



Non-English Language Majors' Motivation of English Learning in Chinese Private College

—A Private University-Based Study

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Abstract

To explore the motivation of learning College English among non-English language major students in our university, a survey was assigned to language major English learners excluding English majors, followed by an interview with randomly chosen subjects in the survey. The study has shown that a majority of non-English language majors are driven by extrinsic motivation and integrated motivation, while a small amount of them are intrinsically driven, which leads to difficulty in teaching College English to learners in our university. In order to solve the problem, some suggestions are proposed to deal with the dilemma in the context of our university.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

Motivation, College English, Demotivate, Non-English Language Major, Chinese Private College

1. Introduction

Motivation has been a complicated factor influencing English Language Learners (ELLs) in language acquisition, which greatly impacts on the outcome and degree of accomplishment in language learning [1]. However, motivation varies among individual learners—some learn for intrinsic motivation, while others are propelled by extrinsic initiatives, both of which have a profound impact on students' acquisition of the language.

The paper is based on a survey of non-English language majors in a Chinese

private university, where all students are required to learn English as a course for general education. To explore how motivation will affect the result of learning, an analysis between survey data and students' test scores, will be conducted. And a reflection on how to motivation non-English language major students in College English learning will be carried out based on the analysis. The goal of this paper is to reflect on what should be done to motivate non-English language major ELLs in the private university setting on the basis of their learning motivations.

1.1. Background Information of the School and Subject

Most college students (excluding vocational schools and schools of further education) in China are at the intermediate level of English since they have passed *Gaokao*, College Entrance Exam in China, where students need to take English test and reach a certain level of English proficiency to be admitted to a college. Yet, that's not the end of their English learning. They are required to take the course as general education in the phase of Higher Education.

As a university that featured foreign languages and applied talents, the institution where the author is currently working with lying out the strict policy on English learning—no matter what the students' major are, College English is a compulsory course for them. Moreover, the school sets a goal for the majority of students that they need to pass CET-4 (College English Test Band 4, an official English proficiency test run at national level in China) during the four-year education as the school aims at cultivating global citizens. However, more than 30% of students in the university are linguistics majors excluding English, which means that they should study a third language besides English and invest their time and energy in the third one since it is their major.

Though having a major language to be acquired during the four-year period, students keep on learning English out of different reasons. It aroused my curiosity about the students' motivation of learning English while taking another language as their major. To investigate students' motivation of learning English in college, the author designed and assigned a survey to further explore the answer.

1.2. The Survey on Students' Motivation

The survey is implemented among non-English majors in our university, who are of various languages. Participants of the study are majoring in German (22 participants), Japanese (20 participants), Spanish (20 participants), Portuguese (15 participants), Korean (15 participants), Italian (13 participants) and Russian (15 participants), who take college English course 2 times a week. And most of them are quite keen on learning their major language rather than English, which resembles a general education course.

To ensure the reliability of the survey, diverse types of questions are employed including multiple choices, short answer questions, and votes. And to make sure the results are valid and authentic, names and accounts of participants were pre-registered in the system. A private link was sent to each participant who can

only access the survey with it, which corresponds to the name and account registered in the system. If any participant drops out, it will be clearly demonstrated in the system. Also, a one-on-one interview with 12 random participants was carried out to make sure the result is detailed and comprehensive.

In practice, 120 questionnaires had been sent out and 110 valid ones were collected when the online survey closed. According to the record in the survey system, the valid questionnaires are filled out by 22 German majors, 20 majoring in Japanese, 17 from Spanish major, 12 of Portuguese, 13 participants of Korean, Italian and Russian majors respectively. In order to acquire a precise and genuine result, the participants were told to take it voluntarily; however, 10 participants dropped out from the survey due to reluctance. The effective rate of this survey is 91.6%, which is a relatively high and reliable responsive rate for further data analysis.

2. Data Analysis

As shown in **Table 1**, the result demonstrates that about 60% of students regard English as important since they need to pass certain types of tests like CET-4 and CET-6, which is a general requirement of our college. The second top reason was chosen by 50.91% of participants, for learning English is to communicate with foreigners for students should employ the skill during the four-year education. The students have lessons with foreign teachers once or twice a week either in class or online where English is the only language allowed. Moreover, as all the students in the survey are non-English language majors, they agree that to learn English is a way to equip themselves with one more skill and it can probably benefit them in job hunting. About 26% wish to go abroad, where they need English as a vehicle for further education oversea. However, counter to my prediction, earning credit is not among the top 3 reasons for students' English acquisition—only 20% of participants value the importance of credit.

Table 1. Question 2: What are your top 2 reasons for learning English in college?

Option	Total	Percentage
To communicate with foreigners	56	50.91%
To earn credits	22	20%
To study abroad	29	26.36%
To pass certain tests like CET4&6	65	59.09%
To equip myself with more skills	49	44.55%
To have an access to better job positions	44	40%
For self-improvement	34	30.91%
To show myself off	4	3.64%
Others (please specify)	1	0.91%
Valid participant	110	

As shown in **Table 2** and **Table 3**, 82% of the students vote that learning English is beneficial to their current study in university, while the rate increased by 6% on the question whether it will be useful for future career and life. It corresponds to students' choice of equipping themselves with more skills and getting access to better job positions.

3. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

According to cognitive psychologist, learning motivation can be divided into two categories: extrinsic motivation—which relates closely to external factors such as receiving rewards and punishment—and intrinsic motivation, which associates learning with enjoyment rather than regarding it as a burden or valuing the outcome highly [2].

In foreign language learning, motivation will greatly impact the outcome of learning. Comparing to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation is more prevalent among Chinese college students based on the research outcome of Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou. [3] Research shows a positive correlation between motivation and achievement, in which the former is mainly affected by the following factors: self-concept, self-determination, beliefs, attitudes and anxiety.

Table 2. Question 3: Do you agree that learning English in college is useful for you now?

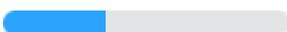
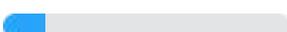
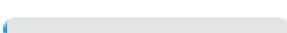
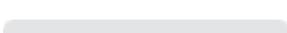
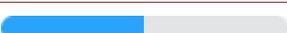
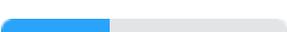
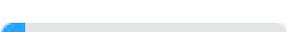
Option	Total	Percentage
Strongly agree	51	 46.36%
Agree	40	 36.36%
Neutral	17	 15.45%
Disagree	2	 1.82%
Strongly disagree	0	 0%
Valid number	110	

Table 3. Question 4: Do you agree that learning English in college will be beneficial to your future career and life?

Option	Total	Percentage
Strongly agree	55	 50%
Agree	42	 38.18%
Neutral	10	 9.09%
Disagree	3	 2.73%
Strongly disagree	0	 0%
Valid number	110	

To communicate with foreigners, and for self-improvement are more intertwined with intrinsic motivation, while the rest, especially test-oriented goal, is more extrinsic because it is related to grades, achievements and awards.

4. Discussion

4.1. Impact of Motivation on College English Course

As is mentioned above, about 60% of students enroll in College English course for the sake of achievements in tests. Thus, as long as they pass certain tests, students start to ignore the importance of English; rather regarding it as a course of general education. Though a majority of non-English majors in our university still take College English after passing CET-4 and CET-6, their language acquisition process ceased or lost interest in improving their proficiency. Though taking tests is usually regarded as a social factor motivating students on English learning, it has both negative and positive effects. In the meanwhile, learners who continue learning English in college for the purpose of studying abroad and gaining credits are driven by external factors, which demotivate students once the aspiration or need for achievement disappears [4].

For those who are propelled by the motivation to equip themselves with one more skill or out of self-improvement, which are more intrinsic, learning English will be less like a burden to them, being more motivated even though they are not required to do so.

There are two complex factors on the list—to access a better position and to communicate with foreigners. As all the participants in the study are non-English language major students, English to some degree will be a necessity in job hunting and socializing, which is more like an external factor; however, when learners have the initiative to communicate with foreigners or autonomously choose a job related to English, it is more like an internal need. Initiatives like these are categorized as integrated motivation [5].

According to Atkinson, motivation will have an impact on how learners react to learning while achievement and self-efficacy closely correlate with perseverance and aspiration of learning. [6] Since 60% of learners are motivated by tests and achievements, as soon as their needs are fulfilled, their motivation gradually wanes. Because their self-efficacy has reached the anticipated level, students lost motivation in language acquisition, impairing students' motivation greatly. On the contrary, students with internal drive will keep on acquiring new knowledge rather than being demotivated even if they have passed the tests. Learners of this type usually don't perceive English as a course or a required subject in the university. Rather, they equate learning English with an interest or self-efficacy, constantly improving language proficiency in an autonomous psychological status [7].

4.2. The Contradiction in Real-Life Context

As is shown from the survey that a bulk of student body in our university learn

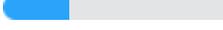
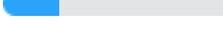
English out of extrinsic motivation, which will not be a long-lasting drive for learners. Yet around 88% of students view English as a significant skill for their future life and career, which is quite paradoxical to their language learning motivation. In order to probe into the contradiction, one more question was assigned to the participants asking them to rank the most important 2 skills of English (the result is shown in **Table 4**).

Interestingly, the top 2 skills perceived as the most significant are listening and speaking, which correspond to students' motivation to learn English—to communicate with foreigners and to use it in future life and career. However, the skill of speaking is somewhat less frequently tested in some tests, especially in the CET-4 and CET-6, which is ironical to the reality.

Tests like the CET-4 and CET-6 are more inclined to assess students on their listening, reading and writing skills. Only partial of test-takers get their speaking skill tested. According to statistics, more than 210 thousand students of 79 colleges took the CET-4 test in December, 2020. In contrast, only 2 test centers were available for oral/speaking tests, which means around 8 thousand students were able to be assessed on their English speaking proficiency. It detaches from the students' need and purpose of learning English, which causes demotivation in language acquisition. A mismatch between expectation and outcome can harm students' motivation in learning English [8] [9].

In addition to the survey, a one-on-one interview was carried out between the author and 12 learners randomly selected from the participants (Subject A-L). One-fourth of interviewees (Subject D, G, K) responded that it was due to the interference of their major on English, they were less likely to make progress in English, which discouraged them from learning it. 5 interviewees (Subject A, B, E, J, L) gave the feedback that they simply have negative attitude toward learning English as they had been forced to learn this subject since Grade 3 in primary school. The other 3 interviewees (Subject C, F, H) told the author what they were currently learning in class had nothing to do with their actual needs, which was useless. Only two participants (Subject D, I) expressed their discontentment on teaching methodology or the teacher. The result accords with the research findings of Dörnyei in 2011 [10].

Table 4. Question 5: Vote on the top 2 skills in English which you think is the most important.

Option	Total	Percentage
Listening	94	 85.45%
Speaking	106	 96.36%
Reading	45	 40.91%
Writing	26	 23.64%
Culture	22	 20%
Valid number	110	

Based on the survey and the interview, it is clear that non-English language major students in our university are demotivated in learning English for 3 different reasons: 1) disconnection between tests/the course and actual needs; 2) interference of major (foreign language) with English; 3) discontentment with the teacher or methodology.

4.3. Solution to the Paradox

To solve the issues stated above, learners should not be the only person making effort, teachers and the university should strive to change the current contradictory situation as well.

4.3.1. English Is More Than a Course

English, in the globalization trend, is more than a subject or course; rather, it is a bridge for mutual communication. To apply and improve English in general, one way is to use it in a real-life context, fulfilling their actual needs to encourage their learning motivation. For learners in our university, they should keep motivated in learning English even though they are non-English language major students, because English is a universal language spoken by more than 70% of the world population. Since the beginning of 21st Century, an increasing number of foreigners have been flowing into China for work and life. Learners can't always use Chinese or the language they majoring in to communicate with foreigners as either the newcomers might be unfamiliar with Chinese or learners might not be as proficient in the target language as expected. It is high time that English could be the one resorted to.

Furthermore, as one of the cultivating goals in our university, learners should attempt to become global citizens, which means they need to have a basic understanding of the world and other cultures. English can be an accessible vehicle to facilitate cultural understanding, breaking down barriers between languages and cultures. Thus, it is not just the course itself is indispensable to learners, but learning to apply the language to different cultural contexts is a must.

4.3.2. Learn the Newest, Win the Toughest

Based on the students' feedback, some students are discouraged from learning because of the teacher or the teaching methodology. Then, an update on the teacher or methods of teaching is necessary.

Research has shown that College English teachers are demotivated for three main reasons: marginalization of the course, unfavorable teaching environment and teachers' negative attitude toward professional development [11]. On the aspect of teachers, one way to improve the quality of College English is to foster a positive attitude towards professional development. Learning is a life-long journey and mission, especially for teachers in college due to divergence of audiences. College students are recruited from various locations in China, which imposes special requirements on teachers that they shall know some basics about the students—students' psychology of studying and their needs. Also, students

in our classes are familiar with all kinds of information technology as they were born in the era of Internet. It lays a requirement on the teacher to be tech-intelligent. Otherwise, teachers tend to be left out or even despised by students to some extent.

Likewise the teachers, college students seek professional development during the four-year education. If the content taught to them was irrelevant to their future or current study, students are likely to lose interest in the course since most of them are driven by extrinsic motivation. So an urgent goal for teachers to achieve is to incorporate what students are inquiring for or interested in into the course. It is the very time when teaching methodology and theories come into play, which can facilitate integrating English with students' needs and interests, making English practical and accessible.

In addition, Ministry of Education of China has been constantly promoting reforms in Chinese institutes of Higher Education in recent years, which requires teachers to keep up with the trend, pumping the newest knowledge to win the toughest battle ever—teaching College English to non-English language majors.

4.3.3. Not Just the Test

To propose a further suggestion to change the current dilemma, the university should be involved as well. Though our university is an outcome-oriented institute, in the author's regard, results of tests should not be the only scale to evaluate the students.

Multi-dimensional evaluation is being widely promoted in colleges around China, researches have shown that the outcome of implementing multi-dimensional evaluation helps to foster students' autonomy in learning English as well as improving self-efficacy [12] [13]. If the College English course can improve students' autonomy and self-efficacy in language acquisition, it is another form of achievement, regardless of students' grades in tests. What is more significant, College English teachers shouldn't be assessed on how many of their students' passed tests like CET-4 and CET-6 or how much the students get in the tests since it will be neither favorable to students nor to the teachers; Rather it will just demotivate them on English learning and teaching.

5. Summary

The motivation of learning College English varies among individuals in our university, which has a significant impact on attitudes towards learning the language. However, as is demonstrated in the survey, a majority of students are driven by external initiatives like passing certain tests or getting course credit, while about half of students learn English for the sake of integrated purposes, which directly influences their motivation regardless of English proficiency [14]. Due to the domination of extrinsic and integrated motivation, teaching College English to students in our university is a tough battle to be accomplished for teachers.

In order to solve the issue, the three parties should make joint effort to facilitate College English learning—learners, teachers, and the university. Learners should perceive English from a more macro perspective rather than as a course to be completed; teachers should equip themselves with more advanced and comprehensive professional knowledge to cater to the younger and tech-savvy generation; and the university should encourage students to be evaluated from multiple dimensions rather than just valuing their tests scores or the rate of passing.

Besides what has been revealed in the survey, there are a series of limitations in the study. For instance, the volume of subjects is not large enough due to voluntary participation and a limited number of students I can reach out to. For further study, if certain rewards can be given to the participants and the number of recruited student volunteers can be enlarged, the result will be more accurate and convincing. Secondly, the student body in our university is different from other universities in China, with 80% of female and 20% of male, which might affect the result to some degree. Thirdly, the study is only targeted at non-English language major students besides English, which means students of many other majors are not involved. It will impact the outcome of this research as well. In future research, to get a profound insight into how motivation affects non-English majors in the Chinese private college setting, a follow-up survey will be conducted on the non-English majors in our college with comprehensive data analysis and global discussion.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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