen as a primordially internal factor that may be influenced by external factors. It is primordially internal because it involves learners setting their own learning goals, giving their own personal definitions and judgments of success and failure, being aware of their own personal strengths and weaknesses, and assessing their own learning outcomes. Nevertheless, learners’ sense of progress can be decisively shaped by external factors such as the nature and amount of teachers’ feedback, classroom learning experiences, the nature and amount of praise received by significant others and societal expectations and attitudes.

### 2.3. Dörnyei’s Model of Motivation

Dörnyei (2005) endorses a process-oriented approach to the study of L2 learning motivation that takes into account the dynamic nature and temporal variation of motivation. Such an approach would “account for the daily ups

and downs of motivation to learn, that is, the ongoing changes for motivation over time” (Dörnyei, 2005). He maintains that students’ L2 learning motivation displays changeability in several varied learning time spans, ranging from a single L2 class to the situation of learning a language for months and years, or over a lifetime.

Consistent with this process-oriented perspective, Dörnyei (2005) presents a process model of L2 motivation that depicts some aspects of motivational development. This model categorizes the motivational process into several distinct chronological divisions that belong to three diverse motivational stages. The first stage - denominated preactional stage - involves the process of generation of motivation to learn the L2. This generated motivation is referred to as choice motivation because it “leads to the selection of the goal or task that the individual will pursue” (Dörnyei, 2005). The main motivational influences at the preactional stage include goal properties, values associated with the learning process itself, attitudes towards the L2 and its speakers, expectancy of success, learner beliefs and strategies and environmental support or hindrance (Dörnyei, 2005).

The second stage – labeled actional stage – is the stage where the generated motivation will be sustained and preserved while the specific action endures, developing into a new motivational dimension denominated executive motivation. According to Dörnyei, executive motivation is “particularly relevant to sustained activities such as studying an L2, and especially to learning in classroom settings, where students are exposed to a great number of distracting influences” (Dörnyei, 2005). The main motivational influences at the actional stage include the quality of the learning experience, learners’ sense of autonomy, teachers’ and parents’ influence, classroom reward- and goal structure, influence of the learner group and knowledge and use of self-regulatory strategies (Dörnyei, 2005). At last, the third stage – identified as the postactional stage – is the motivational phase that follows the conclusion of the action. In this stage, learners will make a retrospective assessment of the ways events occurred, which originates a motivational dimension termed motivational retrospection. The main motivational influences at this stage are attributional factors and self-concept beliefs as well as received feedback, praise and grades. As stated by Dörnyei, “the way students process their past experiences in this retrospective phase will determine the kind of activities they will be motivated to pursue in the future” (Dörnyei, 2005).

Two limitations of the process model of motivation described above are acknowledged by Dörnyei. First, it assumes that the actional process is “well-definable and has clear-cut boundaries” (Dörnyei, 2005), which is not truthful since it is difficult to establish when an action starts and finishes in an educational context. The second problem is related to the fact that the actional process does not take place in isolation, without any interventions

from other activities the learner is involved in. Individuals are often engaged in a number of parallel action procedures which means that a variety of action events can be concurrently in operation. For example, a new action may be commenced while the accomplishment of the preceding action is still being appraised. Dörnyei argues that “this is particularly valid for classroom contexts where student motivation and achievement are the product of a complex set of interacting goals and intentions of both academic and social nature” (Dörnyei, 2005).

At this point in the discussion of Dörnyei’s L2 model of motivation, it is imperative to locate it in a place for the construct sense of progress. It seems appropriate to view sense of progress as an additional motivational influence in both the actional and postactional stages of the motivational model in question. In the actional stage, sense of progress could be a key factor in establishing the individual’s control of his/her actions and promoting self-regulation in the learning process. In the postactional stage, sense of progress may be associated with causal attributions for learning successes and failures. Additionally, it may represent in this stage a crucial aspect in the beneficial construction of learning standards and strategies by learners – and its absence may lead to the harmful dismissal of the intention to learn and further planning (Dörnyei, 2005). The tentative placement of L2 learners’ sense of progress in these two motivational stages implies that it might hold the same dynamic character and temporal variation as Dörnyei’s concept of motivation.

### *3. Sense of Progress and Individuals’ Definitions of Success and Failure*

It was proposed in the second section of this paper that L2 learners’ sense of progress is determined by individuals’ definitions of successes and failures in L2 learning. This hypothesis also implies that these definitions are peculiar to each individual, i.e., what constitutes success for a particular learner in a given learning task may represent failure for another. These conceptual disparities across individuals about their language learning achievements will inevitably produce a multiplicity of perceptions about their L2 learning progress.

As maintained by Frieze et al (1983), success and failure are not tangible experiences - they are psychological conditions that result of the perception of achieving or not achieving goals. The goal aspect in L2 learners’ sense of progress will be dealt with in a subsequent section of this paper. These authors also argue that success is individually defined and influenced by societal norms and comparison with relevant others. In addition, they state that success has been defined in the research literature as “doing well at a challenging or effort-requiring task, exceeding one’s

expectations and defeating rivals, and doing well in specific situations” (Frieze et al, 1983).

Williams & Burden (1999) point out four levels of variation which individuals’ constructions of success and failure may display. First, they may vary from one subject area to another. Second, as mentioned above, they may differ from one individual to another. Third, in the school context, they may be influenced by “expectations and demands of the curriculum” (Williams & Burden, 1999). Finally, they may also be shaped by interactions with significant other people. According to Williams & Burden (1999), all these levels need to be scrutinized when investigating individuals’ conceptions of success and failure in learning settings.

Veroff (1977) identifies three standards for establishing definitions of success individuals may employ: task standards, personal standards and social standards. Task standards involve aspects such as types of tasks, task involvement and intrinsic qualities of the task. Personal standards consist of individuals’ comparison of achievement goals based on their internal standards with objective levels of performance. Lastly, social standards refer to factors such as the individual’s current performance and past achievements, social comparison and praise received by teachers and others (Veroff, 1977, quoted in Frieze et al, 1983, pp. 15-17).

When investigating L2 learners’ sense of progress, two specific factors need to be carefully taken into account. First, what L2 learners mean by learning successes and failures in view of their individual success values. Second, it is imperative to consider attributions regarding causes of performances perceived as successes or failures since an individual’s convictions about the reasons for his/her performance are central determinants of how successful the performance is identified to be. This observation leads to the next section of this paper that will delve into Attribution Theory and its paramount relevance to the development of the construct sense of progress in L2 learning.

#### *4. Attribution Theory and Sense of Progress*

Having emerged within the field of social psychology, Attribution Theory (henceforth AT) claims that human beings are motivated to find out the causes of events in order to enhance the understanding of their environment. In addition, AT proposes that the subjective causes to which individuals attribute their past successes and failures to a large extent affect their motivational disposition underlying future action. If, for instance, an individual’s past failure in a particular learning task is ascribed to low ability, the chances are that he/she will never attempt the task again. Conversely, if an individual accepts as true that his/her difficulty in a

learning activity is attributable to insufficient effort or inappropriate learning strategies, he/she is more likely to try it another time (Dörnyei, 2005).

A vast amount of research on AT concerning the determinants of success and failure has been carried out in the fields of education, sociology and psychology. In the field of second language acquisition, however, research into attributions in L2 learning is still in an incipient stage in spite of the fact that its importance has been emphasized by authors such as Dörnyei, Oxford & Shearin, Crookes & Schimdt and Skehan (all cited in Williams & Burden, 1999). As indicated by Dörnyei, “the study of attributions in L2 learning is clearly an important line of investigation with much future scope” (Dörnyei, 2005).

Fritz Heider (1958) was the first scholar to propose a psychological theory of attribution and is regarded by many as the responsible for the current growing interest in AT. He first wrote about AT in his book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships* (1958) which played a central role in the origination and definition of AT. As already mentioned above, Heider’s theory had as its underlying foundation the assumption that individuals need to find out the causes of events and to understand their environment. According to him, this causal search makes it possible a world that is more or less stable, predictable and controllable (Heider, 1958). Heider also argued that this search for explanation of events occurs both in impersonal situations and in interpersonal relations and that our actions derive from personal or impersonal causality. Personal causality is dependent on the individual’s control of his/her own actions. Impersonal causality, in turn, is subordinated to external forces (i.e. the environment). If one perceives an action as derived from personal forces, he is making a personal causality attribution. If, on the contrary, one attributes the event to causes external to him/her (which he/she does not have control over), he/she is making an impersonal causality attribution. Heider believed that the attribution of causality – either personal or impersonal - is a three-step process in which people have: (1) a perception of the action; (2) a judgment of intention; and (3) an attribution of disposition (Heider, 1958). Although Heider was the first to develop a theory of attribution, it was Bernard Weiner (1979, 1983 & 1986) who developed a theoretical framework for AT that has become a major research paradigm of social psychology. Weiner’s AT also lies on the assumption that individuals look for causal understanding seeking answers to events (Weiner 1983). He defines causes as “constructions imposed by the perceiver (either an actor or an observer) to account for the relation between an action and an outcome” (Weiner, 1986). According to him, these causes are particularly relevant when considering the reasons for success and failure in achievement-related situations.

The earliest version of Weiner's AT suggested that the four major attributions that individuals use to account for academic achievement (whether considered to be a success or a failure) are ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty. Graham (2004) points out that "effort, together with ability, is one of the attributions for success most commonly identified in western cultures and is generally held to have a positive influence on motivation". Nonetheless, later research has demonstrated that students point out other attributions for their perceived successes or failures such as: the teacher, being in a 'good' or 'bad' mood or feeling sick (Frieze et al, 1983). Moreover, Weiner himself acknowledged that "the potential causes of an achievement-related outcome are infinite" (Weiner, 1986). Graham (2004) adds that these causes are also subordinate to the context in which the attributions are made.

Due to the fact that there are numerous possible attributions for success or failure, Weiner conceived of an expanded, three-dimensional classification scheme of these attributions. The first dimension (locus of causality) of this scheme is related to the internalization or externalization of attributions. In other words, this dimension is concerned both with "factors that arise from inside of us", internal attributions, and "factor that arise from outside of us", external attributions (Weiner, 1986). The second dimension that plays a role in the consideration of attributions is stability, which involves the question of whether or not a factor can be changed. According to Williams and Burden (1997), it should be evident that ability and effort are categories of internal attribution, while luck and task difficulty are external forms of attribution. It should also seem evident that ability and task difficulty are stable factors, whereas effort and luck are unstable. They indicate, however, that individuals diverge in the ways in which they perceive these attributions. For example, someone may regard luck as an internal and stable attribute when they say, "I guess I was just born lucky". Someone might also consider ability to be an unstable factor when declaring to do better on certain days according to how one feels (Williams and Burden, 1997). The third attributional dimension included by Weiner comprises of attributions that individuals report are within or outside their control. This dimension is labeled controllability – and it refers to the level of "volitional influence that can be exerted upon a cause" (Weiner, 1986). According to Williams & Burden (1997), most people are prone to regard the amount of effort they put in a task as within their control and their ability to do well in a task as outside their control.

Williams & Burden (1997) draw attention to the fact that the arrangement of attribution components and dimensions fluctuates significantly between individuals concerning "specific events and activities". In short, "different combinations are likely to lead to different action outcomes". They also provide examples of these combinations and

outcomes. For example, if a person believes that he/she does not have the ability to learn a foreign language and views this inability as a stable internal factor beyond his/her control, then that person will be unlikely to make an effort to do better. Conversely, if a person judges that language ability is an unstable skill that can be enhanced by hard work, then that person will be more likely to make an effort to improve.

Weiner's basic attributional model postulated that "causal attributions are important mediators of subsequent performance" (Frieze et al, 1983). These authors state that even though Weiner's original attributional model has been improved and expanded, "most of the relevant research has supported the basic model" This basic model disregards the possibility of varying definitions of success performance. It has as a starting point an "established" success or failure by the researcher and explains the resulting processes. This practice does not allow for individual differences in success evaluations (Frieze et al, 1983).

It is necessary therefore to establish the differences between the objective success definitions used by researchers and the subjective appraisals of success offered by research participants. Weiner acknowledged that "attributional decisions represent phenomenal causality – it is the causal world as perceived by the viewer" (Weiner 1986). He also recognized as a "methodological error" in AT research the "failure to conceptualize the situation as perceived by the experimental subject" (Weiner, 1983). Frieze et al (1983) make a claim for a new and expanded model of the attribution process that should incorporate "subjective success definitions" and "the affect associated with success judgments" (Frieze et al, 1983).

According to Skehan (1989), what is relevant in AT to language learning are the causal factors to which success is attributed. If the stable factors of ability (such as intelligence and language aptitude) are deemed important, persistence will be lower. If unstable factors (such as effort and luck) are prominent, motivation will be enhanced because the learner will "see himself as having a potential impact on learning progress" (Skehan, 1989). Dörnyei (1990) identified an attribution about past failures component to L2 motivation and argued that these attributions are particularly important in foreign language learning contexts where L2 learning failure is a very frequent occurrence.

So far, the most significant research work concerning AT and L2 learning has been done by Marion Williams and Robert Burden. They advocate that the adoption of a constructive framework in the investigation of attributions. This framework is underlay by the assumption that different people define success in different ways and that progress in a learning enterprise is not an absolute, but instead it is conceptualized in "different ways by different cultures, groups and individuals" (Williams & Burden, 1997). Under this constructive perspective, learners' developing conceptions

of themselves form the core of the learning process because they “profoundly influence the ways in which individuals make sense of new stimuli and construct new knowledge” (Williams and Burden, 1999). The ways individuals view themselves as learners can shape their attitude towards new learning tasks and new information.

Along the lines of this constructive perspective Williams and Burden (1999) conducted a small-scale research study by investigating young learners’ attributions for success and failure in learning French at a school in the southwest of England. This study investigated the way in which students conceptualized the notion of “doing well” as well as their perceived reasons for their successes and failures. The results demonstrated that the majority of the interviewees conceptualize their achievement in terms of external factors such as teacher approval and grades. In addition, they found that the range of these conceptualizations increases with age. This increase corroborates Graham’s (2004) acknowledgment already mentioned in this section of the importance of the context in determining the range of attributions.

In another study Williams & Burden found that the range of attributional categories developed by FL students was partially a function of their cultural background (Williams et al, 2001). In this study they examined a sample of Arab students among whom the notion of luck was never mentioned and ability was rarely cited. Nevertheless, these participants mentioned a wide variety of attributional factors related to the classroom environment, circumstances, exposure to the language, interest, strategy use, and support from others (Williams et al, 2001).

AT represents a fundamental theoretical underpinning for the construct sense of progress in L2 learning given that students’ perceptions about their learning progress may be powerfully influenced by causal attributions they make for their perceived language learning successes and failures. The fact that the arrangement of attribution elements and dimensions fluctuates significantly between individuals in relation to particular events and activities implies that different arrangements are likely to lead to different action outcomes such as deciding to employ more, less or no effort in the task of language learning. This implies that performance attributions may also be a key determinant of L2 learners’ actual performance and for this reason their investigation is of paramount importance.

##### *5. Learners’ Goals and Sense of Progress*

Learning goals may constitute a critical aspect in promoting sense of progress in L2 students given the fact that, without them, learners are not likely to have a clear assessment of their learning progress. Provided that

students are successful in establishing and reaching learning goals, they are prone to achieve satisfaction with their learning progress and become further committed to these goals (Oxford & Shearin, 1994).

Veroff (1977) posits that the goal for any specific performance is based on ability estimates, assessment of the difficulty of the task, expectations based on past experiences and relationship of the present performance to longer range goals. This author also draws attention to the importance of the effect of goals on assessments of performance by arguing that “the discrepancy between desired and obtained performance is critical for subjective assessment of success” (Veroff, 1977, quoted in Frieze et al, 1983, p. 16).

Bandura (1997) adds that goals are unlikely to have much effect if there is little personal commitment to them since such commitment is affected by the degree to which goals are personally established. If goals are stipulated by others, individuals might not necessarily acknowledge them or feel obliged to achieve them (Bandura, 1997). Oxford & Shearin (1994) highlight that L2 students’ learning goals ought to be realistic but challenging and they should concern their ultimate L2 proficiency. From this ultimate proficiency goal, students should be able to develop immediate and attainable learning sub goals that are precisely what gives them a sense of progress.

Bandura (1997) also makes a case in favor of proximal learning goals by claiming that they bestow instant incentives and guides for current learning activities – in contrast to distant goals that are too remote in time to be helpful self-motivators. According to him, self-motivation is best maintained by bringing together a “long-range goal” (that sets the route of an individual’s endeavor) with a series of achievable sub goals to guide and sustain this individual’s efforts along the way (Bandura, 1997).

In addition to functioning as cognitive motivators, Bandura (1997) claims that proximal goals serve as a valuable instrument for promoting a sense of personal efficacy in individuals. Without criteria against which to evaluate their performance, people have not enough foundation for estimating how they are doing or for judging their capabilities. According to him, the need to concentrate on progress rather than on distal outcomes is particularly important for individuals “who are convinced of their personal inefficacy and who need repeated self-persuasive evidence that they have what it takes for high attainments” (Bandura, 1997). He adds that it is easier to inculcate beliefs of personal efficacy in an individual if the instruction and feedback focus not only on level of performance but also on mastery of strategies that allow this individual to attain progress (Bandura, 1997).

*6. Locus of Control and Sense of Progress*

As indicated by Oxford & Shearin (1994), L2 learners must believe that they have some control over both their learning successes and learning failures. If they feel they are in control of the learning situation, it is likely that they will feel more responsible for their own learning and as a result become more autonomous and less dependent on teachers' guidance and supervision. This autonomy, in turn, may promote not only a sense of progress but also a sense of efficiency within learners so that they will wish to persist in learning the L2 (Oxford & Shearin, 1994).

Locus of control is a concept developed from the Social Learning Theory of Julian Rotter (1954). It draws a distinction between internals – individuals who feel personally responsible to what occurs to them – and externals – individuals who feel that their outcomes in life are determined by influences beyond their control. Most individuals are located at some point between these two extremes and many people are inclined toward one extreme or the other where significant life events are concerned. In addition, individuals typically differ in the ways they have a sense of control over negative as opposed to positive occurrences events (Findley & Cooper, 1983).

Williams & Burden state that research investigating locus of control and its relationship with learning revealed that individuals that hold a high internal locus of control display a strong predisposition “to seek information and use it appropriately in problem-solving tasks, to be active and assertive and to exhibit a high degree of exploratory behavior and excitement about learning” (Williams & Burden, 1997). They also point out that it is vital that locus of control is not regarded as a permanent or static characteristic since this perspective does not empower learners in terms of assuming responsibility for their own learning. If learners believe that they can do nothing to change the locus of control, they will relinquish control over to the circumstances and thereby reduce the likelihood of any positive change.

**Towards a Definition of Sense of Progress**

It has been argued in this paper that the notion of L2 learners' sense of progress is directly linked to at least six crucial aspects. An overview of the theoretical developments related to each one of these aspects has been attempted with the intention of building associations that could assist in the ultimate goal of this study: to propose a tentative definition of sense of progress in L2 learning. The definition that will be suggested is the following:

L2 learners' sense of progress is a component of metacognitive knowledge that involves learners' management and assessment of the

outcomes (successes or failures) of their learning activities in face of their personally established learning goals. These successes or failures are individually defined and perceived differently by different learners. These definitions and perceptions may be influenced by internal or external factors and are strongly shaped by causal attributions learners make for their learning outcomes. Sense of progress is a key factor in promoting learners' control over their learning process and it is a powerful motivational influence in L2 learning.

As a final point, it is important to reiterate that no claims towards the unquestionable comprehensiveness and conclusiveness of the definition suggested above are being made. As previously indicated in this discussion, this provisional elaboration is simply a first move that will hopefully encourage much needed theoretical and empirical studies that would contribute to the development of a more wide-ranging description of the construct sense of progress in L2 learning.

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