

Learning Motivation of English Based on Sociocultural Theory: A Study of Chinese College Students in English Majors

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Abstract: Sociocultural theory emphasizes the use of sociocultural contexts and cultural artifacts to regulate interpersonal relationships and facilitate thinking and language acquisition. Based on this theory, research on foreign language learning has shown that learning a foreign language is not a personal effort invested blindly, but rather is realized and internalized through language as a cognitive tool with the help of other supports. Learning motivation is an important factor that directly affects the learning behavior and effect of college students, and it is the internal motivation and need that drives students to learn. To understand the current situation of learning motivation of Chinese English majors under the sociocultural theory, this study adopts a questionnaire to investigate the learning motivation status of 150 students majoring in English in a comprehensive undergraduate university. Based on the problems found, this study makes suggestions to both students and teachers to stimulate students' learning motivation.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, learning motivation, English majors

1. Introduction

The sociocultural theory originated from Vygotsky (1896-1934), a famous psychologist in the Soviet Union in the early 20th century, which was put forward by Vygotskian scholars and emphasized the central role of sociocultural factors in cognitive development. Vygotsky divided individual mental functions into low-level and high-level mental functions, and based on this, he put forward the core concepts of mediation, internalization, and zone of proximal development (ZPD), emphasizing the importance of the social and cultural environment to individual learning and development, which is also closely related to learning motivation [1].

This study aims to investigate the current situation of learning motivation of English major college students based on sociocultural theory, and propose strategies to stimulate students' learning motivation and help them establish, consolidate and maintain correct learning motivation. By empirically studying the learning motivation of English majors, it provides a theoretical reference for the cultivation of learning motivation based on sociocultural theory. Meanwhile, it contributes to the field of education by offering more extensive research content and methodological approaches, thus facilitating the development of educational psychology and learning motivation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory was initially created to study children's psychological development, emphasizing the significance of sociocultural factors in cognitive development and knowledge construction. It asserts that thinking and cognition are inextricably linked to social culture and that cognitive activities derive from social activities. Regarding the process of knowledge transfer, the essential property of knowledge is social nature [2]. The theory asserts that an individual's cognitive and psychological development occurs through the influence of social interactions and cultural traditions. Vygotsky argued that human cognitive processes and psychological development take place in a social environment and are not solely determined by factors within the individual. He emphasized the role of interpersonal cooperation, communication, and sociocultural activities in shaping the cognitive and psychological abilities of individuals. The sociocultural theory helps to understand the dynamic interaction between motivation, cognition, emotion, and environment and provides a unique advantage for the in-depth study of the origin and development of motivation, as well as a fresh perspective for motivation research [3].

2.2. Studies on Learning Motivation

The theoretical foundation of foreign learning motivation is relatively rich, from the 1950s to the 1980s, Gardner and Lambert first began to conduct systematic research on foreign language learning motivation. Biggs & Moore (1987) classified learning motivation into superficial motivation, deep motivation, and achievement motivation. Superficial motivation refers to students' motivation to meet examination requirements, while deep motivation is driven by the desire to acquire knowledge of interest. Achievement motivation refers to the motivation to acquire external rewards and recognition [4]. Furthermore, Bernard (1996) provided further elaborated on two related theories of motivation in his article "Intra- and Interpersonal Theories of Motivation from Attributions". One is the intra-individual theory, which includes self-directed intentions and self-directed affective factors. The other is an interpersonal theory, which includes others' beliefs about responsibility and their emotional factors like anger and empathy. Gardner (2006) found that students' learning motivation in the classroom is influenced by the teacher, classroom climate, course content, materials, instructional facilities, and individual students' personality traits [5].

China's research on learning motivation started later than that of Western countries, probably in the 1980s. Educational psychologists generally believe that learning is a purposeful activity caused by motivation, which serves as the starting point and motive of learning. Wen (1996) categorized English learning motivation into deep motivation and surface motivation from a behaviorist psychology perspective. Deep motivation refers to learners learning to satisfy spiritual needs, while superficial motivation refers to learners' drive to satisfy shallower levels of spiritual pursuits and to fulfill certain material needs [6]. Liu (2005) and others showed that college students' overall level of learning motivation ranked as follows: materialistic pursuit, knowledge-seeking, small-group orientation, social orientation, fear of failure, and personal achievement. This reflects that contemporary college students' pursuit of personal interests and the desire for personal development and success play in their learning [7]. Chang (2021) used directed motivational flow as a theoretical framework to examine the multidimensional dynamics of English learning motivation of Chinese college students over two semesters and found that English learning motivation in that perspective is a complex system [8].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Question

The fundamental purpose of this study is to find out the current status of college students' learning motivation based on sociocultural theory and to analyze the factors affecting the development of students' learning motivation. In addition, some reasonable suggestions will be made as a way to stimulate college students' learning motivation. Therefore, the following two research questions shall be investigated.

(1) What is the current status of learning motivation of Chinese college students majors in English based on sociocultural theory? What are the problems?

(2) In response to these problems, how can students' learning motivation be stimulated?

3.2. Research Subject

This study was conducted in a comprehensive undergraduate university for 150 junior students of the college who participated in this survey. In the student questionnaire survey, 150 questionnaires were distributed, 149 questionnaires were recovered, and 3 invalid questionnaires were removed, leaving 146 valid questionnaires, with an effective rate of 97.3%.

3.3. Research Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire was utilized to collect data from the participants, and a five-point Likert scale was employed, with response options ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree", with scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The higher the score of a certain learning motivation, the stronger the motivation; on the contrary, the lower the score, the weaker the motivation. The questionnaire is mainly based on the questionnaire on the types of English motivation of college students compiled by Gao Yihong, Zhao Yuan, Cheng Ying, and Zhou Yan [9], which was adapted by the author with the relevant knowledge of sociocultural theory. Thus, the questionnaire investigated the current situation of Chinese English majors' learning motivation based on sociocultural theory mainly from five dimensions: intrinsic interest, immediate achievement, learning situation, social responsibility, and individual development.

4. Result and discussion

It is crucial to understand the current status of English majors' learning motivation through questionnaires. The options on this part of the question are: A=totally agree; B=relatively agree; C=neutral; D=relatively disagree; E=totally disagree.

Table 1: Learning Motivation.

Questions	Average
Intrinsic Interest	3.66
Immediate Achievement	3.45
Learning Situation	3.32
Social Responsibility	3.60
Individual Development	3.76

4.1. Intrinsic Interest

Table 1 shows that the second-highest mean score is intrinsic interest. More than 60% of students chose “relatively agree” and “neutral” in the first three questions and the fifth question, which indicates that they have an intuitive attraction to English or feel a sense of connection with English. This emotional connection may come from students’ own personal experiences, feelings, or intrinsic interests. Students want to learn English to better understand and experience foreign cultures and want to better understand their ways of thinking and cultural backgrounds. There are also indications that English majors are interested in the structure of the language, grammatical rules, vocabulary, and other aspects. About 40% of the college students responded to the question “My love for English songs/movies has made me very interested in English.” The choice of “totally agree” for this question suggests that students may be interested in foreign history, art, literature, music, movies, etc., and be attracted by the unique charm of foreign cultures.

4.2. Immediate Achievement

Table 1 shows that the fourth-highest mean score is immediate achievement. Most of the students learn English in preparation for their university entrance exams. They hoped to increase their chances of being admitted to their desired universities by improving their English scores. Nearly three-fourths of the college students pursued excellence in English learning, which reflects the importance they attached to their immediate achievement and their positive attitude towards English learning. According to comparing the data of questions 8 and 9, it can be found that college students’ motivation to learn English will decrease after entering college depending on their immediate achievement. And 37.67% of the English majors feel that an important purpose of learning English is to get a graduation certificate symbolizes their immediate achievement.

4.3. Learning Situation

Table 1 shows that the fifth-highest mean score is learning situation. Comparing questions 11 and 12, it can be seen that more than half of the student’s motivation for learning English stems more from intrinsic personal factors than from the influence of whether or not they like their English teacher. 32.88% of the students chose “relatively agree” for the influence of the quality of English classes, while 31.51% chose “neutral” for the influence of teaching materials, which shows that English majors are more concerned about the quality of English classes. This shows that English majors pay more attention to the teaching effect of English classes and the professional level of teachers, but they think that textbooks have some limitations in learning motivation, and sometimes they can’t fully meet their needs. Nearly 50% of the students enjoy participating in English-related activities and find them highly beneficial. This underscores the importance of the learning environment as a significant factor influencing students’ learning motivation.

4.4. Social Responsibility

Table 1 shows that the third-highest mean score is social responsibility. For the question “I learn English because of the school rules and regulations”, 30.82% of the students chose “neutral” and 26.71% chose “relatively disagree”. Compared with secondary school, the university is less binding on students’ learning. A large proportion of students learn English well to fulfill their parent’s expectations, and many students feel a great responsibility in the face of their parent’s expectations, which may reduce their learning motivation. Regarding the three questions 18, 19, and 20, it can be seen that learning English well is an optimistic manifestation of contemporary Chinese college

students. They hope to contribute to the promotion of social progress and cross-cultural communication through the study and application of English.

4.5. Individual Development

Table 1 shows that the first-highest mean score is individual development. More than 70% of college students consider learning English to be important, which reflects their understanding and awareness of today's society. 65.07% of the college students agree that learning English well can bring them a sense of achievement, which shows that individual development has a significant influence on the learning motivation of English majors. 34.93% of the college students think that learning English well can lead them to find a good job, and 33.56% of the college students view English as an important brick to knock on doors, which reflects their deep understanding of and urgent need for competition in today's workplace. Consequently, college students are actively learning and improving their English skills to realize their personal career goals and expand their global horizons. For question 25, 34.25% of the students chose "relatively agree" and 29.45% chose "neutral", demonstrating that contemporary college students prioritize their personal growth and development. They recognize the significance of acquiring an international language and exhibit commendable personal progress.

According to the data of the questionnaire, the average intrinsic interest score of English majors is 3.66. Most of the students are interested in English learning and willing to take the initiative to learn, but there are a few students who lack intrinsic interest. This may lead to their lack of motivation and enthusiasm in the learning process, thus affecting the learning effect. The mean score of 3.45 for immediate achievement indicates that some students may lose motivation, and feel frustrated and depressed due to their poor performance, which in turn leads to learning anxiety, resulting in their lack of interest and motivation. Learning anxiety would further weaken students' interest and motivation and make them resistant to learning. The average score of 3.32 in the learning situation indicates that there is still room for improvement in the practical application and contextual adaptation. Some students were tired of learning because of the deficiencies in teaching content, teaching methods and teaching quality, thus weakening their learning motivation. The average score of 3.6 in the area of social responsibility indicates that students have made some achievements in paying attention to social issues and possessing an awareness of social responsibility. However, some students may not realize the important role of English majors in international communication, cultural dissemination and cross-cultural understanding, and lack the corresponding training opportunities. The average score of 3.76 in the area of individual development indicates that students have achieved relatively good results in actively developing their personal abilities, focusing on self-growth, and planning for their professional future. Considering the different levels of students, there is still a need to provide individualized support and opportunities for their holistic development.

5. Conclusion

For students, the author gives the following suggestions. First, recognize the importance of learning and its relevance to personal goals. View learning as an opportunity to grow and realize your dreams, and gain a deeper understanding of the practical application and significance of the subject. Stimulate curiosity and increase learning motivation. Second, develop self-confidence and positive evaluation. Believe that you can succeed, recognize your potential by reviewing past achievements, and seek support and encouragement from others. Finally, find points of interest and practical applications. Choose learning styles and resources that suit you, share your learning experiences with others, develop enthusiasm and curiosity, and stimulate learning motivation.

For teachers, the author gives the following suggestions. First, clear learning goals and expectations. Teachers should help students set specific, feasible, and challenging goals, and give timely feedback and rewards. Second, create a favorable learning environment. Teachers should emphasize students' strengths and progress, encourage students to actively participate in classroom discussions and group projects, and promote positive interaction and cooperation. Finally, diversify learning styles. Teachers use diverse teaching methods and resources to meet the learning needs of different students, and stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm for learning through rich teaching activities and interactions.

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