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**Zoltán Dörnyei, Katerina Mentzelopoulos,
*Lessons From Exceptional Language Learners
Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency:
Motivation, Cognition and Identity*
Multilingual Matters, 2022, xviii + 196 pp.**

The reviewed volume, *Lessons From Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency: Motivation, Cognition and Identity*, by Zoltán Dörnyei and Katarina Mentzelopoulos, forms part of the series in the Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching (Multilingual Matters). One of the world's leading figures in applied linguistics, Zoltán Dörnyei was Professor at the University of Nottingham (United Kingdom) before his untimely passing in the summer of 2022. Accordingly, as one of his last works, the current volume opens with an *in memoriam* by his co-author and doctoral student Katerina Mentzelopoulos, where she pays tribute to the scholar and the man whom she and many others held in such high esteem.

Though it of course depends on the context and type of interaction, one of the most appreciated accolades received by non-native L2 learners is to be unexpectedly mistaken for a native speaker. Indeed, with native-level proficiency often seen as the pinnacle of linguistic achievement by many language students and their teachers, it is perhaps surprising that research relating to the psychological and developmental features of such highly-skilled language learners has attracted scant attention from the scholarly community (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, p. xii).

The work's Introduction outlines the origin and novelty of the idea which led to the research project as well as information regarding the basic selection procedure for the interviewees (for example, heritage language learners were ineligible, as were learners who had mastered an L2 that they had been surrounded by during their childhood/teenage years). In addition, some preliminary

remarks on the broad approach taken over the course of the subsequent twelve chapters are also given. Noting the wealth of participant data obtained during the study, the Introduction also contrasts the reviewed work's more analytical approach to motivation, cognition, and identity with the more narrative-based approach taken in its interconnected yet independent companion volume (Mentzelopoulos & Dörnyei, 2022), which centres primarily on the voices and stories of these exceptional language learners.

The first three chapters provide the necessary background and context which are the foundation for the study. As such, Chapter 1 locates the analysis within the framework of past research on these exceptional learners. Acknowledging previous work done from a linguistic perspective, the authors then review the relevant literature on previous psychological and developmental studies pertaining to the processes, limitations, and characteristics of these nativelike learners. This is supplemented by an overview of other research that exceptional learners have participated in, but where their nativelike skills have not been the major focus (for example, in studies exploring the Critical Period Hypothesis or in more general research on aptitude and talent within language learning).

The second chapter outlines the methodological approach undertaken, with information on how the interviewees were obtained, as well as information on how the qualitative data was collected and analysed. Comprehensive demographic and linguistic information regarding the 30 participants is presented in a convenient table (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, pp. 23–26) which is a useful point of reference as the book progresses. With the title of the book explicitly referring to the concept of nativelikeness (and by extension, to the native speaker, Chapter 3 tackles this at-times contentious aspect by considering relevant interpretations of this concept as presented in the theoretical literature as well as by the study participants themselves. Indeed, a subsection of this chapter (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, pp. 35–39) focuses on the interviewees' own perception of those instances where they had been assumed to be native speakers of the L2.

The next seven chapters shine the spotlight firmly on the participants in this study, each adopting a similar structure of first presenting the salient aspects, before a closing discussion subsection provides additional analysis. This is supplemented by text boxes (ranging from half a page to a whole page in size) which present short examples taken from the relevant experiences of a given interviewee. In Chapter 4, entitled *A Favourable Set-Up*, the importance of environmental factors is underlined, including indirect and direct linguistic exposure through the media, family connections, as well as to broader social and societal aspects including globalisation and the seeming ubiquity of English encountered in certain non-Anglophone countries. Chapter 5 outlines how participants developed a bond with the selected L2, discussed as “one of the most important productive features” (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, p. 44)

of the interviewees' narratives. Indeed, some of the different aspects which were presented and discussed included cultural sources such as literature and music, direct contact with the L2 and its speakers, as well as practical reasons such as education, leisure, or socializing. For some, this could even comprise grammatical or script-related characteristics of a given language.

The sixth chapter shifts towards a cognitive focus, where the authors present and discuss various factors relating to personality, motivation, success, and so forth, also making the interesting observation that aspects of the study did not fully align with traditional approaches to language aptitude. Chapter 7 examines natively-like pronunciation, examining it through various lenses (e.g., via the L1, family influence, mimicry, musical training, social benefits, etc.). In analysing this phenomenon, the authors also posit that the lower priority of pronunciation in traditional L2 pedagogy may be the reason why many L2 learners might not realize their full capabilities in this area (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, p. 104). Chapter 8 highlights the efforts made and strategies employed by these natively-like learners to achieve their skills, including even by those who seemingly absorbed the L2 in a spongelike fashion. In this regard, the importance of creativity and awareness within learning patterns is also presented. As such, the authors observe that there are multiple “approaches that can lead to successful learning, provided that one takes a flexible approach” (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, p. 114). In the ninth chapter of the volume, Robert C. Gardner's (1985) theory of language learning motivation is used as a springboard for exploring personal and professional relationship-related and social aspects of these exceptional language learners. Dörnyei's (2020) framework is used to structure Chapter 10 of the volume, which examines the source of the persistence that the interviewees drew upon during their language-related quests. Using several automotive analogies as a metaphor (i.e., that the language learning journey is similar to going on a lengthy trip by car), this chapter presents the participants' experiences and insights accordingly.

In the penultimate chapter, the focus is on how interviewees view themselves within the context of their L2 proficiency, as the title *Confidence, Comfort, and Ownership* suggests. Chapter 12 highlights the concept of identity, the third element of the book's subtitle. Through analysing this multi-layered and often blurred notion, the authors seek to understand what “membership in the highly selective club of natively-like second language L2 speakers” (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022, p. 154) signifies to the interviewees. The book's conclusion draws together the various strands of motivation, cognition, and identity, and distils the insights gained through the study into eight succinct and impactful points.

In terms of dimensions, *Lessons From Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Natively-like Proficiency: Motivation, Cognition and Identity* comes in at 196 pages of text, including an appendix containing the interview

questions as well as a list of the over 250 works cited and an index, with more information regarding the participants' own narratives contained in the companion volume (Mentzelopoulos & Dörnyei, 2022). As has been outlined above, the book is concise, clearly-structured, and extremely well-thought out, with chapter subheadings making the volume suitable for dipping into and out of as needed. Indeed, the breadth and depth of the new perspectives contained in the work mean that this volume is highly recommended for all scholars interested in any aspect of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. In the opinion of this reviewer, it would also be of relevance for language teachers and for any advanced language learners seeking to gain academic perspectives on how to proceed beyond the CEFR C2 level (for example, student interpreters seeking to improve a return language). Hence, *Lessons From Exceptional Language Learners Who Have Achieved Nativelike Proficiency: Motivation, Cognition and Identity* is a ground-breaking work with immense potential to influence the future scope of research in this valuable and important area.

References

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