

Investigation of Learner Demotivation in English Learning in Chinese College

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Abstract: *The new phase of College English curriculum reform is under way. Despite changes to course books and introduction of new teaching methods, teachers of English in Chinese schools are felt puzzled as to why students are underperforming. The author's survey reveals that the problem lies in lack of motivation. This writing briefly introduces the notion of motivation, outlines causes of demotivation, and puts forward practical solutions to increase motivation suited to the Chinese context.*

Keywords: *college students; teaching and learning English; motivation*

1. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, we spent our time and made much of our effort in discussing in what way we can teach our students more effectively. A more recent trend is, however, that more and more researchers and teachers have found it equally valuable to study effective ways of learning. Students rather than teachers have become the focus of research. Motivation is an important factor influencing Chinese college students' learning, which I think well worth our consideration. This article puts forwards the three questions

- What motivation is and how it is commonly classified
- Common factors influence college students' motivation in learning English
- Causes of low motivation and practical solutions

2. WHAT IS MOTIVATION?

A lot of people have done an enormous amount of work to clarify what motivation is, The following stand out as being key terms: internal process/state, intention, activation, maintenance, desire, goal, drive, effort and attitude. It is not difficult to see that motivation is an internal process that activates an individual's activity and helps him/her to maintain their effort to realize their expected goal. Its main elements are goal setting, initiation of internal drive, justification of constant effort. For language teachers, to motivate our students is to help them set reasonable goals with positive attitudes, stimulate their learning desires and try our best to support their constant learning efforts.

2.1. Classification of Motivation

Educational psychologists and psycholinguists classify motivation differently.

Studies (Gardner. 2004; Qin Xiaoqin. 2002; Deci. 1971; Harackiewicz, 1970) have shown that intrinsic and integrative motivations have positive and prolonged effects in enhancing foreign language learning.

Table 1. *Classification of Motivation*

Educational Psychologist	Intrinsic Motivation	Doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable –the motivation comes from inside the learner.
	Extrinsic Motivation	Doing something because it leads to a separable outcome – the thing motivating is outside the learner.
Psycholinguist	Integrative Motivation	Learning a second language in which a learner shows a genuine interest in learning interest in learning the language in order to come closer psychologically to the other language community.
	Instrumental Motivation	Learning a foreign language for pragmatics like, “I want to get a good job,” or “Speaking the foreign language will be important for my future career,” or “I can be better educated.”

2.2. Common Factors Influencing College Student’s Motivation in Learning English

It is generally agreed that the following are key factors influencing learning achievement.

Table 2. *Factors Influencing College Student’s Motivation*

Background	Individual differences, previous school learning experience, general perception of current learning
Attitude and motivation	Interest, attitudes toward English-speaking purpose, attitudes toward learning, priority over integrative or instrumental orientation, encouragement, motivational intensity, learning desire
Classroom Learning Situation	Students’ perception of their course(such as teacher ‘s competence, inspiration, course difficulty, utility, interest)

2.3. Causes of Low Motivation

A survey of the freshmen in University of Jinan I conducted (700 valid questionnaires were collected) indicates that the most influential factors that restrict students’ motivation in English learning are low degree of integrative motivation, insufficient teacher rapport, too strong sense of course difficulty and disinterest in learning.

3. PRACTICAL SOLUTION TO THE DEMOTIVATION

This section offers practical solutions for teachers of English in Chinese College schools, It aims to answer the following three questions:

How to improve students’ integrative motivation?

How to motivate students to become effective learners?

How to build a harmonious learning environment?

3.1. How to Improve Students’ Integrative Motivation

Table 3. *Different Goals and Motivation of the College Students*

Goal for Passing Exams	Goal for Integrative Purpose
•motivation is exams	•Have greater ambitions beyond just exams
•tend to limit effort and learning to the scope of examination requirements	•cultural communication driven
•passive learning, accepting style	•more brave at difficulties and challenging situations and tend to exercise above the “official limit”
•their drive is something external, such as reward and immediate benefit	•more active and positive in their learning
•the goal is shot-term one	•the goal is a long-term one
•Sees exam as the end of learning	•sees exams as a few bridges on their way to the final destination
•less motivated, less motivation intensity	•much more motivated to strive for goal
•exam passed, learning stopped	•learning is sustainable, exams are motives

This is the issue of goal setting. Why should we learn? What is the purpose of our learning? Students’ answers to these questions greatly influence their learning performance. One of my surveys reveals that 80% of students’ motivation orientation is instrumental. Most of the students chose to learn not because of any intrinsic interests, but because of the College English Band 4

Test (CET4), or job opportunities in the future, or, mostly, just because they have to, since it is in the college curriculum. The only goal is to pass exams. In my 28 years of teaching experience, I have found that students with different goals perform quite differently.

Equipped with better qualities, students with integrative goals can make far more progress than those with only "short-term" goals. They can also get good marks in their exams with ease, because what they have learned is usually beyond the official common requirement limit.

As Gardner points out, "If the student learns the language just to get a good grade in the course, then he or she has little incentive to go beyond the class requirements. If he or she views it as a means of establishing real bonds of communication with another people, then she or he is truly learning the language." "This is the distinction between using the language as a means of communication, and using it in order to make oneself understood" (Gardner, 2004).

In my study with my own students I found that integrativeness has a significant positive relation with students' age. One of my explanations is that students start with an instrumental goal, but as learning develops, the sense of integrativeness increases. That is to say, instrumental motivation and integrative motivation can be transferable. What we teachers need to do is to develop ways to enhance and smooth the path of this transition. The following means are helpful.

3.1.1. Change our Goal Concept

Why do we teach? For what purpose do we teach? Is exam the final goal of our work?

One day when all examinations are over, will learning English still be meaningful to our students?

In China, to many teachers and students, the exam is the goal of their teaching and learning. Both teachers and students need to change this goal concept. In reality the exam is just a means to facilitate students on their long journey to the success of mastering a tool of living--a foreign language. Fostering students' language competence for communication in the target language and/or with the target language community should be our first priority goal of teaching and learning. The evaluation of student's learning and teacher's teaching is to see how well the students can use the language in communicating in the target language when he/she has no more exams to take. Examination, whatever level it may be, is only a means to an end. This belief can profoundly change teacher's instruction method and students' learning strategy.

3.1.2. Help Students to Set Down-to-earth Goals

We can take an instrumental goal as a bridge to an integrative one. Motivation intensity is closely bound up with a person's degree of desire to achieve a goal. Helping students to keep a balance between a long-term and ambitious goal and a practical short-term one is especially helpful.

Table 4. *Long-term and Short-term goals of College Students*

Examples of Long-term goals	Examples of Short-term goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn English to communicate with non-Chinese speakers • become a member of another society • pass an important exam (CET4/GRE) • improve job prospects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn a song, lines to perform • write a copy of resume successfully • take part in a discussion, contest • pass a weekly progressive test
Key factors of long-term goals	Key factors of short-term goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • long-term goals often link to the higher-level needs, for example: • safety needs • needs for love and belongingness • esteem needs • needs for self-actualization • needs of knowledge • aesthetic needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • much closer to the student's day-to-day reality for example: • easier to focus on • should be at the appropriate level and achievable • increase self-confidence • strengthen motivation • students know why they are doing something • easier to assess whether goals are reached • goals should be negotiated

Long term goals are vitally important, but often seem too far away. Short term goals are essential to bridge the gap. Without short-term goals, the long term goals may seem to be mirages in the desert, appearing and disappearing at random.

3.1.3. Generate Students' Internal Interest in their Learning

One way to generate students' intrinsic motivation is to arouse the students' curiosity and attention, and to create an attractive image for the course. This can enhance the learner's language-related values and attitudes. It is necessary for teachers to make the L2 feel real by introducing learners to its cultural background, customs, its media, using authentic materials, and promoting contact with native speakers of L2. Creating such language environment is one of special important. With the advance of the policy of reform and opening up, students have more and more opportunities to communicate with native speakers via internet or in person. The most important is that their intrinsic interest can be generated by the direct use the language. Once the students' internal interest is generated, their attitude toward learning will shift from "I am wanted to learn" to "I wanna learn." This second type of attitude relates to long-term success. Qin Xiaoqing and Wen Qiufang's (2002, cited in Ma Guanghui, 2005) research also shows that interest is the most influential factor of motivation. Students with intrinsic interest are more willingly and actively making efforts in foreign language learning (Ma Guanghui).

3.2. How to Motivate Students to Become Effective Learners

3.2.1. Create Lessons which Cater to Different Students

As teachers, we need to recognize people as individuals. Even in large classes, we can recognize and take account of each learner's uniqueness, in terms of learning style, goals, need and interest by varying activities, presentation, topics. Pair and group work and free the teacher up to spend time with individual students, using open ended activities.

3.2.2. Promote Cooperative Learning

Learning can be maximized if teachers create a classroom environment in which learners are encouraged to support and help each other. Pair work and group work are of course vital: group project can also encourage cooperative learning, especially with high-grade students when their learning is sufficient to complete such projects. With mixed-ability classes, teachers can make good use of classroom management skills to adjust student relationships. For example, arranging student with mixed abilities together either purposely or randomly. We should reduce the students' anxiety; we must be fair to every student and let everyone have equal opportunities. The more students can take ownership of their own learning, the greater their motivation will be.

3.2.3. Give Feedback which is Helpful

The teacher's evaluation is an important motivational factor. We need to understand the students' anxiety and help them to make positive attributions on their achievements. Feedback should be informative. Positive feedback is vital for, self-confidence, and hence motivation. Wherever and whenever possible, we should give simple praise. It will help learners improve further. Pointing out specific areas that seem to be causing difficulty to the learner, whether lexical, grammatical or pragmatic will help raise students' awareness of their own progress and encourage self-correction. Using the tests and exams as feedback tools for your own teaching and the students learning is also possible.

3.2.4. Promote Learner Autonomy

Providing ways in which students can learn independently of the teacher will also enable them and increase motivation. This could include raising awareness of teaching general learning strategies, giving guidance for vocabulary organization and getting students to keep journals in English. We should also get students to use the media by encouraging the use of the Internet, English language teaching websites, listening to songs in English and following English on the radio, TV, movies etc. We should encourage students to try out different activities regularly and reflect on how useful they are. This self-reflection is also important.

3.2.5. Inspire the Learner's Own Effort

Ma Guanghui (2005) finds that motivation as a psychological intention does not inevitably result in an increase in learning achievement. The learners must put some effort. The amount of effort is one crucial factor influencing English learning achievement. The more effort and energy a learner spends on learning, the higher his/her English achievement. Learners need to treat their learning

in a serious way. To learn English as a foreign language well in the Chinese learning context, where there are not frequent target language contact opportunities. You can never read and listen, see... too much. It requires a lot time and painstaking effort. Improvement in quality is based on quantity. Learning is very much a individual process. No one can replace the learner's own effort. Only by hard work can we gain a bumper harvest (Du Zhengxue, 2005).

3.3. How to Build a Harmonious Learning Environment

3.3.1. Teacher Rapport

Dörnyei (1998), in a study of motivation in foreign language learning, lists ten demotivations identified by students in order of perceived importance. The teacher (personality, commitment, competence, teaching method) is placed first. The teacher plays a key role in students' English learning. The teacher's behaviour can exert a direct influence on students' learning motivation. If teachers are not motivated in their teaching, enthusiastic and interested in all their students, they cannot reasonably expect all of their learners to be motivated to learn! The teacher's attitude can greatly influence learners, both negatively and positively, therefore, the teacher as a positive model is invaluable.

Based on Williams and Burden (1997) and Dörnyei (2001), there are some questions which we should consider:

1. How can teachers create a pleasant, relaxed and supportive atmosphere in the classroom which is an essential part of the learning process?
2. How can teachers vary and use different language games and activities, the students' own strengths and interests to make the language classes interesting?
3. How can teachers give feedback in a positive way to recognize the students' values, effort, content, ideas and potential?
4. How can teachers keep an up-to-date understanding of language teaching?
5. How can teachers create classrooms which are more student centred?
6. How can teachers bring into full play their students' potential and creativity?
7. How can teachers foster students' autonomy, independence and collaborative spirit so that they can master learning strategies for life-long learning?
8. How can teachers use self-access materials, extracurricular activities, learning resources such as the internet, TV, movies, newspapers, English Corpus... to enhance learning?

If teachers are positively caring towards their students, if teachers are passionate in their work, if teachers can place their students' academic development as their most important concern, it will be easy to construct a harmonious relationship with students. The more harmonious this relationship is, the more teacher rapport the students will feel. "He that loves the tree loves the branch." Those who love the teacher will love their course.

3.3.2. Combining the Course with Students' Speciality and Culture

The ways of traditional teaching always get half the result with twice effort, because of the length, difficulty, complication and unity of the intensive reading texts in College English. There are many ways we can adapt and supplement the curriculum and the course books to better suit our teaching contexts. Teachers can:

- combining the Course with Students' Speciality
- Replacing names of people- and places with which is a reflection of cultural deposit and local customs and practices in English speaking countries.
- Using the multimedia and communication technology, video tends to have more and more practical application.
- using more authentic materials which are more interesting to the students which still achieve the objective suggested in the book

The University English Teaching Syllabus explicitly asks teachers to adapt materials to suit the learners. The materials should not only be valuable with regard to knowledge, but also helpful in cultivating students' appreciation, thinking ability, and ability to innovate. Teaching materials need to be pragmatic and in connection with the existing situation. Enthusiastic teachers should try their best to reduce the course difficulty level in classroom teaching. They need to try every means to make the English classes more attractive. It is important to keep a balance between language skills and grammar, and between language use and usage. Classroom teaching has to be student centred. The largest proportion of class time should be taken by the students conducting their language practice activities. Teachers need to be brave enough to challenge the textbook material and select and adapt practical materials for their own students. The only textbook written to meet your specific context is the one adapt. Equally important, we need to pay attention use of modern techniques including computer- assisted learning. Help students to get access to different learning sources for more recent and interesting materials through the internet. This can provide new authentic materials to meet various needs. A new phase of curriculum reform is under way. With joint efforts of experts from all related fields, we believe the future courses will be more pragmatic, more interesting, and more motivating.

4. CONCLUSION

Motivation is significant in influencing college students on foreign language learning. As teachers, to keep ourselves and our students highly motivated is crucial.

My study of motivation has helped me to understand my students more. It enables me to give a more helpful hand to my students. Goal setting has allowed my students to excel in learning English and in their academic field. What is your long term goal for your teaching and your students? What do you need to do to realize those goals? And more importantly, what will make those goals truly motivating?

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