

Attitudes and Motivation in Vocational English as a Foreign Language Learning: A Review of Related Literature

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Abstract: Attitudes and motivation have long been recognized as central affective factors influencing success in second and foreign language learning. In vocational education contexts, where English is often learned as a practical tool for employment and professional development, these variables play a particularly critical role in shaping students' engagement and persistence. Despite the growing importance of vocational education in China, research on English learning in this sector remains fragmented and underrepresented in the literature. This paper synthesizes classical and contemporary studies on attitudes toward English, motivational orientations, and the relationship between attitudes and motivation among vocational learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, with particular attention to China. Drawing on socio-educational and motivational theories, the review examines how vocational students perceive English learning, what motivates them to engage with the language, and how attitudes and motivation interact to influence learning behavior. The synthesis identifies key patterns, highlights gaps in existing research, and underscores the need for integrated, context-sensitive pedagogical approaches. The paper concludes by proposing directions for future research aimed at informing the development of effective English language pedagogical frameworks for vocational education.

Keywords: Vocational Education, English as a Foreign Language, Attitudes Toward English, Language Learning Motivation, Vocational EFL Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Research on second and foreign language learning has long emphasized the crucial role of learner-related variables—particularly attitudes and motivation—in shaping language engagement and achievement. These affective factors influence not only how learners perceive English but also the effort they invest and the persistence they demonstrate over time. In contexts where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), such as China, these variables become even more salient due to limited exposure outside the classroom and strong exam- and career-oriented pressures [1].

Within Chinese vocational education, English occupies a distinctive position. Unlike university students, vocational learners typically approach English as a functional tool closely tied to employment, professional certification, and workplace communication rather than academic or cultural integration. As a result, their learning experiences are shaped by pragmatic goals and heterogeneous academic backgrounds [2]. Despite the rapid expansion of vocational education in China, research on English learning in this sector remains comparatively limited.

This review paper synthesizes classical and contemporary literature on attitudes and motivation in vocational English learning, with a particular focus on the Chinese context. It aims to (1) analyze vocational students' attitudes toward English, (2) review motivational orientations in vocational EFL learning, and (3) explore the interrelationship between attitudes and motivation. The review concludes by identifying research gaps and proposing directions for future studies, especially those seeking to inform pedagogical frameworks tailored to vocational students.

2. Attitudes Toward English Learning

Attitudes toward English significantly influence learners' willingness to engage and persist. Learners who perceive English as valuable and attainable are more likely to invest sustained effort, whereas negative perceptions often lead to anxiety, avoidance, and low achievement [3, 4]. In Chinese vocational contexts, attitudes are strongly shaped by perceptions of career utility. Students who view English as enhancing employability tend to show higher engagement, while those who regard it as overly difficult or irrelevant often disengage [2].

Instructional practices and classroom environments play a critical role in shaping these attitudes. Supportive learning climates, practical tasks, and career-relevant materials have been shown to enhance vocational students' perceptions of English learning [5]. Empirical studies report that when English instruction incorporates field-specific vocabulary and authentic workplace scenarios, students respond with more positive attitudes and greater confidence [1].

Cultural perceptions further complicate vocational students' attitudes. English is widely associated with global mobility, higher income, and professional status, yet it may also symbolize inequality or unattainability for learners with limited prior exposure [6]. These ambivalent perceptions suggest that attitudes toward English in vocational education are multifaceted and deeply embedded in broader social and educational structures.

3. Motivation in English Learning

Motivation is widely regarded as one of the strongest predictors of success in language learning. It determines the

amount of effort learners invest and their persistence in the face of difficulty [7]. In vocational EFL contexts, motivation is predominantly instrumental, reflecting students' focus on employment, certification, and workplace communication [8].

Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivation-driven by interest and enjoyment and extrinsic motivation-driven by external rewards or pressures [9]. Research in Chinese vocational colleges indicates that intrinsic motivation is associated with greater persistence and confidence, whereas purely extrinsic motivation may decline once immediate goals are achieved [10]. Scholars have therefore emphasized the importance of transforming extrinsic motivations into more internalized forms to sustain long-term engagement [11].

At the same time, vocational students' motivational profiles are highly diverse. Some learners are strongly motivated by professional aspirations, while others are influenced by personal interests such as travel or intercultural communication [12]. These variations caution against overgeneralization and point to the need for flexible, learner-centered motivational strategies.

4. Relationship Between Attitudes and Motivation

The interrelationship between attitudes and motivation has been consistently supported in language learning research. Positive attitudes toward the target language tend to strengthen motivation, which in turn promotes higher achievement, creating a reinforcing cycle [8, 13]. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that favorable attitudes are closely linked to stronger motivational intensity [14].

In Chinese vocational settings, this interaction is particularly evident. Students who perceive English as relevant to their careers generally report higher motivation and persistence, whereas negative attitudes-such as viewing English as irrelevant or excessively difficult-are associated with low motivation and disengagement [10, 15]. Structural factors, including limited exposure and regional disparities in educational resources, can further exacerbate negative attitudes and weaken motivation.

Broader socio-economic initiatives, such as increased international cooperation and labor mobility, have also influenced vocational students' attitudes and motivations by heightening the perceived value of English proficiency [2]. Nevertheless, unequal access to quality instruction means that not all students benefit equally from these opportunities.

5. Future Research Directions

Future studies should prioritize vocational education settings to address the imbalance in the existing literature on English as a foreign language learning. Longitudinal research designs are particularly needed to capture changes in students' attitudes and motivation across different stages of vocational study, as these affective variables are dynamic rather than static. Such designs would allow researchers to examine how learning experiences, institutional practices, and career-related pressures shape students' engagement with English over time.

Further research should also focus on developing and empirically validating pedagogical frameworks that integrate attitude enhancement and motivational support tailored to vocational English education. Investigating the effectiveness of career-integrated English instruction, technology-

enhanced learning environments, and targeted teacher professional development would be particularly valuable. Comparative studies across institutional contexts and program types may also help identify best practices and context-specific challenges, contributing to more responsive and sustainable approaches to vocational English teaching.

6. Conclusion

This paper underscores the central role of attitudes, and motivation in shaping vocational students' engagement with English learning in China. The literature reveals that vocational learners possess diverse motivational profiles influenced by age, gender, academic stage, and discipline, and that their attitudes toward English are closely tied to perceived career relevance and instructional practices. Motivation-largely instrumental but sustained by intrinsic elements-interacts dynamically with attitudes to influence learning persistence.

By synthesizing existing research and identifying key gaps, this review highlights the need for more context-sensitive and integrated approaches to vocational English education. Addressing these gaps through targeted research and pedagogical innovation may contribute to the development of effective English language frameworks that better equip vocational students for career readiness and global participation.

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