



An analysis of Curricular Aspects in EFL Teaching in Chinese Primary Schools and Their Connection to Student Motivation Grounded in Positive Psychology.

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Abstract: This paper will discuss the problems existing in primary school students' English learning motivation and analyse the causes of these problems. In addition, this paper will explore how to combine the knowledge of positive psychology with teaching materials and methods to motivate Chinese elementary students in second language acquisition, and this paper will also talk about how to stimulate students' learning motivation in English learning from both two perspectives. The second part is the literature review, which includes studies regarding the L2 motivation theories, positive psychology in SLA, and studies that have focused on motivation and positive psychology in connection with classroom practices. The current education system in China and my own internship experiences are addressed in the third part. The fourth part discusses how to combine teaching materials with the theories about positive psychology to motivate Chinese primary school students in real classrooms, and some suggestions for teachers to improve their teaching practices.

Keywords: English for young learners, L2 motivation, SLA theories, young learners, positive psychology

1 Introduction

English for young learners (EYL) is a neglected research topic in China, even though it forms the foundation for higher levels of study. Furthermore, despite official advocacy for developing more learner-centered teaching methods and how learners view their language learning is crucial, there has been little research on young learners' opinions of their English learning motivation.[9] Motivation is of great importance in SLA.[4] Describes that "motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent" (p.65).[14] states that psychology is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play, not merely about disease or health. It could be inferred that the definition of psychology

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highlights that possessing positive psychology might have a beneficial effect on the learning process. Moreover, positive psychology in SLA has a brief history but a long development, [11] and the term of positive psychology has evolved until now. Positive psychology does not depend on striving for the best things deliberately; however, it attempts to explore the best things in the scientific process, apply them to the various kinds of problems that people face in their lives, and overcome those difficulties [12], which means using knowledge about positive psychology could also be used to solve students' difficulties in the learning process.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Studies Regarding Motivations in Second Language Learning

Motivation Theories in SLA. Various definitions could be found in the field of motivation. There are two norms for determining whether an individual is motivated: firstly, the individual exhibits some goal-oriented behaviors; secondly, the learner studies hard and has the drive to attain goals as well as a good attitude toward learning activities. Nevertheless, motivation can be thought of as a way of awakening an individual's cognition and emotions. Consequently, it generates intentional behavioral decisions and an ongoing period of noetic or manual effort to attain a predetermined objective, which means motivation may be a temporary emotional state and does not include the act of exerting effort. In contrast to Gardener's opinion, Dörnyei argues that motivation no longer emphasizes the learner's positive attitude or emotional experiences, [4] but more emphasis on the two dimensions of goal and effort in Gardener's concept of motivation. Additionally, Dörnyei (2009) describes the L2 motivational self-system consisting of Ideal L2 Self, an Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience. In psychological research, the ought-to self has been connected to despair, fear, unhappiness, and mental problems. On the contrary, the Ideal L2 Self may still be viewed as being related to perfectionism. [3]

Based on "The Socio-educational Model", individual variations in intelligence, linguistic ability, motivation, and situational anxiety are influenced by cultural judgments in the social context, which could directly influence language learning and finally contribute to differences in learning outcomes. Gardner and Lambert (1959) identify two different types of motivation for language learning: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Learners with integrative motivation aim to integrate into a second language group, they would like to socialize with members of that group and become one of them. In contrast, [6] the practical worth and benefits of learning a new language are emphasized in instrumental motivation.[7] However, there exist some challenges to Gardener's Socio-educational Model. These criticisms resulted in a paradigm change from a macro to a micro perspective, as well as the birth of various models of motivation in second language learning.[19] Self-determination theory differentiates intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation resides within a person and is associated with a person's character and happiness. Extrinsic motivation originates outside of the individual such as gaining an award or avoiding punishment. Other theories

of motivation for SLA include Attribution theory, Goal theory, the Neurobiology of L2 Motivation and so on. [19]

L2 Motivation Research in Young Learners. Behavioral learning theory claims that learning is the relationship between incentives and reactions. [15] Behaviorist reinforcement theory is derived from Skinner's experiments on operant conditioning, which suggest that people or animals will act on their environment to achieve a certain goal, and then the environment will give feedback. When the feedback is positive, the behavior is facilitated to repeat itself, if not, the behavior is reduced or terminated. [16] As a result, when shaping students' learning behavior, it is necessary to follow the mechanism of reinforcement, that is, to use external rewards. External reinforcement could be actively participated by students to contribute to the cultivation of their internal motivation. Attributional theory suggests that attributions do not directly lead to behavior, but rather that they cause emotional responses and expectations of outcomes that in turn lead to certain behaviors. Attributions of behavior are divided into four dimensions: internal and external causes and two dimensions of stability and instability. Also, Attributional behavior carries a strong subjective interpretation and is an important factor influencing an individual's learning motivation. [18] So how to motivate students to learn and to stimulate good motivation in teaching activities in schools is significant for research in the field of motivation.

There exist other factors that affect students' learning motivation. Parents' cultivation of children's autonomy and the influence of teachers and peers could all promote children's intrinsic learning motivation to a certain extent. The age group of Chinese primary school students is between six and twelve years old, which belongs to the fourth stage in Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, children at this stage are supposed to be educated in school. If learners do well in school and achieve excellent academic results, they will require a sense of diligence that will make them confident in their lives. In the meantime, if they encounter difficulties in the future, they will tackle them confidently. On the contrary, it will produce an inferiority complex. Piaget's Theory of cognitive development suggests that primary school students aged seven to eleven are in the concrete operational stage. At this stage, children begin to develop concrete logical thinking skills and learn to analyze things rationally. However, they are not yet able to think logically in isolation from objects, so their thinking at this stage is more figurative than abstract. [13] This is the reason why primary school teachers often need to use real objects as examples in class.

2.2 Studies Related to Positive Psychology and Learning Motivation

Positive Psychology. The formal introduction of the concept of positive psychology was marked by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's paper "An Introduction to Positive Psychology" published in January 2000.[2] Positive psychology utilizes approaches and theories to investigate happiness and the positive orientation of psychology, as well as the positive psychological qualities of human beings such as health psychology, love, and happiness, integrating all these wonderful qualities. The basic theoretical content

of positive psychology includes three topic areas: positive emotional experiences, positive personal characteristics such as those associated with a good life and positive organizational systems.[11] Positive emotions could enhance the individual's immediate thoughts and actions as well as affect people's thoughts and actions in the long run.

The purpose of positive psychology is to help people quickly shift from facing the difficulties they encounter in life with a negative attitude to treating them with a positive attitude. Also, the premise of positive psychology is to have an optimistic explanatory style, which refers to how individuals understand the reasons for events that happen to them.[8] Explanatory style is found to be somewhat heritable in the population by following large-scale, population-based research of the explanatory styles. Children's explanatory style could be influenced by their parents. One influence is that children are sensitive to how their parents understand the world, and as a result, they may be likely to interpret their surroundings similarly. Another influence is that increased pessimism and diminished social support resulting from insufficient parental support may lead some teenagers to feel helpless to affect their social environment.[1] Additionally, teachers' feedback on children's performance, whether positive or negative, could affect children's developing explanatory style.

L2 Motivation and Positive Psychology in Connection with Classroom Practices.

Teachers need to cultivate students' positive emotions in English class. Positive psychology emphasizes the important role of positive emotions in human development. Fredrickson (2001) put forward Broaden-and-Build Theory, the theory states that positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride and love have the following positive functions. [5] They could expand attention and thinking patterns to broaden horizons, eliminate the residual effects of negative emotional awakening, enhance mental toughness, create personal resources, and contribute to a higher sense of well-being. Meditation is a kind of mindfulness, which has been related to improved attention as well as reduced sadness, anxiety and stress. Meditation is the act of entirely focusing one's mind and it is being present at the moment drowning out other ideas and noise in our heads. Therefore, we could introduce meditation into our classroom. Moreover, Weiner's Attributional Theory claims that teachers need to guide students to make correct attributions and encourage students to make more internal controllable attributions such as effort, and less external uncontrollable attributions such as luck and task difficulty.[6] For example, when students make progress in English learning, teachers need to give timely encouragement and teach students to attribute their progress to their efforts.

3 Context

In the modernizing era, the English curricular standards (ECS) focus on activating students' interests in learning, connecting course content with learners' life experiences and cognitive stages of development, and students' active involvement in participating in activities and cooperating with each other could promote learning. ECS's main purpose is to enhance students' comprehensive language competence by making learning

a process in which they acquire positive attitudes, develop thinking skills, improve cross-cultural awareness, and develop effective learning techniques to progressively become autonomous learners. Holding a positive attitude towards learning is required by the new curriculum, so research into how positive psychology could be used to motivate students becomes particularly important. I teach English in a Chinese ordinary local primary school. Most of students in this school are born in peasant families. Some parents teach their children in the wrong way, which leads to a wide range of problems in schools, such as being tired of learning, skipping classes, psychological problems caused by high pressure, and so on. Worse still, many of the psychological problems that children have at school are caused by their original families such as divorced parents, children left behind, and so on.

4 Application

4.1 An Analysis of the Causes of Pupils' Lack of Motivation in English Learning

Internal Causes. To begin with, the lack of intrinsic learning motivation is one of the internal causes. This could be explained by the following two aspects. One aspect is that an over-emphasis on test scores in China has turned English learning into driven instrumental learning that does not last (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991), which damages the intrinsic motivation of English learning. Another aspect is that teachers do not provide timely psychological support and help students with correct attribution for students' negative emotions and failure results produced in learning activities. Secondly, students lack self-awareness of English learning. Pupils recognize the importance of English marks but do not realize that the process of learning English is a social experience. Thirdly, since the abilities of self-management and self-regulation of pupils are weak, it is easy for children to be affected by social electronic products, games, bad habits of peers and so on, which will distract their energy in English language learning and lead to weak motivation in English learning. Finally, students do not experience the joy of English learning. According to Broaden-and-Build Theory, [5] joy is a kind of positive emotion that could expand students' attention span and promote students to think about questions from multiple perspectives. If students could experience such positive emotions in English learning, their English learning motivation will increase gradually.

External Causes. There are three external causes. To begin with, the inadequate social concepts lead to students' lack of learning motivation. In China, the English learning effect of primary school students is mainly measured by their English test results, due to the long-term examination-oriented education mode in China, the oral English education of students has been ignored. [8] In addition, family education is one of the external causes as well. For example, some parents are not well educated, so they could not take part in teaching their children English. As discussed in the Literature Review, parents' lack of concern for their children's English learning or insufficient parental

encouragement also make students lack English learning motivation. [1] Worse still, wrong family education such as manipulating children's thoughts, and scolding children without any reason will demotivate students. Finally, teachers' professional level, personal charisma, and teaching style could affect students' learning in a way. However, a good teacher-student relationship could stimulate students' learning motivation.

4.2 Strategies for Motivating Students to Learn English Grounded in Positive Psychology

Internal Motivation Stimulating Strategies.

(1) Cultivate Students' Positive Emotions and Emotional Control Ability in English Learning.

Regarding the lack of motivation for primary school students in English learning, we need to eliminate the negative emotions such as tension and fear of not learning English well before learning, so in this way, they could generate and maintain positive emotions to learn English. Nevertheless, eliminating negative emotions requires some technical exercises. For example, at the beginning of my class, I had my students practice mindfulness. In addition, after classes, I provided psychological support and attribution exercises for my students. I found that many of my students who encounter difficulties in English learning attribute their failure to low self-efficacy, producing a sense of incompetence, and fundamentally denying themselves, which could be easy to produce inferiority. Such negative emotions could hinder students' development. Therefore, setback education was being integrated into my classroom teaching. Also, teachers need to intervene in students' inappropriate attributions and transform those negative attributions into positive ones. As stated in the literature review, teachers need to praise students with weak abilities and high effort in time and criticize students with strong abilities and low effort. [18]

(2) Strengthen Students' Positive Emotional Experience in English Learning.

As mentioned above, positive emotions could influence people's immediate thoughts and actions. So positive emotional experience in English learning has an important effect on the cultivation of students' learning motivation, and it affects students' learning feelings and learning effects. From my own teaching experiences, I created an open and comfortable English learning atmosphere in my class. For some shy students in my class, they hardly take the initiative to raise their hands to answer questions. To make every student have a chance to express themselves, I invited some active students to answer the questions first and left time for those shy students to think about the question. Then I smiled or did gestures to encourage those shy students to answer. If students answered questions wrong, I would not criticize them. Instead, I praised their performance and guided them to give the correct answer. In this way, students would have the courage to speak up and not be afraid of making mistakes, so that they could have a successful and enjoyable experience in English learning. Also, when assigning homework after class, I set different homework for students of different levels. For the

mistakes in the homework, I marked them and made students correct themselves, which makes them feel “I can do it!” and guided them to have a successful experience.

(3) Develop Students' Positive Personality and Self-Awareness in English Learning.

Positive psychology divides personality into optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles. People with an optimistic explanatory style see difficulties and setbacks as temporary and caused by external causes. On the contrary, people with a pessimistic explanatory style see it as permanent and caused by their internal causes. As discussed in the literature review, the formation of an individual's personality is related to heredity, family background, school education, and so on. Therefore, as a teacher, we need to develop students' positive personalities and self-awareness in English learning. Firstly, teachers need to pay attention to students' learning feedback, teach them according to their individual differences, encourage their progress, and maintain their self-esteem. Secondly, it is essential for teachers to cultivate students' autonomy in learning English. Take my own teaching experience for example, I created situations with the help of objects or pictures and made students learn in a happy and relaxed atmosphere by using games, role-play, and other activities. Teaching with objects or pictures is more conducive to students' understanding because the thinking mode of primary school students belongs to the third stage of the Theory of Piaget's cognitive development. [2] At the same time, students' interest in English learning could be stimulated and their independent learning ability could be cultivated in a relaxed and happy class.

External Motivation Stimulating Strategies.

(1) Cultivate Students' Positive English Learning Strategies.

Flow is the state of being completely immersed in an activity due to an internal drive. The characteristics of target language learning tasks and the target language skills that learners already possess could affect students' psychological state and academic performance. The pleasure produced by flow could enhance students' learning motivation, and active learning strategies could give full play to students' subjective initiative. Therefore, teachers need to pay attention to cultivating students' active English learning strategies. In the beginning, teachers need to help students set clear learning objectives and define the learning tasks for each lesson. Students are motivated to learn when they have a clear goal. In addition, the teaching strategies of the English sections are also important. Take vocabulary teaching, I guided students to use the method of association, which means associating their own experiences or connecting with pictures, or comparing similar words, to connect new words with the words they have learned, and students could memorize them easily.

(2) Carry Out Active Family Education.

As described above, the living environment is closely related to children's healthy growth and self-realization. A positive living environment and psychological support provided by parents could promote children's mental health. [2002] Conversely, if children are raised in a negative environment, their physical and mental health would be hindered accordingly. [1] Hence, the first thing parents need to do is to accept their

children's characteristics and not force them to change. Also, it is important for parents to listen to their children's ideas and look at things from the perspective of their children. For English learning, parents could agree with their children about the rules of learning. The requirements of parents for children should be in line with their children's physical and mental development characteristics. More importantly, it is indispensable for parents to transfer the learning choice to their children and encourage them to look forward to their future and goals, parents could give their children advice but reduce their controlling behavior. When children could complete a task independently, parents may gradually cancel the intervention and assistance to their children to realize the development of children's autonomous ability.

(3) Exert Teachers' Positive Power.

Every move of teachers plays a key role for pupils. It is necessary for English teachers to constantly improve their professional quality, such as correcting non-pure oral English, studying better teaching methods and so on. Additionally, the good character of teachers would also help to create a comfortable and dynamic learning atmosphere as well as produce a good teaching effect while teaching. For instance, teachers could carry out positive group interaction and role model motivational activities. In positive psychology, rewards and praise belong to "positive reinforcement", which could encourage students to strengthen their good behavior. This follows Skinner's behaviorist reinforcement theory mentioned in the literature review. [5]

4.3 The Impact of Using Knowledge about Positive Psychology on Students' Learning Motivation.

The biggest effect is that students in my class have gradually developed an interest in English learning, they take the initiative to speak in class, and every time when I assign group tasks, they would actively participate in the group activities. They know how to get rid of their bad feelings when they fail an exam, and they also know how to set goals for their future study. Honestly speaking, students gain a lot from training in the knowledge of positive psychology, and their English abilities have significantly improved. More importantly, the biggest gain for them is that they will face English learning with a positive attitude in the future. [10]

5 Conclusion

From what has been discussed above, this paper has studied the main factors that affect primary school students' English learning motivation, which include internal factors such as students' intrinsic interest, intrinsic motivation, cognitive and learning strategy, attribution style and emotional experience, and external factors such as the social environment, family education, school learning atmosphere, teacher-student relationship, and teachers' classroom practices. For one thing, the measures to stimulate students' English learning motivation are as follows. Teachers could cultivate students' positive emotions and their emotional control ability in English learning, for example, teachers

could provide meditation exercises for students before class. Furthermore, it is significant for teachers to guide students to make correct attributions. Teachers could emphasize turning setbacks into constructive opportunities for growth, rather than seeing them as indicators of inadequacy, and empower students to view criticism in a constructive manner. [8] Strengthening students' positive emotional experience in English learning is also one of the internal measures, so an open and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom is conducive to stimulating students' learning motivation. At last, students' positive personalities and self-awareness in English learning should be developed. For another, there exist some external measures to stimulate students' learning motivation. It is necessary for teachers to cultivate students' positive English learning strategies, which means teachers should clarify the learning tasks of each lesson while helping students set clear learning goals. More importantly, teachers need to exert their positive power and improve their professional quality. Meanwhile, carrying out home-school education is also of great value. Parents could give suggestions for their children's learning, but they should reduce their desire to control their children and respect their children's ideas and choices. The apparent advantages in English performance among only children and urban EFL learners reflect an uneven distribution of educational resources. Therefore, the one-child policy and disparities in urban-rural resources warrant greater attention from relevant government departments and policymakers. [17] Considering all the previously discussed topics, I would recommend deeper research on what can be done to reduce the anxiety and fear of students before SLA in more detail or how to stimulate students' English learning motivation grounded in positive psychology from other perspectives.

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