



A Research on the Relationship between the Freshmen's English Learning Motivation and Achievements in a Chinese University

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Author's contribution

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ABSTRACT

Motivation is one of the important affective factors influencing foreign language learning. This paper makes a quantitative analysis of freshmen's English learning motivation from the perspectives of English achievements and gender differences. The correlation analysis shows that the subjects' deep motivation correlates negatively with their surface motivation and their English achievements also correlate negatively with their surface motivation. One T-test shows the significant difference between the achievements of the high-score group and the low-score group. The high-score group's deep motivation and surface motivation are both significantly different from the low-score group. The other T-test shows the female students' surface motivation is lower and significantly different from the male students'. Finally, the paper offers some suggestions based on the results.

Keywords: English learning; motivation; achievements; gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a multifaceted construct that serves as a driving force in the challenging process of learning a foreign language [1]. That is, motivation consists of a combination of factors that induces individuals to achieve their goals. It's also defined as a physical, psychological or social need that motivates the individuals to reach their goals and fulfill their needs and, finally, feel satisfied as a result of achieving their aims [2]. It's a phenomenon regarded as one of the most important requirements for success and satisfaction. The role and importance of motivation is no different in education, as well. In this respect, motivation functions as one of the basic, most needed and important factors for academic learning and achievement across childhood through adolescence [3,4]. Gardner and Lambert [5] have proposed two types of motivation in terms of language learning: one is integrative motivation, the other is instrumental motivation. The foreign language learners who hold integrative motivation aim at making a better living and development in the environment of the target language, especially for a smooth integration with the local people in all walks of their life. However, the foreign language learners who have instrumental motivation pay more attention to finding a good job or establishing an ideal status in the society of the target language. Deci and Ryan [6] have pointed out that motivation is related to various outcomes such as curiosity, persistence, learning and performance. According to Self –Determination [7] there were three types of motivation: extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation is related to mental satisfaction that is achieved by others' praise, while, extrinsic motivation is related to incentives activated by external factors such as getting rewards for achievements and success. In amotivation, individuals are neither intrinsically motivated nor extrinsically motivated and lack any type of motivation for some reason. The amotivated individuals experience feelings of incompetence and suffer from the feeling of insufficiency that is caused by uncontrollable forces. Intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in achievements, competency and academic learning. Deci and Ryan [6] have put forward that intrinsic motivation is generated due to the innate psychological needs of competence and level of self determination. Regarding the role of motivation in language learning, there are several claims that positive motivation increases the level of achievements, whereas negative

impact of motivation decreases the level of achievements [8, 9]. According to Cook [10] the performance and presentation of a number of learners in the context of foreign language learning is improved and superior to others due to positive motivation. Cook [10] also claims that there are three factors which influence language learning: age, personality and motivation. However, it could be claimed that motivation is the most important and effective factor among the mentioned three factors that affect foreign language learning. Supporting this assumption, Ellis argued [11] that the learning process simply occurs when a person is motivated for learning. In this respect, it could be argued that two kinds of motivations can be observed among learners; the type of motivation which has a positive, efficient, and useful effect in learning and the type of motivation which has negative effects on learning and weakens the language learning process.

Tengku and Sepideh [2] have claimed that the aims of the class should motivate the learners who have instrumental motivation in order to become aware of and realize the value of the learner who thinks about foreign language as an instrument for reaching a particular goal, such as achieving grades. Besides, it is generally agreed that in order to make the learners have a positive view about their own efforts, some rewards such as grades, degrees, and any sort of educational, scholastic, and academic encouragement should be given to them [8, 9, 12]. In addition to this, the policies developed for encouragement of the learners in classroom environments play an important role in achievements and in obtaining a positive learning outcome. Consequently, motivation directly influences and affects the language learners' learning methods, skills, and practices. That is, motivation has a high effect on learner's communication with foreigners, determining learning amount, in addition to developing the desired levels of language teaching such as reading, comprehension, speaking, and writing.

A substantial body of research has acknowledged the importance of motivation in effective learning in a foreign language learning context as well as other disciplines [13, 14, 15]. Vaezi [16] examined Iranian undergraduate students' motivation toward EFL learning. It was found that Iranian EFL learners had high motivation and positive attitudes toward EFL learning. Tahaine and Daana [17] studied the motivation orientations (i.e., instrumental and

integrative) of the EFL undergraduates and their attitudes towards English learning and its community. The results showed that learning English had a minimal effect on the students' English language motivation, while the participants' attitudes toward the English community were highly positive. In a study conducted by Fatehi and Akbari [18], a positive relationship between motivation and language achievements was found. In their study they equipped the teachers with new and modern strategies in order to increase the learners' motivation in the classroom. The results indicated that highly motivation learners obtained better scores in their final exams. Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin [19], found that motivation had a strong role in the learning process of Turkish undergraduate students majoring in English as a foreign language.

In China, in the 1980s, the studies on foreign language learning motivation was studied by the experts and scholars. Wen [20] from the perspective of educational psychology, classified 2 types of foreign language learning motivation - surface motivation and deep motivation. Surface motivation related with some material pursuits like good salaries or higher diplomas; deep motivation refers to the desire generated from knowledge accumulation or interest development. In this paper, the terms surface motivation and deep motivation were chosen as the theoretical constructs for the reason that these two types of classifications of motivation are much easier to distinguish in China and correspond with the Chinese students' English learning conditions. In China, English was first learned at school as a compulsory course with adopting of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. For the requirement of communicating with other countries, the people who have developed English communication skills are popular which can provide them good jobs with high salaries. Therefore learning English in that age was influenced by surface motivation. Nowadays, good English skills can earn some material benefits, too, because currently some people are really interested in the foreign countries' culture or they hope to transmit Chinese culture to other places of the world through their English language skills, which is an example of deep motivation for learning English. Gao [21] of Peking University used questionnaires and factor analysis models and has thereby identified 7 types of foreign language learning motivation. Liu [22] adopted the computer assisted instruction method introducing the ARCS model that

suggested that learning motivation is constructed by attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction. Qin and Dai [23] established a University English Learning Motivation System Model by uniting the Activity Theory of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the L2 Motivational Self-System proposed by Dörnyei, that provides some enlightenment for English-teaching in Chinese universities.

To date, despite the importance of motivation in the foreign/second language learning process, however, in China, there has been inadequate empirical research regarding the relationship between the different types of motivations and achievements. In the present study, we aim to identify whether the English learners who hold surface motivation will gain fewer achievements than those who hold deep motivation when learning English. Besides this, the gender difference in motivation and achievements was examined as well, by examining motivations of freshmen in a Chinese university with the goal of identifying some teaching and learning implications.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Questions

In order to conduct a comprehensive study on how the learning motivation works in the acquisition process of a foreign language, the following related three issues will be addressed in this paper.

1. What are the correlational relationships between the different types of motivations and achievements?
2. What are the effects of the surface motivation and the deep motivation have in learning a foreign language?
3. What are the gender differences in motivations and achievements?

2.2 Subjects

A total of 134 English-major freshmen in Hebei University of Hebei province, China were recruited for this study. There were 86 female students and 48 male students.

2.3 Instruments

A quantitative research design was used in this study and survey methodology employed to collect data. A questionnaire consisting of the

closed questions about surface and deep motivation was used during the classes with the help of the English teachers. The questionnaire includes 3 parts: the first part gathered some basic personal information like gender, age, scores of UEE (scores of the University Entrance Exam) etc. Here it's worth noting that in China, English is one of the required subjects in the University Entrance Exam. In the second part, each of 15 statements relating to surface motivation and deep motivation were presented randomly for the purpose of avoiding habitual guessing. These statements are mainly selected from the questionnaire designed by Wen [20]. For instance, the questionnaire includes statements like "I learn English in order to have a good job" (surface motivation); "I want to know more about the other countries" (deep motivation). Some of the statements have been changed a little. Meanwhile, it should be noticed that some of the questions are of reverse design. An opinion based on (strongly disagrees, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) Likert Scale with five levels was used to obtain the responses. The third part of the questionnaire was a semi-open question to solicit suggestions or ideas on English or English learning.

2.4 Data Collection

At the beginning of school, English teachers distributed the questionnaires in the classrooms and gave some explanation to the students about how to fill out the questionnaires. When this work was done, the English teachers collected the questionnaires. In this study, 135 questionnaires were distributed and 134 questionnaires were

collected. These 134 questionnaires were valid questionnaires. After the questionnaires were collected, the data were extracted then entered into a computer for analysis. In the statistical analysis of the data, the SPSS version 17.0 was used.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Relationship between English Learning Motivation and Achievements

In order to make clear about the relationship between the motivation and achievements accomplished by the subjects, a paired-samples T test was conducted between surface motivation and deep motivation in order to investigate whether they were on the same level. The result is shown in Table 1. Secondly, a correlation analysis was carried out between motivation and achievements. The statistics are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 shows that among all the participants, the strength of deep motivation is greater than surface motivation with the mean value of 1.0776 and T value of 12.432 which reaches a significant difference of statistics ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, the surface motivation and the deep motivation of the students are not in the same level. It also indicates that most students who choose English as a major in university mainly for the deep motivation rather than surface motivation which is, to some degree, a development of the students' perceptions towards learning English.

Table 1. T test results of the surface motivation and the deep motivation

	Mean	Sd	N	Mean difference	T value	Significance
The deep motivation	3.4552	.55733	134	1.0776	12.432**	.000
The surface motivation	2.3776	.65519	134			

** $p < 0.01$

Table 2. Results of correlational analyses

		Scores of CEE	The deep motivation	The surface motivation
Scores of CEE	Person Correlation	1	.146	-.278**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.093	.001
	N	133	133	133
The deep motivation	Person Correlation	.146	1	-.366**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.093		.000
	N	133	134	134
The surface motivation	Person Correlation	-.278**	-.366**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.001	.000	
	N	133	134	134

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 shows that there is a negative correlation between the scores of CEE which means that the greater the surface motivation they have, the worse the scores will be and such negative correlation reaches a very significant difference of the statistics ($r = -.278, p < 0.01$). At the same time, Table 2 also shows a positive correlation between the scores of CEE and the deep motivation; however it shows no statistically significant difference. From the correlational results showed in Table 2, it is inferred that the surface motivation and the deep motivation play different roles in accelerating learning of English. Deep motivation does have more power to make the students work harder in learning English than surface motivation does. Therefore, this data shows that it's very important for the students to develop deep motivation when they are learning English.

This result is similar to the findings of Ma [24] who has conducted a study to investigate the influences of learning motivation and learning efforts of English learners. In her study, there existed a positive correlation between the English learners' achievements and their learning motivations. However, In Ma's study, there was no direct impact of motivation but the study clearly showed that efforts to learn are critical in gaining good scores. Combined with Ma's study, we conclude that deep motivation is a crucial factor which influences the students to learn English as this study has shown that the students who have higher surface motivation exert less effort than the ones with higher deep motivation and gain fewer achievements in learning English.

From the analysis reported in Table 2, we have known the important function of deep motivation in learning English. Deep motivation was studied further and the results were showed in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that more than 80% (agree + strongly agree) of participants hold deep motivation in relation to learning English. More than 70% of participants hold deep motivation to learn English aimed at outside communicating. However, the motivation that learning English for better academic communication ranks in the lowest place with the least frequency of all kinds of motivations; this proved that, for the participants, they are not interested in taking the academic route. Similarly, the second lowest type of motivation is for the purpose of paper reading, which also indicates that the learners are not fond of doing academic research. Among the 5 types of motivation, the motivation for the acquisition of foreign culture ranks in the middle. It's worthy to note neutral positions suggest that the learners are sometimes learning English with unclear motivation.

Although most of the learners have deep motivations of various types, in fact, the deep motivations are not totally in accordance with their achievements. Whether deep motivations can translate into learning efforts by the learners is subjected to be confirmed. In order to know whether the learners are willing to learn English continuously after class, several interviews were conducted with some of the students. The findings of the interviews show that people with deep motivation related to "academic communication" and "paper reading" are only doing some English learning when they need to write a paper or look for some critical English materials. Therefore, their English learning level is almost static without much progress. However the learners who showed great interests in English always try to learn English or get access to related knowledge as much as possible, resulting in a good achievement.

Table 3. Frequency of the deep motivation

The deep motivation indicators	R	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Academic communication	N 6 % 4.5	44 32.8	41 30.6	37 27.6	6 4.5	134 100	
Paper-reading	N 4 % 3.0	38 28.3	35 26.1	51 38.1	6 4.5	134 100	
Foreign culture learning	N 4 % 3.0	40 29.9	31 23.1	50 37.3	9 6.7	134 100	
Outside communication	N 2 % 1.5	6 4.5	30 22.4	72 53.7	24 17.9	134 100	
Interest in English	N 1 % 0.7	1 0.7	13 9.7	70 52.3	49 36.6	134 100	

Note: A refers to attitudes; R refers to results

Table 4 shows that many learners have surface motivation to pass the College Entrance Exam or to find a good job. It may be that the effects of surface motivation are less enduring than those of deep motivation; that is, once the purposes of the surface motivation were realized, learning efforts would be weakened or even disappear. This study has shown that most of the students have reduced their time spent on learning English or even quit learning English when they pass the College Entrance Exam which is a compulsory requirement for the students to take the English test. With regard to the weaker efforts made by students with only surface motivation, it's easy to understand why there is a negative correlation between the English learners' motivation and their examination scores.

3.2 The Results of the T test and Related Discussion

Firstly, a high-score group and a low-score group were class participants whose scores were ranked in the most front were named as high - score group and the last 25% of participants whose scores were ranked in lowest group were called for low – score group. Secondly, using independent-samples T test, the related data were calculated for the two groups. The detailed information is presented in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference between the high-score group and the low-score group ($t=19.606, p<0.01$). In the terms of deep motivation, the mean value of the high-score group is higher than that of the low-score group with a significant difference. In terms of the surface motivation, the mean value of the high-score group is lower than that of the low-score group with a significant difference. The results proved that surface motivation and deep motivation do have different influence on

achievements. Deep motivation works more effectively in translating willingness in learning a foreign language to practical efforts. However, the current finding contradicts the finding revealed in Binalet and Guerra's [25] study, where the researchers reported that motivation is not highly associated with language learning achievements.

From the later interviews with some of the students, it was found that the learners who have surface motivations to learn English always have very simple ways of undergoing the processes of input and output and they do not form the habits of self – learning after class or use retrospection of their learning procedures. For example, they would do exercises only for preparing for the coming test in the near future that only work in the periods around the test. However, for the English learners who have deep motivations for learning English such as interests in learning English or life goals related to English, seize every chance to learn English from listening, speaking, reading, writing and all the other aspects of life with persistent efforts. Comparatively speaking, deep motivation of the learners can work more efficiently in spurring the learners to make efforts to gain progress. Ramage [26] carried out research and proved that the language learners who were interested in what they are learning have better performance than the ones who only aimed at entering a higher school.

In summary, deep motivation plays an important role related to achievements. However, as a matter of fact, it's very common that on most occasions, surface motivation and deep motivation can be combined together to influence the students to learn English. That is to say, surface motivation and deep motivation can co-occur and one of the two may take a leading role. Therefore, we conclude that motivation is not

Table 4. Frequency of the surface motivation

The surface motivation	R	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Exam-passing	N	30	72	17	14	1	134
	%	22.4	53.8	12.7	10.4	0.7	100
Compulsory course	N	25	60	26	19	4	134
	%	18.6	44.8	19.4	14.2	3.0	100
Job-pursuing	N	6	39	35	50	4	134
	%	4.5	29.1	26.1	37.3	3.0	100
Passive learning	N	292	83	13	7	2	134
	%	21.7	61.9	9.7	5.2	1.5	100

Note: A refers to attitudes; R refers to results

Table 5. T test results between the high-score group and the low-score group

	Groups	Mean	Sd	T value	Significance
Scores of CEE	High-score group	71.2581	5.60932	19.606**	.000
	Low-score group	50.1212	2.20451		
The deep motivation	High-score group	3.6688	.37882	2.006*	.050
	Low-score group	3.3939	.68645		
The surface motivation	High-score group	2.2063	.46693	-2.330*	0.024
	Low-score group	2.5939	.82989		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ **Table 6. T test results of gender**

	Male		Female		T value	Significance
	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd		
Scores of CEE	58.2235	8.41254	61.2083	7.74036	-2.022*	.045
The deep motivation	3.4953	.57618	3.3833	.51996	1.117	.266
The surface motivation	2.4884	.66198	2.1792	.59963	2.574**	.008

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

static but dynamic in some conditions and deep motivation can also change into surface motivation. Therefore, it is important to cultivate and maintain learning interests when we want to learn something.

3.3 The Relationship between English Learning Motivation and Gender

Table 6 shows, in regard to deep motivation, the mean value of the female is lower than that of the male, but there is no significant difference between them. However, as regards the surface motivation, the mean value of the male is higher than that of the female with a significant difference. Moreover, the female's scores are higher than the male's. In an analysis of all the data shown in Table 6, it can be inferred that the reason why the male's scores are lower than the female is that they have much stronger surface motivation which plays a less important role than the deep motivation in learning processes and behind such phenomenon there is an explanation to account for this. In interviews with some of the boys, it was mentioned many times that they think English is kind of a girl's subject and they have more interest in science which can prove their intelligence instead of English, so most of the boys hold surface motivation such as taking tests or entering a higher school which can be attributed to the outside pressure via teacher or parents. Once they learning English mainly inspired by surface motivation, the translation of real effort could be greatly reduced, which may lead to less achievement.

Chinese scholar Li [27] conducted research that proved in all types of motivation, gender has a significant influence on deep motivation. To be more specific, in her study, deep motivation of the female is much stronger than the male. In fact, during the practical classes the girls were also more interested in English and studied harder in learning English. Li's study also revealed that deep motivation can effectively transfer active efforts in learning English.

In summary, there are different functions of surface motivation and deep motivation in learning a foreign language. The language learners who hold strong deep motivations to learn English always have unflagging efforts. In such a learning process, English learners are more likely to achieve. However, if the English learners lack deep learning motivation, they may exert discontinuous efforts in reaching their simple goals. In further interviews with some of the students, it was concluded that there are some reasons that can explain why the students have weak deep learning motivation: 1) They are not interested in learning English and sometimes under the pressure of other subjects, they abandon the study of English. 2) They do not have confidence to learn English well. 3) They do not think the teacher adopts a good approach to teach English. 4) They don't think there is any connection with their job related goals. This reflects the work of Oxford and Shearin [28] who analyzed 12 types of motivation theories and reported that the main factors that influence learning motivation is the learners' attitude towards the target language, confidence towards learning target language, to what extent the

learners take part in the learning activities, learning purposes, and supports from outside.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 Conclusions

In this study, using quantitative strategies, we found that: 1) On the whole, the subjects' deep motivation is stronger than their surface motivation and there is a negative correlation between them with a significant difference; There is a negative correlation between the subjects' scores on College Entrance Exams and their surface motivation with an extremely significant difference. 2) In terms of the scores of the CEE of the subjects, there is a significant difference between the high-score group and the low-score group; the high-score group's mean value of deep motivation is higher than that of the low-score group; However, the high-score group's mean value of surface motivation is lower than that of the low-score group. 3) The female's scores on the College Entrance Exams are higher than those of the males to a significant level.

By the analyses of the data, it's found that the surface motivation and the deep motivation have various degrees of effects on inspiring the learners to put efforts in learning English in practical study. Meanwhile, this study reveals that, in fact, the deep motivation does not directly influence the achievements of the language learners but via does have influence because deeply motivated students will exert real efforts in the learning process. In this study, some of the English learners have relatively weak learning motivation resulting in non-ideal effects; however, some of the English learners have strong learning motivation but with little efforts in practical learning processes also resulting in unsatisfactory achievement. In practice, there are many reasons for this phenomenon in China. Ge [29] supposed that there are some problems related with the teaching methods of the English teacher, for example, most of the English teachers in China adopt the traditional teacher-oriented teaching mode or may pay more attention to the test regardless of the practical usages like communication with others. All the reasons mentioned above have become obstacles for the learners to get access to the International stage, that in turn can dispel the enthusiasm of learning English.

4.2 Suggestions

For the problems we have identified through this study, some suggestions are given from the microscopic and macroscopic perspectives.

1) To help the students establish a correct attitude towards English-learning

Attitude is a critical factor that can influence the final result. In learning a foreign language, attitude is presented by the learners' motivation. In foreign language learning, this includes the basic attitudes toward the target language and some other related things, for instance, attitudes of the target language community and the general public, attitudes to learn the target language, and the general attitudes toward language and language learning [30]. Generally speaking, positive attitudes can promote foreign language learning, but negative attitudes can hinder foreign language learning [31]. Therefore, the English teacher should impart the language knowledge, and cultivate language skills and at the same time should also help their students to establish a correct attitude towards English, to develop an interest to learn English. Teachers of English have to make the students know that English is a necessary communication tool that is practical during their whole life not just at the periods of tests.

2) To understand the students' needs and stimulate their deep motivation

Motivation generates on the basis of needs. The teachers should take the students' stance and understand their requirements when they learn English. The students will get bored if they only treat English-learning as a task, not as a necessity. Therefore, the teachers should take the students' stance to think about their needs and make some adjustments in the process of the course to help them know more about their real needs and stimulate their deep motivation.

3) To change the evaluation system and enhance the students' participation in class

For the entire Chinese student body, at the beginning of their schooling, they begin to take all kinds of test including testing the process of learning English and their English capacity. Gradually, there forms a trend; the students only extend their efforts before the English tests which is not a stable and persistent learning behavior.

Only if the evaluation system is changed can the surface motivation of passing the exam be avoided to some degree. Besides this, the teachers also need to change their role in English class. They can adopt some creative and flexible methods to prepare the lessons like group role-playing or using communication conferences with foreigners. No matter what strategies are used in the class, it's very important to ensure that students are active and engaged in their learning and that the teacher acts in a guiding and supporting role.

Although this paper has limitation in its participant numbers, it reveals that fact that different types of motivation have different functions in the English learning process, and no matter what kinds of motivations the learners hold, the most critical factor in language learning success is the efforts the learners puts forward in practical learning. Compared with surface motivation, deep motivation in learning English is shown to work more effectively in transferring the real efforts that have some pedagogical implications. Therefore, the teacher should try to motivate and cultivate deep motivation of the foreign language learners. Furthermore, among all types of deep motivation, interest in English takes on strong importance. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to arousing the learners' interests with novel and creative approaches.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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