Relationship between Iraqi EFL Teachers' Teaching Behavior and their Students' L2 Motivation and Academic Self-concept

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Abstract:

This research aims to explore the connections between teacher behavior, L2 motivation, and academic self-concept (ASC) in Iraqi EFL high school contexts. Eight intact classes in Baghdad and Karbala were initially chosen for the study, with 200 students serving as the sample group. Data collection spanned three weeks, starting with students filling out a teacher behavior questionnaire in print. A week later, they responded to the L2 Motivational Self-System Questionnaire and, one more week later, completed the ASC questionnaire. The findings reveal a positive link between students' L2 motivation, ASC, and various teacher behavior traits. Notably, all components of L2 motivation and ASC are correlated to different extents with teacher behavior traits, with enthusiasm and rapport showing as the most influential predictors. These results suggest that the learning environment preferences are tied to both students' and teachers' thinking styles. Hence, this study encourages language educators to consider the impact of the L2 classroom environment and their teaching practices to foster a more conducive learning atmosphere.

Keywords: Instructional behavior, academic self-concept (ASC), motivation, learning environment

Introduction

There is extensive existing research on effective teaching practices in primary and secondary schools (Brophy & Good, 1986; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974), as well as in higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Perry & Smart, 2007). However, there is a scarcity of research in higher education literature exploring effective teaching behaviors in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and how they influence EFL learners' psychological aspects like motivation and ASC. This study aimed to fill this research gap. The notion of learning environment includes elements such as teacher-student interactions, choice of educational materials, instructional approaches, student motivational techniques, and evaluation methods (Fraser, 2002; Wubbels & Levy, 1993). The importance of teachers' behavior in creating a positive classroom environment and influencing student learning outcomes is highlighted (Wubbels & Levy, 1993). Research on motivation seeks to understand the underlying reasons for individuals' thoughts and actions, including decision-making, persistence, and effort levels (Dornyie, 2001). The understanding of motivation is crucial in English as EFL settings. Self-concept, a well-established concept in social science, is also significant in educational settings (James, 1896; Denissen, Zarrett, & Eccles, 2007; Hattie, 1992; Marsh & Yeung, 1998; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Self-concept encompasses personal beliefs related to academic performance, gender roles, and racial identity. This study aimed to investigate how teachers' instructional approaches are connected to concepts like second language (L2) motivation and ASC by building on existing research. The traditional focus of second language acquisition (SLA) has been on exploring the various factors that can influence the complex aspects of human behavior related to language learning in EFL/ESL environments (Brown, 2007). This understanding is essential for aiding educators of foreign languages in deciphering how to effectively assist learners in acquiring proficiency and reaching their language learning goals. One aspect that has been explored in research is the interpersonal conduct of teachers (den Brok, 2001).

There is an extensive body of research delving into the relationship between particular teacher actions, learning of course-related knowledge, and student success. This research has been synthesized in various meta-analyses and narrative reviews (e.g., Abrami, d'Apollonia, & Rosenfield, 2007; Feldman, 1996, 1997; McKeachie, 1997; Wachtel, 1998; among others). Nonetheless, despite the wealth of studies on effective teacher behaviors and their effects on student learning and achievement, there is limited understanding of how specific teaching practices are linked to individual student traits like motivation and ASC in the context of second language (L2) education.

Moreover, the issue of how to inspire students has been a key point of interest for educators, teachers, and teacher trainers for a considerable amount of time (Dorniye, 2001). The interest in understanding the influence or connection that teachers' actions can have on students' emotional factors such as second language (L2) motivation and self-concept is evident in various educational research fields, including educational psychology, subject-specific instruction, school and teacher effectiveness studies, examination of learning environments, and second language acquisition (Brekelmans, Sleegers & Fraser, 2000; den Brok, Bergen, Stahl, & Brekelmans, 2004; Wubbels & Levy, 1993). With a shortage of research in the Iraqi context, this study aimed to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the potential relationships among different aspects of teacher behavior inventory and those of the L2 motivational self-system (Dorniye, 2001) and ASC in the Iraqi EFL context.

A. *1.1 Teacher Teaching Behavior*

Teacher behavior has a significant impact on language teaching, directly influencing students' language acquisition, motivation, and overall learning experience (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). The way teachers engage with students, the strategies they use, and the feedback they offer all contribute to effective language instruction.

In the realm of language teaching, creating a supportive and communicative classroom environment stands out as a critical aspect of teacher behavior (Richards & Rogers, 2001). By establishing positive relationships with students, expressing empathy, and cultivating a safe space for language practice and experimentation, teachers can establish a perfect learning atmosphere where students are motivated to join in actively in language learning, dare to take risks, and participate in meaningful interactions (Dornyei & MacIntyre, 2011).

Effective communication also plays a key role in teacher behavior within language teaching (Long & Richards, 2015). Teachers who utilize clear and understandable language, present appropriate models of target language usage (Harmer, 2007), and facilitate authentic communication opportunities (Breen, 1987) foster language development. Through the use of suitable instructional language, teachers assist students in grasping new concepts, vocabulary, and grammar structures, guiding them toward accurate and fluent language use (Ellis, 2009).

Moreover, teacher behavior encompasses various instructional strategies and techniques. Educators who incorporate a range of teaching approaches, such as communicative activities, role-plays, games, and authentic materials, cater to diverse learning styles and actively involve students in practicing the language (Richards & Nunan, 1990). By providing appropriate support and progressively increasing the task complexity, teachers scaffold learning effectively, a concept developed by Wood et al. (1976), and help students enhance their language skills.

Feedback and assessment also hold significant importance in teacher behavior within language teaching (Sadler, 1989). Offering timely and constructive feedback empowers students to recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, guiding them along their language learning journey (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Teachers who deliver specific and focused feedback on language accuracy, pronunciation, and communication skills assist students in refining their language abilities and building their confidence (Wiliam & Black, 1989).

Lastly, the enthusiasm and passion displayed by teachers in the field of language teaching have a profound impact on students' motivation and engagement (Emmer & Brophy, 2011). When teachers exhibit genuine enthusiasm for the language, culture, and learning process, they inspire students to become more invested in their language learning journey (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Enthusiastic educators foster a positive classroom atmosphere that nurtures students' curiosity, intrinsic motivation, and eagerness to explore and master the language (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

B. *1.2 L2 Motivation and L2 Motivational System*

L2 motivation, or second language motivation, is a key factor that influences language learning success and proficiency. It refers to the reasons or driving forces that compel individuals to learn a second language. Understanding L2 motivation is crucial for educators and learners alike as it can impact engagement, persistence, and ultimately, language learning outcomes. According to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005), motivation is a dynamic and complex process that involves various components such as the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience.

The L2 Motivational Self System proposed by Dörnyei suggests that individuals are motivated to learn a second language based on their ideal self, which is their vision of the person they want to become through language proficiency. The ought-to self, on the other hand, represents the person an individual believes they should not become, motivating them to avoid failures or setbacks in language learning. These aspects of the self-play a significant role in shaping an individual's motivation and persistence in their L2 learning journey (Dörnyei, 2005).

Additionally, Dörnyei's theory emphasizes the importance of the L2 learning experience itself in shaping motivation. Positive learning experiences, such as successful communication in the target language, receiving praise or recognition for language skills, or feeling a sense of belonging in the target language community, can enhance motivation and foster a deeper commitment to language learning (Dörnyei, 2005).

Research has consistently demonstrated the significant influence of the L2 motivational self-system on various aspects of language learning, such as language proficiency, learning strategies, and learner autonomy (Tseng & Lin, 2017; Behjat & Derakhshan, 2018; Yang, 2017). Learners with a stronger Ideal L2 Self and more positive L2 learning experiences tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation and ultimately achieve greater success in their language learning endeavors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Understanding the dynamics of L2 motivation and the L2 motivational self-system is crucial for language educators, as it can inform the design of effective instructional strategies and the development of language learning materials that cater to the unique needs and aspirations of individual learners (Dörnyei, 2009). By leveraging the power of self-guides and fostering positive learning experiences, language instructors can cultivate sustained motivation and enhance the overall language learning outcomes of their students.

C. 1.3 Academic Self-concept (ASC)

In the field of language education, ASC refers to how language learners perceive their own language learning abilities and proficiency. This aspect plays a crucial role in shaping learners' goal-setting, motivating their efforts, and determining whether they continue with their learning journey or give up (Erten & Burden, 2014). While self-concept and self-efficacy are related in terms of self-perception, Bong and Skaalvik (2003) distinguish them by highlighting that self-concept is more overarching and geared towards goals, encompassing an individual's assessments and perceptions of their proficiency in a specific area. Conversely, self-efficacy is task-specific, reflecting an individual's perceptions and evaluations of their abilities to carry out a particular task or activity. However, a majority of studies centering on self-related beliefs have predominantly concentrated on self-efficacy.

In the field of language teaching and learning, there have been limited investigations on studying ASC (e.g., De Fraine, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2007; Erten & Burden, 2014; Marsh, Hau, & Kong, 2002; Mercer, 2011). Mercer (2011) explored ASC in the foreign language domain, discovering that it comprises both changeable (dynamic) and enduring (stable) aspects. The dynamic part includes beliefs that can adapt to context, while the stable part includes more steadfast beliefs. Erten and Burden (2014) later investigated the links between ASC, attributions, and second language (L2) achievement, revealing a strong connection between ASC and language learning results. These studies collectively highlight that contextual factors, like teachers' teaching behavior, can affect ASC, an area that has not yet received sufficient attention.

1. Previous Research on Teaching Behavior, Motivation and Academic Self-concept

The interaction between students and teachers in learning environments is essential for the educational experience, as highlighted by research (Wubbels, Créton, & Hooymayers, 1992). Both students and teachers play a vital role in shaping the classroom teaching and learning process (Leary, 1957; Wubbels & Levy, 1993). Studies have shown that teacher interpersonal behavior has a positive impact on students' cognitive and affective learning outcomes (den Brok et al., 2004; Meece, 2003; She & Fisher, 2002), and students' perceptions of the classroom environment significantly influence their learning achievement and satisfaction with learning (Meece, 2003).

Research has revealed that strong teacher-student bonds are linked to higher levels of student involvement, leading to better academic performance (Roorda et al., 2011). Additionally, teacher assistance and attentiveness have been associated with enhanced cognitive development in students

(Hamre & Pianta, 2001), as well as improved social skills and reduced behavior issues (Pianta et al., 2003).

Studies have also explored the influence of teacher support on students' motivation and self-esteem. The findings suggest that students who feel they receive more support from teachers show increased academic motivation and higher levels of self-esteem (Wentzel, 2002). Furthermore, research has highlighted the significant role of the L2 motivational self-system in language learning motivation and success (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Derakhshan & Behjat, 2018; Yang, 2017; Azimi, 2018; Tseng & Lin, 2017; Behjat & Derakhshan, 2018; Karimnia & Ketabi, 2016; Yang, 2017; Ahmadi & Behjat, 2018).

Interestingly, studies have also explored the impact of student grouping on ASC. Ireson, Hallam, and Plewis (2001) found that grouping affected the ASC of weaker students in English learning environments, while Liu, Wang, and Parkins (2005) observed that over time, lower-achieving secondary students developed a more positive ASC than their high-achieving peers.

Scholars have highlighted that students' ASC can be enhanced when placed in a high-performing group, known as the "assimilation effect" (Marsh et al., 2000; Trautwein et al., 2006). Conversely, if students' ASC is adversely affected by the exceptional achievements of their high-performing peers, a "contrast effect" is observed (Marsh, 1991, 1994; Marsh & Hiu, 2003; Marsh & Parker, 1984).

Guay and colleagues (2010) emphasized the key role of motivation in linking ASC and academic performance. In a separate study, Liu and Chang (2013) explored the utilization of language learning strategies (LLSU) among EFL university students in relation to ASC. They identified a robust and positive connection between 50 language learning strategy items and ASC, with metacognitive and cognitive strategies exhibiting the strongest associations. Arnaiz and Guillen (2012) studied 216 university students across various English language courses to analyze the influence of gender, age, language marks, language proficiency level, and ASC. They unveiled a noteworthy positive connection between students' marks and the emotional aspect of ASC, while observing a negative correlation between students' proficiency level and ASC. Tamannaifar, Sadeghi, and Sakami (2011) explored the link between ASC and academic achievement among 400 university students, but did not uncover a significant relationship. Conversely, Qalavand and colleagues (2013) focused on a homogeneous EFL intermediate class of 30 students and identified a significant correlation between ASC and academic success.

Tang's research (2013) uncovered a marked association between proficiency in English pronunciation and one's overall self-concept in English. The study demonstrated that individuals with a strong belief in their English pronunciation skills also tended to have a positive perception of their general English abilities. Meshkat and Hosseini (2022) involving 320 high school students employed intact sampling. The researchers examined academic performance using tests in English, Persian literature, Arabic, and Theology. The findings indicated a robust link between students' ASC and their academic accomplishments, encompassing both English proficiency and overall academic grades.

By using multiple regression analysis, this study aimed to identify which aspects of Iraqi teachers' teaching practices inventory are most predictive of their students' motivation to learn a second language. This research sought to address the current research gap by examining the specific elements of teachers' behavior that may be associated with learners' motivation and ASC. Thus, the following research questions were formulated:
(1) What components of Iraqi EFL teachers' teaching behavior are better predictors of their students' L2 motivation?
(2) What components of Iraqi EFL teachers' teaching behavior are better predictors of their students' academic self-concept?

Method
D.   3.1 Participants
In this study, the focus group was Iraqi high school students attending English GB classes in Karbala and Baghdad. By using convenience sampling, 8 undivided classes of high school students were chosen. The average class size was 25, totaling 200 students who were given three surveys to complete over separate days, with a one-week gap in between each day. All participants are native Arabic speakers. The students, spanning ages 14 to 19, included both male and female individuals.

Across the classes, there were eight different EFL teachers holding an M.A. or a B.A. degree in TEFL, each with a minimum of 3 years of experience teaching English to high school students.

2. Data Collection Instruments
E. 4.1 Teachers' Teaching Behavior Inventory
In order to investigate the teachers' teaching behavior, Murray's (1983) questionnaire was used. This survey is widely utilized in analyzing teachers' behaviors and has been valuable in numerous studies. Consisting of 60 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, the questionnaire was intended to gather L2 students' perceptions of their teachers' instructional methods. The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed using the Alpha Cronbach method, showing a satisfactory level of reliability (r=0.78). To validate the questionnaire, two Ph.D. experts in TEFL reviewed and endorsed its validity.

F. 4.2 L2 Motivational Self-System Questionnaire
To examine students' motivation for learning a second language, Taguchi and colleagues (2009) utilized a survey with 87 items that were ranked on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.' The survey focused on 10 different factors, such as outcome expectations, ideal self in the second language, obligations in language learning, family influence, practicality, attitudes toward learning the language, interest in the language's culture, attitudes toward the language community, and openness to integrating the language in motivation. The tool's reliability was computed, showing a satisfactory level of internal consistency (α= 0.74). Moreover, the questionnaire's validity was ensured by consulting two experts.

G. 4.3 Academic Self-concept Questionnaire
Another survey employed in the study was the initial ASC scale survey developed by Liu and Wang in 2005. This survey consists of two parts: one centering on academic self-assurance and the other on academic diligence, with each section containing 10 assertions graded on a Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. This survey was utilized to collect data on L2 learners' ASC. The questionnaire's reliability (r=0.81) and validity (through expert opinion) were also assessed.

Procedure
In the beginning of the research, eight intact classes of high school students in Karbala and Baghdad were chosen, with approval from school authorities and teachers. These classes were taught by eight different EFL teachers who held either an M.A. or a B.A. degree in TEFL, each having a minimum of 3 years of experience in teaching English in Iraqi high schools. The average class size in high schools is 25 students, totaling 200 students who were given three questionnaires to complete. Initially, students were provided with a printed version of a questionnaire on teachers' teaching behavior by Murray (1983) to fill out within 40 minutes on the first day. A week later, they were given the L2 Motivational Self-System Questionnaire to complete in approximately one hour. Subsequently, after another week, students were presented with a questionnaire on ASC designed by Liu and Wang (2005) to be completed in 30 minutes. The collected data was analyzed using Multiple Regression analysis to address the research questions in the study.

Results
The first research question in the study was: "Which aspects of the teaching behavior demonstrated by Iraqi EFL teachers most effectively forecast their students' motivation in learning a second language?" To address this question, the researchers utilized multiple regressions to explore how the eight teaching behavior subcategories influenced the second language motivation of the students. The findings from the data analysis revealed positive correlations between the students' L2 motivation scores and all of the teachers' teaching behavior subcategories. The connection between motivation and clarity was slightly positive (r = .28), along with the relationships between motivation and interaction (r = .10), motivation and pacing (r = .27), motivation and disclosure (r = .21), and motivation and speech (r = .17). Conversely, the links between motivation and enthusiasm (r = .35), motivation and organization (r = .43), and motivation and rapport (r = .45) were moderately positive. Furthermore, additional examination indicated that the eight teaching behavior subcategories could significantly predict the students' L2 motivation. Notably, the highest predictive value was observed for enthusiasm (.28), followed by rapport (.25), signifying that teachers' levels of enthusiasm and rapport had the most substantial impact on explaining the students' second language motivation.

The second research question of this study explored which aspects of Iraqi EFL teachers' teaching behaviors serve as better indicators of their students' ASC. To address this inquiry, the researchers

employed multiple regressions to assess the impact of eight teaching behavior categories on students' ASC. The findings revealed that students' ASC scores were positively associated with all teaching behavior subcategories. Specifically, ASC exhibited moderate positive correlations with clarity (r = .36), enthusiasm (r = .38), organization (r = .44), and rapport (r = .41), all of which were statistically significant at p < .05. Additionally, ASC showed weak positive correlations with pacing (r = .25), disclosure (r = .18), and speech (r = .41), all demonstrating statistical significance. However, the relationship between ASC and interaction was weak, positive, and not statistically significant (r = .09). Upon further examination through multiple regressions, it was evident that the eight teaching behavior subcategories could significantly predict L2 students' ASC. Notably, enthusiasm scored the highest value (.27) among the teacher behaviors, followed by organization (.24), indicating that teachers' enthusiasm and organizational skills made the most substantial contributions towards explaining L2 students' ASC.

Discussion

The study aimed to address the lack of research in the Iraqi context by exploring how teacher behavior, L2 motivation, and ASC are interconnected in Iraqi EFL education. It sought to identify which aspects of teacher behavior best predict students' L2 motivation and ASC. The findings revealed a positive link between students' L2 motivation and the various aspects of teacher behavior. Specifically, enthusiasm and rapport were identified as the most influential predictors of L2 motivation.

The results of this study reinforce previous findings by other researchers who have supported the link between teachers' behavior and students' L2 motivation (Wubbels & Levy, 1993; Vanthournout, Zhang & Huang, 2001, Zhang 2002; Donche, Gijbels & Van Petegem, 2011). Put simply, this study, aligned with prior research, suggests that teachers' cognitive styles are related to their preferred interpersonal behavior in teaching, and these behaviors can directly impact students' personal factors such as motivation (Zhang & Sternberg, 2006; Javidkar & Soleimani, 2016; Colombo, 2017). Similarly, the results of this study echo findings from other research that have demonstrated a positive correlation between teacher classroom practices and students' motivation (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2011). Hence, it can be inferred that numerous researchers acknowledge the association between teacher classroom conduct and students' overall behavior and specifically their L2 motivation levels.

These observations can be linked to the pivotal role of the L2 learning environment in language acquisition and students' perception of their learning (Fraser, 2002; Khany & Ghoreyshi, 2013). Indeed, the L2 learning environment significantly influences the success or failure of learners, as highlighted by Dörnyei (2009) as a key factor closely related to L2 motivation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that other related studies (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2011) emphasize the importance of creating effective learning environments in language classrooms. The learning environment is composed of multiple elements, with teachers' teaching behavior being the most crucial, as it can establish and sustain a motivating atmosphere within the classroom, nurturing better learning outcomes (Zhang & Sternberg, 2006). Furthermore, the finding that teachers' enthusiasm and rapport significantly contribute to explaining L2 motivation aligns with previous research suggesting that L2 students highly value the quality of their relationships with their teachers, sometimes even more than the actual classroom practices (Saafin, 2005; Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, & Al-Siyabi, 2015). Given the importance students place on building interpersonal connections with their teachers, it is expected that they also consider teachers' enthusiasm and rapport as crucial factors influencing their L2 motivation.

With regard to the second research question, the study demonstrated a positive relationship between students' ASC and teacher behavior, with enthusiasm and organization emerging as significant predictors of ASC. The results regarding the second research question align with prior studies that have established a link between teachers' conduct and students' ASC (Sanches & Roda, 2003; Arnold, 2007; Wei, den Brok, & Zhou, 2009; Mercer, 2011). Numerous researchers have found that teachers who demonstrate care for their students and exhibit genuine interest in and enthusiasm for their academic progress have a positive impact on students' ASC, thereby contributing to their academic success. Therefore, it is not unexpected to observe a strong correlation between students' ASC and academic achievements with the behaviors exhibited by teachers. Furthermore, our findings supplement existing research that emphasizes the significance of interpersonal interactions within the L2 classroom for effective language learning, often superseding the importance of instructional materials and methodologies (Dörnyei, 2009; Glotova & Wilhelm, 2014). Arnold and Brown (1999) also noted that even the most innovative techniques and engaging materials may prove ineffective in a learning environment influenced by negative emotional factors. Hence, the present study underscores

the role of teachers' enthusiasm as a crucial emotional factor in explaining and predicting students' ASC. Likewise, the current results substantiate the notion put forth by other scholars that teachers' behaviors within the L2 instructional setting play a predictive role in shaping students' perceptions of their ASC (Marsh, Han, & Kong, 2002). In essence, ASC constructs as social factors can significantly impact the development of ASC in students.

Conclusions

In light of the limited research conducted in the Iraqi setting, this study aimed to bridge the gap in existing literature by exploring the potential connections among the different elements of the teacher behavior inventory, L2 motivational self-system, and ASC in the Iraqi EFL environment. The primary goal was to identify which aspects of teachers' behavior most accurately forecast Iraqi students' L2 motivation and ASC. Consequently, the study found a positive relationship between students' L2 motivation scores and the various facets of teachers' teaching behavior, showing that all aspects of the L2 motivational self-system were linked, albeit to varying extents, with the elements of teachers' teaching behavior. Notably, the study revealed that the eight components of teaching behavior could effectively forecast students' L2 motivation, with enthusiasm and rapport emerging as the most influential predictors. Moreover, the study findings indicated a positive correlation between students' ASC scores and all aspects of teachers' teaching behavior. Similar to the L2 motivational self-system components, the ASC questionnaire components displayed varying levels of correlation with the teachers' teaching behavior facets. The study highlighted that enthusiasm and organization were the most significant predictors of ASC.

The findings of the current study can contribute to advancing existing research, but there are constraints that should be recognized. One significant limitation to consider when interpreting our study results is the specific population and sample of learners involved. All participants were drawn from undergraduate students of English Translation in eight intact classes at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch, potentially impacting the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, the study distributed three questionnaires to 300 students. Including a larger and more diverse sample size could enhance the generalizability of the results, but the researcher only had access to this number of participants. Moreover, conducting interviews could provide deeper insights into opinions and perceptions related to the topic, but a lack of available subjects made this unfeasible. Lastly, the researcher did not conduct a pilot study before the main research due to time constraints, which is another limitation of the study. A pilot study could have highlighted issues encountered during the research process.

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