

Motivation Theory Application in Chinese Language Study Context

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Abstract: Motivation has long been considered by psychologists and educators as an important factor that influences learner's study and achievement. This paper explored the reflection of the practicum lessons and offers advice to language learner that may help the learner to reach higher level of language development.

1. Introduction

According to the reflection of my practicum experience which has finished this session, I have found that motivation has great impact on students' language learning. Motivation has long been considered by psychologists and educators as an important factor that influences learner's study and achievement. Pintrich and Schunk (2002, p.45) claimed that a number of motivational constructs have impacts on students' learning through their research in motivation. It researched that intrinsic motivation and achievement goals are powerful enablers for academic learning and achievement. This essay explored the reflection of the practicum lessons and offers advice to language learner that may help the learner to reach higher level of language development.

2. Previous Research Background

In the field of second language acquisition there have been various attempts to define second language acquisition motivation and to discover the relationship between motivation and English achievement. It has been argued that learning a second language differs from learning other school subjects because of its social nature (Dörnyei, 2003, p.332). Many theories of language learning motivation tend to be social-psychological, among which the most influential is Gardner's socio-educational model, including attitudes, motivations and anxiety variables (Gardner, 1988, pp101-126; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004, p.25; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003, p.285). Integrative orientation and instrumental orientation are two important factors in his theory. An integrative orientation occurs when learners hold favorable attitudes to the language/culture, and wish to identify with the culture of speakers of that language. An instrumental orientation refers to the utility value of learning a second/foreign language, such as passing examinations, financial rewards or future career. Burke (2004, p.159) found that aspects of integrative motivation are related to greater motivational effort as well as better language competence in learning a second language. An instrumental orientation was likely related to outcomes such as job-seeking and social status.

In recent years Gardner's socio-educational model has met with some criticism. Much of the criticism seems to question the importance of social aspects of second language learning motivation, and its relevance in different contexts (Mori & Gobel, 2006, p.203). Furthermore, Csizé and Dörnyei (2005, p.633) found that the term integration was not so much related to any actual integration into a second language community as to a more basic identification process within the individual's self-concept. It is necessary to seek potential new conceptualizations and interpretations. Moreover, psychology researchers have become increasingly aware of the importance of contextual and cultural variables affecting motivational processes, especially the difference between Asian students and American or European students (Yi-Guang, McKeachie, & Yung, 2003, p.257).

Intrinsic motivation originates from within the individual and results in enjoyment of the process of increasing one's competency in regard to particular academic tasks. Extrinsic motivation is

motivation induced by rewards or punishment dependent upon success or failure in the task (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p.649; Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006, p.7). Contrasted with intrinsically motivated students, who work for the feeling of satisfaction or accomplishment, extrinsically motivated students will perform mainly for the attainment of a desired external reward or to avoid external punishment.

Researchers found that extrinsic motivation sometimes has a destructive impact on intrinsic motivation by perceived constraints on autonomy (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973, p.132). Hennessey and Amabile (1998, p.674) also found that a promised reward for non-specific performance lessened intrinsic motivation by reducing perceived self-determination or increasing attention to the reward. However, the external reward contingency (requiring a high level of performance or novel performance) may increase perceived competence and self-determination, thus increasing intrinsic motivation. Researchers (Covington, 2000a, p.23, 2000b, p.183; Eisenberger & Shanock, 2003, p.126) found that if external rewards function as feedback for how they can improve and learn more, external rewards may improve intrinsic motivation.

Self-determination theory has proposed that individuals have three innate, psychological needs. These are the need for autonomy, which concerns experiencing choice and feeling like the initiator of one's own actions; the need for competence, which is the need to succeed at optimally challenging tasks and to be able to attain desired outcomes; and the need for relatedness, a social need concerned with establishing a sense of mutual respect and relatedness with others (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004, p.2053; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p.327). External factors which fulfill those three basic psychological needs would enhance intrinsic motivation and those factors which reduce them would decrease intrinsic motivation.

In SDT internalization is the process of taking in a value or regulation, and integration is the process by which individuals more fully transform the regulation into their own. According to the degree of internalization, extrinsic motivation can range from unwillingness, to passive compliance, to active personal commitment. That is motivation, which is the state of lacking an intention to act; external regulation, under which behaviors are performed to satisfy an external demand or obtain an externally imposed reward contingency; introjected regulation, which refers to a partial internalization in which external regulations are taken in by the individual but are not accepted as his or her own (Black & Deci, 2000, p.744); identification, which refers to a fuller internalization in which the person identifies with the value of a behavior and accepts it as his or her own; integrated motivation, when one fully internalizes the reasons for an action and assimilates them to the self, when extrinsically motivated actions became integrated and self-determined (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p.345; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p.62, 2000b, p. 334; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006, p.26).

Noels et al. (2001, p.57) found that external regulation strongly correlated with instrumental orientation, identified regulation and intrinsic motivation correlated with travel, friendship and knowledge orientation in second language learning. He also suggested that integration is an intergroup substrate and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation is an interpersonal motivational substrate. Tae-II Pae (2008, p.17) found that instrumental orientation and external regulation are basically the same, whereas integrative orientation and intrinsic motivation are different.

3. English Study Motivation Research in China

Interest in learning English in China is high because “it is regarded as an important instrument for China to gain access to Western science and technology and to actively participate in the total global family of nations” (Ford, 1988, p.4). Interest in learning is mostly discussed within the framework of motivation so that “the study of motivation has been dominated (and directed) by categories like integrative, instrumental, intrinsic, and extrinsic” (Ushioda, 2001, p.128). Integrative motivation refers to “an interest in and willingness to get to know about a new group of people and their culture, coupled with a willingness to learn a language to do so” (Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001, p.314). Therefore, whether the learners are successful in English or not touches thousands of families, schools and teachers all over China. Chen et al. (2004, p.4) state that English learning in China has been labeled as ‘high investment but low output’. Commenting on the situation in the

learning of English, Li (1996, p.1), the former vice premier who was then in charge of education in China stated: foreign language teaching and learning has been time consuming but of low efficiency. Chinese students start learning English when they are in the junior secondary school in the countryside and those in the cities are required to learn from grade 3 in primary schools. However, many schools in the cities begin teaching English from grade one in primary schools. English is the only subject that lasts for so long while achieving so little in China.

Li identifies a critical, if not devastating situation in teaching English as a foreign language in China. However, failure and unsuccessful learning are not uncommon worldwide. Dörnyei (2006, p.37) indicates that failure to achieve goals in learning an L2 is widespread internationally even though many people have invested much effort in studying new languages. Causes of the unsatisfactory results for English in China have been investigated, but much of the research in the area has been focused on learning strategies (Stern, 1983; Wen, 2003; Yang, 2004; Zhang, 2003) rather than interest in learning English. Krapp, Kidi, and Renninger (1992, p.32) claim that interest is a critical element in learning success and has classified 'interest' into three categories: personal interest, situational interest, and interest as a psychological state. According to Krapp et al. (1992, p.34), personal interest refers to emotions such as love from one's inside leading to being intrinsically motivated to join in an activity. Applied to language learning, learners learn the language because they like it and find enjoyment in the activity rather than because they are seeking rewards outside of the activity itself. They seek the pleasure and satisfaction that participation in the activity itself brings.

According to the social psychology theory of motivation established by Gardner and Lambert starting in the 1950's, motivation is the central predictor in learning success. Gardner's main research has been in Canadian settings, exploring motivation in second language learning, in which distinguishing types of integrative motivation and relating motivations and actions was the key to his theoretical framework. Gardner's (1985, p.15) simple but vivid description of motivation was as follows: many of us want to be millionaires, but if this desire is not associated with a concomitant effort to achieve the goal we are not really motivated to become millionaires. It is a pipe dream, something to think about, but not something that we set out diligently to achieve. When the desire to achieve the goal and favorable attitudes toward the goal are linked with the effort or the drive, then we have a motivated organism (p.11).

Gardner's comments focused on two aspects: interest and action. One needs to be interested in doing the job. However, that is not enough. One needs actions to realize the goal. Gardner's research into integrative motivation was related to the question of 'how could people learn a language well if they don't like it?' His simple question has a fundamental importance for language learning. Namely, if one is not interested in the target culture, then, success in that language is very unlikely, but on its own, this contains no claim about actions. In relation to intrinsic motivation, interest in language learning reflects love and enthusiasm as well as the desire to perform an activity simply for the pleasure and satisfaction that accompany the action and these feelings of pleasure derive from fulfilling innate needs for competence and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p.23).

However, intrinsic motivation is not the only thing that drives learners. According to Gardner (1985, p.47), instrumentally motivated students are basically not 'interested' in English but rather in material rewards that may result from learning English. They learn the language because they think it brings along concrete benefits, good jobs or other tangible rewards. This kind of motivation means that instrumentally motivated students are more likely to stop learning once their goals are obtained. In contrast, it is claimed that integratively motivated students would sustain their interest in learning and become more successful than others (Gardner, 1985, p.49). These students maintain their learning because their learning interest is established intrinsically, namely, from inside the learners. However, instrumental motivation has proved to be a more effective practical method to achieve learning goals in FL contexts (Dörnyei, 2003, p.332, 2006, p.57) and this is the case in the Chinese setting (Jiang, 2004, p.31; Yuan, 2005, p.58; Yang, 2004, p.62). Nevertheless, Dörnyei's (2006, p.77) study shows that integrative motivation is necessary for achieving a higher proficiency

in the target language. Therefore, integrative and instrumental motivations help learning in different ways. But they may also be blurred so that sometimes they are mingled together and sometimes they compete.

Some Chinese researchers think that some motivational variables (e.g. 'integrative motivation') do not fit in the Chinese context (Hua, 1998, p.45). Consistent with this, a study conducted in Taiwan by Warden and Lin (2000, p. 544) concluded that in the Taiwanese EFL environment "an integrative motivational group is notably absent." Hua (1998, p.46) hold a different opinion about 'integrative motivation', arguing that integrative motivation does not necessarily mean that learners are physically involved in the target culture because the learners can be more emotionally interested in the people and language of the target communities.

The emotional aspect of integrative motivation is 'fragile' and can be exhausted or lost due to too great an emphasis on instrumentality. The issue of 'interest' in learning English in China has been addressed by Jiang (2004, p.31) using questionnaires. According to Jiang's (2004, p.31) research, students' overall interest in English is low in China. Jiang surveyed 106 students in Zhejiang Province of the P.R. China and the result suggested that only 12% of the students found enjoyment in learning English. In an earlier study that addressed changes in interest, Liu (2003, p.15) states that "forty-nine percent of the teachers find that students' interest in learning foreign language declines as time moves on". Zhang et al. (2000, p.22) investigated 1309 junior secondary school students in eastern Jiangsu Province, China. The purpose of this research was to investigate the causes of poor English learning in year 8 and year 9 using questionnaires and interviews. They surveyed 10 rural junior secondary schools where more poor students were supposed to be located. They found that 61% (800 students) were not interested in English, afraid of English or even felt disgust when learning English. Considering elements such as location and the educational level of Jiangsu Province, which has been regarded as high, it is reasonable to assume that many other parts of China, for example the less developed southwest Yunnan Province would have more underachieving learners than in Jiangsu Province.

As described in the previous sections, Chinese students' interest in the learning of English declines as they progress through school (Jiang, 2004, p.33). Zhang (2002, p. 19) stated that "students in the remote areas are not generally interested in English and they find there is no point to learn it." Considering the limited interest in English for many Chinese students and in order to improve students' interest in learning English, Yan (2004, p. 1) suggested that to "stimulate and cultivate students' learning interest is the task for English learning during primary and secondary school education period." This suggests that 'interest in English' is important for students when they begin learning but it is even more important to sustain it in the long term. In line with Yan (2004, p.1), Wang et al. (1998, p.4) think that early rather than later training of interest is better. They think that strong interest in English is important and primary school is the ideal period in which to begin.

Wang et al. (1998, p.5) observed a decline in students' interest in the learning of English from primary school to secondary school. In order to improve students' interest in English, Wang asserted that "developing interest in learning should enjoy priority; children should be provided with various kinds of modern facilities in order to create a relaxing, interesting, active and real language learning environment". Reflecting different values, Hau and Salili (1996) commented on Chinese students in terms of their interest in learning. They say "students are encouraged to learn by drill and their interest in learning will be cultivated later through their repetitive work" (p.134-135).

Chinese research on students' interest 'decline' is consistent with what Harter's (1992, pp77-114) research results revealed. Harter's (1992, pp77-114) research suggested that as students advanced from low grades to higher grades, their intrinsic motivation waned and in the process extrinsic rewards imposed a negative influence to minimize the intrinsic motivation. Harter's research result is in line with the general situation of English learning in the Chinese context. Examinations play a significant role in learning English. 'Kao kao kao, laoshi de fabao, fen fen fen, xuesheng de minggen' which literally means 'examinations, examinations and examinations are the formula of a teacher; points, points and points are the lifeline of a student', reflects a widely-shared understanding of current teaching and learning in China. According to Harter (1992, pp77-114), this

examination-centered learning system has a negative impact on students and it causes students' 'interest' to decline. Examinations become the only instruments to evaluate students and they are the things that matter for students. Students' 'interest' in English is gradually exhausted. This general status is associated with the extrinsic context: an educational system in which the purpose of learning is to go to a higher and better school. Examinations and tests have become the key measure to appraise schools as well as students. Under this circumstance, 'interest' in learning English has been shifted from 'intrinsic' to more 'extrinsic' to sustain the learning of English.

Zhang et al. (2000, p. 22) stated that "once entering junior secondary school, subjects that are examined increase dramatically, especially for English courses and the exams make their lives unbearable." It is reasonable to assume that these external factors have a strong impact on the students. Tachibana, Matsukawa, and Zhong (1996, p.694) investigated 801 Chinese and Japanese pupils and found that the students' interest in learning English declined after junior secondary school both in Japan and in China. Zhang et al. (2000, p.22) and Zhong (1996, p.694) reflect a general picture: students' interest declines and this seems to be connected with an educational practice which focuses on examinations.

Shu et al. (2004) argued that teachers are crucial agents in cultivating students' interest in foreign language and this is echoed by Pintrich and Schunk (1996, p. 171) "enthusiastic teachers help foster students' interest and motivation in learning." Similar to Shu et al.'s theory, Zhu (2001, p.19) argued that providing success for students in the early learning experiences is a vital responsibility of teachers.

Shu et al. (2004) and Zhu (2001, p.19) seem to share commonalities regarding how students' interest is created in learning and the roles of their teachers in this process. Therefore, having 'interest in English' is associated with the language teacher, at least in the Chinese context. Liu (2002, p.17) further expands the area connected to interest by stating that "teaching content, teachers' attitudes to students, teaching approaches and teaching methodologies all impact directly on students' interest in studying the course". Therefore, developing students' interest in the learning of English is imperative. Jiang (1996, p. 6) states that "once students lose interest in English, learning is no longer enjoyable." This reinforces the role of the teacher as a motivator – a role that cannot be filled by textbooks.

Xu (1997, p.8) points that textbooks are problematic in developing students' interest in English. Xu says:

- 1) Text should be based on dialogue and communication considering the limited vocabulary for junior secondary school students, it is difficult to introduce foreign culture;

- 2) China is a huge agricultural country and the majority of students come from the countryside; many of them have never been to the nearest city and may not use English in the future, a foreign culture is too remote for them, and

- 3) There will be resistance once the textbooks are compiled "too foreign and too fashionable."

Within the Chinese context, developing students' interest is associated with teachers, who are the main sources of the language and the teacher-student rapport relationship. Xu's comments (1997, p.8) above reflect the existing problems and gaps between the textbooks and students in the classrooms and it appears that these nation-wide textbooks have a strong but largely negative impact on the majority of the students' interest in the countryside. From this perspective, students' interest in learning English is in the hands of their English teachers, which is connected with the rapport between teacher and student. Therefore, it is important to explore students' interest in learning English from teachers, and the ways in which those teachers use textbooks and methodologies so that we can help support improvement in these areas to facilitate students' interest in the course: a shift from locating the interest in learning English outside the learner to inside the learner while recognizing that factors outside the learner will continue to influence what goes on in their hearts and minds.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the article, I have reviewed the importance of 'interest' in learning and a

general background of 'interest' in the learning of English in the Chinese context. By reviewing the literature and the background of English learning, I have argued that the low efficiency of teaching and learning of English in Chinese system is due to the lack of 'interest' in students and their loss of interest as they progress through school. In this paper, I also suggest placing emphasis on 'interest' and motivation in English because developing 'interest' in learning is one of the key ways to enhance students' academic performance. It is important to develop students' interest in English by working on different ways to support teacher-student rapport as well as elements of the curriculum to sustain interest. Therefore, steps need to be considered to improve students' interest in the learning of English which are detailed below:

Steps at Ministry level: In order to enhance students' interest in English and to ensure its sustainability, the Ministry of Education needs to understand the causes of the decline in interest and make relevant adjustments. As we have pointed out, repeated examinations and instrumental English learning are the two main reasons that need to be explored. Excessive external examination and pressures not only cause intrinsic motivation to be short-lived but also damage the possibility for individual students to learn.

Steps at school and local level: Interest in English can be sustained only if the external pressure diminishes so that a supportive learning environment could be created by teachers to improve students' learning performance. In the past 20 years, English learning was large scale and inefficiency abounded. Developing students' interest becomes possible when tension is eased, and a context is created where both teacher and students share in learning the language and culture, not only for examination, but to develop a sense of willingness to interact with the target culture and its people. On the basis of this, learning from intrinsic interest could be possible. By analyzing and exploring the causes of students' interest in learning, we have suggested re-examining the use of textbooks and emphasizing the importance of teachers as the introducers of a different culture and the main source of students' learning in order to promote students' interest and to develop a process that moves the source of that interest from outside to inside.

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