The Effect of Motivation on the English Acquisition Level of Chinese College Students

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Abstract. With the trend of globalization, the demands for students' English proficiency are becoming increasing higher. This study explores the interactions between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on English acquisition and their impacts on learning through the application of motivation theory and the analysis of questionnaire data. A series of suggestions are also proposed on how to integrate these two motivations for teaching. Results of the study indicate that intrinsic motivation plays a fundamental role in influencing students' English acquisition, while extrinsic motivation promotes learning motivation to a certain extent.

Keywords: Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation, Chinese college students, English language learning, Motivation theory, Pedagogical strategies.

1. Introduction

The degree of English learning among Chinese college students is mainly determined by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which is a crucial component of second language acquisition. Also, the effects of various motives on learning are not always the same [1]. For an effort to help students achieve better learning outcomes, this paper adopts Dörnyei's theory of second language motivation self system as background and combines the three sections of the theory of "the ideal L2 self," "ought-to L2 self," and "L2 learning experience" with detailed analysis [2].

In the current study, a survey will be released to explore the impacts of different motivation on college students' English learning, and which aspect have a greater effect, based on a large amount of data points..The study of students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provides a special perspective for improving the current English learning environment and educational methods. In future English acquisition, teachers not only need to introduce more English values to students for awakening their intrinsic motivation, but also adhere to a student-centered teaching model, creating a good learning environment, thereby unleashing the positive effects of extrinsic motivation.

This study focuses on college students because most of the previous research mainly focused on young children or primary and secondary school students, for example, one researcher studied the role of maker education in deep learning for primary school students, stating that updating learning platforms and tools can improve students' innovation and practical abilities [3]; The other researcher conducted a survey on the learning motivation among rural middle school students in China, highlighting the importance of understanding factors that can hinder students' motivation and emphasizing the need to build a supportive cultural environment [4]. Due to the growing population of college students in society, it is particularly necessary to study the effect of motivation on their English acquisition level.

2. Motivation Study

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Motivation Theory

A theoretical framework that has recently had a major impact on the study of L2 acquisition is Dörnyei's second language learning motivation self system. Based on the "possible self" theory of Markus and Nurius, it was created by British academic Dörnyei. The ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience, which highlights the learner's inner motility and provides a fresh

perspective on second language learning motivation, make up the three main parts of this theory [5-10].

The term "ideal L2 self" is described as an idealized state or identity that learners aspire to achieve through fluency in a second language, such as being able to communicate with foreigners or engage in cross-border work. This ideal state can provide learners with strong motivation to take action so as to close the gap between reality and ideals [11].

The "ought-to L2 self" reflects learners' perceptions that studying a second language is a behavior meant to satisfy external standards, for the purpose of passing exams, or just for not to disappoint their family or teachers, etc. This external pressure can also stimulate learners' learning motivation, but its effect may be limited [3].

The "L2 learning experience" focuses on the active or passive experiences of learners in the daily learning process, which may influence their academic motivation directly. For example, a pleasant atmosphere can arouse people's interest, while negative experiences may weaken their motivations [9].

2.2. Conception of Motivations

Learning motivation, which comes from the learner's innermost feelings and keeps language learning progressing, is an essential component of the individual learning process. It involves multiple fields such as psychology, education, and linguistics, and with the advancement of these fields, the interpretation of learning motivation is becoming increasingly diverse [4].

Among various theories of learning motivation, Gardner's viewpoint is particularly classic. He defined motivation as the positive attitude and persistent effort exhibited by learners in learning a language to achieve specific goals. This viewpoint has also been echoed by scholars such as Ellis, who argued that motivation involves the attitudes, emotions, and level of effort [8]. Subsequently, William and Burden integrated cognitivist and constructivist motivation theories, observing learning motivation as a process of persistent effort that inspires someone to deliberately take action in order to realize a set goal, as well as a state of cognitive and emotive arousal [10].

Therefore, this paper believes that foreign language learning motivation can be broadly defined as the psychological process behind the positive efforts that learners show in foreign language learning to achieve a specific goal, which is similar to Dörnyei's theoretical viewpoint that learning motivation not only includes its generation and maintenance, but also encompasses some factors that affect this process [12-13].

2.3. Classification of Motivations

Motivation can be classified based on different dimensions and theoretical frameworks. Cognitive psychology categorizes motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: intrinsic motivation arises from individual's interest, enjoyment, or sense of achievement to one issue, such as the novelty about language learning [12]. Extrinsic motivation is triggered by external factors, often used as a mean to encourage people to engage in a certain activity [14-15]. In addition to these, motivation can also be further refined based on factors such as the nature of the goal or the social significance of the behavior, including mastery motivation, achievement motivation, and advanced motivation. These motivations constitute a complex dynamic system that drives individual growth.

3. Results

3.1. Materials

This paper will use a questionnaire to collect data. Through responses from respondents of different grades and English proficiency levels, college students' different attitudes and motivations towards English learning can be observed. The design of this questionnaire covers multiple dimensions and is mainly divided into the following parts: 1). Basic information; 2). Learning motivation; 3.) Learning situation; 4.) Learning effectiveness.

3.2. Interpretation of Intrinsic Motivation Data

Intrinsic motivation refers to the behavioral motivation driven by a person's intrinsic interests or personal values, which can motivate people to participate in activities even without external rewards. Survey data shows that nearly 65% of college students are interested in learning English itself, largely due to their curiosity about this subject. Besides, it is found that college students enjoy watching English movies or listening to English songs in their daily life, which will become a more favored way for them to learn English compared to reading English books or articles. Additionally, more than 85% of people always imagine that they can speak English smoothly or have fluent conversations, which is a welcoming factor for language learning.

3.3. Interpretation of Extrinsic Motivation Data

Extrinsic motivation is mainly derived from external forces and environmental stimuli, such as the ideas of others, social needs, and the quality of the surrounding environment, which is easily disturbed and changed.

Through survey data, it is noticeable that nearly 80% of college students believe that a certain level of English proficiency can help them better complete studies or find jobs, including but not limited to improving their English grades, assisting in studying abroad, and enhancing career competitiveness. In terms of learning environment, over half of the students indicated that atmosphere of classes and teacher's teaching style would affect their enthusiasm for one subject, proving that the quality of English classrooms can determine their learning motivation to some extent. Furthermore, a positive and healthy environment can also stimulate students' learning potential. According to the statistics, nearly 85% of college students believe that the city where they reside or the school they study in has sufficient ability to support the development of English teaching , having a great number of learning resources.

Although most of the survey results regarding extrinsic motivation are similar to our speculation, there is still controversy. Data shows that over half of students will not give up learning English due to their poor academic performance, nor will they dislike the subject due to some criticism from English teachers. Instead, they will work harder to seek breakthroughs. At the same time, it is noticeable that most students hold a neutral or opposing attitude towards the opinion that well-educated individuals should be proficient in English, demonstrating the diverse values of contemporary young people [7].

3.4. The Combination of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation and Theory

According to Dörnyei's second language motivational self system theory, intrinsic motivation can be integrated with the concept of the "ideal L2 self" as a foundational aspect of research. When students hold a firm belief that acquiring a second language is an important way to make their personal objectives come true, their intrinsic interest will be stimulated, thereby transforming into a strong learning motivation. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation is also related to the "ought-to L2 self" and the "L2 learning experience." Students learn English in order to achieve better grades or work, while positive or negative learning experiences can affect learners' motivation [13-16].

Specifically, extrinsic motivation establishes specific goals and rewards for students, while intrinsic motivation enhances their persistence of learning. However, although both of them play their own roles in influencing the English acquisition level of Chinese college students, there are always differences in their importance. The data shows that intrinsic motivation plays a more vital role in stimulating college students' English learning motivation, which coincides with the theoretical views that this study refer to [12].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the intensity of learning motivation is closely related to the level of English acquisition of Chinese college students, showing a positive correlation trend. High value perception

can enhance students' learning motivation, thereby improving their foreign language learning outcomes. The social environment and teachers also have complex influences on motivation. In future teaching, teachers are expected to have a deep understanding of students' interests and needs, provide timely feedback to them, and help them realize the value of effort more. A reasonable external incentive mechanism and a joyful classroom atmosphere are also crucial. Therefore, it is necessary to persist in the development of intrinsic motivation and actively pay attention to the joint effect of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations .

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