

A Study of Technical College Students' English Learning

Motivation in Southern Taiwan

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Abstract

The English proficiency of students in Taiwan's technical colleges has become increasingly worse over the years. Teachers face the difficult challenge to find ways to help improve technical college students' English proficiency in a short amount of time. In fact, many factors are responsible for EFL college students' poor English competence. Based on a review of the literature, learning achievement can be correlated with learning motivation, learning strategies, learning styles, learning environment, instructors' teaching methods, teaching materials, teaching attitudes, and parental attitudes. Though different factors have different levels of effect on learning achievement and efficiency, the researchers strongly believe that learning motivation is a vital element in the process of learning, and it is the fundamental force in reaching a goal. Without a doubt, having no learning motivation is not easy to gain learning achievement. According to Dörnyei's statement (2001), most researchers agree that motivation is the choice of whether to perform a particular action, the persistence pursuing the action, and the effort expended on the action. In other words, motivation is the reason why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are willing to pursue the activity. Learning English is required in the technical college curriculum even though most of the students' English background is weak; therefore, determining how to promote technical college students' English learning motivation is crucial. According to Gardner (1985), language learning motivation has three components: motivational intensity, the desire to learn the language, and the attitude towards learning the language. Moreover, based on Dörnyei and Otto's definition of L2 motivation (1998), motivation can be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, organized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out. Schumann (1998) also argued "second language acquisition is emotionally driven and emotion underlies most, if not all cognition." In other words, motivation plays a critical role in language learning. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to

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determine which kind of learning motivation the technical college students regard as most important when learning English. The research instrument was an English Learning Motivation Scale designed by Li et al. (2006), and the subjects were 396 English Level A and C students enrolled in the General English course at Meiho Institute of Technology, located in southern Taiwan. Based on the data collected from the English learning motivation scale, the findings showed that the ranking of learning motivation given by the English Level C subjects from the highest to the lowest was an interest in foreign cultures, supereminence motivation, self-efficacy, passive motivation, expectancy-value, and instrumental motivation. Moreover, the ranking of learning motivation given by the English Level A subjects from the highest to the lowest was passive motivation, supereminence motivation, an interest in foreign cultures, self-efficacy, expectancy-value, and instrumental motivation. Finally, the researchers drew a conclusion and provided some implications to English learners and instructors.

Keywords: motivation, instrumental, expectancy-value, self-efficacy, supereminence

I. Introduction

The researchers have taught English in an institute of technology for many years and find most of their students' English ability to be low. These young people will be the workforce in this country someday in the future. In order to increase global competition, having a proficient English ability is important. Therefore, it is worth considering how to promote college students' English abilities. The researchers find that most of their students have had few successful English learning experiences or they had an English-phobia when they were in junior high school. Those students lost confidence in learning English, so they are afraid of learning English. The researchers believe previous English learning failure has a great effect on the following learning. Only when those students experience successful learning achievement will they gain confidence and their learning motivation will be stimulated. In Taiwan, learning English is very popular and some people learn English for course requirement, some for work, some for personal interest, and some for other reasons. In other words, everyone has different motivation to learn English. Yang (1996) and Lin (1999) showed that among the English learners of all ages in Taiwan, it is very easy to find some learners with weak English performance. Yang indicated that the main reasons of those learners' weak English performance included a lack of learning motivation and of an appropriate learning attitude. Moreover,

Chen et. al (2003) also showed that 23.6% of students would like to give up learning English based on their survey of English learning motivation. That is to say, it is the first priority of teachers to arouse students' English learning motivation if they want to improve students' English abilities. Even though most of the students did not have satisfactory English performance, the researchers believe that understanding students' English learning motivation will help students access English much more easily. The purpose of the study is to understand the difference between English Level A and C students' English learning motivation in Meiho Institute of Technology. The researchers utilized an English learning motivation questionnaire to survey students' English learning preference. After analysis of the data collected by questionnaire, the results can be utilized reference of English teaching.

II. Literature Review

1. What is Motivation?

Psychological researchers and educators are often concerned with student learning motivation because results cannot be achieved if someone does not have the motivation or the force to do something. Many researchers found that many learners lost their learning motivation after they attended school. It is worth exploring why many learners learned with interest and excitement in their childhood, but that kind of interest and excitement gradually disappeared as time went by. Some even reach the point of disliking English courses in school and found learning is to be an unhappy or even negative experience. Some researchers have defined motivation in various ways. For example, Huang (1996) indicated that motivation not only makes learners have the power to learn but also makes learners grasp the learning objectives, and understand the priority of different learning activities as well as makes learners' learning behaviors become organized patterns. Chang (1997) showed that motivation is a kind of internal force to make individuals do various behaviors, a kind of internal interaction to make individuals act, maintain the activity, and spur on the goal of activity. Yang (2000) found that motivation is the crucial factor to determine whether an individual would enthusiastically participate in a language learning activity. Lin (2003) showed that motivation is a critical element to have an effect on a learning process and if someone would like to conduct a long term and significant learning activity effectively, motivation is indispensable. Although those researchers use different statements to define motivation, the nature of how motivation is defined is similar. Simply speaking, if an individual wants to do something, it is necessary for him or her to have the motivation or desire to complete the task. Therefore, language learning motivation is very important for people to learn a target language.

No wonder, Chang (2006) pointed out that the priority is to stimulate learners' learning motivation when teachers teach.

2. Language learning motivation

According to Dörnyei's statement (2001), most researchers would agree that motivation is the choice of whether to perform a particular action, the persistence pursuing the action, and the effort expended on it. In other words, motivation is the reason why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it. Learning English is required in the technical college curriculum even though most of the students' English background is weak; therefore, understanding their English learning motivation and determining how to promote their English learning motivation are crucial. Based on Gardner's description (1985), language learning motivation has three components: motivational intensity, the desire to learn the language, and the attitudes towards learning the language. Moreover, based on Dörnyei and Otto's definition of L2 motivation (1998), motivation can be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, organized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out. Schumann (1998) also argued "second language acquisition is emotionally driven and emotion underlies most, if not all cognition." In other words, a motivation to learn a target language plays a critical role in language learning.

Without a doubt, pursuing success is the goal for most people in the process of learning. English is a required course in Taiwan; therefore, it is one of indicators for successful academic performance. And Gardner (1990) showed that the key factor of successful language learning is motivation. Many researchers also found that there was a significant correlation between learning motivation and academic performance (Chuang & Huang, 1981; Kuo, 1983; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Wang, 1991; Wu, 1998; Yu, 1987). Successful achievement leads to performance motivation and then forms a virtuous circle. Atkinson and Birch (1970) thought those who with high performance motivation are more willing to accept challenging work, and that is a part of the intrinsic value. In addition, Corno and Rohrkemper (1985) found that if a teacher makes students understand the intrinsic value of courses, it is much easier to arouse students' learning desire and then students will spend more time learning. Then, Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) proposed a motivation belief model to understand the relationship between motivation and academic achievement, and there are three components in the model: self-efficacy, intrinsic value, and test anxiety. They also found that there were significant relationships between self-efficacy, intrinsic value, and test anxiety; and those with high test anxiety have

low academic performance. Therefore, self-efficacy and intrinsic value are also included in the English learning motivation scale in this study.

3. The comparison of proficient and non-proficient learners' language motivation

Though English learning is necessary in Taiwan, not every student has successful English learning experiences. Some are frustrated in English learning and then lose their learning motivation; some are excited about English learning and love English more and more. Therefore, it is worth exploring proficient and non-proficient language learners' motivation. Chuang and Huang (1981) found external factors contribute to successful academic performance, and found that the students with unsuccessful academic performance attributed their unsuccessful learning to competence. Similarly, in this study, the researchers would like to discover the difference between proficient learners and non-proficient learners in English learning motivation. Moreover, Chen (1991) and Chen (1994) found learners' learning motivation, learning interest, and scholastic aptitude can predict their learning performance more than their learning strategy. In addition, Mao (1997) found proficient learners have more self-reinforcing motivation and they have higher performance, however, lower achievers attribute their failure to incompetence, and bad luck. Also, Chuang (1997) found English course repeaters have lower learning motivation than general students and learning motivation is an important indicator to predict learners' learning achievement. In other words, learning motivation plays a critical role in the learning process and it is worth comparing proficient and non-proficient language learners' learning motivation.

III. Methodology

1. **Study design:** This study is a questionnaire study.
2. **The participants:** The researchers applied convenience sampling to conduct the study. The research subjects were 396 freshmen from Meiho Institute of Technology. After deleting invalid samples, the valid samples included 366 subjects, of whom 162 were English Level A students (50 males, 112 females) and 194 English Level C students (107 males, 87 females).
3. **The materials:** The researchers employed Li et al.'s (2006) English Learning Motivation Scale as the instrument (shown in Appendix) and all the participants completed a Chinese version of a 38-item questionnaire to provide data for the study. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: Part I with 11 items on the participants' background information, and Part II with 27 items on their self-evaluation of English learning motivation. The English Learning Motivation Scale can explain 61.25% variance and the value of coefficient (Cronbach's) alpha for English learning motivation scale is .917. In other words, the English

Learning Motivation Scale has excellent validity and reliability. The software package SPSS 10.0 for Windows was used to organize and analyze the data to provide both descriptive and inferential statistical results. However, this study will focus on the descriptive results.

4. **The procedure:** The questionnaire was distributed to participants in 2009. It was completed in the presence of the researchers. The researchers collected the data in the beginning of the school year.

IV. Finding and Discussion

The English Learning Motivation Scale is the main research instrument in this study and it includes six factors, which account for 61.25% of the total variation. These six factors are described below:

1. Expectancy-value: According to the “expectancy-value theory”, a learner’s motivation is determined by how much they **value** the goal, and whether they **expect** to succeed. (Questions 1-4 in the English Learning Motivation Scale)
2. Instrumental motivation: Wanting to learn a language for the purpose of obtaining some concrete goals such as a job, graduation, or the ability to read academic materials. (Questions 5-11 in the English Learning Motivation Scale)
3. An interest in foreign cultures: Learning English because of being interested in the people and things from English-speaking countries. (Questions 12-16 in the English Learning Motivation Scale)
4. Self-efficacy: People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. (Questions 17-20 in the English Learning Motivation Scale)
5. Supereminence: The quality of superior eminence, rank, or dignity; distinguished, conspicuous, or worthy of note above others. (Questions 21-24 in the English Learning Motivation Scale)
6. Passive motivation: Passive motivation is described as more of an extrinsic motivational quality. A learner with passive motivation usually learns because of external factors, such as environmental trends, and thinks it is not easy for them to change something, such as intelligence. (Questions 25-27 in the English Learning Motivation Scale)

In this study, the subjects were 179 English Level A students (the valid samples were from 162 participants including 50 males and 112 females) and 217 English Level C students (the valid samples were from 194 participants including 107 males and 87 females) in the freshmen English course. Based on the data analyzed, the researchers recorded the findings as the following:

Regarding the subjects' previous educational background, 24.1% of the English Level A students graduated from the high school section in vocational high school; 61.7% of the English Level A students graduated from vocational high schools; 12.3% graduated from senior high schools; 1.2% graduated from junior colleges, and 0.6% graduated from another kind of school. On the other hand, 21.6% of the English Level C students graduated from high school section in vocational high school; 64.9% of the English Level C students graduated from vocational high schools; 10.8% graduated from senior high schools; 2.1% graduated from junior colleges, and 0.5% graduated from another kind of school. In other words, most of the subjects graduated from vocational high school.

With regard to the subjects' majors, 17.9% of the English Level A students major in business or management; 60.5% major in nursing, food science, or beauty science, and 21.6% major in humanities. On the other hand, 45.2% of the English Level C students major in business or management; 39.4% major in nursing, food science, or beauty science, and 15.4% major in humanities. That is to say, the range of the subjects' majors varied.

Concerning the amount of time learning English outside of class per week, 75.3% of the English Level A students spent less than one hour studying English after class; 22.2% of them spent 2-5 hours; 2.5% of them spent 5-10 hours, and none of them spent more than 10 hours. On the other hand, 86.6% of the English Level C students spent less than one hour studying English after class; 11.3% of them spent 2-5 hours; 0.5% of them spent 5-10 hours, and 1.5 of them spent more than 10 hours. In other words, most of the subjects stated that they spend less than one hour per week studying English after class.

Regarding the experience of traveling in English-speaking countries, 8% of the English Level A students have been to English-speaking countries; 92% of them didn't have this kind of experience. On the other hand, 7.7% of the English Level C students have been to English-speaking countries, and 92.3% didn't have this kind of experience. That is to say, most of the subjects did not have any experience of traveling in English-speaking countries.

With regard to earning foreign language certificates, 7.4% of the English Level A students have foreign language certificates, but 92.6% of them didn't have any foreign language certificates. On the other hand, 3.6% of the English Level C students have foreign language certificates, but 96.4% of them didn't have any foreign language certificates. In other words, most of the subjects did not have a foreign language certificate.

In terms of the experience of learning English, 51.2% of the English Level A students have had positive English learning experiences; 26.5% of them have had

unhappy English learning experiences; 22.3% were neutral in their opinions or didn't have any special learning experiences. On the other hand, 24.7% of the English Level C students have had positive English learning experiences; 50% of them have had negative English learning experiences; 25.3% of them were neutral in their opinions or didn't have any special learning experience. This finding is very similar to the survey of Chen et. al (2003) because if a learner did not have happy English learning experience, it is very natural for him or her to want to give up learning English. In general, more Level A students had more positive English learning experiences than the Level C students.

With regard to the English learning motivation, the ranking of learning motivation given by the English Level A subjects from the highest to the lowest was passive motivation, supereminence motivation, having an interest in foreign cultures, self-efficacy, expectancy-value, and instrumental motivation. On the other hand, the ranking of learning motivation given by the English Level C subjects from the highest to the lowest was having an interest in foreign cultures, supereminence motivation, self-efficacy, passive motivation, expectancy-value, and instrumental motivation.

Regarding their motivation to improve their English listening ability, 76.5% of the English Level A students would like to improve their English listening ability; 6.8% of them would not like to improve their English listening ability; 16.7% of them didn't have special viewpoint. On the other hand, 63.4% of the English Level C students would like to improve their English listening ability; 14.4% of them would not like to improve their English listening ability; 22.2% of them didn't have any special viewpoint. In fact, most of the subjects would like to promote their listening ability.

With regard to their motivation to improve their English spoken ability, 80.2% of the English Level A would like to improve their oral ability; 6.2% of them would not like to improve their oral ability; 13.6% of them didn't have any special viewpoint. On the other hand, 68% of the English Level C students would like to improve their oral ability; 13.4% of them would not like to improve their oral ability; 18.6% of them didn't have any special opinion. Similarly, most of the subjects would like to improve their oral ability.

Regarding their motivation to improve their English reading ability, 82.1% of the English Level A students would like to improve their English reading ability; 3.7% of them would not; 14.2% of them didn't have special opinion. On the other hand, 65.5% of the English Level C students would like to improve their English reading ability; 12.3% of them would not; 22.2% of them didn't have special opinion. That is to say, most of the subjects would like to promote their reading ability.

Concerning their motivation to improve their English writing ability, 72.2% of

the English Level A students would like to improve their writing ability; 11.1% of them would not; 16.7% of them didn't have special opinion. On the other hand, 52.6% of the English Level C students would like to improve their English writing ability; 25.8% of them would not; 21.6% of them didn't have any special opinion. More English Level A students would like to increase their writing than English Level C students. Based on the data, nearly 80% of English Level A students would like to improve their four English skills and the ranking of four English skills improved by the English Level A subjects from the highest to the lowest was reading, speaking, listening, and writing. On the other hand, over half of English Level C students would like to improve their four English skills and the ranking of four English skills improved by the English Level C subjects from the highest to the lowest was speaking, reading, listening, and writing. In fact, writing ability is the higher level English skill; therefore, it is not practical for technical college students to improve because most of them did not have enough English competence. Naturally, they did not have high willingness to improve their English writing ability.

V. Conclusions

According to the findings and results, the researchers drew the following conclusions. First, regarding participants' previous educational background, no matter the participants' level, most of them have at least graduated from a vocational high school. Second, regarding the time participants spent on English learning outside of English courses, they did not spend much time on English learning. Third, regarding experience of traveling to English-speaking nations, most of the participants had no such experience. Fourth, regarding obtaining foreign language certificates, most of the participants haven't earned any foreign language certificates. Fifth, regarding the experience of English learning, about 35% of the subjects have had positive English learning experiences, but 38% of the subjects stated they have had negative English learning experiences.

Sixth, with regard to the order of English learning motivation, Level A participants mostly had passive motivation, followed by supereminence, an interest in foreign cultures, self-efficacy, expectancy-value, and instrumental motivation. On the other hand, Level C participants had the English learning motivation of an interest in foreign cultures, followed by supereminence, self-efficacy, passive motivation, expectancy-value, and instrumental motivation. In other words, instrumental motivation was the weakest one had by the subjects when they learn English. It's possible that the subjects still did not understand the importance of instrumental motivation for their studies or work in the future. Moreover, most of the subjects would like to improve their English reading, writing, speaking and listening. Level

A students ranked reading as their first choice, and then speaking, listening, and writing. On the other hand, the ranking of four English skills the English Level C subjects would like to improve from the highest to the lowest was speaking, reading, listening, and writing. In other words, speaking and reading abilities are the two English skills technical college freshmen students in this study would like to improve most.

VI. Implications

Based on the conclusions, the researchers provide the following suggestions for English learners, English instructors, and educational organizations in order to promote English learning efficacy. First, English instructors should provide learners various English learning resources and channels to learn English, encourage students to self-learn English after school, and give students rewards when they make progress. Second, English instructors should design some English contests according to students' learning content to promote students' learning motivation. Third, English instructors should provide students some interesting learning activities, to arouse their English learning desire and encourage students to get English certificates for possible job requirements in the future. Fourth, English instructors should design a variety of lively classroom activities or programs to allow students to achieve positive English learning experiences. Fifth, English instructors should assign a few high-achieving students to share their English learning experience and motivation with classmates to provide students with role models, and make English high-achievers understand learning English can help them find other resources and increase their social dominance in the future. Sixth, English instructors should design some English cultural programs to increase English low-achievers' English learning motivation.

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Appendix

Part I: Background information

1. What is your gender? male female
2. What is your major? business school nursing humanities
other _____
3. You graduated from comprehensive high school vocational high school
senior high school college other
4. Every week you learn English by yourself less than one hour 2-5 hours
 5-10 hours over 10 hours
5. Have you ever been to English speaking countries? Yes No
6. Do you have any English certificates? Yes No
7. Did you have a positive English learning experience?

Yes No I don't know

8. Do you want to improve your English listening ability?

Yes No I don't know

9. Do you want to improve your English speaking ability?

Yes No I don't know

10. Do you want to improve your English reading ability?

Yes No I don't know

11. Do you want to improve your English writing ability?

Yes No I don't know

Part II: Please answer the following questions based on your experience.

English learning motivation scale	Strongly agree	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I believe if I make efforts, my English is sure to be good.	4	3	2	1
2. I think learning English increases my self-confidence.	4	3	2	1
3. I think learning English makes me happy.	4	3	2	1
4. I think having good English is an honor.	4	3	2	1
5. I learn English because it is beneficial to job-hunting in the future.	4	3	2	1
6. I learn English because it is useful for studies and tests.	4	3	2	1
7. I learn English because I can make friends with English speakers.	4	3	2	1
8. I learn English because it is convenient for me to travel overseas.	4	3	2	1
9. I learn English because English is a global language.	4	3	2	1
10. I learn English because it is useful for reading English books, newspapers, magazines, and comic books.	4	3	2	1
11. I think learning English can help me learn different kinds of knowledge.	4	3	2	1
12. I learn English because I am interested in	4	3	2	1

English-speaking countries.				
13. I learn English because I am interested in the people and things in English-speaking countries.	4	3	2	1
14. I learn English because English is a special language.	4	3	2	1
15. I learn English because English is melodious.	4	3	2	1
16. I learn English because English is beautiful.	4	3	2	1
17. I learn English because I may move to English-speaking countries someday.	4	3	2	1
18. I learn English because I may work in English-speaking countries someday.	4	3	2	1
19. I think learn English can make me get a lot of praise, compliments, and encouragements.	4	3	2	1
20. I think having good English can make more friends.	4	3	2	1
21. I learn English because English-speaking countries are powerful nations nowadays.	4	3	2	1
22. I learn English because many successful people can speak English.	4	3	2	1
23. I think a leader should be able to speak English.	4	3	2	1
24. I think it is behind the times if someone does not learn English.	4	3	2	1
25. I learn English because it makes me understand English movies, programs, and cartoons.	4	3	2	1
26. I learn English because everyone learns English.	4	3	2	1
27. I think learning English is related to intelligence.	4	3	2	1