



The Environmental Impact on the L2 Motivational System in the Chinese Context

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Abstract. The Learning motivation is an important factor that affects second language acquisition and directly influences learners' ultimate learning achievements. Learning motivation is also influenced by many factors. This paper combines the theory of the L2 Motivational Self-System and analyzes the impact of the Chinese environment on second language learners' learning motivation. This provides a reference for improving the level of second language teaching and promoting the learning motivation of second language learners in China. The research found that China's policies and education system, cultural context, and level of contact with the target language culture all have specific effects on the learning motivation of Chinese second language learners. In the end, this paper proposes implementation suggestions for improving the external learning environment. The government could adopt a “muti-language” education approach to satisfy those interested in minor languages. Schools should provide advanced learning equipment and more platforms or activities for learners to better practice their learning knowledge. Teachers should create a better classroom atmosphere and use specific teaching strategies such as incorporating extracurricular knowledge, giving positive feedback and helping them set goals, to motivate learners' learning motivation.

Keywords: Second language learning, Learning motivation, Chinese context, L2 Motivational Self-Systems.

1 Introduction

The communication and cooperation between China and the international community have become increasingly frequent, leading to a high demand for foreign language talents. Foreign language education, especially English education, as an international language, is highly valued. Second language learning motivation is an important factor that influences learners' second language acquisition and is a research hotspot both domestically and internationally. Teachers can adjust their teaching methods based on the specific situation and better stimulate learners' learning motivation only if they fully understand the factors that affect learners' learning motivation. However, second language learning motivation has national differences, and specific environments need to be analyzed to find ways to improve learners' motivation. Taking into account China's

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unique national conditions and social culture, this paper combines the theory of L2 Motivational Self-System to first analyze the impact of China's policies and educational system on second language learning motivation. It then examines the impact of China's unique cultural context on second language learning motivation, and finally analyzes the impact of domestic learners' exposure to the target language culture on second language learning motivation. This paper provides some reference for improving China's second language teaching level and promoting Chinese learners' second language learning motivation.

2 The L2 Motivational Self System

Early studies on second language motivation were based on Gardner and Lambert's (1972) theory, which divided second language learning motivation into integrative and instrumental motivation ^[1]. However, with the increasing globalization and the rise of English learners worldwide, many researchers have found that this traditional theory is no longer applicable to the motivational characteristics of global English learning and cannot be applied to many second language learners.

In response to this, Dörnyei (2009) proposed the "L2 Motivation Self-System" to redefine L2 motivation and make it more relevant to modern learners ^[2]. The L2 Motivational Self-System is composed of three dimensions: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience ^[3].

The ideal L2 self refers to the ideal self-image of L2 learners compared to their actual self. Learners will be motivated to bridge the gap between their ideal self and their real self in order to achieve their learning goals.

The ought-to L2 self refers to the image that others think the learners should become. Learners are motivated to live up to the expectations of others and prevent negative outcomes.

The L2 learning experience is related to the learners' learning experience, and the immediate learning environment, including teacher impact, curriculum, peer group, successful experience, etc ^[2].

The motivation to learn a second language provides the original driving force and impetus, and can to some extent make up for the deficiencies in linguistic ability and learning conditions. Therefore, this is one of the main factors affecting second-language learning outcomes ^[4]. Combining the L2 Motivational Self-System, the learner's learning interests, ideal self, sense of achievement, future vision, etc. can be attributed to intrinsic motivation, while the learning environment, teachers, and teaching methods are external motivation.

This paper will further explore the impact of China's domestic environment on second language learning motivation by analyzing the overall environment of second language learning in China. This will help learners to adjust their learning motivation to achieve better learning outcomes, and also help teachers to adjust their teaching methods and strategies to better improve their second language teaching level.

3 The Influence Factors on L2 Learning Motivation in the Chinese Context

3.1 The Educational System and Policy

China has attached great importance to foreign language education and the cultivation of foreign language talents for a long time, especially since China's opening policy was implemented in the period of reform and opening-up. China has developed an open economy and actively expanded its economic exchange with foreign countries, which has led to the increasing frequency of international communication and cooperation. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 has further promoted its participation in the world economy and international division of labor. Against this backdrop, the demand for foreign language talent in China is increasing and foreign language education is becoming increasingly important. In compulsory education, English is a mandatory subject and is equally important as Chinese and mathematics, and it is also a subject on the college entrance exam. Regardless of the major, English is an obligatory class for students in China's colleges. Under the influence of China's national conditions and social environment, Chinese learners' second language motivation has shown a strong sensitivity to the environment. The middle school and college entrance examinations are exams that are closely related to the interests of learners and have to a certain extent shaped the exam culture and family concept^[5]. Chinese learners hope to achieve their future vision and meet their intrinsic needs and self-worth through success in exams. Under the strong influence of the family concept, learners also have a learning motivation to meet their parents' expectations and obtain family benefits^[5]. Moreover, under the influence of China's traditional culture of filial piety, Chinese learners have a strong sense of responsibility and mission to support and respect their parents, fulfill their wishes, and meet their expectations. They are viewed as being less individualistic since they frequently had to fulfill "reciprocal duty"^[6]. According to the research of Wang Zhe, Azizah Rajab, Hamdan Said, Masdinah Alauyah Md Yusof (2019), parents' expectations will make Chinese learners invest more time and effort into learning English.^[7] In their study, most of the survey participants stated that if they perform poorly in English, it may make them lack certain competitiveness in the job market, which would disappoint their parents. In the Chinese context, learners are assigned a "mission" by their families from a young age, and are influenced by social pressure, parental expectations, and peer competition, which promote the generation of their ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 motivation.

Driven by national policies and education systems., examinations have become the main competitive approach in education, and cultivating exam-oriented abilities, pursuing high scores and admission rates has become the main goal of teaching in schools, gradually forming the "Chinese-style exam-oriented education". Under this exam-oriented education, English has been given great instrumental value^[8]. Learners regard completing tasks and taking exams as their main learning motivation, which to some extent can promote learners' active learning. However, many learners lack learning interest as an internal driving force, and learning interest is the core factor of foreign language learning motivation, which determines learners' goal-setting and

achievement, especially in the initial stage of language learning. Learning interest will have a chain effect on subsequent learning motivation, attitudes, and performance [5,9]. From a long-term perspective, a lack of learning interest in language learning will be detrimental to learners' ability to maintain a good learning state and long-term learning enthusiasm. Under such a macro environment, most second language classrooms in China are exam-oriented, and since the exam format is written rather than oral, teachers focus on exam-related knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar, aiming to help students obtain high scores in exams and enter better schools, while paying little attention to or even neglecting the essence of language as a communication tool and students' communication ability in actual language use. This also leads to the phenomenon of "dumb English" among Chinese English learners.

3.2 The Chinese Cultural Context

According to the L2 Motivation Self-System theory, factors such as teachers, curriculum design, peers, and learning environment are important factors affecting the motivation of learners to acquire a second language. A positive and relaxed classroom environment can significantly stimulate learners' interest and promote their motivation. However, it is widely known that the classroom atmosphere in China is quieter compared to Western countries, with mostly traditional teaching methods and low willingness to communicate among students. Chinese students are widely considered hard-working, good at memorizing and preparing for exams, but they tend to sit quietly in class and not active in class activities. As well, they do not like to ask or answer questions and are not willing to attend group work^[10]. This phenomenon is largely attributed to China's unique social and cultural background, where China is a typical collectivist country and a high-context culture. In collectivist societies, people prioritize the collective interest over individual interests, value altruism, often neglect individuality, and generally have a strong conformity tendency, preferring not to be a "nonconformist". Therefore, Chinese learners are more adept at listening to others' opinions rather than actively expressing their own views. People in high-context cultures tend to communicate indirectly and implicitly, are more concerned about others' feelings, and rarely show reactions. Chinese learners prefer nonverbal communication, which is often perceived as poor expression skills by others. Humility is a traditional virtue that Chinese society has always advocated. Under the influence of traditional values, people tend to have reserved and humble personality, which makes them relatively passive about learning foreign language. Due to the lack of a language environment and the influence of Chinese cultural characteristics, Chinese second-language learners have fewer opportunities to speak and weaker speaking abilities, often appearing to lack confidence. In particular, in competitive classroom speaking activities, learners are more likely to experience anxiety, which highlights the inhibitory effects of anxiety in the classroom speaking environment^[11].

Given the unique social and cultural background of China, the influence of teachers and the second language learning environment they create on second language learning motivation becomes even more important. The second language classroom where learners are situated is equivalent to a micro-environment created by the teacher, which will

directly affect learners' interest and motivation to learn. Analyzing the three dimensions of the L2 Motivation Self-System, it is found that all three aspects of motivation have a direct and significant positive impact on classroom oral participation motivation. If the classroom atmosphere is relaxed and lively, the teacher-student relationship is close, and the learning process is enjoyable, students will be more active and willing to put in more effort in oral participation ^[11]. The highest degree of learning that a pupil is capable of has been determined by the teachers' language knowledge, which includes an understanding of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and the context of the target culture. The personality and extracurricular activities of teachers have a large impact on how well children perform. The attitude and conduct of teachers toward their pupils have a key role in fostering the acquisition of second languages ^[10]. Communication between teachers and students can also directly influence learners' investment and the intensity of their learning motivation ^[12]. Teacher-student interaction and communication in or out of the second language classroom both have a positive effect on promoting learners' learning motivation.

3.3 Contact with the Target Language Culture

Interest in learning is, to a certain degree, the starting point of learning a language. When learners are strongly interested in a language, they will want to learn it in a systematic way ^[13]. Therefore, the degree of contact between second language learners and the target language culture has a crucial influence on their language learning motivation. Learners' motivation to learn a second language originates from their interest in foreign cultures and languages, and their desire to enrich their own language and cultural knowledge through learning a second language ^[14]. If learners were exposed to foreign cultural works such as movies, music, and books and were interested in them at an early age, they are more likely to have the goal of learning a foreign language or have a dream of becoming a translator in the future. Their ideal L2 self will be formed and shaped earlier than others, which is closely related to their family and learning environment. If learners themselves love foreign literature or movies and want to watch them in the original language, it may also become their motivation to learn a foreign language. There are also people who want to study a second language because they like foreign entertainment or sports stars and want to learn about their country's culture, which also promotes their second language learning to some extent. Therefore, the deeper the learners are exposed to the target language culture, the more likely they are to develop an interest in learning the target language, which becomes their motivation for learning.

The ideal L2 self is placed at the top of the ideal vision layer, and the middle layer includes dimensions like interests of the culture, attitudes towards native speakers of the target language, and instrumental motivation of the L2 self (such as personal development). The language learning interest has a direct impact on all these dimensions of L2 learning motivation ^[15]. However, Chinese English learners are less likely to experience pleasure while learning English in the classroom due to China's exam-oriented education system. The domestic second language classroom is exam-oriented, with teaching methods mostly being straightforward and teaching content often limited to

the content that needs to be tested in textbooks. Teachers focus on teaching vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects, and rarely incorporate cultural background content from the target language country into the classroom. Interest becomes the key constraint factor for second language motivation when learners have no clear understanding and full knowledge of the second language [5]. Learners face boring and uninteresting language classes and teaching content, making it difficult for them to develop a sense of interest for language. The more significant a learner's interest in language learning, the more they will value the role of language learning in personal development [15]. If learners lack interest, their learning attitude will be relatively poor, which will be detrimental to their future development and achievement in second language learning.

4 Suggestions

4.1 Government Policy Adjustment

China places particular emphasis on English education, which is integrated throughout the learning process of students. However, the teaching of minor languages is relatively poor. Before attending university, if learners are interested in minor languages, they have little or even no opportunity for systematic learning in school, especially during compulsory education. This to some extent consumes the interest and motivation of learners. With the development of the Chinese "The Belt and Road" initiative, its relations with neighboring non-English-speaking countries is becoming closer, and there is a great demand for foreign language talents who can master minor languages. It is necessary for the country to adopt a "multi-language" education approach, so that learners' second language learning is not limited to English, and to guide learners to break free from the constraints of global English and recognize the diversity of the world's languages. This will help to cultivate more high-end foreign language talents to build a "community of human destiny" [8].

4.2 Improvement of School Work

The learning environment created by schools also plays a major role in motivating learners. A good and correctly guided learning atmosphere, up-to-date learning equipment and learning information, and language communities for communication and exchange can enhance the motivation for second language learning [13]. Schools need to provide more platforms or activities for learners to communicate, allowing them to have greater exposure to the target language and culture, and improving students' capacity for using the language.

4.3 Improvement of Teachers' Teaching Strategy

Teachers have a direct impact on students' learning motivation. Due to the influence of Chinese society and culture, Chinese learners may have weak communication willingness, and teachers should create a comfortable and relaxed classroom atmosphere to

encourage students to freely express their ideas and reduce their pressure and anxiety about communication. Optimizing and adjusting teaching content is an important condition for improving students' classroom learning motivation. Teachers need to incorporate extracurricular knowledge into teaching content, increase the fun of the classroom, enhance students' understanding of the target language culture, together with national customs, historical references, and linguistic content, and increase their interest in language learning. Teachers should act as guides and motivators, using effective motivation strategies for different learners. They should give students more positive feedback and stage-specific feedback to help them feel a sense of achievement and increase their confidence to learn a second language. Teachers should also guide learners to reasonably shape their ideal L2 self, help them set ideal visions and goals, and guide them to create positive L2 learning experiences.

5 Conclusion

This paper finds that the social and cultural environment in China has a significant impact on the motivation of second language learners. China's policies and education system contribute to a certain degree to motivate learners, but exam-oriented education can have some negative effects on learners. Therefore, adjustments need to be made to the goals and methods of education. China's unique social and cultural background makes second language learners less willing to communicate, so the classroom environment is particularly important, and creating a good classroom environment can greatly promote motivation among second language learners. The degree of exposure to the target language culture also has a very large impact on the motivation of second language learners. Only by fully mobilizing learners' learning interests can their motivation be further promoted.

The motivation of second language learners has a close relationship with their learning outcomes, and how to stimulate their interest, adjust their learning strategies, and inspire their motivation are issues worthy of discussion and research in second language acquisition. Many researchers have analyzed and studied the internal factors of second language learners, such as individual differences and learning emotions, that affect their motivation. This paper focuses on the external environmental factors in China and studies their impact on the motivation of second language learners. In future research, it is necessary to combine internal and external factors for analysis, further explore the common role of external and internal factors, and comprehensively investigate the methods for promoting learning motivation.

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