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CULTURAL FACTORS MOTIVATING CHINESE ESL STUDENTS

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Cultural factors motivating Chinese ESL students

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate why students of English as a second language have different kinds of motivation. In particular, I would like to explore whether the nationality of the students has something to do with motivational differences.

Motivation is very widely studied in the field of psychology and education. Ample research has examined how motivation influences students' achievement especially in the field of foreign language education. Many researchers are now trying to apply the results of research on motivation to methodology. However, motivation is a very complex concept influenced by various factors, such as personality, gender, age, geography, and social expectations. For example, some research found a positive influence under certain conditions while others indicated a negative result even though the methodology was the same. Sometimes people respond to rewards more and other times they respond to personal interest. Sometimes females show higher positive attitude towards learning languages but in other cases age determines participants' motivation. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the home culture of the learners also has an effect on motivation and this is what the present paper attempts to explore.

The incentive why I want to carry out this research is my personal experience. I have found that in a micro-teaching situation, where the students are all TAs who need to learn teaching methodology, learners are highly motivated and highly successful, whereas in a regular classroom, success may lag behind and the question is why. It seems to me that the reason is the different degrees of motivation. If so, this shows that motivation is an important factor for success in learning.

Previous research

Before I report on my own results, let us see what the literature has to say about the topic. I'd like to review the existing literature on two basic points: types of motivation and the relationship between motivation and the cultural background of the students.

Starting with the first point, Gardner's work (1988, 2003, 2004, 2006) is crucial because he emphasized the difference between integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is described as disposition of participation and openness in the social group which uses the target language. Instrumental motivation is based on the rewards or other benefits of studying languages.

However, Mori (2005) suggested a four-way typology of motivation: attainment, intrinsic, extrinsic, and cost. Two of them corresponds the Gardner's categories. Intrinsic motivation is similar to Gardner's integrative factor and extrinsic motivation is like Gardner's instrumental factor. Attainment is how an individual perceives the importance of success and cost is defined as negative consequences such as effort and anxiety.

The second issue has to do with the relationship between the types of motivation and the nationality of the students. Gardner found that European students were integratively motivated. However, researchers studying Asian students came up with different results: learners' achievement was more instrumentally motivated than integratively (Chen, Warden, Chang, 2005; Lamb, 2007; Daguo, 2006; Ghenghesh, 2010; Sultan & Hussain, 2010). Daguo (2006) suggested that it was instrumental motivation that prompted Asian students initially and it was only later that integrative motivation emerged.

In their study, Chen et al. (2005) distinguished between individualist and collectivist cultures and stated that "Hong Kong respondents (Chinese culture) showed higher collectivism than respondents from all other nationalities measured, including the United States, Australia, The Netherlands, Germany, Japan, Greece, and Korea" (p.613). In terms of goals, individualist culture focuses on self-realization while collectivist culture emphasizes social expectation. Further, Chen et al. mentioned the term "required

motivation” introduced by Warden and Lin (2000). They proposed that the initial factor was required motivation - that is to say, social expectations - and instrumental motivation came later. In the Chinese cultural setting where “social expectations emphasizing standardized requirements and de-emphasizing the individual” (p.612), required motivation seems to act stronger than either instrumental or integrative motivation.

It is the work of Chen et al. that the present paper takes off from. Their work suggests a relationship between the type of motivation and nationality and this is the issue I’d like to investigate.

Research question and hypothesis

Given that there are many factors influencing motivation and the same motivating factors act differently according to cultural setting, the following question arises. What is the balance of integrative and instrumental motivation under different social conditions, in particular in collectivist versus individualist cultures? This research will investigate the question with the respect to the ESL students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

My hypothesis is that there is a correlation between individualist culture and integrative motivation on the one hand and collectivist culture and instrumental motivation on the other hand. Precise definitions of individualist and collectivist culture are beyond the scope of this paper. I will simply take the results from the Chinese students as representatives of collectivist culture. If my hypothesis is correct, then scores for instrumental motivation should be higher for the Chinese students than for the others. If the scores of the Chinese participants on instrumental motivation are equal or lower than those of the other participants, that would refute the hypothesis.

Procedure

The survey was conducted in the Spring of 2013 among the students of the ESL program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The survey questions, taken from Gardner’s “Attitude/Motivation Test Battery” extended beyond integrative and

instrumental motivation. They included questions about anxiety of learning English and attitude. The questions about the individual's home country and environment were created by this researcher. Some questions were of the Likert scale type, others were yes/no question, and again others required short comments. To facilitate the answering process, an on-line survey was employed. Since the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has its own survey system called "Qualtrics", questions were created and distributed by the Qualtrics system. The questions were first sent to the director of the ESL program and then he distributed them to the ESL students and encouraged them to answer them in a week.

After collecting the responses, the Likert scale questions were sorted as "attitude toward foreign languages", "attitude toward English", "integrative factors", "instrumental factors", and "anxiety of learning English". They were scored 1 to 5 ranging from "definitely not agree" through "definitely agree" and they were converted into percentage scores. The rest of the questions - yes/no questions and short comments - were about cultural background.

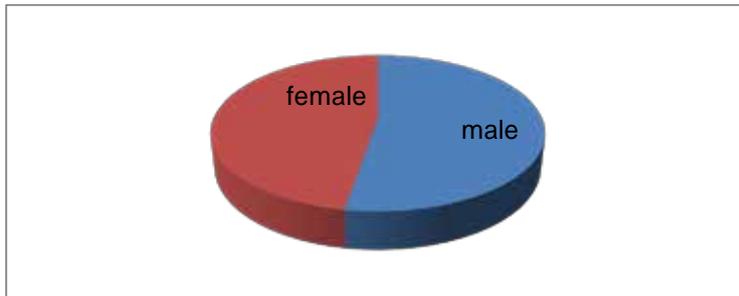
Results

22 responses were received and analyzed. Among them, 3 responses were disregarded due to insufficient information. The remaining 19 sets of responses were sorted by nationality. As Table 1 shows most of the participants were from Saudi Arabia, China, and Turkey. From each of Russia, Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and the Ivory Coast, there was only one student. The statistics of the participants' demographic information is shown in Graph 1 and Graph 2.

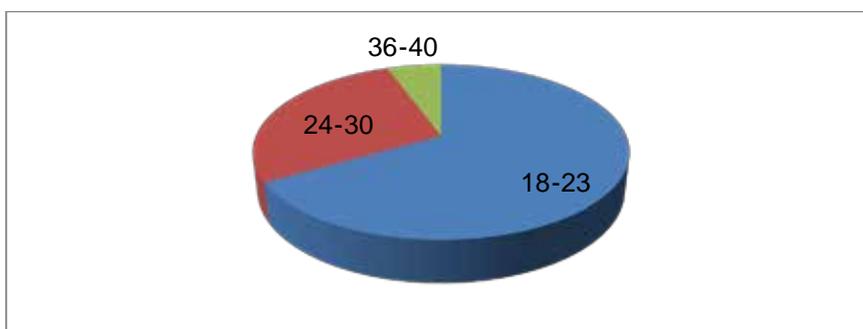
Table 1. Participant Nationality

Country	Turkey	China	Saudi Arabia	Russia	Mexico	Laos	Ivory Coast	Italy	Brazil	Colombia	Total
No.	3	4	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	19

Graph 1. Participants' gender

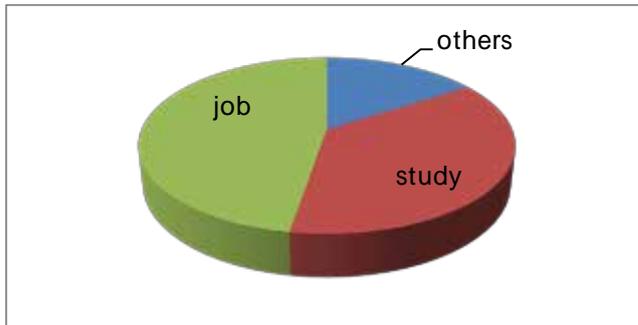


Graph 2. Participants' age range



The students' primary purpose for studying English was of two kinds: further study in the United States and career ("study" and "job" in Graph. 3). 17 participants gave affirmative answers to the question of whether studying English abroad in their home country was a common trend and the same number answered yes to the question whether English was becoming a 2nd language in their country. However, an interesting fact is that 1 out of the 4 Chinese participants said that English was not a 2nd language in their country. Also, 1 out of the 3 Turkish participants said that studying English abroad was not a trend. The difference between their answers may be caused by the respondents coming from different regions of the same country.

Graph 3. Purpose of studying English abroad



For the question of who helped them financially in their studies abroad, 10 participants answered parents, 6 said they came on their own, and 3 mentioned government scholarships (Graph 4).

Graph 4. Category of financial aid

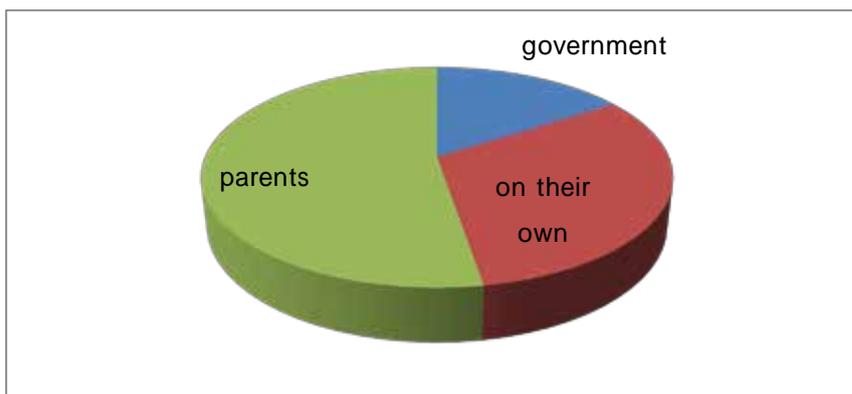


Table 2 shows the statistics sorted by financial aid. It is noticeable that it shows some pattern: the participants from Europe and South America did not get any financial help from either parents or government while the Saudi government does support the students to learn English.

Table 2. Statistics by financial aid

Source of financial aid	Participants' nationality
From parents	China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Ivory Coast
From government	Saudi Arabia
On their own	Russia, Italy, Colombia, Brazil, Laos, Mexico

Table 3 shows scores for attitudes, integrative and instrumental motives, and the degree of anxiety in learning English. The scores were converted from the Likert scale to percentiles.

Table 3. Scores of attitudes and motivation (percentile)

Country	Attitude toward foreign language	Attitude toward English	Integr. motivation	Instrum. motivation	Anxiety of English
Italy	96	94	73	70	44
Russia	90	97	88	100	63
Ivory Coast	88	94	75	90	49
China 1	84	88	90	100	51
China 2	90	75	73	100	50
China 3	62	78	83	100	63
China 4	86	89	65	90	39
Colombia	80	82	85	90	54
Mexico	100	95	85	100	31
Brazil	90	89	65	100	40
Laos	90	92	65	100	50
Turkey 1	86	82	75	90	59
Turkey 2	58	71	58	90	69
Turkey 3	84	83	75	90	39
Saudi A. 1	86	95	88	90	51
Saudi A. 2	74	58	60	70	49
Saudi A. 3	84	85	70	90	66
Saudi A. 4	50	55	63	60	59
Saudi A. 5	80	77	83	80	57

6 participants said that English was difficult to learn due to pronunciation and grammar. European participants said that English was difficult due to pronunciation while Chinese participants referred to grammar. Chinese participants were also suffering from different culture and financial difficulties while South American participants were mostly

suffering from financial difficulties. European participants also referred to their difficulties with official procedures in America.

Discussion

Some of the results of the survey do not directly bear on my hypothesis. First, let us look at the levels of anxiety. European people seemed to feel less anxious about learning English. However, this cannot be fully generalized since the Russian participant ranked as having the highest level of anxiety. However, a pattern emerges if we consider gender: female participants were more anxious than male ones.

Second, I have results on how the students felt about the status of English in their home countries because this issue relates to motivation. Almost all the students felt that English was becoming important and that it occupied the status of “an international language”. They also thought that high competency of English guaranteed an advantage in any career even if the job did not require fluent English skills. However, attitudes seemed slightly different according to nationality. The Europeans’ attitude toward foreign languages and English in particular was more favorable than in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and China. This implies that European participants would tend to be influenced by intrinsic motivation. In addition, all Chinese, Turkish, and Saudi Arabian participants got financial help from their parents while European and South American participants managed to do by themselves. This may imply that different cultural backgrounds influence motivation as Chen (2005) stated. Chinese students in general recognize that English is becoming an international language and therefore it is getting important to acquire English as a skill. In the collectivist Chinese society, children’s success is regarded as the family’s success and therefore, it is natural for parents to help their children to satisfy social expectation. The status of English in a country is a cultural factor which may also feed into instrumental motivation.

The results of the survey that are relevant for testing my hypothesis are the scores of instrumental motivation. There was a clear difference in the scores of instrumental

motivation and the difference was in the predicted direction. In particular, the results of Chinese, Turkish, and Saudi Arabian participants did not show any pattern or trend in integrative motivation according to nationality or gender but instrumental motivation was higher for the Chinese participants compared to Turkish or Saudi Arabian ones. European and South American participants' scores ranked comparatively high in integrative motivation. The Russian, Mexican, and Brazilian participants showed high scores in both integrative and instrumental motivation. This indicates that both integrative and instrumental factors are important motivational factors to influence students from Western countries. This result supports Gardner's socio-educational model: other things being equal, higher degrees of integrative factors result in higher degrees of instrumental factors. However, this does not hold for Chinese, Turkish, and Saudi Arabian students. Rather, it seems that for the Chinese participants, integrative motivation depends simply on personality. This supports Chen's proposal that integrative factors do not play a significant role in Chinese culture.

In sum, as many researchers emphasized, motivation is very complex and it is related very closely to various factors having to do with environment and students' personality. As Chen indicated, in the Chinese collectivist culture, the motivational factors were different from other nationalities although the difference was small. Saudi Arabian participants showed relatively low instrumental motivation perhaps caused by the sensitive political relationship between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Also, individual differences were not negligible even though they were small. The results of this study support the hypothesis that motivational factors are different according to culture and social standards. The strength of motivational factors depends on the participants' nationality. In particular, the central outcome of the hypothesis of this paper according to which Chinese students coming from collectivist culture should be instrumentally motivated is supported.

Limitations

This has been a pilot study with three limitations. First, since the number of respondents was rather small, it is hard to generalize the results to other groups. Second, the on-line survey is an efficient tool to save time, money, and effort since it does not take up time in regular classes and researchers do not need to make hard copies of the questions. However, the response rate was rather low since there was no pressure to complete the survey; in other words, there was no incentive to motivate students to participate. Third, no attention was paid to personality differences. The differences among individual characteristics may be an important factor and in future research, they need to be considered as well.

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