

Reflections of the Role of Motivation on Learning English for Successful College EFL Learners in Taiwan

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Abstract

While a number of studies have investigated the relationship between motivation and foreign or second language learning outcomes, the process of how such motivation transforms into successful learning outcomes is relatively unexplored. Interviewing a group of four participants, this study seeks to understand how college English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students produce successful learning outcomes, and to suggest some theoretical as well as practical implications of the transformation. In doing so it contributes to our growing understanding of how and to what extent motivation shapes the process of EFL learning.

Keywords: *Motivation, Self-Learning, English as a Foreign Language, Internal Motivation, External Motivation, Learning Outcomes*

1. Introduction

English is a lingua franca, and whoever owns the skills possesses competitive edge. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) is a field that is in a state of constant change. Given that, EFL or ESL has become an important issue in higher education in the age of globalization (Cheng, 2011).

Since the first appearance on foreign/second language learning, motivation has become increasingly sophisticated and concerned. There has been a number of studies that have investigated the relationship between motivation and EFL/ESL learners' learning outcomes (Csizer, kormos, & Sarkadi, 2010; Dörnyei, 1990; Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei, 2009; Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2004). And, an increasing number of recent publications and empirical studies have reassessed the positive contribution that motivation can make to learning outcomes (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1990; Noels, 2001, Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Wachob, 2005). To date, however, no clear direction has emerged to suggest how such motivation translates into successful learning outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to present evidence that motivation can make to successful foreign language learning outcomes. More specifically, this study was undertaken in order to understand how college EFL learners in Taiwan produce successful learning outcomes, and to suggest some theoretical as well as practical implications of this process. In doing so it seeks to contribute to our growing understanding of how and to what extent motivation shapes the process of EFL learning.

2. The Review of Literature

A substantial amount of research has identified that learners' motivation is closely related to EFL/ESL education (Gradman & Hanania, 1991; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Motivation is further classified as internal and external (Amabile et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kwan and Cheung, 2006; Osterloh & Frey, 2000; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Vallerand, 1997). Internal motivation refers to the satisfaction that learners acquire while conducting certain activities; external motivation is the benefits or rewards from them.

With the significance on learning outcomes, motivation is considered one of the most crucial factors in successful learning outcomes (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1990; Noels, 2001, Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Wachob, 2005). Vallerand (1997) even proposed that learners with internal motivation, *integrativeness*, tend to produce positive learning outcomes while external motivation is geared toward more negative learning outcomes. Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) point out that internal motivation plays a crucial role in affecting English learning outcomes. Further in the study, it is stated that most of the successful learners possess internal motivation, including interests in learning, learning improvement, increase in self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Integrativeness, as defined by Gardner (2001), addresses not only positive attitude towards a foreign/second language but also learners' appropriate and efficient intercultural competence. On the other hand, unsuccessful learners are constrained by external motivation. Given that, unsuccessful EFL/ESL learners tend to contribute learning difficulty to teachers and the environment. Gardner (1985) believes that learning motivation is positively related to second language learning outcomes. Higher learning motivation represents higher needs in learning, which would help learners persist in learning when encountered with frustration and difficulty. Studies also show that foreign language learners with higher achievements tend to show greater motivation and more positive attitude towards acquiring a foreign language, and could better adjust personal learning strategies based on personal ability and goals (Gradman & Hanania, 1991; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). As this review has shown, motivation, especially integrativeness, is closely related to learning outcomes; more importantly, learning outcomes and motivation are intertwined (Klein et al., 2006; Pintrich, 2002).

3. Research Questions

To address the issue already outlined and to begin to fill the gaps in the previous research, the present study was designed to emphasize the following questions:

- 1) What perceptions, in terms of English learning, do successful EFL learners have about motivation?
- 2) How does motivation take place and influence successful EFL learners' English learning journey?

4. Methodology

4.1 The Participant

The participants were chosen from the junior cohort at the Department of Applied English at an institute of technology in central Taiwan, using networking sampling. All of the participants were purposefully selected based on their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores. According to Educational Testing Service (ETS) 2010 report (TOEIC, 2010), the average TOEIC score of undergraduate students at institutes of technology in Taiwan is 427 points. Therefore, the requirement for participation was set at a minimum of TOEIC score of 700 points to be considered a successful EFL learner. The participants who volunteered to take part in the study were two males and two females. The demographic information of each participant is as below. (see Table 1)

Table 1: The demographic information of the participating students

Pseudonym	Gender	Experiences of Attending Cramming School	First exposure to English Learning	TOEIC Score
Josh	M	No	Kindergarten	815
Matt	M	Yes	The third grade	785
Emma	F	No	The seventh grade	770
Jessica	F	Yes	Kindergarten	720

4.2 Data Collection

The research employed a qualitative approach. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted individually and were tape recorded for later coding and analysis. Each interview session lasted about ninety minutes. Interviews were conducted based on interview protocols (see Appendix A), which were reviewed by two field experts. To retain the authenticity of the participants' perspectives and views, all interviews were conducted in Chinese, the native language of the participating students. The study documented the participants' thoughts and feeling about their English learning outcomes over an extended period of time, revealing their struggles as well as personally significant transformations. This study solely relied on interviews because it seeks to reflect on

the participants' personal and insightful experiences.

4.3 Data Analysis

Each interview was taped, transcribed in Chinese, translated into English and then back-translated into Chinese. Back-translation was conducted to reduce the inconsistency between translations. Each transcription, both in English and Chinese, was sent back to the interviewees for confirmation via e-mail. Revision was conducted upon interviewees' requests. Finally, minimal grammatical errors were corrected.

During the analysis, the interview transcripts were repeatedly read, summarizing the participants' views, grouping these summaries, and describing them more precisely under headings. The data were then reexamined in their entirety and coded. During coding, the headings were revised and refined to more accurately reflect the data, and these categories were renamed to reflect the nature of the participants' comments more precisely.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

Despite the advantages of interview, it does have some limitations. First, not everyone is comfortable being interviewed. Moreover, trying to recall personal history is challenging. In spite of these limitations, interview has been used to study the issues related to beliefs, perspectives, and personal experiences.

5. Results

Research Question 1: What perceptions, in terms of English learning, do successful EFL learners have about motivation?

In analyzing the data, two categories emerged: 1) momentum, and 2) self-discipline. Each category was unique in terms of the problems it addressed and the source from which it came.

Momentum rose from Josh's belief that, if momentum was not in place, little could be accomplished. In his own words,

"Motivation is like the engine of a machine. It gives you power to move forward. I think my power comes from the encouragement from my parents. Unlike many other parents who simply ask for achievements in grades, my parents expose me to lots of different forms of learning in English...English is then taken as a tool for me to explore the world around it. I still can vividly recall the animation that I watched while I was little even though I did not quite understand it well. But, it is all right that I cannot understand it. The only thing that matters is the spark it triggers me to move forward."

"To me, it [motivation] is hard to define. But, I think it is the thing that you want to achieve. If you want it so bad, then you could make it happen. Everyone is different because everyone desires for different things. We all have different priority in life." [Matt]

"Motivation is the push that you give to yourself. Some people choose to do nothing while others know the difference they can make if they are willing to try harder. I guess I am more aware of this because I know I want to have options in my life. I have been educated that I need to work hard for myself and for my life. My parents teach me well about this. I truly agree that there is no free lunch." [Emma]

"It [motivation] is so abstract and hard to be put into words. I think it is the promise you make with yourself. Promise is something that you really want to accomplish. I believe that motivation comes from promises that you make. When you promise someone to be with him/her, it is a *YES* thing for a life time." [Jessica]

To the participating students, motivation could be replaced as momentum, which provides one power to continue and move forward. When asked to further elaborate on motivation, the responses were generally positive. Self-discipline seems to dominate the second category.

"It [motivation] is the power. But, you need discipline to continue and to sustain. To make sure that I am on the track, I need to constantly remind myself of the goal that I set for myself. I think self-discipline is key. Even though my TOEIC is above 800, I still believe that I shall be able to do better." [Josh]

"Motivation really matters when you want to accomplish things or goals. As I said, it is the thing that you want for yourself. The thing that *you* want is the key. No one tells you what they expect from you." [Matt]

"...I guess I am more aware of this because I know I want to have options in my life. I have been educated that I need to work hard for myself and for my life." [Emma]

"...I think it is the promise you make with yourself. Promise is something that you really want to accomplish."

[Jessica]

To them, self-discipline is the key that determines motivation. Even motivation is defined as the power that triggers action that follows, self-discipline seems to be the fuel that keeps the engine moving and working in a long term.

Research question 2: How does motivation take place and influence successful EFL learners' English learning journey?

A few themes were extracted: 1) Interest initiated their English learning journey; 2) Stress was another form of motivation; 3) Self-learning was critical. All four of them consider interest as motivation in terms of English learning, and their interests started when they were first exposed to English in their early ages. It is apparent that interest initiated their English learning journey. As Josh said,

“When I first started learning English, I was very excited that I had foreign teachers in my classroom. Even though I did not understand much of what he said in the classroom, I enjoyed playing with my foreign teachers. I had a great time with them...I then started to develop passion for English songs, such as rap and some rock music as well. In order to understand the songs, I had to go through the lyrics. I also love foreign movies. I believe that you learn more English in out-of-classroom activities.”

“English is like another code. To unlock the code, you need to love it before knowing it. I really enjoy learning English because it is like a second me. When I speak English, I sometimes feel like a foreigner in me. I know that sounds strange...” [Matt]

“Unlike others, I did not learn English until my 7th grade. At the beginning, English is simply like a subject. But, for some reasons, I did quite well on most of English tests and exams. That was why I started to spend more time learning it on my own. I guess I take that as my leisure activity.” [Emma]

“I like English because I do well on most of my English tests and exams. Grades do provide me a good reason to devote my time to studying English...Outside of classes, I love chatting with net friends from around the world. Their lives are so different from us. I cannot imagine how I can communicate with them without English. [Jessica]

Stress is another form of motivation to the participating students. Of the four students, all of them considered stress provided them learning motivation. Stress is primarily derived from their parents, teachers, and self-discipline.

“Without stress, you are not going to push yourself further. I have been constantly told that I need to do better, which is considered stress to me. I think stress is good in terms of learning outcomes...motivation is indeed another form of stress. You motivate yourself because you have stress to do better.” [Josh]

“My mom has constantly told me that I need to have a good grade on TOEIC exam because she knows what that can do for my future. I am planning on applying for a graduate program in the States, which requires some degree of proficiency in English if you want to get into a good program...With good grades in TOEIC, you really can make things happen, especially for your future employment and further study. A bachelor's degree can never be good enough for our generation.” [Matt]

“I have student loans, and I really need to get a good job so I can get my loans paid off. I don't want to have just *a job*. I want to have a well-paid job. A well-paid job requires a certain degree of outstanding performance on English proficiency...I am an English major's, and I believe that English proficiency should be my strength. My teacher has emphasized that English majors' need to outperform their peers in terms of English proficiency. English is a world language. Without a second or foreign language skill, you won't have too many options in terms of job employment. [Emma]

“My motivation expands because I know I can do better and better. I have spent so much time learning English. I don't think it is easy to call it quit at any point in time. I want my English skill to be my best competitive advantage, which is especially important for my future employment.” [Jessica]

Of the four students, they all expressed the opinion that self-learning is crucial to sustain their English learning. Furthermore, the notion that English learning should not be limited to in-class materials was repeatedly mentioned and emphasized.

“...movies are great sources in terms of practicing English listening and speaking in practical purposes. English is learned to conduct day-to-day communication, which my teachers have emphasized. I want to have practical skills and be able to use the skills when I need them. I usually watch two to three English films a

week and read couple English articles a week. I think this practice is very important if you want to improve your English proficiency in a practical manner.” [Josh]

“Some of my classes are really easy for me. If I want to upgrade myself, I need to find my own resources. I do TOEIC mock exams almost every day. Of course, this has nothing to do with my school grades. I believe that self-studying is crucial because you are not going to depend on the classes or the teachers to provide you all the input you need. We are not like elementary school students any more. We need to learn how to learn on our own. [Matt]

“I have never attended any cramming school, which is quite rare to other peers. I think you need to develop interests and passion in learning. I find it fun to listen to English music radio program and to watch English movies. Textbooks are too academic. I like learning in my leisure activities. Of course, I still have to spend time practicing my English from my school courses. But, my point is that learning does not limit to school textbooks and subjects.” [Emma]

“...I try to read lots of English magazines whenever I get the time. English magazines contain a wide variety of topics and issues that interest me. This is important when I talk to my foreign friends online. It is boring to run out of topics when you talk to them. You need to have updated issues so you can keep conversation going.” [Jessica]

6. Discussions and Findings

To conclude, the present study reveals the process of motivation to successful foreign language learning outcomes. More specifically, this study was undertaken in order to understand how motivation took place to produce successful learning outcomes for college EFL students in Taiwan. A major finding is that the effect of motivation can be observed. The results also indicate that the transformation of motivation is time-consuming. It can be reasoned that successful long-term learning outcomes requires time and motivation to work effectively and efficiently together. But, it remains unclear why certain people develop interests at the first place and continue to transform interest into long-term motivation.

The findings are not in contradiction with those of the empirical studies discussed above. The results lend some credence to the beliefs that motivation, especially internal motivation, is crucial in determining successful learning outcomes (e. g. Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1990; Noels, 2001, Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Wachob, 2005). The better performance on English proficiency exams seems to be indicative of the fact that the factor of motivation could be traced back to the initial learning stage. The participating learners' *integrativeness*, which is considered internal motivation, was shown in their interests in music, movies, and other outside-of-class activities. Tien (2011) emphasized that interests are indeed the best motivation in terms of successful language learning outcomes. In addition, the rewards from tests and exams, known as external motivation, play an important role in providing confidence to the participants. Finally, their English learning did not simply rely on the input from the classes. With the extended learning in out-of-class activities, they seemed to develop personal learning strategies. The findings confirm those of Lamb (2002), Pickard (1995), and Pearson (2004) that self-learning is beneficial to successful learning outcomes in terms of foreign and second language acquisition. More importantly, their self-discipline obviously helps them sustain English learning and make learning tailored to their own personal needs and goals.

The finding also suggests that successful learning outcomes do not solely rely on interest alone. Self-discipline seems to be critical in terms of sustaining learning in the long run. The role of self-discipline has helped the participating learners construct pattern of self-learning. Self-learning indeed is considered critical in terms of learning outcomes in the long run (Lamb, 2002; Pickard, 1995; Pearson, 2004). For the participating learners, they all indicated that self-learning played an important role in their learning outcomes. Overall, integratively motivated students are more likely to work harder and are less likely to drop out of language study, and therefore produce better outcomes in the long run.

The findings could be applied to improve the teaching methodology as well as self-learning strategy in foreign language program. On a more specific basis, the research could serve to reinforce the need of self-learning. Finally, it is hoped that it will throw some light on several issues or at least pave the way to new research projects which will help consolidate the study of motivation in learning English at a practical level.

7. Suggestion for Future Research

This study provides a descriptive basis for additional research. There is a continuing need for an adequate theoretical basis for the practical application of motivation in learning English. However, whether the findings will also apply to other contexts cannot be determined based on this study. Future research is therefore warranted in different teaching contexts.

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Appendix A

Interview protocols

1. How would you, as an EFL learner, define motivation?
2. How important is motivation? Please provide examples to explain your perspectives.
3. Please recall your English learning journey.
4. Do you consider yourself as successful EFL learner?
5. What is the most important factor in affecting your English learning?
6. How have you learned to sustain your English learning?