

# Time Perspective: A New Construct for Motivation in Second Language Learning

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## Abstract

Studies of motivation in ESL learners have proliferated in recent years (Dornyei, 2005). However, there is an aspect of motivation and self-regulation that, despite having received a good deal of attention in general psychological studies, has not been addressed with regard to ESL learners, namely, time perspective. Time perspective refers to the ways in which an individual views his past, present, and future and how those conceptions of time influence motivation and achievement. Research suggests that an individual's perspective on time can either positively or negatively affect his attitude towards present tasks and responsibilities (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). In this paper I will review the psychological theory and literature on time perspective and describe the results of a preliminary study designed to develop an instrument with which to explore time perspective in Japanese university students.

Researchers in psychology have developed various theories concerning the ways individuals conceptualize themselves within time and the effect that these conceptualizations have on behavior. These theories include the ideas of possible selves, the temporally extended self, time orientation, and temporal orientation (Leondari, 2007). Some recent psychological theorizing on time has centered on psychometric measurement of human time perspective and its effect on motivation, self-regulation, and happiness (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Within this perspective, there has been research that has specifically investigated attitudes towards time in educational contexts (Kauffman & Husman, 2004). However, to date, there have not been any studies that have attempted to apply this psychometric analytical assessment of time perspective to the analysis of second-language learners' motivation and level of achievement.

## Literature review

### *The Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory*

Many different instruments have been used to measure individuals' time perspective

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(Jackson, 2006). One such instrument is the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Zimbardo and Boyd define time perspective as “the often nonconscious process whereby the continual flows of personal and social experiences are assigned to temporal categories, or time frames, that help to give order, coherence, and meaning to those events” (p. 1271). They have developed a 56-item Likert-response questionnaire that measures five dimensions of an individual’s time perspective. The five dimensions of the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI) are Past-Negative, Present-Hedonistic, Future, Past-Positive, and Present-Fatalistic. These five dimensions were determined through exploratory factor analysis of the survey after it was administered to 606 students at two universities in California (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

Past-Negative reflects a negative, aversive view of the past. This view may result from actual adverse experiences or could be due to a negative interpretation of the past. Some ZTPI items related to this factor are “Painful past experiences keep being replayed in my mind,” and “I’ve made mistakes in the past that I wish I could undo.” Present-hedonistic describes an attitude of thrill-seeking and pleasure-seeking in the present with little regard for future consequences. Sample items loading on this factor include, “I believe that getting together with one’s friends to party is one of life’s important pleasures,” and “It is important to put excitement in my life.” The Future perspective reflects a focus on future goals and rewards accompanied by a willingness to forgo gratification in the present in order to achieve those goals. A typical item loading on this factor is “Meeting tomorrow’s deadlines and doing other necessary work comes before tonight’s play.” Past-Positive indicates a warm, sentimental feeling for the past. A representative survey item would be “Familiar childhood sights, sounds, smells often bring back a flood of wonderful memories.” The final factor is Present-Fatalistic. It indicates hopelessness, resignation, and a feeling that life’s events are uncontrollable. A sample item is “Since whatever will be will be, it doesn’t really matter what I do.”

Test-retest reliability of the ZTPI was found to range from 0.70 to 0.80 for the five subscales. Zimbardo and Boyd investigated validity of the instrument by comparing a subsample ( $n = 205$ ) of their participants’ results on the ZTPI with the same participants’ results from 12 established scales that measured what Zimbardo and Boyd hypothesized to be constructs related to those on the ZTPI. Among these were constructs for aggression, depression, friendliness, openness, consideration of future consequences, impulse control, and self-esteem. Significant correlations were found between these scales and the ZTPI (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

#### *Implications of Time Perspective*

In their discussion and conclusion Zimbardo and Boyd suggested that a balanced time

perspective is most psychologically healthy for individuals and most conducive to successful societal functioning (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). They defined balance as “the mental ability to switch flexibly among TPs depending on task features, situational considerations, and personal resources rather than be biased toward a specific TP that is not adaptive across situations” (p. 1285). However, among their participants the survey results revealed many whose TPs were skewed towards a particular factor. Zimbardo and Boyd conducted case study interviews with 31 of these participants. They found behavioral and lifestyle features that could possibly be explained by an individual’s TP. For example, participants scoring high on the Past-Negative factor reported unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships and a disinclination to work for future rewards; participants scoring high on the Present-Hedonistic factor used alcohol more, had unclear future goals, and tended to be highly energetic. These and other similar findings suggest that time perspective could be useful in explaining the reasons behind motivation and self-regulation.

Zimbardo and Boyd went on to discuss TP with reference to other areas of psychological interest. For example, they considered TP with respect to health, homelessness, status, and sleep and dreaming problems. They did not have much to say about the effect of TP on education, except for a brief discussion of TP and dropout rates. However, other researchers have more explicitly investigated the possible relationships between time perspective and education (Kauffman & Husman, 2004). Phalet, Andriessen, and Lens (2004) explored the effect of future goals on enhancing motivation and learning in multicultural classrooms. Bembenutty and Karabenick (2004) posited an inherent association between delay of gratification, future time perspective, and self-regulated learning. Miller and Brickman (2004) have attempted to integrate the social-cognitive perspective on self-regulation with theories of future-oriented self-regulation. They recommend that research on motivation and self-regulation of students include investigation of students’ future goals and subgoals. McInerney (2004) delineated several key questions with respect to future time perspective and its relationship to desired educational outcomes. Among those questions were, what is the nature of the future that individuals articulate for themselves, what is the relationship between future time perspective and other psychological processes such as motivation and self-regulation, and what is the relationship of future time perspective to gender, culture, and socioeconomic status? These articles are just a small indication of the relatively new research on attitudes towards time as an individual-differences metric. Zimbardo and Boniwell (2004) critiqued such recent efforts and recommended both new directions for future research and possible practical applications in clinical psychology, in particular with respect to the recent interest in positive psychology and the psychology of happiness.

As can be seen in the work described above, the concept of time perspective and its relationship to motivation, self-regulation, and achievement has been explored in the fields of general psychology and, to some extent, in education, and some researchers have argued that it is an important psychological construct that merits further investigation. However, time perspective has not been investigated with regard to motivation in second-language learners.

## **Time Perspective in Japanese University Students**

### *Background*

As I have described, the full Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory is a 56-item questionnaire that measures TP on five subscales (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Research has also been conducted using a shorter version of the questionnaire (Appendix). The short version has 22 items and was designed to distinguish between Present TP and Future TP. This instrument has been used to assess risky driving behavior (Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997) and substance abuse by university students (Keough, Zimbardo, & Boyd, 1999). D'Alessio, Guarino, De Pascalis, and Zimbardo (2003) administered the short form of the ZTPI to a sample of 1507 Italian university students in order to assess its performance with participants from a different culture. The results of this study seemed to indicate that the instrument was testing three factors: Future, Hedonistic Present, and Fatalistic Present. The authors concluded that their results had, in general, paralleled the results obtained with a population of American university students. There were, however, some differences, and the authors expressed their intention to repeat the study with the 56-item version of the ZTPI.

### *Research questions*

The purpose of the present study was to investigate time perspective in Japanese university ESL students and to begin to develop a testing instrument that can measure TP in a Japanese cultural context. The research questions were as follows:

1. Can time perspective be measured as a valid, reliable individual-differences metric in Japanese university ESL students?
2. If it can be measured, does time perspective in Japanese university ESL students exhibit the same dimensional structure as has been found in studies of students from other cultures?

### *Participants*

One-hundred-fifty Japanese first-year university ESL students participated in this study.

### *Materials and method*

The instrument used in this study was a Japanese translation of the 22-item version of the ZTPI (D'Alessio, Guarino, De Pascalis, and Zimbardo, 2003).

### Results

The questionnaire data was analyzed for a three-factor solution with Varimax rotation. The results of this factor analysis were not as clear as the results claimed in the Italian study (D'Alessio et al., 2003). In the Italian study the three factors loaded cleanly and exclusively on the subscale items they were intended to measure. As can be seen in Table 1., this is not the case with the present study. There are complex loadings and some items load on different factors as compared to the Italian study. One reason for this discrepancy could be the relatively small sample size; 150 participants are probably too few for a factor analysis of a 22-item questionnaire (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). Another reason could be that the Italian study itself has some contradictory observations. For example, it's not clear why item 4, "It gives me pleasure to think about my past," should be considered a sign of Future TP. However, it's probably also true that some of the questionnaire items are inappropriate for Japanese university students. In fact, some students commented that some of the questions seemed confusing. These anomalies could be due to cultural differences or could be caused by problems in translating the survey into Japanese.

**Table 1.**  
*Rotated component matrix*

Item	F	HP	FP
1HP	.122	.589	.173
2F	.314	-.213	.613
3HP	-.274	.284	-.594
4F	.053	.296	-.136
5F	.701	.064	.033
6F	.659	-.177	.248
7F	.614	.266	.186
8FP	.672	.205	-.070
9FP	.150	.313	-.202
10HP	-.046	.738	-.047
11HP	-.007	-.158	.443
12FP	.016	.577	-.069
13HP	-.154	.486	-.110
14FP	-.099	.572	.031
15FP	-.296	.324	.602
16HP	-.051	.099	.690
17HP	.023	.435	-.064
18F	.565	-.084	.474
19HP	-.054	.142	-.306
20F	.421	.061	.413
21F	-.249	-.393	.148
22F	.533	-.136	-.163

F = Future, HP = Hedonistic-Present, FP = Fatalistic-Present (The item column indicates the factor loadings in the Italian study.)

### Discussion

Although the results show that the instrument in its present form may not be entirely suitable as a measure of Japanese university students' time perspective, they are not entirely discouraging. Some of the items did work as intended, for example items 1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22. A next step will be to try to do a smaller pilot study with the full 56-item ZTPI in order to select items from it that could be included in a revised version suitable for use with a population of Japanese university students.

The exploration of the relationships between time perspective, student behavior, and learning outcomes can provide new insight into motivation in second-language learners. Such insight can help shape approaches to teaching methodology and program development.

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## APPENDIX

### ZTPI SHORT FORM

- 1) I believe that getting together with one's friends to party is one of life's important pleasures.
- 2) I believe that a person's day should be planned ahead each morning.
- 3) If things don't get done on time, I don't worry about it.
- 4) It gives me pleasure to think about my past.
- 5) When I want to achieve something, I set goals and consider specific means for reaching those goals.
- 6) Meeting tomorrow's deadlines and doing other necessary work comes before tonight's play.
- 7) I believe that my future is beautiful and well planned.
- 8) I try to live my life as fully as possible one day at a time.
- 9) It doesn't make sense to worry about the future since there is nothing to do about it anyway.
- 10) When I have money I like playing and betting.
- 11) It upsets me to be late for appointments.
- 12) I do things impulsively and I take decisions at the moment.
- 13) I feel that it's more important to enjoy what you're doing than to get work done on time.
- 14) I don't make things that are important for me in the future, if they don't like me now.
- 15) I'm inclined to lose my self-control if someone provokes me.
- 16) It upsets me when people are late for appointments.
- 17) When I go to parties I get drunk.
- 18) I complete projects on time by making steady progress.
- 19) I take risks to put excitement in my life.
- 20) I make lists of things to do.
- 21) I keep working at difficult, uninteresting tasks if they will help me get ahead.
- 22) I am able to resist temptations when I know that there is work to be done.

**Note.** Respondents are asked to read each item and, as honestly as they can, answer the following question: "How characteristic or true is this of you?" (1 = *very uncharacteristic*, 2 = *uncharacteristic*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *characteristic*, 5 = *very characteristic*).