

English Performance of Chinese University Students The Influence of Different Factors on English Learning

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ABSTRACT

Since English became a compulsory subject from elementary education to higher education in China, the discussion about Chinese ESL learners has never ceased. However, the focus on the English performance of Chinese university students is less than secondary school students in recent years. Therefore, through a systematic literature review, this study will investigate the impacts of some key factors on the English proficiency of Chinese university students. The results reveal that both external and internal factors have more or less influence on the English learning of these students. This study can be used as a starting point for Chinese universities to formulate more feasible English teaching strategies, eliminate the negative effects of various factors and improve the English performance of Chinese university students.

Keywords: *EAL learning, Chinese university students, external factors, internal factor*

1. INTRODUCTION

English, as a global language, has been influenced by various cultural, political, economic, technological and historical factors (including colonization). It is necessary to raise awareness of how it is taught and learned in non-English-speaking nations. China, as the world's most populous country with a powerful economy, has placed a strong emphasis on strengthening international political and economic ties. This made English become a compulsory subject in primary schools, secondary schools, and universities in China to help attain this goal since 2003 [1]. Before attending university, Chinese students study English as an additional language (EAL) for an average of seven years. During undergraduate years, they must pass at least one university-level English test (CET band 4). Despite the fact that this exam-oriented technique can improve the overall quality of EAL learning among the young generation in China, the motivation of these tertiary-level students has not been properly investigated. After passing the CET band 4 test, university students' positive attitudes toward English learning begin to decrease [2]. This is especially true for non-English majors students: they have few opportunities to utilize the language, and without practice, their ability tends to decline. Therefore, to fully comprehend the English performance of Chinese

EAL students in universities, it is essential to investigate the factors that affect their learning. This study will address the following research question: How do different factors affect EAL learning among university students in China? Detailed explanations of key terms in the research question are conceptualized as below:

1.1 Factors

Through a systematic literature review, this paper will examine and discuss prior findings on five factors that affect English proficiency of EAL learners: including two internal factors and three external factors. Factor is described as a potential cause for EAL learners' English proficiency. Anxiety and personality are two intrinsic elements. Learning strategy, classroom interaction, and motivation are the three external influences. (It should be emphasized that while many authors refer to motivation as an internal element, in this study it is classified as external and divided into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation).

1.2 Affect

In this study, 'affect' refers to the positive and negative effects of various factors on Chinese EAL learners' English performance.

1.3 ESL learning of university students

In this study, university students are from Chinese top 30 universities (Mainland of China, Hong Kong), include both English majors and non-English majors in their first to third years of study. They are between the ages of 18 and 30 and have been learning EAL for at least seven years.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

For the first intrinsic factor, anxiety, Meihua and Wenhong believe that anxiety has both positive and negative influence on English proficiency among university EAL learners [3]. On the negative side, Chinese students place a greater emphasis on their academic success; the better their grades, the less worry they would experience [3]. Students with a high degree of English proficiency, on the other hand, may feel more anxious when faced with challenges in maintaining their progress and achieving a higher standard. This is particularly evident when students are required to deliver an oral discourse in English [3]. Amiri and Ghonsooly, in a more recent study, find the same result [4]. They discover that having a speech in class without any preparation causes the most anxiety for EAL students [4]. Students are worried about having poor grades. Thus, students with lower grades seem to be more nervous than those with higher grades.

The second internal factor, personality, is divided into two categories by Sharp: introversion and extroversion [5]. Exam-oriented educational policies are implemented in Asian countries such as China, encouraging students to put greater effort into memorizing and individual learning. He claims that introverted EAL learners outperform extroverted EAL learners in Asian countries due to their learning patterns [5]. Zabihi divides personality into five categories [6]. In line with Sharp's result, he indicates that extroversion and neuroticism (bad-tempered students) are found to be inversely connected with English proficiency [5]. Zabihi also states that EAL students who are open to new experiences, amiable (trustworthy), and conscientious would perform better in English learning (take responsibility) [6].

Motivation is the most crucial factor to discuss. Based on self-determination theory, motivation can be divided into two types: intrinsic motivation (IM) and extrinsic motivation (EM) [7]. In learning, IM refers to learners' personal needs and social identities, whereas EM is concerned with rewards and punishment [7]. According to the findings of Noels et al., IM such as learners' feelings, autonomous learning, and friendship have positive effects on students' English competence [7]. As a result, students' learning experiences and classroom atmosphere become primary determinants in evaluating their English competence. Liu expands IM

with more specific aspects in work and study [2]. He states that personal demands, such as future employment and prospects for international study and travel, inspire learners to achieve a high level of English proficiency [2]. Students, on the other hand, lose interest in studying English when the pressure from EM, such as passing tests, reduces [2].

Learning strategy is the second external factor to discuss. EAL learners choose a variety of learning strategies based on their ability level to meet individual learning needs [8]. High proficient learners, for example, choose metacognitive methods to facilitate self-regulated learning, whereas low proficient learners prefer emotional tactics to alleviate anxiety and increase confidence [8]. As a result, the more metacognitive strategies applied, the higher the learners' English performance will be [8]. By contrast, Zhao finds that an emotive strategy has a very weak correlation with English performance [9]. Among Chinese EAL students in universities, a compensating technique (overcoming learning challenges) has become the most popular learning strategy [9]. While the select memory strategy, which requires revising and memorizing visuals and words, becomes the least-used strategy for them [9].

The last external component, classroom interaction, examines how teacher-student and student-student interactions affect English acquisition. Wang and Castro believe that in-class dialogue between teachers and students, as well as scaffolding, can help students attain their language learning objectives [10]. Task-based interactions and small-group conversations, for example, can motivate students to practise English more in class [10]. However, Wang and Castro find no substantial positive association between classroom interaction and Chinese EAL learners' English proficiency [10]. Yang, on the other hand, believes that classroom engagement is important since it encourages students to think creatively [11]. For instance, in a communicative and interactive learning environment, they feel more relaxed and willing to actively participate in various class activities [11]. This is crucial in Chinese classrooms, where students are almost always passive learners rather than active learners. Students are encouraged to practise verbally in English and ask questions during teacher-student interaction to ensure their success in each session [11]. As a result, the combination of active engagement and student evaluation can contribute to the improvement of English performance as well.

3.METHODOLOGY

3.1 Paradigm – social constructivism

The social constructivist viewpoint underpins the systematic literature review methodology. According to Adam's explanation of this theory, learning knowledge is formed through social interactions between people

and the environment [12]. To comprehend the impact of each component on learners' English performance, learners' behaviors and reactions in the presence of these factors, as well as the consequences of these behaviors on their English learning, should be determined first.

3.2 Theoretical perspective

Sociocultural theory (SCT) is the dominant theory lead this study. Howell explains language acquisition as a social behaviour that requires the establishment of a social context and interactive relationship [13]. As a result, different sorts of motivation can assist English learners learn the language in a variety of social and learning situations. Depending on how important motivation is to a learner, it can either accelerate or slow down their progress. Language learning, based on Aimin's explanation, promotes learners to use language as a mediation to develop their personal thinking [14]. When English learners choose appropriate communication strategies to express themselves, they will be less anxious and develop a more extroverted attitude. Furthermore, language learners must achieve self-regulated learning in order to establish a strong link between the language they have acquired and their thoughts [14].

4.SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REIEW

4.1 Database and key terms

This work employed a systematic literature review for data collection and analysis to investigate this qualitative research question thoroughly. First, the database 'Library of the University of Melbourne' was used as a primary search resource to find the appropriate publication. A second database, 'Google Scholar,' was used to find and analyse new resources. Moreover, the search terms of this study were separated into two categories: general key terms for all factors and particular key terms for five components. To summarize, a total of 50 peer-reviewed publications were chosen for additional abstract and content reading after refining each searching criteria and general study question terms from the above two databases.

4.2 Parameters

All journal articles accessed for this study were peer-reviewed and covered the years 2005-2020, assuring the validity and reliability of all data. Furthermore, full-text reviews of the selected articles were required. This is an important phase since it allows the researchers to clearly define their design process, with a full "results and discussion" section to support the research topic before analyzing the data.

5.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following three primary findings will be explored in this section: a) Intrinsic motivation becomes the most important factor in improving learners' English ability over time. b) Teachers must act as facilitators to ensure students' positive English progress. c) The lower the learners' English level, the more introverted and worried they are.

5.1 Finding 1: Motivation and English proficiency of learners

The most noteworthy discovery, according to Du and Jackson, Meihua and Wang, is that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have positive effects on university students' English competence in China [15][16][17]. Whilst, extrinsic motivation is more effective for short-term improvements, and long-term English performance depends on intrinsic motivation. According to Du and Jackson, the external environment and exam-oriented learning models are the two most important extrinsic variables that motivate students to improve their English skills [15]. One reason for this is because the samples used in their study are mainland students who move to Hong Kong to start university education. This international learning environment forces these students to develop their English skills [15]. Moreover, Meihua claims that additional foreign education and career pathway are the two most important extrinsic incentives motivating students to study English [16]. Wang argues that exams become the only motivation for students rather than studying abroad [17]. When exam pressure is relieved, students are less motivated to learn English. Above all, extrinsic motivation can be viewed as a short-term motivational strategy for ensuring students' favourable English performance.

However, Du and Jackson find that intrinsic motivation, such as personal expectations and friendship motivate students to study English in the long run [15]. Meihua and Wang draw on the same conclusion, proving that personal interests and value become two important intrinsic elements in students' English improvement [16] [17]. As university students acquire self-regulated learning, they will shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation [17]. This is due to the fact that passing exams is a short-term motivational objective for English learning, whereas learners will continue to improve their English performance without exams in order to gain long-term fulfillment. Such personal values or interests might be used to describe such expectations. Although both extrinsic and intrinsic drive are positively connected with learners' English proficiency, intrinsic motivation, as opposed to extrinsic incentive, can determine learners' long-term English learning development.

Noels et al., as well as Dincer and Yesilyurt, explore the similar conclusions [7] [18]. When compared to extrinsic incentive, they suggest that intrinsic motivation has a greater impact on students' English performance. Social ties and personal feelings, for example, are classified as the two most important intrinsic elements by Noels et al. [7]. This is in line with the findings of Du and Jackson [15]. Furthermore, Dincer and Yesilyurt, Meihua and Wang, find that personal values and interests are the most compelling intrinsic drive [16][17][18]. Liu indicates that personal requirements is an aspect of intrinsic motivation that includes future job development and overseas study [2]. This is a controversial question, as three previous studies have placed these two factors under extrinsic motivation category. Nonetheless, Liu agrees with Du and Jackson and Wang that exams, as an extrinsic incentive, can only encourage students to enhance their English proficiency during exams [2][15][17]. Overall, Noels et al., Dincer and Yesilyurt, and Liu conclude that intrinsic motivation has a strong positive impact on learners' English proficiency than extrinsic motivation, which is in alignment with Du and Jackson, Meihua and Wang, Hu, Zhang, Chang and Xu's findings [7][18][2][15][16][19]. However, Du and Jackson, Meihua, and Wang emphasize the durability of intrinsic motivation, believing that intrinsic factors can stimulate learners' English performance in the long term that extrinsic factors cannot achieve [15][16][17].

5.2 Finding 2 – learning strategy, classroom interaction and English proficiency of learners

Due to the traditional teacher-centred learning approach in Chinese classrooms, there is neither strong or weak association between learning strategy and learners' English proficiency [19][20][21]. Huang et al. investigate three learning strategies: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, and show that these methods have no effect on learners' English performance [20]. This is because, in an exam-oriented learning environment, students have little option regarding which learning approach to utilize [20]. Accordingly, in such a learning environment, students' preference for improving their English level may not exist. Nisbet et al. discover only a weak association between learners' English competency and their learning techniques (metacognitive, cognitive, social, affective, memory, and compensating) [21]. Students in this sample group decide to employ some appropriate approaches on a regular basis. Among the six strategies, metacognitive becomes the most popular one, while memory is the least used one [21]. Despite this, students make little progress in their English learning since their preferred tactics are ineffective under the exam-oriented context, which is consistent with the previous discussion. Furthermore, Wang et al. focus on the learning approach of self-regulated learning (SRL) and conclude that English proficiency

has a low positive relationship with SRL [19]. Meanwhile, using the same reason as the previous two publications, they prove that the cause for such a weak correlation is due to the low frequency of undertaking students' preferred learning approaches [19]. As a result, the traditional teacher-centred learning approach prevents students from choosing their preferred learning strategies and improving their English skills.

However, Zhao argues that metacognitive (self-regulated) learning reveals a high positive relationship with English proficiency [9]. This is because high-level learners choose to use SRL to improve their own English learning and obtain better results [8]. Consequently, the more capable students are, the more effective learning styles they will choose. This conclusion is in accordance with the prior finding that a metacognitive strategy becomes the preferred strategy among students due to its autonomy [21]. Zhao, on the other hand, states that the most common learning strategy used by most university students in English learning is compensating strategy [9]. However, he doesn't explain how this approach affects learners' English performance. In general, Chinese university students tend to choose their English learning strategies, although this depends on the cultural and educational setting in China, where most learning strategies have a poor or no association with students' English growth.

In terms of classroom interaction, Liu analyses students' behaviours when teachers perform dominators and facilitators in class [2]. He explains that when teachers lead learning in class, students lose their autonomy to study independently and express themselves. In contrast, teachers who scaffold students' English learning, can achieve effective communication [2]. Additionally, during the scaffolding learning process, students can establish self-regulated learning (SRL) and enhance their English skills before achieving their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [22]. Meanwhile, peer interaction can encourage learners to take responsibility, since it allows low-proficiency students to develop their skills by collaborating with high-proficiency students [22]. Whilst, Wang finds no interaction between teachers and students while using a student-centred learning model [23]. Consequently, students make no progress in their learning, that is, they do not provide feedback on their work, and teachers are unable to track students' development [23].

Although Wang and Castro believe that classroom engagement can help students learn English to some extent, the positive correlation is not statistically significant [10]. This finding is consistent with the results of Li and Li, which suggest that, as compared to teacher-centred learning in the classroom, both teacher and peer interactions can have favourable effects on English learning [22][24]. Furthermore, interactive learning creates a pleasant learning environment where

students can actively participate in learning and receive feedback [11]. However, due to the stressful learning environment they experience in school, Chinese students are unable to participate in the interactive classroom [23].

5.3 Finding 3 – Anxiety, personality and English proficiency of learners

Anxiety is negatively correlated with learners' English communication ability [25] [26] [27]. According to Jin et al., anxiety is a significant element that influences learners' English performance, particularly communicative abilities [25]. The more reluctant they are to engage in speaking practice, the more anxious they become. This finding is underpinned by Jing and Junying, Liu, and Amiri and Ghonsooly, who suggest that learners with low competency are less likely to practise speaking because making mistakes in front of others increases their fear [4] [26] [27]. Furthermore, compared to less skilled learners, highly proficient learners are more likely to participate in learning and have a lower level of anxiety [26]. As a result, more talented students will attain higher English proficiency while experiencing less anxiety. Meanwhile, by increasing the learning time, anxiety levels of all learners will be reduced, leading to long-term improvement in English performance [4] [26]. Nevertheless, Liu and Huang present a contrary perspective [28]. They disagree with above findings, claiming that even highly skilled students might become anxious when they are unable to make rapid progress [3]. This finding also applies to oral practise, contrary to the argument that only low-competence learners are afraid to speak English.

The last three papers examine the relationship between personality and English learner performance and draw two different conclusions. According to Cao and Meng, extroversion and motivation are positively connected with learners' English proficiency, whereas neuroticism (lack of organisation) and openness (curiosity) are negatively correlated with learners' performance [29]. Furthermore, Zhou outlines a similar but more specific view that extroverted students will increase their performance if they receive attention from professors [30]. Interestingly, he believes that when teachers are unable to offer them enough attention, extroverted students will become introverted, resulting in an increase in anxiety. As a result, these students will lose confidence in themselves and fall behind in their English studies. Chen, Jiang and Mu, on the other hand, find no connection between personality and English proficiency [31]. The main explanation for their finding is that the Chinese classroom's teacher-centred learning pattern prevents extroverted students from practising their English skills in an interactive manner. Therefore,

considering personality in such a traditional learning setting is pointless [31]. In contrast, Sharp indicates an opposed view of the above discussions and believes that introverted learners attain higher English proficiency than extroverted learners [5]. This is because they can choose learning strategies that are more suitable for traditional Chinese classrooms, such as rote memorization and grammar exercises [5]. Furthermore, Zabihi supports Sharp's claim and explains the negative association between extroversion and learners' English proficiency [6].

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study can be used as a starting point for further research on the factors influencing EAL learners' performance in Chinese universities. Future research could explore it in detail. Moreover, study samples can be expanded to other Asian countries, including Japan, South Korea and Vietnam, to provide a more comprehensive prospect of English acquisition in Asia.

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