

# Influence of Motivation, Autonomy and Online Environment on Listening Skills of Elementary and Intermediate Learners of English

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## Abstract

Computer technology provides students with an opportunity to interact with native speakers in many different forums and therefore enables them to practise and develop their listening skills. Furthermore, video and audio have been developed for use in a wide range of classroom activities. With regards to listening skills in language learning, the majority of studies have concentrated on the use of specific course material. For this reason, this study examines the differences in the perceptions of acquiring listening skills using online resources between elementary and intermediate students. 268 students from a private college and a public university in a Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context participated in the research project. The data collection methods included questionnaires and interviews, pre- and post-testing measuring tools. According to the pre- and post-test results, the private college students within a technology environment did not make much progress in terms of English listening proficiency. However, the public university students improved significantly within the same environment. The research findings indicate that learner variables, such as learning attitude and motivation, in addition to learner autonomy, play a vital role in facilitating the progress of students at different levels.

**Keywords:** listening skills, motivation, learner autonomy

## 1. Introduction

Listening is often seen as a receptive skill in a second language classroom. Accordingly, methods to improve listening comprehension are often conceptualized. Researchers recognise the importance of comprehensible input for students so as to understand a context. The nature of listening in the classroom is related to the kind of listening that takes place in the real world. The multimedia contents also affect the interest of learners, which will make learning effective (Mitchell, 2009; Romero & Arévalo, 2010). The use of technology or online resources in second language learning is now very popular (Levin & Wadman, 2006; Ma, Andersson, & Streith, 2005; Timucin, 2006). These online sources comprise a variety of combinations of communications elements, including video, sound, text and graphics. Therefore, this study mainly examines the improvement of listening levels in English learners with different levels of reading skills with the same teacher, similar classroom environments, with the same online learning environments, during the same experimental time (four months). Meanwhile, it examines learner variables, learning attitude and motivation, in addition to learner autonomy, which may play a vital role in facilitating the progress of students at different levels. Finally, the paper concludes with some implications and suggestions on how to motivate students to learn English autonomously within a technology environment.

## 2. Literature Review

In the research area of language learning, motivation is one of the most important factors which affect learning success and learning achievement. Motivation refers to the thoughts and feelings which make learners want to and continue to do something (Spratt, Pulverness, & Williams, 2011). Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguished between instrumental motivation, which refers to a functional goal for language learners, such as getting a job or passing an examination, and integrative motivation, which refers to a learner's wishes to identify with the culture of the L2 (Second Language) group. Another widely held distinction is made between intrinsic motivation, the enjoyment of learning a second or foreign language, and extrinsic motivation, caused by external factors such as passing an examination, parental pressure, academic requirements, or other sources of rewards (e.g., the hope of financial reward) and punishments (Brophy, 2004; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). Dörnyei and Ushioda

(2011) emphasise the importance of motivation for learners in learning a second language. They also argue that sufficient motivation is a necessary and important precondition to help learners accomplish their long-term goals. More importantly, high motivation can compensate for deficiencies in both language learners' aptitude and their learning conditions (Dörnyei, 2005; Wigfield & Tonks, 2004).

Statistical evidence also indicates that motivation is a predictor of language-learning success, confirmed by numerous quantitative studies (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Sullo, 2009). Therefore, motivation is regarded as one of the primary factors that determine whether a student succeeds or fails in second language learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Meanwhile, interest is closely related to the promotion of learners' motivation. From our teaching experience, student interest in the subject they are learning is initially helpful in motivating them to learn. If students continue to be intrinsically motivated, teachers should provide them with various interesting language activities and exercises in the language classroom (Harmer, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2009), including materials to learn autonomously outside of the classroom, so that learners' motivation and autonomous learning abilities can be promoted.

Moreover, motivation and learner autonomy are closely linked to each other (Alderman, 2004; Oxford, 2003). Dickinson (1995) asserts that autonomous learners become more highly motivated and the greater learner autonomy leads to better and more effective work. The reviewed literature on motivation in this paper suggests that there is an important link between autonomy and educational theories of motivation, which could account for the claimed power of autonomy (Malcolm, 2011; Reid, 2007). Spratt et al. (2011) point out that motivation may lead to autonomy or be a precondition for it. Their study indicated the importance of developing a student's motivation to learn in teachers' teaching practice, in advance of the promotion of their autonomous learning abilities. Arguably, one of the main characteristics of autonomy is that autonomous learners should be highly motivated.

Finally, the use of technology and the Internet leads to learner motivation (Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn, & Malenoski, 2007). Katz (2002) shows that a certain psychological attitude towards the use of technology facilitates the efficient use of distance learning. Satisfaction with learning, level of control of the learning process, and study motivation for distance learning are all positively related to student preferences for structured distance learning. Schofield and Davidson (2003), in their five-year primarily qualitative study to bring the Internet to a large urban school district in the United States, suggest that the use of the Internet increased not only learner enjoyment and motivation but also their autonomous learning abilities. In short, the above studies reveal that positive attitude by learners towards the use of technology, their learning motivation and autonomous learning are helpful in enhancing their learning.

### **3. Research Design**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which students under the same teacher, with different levels of English proficiency, improve their English listening abilities by using the same online learning environment. Through the comparison, this study will also explore how important learner variables, such as learning attitude and motivation, in addition to learner autonomy, play a vital role.

#### *3.1 Research Methods*

This research project was conducted during the first semester of the 2010 academic year at a private college and a public university in an EFL context in Northeastern China. The research methods included questionnaires and interviews, learning diaries and pre- and post-testing measuring tools. The questionnaire was administered at the start and at the end of that semester so that the students' learning problems could be identified and their learning attitude or perceptions of motivation and learner autonomy could be investigated. The purposes of using questionnaires were as follows, according to the advantages of the questionnaires (Dörnyei, 2003): firstly, the attractive feature is exceptional efficiency in terms of a researcher's time, effort and finance. Secondly, much more information can be obtained within a shorter time frame, in comparison with interviews with the same number of people. Thirdly, a well-constructed questionnaire can process the data quickly and relatively straightforwardly by using computer software. However, the primary disadvantage is that respondents usually give very simple and superficial answers, mainly because they are unwilling to spend more time than necessary in answering the questionnaires (Dörnyei, 2003). Such superficial data is difficult for researchers to interpret complicated phenomena that occur in educational research. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to use the other research methods such as interviews and learning diaries in order to collect more qualitative data and make the findings more convincing.

The purpose of an interview is to understand the respondent's point of view. Therefore, researchers use open-ended questions to enable the interviewee to talk more freely (Norton, 2009). Another crucial purpose of

using interviews is to probably get more detailed answers from the interviewees so as to clarify the ambiguous answers from the questionnaires (Leonard, 2003).

In addition, at the end of the semester, in order to check the students' progress, the students were tested again (the post-test), the difficulty of which was the same or similar to the previous pre-test at the beginning of the semester. Students' listening proficiency was measured to find how much they had progressed in their English study.

### *3.2 Research Participants*

The research participants were from both a private college and a public university. The private college fresh students consisted of two classes majoring in computer sciences (90 students) and two classes majoring in business administration (86 students), 176 in total. The English proficiency of these students was at an elementary level, although they had studied the language for at least six years in middle schools (indeed, some had studied English for more than six years).

The second-year public university students were composed of two classes of computer science students, a total of 92 students. Most had passed the College English Test (CET) Band 4 in China. (Note: According to the testing syllabus, College English Test (CET) Band 4 level is nearly an intermediate level in terms of English proficiency). They were very busy preparing for the top level English test for non-English majors, College English Test (CET) Band 6.

Regarding the teaching time in that semester, the two different groups of students had different time plans. At the private college, there were four periods of classroom teaching each week in each class (i.e., 50 minutes  $\times$  4 = 200 minutes). However, at the public university, there were just two periods of classroom teaching each week in each class (i.e., 50 minutes  $\times$  2 = 100 minutes) and they were given another two periods (100 minutes) of time to learn English autonomously in computer rooms by using computers and networking environments, without guidance from a teacher.

As for the teaching environments, the classrooms at both the private college and the public university were fully equipped with modern technology, such as networked computers, in addition to traditional equipment. So if necessary, a teacher could still write something up on the blackboard. Besides those, there were four loudspeakers in the top corners of the front wall and the back wall of each classroom so that students could clearly hear. In addition, there was a computer autonomous learning centre with two classrooms at the public university. In each of these classrooms, there were at least sixty desktop computers with headphones for students to practise listening and speaking skills autonomously. However, the computer centre for autonomous learning at the private college was still being constructed. In the students' dormitories, at both higher education institutions, there was broadband networking connection allowing students to use the Internet.

### *3.3 Identification of Learning Problems*

In this section, the first discussion focuses on the students' learning problems, such as those with listening and speaking skills that they had encountered in their previous English study, based on the pre-course questionnaire and the follow-up interviews at the start of the course. This allows teaching at different levels in accordance with their own various aptitude or natural abilities. The main purpose of this investigation was to have students at different levels make greater progress, based upon their original English levels.

The main problems of the private college students were as follows: first of all, their English vocabulary was less than 1,000 words. Secondly, they had not mastered basic grammatical rules, such as simple sentence structures. Thirdly, for the above reasons, they had no reading skills or writing skills. Finally, the majority of students could neither understand oral English nor speak English.

The reading and writing skills of the public university students, on the other hand, were really good. Also, basic grammatical structures could correctly be used in their writing. However, their listening and speaking skills were very weak, especially their listening. Their specific problems in terms of listening were: A) they could only understand a speaker at slower speeds than a natural speaking speed; B) they could understand a short dialogue but they could not make sense of a long talk or passage in listening comprehension.

From the above learning problems that different level students had encountered, the biggest problem was their listening comprehension. Therefore, one of the most important tasks for the teacher was to concentrate on improving students' listening skills. Meanwhile, the other language skills, such as speaking and reading, should be also emphasized as well.

### 3.4 Teaching Action

At the beginning of the course, besides the questionnaire investigation, the teacher tested the levels of the students' listening comprehension at different levels listening comprehension. For the private college students, the listening practice test for entrance to senior high schools consisted of 25 multiple choice questions. For the public university students, the listening test was selected from authentic College English Test (CET) Band 6 past papers, consisting of 25 multiple choice questions and an 11-item dictation that required filling in blanks, in order to check the candidate's listening abilities and test the level of spoken English indirectly. The primary purpose of the pre-test, also called diagnostic tests (Hughes, 2003), was to diagnose the students' strengths and weaknesses in listening proficiency, which may help language teachers identify the core of teaching points and the students' weakness, which will be addressed in later teaching.

Regarding the teaching of private college students, due to their lower levels in English proficiency, the teacher selected an elementary English textbook, *New Concept English (Book One)* (Alexander, 1997). The students were taught key language points from the reading texts, such as vocabulary and grammatical structures. As for pronunciation and listening teaching, Baker's elementary pronunciation course was used (Baker, 2006) with audio files (MP3s) to teach them Standard British English in class, in addition to pronunciation tips available from the BBC learning English website. Further, effective learning methods and strategies were taught in order to help students enhance their learning efficiency. More importantly, the students were encouraged to access some useful English learning websites, which were suitable for elementary level learners and for their autonomous learning out of class, in order that they could listen to short dialogues and stories.

The public university students had already been on intensive English courses for one year and had passed College English Test (CET) Band 4 in the second year, so extensive reading and listening practice was emphasised to enhance their overall abilities. As class time was pressing (100 minutes each week, as mentioned above), only listening and speaking practice were focused on in classroom teaching. Reading and writing skills were to be practised autonomously out of class. In addition, a student-centred teaching approach was used in class. Meanwhile, effective learning methods and strategies were taught and some learning materials from useful English learning websites, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) learning English website, were strongly recommended to them for their autonomous learning outside class.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Data Analysis

The research findings were generated from data collected at the end of that semester (January 2010) by using student questionnaires, interviews, and pre- and post-testing measuring tools. Of the 268 completed questionnaires, 176 were from the private college and the rest (92) were from the public university. Table 1 shows the students' their interest and motivation in learning English. They were required to choose one answer to indicate the extent to which they either agreed or disagreed with a statement, lettered (1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Unsure (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree. There were 12 statements in total. (Note: the total number of the Private College students (176); the total number of the Public University Students (92)).

Table 1. Students' attitude towards motivation, autonomy and learning environments

		Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I am interested in learning English.	Private	10%	21%	15%	23%	31%
	Public	67%	33%	0	0	0
2. Learning English well will be beneficial for my future job-hunting.	Private	14%	37%	40%	9%	0
	Public	71%	29%	0	0	0
3. I study English in order to pass a compulsory examination to obtain a BA degree.	Private	46%	21%	13%	12%	8%
	Public	10%	25%	14%	16%	35%
4. Learning English will be helpful in studying abroad.	Private	10%	25%	42%	23%	0
	Public	50%	31%	19%	0	0
5. Learning English will be helpful in working abroad.	Private	41%	27%	32%	0	0
	Public	58%	32%	10%	0	0
6. Learning English will be helpful in learning advanced science and technology from Western countries.	Private	30%	22%	48%	0	0
	Public	65%	35%	0	0	0
7. I learn English because I like to learn about British and American cultures.	Private	0	20%	54%	26%	0
	Public	6%	34%	56%	4%	0
8. Lively and interesting online practice tests enhance my motivation in learning English.	Private	10%	23%	45%	22%	0
	Public	55%	45%	0	0	0
9. My school computers and networking facilities have positively affected my English learning autonomously.	Private	17%	21%	43%	19%	0
	Public	45%	31%	24%	0	0
10. Watching English-language movies is one of the most effective ways to improve listening.	Private	12%	23%	38%	27%	0
	Public	62%	38%	0	0	0
11. Chatting in English on the Internet improves listening and speaking skills.	Private	18%	16%	66%	0	0
	Public	68%	32%	0	0	0
12. Using computer environment is one of the most effective ways to learn English.	Private	25%	41%	34%	0	0
	Public	64%	36%	0	0	0

#### 4.2 Discussion

1) Interest in learning English (Statement 1): Table 1 shows clearly that the number of university students choosing agree and strongly agree (accounting for 100%) is clearly higher than the number of students at the private college (nearly one third). This suggests that the public university students are much more interested in learning English than those at the private college. From my many years' teaching experience, a greater interest in learning something is helpful to increase a student's learning motivation. There is no learning motivation without an interest in learning.

2) Some of the motivation related to future jobs and further study and this was found to be more positively perceived by the public university students (Statements 2 to 5). From the responses to Statements 2, 4 and 5, it is very obvious that the percentage who agreed with the views of the public university students (at least 80%) was much higher than that of the private college students. Also, it suggests that the public university students' instrumental motivation is much higher because their purpose for learning English is to help find an ideal job in the future after graduation, or for further study abroad (Gardner, 2010). This motivates them in their English language learning. The purpose of learning English was not just limited to the passing of tests but they also wanted to pursue higher goals for their future. Additionally, from the responses to Statement 6, the public university students realised the importance of English in learning advanced science and technology, which might cause their motivation in learning English to be increased. This also pushed some of them to learn English in

order to go abroad for further study after graduation. On the other hand, the majority of students disagreed with the view that one of the purposes of learning English is to learn about British and American cultures.

3) The Internet and computer environments affected motivation and learner autonomy (Statements 8 and 9). Statement 8 shows that the public university students either agree or strongly agree that lively and interesting online exercises enhance their motivation, with no students opposed to it. But one third of the private college students were in favour of the view. Statement 9 indicates that nearly 80% of the public university students and nearly 40% of the private college students either strongly agree or agree that their computer technology facilities at their university or college have positively affected their autonomous English learning. All these suggest that the public university students became more motivated and more autonomous in learning English by using computers and online learning environments.

4) Statements 10 to 12 indicate that computer technology learning environments affected learners' progress in their English study. The responses to Statements 10 and 11 suggest that all of the public university students agreed that watching English movies, surfing websites and speaking in English were the most effective ways to enhance their listening and speaking skills. However, one third of the private college students shared these views. Regarding the final response, all of the public university students and two thirds of the private college students strongly held the view that using technology environments is one of the most effective ways to learn English. On the whole, the public university students had much more positive views than the private college students in the use of modern technology and computer environments in learning English. Perhaps the national university students had a rich learning experience using the above environments.

#### 4.3 Analysis of the Pre- and Post-Test Results of the Listening Comprehension

In order to check the students' progress in terms of listening comprehension, the post-test, the difficulty of which was the same or similar to the pre-test, was conducted at the end of the semester. Table 2 indicates such statistics for the two different higher education institutions.

Table 2. Statistics of the pre-test and post-test results of the listening comprehension

	Number of students	(Full Mark: 100 points)	Total scores	Mean	Increased by (%), in comparison with pre-test
Public University	92	Pre-test	4428	48.1	20.4%
		Post-test	6302	68.5	
Private College	176	Pre-test	6124	34.8	4.9%
		Post-test	6988	39.7	

Table 2 shows that the comparison of the public university students with the private college students in the listening comprehension pre-test and the post-test. Compared with the pre-test result, the mean of the post-test result of the public university students had increased by more than 20%, which indicates that their listening comprehension had improved significantly. To our disappointment, the mean of the post-test result of the private college students had increased by less than 5%, in comparison with the pre-test. From the students' test results, it was also found that two thirds of them did not make any progress in terms of listening comprehension, but around one third had made a little more progress than before. This also suggests that all of these test results reflected the attitude of the students towards motivation and learner autonomy in the computer environments. That is to say, the more motivated and more autonomous language learners become, the greater the improvement that could be made, linking Dickinson's (1995) argument that more autonomous learners with higher motivation causes better, more effective work by students in their studies. Also, Benson (2011) claims that autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning and the development of learner autonomy implies their better language learning.

#### 4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis and Discussion

Based on the data collected from the in-depth interviews with students' and the teacher's classroom observations, I discuss why various levels of students at different higher education institutions achieved different results with the same teacher using the same methods within the same technology-based learning environments.

Firstly, interest is one of the key factors to learning English well. From the group interviews (the number of the participants from the private college was about 30), the interview data show that the majority were not interested

in learning English. Some of the primary reasons are as follows: they did not have the basic foundations in English learning at the outset in junior middle schools. When they did not catch up with their own teachers in class, they felt very tired of learning English. They did not recite vocabulary, grammatical rules or English texts at all. They did not listen to teachers attentively in class, and they did not learn English autonomously after class. All these led to poor marks in the national college entrance examinations in China (some even got around 20 or 30 points out of 150 points in the Test of English). After they studied at the private college, they were still unwilling to learn English. They had no definite objectives in their English learning, so they had no motivation to learn. Unlike the other students, they used computers and the Internet to play games for fun and chat with friends. On the whole, they were not interested or motivated or autonomous in learning the language, which led to no achievement in their studies.

On the other hand, all of the public university students were very interested in learning English, from the above survey research (see Table 1). The data from the interviews and their learning diaries indicate that they had a good foundation in English learning from their middle schools and the majority of them studied at leading schools in their own provinces. Their English test results were very good in the national college entrance examinations (two thirds of them got more than 120 points, 10% scored 135 to 146 points (10%) out of 150). They worked very hard in learning English, with clearly defined objectives (e.g., after graduation some planned to go abroad to study for master degrees or PhD degrees; others wanted to work in joint foreign companies or work in other countries). Therefore, they were highly motivated in learning English because they were involved in setting their own learning goals through technology environment (McCombs, 2006; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004).

Additionally, the students from the public university had more autonomous learning abilities to learn English. The data from the students' interviews on how to learn English effectively and autonomously from the modern technology such as the computer and the internet, including my analysis and my comments, are as follows:

(A) Technologies such as computers and the internet are the best teachers for learners to learn English autonomously.

*I am very satisfied with the progress with technology in English study. Without them, I can never have made as much progress. The internet is considered our 'best English teacher' because it taught us so much (Student 1).*

*I think modern technologies have become the best way to study English. During this semester, I have learnt to find learning materials on the internet from so many kinds of English learning websites. Meanwhile, we learners can conveniently read the latest English-language news available from foreign websites at any time. Therefore, I will keep studying English in that way (Student 2).*

The students' comments suggest that modern technologies are the best teachers or the best ways to study English, if learners can use them correctly and appropriately. All this has been confirmed in student learning practice. What learners should do is to continue to make full use of the technologies so that their English proficiency can be improved gradually.

(B) Using technology is one of the most effective ways to learn English.

*We cannot deny the fact that modern technologies make us learners study English more convenient and more effective. Nowadays more and more people prefer learning English through the internet to just reading reference books. In my case, with the help of the electronic products, I have made great progress in recent years..... Indeed, electronic products help me with my English study (Student 3).*

From the above student and other learners' learning experiences, it is clear that using technology such as computers and the internet is one of the most effective ways to learn English. It should be noted that a vital issue is how to make full use of them correctly and appropriately.

(C) Technology-assisted autonomous learning is a perfect way to improve learners' English proficiency.

*By using modern technologies this semester, my speaking and listening abilities in English have improved. I have learnt a lot about Western cultures. I think that self-study with technology is a perfect way to improve English basic abilities (Student 4).*

It is well-known that using modern technologies is one of the most effective ways to learn English. Further, learner autonomy is one of the most vital factors which lead to success in language learning. Without autonomous learning, even if the technologies that learners use are "advanced", they will not succeed in language learning. Therefore, a good combination of modern technologies and learner autonomy is a perfect way to learn English.

On the whole, the public university students had greater interest, higher motivation and more autonomous learning abilities in learning English, and they could make full use of modern technology and the computer learning environments, which led to improvements in their English proficiency.

### 5. Conclusion, Suggestions and Implications

From the above data analysis, research findings and discussion, it is concluded that higher motivation and autonomy lead to greater improvement in English proficiency by learners. From this research project, some implications and suggestions are presented below.

Firstly, language teachers should use effective teaching methods to interest and motivate their students (especially primary school pupils) in the English language classroom. Outside class, the parents of students should also be concerned about their children's English learning and encourage them.

Secondly, teachers should teach their students effective learning methods and strategies. They should also cultivate good study habits so that their learning can become more autonomous and they can unlock their potential.

Thirdly, teachers should encourage their students to make effective use of modern technology. They should also recommend their students effective English learning websites in order that they can enhance their English proficiency quickly. Meanwhile, parents have a responsibility to supervise their under-age children in using computers and the Internet effectively to improve their studies, in order to prevent them from doing something unrelated to their studies.

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