The Challenges Facing EFL Motivation in China and the Discussion of Possible Solutions

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Abstract: As language learning is difficult and dull for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, this paper try to find out effective motivations based on the published research papers, experiment reports, and the reality of Chinese cultures and context, by analysis, summarizing, comparison and contrast. The following conclusions are drawn by this paper: “language motivational theories and factors” are a situated phenomenon, therefore, they should not be applied to the English learners in China without discussion and testing.

Instrumental motivation, self-efficacy, autonomous extrinsic motivation, attitudes to learning English, ought-to L2 self are proven to be effective and can serve as positive motivations. Based on these, suggestions to teachers, parents and schools are given to improve the language learning efficiency.

1. Motivation on language learning---“a situated phenomenon”

Motivation has been regarded as one of the most important factors that influences the speed and outcomes of second/foreign language (L2) learning by language instructors and researchers. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in L2 acquisition presuppose motivation to some extent[2]. However, In general current motivation theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have been developed from a western perspective and most data that have been collected are based on learners who are from western cultures. [12] Psychology researchers have become increasingly aware of the importance of contextual and cultural variables affecting motivational processes, especially the difference between Asian students and American or European students [13]. For example, Chen, Warden, and Chang (2005) found out that the integrative motivation not functional in motivating language learning effort in the Chinese cultural environment; and “go abroad in the future” is tested to be effective to Japanese EFL learners by Mori and Gobel (2006) but played on significant role to Chinese learners in Wang, Fengxia’s research (2008). However “travel orientation” when this is tested again in 2014 by Qi Li, it played a positive role in motivating the students. These can prove that “language motivational theories and factors” are a situated phenomenon. Therefore, they should not be applied to the English learners in China (English as a foreign language---EFL learners) without discussion and testing. The following are the most possible major context and culture reasons which contributed to the motivational difference in China.

2. The reality of Chinese culture & context which contributed to the motivational difference.

A. Language Settings are Different

Generally speaking, a foreign language setting involves learning environments where the target language is usually learned in an institutional or academic context where learners have no or limited opportunities for interacting with the target language community. A second language setting, which is clearly distinct from a foreign language one, refers to a range of learning contexts where the target language is used for communication in daily life. [11] In China when the students stepped out of the English class most or even all communications are carried out in Chinese, so lacking of authentic English environment is a major problem for EFL.
B. The Chinese Cultures on Education

The Chinese Culture put more emphasis on academic success. The society as a whole takes education very seriously. Education is considered by many people, students and parents, as the only way to make a change in their lives. The parents have a relatively high expectation to their children, and a lot more parents even view academic success as the only expectation to their children.

C. The School Systems are Difference

As is widely known, in China’s education system, English is a compulsory course. [11] unlike most ESL schools, which content knowledge was given both in first language and second language (English) or solely English, EFL classes in Chinese school is usually the only class carried out in English and no content knowledge is given in English. And if students want to pursue higher education, for example, college education, graduate school education or if they want to further have their doctor’s degree, they all need to pass and even have a high score on English exams for all majors.

The aforementioned reasons made it more definite that motivation theories and factors needed to be experimentally and empirically tested under Chinese context and culture. In recent years, a few scholars do find out some motivational factors which are effective to the Chinese EFL learners. The following are a summary of some of the important factors (these research are all based on Chinese adult English learners).

3. The effective motivational factors for EFL Learners

A. Instrumental Motivation

Instrumental motivation defined as learners’ interest in learning a foreign language and related to the practical and utilitarian advantages derived from language proficiency, such as better employment or salary [2]. Some findings suggested that instrumental motivation might be more important than integrative motivation for foreign language learners as opposed to second language learners (English as a second language learners --- ESL learners). (e.g. [15])

B. Self-efficacy

Students’ self-efficacy appears to be particularly important across languages, both in the L1 and in EFL, because high self-efficacy can increase children’s confidence in and positive attitudes toward language learning. This likely applies across cultures and individuals. [15] Self efficacy is a key factor for language learning across languages.

C. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation originates from within the individual and results in enjoyment of the process of increasing one’s competency in regard to particular academic tasks. Extrinsic motivation is motivation induced by rewards or punishment dependent upon success or failure in the task. ([4]; [17]). Contrasted with intrinsically motivated students, who work for the feeling of satisfaction or accomplishment, extrinsically motivated students will perform mainly for the attainment of a desired external reward or to avoid external punishment. [12] The research from Wang, Fengxia (2008) tested the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and their motivation relations and results. Her research showed that autonomous extrinsic motivation (e.g. the students want to pass the exams so that they can have a better job and better future) correlated positively with intrinsic motivation and achievement, while controlled extrinsic motivation (such as, the teacher ask the students to pass the exam so that they don’t be punished.) correlated negatively with them.

This finding can also be used to explain other research result ([1]; [6]) that if external rewards function as feedback for how they can improve and learn more, external rewards may improve intrinsic motivation and benefit the EFL learners in the long run.

D. Attitudes to Learning English

For both the EFL and ESL learners, attitudes to learning English and promotional aspect of instrumentality contributed significantly to the learner’s motivated learning behavior, with attitudes to learning English being the most important predictor variable for the EFL learners. [11]
E. L2 Learning Experience

In the case of these Chinese learners, among 3 factors of L2 Motivation Model, L2 learning experience was the most important of the three components in determining their English learning effort, which suggests that teachers play an important role in motivation students and thus should try to improve their teaching methods, employ motivational strategies in the classroom, and encourage and help students to use self-motivating strategies to motivate themselves [3].

F. Ought-to L2 Self

For the EFL learners, the Ought-to L2 Self (refers to the attributes that L2 learners believe ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes by Qi Li) also contributed significantly to their motivated learning behavior. [3]

G. Others

Questionnaire also showed that travel orientation played a positive role, while English anxiety and social expectation played a negative role in shaping their motivated learning behavior. [3]

The above experiment based motivational factors suggest what we can do to motivate EFL in China.

4. What can we do to motivate EFL Learners in China

A. What Teachers can Do?

From the above motivational factors, we can figure out that teachers play a significant role in motivating the students. In teaching process teacher can utilize the results of the research to build a more efficient and motivational language class. For example:

1) When addressing the importance of English, they can put emphasis on positive instrumental motivation, e.g., higher salary, travel abroad, opportunities to work abroad or work for big international companies, getting direct first hand international information and so on instead of merely focusing on passing the exam and get a high score, if not been punished by their parents which potentially cause students’ anxiety and have bad motivation results.

2) In order to improve the students’ self-efficacy and ought-to L2 Self, except teaching the language points and grammar, the language instructor should pay more attention to learn, to follow up and to teach scientific learning methods, for example, time management, reading techniques, which is the best way to learn vocabulary, how to improve listening and so on, and also should give clear teaching plans and language standards to students.

3) The teacher should also encourage students to think big, to plan their future and to have long term personal goals so that they can transfer or upgrade the extrinsic motivation, like, passing the exams, into intrinsic motivation which is more enjoyable, efficient and motivational on the outcome of language learning.

4) From the above information we know that attitudes to learning English and learning experience have constructional effects on the learning efforts of L2. And the Chinese learn English mainly from school classes so teachers to a large extent determine the learning experience of students, so teachers are responsible to employ more advanced teaching techniques, understand the students’ psychology, plan enjoyable and efficient class activities, and should pay attention to the tone of the voice.

B. What Technology can Do?

When we go back to the major context and culture reasons which contributed to the motivational difference, we can easily figure out the major dilemma for EFL is lacking of an authentic language environment, but with the popularization of Web 2.0 which resulting increase in interaction, social networking and sources of information, which are now available online [7], we can possibly find out solutions by taking advantage of the internet and some softwares(such as, MSN, QQ, Skype).

For example, Ya-Ting C. Yang, Jeffrey Gamble and Shiun-Yi S. Tang (2012) experimentally tested the effectiveness of Voice over Instant Messaging (VoIM) for enhancing students’ oral English proficiency and learning motivation. Their research showed that with the facilitation of English teaching assistants, structured online discussions were successful in fostering students oral proficiency and English learning motivation (as compared with structured online discussions with
peer facilitation or unstructured online discussions), contributing to the growing body of literature on the use of technology to enhance English language learning.

Inspired by their research results, more creative and motivational ways of utilizing technology into language teaching can be designed and tested to benefit the huge population of EFL in China.

C. What parents can do?

When parents address the importance of learning English. They should try to help their children to plan a long term goal or put more emphases on the positive side of learning English instead of frighten the students with punishment or verbal humiliation as these will rise the students’ English anxiety and then influence negatively and bring bad outcomes on English learning.

5. Conclusion

Instrumental motivation, self-efficacy, attitudes to learning English, L2 learning experience, ought-to L2 Self, these are all the motivational factors which is tested to work well with Chinese EFL adult learners, and after integrating all the factors we find out that language teachers and technology play a key role to influence the outcomes of language learning, but at the same time, other factors should not be overlooked, a good taken care of them can help English learners to improve a lot.

Last but not least, although motivation is a decisive factor which can influence the outcome of language learning, in the process of completing this paper, very little experimental research results under Chinese context and culture has been found to sufficiently support the discussion following them, so this reminds us that the Chinese researchers should be encouraged more to investigate motivational factors under Chinese circumstances and to benefit more Chinese EFL learners.

References


