An Empirical Study on the Correlation between English Learning Motivation and Strategy

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Abstract

The empirical study aims to investigate the correlation between learning motivation and strategy adopted by non-English majors in a local university. The result of the research shows the subjects use learning strategy and learning motivation at medium level. Students most prefer affective strategy. Instrumental motivation is more prevalent. There are different correlations between learning motivation components and learning strategy components. Findings suggest teachers are supposed to be aware of the effect of motivation on learning strategy and promote comprehensive English learning.

Keywords: learning motivation, learning strategy, correlation, pedagogical implication

1. Introduction

With the focus of language study shifting from the teacher-centered to the learner-centered, one of the major questions in the field of SLA is about differential success in which four most important factors have been well recognized to influence the success in SLA: native language variables, input variables, instructional variables and individual variables (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2000). Only by studying those changeable factors (— what learning strategies they adopt, what motivations they hold, how they regard themselves, whether they can control themselves and how they attribute their successes and failures and so on), can we in fact concern about learners and their changes (William & Burden, 2000). Therefore successful teaching is not only a matter of teaching methods, more important, it also involves students' learning abilities and responsibilities. It has been proved that non-intellectual factors affect learning process and they can even affect learners' achievements (e.g. Brown, 2001; Ellis, 2003 etc.).

As for how language learning is affected by learners' individual differences, learner variables such as learning strategies and motivation have been considered as great importance for SLA. Motivation involves the affective states that influence the learners' effort degree in second language learning. Dornyei argues motivation factor in foreign language class is especially important which can not be ignored by teachers and researchers. Most motivational theorists believe there is close relationship between motivation and learning: motivation can motivate the accomplishment of the goal. They affect the nature and the frequency with which individual learners use learning strategies (Ellis, 2003). Learning strategy can facilitate autonomous learning and appropriate learning strategy is a guarantee for effective learning activities and learning efficiency. Oxford points out that there are two reasons why learning strategy is important: First, strategy is a tool for self-study, especially to improve communicative ability; Secondly, person who uses appropriate learning strategies is more confident and more efficient in learning process (Oxford, 1990). Therefore the study of learning motivation and learning strategies is of potential value to language teachers in foreign language teaching.

In China, research on learning strategies mainly focuses on some specific strategy used by students in some specific language skills such as listening, reading and vocabulary learning. They seldom involve motivation influencing the choice of learning strategies. Furthermore, they mainly involved in undergraduates in some key universities with higher English level (e.g. Gao Yihong, 2003; Qin Xiaoqing&Wen Qiufang, 2002; Zhang Yaping& HaoMei, 2005) and English majors (e.g.Wu Yian, Liu Runqing and P. Jeffrey, 1993). In this case, we take Linyi University, an ordinary local university, as an example, where students' English levels are comparatively low. The purpose of this study is to gain further insights into learning motivation and strategy and

promote English teaching and learning.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Subjects

The subjects concerning this study are college students in Grade 2010, majoring in Mechanical Engineering and Autonomy in Linyi University from four natural classes, whose ages ranging from 18 to 20. There are 164 participants in the survey with 92 males and 72 females. The subjects have finished one-year English learning and formed their own habits, accumulated enough experience and stable motivations in English learning.

2.2 Instruments

In this study, a questionnaire is designed to collect quantitative data, including two parts: the first part is learning strategy questionnaire mainly based on O'Malley and Chamot (1999) and Oxford's(1990) framework with a good reference to Cheng Xiaotang and Zheng Min's (2002) questionnaire to be suitable for Chinese English learners. The second part, learning motivation questionnaire is a modified one according to the "Attitude/Motivation Test Battery: Technical Report (1985)" by R.C. Gardner and the "English learning motivation questionnaires" designed by Gao Yihong and her associates (2003) which were used to investigate the college undergraduates' English learning motivation from 30 universities.

Learning strategy questionnaire is divided into four parts (35 statements): cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies; Motivation questionnaire includes three parts (18 statements): instrumental motivation, integrative motivation and learning situational motivation. The 53 statements are given five choices of use frequency in the form of 5 Likert Scales from 1(Never or almost never true of me) to 5(Always or almost always true of me). The subjects were required to make their choices by choosing one of the five numbers on the answer sheet to tell how often they adopted the learning strategies and to what degree they held the motivation. The statements were all translated into Chinese in case it may bring misunderstanding to the subjects (see Appendix). By reliability analysis, the Cronbach Alpha value of learning strategy part is 0.916 and the motivation part is 0.765, both reaching statistical significance.

2.3 Data Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants in class but required to be finished within the set time and not allowed to be taken out of the classroom. After the collection of 164 valid questionnaires, numbers chosen by the subjects were input into computer and data analysis was carried out by computer with SPSS (Version11.0).

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

From Table 1 and Table 2, it can be seen students' learning strategy use is at medium level with the mean score of 3.021. Most of the students (70.7%) were reported as "sometimes used" although no one was reported as "never or almost never used" or "always or almost always used" learning strategies. Students' learning motivation tendency is also at medium level with the total mean score of 2.937. 67.7% students were reported as "sometimes used". No students' motivation frequency was reported at "always or almost always" level although only 0.6% students were reported at "never or almost never" level. The figures indicate that college students in this local university don't often use learning strategies and their motivation is not strong.

Table 1. Overall view of students' learning strategy and motivation

mean level	numbers of students		percentages	
	Learning strategy	Learning motivation	Learning strategy	Learning motivation
4.5-5.0	0	0	0%	0%
3.5-4.4	32	24	19.5%	14.6%
2.5-3.4	116	111	70.7%	67.7%
1.5-2.4	16	28	9.8%	17.1%
1.0-1.4	0	1	0%	0.6%

Table 2. The mean score and standard deviation of each strategy and motivation category (n=164)

	Type of strategy or motivation	mean	Std. D	order
strategy	Cognitive strategy (1-15)	3.084	.473	2
	Metacognitive strategy (16-27)	2.978	.585	3
	Affective strategy (28-32)	3.226	.721	1
	Social strategy (33-35)	2.797	.665	4
Total mean score of learning strategy		3.021	.497	
motivation	Instrumental motivation (36-45)	3.451	.600	1
	Integrative motivation (46-50)	2.433	.740	3
	Learning situation motivation (51-53)	2.927	.931	2
Total mean score of motivation		2.937	.521	

In Table 2, affective strategy is the most frequently used. The present result is a little out of expectation. By observation, the author thought some cognitive strategies such as repeating, memorizing, taking notes, looking up dictionaries and reference books may be most preferred by students. Affective strategies serve to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes (e.g. strategies for reduction of anxiety and for self-encourage) (Cohen, 2000). The author thinks this can not necessarily illustrate that the subjects use affective strategy appropriately to promote their learning and they are not exactly aware of the conscious behaviors in affective strategies. They do better in adjusting emotions only out of self-comfort and self-encouragement, but they don't give a clear answer as for how to control anxiety in learning activities. In addition, affective strategy is an unobservable mental learning strategy. Learners may not necessarily provide accurate descriptions of it. That is to say they use affective strategy spontaneously or without consciousness. But "consciousness plays a crucial role in cognitive activities" (Schmidt, 1990). Social strategy is the least used in learning strategies. Social strategies are activities affording opportunities for learners to be exposed to and practice their knowledge. They contribute indirectly to learning. They also include knowledge about culture differences. In the current study the use of social strategy is limited by the subjects' classroom learning environment and their strong instrumental motivation. Compared with natural learning environment, social strategies are less used in classroom teaching environment (Wong-Fillmore, 1976, 1979; see Wang, 2001:175). Most students (60%) usually ask to slow down when they have difficulties in understanding in English. But they (72.5%) generally don't like to practice speaking English with others in learning activities. Only a minority of students (19%) are interested in foreign culture.

In motivation part, students' instrumental motivation is the most prominent. The subjects usually think English "is a useful communication tool" (78%) and "helpful for future job" (81%). For them English is usually regarded as "a stepping-stone for success in their life" (71.3%) and mastering English can make them "acquire a sense of achievement" (67%) or as "a symbol of good education and social status"(62.2%). This phenomenon is resulted from the increasing requirement for English in employment market in the present society. They want to promote their individual competitive ability. Because English is widely used in every aspect of people's lives, students are more concerned about English learning although for "direct, practical goal" or for "abstract, psychological investment". The low frequency of integrative motivation is also applicable to a Chinese English learning setting because in China English is a foreign language not a second language and students mainly get contact with English in classroom. Students have limited potential for integrating into the target language community and culture before learning English.

3.2 Correlation between Motivation and Learning Strategy

Table 3. The correlation coefficients of motivation category and learning strategy category

		Cognitive	metacognitive	Affective	Social	n
Instrumental	r	.187*	.158*	.175*	.174*	
motivation	Sig.	.016	.044	.025	.026	164
Integrative	r	.400**	.424**	.470**	.315**	
motivation	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	164
Learning situation motivation	r	.083	.008	-.037	.068	
	Sig.	.293	.916	.640	.385	164

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level, (2-tailed)

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

As shown in Table 3, eight pairs of variables have close correlations with strategy variables except learning situation motivation. The correlation analysis results show that both instrumental motivation and integrative motivation can lead to a variety use of learning strategies. The correlation of integrative motivation and all learning strategies is much stronger than that of instrumental motivation (with $p < .01$ and $p < .05$); Integrative motivation can result in more frequent use of learning strategies. Students with higher integrative motivation have more intrinsic interest in learning activities and they would try to find more positive methods to facilitate their learning and thus promoting more frequent learning strategy use. For example, compared with social strategy, they prefer affective, metacognitive and cognitive strategies such as self-confidence, making plans and replacing and guessing.

Instrumental motivation also has significant correlation with all learning strategy items but weaker than integrative motivation pair. The reason is that students with instrumental motivation have very clear goals of learning English as some instruments to achieve certain goals, which results in more preference for cognitive strategy (Ellis, 2003).

4. Pedagogical Implications

4.1 Take Advantage of Students' Affective Strategy and Integrate Learning Strategies

In this survey, students self-reported the high frequency of affective strategies, which is an advantage for teaching. Affective strategy has no direct relationship with English learning, but it can enhance learning efficiency when used appropriately. Therefore in practical teaching program, teachers should change ideas, be aware of emotion's influence on language learning, help students to approach the task in a positive mind, develop the necessary energy to overcome frustrations, and persist in their efforts. It is essential that teachers convey warmth and empathy towards the learner in order to establish a relationship of trust (Williams and Burden, 2000: 36). Students are asked to combine cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as concentrating or planning, affective and social strategies together so as to reach perfect effect in strategy use. Meanwhile, language teachers should concentrate on integrating language learning strategy training in class and explain the effectiveness of each strategy (Chamot, 1999). Every student has potential to become a successful learner and achieve success when acting wisely in choosing which strategies to integrate.

4.2 Cultivate Learning Interest and Stimulate Students' Learning Motivation

Schools and instructor may build up comfortable learning environment and take advantage of modern learning equipments such as multimedia computer and Internet to make English learning interesting and pleasant. Warm and relax classroom atmosphere can trigger better classroom participation. When students are willing to participate, their learning motivation is raised and would like to apply or experiment with different learning strategies and thus result in better learning outcomes. Instructors are supposed not to ignore learners' instrumental motivations and raise their integrative motivation. Instructors may introduce some culture knowledge, customs and literature works about English speaking countries to stimulate students' interests for foreign culture and foreign people. Because learners with integrative motivation are more active in class and are less likely to drop out (Ellis, 2003).

4.3 Take Advantage of the Effect of Motivation on Learning Strategy and Promote a Comprehensive English Learning

Motivation and learning strategies have both been shown to play a role in FLL. Learning motivation has strong restriction to learning strategies. Generally speaking, learners having strong motivations tend to use various learning strategies consciously and effectively to improve their studies. Through strategy instruction, students will understand good language learning strategies, be aware of what, when, why and how strategies can be used and explore some ways of learning foreign language more effectively. On the other hand, special efforts should be concentrated on helping improve students' motivation to learn English. Language instructors can provide students with more practice and reinforcement of the use of social strategies such as co-operating with peers and teachers. These activities increase learners' motivation and efforts to learn English. Language learners can integrate strategies not only in the classroom contexts but also in everyday life. Using a variety of activities such as looking for opportunities to have conversations with native speakers or peers and encouraging one to ask questions in English can both create interest and effectively help learners to stimulate their motivation. In all, instructor is a facilitator and partner in learning process, whose role is to help students to become more active, more autonomous and more self-directed.

5. Conclusion

Students in this survey adopt learning strategies at medium level and their motivation is not very strong. Motivations affect the choice and use of learning strategies in the current survey, or learners' preference for certain types of learning strategy is partially determined by their learning motivations. However, there are many factors affecting language learning strategy choice such as internal factors, external factors and factors affecting motivation such as learning task, teacher, interest and anxiety, etc. and this is worthy of further research. The samples are all from one department in this local university, not extensive enough and the pedagogical implications are drawn only from the importance of learning strategy and learning motivation. As for the concrete strategy use, it can be conducted through providing students with strategy training and for learning motivation research, it can be done by expanding research perspective(Qin&Wen,2002) such as combining sociapsychology, physiology, behavioral science and cognitive together.

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APPENDIX: Questionnaire on motivation and choice of learning strategy

Direction

This form of the QUESTIONNAIRE ON MOTIVATION AND STRATEGIES is for students of English as a second or foreign language. You will find statements about learning English. Please read each statement. On the separate Worksheet, write the response (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) that tells How True of you the statement is.

1=Never or almost never true of me

2=Usually not true of me

3=Sometimes true of me

4=Usually true of me

5= Always or almost always true of me

Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Put your answers on the separate answer sheet.

Remember, answer 1,2,3,4,or 5(as described above).

Part A Cognitive Strategies

1. I repeat English words, phrases and texts to remember them.

2. I concentrate on lectures in class.

3. I think actively in my study.

4. I'm good at taking down important information in my study.

5. I understand information using visual images.

6. I review English lessons and make summaries

7. I try to find patterns in English.

8. If necessary, I look for words or grammar rules in my own language that are similar to new words or rules in English.

9. I often watch TV shows or go to the Internet to learn English.

10. I often use dictionaries and reference books to help my English study.

11. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

12. I like listening to English audio tapes and lectures.

13. I think of relationships between what I already known and new things I learnt in English.

14. I often use deduction and induction to analyze and solve problems.

15. I guess meaning of new words through context and situation while reading and listening to English materials.

Part B Metacognitive Strategies

16. I have clear goals of learning English.

17. Apart from homework assigned by teacher, I have my own plans for English study.

18. I think about my progress, shortages in learning English.

19. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.

20. I often exchange feelings and experience with my teacher and classmates in learning English.

21. I actively participate in in-and- out-class activities in learning English

22. I choose materials suitable to my English level.

23. I try to take advantage the opportunities to learn English as much as possible.

24. I ask for help once I have difficulties in learning English.

25. I often evaluate my learning effect and summarize my learning methods.

26. I preview the main ideas and concepts of the material to be learned, often by skimming the text.

27. I choose different methods according to different learning tasks.

Part C Affective strategy

28. I try to foster my interest in English study.

29. I have confidence in myself in learning English.

30. I encourage myself to open mouth more often although my oral English is poor.

31. I try to adjust my emotions in English study.

32. l talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.

Part D Social Strategy

33. I communicate actively with my classmates or roommates in English in learning activities.

34. If I can't understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.

35. I learn English with the help of English culture background.

Part E Instrumental Motivation

36. I learn English because of my parents or school's requirements.

37. I study English hard because I have to pass some exams in enrollment or employment.

38. I learn English mainly for certificate.

39. English is very important, because it is a very useful communication tool in the present society.

40. Learning English well can satisfy me with a sense of achievement.

41. Learning English well maybe helpful in finding a good job in future.

42. English is a stepping-stone to success in my life.

43. Speaking fluent English is a symbol of good education and social status.

44 I learn English in order to communicate smoothly with native English speakers

45. I learn English in order to know about economic and technological situations all over the world.

Part F Integrative Motivation

46. I like English because I have intrinsic interest in this language.

47. I like English because I want to know more about the language and culture in English speaking countries.

48. I learn English because I want to make opportunity for going abroad in future.

49. I learn English because it is convenient for me to work abroad in future.

50. I learn English because I want to go abroad to experience English culture.

Part G Learning Situation Motivation

51. At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on my English teacher.

52. At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on English class quality.

53. At college, my enthusiasm for English depends on English textbook.