

# A Survey on the Role of Motivation and Attitude in Second Language Learning of Chinese College Students

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## Abstract

Motivation and attitude play a vital role in second language learning. Therefore, how Chinese students can be greatly motivated in their foreign language learning should be studied at great length in order to achieve more efficiency in learning. This survey was conducted by investigating how instrumental motivation and integrative motivation function in Chinese college students' second language learning, and thus help them take a positive attitude toward it.

**Keywords:** Integrative motivation, Instrumental Motivation, Attitude, Second Language Learning

## 1. Introduction

An important factor that can contribute a lot of failure and success to foreign language learning is motivation. The research on learning motivation now has become a hot issue in the area of foreign language teaching. So far, considerable research has been made in this area and a wide variety of theories and approaches have proliferated with each expert advocating his own ideas and methods. Most of the empirical study on foreign language motivation at home follows Gardner's (1972) theories to explore the effects of improvement exercised by learning motivation on foreign language learning, and the relationship between learning

motivation and attitudes that might influence the result of foreign language learning. Therefore, this paper intends to investigate English learning motivations, learning attitude and the effects among science students in order to understand their general motivation, attitude and the effect, find the reason for such a motivation, attitude in order to stimulate science students' learning motivation and help them to establish a correct learning attitude during language learning processes.

## 2. Literature Review

One of the best-known and historically significant studies of motivation in second language learning was carried out by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert(1972). Over a period of 12 years they extensively studied foreign language learners in Canada, several parts of the United States, and the Philippines in an effort to determine how attitudinal and motivational factors affect language learning success. Motivation was examined as a factor of a number of different kinds of attitudes. They coined the terms integrative motivation to refer to language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment, and instrumental motivation for language learning for more immediate or practical goals. Many of Lambert's studies (Lambert 1972) and one study by Spolsky (1969) found that integrative motivation generally accompanied higher scores in proficiency tests

in a foreign language. The conclusion from these studies was that integrative motivation may indeed be an important requirement for successful language learning. And some teachers and researchers have even gone so far as to claim that integrative motivation is absolutely essential for successful second language learning.

However it was also claimed by Yasmeen Lukmani (1972) that Marathi-speaking Indian students learning English in India, those with higher instrumental motivation scored higher in tests of English proficiency. Braj Kachru(1977, 1992) has noted that Indian English is but one example of a variety of Englishes, which, especially in Third World countries where English has become an international language, can be acquired very successfully for instrumental reasons alone. Even Gardner himself, with his associates, has recently found that certain contexts point toward instrumental orientation as an effective motive for language success (Gardner and MacIntyre 1991), and that others favor integrative motivation (Gardner, Day and MacIntyre 1992). Burstall(1974) and her colleagues undertook a large-scale research project concerned with teaching of French at primary schools in Britain. They found that motivational characteristics of individual pupils appeared to be neither exclusively integrative nor wholly instrumental. The motives of the pupils were often complex, and difficult to categorize completely in terms of the integrative/instrumental distinction.

Such variable findings in empirical investigations point out that there is no single means of learning a second language: some learners in some contexts are more successful in learning a language if they are integratively oriented, and others in different contexts benefit from an instrumental orientation. The findings also suggest that the two types of

motivation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Second language learning is rarely motivated by attitudes that are exclusively instrumental or exclusively integrative. Most situations involve a mixture of each type of motivation.

In addition to motivation, attitude is believed to be another important factor related to language learning. By far the most studied is attitude towards the target-language speakers, sometimes called the reference group.

According to Gardner's socio-educational model, the variable, Attitudes toward the Learning Situation, involves attitudes toward any aspect of the situation in which the language is learned. In the school context, these attitudes could be directed toward the teacher, the course in general, one's classmates, the course materials, extra-curricular activities associated with the course, etc... This is not meant to imply that the individual necessarily thinks everything about the class is ideal. If the language teacher is ineffective or non-responsive, or, if the course is particularly dull or confusing, etc., these factors will undoubtedly be reflected in the individual's attitudes toward the learning situation.

### 3. Research Questions

Now in China, most students have to learn English, because it is one of the compulsory courses. They take up their English learning since primary schools even kindergartens. It is apparent to see that if one is good at English, he or she will get more chances whether in examinations or in applying for jobs. Then, how about those students? What are their attitudes towards English? Are they pushed to learn or study hard automatically? Therefore, another question comes to my mind: how motivation and attitude actually influence English learning of Chinese college students. If we can have a better

understanding of this question, it will be helpful for teachers to take different strategies to stimulate students' motivations to their capacity in the classroom settings.

#### 4. Methods

Because I don't think a single test can reflect a person's learning results accurately, I choose a group of college graduates as my subjects. Then I conducted a survey among those graduates majoring in Micro-electronics( aged 25-30), who had at least 5 chances in college to take part in CET4 or CET6 before their graduation. All of the 30 participants in this group began their English learning experience around puberty just as most of other Chinese students.

To start with, they are asked to answer a questionnaire.

Then a thorough analysis is made on the collected data. It is found that 10% of the students want to migrate to an English-speaking country, 63.3% want to make friends with English speakers, and 76.7% claim that they are interested in English culture and want to learn more about it with the help of English. According to these data, it is obvious that integrative motivation really exists among more than half of Chinese students.

Then how about instrumental motivation? 43.3% of these students demonstrate their hope to study abroad; 46.7% admit they learn English because they have to pass various English exams; the percentage of the students who believe CET 4/6 diploma will be very helpful to get a good job is as high as 60%; as many as 63.3% of the students say they want to work in an international company, where English will be a working language; 73.3% say that they want to do everything well, including language learning; and 60% learn English well from the very beginning and hope to learn it better and better. These data show a majority of

Chinese students also learn English for instrumental purposes, especially for the purpose of passing academic exams.

It is necessary to point out that most of those students have mixture motivation -they may be both instrumentally motivated and integratively motivated at the same time. This seems to accord with the findings of Burstall(1974). In addition, there are 33% of the students claiming they learn English because their parents and teachers urge them to do. For them, the motivation seems to be neither instrumental nor integrative one. Instead, it can be considered as an external one. This provides a further evidence that learners' motivation can be so complex that sometimes it is too simple to divide it into just two types. Another very interesting thing is that for the ninth question, 60% learners ticked YES. This figure shows that those learners are motivated because they are successful, which is similar to Peter Skehan's finding.

Now let's focus on the data reflecting some aspects related to attitudes. We find that 36.7% of the learners say they like English courses, 50% hold a neutral attitude, and only 13.3% of them dislike English. Toward English itself as a language, as many as 46.7% of the subjects show their positive attitudes, and those who hold the neutral attitudes also cover the same percentage, with only two expressing their negative attitudes. As to the English culture, 60% subjects like it, 30% neither like it nor dislike it, and only 10% of them dislikes it. How about their attitudes towards English speaking countries? Those graduates who claim to like English speakers cover 36.7% and 40% hold the neutral position. 23.3% of them dislike them. These statistics demonstrate a fact that more than half Chinese learners have positive attitudes towards English culture and nearly half have positive ones towards English language. Practically

quite a few has negative attitudes. From this point, we can see again that more than half of them are instrumentally motivated and people show more interest in English culture than English language itself, which can also be attributed to the success of contemporary college English education in China which focuses more on comprehensive learning.

At last, we will check learners' attitudes towards their English teachers. To my surprise, most of the subjects ticked the neutral attitudes toward their English teachers. Besides 33.3% of them show their positive attitudes, only one holds the negative one. Maybe the subjects I choose are mature enough in their macro-cognitive thoughts after so many years English learning, so they are more self-centered in it. Therefore, their attitudes towards their teachers do not seem having influenced them much.

## 5. Conclusion

Motivation and attitude play a very important role in foreign language learning. Various learners have various motivation and attitudes. It seems that there is no definite answer to the question whether one type of motivation or attitude is superior to another to lead to language-learning success. Some learners may get benefit from integrative motivation, while some get benefit from instrumental motivations. It sometimes depends on certain outside factors, for instance, social environment, exam system, etc. What's more, even for the same person, the motivation and attitude in his or her different stages of learning may not be the same. At the same time, language teachers have responsibilities to help learners adjust their motivation and attitudes so that they can be fully motivated to learn well. Therefore, it is of great significance for teachers to try every means to understand their students'

motivations, attitudes, and even the change of them. My research is just one try, which needs much further improvements in the future.

## 6. Limitations

Every research has its limitations. This is without exception, just as mentioned above. To start with, it may not be scientific enough for me to only choose 30 subjects to represent all the Chinese college students, so my research should be broad enough in the following days. And my questionnaire is not objective enough, because the data I've taken are just what the subjects claim instead of what they do.

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