

ENGLISH LEARNERS AT VOCATIONAL COLLEGES IN CHINA: IMPROVING THEIR
MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING ENGLISH

Approved: James Flomby Date: May 21st, 2018
Paper Advisor

Suggested content descriptor keywords:

Motivation for English Learning, Career English, Foreign Language Anxiety

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By

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2018-04-30

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. James Romesburg for his support, careful advice and guidance about this paper. He has helped with the paper structure and the grammar of the sentences. And he also taught how to carry out this study with the topic. At the same time, great thanks to the writing center for helping the students in China with the grammar mistakes of the paper.

ABSTRACT

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Under the Supervision of Dr. James Romesburg

English learning is a complex process which is relevant to many factors such as linguistics, psychology, sociology etc. Recently, following the development of psychological linguistics, the form of English teaching has changed from “teacher-centered” to “student-centered.” Therefore the question of how to improve the motivation of students for English learning has become more and more important. Vocational colleges pay more and more attention to students' practical English skills, and improving vocational college students' English learning motivation is more important than before.

There is no doubt that motivation is one of the most important factors in the field of Second Language Acquisition. Generally speaking, a learner who has proper motivation may be called a willing learner. A willing learner is self-motivated, thriving on challenge and change, and tends to take responsibility for his learning and career development. The more he wants to learn, the easier and more sustainable the learning becomes and the greater his contribution will be now and in the future. Motivation, as one of the important learning factors, has gained researchers' attention. Studies indicate that motivation has a substantial positive effect on learning English. Thus it is important to clarify the question of, what the definition of motivation is and how to stimulate and maintain students' motivation in English learning?

This paper aims to investigate the motivation of Chinese vocational college students. Library research are adopted to analyze college students' learning motivation and their motivating degree. The author also lists some advices for the college English teachers to improve their teaching methods and protect the students' learning motivation.

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Chapter I. INTRODUCTION

Advanced vocational education is a kind of advanced education. It plays an important role in China's higher education. The purpose of advanced education is to provide educational opportunities for more students on different levels, especially for those who do not have chance to go to four- year universities. Most of the students are from technical schools, professional high schools and vocational middle schools. The students from those schools are different from the students of ordinary middle schools because of their different learning strategies, the learning environment and the purpose of learning.

English in advanced vocational education are different from the ordinary students in many aspects. Many of them have not gone to regular high schools. Although they studied English in middle schools, they paid little attention to English learning mainly due to two reasons. One of the reasons is that the aim of those schools is not to improving the students' practical skills. They do not place as much emphasis on the English course as other practical courses. Another reason lies in students themselves. Most of the time during the three years in these schools, they studied English only to pass the final examination of each term.

Because of their lower English proficiency , they have a harder time adapting to the college English teaching methods. Some students have much difficulty in learning English, especially in communicating with others. The fear of making mistakes or performing poorly may cause low self-esteem. And then the students may lose interests of learning English. What a college English teacher has to do is to motivate college students according to the certain college teaching and learning context.

Many college English teachers get headaches about the students for lacking of learning motivations. Just as the old saying goes : "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." In language learning , there are three important factors: motivation, personality and aptitude. It is impossible for English teachers to improve learners' personality and aptitude in nature. Therefore, how to stimulate the learners' motivation of learning is the most important factor in successful language learning and teaching.

This research will analyze how to improve vocational school students' motivation to learn English from three aspects:

Aspect 1: Vocational college students are suffering more foreign language anxiety in their English learning. Based on this situation , I will pose some pedagogical implication from the perspective of how to create a delightful class atmosphere so as to reduce students' foreign language learning anxiety. It may help students get rid of their language anxiety that harries them in their language learning so that satisfying and efficient language learning can be achieved.

Aspect 2: As we all know, traditional education focuses on the development of students' cognitive capability and pays little attention to their interest in learning. But recently, more and more educators have begun to emphasize students' learning interest, for a positive attitude can promote English learning while a negative attitude may cause affective obstacles and thus blocks English learning. In most situations, the computer is not taken as a typical language learning tool in students' daily life. It is known that most students' English basis is relatively weak in vocational colleges; meanwhile, the way in which they learned English during the middle school period was basically examination-oriented. Thus they have little or even no interest in English

learning at all. In this way, discovering a new and interesting way with the aid of computers to learn English is of essential importance. Based on this, I will research computer-assisted English learning. It is hoped that vocational college English teaching and learning can become more efficient by means of computer technology, and finally students' English learning motivation and English competence can be enhanced to a great extent.

Aspect 3: Group work or pair work has become increasingly popular in language teaching because they are seen to have many advantages. Group work is a cooperative activity: five students, perhaps, discussing a topic, doing a role-play or solving a problem. In groups, students tend to participate more actively and equally, and they are also able to experiment and use the language when they are in a whole-class arrangement. Pair work has many of the same advantages. Both group work and pair work give the students more chances of independent learning. Therefore, in English teaching, we should adopt group work or pair work method to cultivate students' autonomous study abilities.

Statement of the Problem

In the 1970s in China, the focus in language teaching began to shift from studying how to teach to studying how to learn. Some researchers turned their attention to the motivation of learners. And the study of motivation has become increasingly popular since the 1980s and 1990s. Gradually more and more people have come to realize that the motivational component contributes more to language learning than cognitive skills. Motivation, as the core and nature of second language learning, has turned to be an essential issue in second language learning. Motivation has been a pivotal concept in the study of second language learning (Klimova, 2011)

[1]. So the research question is “How can teachers improve vocational college students' motivation for learning English?” In this study, I want to find some effective teaching and learning strategies to improve vocational college students' learning motivation so as to improve their practical English skills .And I hope that these findings will help foreign language teachers understand the effects of language motivation on foreign language teaching better, which hopefully can enable them to help students learn foreign languages more efficiently.

Definition of Terms

1. Motivation

Motivation explains why people are determined to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it and how long they are willing to sustain the activity. The current emphasis in motivational psychology is characterized by another theoretical orientation, the cognitive approach, which focused on how the individual's attitudes, thoughts, beliefs and thinking pattern influence their behaviors, that is, how mental processes are transformed into action.

Harmer (2007:98) said, “Motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something.” Learners with strong learning motivation approach school tasks more eagerly and work more diligently on school assignments, while others avoid schoolwork or work half-heartedly. Oliva and Pawlas (2002) state that the first and primary meaning of motivation as related to the process of learning is the disposition or desire of the learner to learn.

2. Career English

Career English refers to English not used for the purpose of academic need, but for the career or work. For college students, it means using skilled English in the future workplace, such as project English and business English, which is different from Specialized English (English for Specific Purposes, such as business English, science and technology English, tourism English, etc.) and General English (including listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary and spelling and other basic skills to prepare for entering the professional field).

3. Foreign Language Anxiety

According to Gardner (1994), language anxiety refers to anxiety, apprehension or fear occurring in the process of foreign or second language learning. Language anxiety is directly linked to performance that language learners use the target language to listen, speak, read and write. The language learners tend to feel nervous and worried when they find that their limited language ability cannot “accurately and effectively express what they mean”; thus “language anxiety is described as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to using a foreign or second language for communication beyond the language classroom.”

4. Self-concept

Self-concept is the image a person has of himself. It contains the perception of the comparison between oneself and others, and “of how other people view himself and of what kind of person himself wants to be.”

Purpose of the Study

This paper focuses on the vocational college students' experiences in English learning, classroom activities, and attitudes to their English learning and achievements. It aims to find out how the students make use of their positive personal factors to improve their English achievement, thus giving some enlightenment to both vocational college teachers and students.

Significance of the Study

English learning is a pretty complicated and difficult process, and it is affected not only by English linguistic characteristics but also by some emotional variables, such as attitude, motivation, mood and anxiety. According to Chinese scholar Huang, X (2008) and foreign scholar Rogers (1969) 's related investigation, the teacher ought to create an unconstrained atmosphere where both the students and the teachers can relax themselves and then effective learning and teaching can be achieved.

Higher vocational college students are suffering more foreign language anxiety than the ordinary university students in their English learning. Based on this situation, I have researched on some pedagogical implication from the perspectives of how to create delightful class atmosphere and improve students' language motivation. It will help students learn a foreign language more effeciently .

Nowadays, with the change of college learning environment, the role of college English teachers has to be changed accordingly from forever being a knowledge-giver to being a motivation provider who can inspire the English learners' interest in English learning. Motivation has important implications for learning. As College English teachers, knowing how to promote

the motivation of learners will push learners to engage actively and productively in learning activities.

Methodology

This project will be conducted through library research. This paper will search relevant journals from JSTOR and other academic websites. Target articles will include information about instructional methods, strategies and activities to promote active learning of the English language, thus answering the research questions.

Chapter II. Review of Literature

In this chapter, I will discuss about the three sections from searching the research articles: First, the higher vocational English teaching still existed some problems: the disadvantages of traditional teaching & language anxiety in foreign language learning. Secondly, discussion on the significance of improving students' English learning motivation. Thirdly, several ways to improve vocational college students' English learning motivation are discussed. And in this chapter, I will introduce some materials or strategies to be used to improve motivation of Language learners so as to learning English effectively.

Problems in English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges in China

For quite a long time, English teaching or learning in China has always had lots of problems due to the examination-oriented education. Although most of Chinese students have been learning English since they were very young, the learning motivation of most students can still be considered as instrumental, meeting the requirements for school or university graduation. Hua (1998) put forward that 80% of Chinese English learners have “Certification motivation”. The lack of integrative motivation is likely to become a problem only when learning was imposed on the learner, for it may kill their natural interest of learning and using a foreign language gradually. That is to say, the aim of teaching and learning English seems merely to pass various examinations and get certifications. In this sense, the students tend to be more interested in acquiring knowledge about language than in practicing the language in use.

Zhang (2006) pointed out that there are many causes of language anxiety. However, students' anxiety is mostly related to negative experiences and surrounding attitudes to them,

such as students' low English proficiency, their fear of mistakes and derision, unscientific learning methods, a tense classroom atmosphere, and so on.

And the study of affect has become increasingly popular since the 1980s and 1990s. Gradually more and more have come to realize that "the affective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than cognitive skills" (Stern, 1983). Among various affective factors, language anxiety has been concerned by many researchers and teachers because it has great influence on language performance.

Researchers have come to agreement on the effect of language anxiety in language learning. For example, Oxford (2000) pointed explicitly that language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal. Moreover, she stated that the causes of anxiety in language learning include achievement on language courses, oral and writing tasks, self-confidence and self-esteem, etc.

The significance of improving students' motivation in English learning.

Ellis (2003) points out that people have different language aptitude which they are endowed with as a natural ability for learning L2. In terms of the importance extent, they can be ranked in the following order: motivation, personality, aptitude. If a language learner lacks the motivation to learn, s/he will never be successful in language learning, and their personality and aptitude will not play any role actively in their language learning.

He also said language aptitude is a natural ability for learning L2. It does not matter whether language aptitude truly exists or not. College English learners have to grasp the language even if they lack the aptitude for language learning. More often than not, it is impossible to know

whether a person has the aptitude or not. What college English teachers should always do is to believe that students can learn language well if they work hard on it.

Zoltan (2005) fully acknowledges the significance of motivation to successful language learning: my personal experience is that 99 percent of language learners who really want to learn a foreign language will be able to master a reasonable working knowledge of it as minimum, regardless of their language aptitude. As many researchers claim, culture/context has its own achievement-relevant beliefs, goals and values and this meaning system tends to influence learners' learning motivation to a great degree. However, "in classroom contexts, in particular, it is rare to find dramatic motivational events that is like a lightening or a revelation to help reshape the students' mindsets from one moment to another." (Zoltan Dornyei, 2005: 25) Therefore, college students need English teachers to be wonderful motivation-promoters more than knowledge-givers. What a college English teacher has to do is to motivate college students according to the certain college teaching and learning context.

Cook (1994) considers that motivation includes the attitudes and affective states which affect the extent of effort that learners make to learn an L2. According to Cook, "nevertheless students will find it difficult to learn a second language in the classroom if they have neither instrumental nor integrative motivation, as is probably often the case in school language teaching. Therefore, motivation is a more important factor than personality and aptitude for successful language learning.

How to improve the vocational students' motivation in English learning?

Huang (2008) points out that interests in learning English and a harmonious relationship between teachers and students are the fundamental premises of protection of learning efficiency. An investigation from China Education Sciences also shows that a disharmonious relationship between teachers and students is the main factor which brings pressure for students. Some students don't have positive attitude to English learning and their anxiety level and self-esteem will be impacted which leads to the result that they are too inhibited to attend classroom interactions. What's more, among the six affective factors, except risk-taking, the others all have relatively significant correlation with English learning. As a result, English teachers should pay more attention to the students' emotions. Teachers strive to cultivate students' positive emotions to ensure the all-round development of students.

As Rogers (1969) once stated, creating a lively and friendly classroom atmosphere means offering students a scene or environment for free learning. Under the healthy, lively classroom atmosphere, the classroom activities meet the students' desire for knowledge as well as their psychological characteristics. The teacher and his students have a harmonious relationship and happy emotions. Under a defensive classroom atmosphere, students feel anxious, bored, tense or depressed. Their need for knowledge and mental care can't be satisfied. English learning is an activity which related closely with affect and the study of college English is of much difficulty, so students are supposed to have enough confidence and a strong will. As a result, teachers should pay attention to students' psychological characteristics and affective experience so as to build harmonious relationship with students.

Harmer (2000) pointed out promoting group work and pair work is a good way to arouse students' interests of learning English, develop their self-esteem, as well as remove some anxiety in English learning process. The successful results of English Learning through group work can build in greater confidence and self-esteem on the whole which will increase students' effort and willingness in English learning. The other great advantage of group work and pair work is that they offer the teacher opportunity to work with individual students.

As Rogers(1959) described, the concept of oneself involves two parts: the real self and the ideal self , or we can say, the objective one being perceived-Me and the subjective one who perceives the self-I. If there is an unhealthy self -concept, people will suffer anxiety, confusion, unhappiness or other affective pains. Positive self-concepts can promote English learning and high scores will gain teachers' praise and classmates' admiration, which,as a result, will bring more positive self-concepts. Negative self-concepts hamper the progress of English learning, and low scores in English will bring more negative self-concepts. Thus, building a healthy self-concept is important and necessary for students.

Shu (2004) points out that, according to the statistics of a random sampling survey, more than 70% teachers admitted that their teaching method was basically grammar- translation. Under this circumstance, English teachers often gave lectures by reading the textbook in the classroom and students had to passively learn the knowledge. Therefore, a new teaching and learning mode should be put forward to meet the higher need of English teachers and learners and improve the learners' interest in English learning. The multimedia teaching is able to demonstrate the contents of sound and video files intuitively. By finding some videos and

pictures related to the teaching content, the teacher can make a gradually in-depth fragment of knowledge according to the characteristics of teaching content, and then play it out in teaching. A random survey of students showed that more than 85% of students prefer multimedia teaching to traditional teaching. As a consequence, this approach could enhance students' motivation to learn English.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Through extensive access to information and literature, the author makes a more systematic understanding of how to improve vocational college students' motivation for English learning. I found that teachers' teaching methods have great influence on students' learning motivation and the relationship between the teacher and the students will also affect students' learning motivation. A good relationship may help students to accept the teacher. There are a lot of strategies that former educators found and practiced. Based on the study of the scholars such as Huang (2008), Rogers (1959) (1969), Harmer (2000) and Shu (2004), the paper mainly discusses the following three strategies:

1. Establishing an emotional connection between teachers and students

Scholar Huang and Rogers believe that students' learning efficiency is in proportion to a harmonious relationship between teachers and students. I agree with them. However, in practical teaching experience it can be found that building trust in a classroom is a slow process. For my students, I must be respond honestly and dependably in many small incidents so that they can slowly trust me fully. Developing a personal relationship with the students and achieving their respect is easier said than done. It is a gradual process built on a foundation includes the teacher's acceptance of the students and the ability to listen and pay attention to them. One of my students, Lucy, told me that her former English teacher was very mean and all of her classmates hated him, which led to the result that they don't like learning English at all. But now they are beginning to like English because of my understanding and patience with them. I was very much touched by Lucy's word, and I think a good teacher-student relationship is very useful for

improving students' motivation in English learning. Generally speaking, if teacher show commitment towards the students learning and progress, there is a very good chance that they will do the same thing. It is important that everybody in the classroom should be aware that you care about them and their learning progress, that you are not there just for the salary, that it is important for you that your students succeed, that you are ready to work just as hard as the students towards this success. A good relationship between teacher and students needs efforts from both parties.

2. Using multimedia teaching and make the teaching materials relevant for the students

I agree with Shu (2004) that the application of computer multimedia technology in English teaching can enhance the students' interest in learning. I think if applying computer multimedia technology to English teaching in vocational college, we can not only improve students' interest in learning, but also help to create a good environment of English speaking and listening. For example, in my class, according to the actual situation of the students, I always search some foreign pictures, and then use the beautiful pictures with English introduction aside to show them out. Then students would be of great interest to watch the beautiful pictures. So they will listen to the introduction in English a lot more carefully. Sometimes I merge the actual teaching content such as words and grammar in the lesson into presentation, which will improve students' interest in learning and completing the task at the same time. Based on my teaching experience, multimedia teaching is proved to be very effective for students. However, affected by the factors such as funds, teaching methods and course content, the current English multimedia teaching in

our country is not effective enough. I hope this teaching method can be popularized in vocational English teaching in the near future.³ Promoting cooperation among the students

Group work and pair work between students has already been discussed by scholar Harmer. If students are allowed to cooperate with each other towards a certain goal, their expectancy of success is likely to be higher than if they are to work individually. Because they know that they can also count on their peers. They can help each other to succeed.

Furthermore, my research revealed too little information on how teachers apply the relevant teaching methods to the actual English classroom. For future research, maybe the educators can pay more attention to do some primary research, collect the application of comparative data in practical teaching methods, and discover some new things that really helpful for vocational educators.

Above all, motivation for learning English has become one of the most important non-intelligence factors affecting the achievement of English learning. The vocational students learn knowledge very quickly while at the same time, they are easily affected by others. So our English teaching has to meet the need of students, cultivate active learning attitude of students, unceasingly improve the teaching method in order to arouse, maintain and protect the students' learning motivation. In a word, as English teachers of higher vocational colleges, we should continue to renew our teaching philosophy and explore good ways actively in order to improve teaching quality of public English.

Through extensive access to information and literature, the author makes a more systematic understanding of that how to improve the vocational students' motivation in English learning.

There are a lot of strategies that former educators have found and practiced. If the teachers set up a class or homework with reasonable logic under the help of these strategies, the students will be motivated to learn English with more interest and their learning process will be more efficient. In addition, teachers and researchers should keep summing up teaching experience and practices and exploring new effective measures to put them into practice.

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