

# CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE PURPOSEFUL GENERATION OF GROUP- DIRECTED MOTIVATIONAL CURRENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Kadidja KONE**

Ecole Normale d'Enseignement Technique et Professionnel (ENETP)

*Kadidja\_kone@yahoo.fr*

## ABSTRACT

Although there is a growing body of studies related to the directed motivational current (DMC) theory, very few have addressed the purposeful generation of group-directed motivational currents in the educational context of francophone Africa. In an attempt to fill this empirical gap, the present study examines the challenges related to the purposeful generation of group-DMCs in English as a foreign language context of Mali during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were collected from four students and their teacher using qualitative methods of research, specifically learner and teacher reflective journals. The results revealed that the lack of technological facilities, the scarcity of financial resources, the non-cohesiveness of the group, the lack of positive group norms, and inadequate training were factors that prevented the purposeful generation of group-DMCs. The present study has made a significant contribution to the DMC-related research by focusing the conversation on its purposeful generation during Covid-19.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Covid-19, generation, group-directed motivational currents, project

## RÉSUMÉ

Bien qu'il existe un nombre croissant d'études liées à la théorie du flux motivationnel intense, très peu ont exploré la stimulation ciblée de flux motivationnels partagés et soutenus par un groupe dans le contexte éducatif de l'Afrique francophone. Pour tenter de combler cette lacune empirique, la présente étude examine les défis liés à la stimulation ciblée de flux motivationnels dans le contexte de l'Anglais en tant que langue étrangère pendant la Covid-19. Pour atteindre cet objectif, des données ont été collectées auprès de quatre étudiants de l'Ecole Supérieure de Gestion, d'Informatique et de Comptabilité et de leur professeur d'Anglais en utilisant des méthodes qualitatives, en particulier des journaux de réflexion des

apprenants et des enseignants. Les résultats ont révélé que le manque d'équipements technologiques, la rareté des ressources financières, la non-cohésion du groupe, l'absence de normes positives de groupe et une formation inadéquate étaient des facteurs qui empêchaient la stimulation de flux motivationnels partagés et soutenus par un groupe pendant la pandémie de Covid-19. La présente étude a apporté une contribution significative à la recherche liée à la motivation en orientant la conversation vers la stimulation ciblée de flux motivationnels partagés et soutenus par un groupe pendant la pandémie de Covid-19.

**Mots clés:** Covid-19, défis, flux de motivation partagés par un groupe, stimulation, travail de projet intensif.

## INTRODUCTION

Directed motivational currents (DMCs) are intense motivational phenomena that are found on all educational contexts regardless of the particularities that characterize each teaching and learning context (Muir, 2016; Rasman, 2018). They are unique motivational surges that encourage a learner to surpass themselves to achieve a valued and desired learning goal at all costs (Muir & Gümüş, 2020). Muir and Dörnyei (2013) conceptualized DMCs to highlight the significance of vision in second language (L2) learners' motivation. They viewed vision as a core element of the construct of motivation because it is capable of sustaining a DMC experience. Further studies by Dörnyei, Ibrahim, and Muir (2015) and Dörnyei, Muir, and Ibrahim (2014) identified the various characteristics of a DMC. These characteristics included vision/goal orientedness, a salient facilitative structure, positive emotionality, and generating parameters. A vision is the passion or drive that guides motivated behavior toward the achievement of a goal (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). A salient facilitative structure is concerned with the routines that a person experiencing DMCs establishes to reach their goals (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Dörnyei et al., 2014). For example, the study by Selçuk and Erten (2017) emphasized the importance of behavioral routines to support DMC experiences. Betül, one of Selçuk and Erten's participants whose DMCs were not launched had difficulty establishing behavioral routines and maintaining her motivational fluctuations. Positive emotionality includes affective feelings such as enjoyment, satisfaction, appreciation, and confidence resulting from the achievement of an outstanding goal (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Dörnyei et al., 2014). Regarding the generating parameters, they refer to the factors or situations that trigger a DMC (Ibrahim, 2017).

With regard to the frameworks for focused interventions, Dörnyei, Henry, and Muir (2016) suggested seven DMC project templates (for more details see Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016, p. 177). According to these authors, DMC theory is applied in a language class through intensive group project work that brings language learners together around a collective goal achievement. However, it is necessary to mention that an extremely contagious disease called "Covid-19" discovered in Hubei, China in 2019 (Adhikari et al., 2020) is challenging the social rules and traditions, including the methods of language teaching and learning. Therefore, working in small groups becomes difficult and almost impossible in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Mali, where pedagogical innovations are limited due to the absence of adequate technological facilities. For example, North American universities, which already had online platforms such as the "Desire to Learn or Bright Space" and "Blackboard" enhanced their system by purchasing applications

such as “Zoom” to organize online meetings between teachers and learners as a class. These technological innovations offered students the opportunity to take their courses online and school authorities also held online graduation ceremonies.

In developing countries such as Mali, schools remained closed without any possibilities to teach online. When they opened, the school administrations strongly recommended that teachers and learners respect the social distancing rules. These health measures weakened an educational system that struggled to provide practice time for every English learner. A way to ensure that each learner was involved in the process of teaching and learning was to organize intensive group project work. However, it is important to note that teachers and learners were in dilemma. For example, they did not know how to interact in small groups without being closer and touching one another from time to time. Additionally, teachers did not know how to give personalized feedback to their learners. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine the challenges faced by Malian EFL teachers in triggering group-DMCs. The novelty of the study is that it explores, for the first time, the challenges that may prevent the purposeful generation of group-DMCs during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results will improve the process of teaching and learning English in Mali. They will also give a new dimension to the DMC-related research. The article is organized around four sections: review of literature, research methods, results, and discussion in addition to the introduction, conclusion, and references.

## **1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **1.1. Characteristics of Individual Directed Motivational Currents**

Dörnyei et al. (2016), Dörnyei et al. (2015), Dörnyei et al. (2014), and Muir and Dörnyei (2013) identified two types of DMCs: individual and group-DMCs. A student or any other person may experience an individual DMC. Individual DMCs are triggered by a positive or negative event (Ibrahim, 2017). They are characterized by an intense motivational drive that is capable of supporting L2 learning for a longer period (Dörnyei et al., 2016). Individuals under the influence of DMCs experience a special moment that motivates them to achieve their desired goals (Koné, 2020). They generally establish behavioral routines that maintain the motivated behavior until they achieve their goals. Those characteristics were observed in the study by Henry, Davydenko, and Dörnyei (2015) with three women learning Swedish as an L2. It is difficult to make the other students benefit from the motivational currents of an individual DMC or implement it in a language classroom because its currents are not contagious.

### **1.2. Characteristics of Group-Directed Motivational Currents**

Dörnyei et al. (2016), Ibrahim and Al-Hoorie (2019), and Muir (2016) described group-DMCs as intensive group projects, the completion of which can create an intense and exceptional motivational drive that is shared or experienced by a group of learners until they achieve the goals set for a project work. A group of students, a class, or an entire school, including teachers can experience group-DMCs. Contrary to an individual DMC, the currents of a group-DMC are contagious and can provide each group member with sufficient energy to achieve the goals set for a project work. Group-DMCs can be facilitated intentionally

when the following conditions are met: A group project that stimulates passion, curiosity, and attachment, an inspiring group leader, group autonomy, and an enthusiastic and supportive teacher capable of providing learners with quality feedback (Ibrahim, 2016; Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019). Additionally, the topic of the project must be congruent with learners' lives and identities. A group-DMC is characterized by an exceptional productivity that motivates each group member to surpass themselves to reach their common goals. Group members explicitly establish recurrent routines to inject enough fuel that ensures a safe departure for every member. The benefits associated with the positive relationship between group peers is reflected in a study by Chang (2010), which found that members of cohesive groups with positive norms were more successful in achieving their project work goals than non-cohesive groups. While there is an array of studies that focused on group-DMCs, there is little empirical evidence to support the challenges related to the purposeful generation of group-DMCs in the Malian EFL context during the Covid-19 pandemic. When Dörnyei et al. (2016) suggested intensive project work as a salient framework for generating motivational flows, they could not imagine that a global pandemic like Covid-19 would question people's work habits and social gatherings. The present study therefore attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Is it possible to trigger group-DMCs during Covid-19 while students are taking their English course online?
2. What are the challenges related to the purposeful generation of group-DMCs during the Covid-19 pandemic?

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

### **2.1. Research Design**

I used a qualitative research approach to examine the challenges that Malian EFL teachers and learners faced in facilitating group-DMCs during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teacher and learner reflective journals were used so that participants could reflect on their practices during covid-19 (the schools were closed) and recount them in their journal entries.

### **2.2. Participants**

The sample involved one teacher and four students working in a small group. The students were taking the teacher-participant's English course at the Ecole Supérieure de Gestion, d'Informatique et de Comptabilité, a private university in Bamako. A purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit the student-participants who were volunteers. While the teacher volunteered to be a participant for the study, he was recruited because he taught online during the Covid-19 pandemic when schools were closed. Moreover, he agreed to use a four-week intensive project work to trigger his learners' group-DMCs. The project required the student-participants to watch a one-hour or 45-minute romantic film together and then prepare an oral presentation about the film. The group of students prepared their oral presentation and uploaded it online so that the teacher could view and grade it. The participants were given pseudonyms to keep them anonymous as shown in table 1, which provides a description of the participants. Student-participants of the present study are referred to as students, learners, and participants. The teacher on the other hand is referred to as teacher-participant or teacher.

**Table 1***Participants' Profiles*

Names	Age	Gender	Role	Experiences with Online Courses
Abdoulaye	35	Male	teacher	Two-week training following the outbreak of Covid-19
Antoine	21	Male	student	None
Mamou	19	female	student	None
Moussa	20	Male	student	None
Safiatou	19	female	student	None

## 2.3. Data Collection Instruments

### 2.3.1. Reflective Journals

Reflective journals were used to collect data from participants. They offer an effective way to capture and understand the factors that prevented the purposeful generation of group-DMCs despite the teacher's strong determination. Additionally, they gave learners a voice to genuinely share their experiences without any pressure that could decrease the reliability of the data collected. In a recent article, Nimehchisalem (2018) has argued that reflective journals allow the researcher to reliably report and interpret the participants' sayings. Each learner made two entries for a total of 8 entries in their reflective journals whereas the teacher made four entries. Participants were not given any specific writing instructions to increase the validity of the reflective journals as data collection instruments. They were only requested to reflect on their teaching and learning practices in their various entries.

## 2.4. Procedures and Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis method was adopted to determine the factors that prevented the purposeful generation of group-DMCs during online teaching. However, it is important to note that the process of analysis was iterative in the sense that learners' written entries were first merged and read several times to comprehend them. After this phase focused on reading and comprehension, data were interpreted to identify the themes, which explained the factors that prevented the successful facilitation of group-DMCs. The themes were selected based on their number of references by the students. According to Dörnyei and Tagushi (2010), an analysis based on the number of references to a theme in the data allowed the researcher to reliably report and interpret what the participants said as can be seen in the teacher's comment:

The chief of the group had *hard time to bring together or convince the group members to work together online*. The group was *not cohesive enough* to produce something great. They were *dispersed* and I could see *the lack of cohesion* in their presentation even if the chief of group submitted the final presentation as a group work.

Therefore, the non-cohesiveness of the group and the lack of positive group norms would be counted as 4 because the teacher-participant mentioned it directly or indirectly four times. I repeated the same procedure until I completely interpreted and identified all the themes. It is necessary to specify that the data collected from the teacher-participant were analyzed and interpreted separately from the student-participants' data, but the same technique was used to analyze both. Although only three or four sample comments are displayed

to illustrate each theme, the complete dataset was used to select a theme and the number of references to it. The selection of three or four sample comments was based on their clarity or relevance to illustrate a theme. It is worth mentioning that one sample comment is displayed to illustrate the themes resulting from the analysis of the teacher-participant’s data.

### 3. RESULTS

Data analysis revealed that the lack of adequate technological facilities, the scarcity of financial resources, inadequate training, and the non-cohesiveness of the group were obstacles that prevented the purposeful generation of group-DMCs although the teacher and some of his students were motivated to overcome the challenges.

#### 3.1. Teacher’s Perceived Difficulties

The teacher-participant frequently mentioned four themes to explain why it was difficult to trigger group-DMCs during the Covid-19 pandemic. The themes included the lack of adequate technological facilities, the scarcity of financial resources, inadequate training, the non-cohesiveness of the student group, and the lack of positive group norms as can be seen in table 2 that demonstrates the various themes with sample comments. In each of his entries, the teacher-participant moved back and forth between these themes. While only one sample comment is displayed to illustrate each of these themes, the whole dataset was interpreted to select a theme. The number of references to a theme is in the parentheses.

**Table 2**

*Themes Developed from the Teacher’s Entries*

Themes and Number of References	Sample Comments
Lack of adequate technological facilities (12)	It was not easy and I can say without any doubt that it was nearly impossible because my university does not have an appropriate computer room for courses online. For example, they created a platform that only existed by name because it was always on maintenance. For the school administration, recording teachers’ courses is online teaching. There was no platform for interaction. To fill in for this lack, I used What’s up.
Scarcity of financial resources (15)	It was difficult for my students to buy the internet connection because most of them do not work. Moreover, the school did not offer me enough financial aid so that I could secure a high-speed internet connection to upload my files or to financially help my students. To tell the truth, only my own determination as an English teacher helped me go forward with this online teaching project.
Inadequate training (7)	One of my problems was training because I was not familiar with online teaching although I had a personal computer. I just followed a training for two weeks and this was not enough because the trainer did not take my interests into account.
Non-cohesiveness of the group and lack of positive norms (10)	The chief of the group had hard time to bring together or convince the group members to work. The group was not cohesive enough to produce something great. They were dispersed and I could see the lack of cohesion in their presentation even if the chief of group submitted the final presentation as a group work.

### 3.2. Learners' Perceived Difficulties

The four students commonly mentioned that they faced challenges ranging from setting a meeting time online, bringing the whole group together to discuss the topic of the oral presentation, the lack of maturity of the group, the lack of adequate technological facilities to the scarcity of financial resources as can be seen in table 3 that illustrates the different themes with sample comments. Certain ideas were merged to develop one major theme. Therefore, setting a meeting time online, bringing the whole group together to discuss the topic of the presentation, and the lack of maturity of the group were merged to form the theme non-cohesiveness of the group with positive norms. Three or four sample comments are displayed to illustrate each theme. The selection of these comments has been motivated by their clarity and relevance to illustrate the themes. However, it is important to note that I interpreted the complete data to choose a theme although only three or four were selected as examples. The number of references to a theme is in the parentheses.

**Table 3**

*Themes Developed from the Learners' Entries*

Themes and Number of References	Sample Comments
Non-cohesiveness of the group and lack of positive group norms (20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My group members were not serious except for one friend but it was not easy for him to find credits and communicate with me. I was obliged to send him credit because he worked hard. The other two students posted videos and things which we didn't need for our presentation.</li> <li>• I could not respect the time because I was busy and I think I did not like the film our group president choose [chose]. I proposed a new film and they did not want to watch this film. So, I was not in this project, our last project before Corona was cool.</li> <li>• I don't like to work on What's Up even if I use it. It is for enjoyment not for serious work. My group chief was too serious and strict and I don't like to work if there is no school.</li> <li>• I wanted to be with my group but it was not easy and when I connected to see things I just see videos that were nonsense. My group chief and me only worked seriously. It was a group of two persons.</li> </ul>
Lack of adequate technological facilities (26)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The site that the school created didn't work. It is always written in maintenance and I did not have a personal computer. I was obliged to borrow a computer of a friend.</li> <li>• We were obliged to use What's Up to communicate because only one person had an old computer but everybody has a telephone. So, it was complicated to work because we could not meet in reality or speak the way we wanted. I preferred Zoom meetings.</li> <li>• Our computer room did not offer anything new. I want to say there was nothing technological in it. Computers are old and slow. The connection did not work properly. This discouraged me a lot in this project.</li> </ul>
Scarcity of financial resources (14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was not easy to buy connection all the time so I miss some communications of my group friends and the school did not help for that.</li> <li>• I could not buy a lot of credit to upload documents and we lost time before we watched the film. I have an old computer, but it consumes credits a lot.</li> <li>• I think that the school could give us some fund for the project because it was easy to buy internet connection and work hard.</li> </ul>

## 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study suggest that the teacher-participant did not succeed in triggering group-DMC during online teaching although some of his students were exceptionally motivated. As a result, the four students and their teacher did not experience a purposefully generated group-DMC. A possible explanation for the results might be the non-cohesiveness of the group and the lack of positive group norms. The non-cohesiveness of the group made it difficult, if not impossible to provide each student with sufficient energy for a successful group-DMC to be launched. For example, the learners did not reach a consensus on the film that they were supposed to watch together and the group leader failed to convey his positive attitudes such as enthusiasm to each member of his group despite his strong personality and motivation to achieve the project goals at all costs. For example, he bought the internet connection for one of his group peers who was caught up in his motivational currents. If they were in a face-to-face classroom situation where they could meet and negotiate as a group, they could establish positive group norms that would support the group motivated behavior and encourage those learners who were reluctant or less passionate about the chosen film to cooperate. Furthermore, the teacher could have given more constructive feedback and made sure that the learners understood his explanations correctly because two students pretended not to notice his feedback regarding their negative attitudes during the group work. Positive progress checks are necessary so that a group of learners engaged in a project work can achieve the various subgoals included in the completion of their project. Quality feedback increases learners' level of motivation and therefore sustains their motivational flows until they reach their goals. On the other hand, the absence of adequate positive progress checks can block the establishment of recurrent routines and then negatively affect the motivational level of a group of learners.

In line with the previous studies (Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019; Koné, 2020; Muir, 2016), the findings of the present study also support that a group-DMC may be successfully launched when the following requirements are met: An intensive project work, along with a topic that is congruent with learners' lives, a collective goal, a group identity, establishment of recurrent routines, group maturity and autonomy, group peer's support, and a supportive and available teacher capable of providing learners with quality feedback. Although the teacher met the first condition, the other parameters were not successfully established. As a result, the participants did not experience intense motivational peaks that were identical to group-DMCs. The findings suggests that the Malian EFL learners, specifically the participants of the present study could have experienced shared motivational flows if they had met face-to-face and then interacted in real-life situations where jokes and gestures are salient and communicative. Some of them did not consider online meetings facilitated by What's Up as part of their regular courses. Accordingly, the application was seen as an entertainment whereas schools were considered as the right place for studies:

*I don't like to work on What's Up even if I use it. It is for enjoyment not for serious work. My group chief was too serious and strict and I don't like to work if there is no school.*

A learner can only produce out of expectation if they feel enthusiastic, confident, and safe in their small groups. The feeling of safety creates closeness and friendship, and group members feel a sense of belonging

to the group. This reflects Poupore's (2016) notion of group work dynamics. In his introduction he points out: "... there needs to be a positive social climate within the group that exhibits a sense of trust, enthusiasm, joy, and achievement" (p. 720). Furthermore, the results are consistent with those of Chang (2010) who also found that a correlation existed between group cohesiveness and individual learners' motivation. As explained in the first paragraph of this section, the non-cohesiveness of the group with positive group norms might explain why these participants did not experience group-DMCs.

Other factors that hindered the purposeful generation of motivational currents were the lack of technological facilities, inadequate training, and the scarcity of financial resources. These situations prevented the teacher from interacting with his students online and providing them with positive progress checks so that they could feel confident and engage in their project work. As the teacher could not regularly offer learners his support so that they could be aware of the positive group norms, it was difficult for them to function as a group and reach maturity. Another issue related to the group was the leader who could not effectively play his role although he was a motivated learner. In face-to-face situations, he could have inspired his group peers to adhere to the positive group norms set by the group.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the challenges that prevented the purposeful generation of group-DMCs during the process of teaching and learning online. The findings indicate that it is difficult to generate group-motivational flows if learners and teachers do not have a platform that allows them to meet and interact like in real-life situations. Although the teacher and two of his students were exceptionally motivated, their motivational currents were not contagious. As a result, the other students did not feel a sense of belonging to the group. Additionally, they did not notice the teacher's feedback that could help them change their attitudes toward the group.

The results of the present study should not discourage EFL teachers from triggering group-DMCs in their classrooms during online teaching and learning. First, they should implement intensive project work. Second, they should establish positive group work dynamics such as group cohesiveness with positive group norms. Third, technological facilities should be available for learners to negotiate and interact as a group. No one should feel frustrated or demotivated because of the lack of technological facilities, training, or financial resources. These feelings have a negative impact on the group-DMC departure and therefore decrease learners' productivity, engagement, and enjoyment. Finally, a teacher should be able to give quality feedback to their learners so that they can remain confident. Once they are confident, they may take risks and then succeed in their English learning.

However, the present study has some limitations related to the reduced number of participants. Having several groups could allow the researcher to analyze the question from various perspectives. The limitations do not decrease the validity of the study as it is one of the few studies that explores DMCs in the Malian EFL context. Further studies should investigate whether it is possible for an individual learner to experience DMCs during Covid-19 confinement.

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