

Study on English Learning Motivation of the Middle-aged and Elderly Learners in China

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ABSTRACT

As China's society ages, the number of middle-aged and elderly English learners is gradually rising. Understanding this group's English learning motivation is the basis for developing effective teaching strategies and designing appropriate teaching content for them. This paper is aimed at describing the current condition of motivation for middle-aged and elderly English learners in China. Adopting questionnaire as the main research method, this paper targets the middle-aged and elderly people in China who learn English as a second language, to discover what are the main learning motivations of this group and what types can these motivations be sorted into. Also, this paper proposes effective corresponding teaching strategies to improve the teaching quality of this target learning group at the end. By document analysis and questionnaire investigation, this paper discovered that the main motivations are the demand for communication, social responsibility, and self-improvement. Thus, teaching activities for middle-aged and elderly learners should think highly of the communicative function of English and provide opportunities for this group to practice.

Keywords: English learning, motivation, teaching strategy, middle-aged and the elderly learners

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of learning motivation contributes widely to the second language education area. Current related research has provided abundant empirical experiments and theoretical foundations on teenager students' English learning motivation. According to current research, learning motivation, learning willingness and learning strategy have a correspondingly sustainable relationships[4, 6, 8]. To be specific, learning motivation affects willingness to learn and the choice of learning strategy, which in turn affects learning efficiency[8]. Therefore, understanding learners' motivation is one of the foundations for effective second language education. With the increasing trend of demographic aging, second language education for the middle-aged and elderly becomes a topic worthy of being discussed. In China, the amount of middle-aged and the elderly who have the demand for learning English keeps increasing[11]. To fit with the increasing demand, a systematic study about middle-aged and the elderly's English acquisition is necessary. In turn, the study of learning motivation is crucial to the study of second language acquisition[3]. Thus, research about middle-aged and elderly learners' learning motivation

should be valued. However, the pervasive study of English learning motivation targets the middle-aged and elderly group still has a gap. Current research related to English language motivation mostly focuses on teenage school students[11]. Based on the above situation, this paper aims at demonstrating the main learning motivation for middle-aged and elderly learners in China.

This paper researches 140 Chinese English learners aged between 45 to 70 by sending questionnaires. By combining the document analysis and questionnaires, this paper is going to describe the current condition of the main learning motivations for middle-aged and elderly English learners in China. Also, this paper will summarize the types of these motivations that can be sorted into. Meanwhile, how to adjust the teaching strategies to meet the specific motivation of middle-aged and elderly learners will be discussed at the end of this paper. Through the study of the learning motivation of this group, teachers can develop effective teaching strategies to improve teaching efficiency and meet the learning needs of this group. Also, understanding the learning motivation of middle-aged and elderly learners is the basis for understanding the psychological state of middle-aged and elderly people.

Thus, the research in this paper can provide a reference for gerontological research.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Firstly, this paper is aimed at exploring the main learning motivations for middle-aged and elderly English learners in China. Meanwhile, this paper is going to summarize these motivations into several types. Besides, based on the specificity of the learning motivation of middle-aged and elderly learners, what teaching strategies can be used to improve teaching efficiency will also be discussed at the end.

3. RESEARCH OBJECT

The research object is 140 randomly selected middle-aged and elderly Chinese English learners, aged from 45 to 70. Among them, 66 are male learners and 69 are female learners. See table 1 for details. This paper adopts the questionnaire as the main research method. In the survey of this paper, a total of 140 questionnaires are distributed. Recycling questionnaire 138 copies. Recycling effective questionnaire 135 copies. The rate of questionnaire-reclaiming is 98.5%, and the rate of questionnaire-reclaiming efficiency is 96.4%. To ensure the authenticity of the questionnaire, this paper adopts an anonymous survey.

Table 1 Personal information of research objects (N=135)

Variable	type	Number of people	Proportion
gender	male	66	48.89%
	female	69	51.11%
age	45-55	101	74.81%
	56-65	32	23.70%
	66+	2	1.48%

4. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper adopts the questionnaire as the main research method. The questionnaire consists of 14 questions, which can be divided into two sections: personal information and motivation to learn English. Q1 and Q2 are person information-based questions. Q3 to Q14 are learning motivation-based questions. The questionnaire is rated on a five-point scale of "totally disagree", "disagree", "average", "agree", and "totally agree", which corresponds to one point, two points, three points, four points, and five points. Higher scores indicate greater learning motivation.

5. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This survey is conducted from November 2021 to December 2021 with a total duration of one month. Questionnaires are sent through Wenjuanxing, a platform that provides professional questionnaire sending, collection and analysis functions. Respondents fill out the questionnaire anonymously as required. Completing the questionnaire will cost 1-3 minutes for each respondent on average.

Table 2 The mean and overall ranking of English learning motivation (N=135)

Learning motivation	Mean	Total Score	Overall Ranking	Standard Deviation
Traveling abroad, studying, visiting relatives, etc.	4.16	562	2	1.48
Learn about English-speaking cultures	3.93	530	3	1.33
Reading English literature and other literary works	3.76	508	4	1.60
Enjoy movies, music and other art works	3.76	508	4	1.29
Love the language itself	3.270	442	9	1.37
Enjoy learning languages	3.60	486	7	1.24
Promoting Chinese Culture	3.73	504	5	1.48
Job requirements	3.69	498	6	1.24
Gain a sense of	3.69	498	6	1.27

satisfaction/achievement and improve oneself				
Tool for communication	4.37	590	1	0.98
Requests from children/relatives and friends	3.53	476	8	1.43

According to table 2, the total scores of middle-aged and elderly English learners' learning motivation, from highest to lowest in descending order, are “Tool for communication”, “Traveling abroad, studying, visiting relatives, etc.”, “Learn about English-speaking cultures”, “Reading English literature and other literary works”, “Enjoy movies, music and other artworks”, “Promoting Chinese Culture”, “Job requirements”, “Gain a sense of satisfaction/achievement and improve oneself”, “Enjoy learning languages”, “Requests from children/relatives and friends”, and “Love the language itself”.

“Tool for communication” gets the highest total score and mean among these twelve motivations. The total score of this motivation is 590, and the mean of that is 4.37, which indicates that most middle-aged and elderly learners see English as a tool for communication. The purpose of learning English for them is to master the tool to communicate with others. This score is the highest indicating that middle-aged and elderly learners value the communicative function of English the most. On the other hand, “tool for communication” receives the lowest standard deviation of 0.98, which suggests that middle-aged and elderly learners have achieved a uniform perception of this issue, with most of this group learners viewing communicative function as their primary motivation for learning English.

“Traveling abroad, studying, visiting relatives, etc.” second only to the “tool for communication”. The total score of this motivation is 562, and the mean of that is 4.16, which indicates that going abroad is one of the most common motivations for middle-aged and elderly learners. Middle-aged and elderly learners generally think highly of the practical value of English because they have a high demand to use English in the real-life situation. Based on this situation, teaching content for this group should focus on travel English and daily life English.

“Gain a sense of satisfaction/achievement and improve oneself” ranks on the middle with the mean of 3.69, which indicates that some middle-aged and elderly learners learn English for individual development. Learners with this motivation usually reveal a high level of learning autonomy. Language teachers can take full advantage of this feature to improve learning efficiency.

“Love the language itself” gets the lowest total score and mean on this survey. The total score of this motivation is 442, and the mean of that is 3.27, which

indicates that middle-aged and elderly people have a low intrinsic interest in English. Based on this situation, how to motivate students in the teaching process has become a question worthy of consideration by English teachers.

“Requests from children/relatives and friends” receives the second-lowest score on total score and mean. The total score is 476, and the mean of this motivation is 3.53, which indicates that others have less influence on this group's motivation to learn English. The middle-aged and elderly learners have stronger awareness and ability to learn English on their own.

The mean of “Reading English literature and other literary works” achieves an average score in the upper-middle range, which indicates that English literary works drive some middle-aged and elderly people to learn English. However, it gets the highest standard deviation, which demonstrates that different individual holds different views on the influence of this motivation.

This questionnaire sets Q14 (other options) as a supplementary option. This question is an open-ended question that allows respondents to add English learning motivations that are not mentioned in the previous questionnaire. This question is a voluntary answer, there is no need to add the answer that can not fill in. From the results of the survey, the main motivations for supplementation are time pass, education of offspring, and the need for English communication when children marry native English speakers.

A total of seven people filled in “time pass”, accounting for 5.19%. This is because most learners in this age group have retired and therefore have more free time. For this group of learners, language teachers should pay attention to the fun nature of teaching activities. Second only to “time pass”, a total of six people filled in “educate offspring”, accounting for 4.44%. This is because most learners in this age group have children or grandchildren and therefore have the responsibility to educate future generations. For learners with such needs, language teachers should focus on the regularity and accuracy of the teaching content. Also, language teachers should develop an understanding of background information about learners, such as the age of their children and their children’s motivation to learn English, and then develop corresponding learning activities.

Table 3 Q14 supplementary answer data analysis (N=135)

Supplementary Option	Number of people	Proportion	Overall Ranking
Time Pass	7	5.19%	1
Educate offspring	6	4.44%	2
the need for English communication when children marry native English speakers	5	3.70%	3
Communication with foreign friends	2	1.48%	4
Follow others	1	0.74%	5
Curiosity	1	0.74%	5
Exam	1	0.74%	5

Combining multiple-choice and open-ended questions, this survey tries to cover common English learning motivations for middle-aged and elderly learners. According to the survey results, motivations can be broadly classified into tool-based motivation, interest-based motivation, social responsibility, external requirements, individual development, education-based, and entertainment-based. To be specific, “Traveling abroad, studying, visiting relatives, etc.”, “Learn about English-speaking cultures”, “Reading English literature and other literary works”, “Enjoy movies, music and other artworks”, “Tool for communication”, “communicate with foreign friends” and “the need for English communication when children marry native English speakers” can be summarized as tool-based motivation, “love language itself”, “enjoy learning language” can be summarized as interest-based motivation, “job requirement”, “exam”, and “Requests from children/relatives and friends” can be summarized as external requirements, “gain a sense of satisfaction/achievement and improve oneself” can be summarized as individual development, “promoting Chinese culture” can be summarized as society responsibility, “education of offspring” can be summarized as education-based motivation, “time-pass” can be summarized as entertainment-based situation.

6. TEACHING STRATEGIES

Among these seven types, tool-based motivation is the most common one. Middle-aged and elderly learners value highly the communicative function of English, which requires language teachers provides more opportunities for learners to practice. English classrooms in China generally lack educational strategies that emphasize the function of communication [2]. Thus, language teachers of middle-aged and elderly learners should consider teaching strategies that can improve learners’ practical application skills. For example, role-play is one teaching strategy that allows learners to practice what they learned in the classroom [5]. Besides, English corner is a way to encourage learners to practice. Also, teachers can create scenarios

that simulate reality which helps learners clear about what they will meet in the real-life situation [1].

Secondly, entertainment-based motivation can not be ignored in middle-aged and elderly learners of English learning. Due to this specificity, language teachers for this group should consider how to enhance the playfulness of language teaching. Including internet resources in the classroom is an effective way to improve the interest of the class, such as internet stories, news, and podcast[9].

Besides, most middle-aged and elderly learners have plans to go abroad to travel, visit family, or live in the future, which requires language teachers to provide corresponding teaching content. The teaching process should focus on the teaching of daily life language rather than academic language.

7. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary society where aging is increasing, it is necessary to study the English learning motivation of middle-aged and elderly people. This paper combines document analysis and questionnaires to research the current condition for learning motivations of middle-aged and elderly English learners in China. A month-long research study was conducted among 140 middle-aged and elderly people, in which 135 valid questionnaires were collected. According to the research result, there are seven types of common motivations for this group of learners, which are tool-based motivation, interest-based motivation, external requirements, society responsibility, individual development, education-based, and entertainment-based. Among these motivations, tool-based motivation is valued highly by this group of learners. Most middle-aged and elderly learners learn English for communication needs. Based on this characteristic, teaching activities for middle-aged and elderly learners should focus on enhancing the practical application ability of learners. This paper suggests including role-play, English corner, and simulation scenario into the English teaching process to emphasize the communicative function. Meanwhile, individual

development is another commonly accepted motivation, which indicates a high level of willingness to learn on their own. Teachers should make full use of students' motivation to enhance learning efficiency. Also, entertainment-based motivation exists wildly which requires a high level of playfulness in the teaching process. Based on this requirement, this paper suggests English teachers in this group combine internet resources into language teaching. On the other hand, intrinsic interest-based motivation ranks in the last place with the lowest mean and total score, which indicates that learners of this group have less interest in linguistic itself. Thus, thinking about how to improve their interest in English is a challenge for language teachers. However, in order to obtain more accurate results, the sample size of the survey could be increased.

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