Motivations for Second Language Learning: Implications for English Teaching in Chinese Universities

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Abstract. Language learning motivation has constantly been a heated topic in applied linguistics. While there is no agreement on its definition, self-determination theory and goal theories are leading theoretical foundations for studies in this field. Goals of language learning, according to the time demanded to realise them, can be classified into short-term goals and long-term goals. The former include career, education, entertainment and travel; whereas the latter refers to understanding the language, culture and people speaking the language. In view of the specific features of Chinese foreign language teaching, Chinese university students ought to fulfill their second language learning goals through improving their competence from three aspects, namely linguistic, communicative and intercultural.

Introduction

Motivation in language learning is the domain within which numerous studies have been carried out and diverse theories have been put forward. Although there is no universal agreement upon the definition of the concept, motivation is deemed crucial to second language acquisition. This paper begins with defining language learning motivation by referring to a couple of pervasive definitions from diverse sources, Gardner and his socio-educational model particularly being cited. Then two influential theories in the field are reviewed as the background theory: Self-Determination theory and Goal theories. Grounded on the theories reviewed, two categorisations of second language learning goal are classified: short-term goals and long-term goals. Each of the two types embraces several specific aspects which will be discussed respectively. Finally, the paper will take the universities in mainland China as a particular educational situation to justify what are the best goals for Chinese university students to learn English as their second language. Three dimensions of competence will be focused on in this section: namely linguistic, communicative and intercultural.

1. Defining Language Learning Motivation

While motivation is a term which appears frequently in both the fields of education and research, there is little agreement in the literature upon what the concept exactly means [16]. Motivation is defined as: ‘1) the reason or reasons behind one’s actions or behaviour; 2) enthusiasm’ by the Pocket Oxford English Dictionary [17]. In the cognitive developmental theory formulated by Piaget, the term is interpreted as ‘a built-in unconscious striving towards more complex and differentiated development of the individual’s mental structures’ [19].

However, serious research on motivation in the domain of language learning was initiated by social psychologists who initiated the study of social and cultural impacts on L2 learning [14]. According to Gardner [20] the notion motivation in a second language learning context refers to ‘the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity.’ In socio-educational model, two types of motivation were illustrated by Gardner: the integrative and the instrumental, with the former being stressed. The integrative motivation refers to learners’ desire to learn about, interact with, or become closer to the second language community [20]. The instrumental motivation focuses on such functional
motives for learning the language as obtaining a job, developing one’s career, advancing one’s education or passing an examination [20]. Although it was criticised by many other researchers who defined language learning motivation in diverse angles, Gardner’s theory still remains crucial when we discuss the issue.

2. Review of Theories on Motivation in Language Learning

2.1 The Self-Determination Theory

One of the most leading theories on motivation is the self-determination theory. According to the theory, ‘to be self-determining means to experience a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions’ [18]. Autonomy is stressed in the theory and two types of motivations are distinguished by the researchers: intrinsic and extrinsic. As explained in the theory, an individual driven by intrinsic motivation performs an activity particularly because such internal desires as enjoyment, pleasure and curiosity are expected to be satisfied. While in extrinsic motivation such external rewards of the learner’s as good grades or assessment from others are oriented.

Both the two types of motivation can be categorized into diverse classifications in the context of education. Intrinsic motivation (IM) could be classified into: IM-Knowledge (the pleasure of developing knowledge), IM-Accomplishment (the satisfaction of achieving goals), and IM-Stimulation (the enjoyment of the aesthetics of the experience) [7]. Extrinsic motivation could also be one of the three forms: External Regulation, Introjection Regulation and Identification Regulation. The external regulation regards individual’s actions which are determined by such external sources as concrete benefits or costs. The introjected regulation concerns activities performed under some external pressure, which the individual has integrated into the self. The identified regulation refers to personally relevant incentive which drives the individuals. For instance, an individual may learn an L2 because the language is viewed crucial for his educational development [8].

A third dimension, termed a motivation, is fundamental to self-determination theory as well [12]. In the situation of a motivation individuals see no link between the efforts they make and the consequences they obtain but perceive that it is the elements outside of their control that cause what occurs on them. In this case, no goal arises and neither the intrinsic motivation nor the extrinsic motivation dominates the learner to perform activity [10].

2.2 Goal-Related Theories

Although goals are vital to the study of motivation, the definition of goal is sophisticated. The reasons or purposes which learners observe for achievement are focused on in goal theories. Individuals’ performance can be affected by goals in four ways [4]:

- Goals direct attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities and away from irrelevant activities
- Goals have an energizing effect and they help individuals adjust their effort to the difficulty of the task
- Goals affect one’s persistence.
- Goals affect action indirectly by leading to the arousal, discovery, and/or use of task-relevant knowledge and strategies

Of particular importance in the study of motivation are two types of goal-related theories: the goal-setting theory and the goal-orientation theory [4]. According to the goal-setting theory, goals are inevitable if people want to act because ‘human action is caused by purpose, and for action to take place; goals have to be set and pursued by choice’ [16]. It is proposed in the theory that goals have two facets: internal and external, correspondingly referring to ideas (internal aspect) and object or condition sought (external). Goal-setting and performance are interrelated because goals affect the behaviour to perform the task, the energy invested, the strategies employed and its persistence
Researchers on goal-setting theory argue that there are three main features of goals that cause them to be distinguishable: difficulty, specificity and commitment [13]. The goal-orientation theory is differential from the goal-setting theory in that the former was particularly developed to explain children’s learning and performance in a school context, and it might now be one of the most active theories on student motivation within the classroom [15]. As stated in this theory, an individual’s performance is closely associated with the goals that he or she accepted. The distinction between two types of goal orientation is revealed in the theory [1]: performance (ego-involvement goals) and mastery (or task-involvement goals) orientations. Looking good and capable is the major concern for those who possess the first orientation while increasing knowledge and being capable are valued by learners holding the second.

3. Goals of Language Learning

It is apparent that numerous researchers studied the language learning motivation in diverse approaches and great contribution has been made to this domain. Each of the studies may have its limitation. For instance, the socio-educational model of Gardner links more to sociology than it does to education due to the fact that Gardner himself was not a language teacher but a psychologist; however, certain similarities can be perceived among their researches. Take the socio-educational model and self-determination theory for example, both the integrative and intrinsic motivations involve pleasure and inside satisfaction while the instrumental and extrinsic motivations emphasize performance caused by outside forces, which to some extent overlap with the internal and external goals in the goal-setting theory.

Hence based on the theories reviewed and the similarities drawn above, goals of language learning can be simplified into two categorisations, which I would like to label as ‘short-term’ goals and ‘long-term’ goals. Short-term goals refer to specifically practical objectives which an individual expects to achieve by learning a second language for a relatively short period of time while long-term goals refer to those goals that normally will take a long time to realize.

3.1 Short-Term Goals of Language Learning

3.1.1 Career

There are many careers in which knowledge of another language is vital and for certain professions a particular language is necessary. For example, English for air traffic controllers [2]. People learn another language in order to increase job opportunities and salary potential. In fact, passing certain type of English examination has become the prerequisite for getting promoted in many places of China. With the enhancement of globalisation, many corporations extend their market into other regions over the worlds, hence learning another language may guarantee effective function and competition in the global economy of today and the future. Indeed even nations need individuals who are capable of bridging the gap between two countries for economic or political purposes. That is the reason why simultaneous interpreters of many languages are valued everywhere in the world.

3.1.2 Education

Receiving education is a long-term progression, but in this paper education refers to learning language as an academic subject on the curriculum. In many countries around the world, students have to learn a second language whatever their native language may be. Generally, English is the first option for Asian and non-English speaking European countries while native English speakers turn to French, Italian or Latin. Students, particularly in Asian countries, learn the second language to pass examinations which are requested by the authorities. For example, all Chinese university students are required to pass CET examination (College English Test) before they can be granted a degree though the specific implement of the rule may be distinct according to different universities.
Learning a second language is also compulsory if the learner intend to advance his education by studying abroad. One has to learn English and pass the IELTS test provided that he plans to obtain a master’s degree in UK or some other English speaking countries.

3.1.3 Entertainment
To engage oneself into the entertainment produced by the target language is another goal for L2 learners. People enjoy themselves by watching films in their original languages and appreciating the unique flavor in the films. Similarly many literary and musical masterpieces are welcome in their original version. Some people whose native language is not English prefer to surf the internet in English to keep track of what is happening in the fields that they are interested in outside their own countries. Thus learning English as a tool to update information is inevitable in their everyday life.

3.1.4 Travel
To travel in a country where the target language is spoken is also a goal behind many L2 learners. In this situation such everyday travel functions as getting money and food or finding the correct check-in are emphasized though the purpose of language learning for this group is more leisure focused [2].

3.2. Long-Term Goals of Language Learning

3.2.1 Understanding Language Itself
Unlike short-term goals, long-term goals are time-consuming and some may even need lifelong devotion to accomplish. Numerous educated people satisfy themselves by studying language and by knowing how language itself works as part of the human mind and of society though it is indeed a long process to progress [2].

3.2.2 Understanding People Speaking the Language
For this group of learners, learning language means meeting and understanding a great variety of people, particularly those who speak the target language. They improve their vocabulary and language proficiency in order to communicate with members of that language community and they desire to immigrate into the country where the language is spoken provided that they are offered the opportunity.

3.2.3 Understanding Cultures
Language is the symbol of culture. Deeper perspective and appreciation of diverse cultures can be cultivated through learning the language which symbolizes the relevant culture. People learn language to have a better understanding of the way of life in the country where it is spoken and to develop their cultural sensitivity. Globalisation has spread into the domain of culture. Not only can learning another language increase global understanding, it can also improve critical and creative thinking skills to reflect one’s own culture and identity by comparing and contrasting it with that of others.

4. Goals of Learning English as a Second Language for University Students in Mainland China
While diverse theories have contributed to the study upon language learning motivation and goals of learning language can be classified into different categorisations correspondingly, it is complex when the goals of learning language in a particular educational situation are discussed because each educational context has its specific, local characteristics. As Cook [2] asserts, teaching has little point if it is incompatible with the goals in the particular educational setting and cultural context within which the students are placed. Hence this paper will take the university students in mainland China for example, justifying three possibly primary goals for them to learn English as a second language, which include linguistic, communicative and intercultural competence.

4.1 Linguistic Competence
As the main lingua franca, English has become one of the compulsory academic subjects from primary schools to universities in China and children are taught English even from kindergarten in
some regions. However, due to the limitation of various objective conditions, not all the students have the opportunity to learn English from authentic sources, be it a native English speaking teacher or a well-educated Chinese teacher. Exposed to the ‘English’ instructed by local teachers and affected by the features of diverse dialects, many students demonstrate apparent local characteristics ranging from phonology to morphology. Even when they arrive at the level of higher education, these characteristics of their ‘Englishes’ are still salient.

Chinese English or Chinglish, as a major variety of English, has become familiar to the world long before. ‘Words are ungrammatically strung together, with often inappropriate lexis and probably only a partially comprehensible pronunciation’ [9]. Thus there is slight relationship between this form of language and standard English. These features are manifested by numerous students in many universities and it is effortless to pick a Chinese student who may say ‘I very much like football’ rather than ‘I like football very much’. Have taught in a university in mainland China for nine years, I encounter such issues frequently, particularly in students’ writings.

As advanced learners of English, university students should develop their linguistic competence: the knowledge of how the language works—its linguistic organization. Such formal features of English as patterns of phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse should be focused on. This proposed goal may conflict with some core notions put forward by the former scholars who emphasize that the main aim of second language acquisition is to cultivate successful L2 users rather than to reproducing native speakers because of the unique nature of L2 learners, thus it is not necessary to pay too much attention to forms [5]. However, when the degree of proximity to, or distance from, standard English is permitted, comprehensibility should also be taken into account to judge whether a variety of English is acceptable or not though there is little agreement on what is standard English.

4.2 Communicative Competence

To improve the ability to use English as an instrument to communicate appropriately in diverse social contexts is another goal for Chinese university students to accomplish. The educational system of China focuses more on examinations than the application of academic subjects. All the undergraduates are required to pass the College English Test (CET) before they can graduate from the universities and the difficulty of the test varies from Grade 4 to Grade 6. However, the real competence of a student in the language has little relationship with what grade of examination he has passed. In other words, the examinations can hardly improve the students’ aptitude because such knowledge as grammar and vocabulary are emphasized by the tests but the application of such knowledge in communicative way is neglected. For instance, one of my students who had already passed the CET6 even did not know how to buy a train ticket when he was in London.

Language learning should be a natural response to communicative needs [21]. Therefore, the communicative value of what the students are acquiring should consistently be stressed as a goal of language learning. Although the opportunity to apply the language to real social contexts is not available to all students because not everyone has the chance to practice the language with native English speakers, communicative contexts can be created in the classroom where learners should be assisted to use the language to express their personal needs and their own personality [21]. However, this desired goal of language acquisition is not the ability to use English exactly as a native speaker does but to communicate competently.

In order to achieve this goal, not only should the students be aware of the vocabulary of the topic, they should also get familiar with the functions for which the language is to be used and the relevance of the context to the communication and the importance of the relationship between the participants because these factors influence the style, organization and strategy of the language employed in the communication. Furthermore, the students need to have a sense of awareness not only in spoken communication but also in formal and informal written communication. The latter is even of more importance because so much written communication occurs electronically in modern society [3].
Self-confidence should also be developed to facilitate the communicative competence. The more a student practices the language he is learning in social contexts, the more he will enjoy the sense of success emerging during the process and the more interest will be developed in the language as a result. Many studies have demonstrated that the learners’ continued motivation can be affected by their success in integrating themselves into social networks in which opportunities for negotiation, attention to gaps in feedback and restructuring in the interlanguage are promoted [11].

4.3 Intercultural Competence

Language is a part of culture, thus by learning a new language one is acquiring a new culture. The function of English as an instrument to help complete international performance has been increasingly prominent. International political conferences are conducted in English; cross-border business negotiations are carried out in English and significant global events are announced by influential news media in English as well. English is employed to disseminate Western culture and values during these activities. As the practitioners to bridge the gap between China and the world, Chinese university students should develop a strong sense of ‘interculturality’ in themselves through learning the language to satisfy the needs of today and the future.

However, learning about another culture does not necessarily mean that one must accept that culture [6]. Contrarily, critical and creative thinking skills should be promoted to compare the similarities and to contrast the diversities between cultures. Learning culture refers to discovering culture as difference. The idea that the world is defined in the identical way, that love, worship, values, death all have the same meaning for everyone should be judged by the students when they are encouraged to reflect and reexamine the diverse cultures. The students should learn by themselves that within each culture there exists a variety of national characteristics that are related to age, gender, regional origin, ethnic background and social class [6].

In order to fulfill this goal, firstly, the ability to explore and examine the aspects of their own culture through the second language should be cultivated. Then the students should be aware of the habits, attitudes, values of people who live in the country where English is spoken. Finally the international communities in which English is used for professional or academic purposes should also be noted [3]. Such intercultural competence not only facilitates the understanding of Western culture but also improve the ability to view our own culture through another language. However, the students should be cautious about the selection of the source cultural content when they are learning the culture through the language. The source cultural content ought to embrace the socio-cultural and communicative norms of the target culture rather than stereotyping or representation upon the culture.

Conclusion

To sum up, while there is no universally accepted definition upon the conception of motivation, principles from diverse theories in this domain can be employed as guidelines to direct orientation when the issue of language learning motivation is discussed again. However, different individuals or communities may hold various goals of learning a second language due to diverse sociocultural variables and there is no need to evaluate what is the best goal of language learning since each has its own particular characteristics. In regard to Chinese university students, the possibly major goals for them to acquire English are to improve the linguistic knowledge, to enhance the communicative ability and to promote the intercultural competence. The specific feature of Chinese educational system requires that more emphasis should be put on the application of the language rather than passing certain examinations because only the education of cultivating talents with applicable competence can meet the needs of today and the future in a globalised world.

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References


