

A Comparative Study on Learning Motivation of College Students of Different Levels

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Received: January 16, 2014 Accepted: April 3, 2014 Online Published: May 27, 2014

doi:10.5539/ells.v4n2p22 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v4n2p22>

Abstract

This comparative study aims to investigate the difference of English learning motivation held by learners of different levels in a local university. The results show that students have moderate motivation degree. Efficient learners are more highly motivated than less-efficient learners. Both efficient and less-efficient learners have strong instrumental motivation and integrative motivation is in the lowest. The pedagogical implications suggest that some motivational strategies should be adopted to stimulate students' integrative motivation meanwhile their instrumental motivation should be retained to promote college English teaching and learning.

Keywords: leaning motivation, motivational strategies, college English teaching and learning, a comparative study

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition, the focus of foreign language teaching has experienced a great shift from the teacher-controlled approach to the student-centered one from the middle of the 1970s. Learners' learning process and individual differences are more critical factors concerned in foreign language teaching and learning. As for individual differences, it is generally accepted that "motivation is probably the most often used catch-all term for explaining the success or failure of virtually any complex task." (Brown, 2001) Therefore, the study of learning motivation has a practical and theoretical significance to English teaching and learning.

In educational psychology, the definition of what it is to be motivated is quite simple: "to be motivated is to be moved to do something." (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Gardner's socio-educational model has been highly influential in the studies of motivation in foreign and second language learning. According to Gardner, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are the main motivations held by language learners, but they can't explain all reasons why learners learn a foreign language. On the basis of former empirical results and doing his research in Hungary, Zoltan Dornyei put forward the famous three-level motivational theory (see Dornyei, 2005): language level, learner level, and learning situational level, which consists of course-specific, teacher-specific and group-specific motivational components. Dornyei's framework is very concrete and highlights that motivation will be affected by situational factors, which broadens Gardner's instrumental and integrative motivations. At present, the motivation research is focused on its combination with school education and classroom (Yang, Li, & Wang, 2010). This is also the reason why Dornyei's framework is referred to by the author of the present study in designing her motivation questionnaire.

In China, motivation research began in the 1990s. Professor Wen Qiufang (2001) classifies learner's modified variables, among which motivation is closely related to belief and strategy on which deep motivation has more influence compared with surface motivation. Other research in China also finds motivation determines the success and failure of second language learning and has direct influence on strategy frequency. Some investigation results showed that in China students mainly held instrumental motivation (Shi, 2000) and successful learners are intrinsically motivated and unsuccessful learners are extrinsically motivated. Another example, in Gao Yihong and her associates' (2003) study, they surveyed the types of motivation held by undergraduates and came to the conclusion that there mainly exist seven English learning motivations which can be summarized as instrumental motivation, cultural motivation and situational motivation categories. Zhou Yan, Gao Yihong and their project team performed a large scale of longitudinal studies of motivation in many Chinese universities (Zhou et al., 2009), which is one of the most influential research in china.

In summary, the motivation research is mainly involved in undergraduates in some key universities with higher English level (e.g., Gao, 2003; Zhang & Hao, 2005; Zhou et al., 2009; Lv & Yang, 2013) and English majors. Furthermore, the current research was centered on the investigation of the internal structures of College English learning motivation and self-identity changes (e.g., Zhou, He, & Min, 2011; Liu & Gao, 2010, etc.). It is comparatively uncommon to make a comparative study on learners of different proficiency levels. In this case, the present study takes a local university as an example, where students have a comparatively low English proficiency level. The purpose of this study aims to investigate the motivation degrees held by learners of different levels so as to gain further insights into English learning motivation and promote college English teaching and learning.

2. A Comparative Study on Learning Motivations of Students of Different Levels

2.1 Participants

With reference to the above motivation theories, the author of this paper investigated English learning motivations held by students in Grade 2010, majoring in Mechanical Engineering and Automation in Linyi University from four natural classes. There were 164 students who participated in the study, among whom 92 were males and 72 females. After more than one year of college English study, they have accumulated enough learning experience and formed stable motivations in English learning.

2.2 Research Instruments

In this study, the first instrument the author prefers is a questionnaire to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire is modified according to Gardner and designed by Gao Yihong and her associates (2003) which were used to investigate the undergraduates' English learning motivation from 30 universities. Learning motivation questionnaire includes three parts (18 statements): instrumental motivation, integrative motivation and learning situational motivation. The 18 statements are given five choices of use frequency in the form of 5 Likert Scales ranging from 1 (Never or almost never true of me) to 5 (Always or almost always true of me). The participants were required to make their choices by choosing one of the five numbers on the answer sheet to tell to what degree they held the motivations. The statements were all translated into Chinese in case they may bring misunderstanding to the subjects (see Appendix). The second one is SDUET (Note 1) attended by participants at the end of the second academic year, which is a province-wide English test for upgrading from college to university to test students' English learning achievement. It can objectively reflect the subjects' English proficiency.

2.3 Data Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed to the subjects in class but required to be finished within the set time. After the collection of questionnaire, numbers chosen by the subjects were input into computer and data analysis was carried out with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science for Windows) (Version11.0).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 Overall view of students' learning motivation

Mean Level	Numbers of Students	Percentages
4.5-5.0	0	0%
3.5-4.4	24	14.6%
2.5-3.4	111	67.7%
1.5-2.4	28	17.1%
1.0-1.4	1	0.6%
Total	164	100%

Table 2. The mean score and standard deviation of each motivation category (n=164)

Type of Motivation	Mean	Std. D	Order
Instrumental motivation (1-10)	3.451	.600	1
Integrative motivation (11-15)	2.433	.740	3
Learning situational motivation (16-18)	2.927	.931	2
Total mean score of motivation	2.937	.521	

The descriptive statistics findings in Table 1 and Table 2 have been published in the author's previous study (see Yu, 2012). This paper is a follow-up study so it is necessary to make a further analysis of the findings so as to foreshadow the detailed study of next part and retain the completeness of the present study as well. From Table 1 and Table 2, it can be seen students' learning motivation degree is at medium level with the total mean score of 2.937. Instrumental motivation gets the highest score (3.451) followed by learning situation motivation (2.927), and the lowest is integrative motivation (2.433). Although none of the respondents "always or almost always" use learning motivations, almost no one "never or almost never" uses learning motivations. The figures indicate that the participants' learning motivation is not very strong as a whole. However, 67.7% of the students report they "sometimes use" and 14.6% "usually use" and the total percentage reach up to 82.3%. This attributes to the wide use of English in every aspect of people's lives. Students are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of English study although for "direct, practical goal" or for "abstract, psychological investment".

According to the findings of the present study, students are more instrumental in learning English. This result confirms some previous findings (Gardner, 1985; Cook, 1996; cited in Man-Fat, 2004; Shi, 2000; Zhang & Hao, 2005). Most respondents in this study think learning English is "helpful for future job", "a useful communication tool" and "a stepping-stone for success in their life" (81%, 78% and 71%). This phenomenon results from the increasing requirement for English and they want to sharpen their competitive ability in the intense employment market in the present society. They learn English out of utilitarian purpose and it is for their own profits not for their parents or teachers. The research finding further explains "instrumental motivation is the predominant and steady driving force for college students at the elementary stage" (Zhou et al., 2009). Earlier research also suggests that the motivation to learn English for learners from India, china and Japan is primarily instrumental (see Lai, 1999).

Integrative motivation is the lowest degree, which forms a great disparity with instrumental motivation (2.433:3.451). Only a few of respondents learn English to "go abroad to experience foreign culture" and "have intrinsic interest in English" (21% respectively). This is because students live in a monoculture society and classroom is the main environment where they get contact with English and there is also limited potential for integrating into the target language community and the culture of the target language. On the other hand, integrative motivation might be less relevant to foreign language learners than to those learning a second language (Clement & Kruidenier, 1983; see Freeman & Long, 2000), especially in this local university. Whether integrative motivation is related to foreign language learning proficiency will be discussed in next part of this study.

Learning situation motivation is at the medium level with a mean score of 2.927, above integrative motivation. This indicates that class teaching is still the main channel for students to acquire knowledge and components in learning situational level play a significant role in motivation in Chinese settings. More than half of the students have much demand on teaching quality (59%). The present result is in accordance with Elizabeth Root's (1999) findings: learning situation level had the most prominent role, above and beyond an integrative or instrumental orientation. Maybe her explanation is a good reference: many times in a FL setting, the classroom is the only opportunity for language students to come into contact with the target language and culture; motivational factors for FL students, then, often seem to be circumstantial.

3.2 A Comparison of Motivation Held by Efficient and Less-Efficient Learners

As an important learning process, the degree of learning motivation has direct influence on learning proficiency. In this study, a T-test is made to investigate the motivation tendency adopted by efficient and less-efficient learners.

The subjects were divided into three groups according to their scores of SDUET. Among them, 46 students whose scores were above 73 were regarded as efficient learners and 49 students whose scores were below 60 were less-efficient learners. In Table 3, the significant difference in the test scores between efficient and

less-efficient learners shows that they belong to two different groups.

Table 3. T-test for scores of SDUET of the students from different groups

Variable	N	Average score	S.D	T-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Group1	46	77.39	6.774	23.591	.000
Group2	49	52.08	6.160		

3.2.1 The Overall Results and Analysis of Motivation Category Held by the Two Groups

Table 4. The results of T-test of learning motivation category between the two groups

Type of Motivation	M1	M2	S.D1	S.D2	M.D	T	P
Instrumental	3.583	3.353	.531	.612	.230	1.946	.0553
Integrative	2.782	1.881	.642	.711	.901	6.471	.000
Learning Situational	2.986	2.932	.953	.915	.054	0.279	.781
Learning motivation	3.117	2.722	.491	.386	.395		

Note. mean1=mean score of efficient learners, mean2=mean score of less-efficient learners; SD1=standard deviation of efficient learners, SD2=standard deviation of less-efficient learners.

In table 4, the total mean scores of motivation held by efficient and less-efficient learners are 3.117 and 2.722 respectively, suggesting that efficient learners have higher motivation degree than less-efficient learners although they are at medium level. The rank of motivation degree for both groups is instrumental motivation, learning situation motivation, and integrative motivation. Specifically, for both efficient and less-efficient learners instrumental motivation is preferred at “usually used” level (M1:3.583 vs. M2:3.353) and learning situation motivation is “sometimes used” (M1:2.986 vs. M2:2.932). But there is a significant difference in integrative motivation degree between the two groups. For efficient learners, integrative motivation degree is at medium level while it is at low level for less-efficient learners, which is illustrated by the mean scores of the two groups (M1:2.782 vs. M2:1.881). Instrumental motivation and learning situation motivation are “sometimes used” while integrative motivation is “generally not used” by less-efficient learners. This result is in agreement with Shi’s (2000) conclusion that successful learners are intrinsically motivated and unsuccessful learners are extrinsically motivated. It also helps to demonstrate that less-efficient learners in this study have lower English proficiency level. Integrative motivation refers to a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other language group. Probably, the major factor contributing to the low degree of integrative motivation for less-efficient learners is their low level of English upon entering university. They are lacking of self-confidence in English learning and have no interest in English culture, nor do they have the intention of going abroad to have personal experience. Another possible reason is that the respondents are junior college students and their purpose of learning English is to pass examinations and graduate and then find an employment. Maybe most of them never have the idea of going abroad to undertake further studies. All this demotivates their English learning. But T-test indicates that there is a significant difference only in integrative motivation for the two groups ($T=6.471$, $p<0.001$), indicating the one determining learning achievements is integrative motivation. On the other hand, most students have realized the importance of learning English as a skill in the new social environment. Instrument motivation can promote English learning to some extent, but its disadvantage lies in learners’ self-satisfaction once they obtain the goals.

Therefore, it is the teachers’ responsibility to develop students’ intrinsic learning interest and cultivate their integrative motivation because “intrinsic interest is a long-term and influential motivation” (Gao et al., 2003).

3.2.2 The Comparative Analysis of Motivation Degree between the Two Groups

Table 5. Comparison of mean score and Std. deviation of each motivation between the two groups

Items	M1	M2	SD1	SD2
S1	2.043	3.102	1.210	1.403
S2	3.196	3.959	1.147	1.079
S3	2.913	3.367	1.347	1.270
S4	4.457	3.857	.657	1.080
S5	4.152	3.653	.868	1.091
S6	4.348	4.082	.822	.909
S7	4.217	3.714	.841	1.155
S8	4.087	3.327	1.007	1.345
S9	3.304	2.122	.963	1.130
S10	3.109	2.347	1.016	1.284
S11	3.196	1.756	1.167	.947
S12	2.870	2.000	.833	.842
S13	2.739	1.878	1.124	1.033
S14	2.717	1.898	1.205	.963
S15	2.391	1.878	.856	.904
S16	2.848	3.020	1.247	1.479
S17	3.500	3.490	1.225	1.157
S18	2.609	2.286	.954	.979

Note. mean1=mean score of efficient learners, mean2=mean score of less-efficient learners; SD1=standard deviation of efficient learners, SD2=standard deviation of less-efficient learners.

In Table 5 there are 18 motivation statements. For efficient learners, there are 6 statements whose mean scores are in 3.5-4.4, with 33.3% percentage. For less-efficient learners, there are 5 statements whose mean scores are in 3.5-4.4, with 27.8% percentage. Efficient learners are more motivated than less-efficient learners, which is consistent with the result in Table 4.

For integrative motivations (S11-S15), it can be seen that for efficient learners the mean scores are all nearly in 2.5-3.4 while for less-efficient learners none of them is above 2. In addition, the M.D of integrative motivation is 0.901, near 1.000. All this helps to illustrate the significant difference in integrative motivation between the two groups. Efficient learners express their more intrinsic interest in English than less-efficient learners (S11, 3.196:1.756). They have rather high integrative motivation and agree that studying English can allow them to meet and interact with English speakers, learn about foreign cultures, and participate more freely activities of other cultural groups. Less-efficient learners have no specific learning targets and learn English passively. So they cannot use metacognitive strategies effectively to monitor and plan their study autonomously. They learn English not because they are motivated to but they are forced to and are lacking of intrinsic motivation. That is to say, the former is "I want to learn", the latter is "I have to learn".

For instrumental motivations (S1-S10), both efficient and less-efficient learners get the highest mean scores, indicating that they all think English "is helpful in finding a good job" and "a useful tool for communication"; they regard it as a "stepping-stone for success". They learn English for some utilitarian purposes. Most respondents perceive that being able to have an effective communication in English is beneficial in finding an employment. This is understandable, because "If language students do not believe that their performance leads somewhere or is ultimately valuable, their motivation will be lowed." (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). This is why there is no significance difference in instrumental motivation between the two groups ($T=1.946$, $p=.0553>.05$). But less-efficient learners get a higher mean score in S2 "I study English hard because I have to pass some exams in

enrollment or employment” than that of efficient learners (3.959:3.196). This suggests that less-efficient learners are only satisfied with passing the examinations, and they are more certificate-motivated. For them, they won’t have interest or pay great efforts in English learning once their goals are achieved.

The two groups get nearly the similar mean scores in learning situation motivations (S16-S18) (2.986:2.932). It shows both efficient and less-efficient learners are influenced by learning situation motivation to some extent. So T-test shows there is no significant difference between the two groups ($T=0.279$, $P=.781>.05$). Students of both groups get the highest mean scores in S17 “At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on English class quality” (3.500:3.490). Learners are more influenced by English teachers and textbooks are not very related to learning motivation in this study. In Dornyei’s (2005) motivation model, learners’ attitudes towards the curriculum and teachers play an important role in language learning. The result shows the subjects put more emphasis on the English class-teaching quality whatever the textbook is, suggesting that the students are not able to manage their study autonomously and still rely on teachers in college English learning. Students’ heavy dependence on learning situation launches a challenge for English teachers to try to improve class teaching quality and stimulate learners’ interest.

4. Conclusions and Some Motivational Strategies

From the results and analysis above some conclusions can be reached: firstly, students’ motivation is not very strong. Integrative motivation is adopted at low level; the one which occupies a dominant place is instrumental motivation due to the utilitarian purpose. Secondly, in general, efficient learners are more motivated than less-efficient learners in English learning. There is a dramatic contrast in integrative motivation between the two groups.

The investigation results show learning motivation is one of the most important factors influencing learners’ success or failure in language learning. As an English teacher, we should adopt some effective motivational strategies to cultivate students learning interest and stimulate their learning motivation.

4.1 Set up Learner-Centered Teaching Model to Stimulate Learning Interest

In modern education, teacher’s role has been shifted from a knowledge-deliver to a classroom-supervisor, director and information-provider. The present study finds that both efficient and less-efficient learners are influenced by learning situation motivation to some extent. Students are the focus of school education. College teachers should help them to change the habit of being dependent on teachers formed in high school and try to build up comfortable learning environment and make English learning interesting and pleasant. Firstly, Teachers are supposed to raise learning motivation by encouraging students to participate in a variety of English activities. In designing teaching plans, teachers should take students into consideration and try to design the course in accordance with learners’ learning level and abilities. The elaborate materials and tasks should be communicative, exciting, appropriately challenging, capable of stimulating successful performance, and presented according to students’ reality. Secondly, nowadays, the Internet, computer, English TV programs, English songs, and movies are very popular with young students. All this is to create an authentic and relaxed learning environment and arouse their interests. Teachers should take full advantage of modern learning equipments and help students to learn English in a pleasant way. On the one hand, instructors should be sensitive to learners’ instrumental motivations in case students lose learning interests after they obtain short-term goals. According to Zhou et al. (2009), instrumental motivation has positive effect for a long period under the foreign language learning environment in china, which should be paid enough attention and encouragement. On the other hand, instructors should set objectives and offer input which are not only challenging but also achieved and accomplished by most learners, that is “i+1” theory put forward by Crashten. Only in this way will students have permanent learning motivations.

4.2 Cultivate Students’ Cultural Awareness and Induce Integrative Motivation

As far as the present research findings are concerned, teachers should be sensitive to and recognize students’ instrumentality, and at the same time raise their integrative motivation. This study shows only a small percentage of students have integrative motivation while integrative motivation is more effective for learners in the long run. What is important for teachers is to introduce cultural teaching of the target language and enhance learners’ cross-cultural awareness. Language is part of culture and also constitutes culture. It is difficult to master a language in essence without integrating culture into classroom teaching. The present research shows both efficient and less-efficient learners have low integrative motivation so it is teachers’ duty to adopt some effective measures to stimulate students’ integrative motivation. Firstly, in teaching process, teachers may encourage students to read extensively varieties of English novels, classic works, and magazines to broaden their horizon and develop their comprehension of the foreign language and culture. Secondly, teachers can introduce

traditional customs, holidays, festivals and even Bible stories so as to help students get a better understanding of the English language and cultivate their integrative motivation. With the popularity of the Internet, the English language teaching has become an edutainment (education+entertainment) (Shi, 2000) and students can get more access to the target language culture and their intrinsic motivation is rising. Therefore, instructors should help to encourage and develop this incentive motivation (see Zhou et al., 2009).

The present study only gives a cross-sectional view of motivation. There are also many other factors affecting motivation such as learning task, attitude, learning achievement and anxiety, etc. All these factors work together to have influence on foreign language learning, and this is worthy of further research.

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Note

Note 1. English test for students upgrading from college to university of Shandong Province.

Appendix

Questionnaire on motivation

Direction this form of the QUESTIONNAIRE ON MOTIVATION is for students of English as a second or foreign language. You will find statements about learning English. Please read each statement. On the separate Worksheet, write the response (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) that tells How True the statement is for you.

1=Never or almost never true of me

2=Usually not true of me

3=Sometimes true of me

4=Usually true of me

5= Always or almost always true of me

Please answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. There is no right or wrong answer to these statements. Put your answers on the separate answer sheet.

Part A Instrumental motivations

1. I learn English because of my parents or school's requirements.
2. I study English hard because I have to pass some exams in enrollment or employment.
3. I learn English mainly for certificate.
4. English is very important, because it is a very useful communication tool in the present society.
5. Learning English well can satisfy me with a sense of achievement.
6. Learning English well may be helpful in finding a good job in future.
7. English is a stepping-stone to success in my life.
8. Speaking fluent English is a symbol of good education and social status.
9. I learn English in order to communicate smoothly with native English speakers
10. I learn English in order to know about economic and technological situations all over the world.

Part B Integrative motivations

11. I like English because I have intrinsic interest in this language.
12. I like English because I want to know more about the language and culture in English -speaking countries.
13. I learn English because I want to make opportunity for going abroad in future.
14. I learn English because it is convenient for me to work abroad in future.
15. I learn English because I want to go abroad to experience English culture.

Part C Learning situational motivations

16. At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on my English teacher.
17. At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on English class quality.
18. At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on English textbook.

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