Significant Factors in Students’ Motivation to learn English –
A Case Study at One Private University in Southern Taiwan

Jui-Han Wu
Department of Foreign Languages, Kao Yuan University
Lujhu Township, Kaohsiung County, 821 Taiwan

and

Chih-Che Liu
Department of Foreign Languages, Kao Yuan University
Lujhu Township, Kaohsiung County, 821 Taiwan

ABSTRACT
A quantitative research methodology was used to investigate what factors were significant in students’ motivation when they participated in English courses at one private technology university in southern Taiwan. This study utilized a Chinese translation of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) to survey 1,300 students who participated in English courses. 1,280 surveys were returned (98.46%), of which 1,254 were valid (96.46%). The statistical analysis included frequencies, percentages, mean scores, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVAs with post hoc tests by using SPSS 13.0 for Windows with a confidence level of 95%.

The Motivation Scales includes six dimensions – intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, task value, control of learning beliefs, self-efficacy for learning and performance, and test anxiety. The results showed that students rated themselves from 3.72 to 4.92 within the dimensions. Students were most in agreement with statements about control of learning beliefs. They reported less agreement with statements that showed self-efficacy for learning and performance. Students believed that they were able to control their learning if they wanted to; however, they didn’t perceive enough self-efficacy regarding their English learning and performance.

Keywords: Motivation, Control of Learning Beliefs, Self-efficacy, English learning.

INTRODUCTION
As Taiwan has moved toward globalization, students need competence in English in order to communicate in the world market. The Taiwanese government has been engaged in educational reforms and promoted the importance of English. However, tests, such as the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), show poor English proficiency in Taiwan. This study aimed to investigate college students’ motivation to learn English. It will be a benefit if college English teachers adjust their teaching methods based on the students’ motivational factors in English courses. Teachers will be able to teach their students more effectively; on the other hand, students will be able to help themselves be motivated to learn English and have better performance. Traditional Chinese parents have high expectations for
their children. Taiwan’s cultural strengths include an intense commitment to children and their education (Lunetta & Lederman, 1998). Education is influenced deeply by the Confucian value system; therefore, nobility is found in learning. It not only encourages parents to pay more attention to their children’s education, but also to motivate students to learn so they might have a brighter future. This has resulted in excessive competition and pressure to pursue higher education.

The following reasons may explain why Taiwan’s college students lack English proficiency. College students are often only required to take two to four English courses within four years depending on their entrance English level, except for the students who major in English. Also, most college and university instructors give lectures using the Chinese version of the textbooks which does not promote English learning. Another reason is that many private schools were established after the educational reform. Many colleges and universities are available for students to select to attend, and the requirements for students’ admission are lower. Therefore, even students with poor English proficiency can study in colleges and universities.

The traditional education in Taiwan is an educational banking system, which focuses on filling students’ heads with course content. According to Paulo Freire (2003), education thus becomes an act of depositing. Teachers make deposits of information, and students receive, memorize, and repeat. The students may become passive. Motivation emphasizes the importance of reinforcing the belief that students have some self-control over what is occurring in their lives. Therefore, teachers should provide directions to successful instruction. Students are more likely to thrive in environments in which they feel comfortable, accepted, and valued (Strahan, 1989). In order to improve college students’ English proficiency, it is very important to know the motivational orientations students perceived in English courses.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what factors were significant in students’ motivation when students participated in English courses at one private technology university in southern Taiwan. This research utilized a Chinese translation of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) to survey students to gather quantitative data. The research question was to investigate if there is a significant difference in motivational orientations among demographic groups.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Expectancy theory has been recognized as one of the most promising conceptualizations of individual motivation (Ferris, 1977). It was originally developed by Vroom in 1964. According to Robbins (2003), the theory focuses on three relationships:

1. **Effort-performance relationship**, the probability perceived by the individual that exerting a given amount of effort will lead to performance.
2. **Performance-reward relationship**, the degree to which the individual believes that performing at a particular level will lead to the attainment of a desired outcome.
3. **Rewards-personal goals relationship**, the degree to which organizational rewards satisfy an individual’s personal goals or needs and the attractiveness of those potential rewards for the individual. (p. 173)

Expectancy theory has a long history in the psychology of learning (Tolman, 1932). Chen and Lou (2004) believe that expectancy models are cognitive explanations of human behavior that cast a person as an
active, thinking, predicting creature in his or her environment. He or she continuously evaluates the outcomes of his or her behavior and subjectively assesses the likelihood that each of his or her possible actions will lead to various outcomes. If a particular approach has been successful in a wide range of situations, a person will develop a strong generalized expectancy for success when using that approach, regardless of situation (Rotter, 1975). Therefore, the view of learning as a process of acquiring information about relationships between events introduces expectancies as intervening cognitive variables that represent this information (Bolles, 1972, 1979; Rescorla, 1987, 1990).

Pintrich and Schunk (2002) identify three recent advances in expectancy research of value to teachers. First, the expectancy-value model, led by Eccles (1983) and Wigfield (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992), looks at students’ expectancy of success and how they perceive their ability to cope with academic tasks. They also found that both expectancy and perceived ability are highly related to classroom achievement and performance on standardized test scores. The second is children’s perceptions of their own competence (self-perception of ability). Harter (1982) concludes that the majority of pupils are fairly accurate in their self-estimates of ability in conventional school subjects, such as math, English, history, and chemistry. Third, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) has been alluded to above in the section on goal-orientation. According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy theory addresses the origins of beliefs of personal efficacy, their structure and function, the processes through which they operate, and their diverse effects. Self-efficacy is how strong people rate their competence in doing a task in order to achieve a desired goal. It also correlates well with school achievement and standardized tests.

Bandura (1977) made a distinction between efficacy expectations and response outcome expectancies. “Outcome expectancy” is defined as the individual’s estimate that a given behavior will lead to specific outcomes. An efficacy expectation is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior that is necessary to produce the outcomes. Expectancy beliefs are judgments of capability to attain designated types of performances. Those beliefs that have received the bulk of attention in academic motivation studies have been self-concept (Marsh, 1990; Skaalvik, 1997), self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1991), and confidence to use self-regulatory practices (Zimmerman, 1989; Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). In addition, the most extensively researched problem-solving generalized expectancy is locus of control of reinforcement (Phares, 1976; Rotter, 1966). Based on these theories, one should expect to succeed to the extent that one can control his or her successes and failures. Rewards have been a way to manipulate student’s motivation and learning. According to Schultz (2006), “rewards elicit two forms of behavioral reactions, approach and consumption” (p. 94). Reward expectancy is proposed to be a major component of the central motivational state underlying approach behavior (Schultz, 2000).

**METHODOLOGY**

The quantitative research method was used for a large sample of college students from a stratified cluster sampling of their English class level (I, II, III, and IV), and randomly chosen by class to answer the questionnaire (MSLQ). This questionnaire assessed students’ motivational orientations when they participated in English courses at one private university in southern Taiwan. The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire
(MSLQ) was designed and developed by a team of researchers from the National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (NCRPTAL) and the School of Education at the University of Michigan in 1991. The motivation section contains six dimensions: Intrinsic Goal Orientation, Extrinsic Goal Orientation, Task Value, Control of Learning Beliefs, Self-Efficacy for Learning and Performance, and Test Anxiety. There are 31 items. The demographic data included students’ age, gender, high school completion (senior high school, vocational high school, or 5-year junior college), class level (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior), whether they study in day school or in night school, college division (College of Design, College of Applied Social Sciences, College of Informatics, or College of Management), English course level (English Level I, English Level II, English Level III, or English Level IV), how many hours per week they work for pay, how many hours a week they study English excluding English classes, and whether they have taken any English proficiency examinations (GEPT, TOEFL, IELTS, ILTEA, CSEPT, TOEIC, or others), whether they passed the school’s English graduation requirement. The researcher investigated differences in motivation between gender, high school completion (senior high school and others—vocational system), day or night school, whether they have taken any English proficiency exam and among different groups of age, class level, college division, English course level, working hours, and studying hours.

The researcher reported the reliability and validity of the survey instrument. After deleting one statement and rearranging one statement, the revised Cronbach alpha coefficients of each dimension and the overall instrument were from .66 to .90. Factor analysis was used to access the validity of the survey instrument. Descriptive analysis presented students’ demographic information, including age, gender, high school completion, class level, day school or night school, college division, English course level, working hours, studying hours, and whether they have taken any English proficiency examination for the school’s English graduation requirement.

The research hypotheses used either an independent-samples t-test or one-way ANOVA to test the differences in every dimension of motivation orientations based on demographic variables: age, gender, high school completion, class level, day school or night school, college division, English course level, working hours, studying hours, and whether they have taken any English proficiency examination for the school’s English graduation requirement.

RESULTS
The results showed that students rated themselves from 3.72 to 4.92 within the dimensions. Students were most in agreement with statements about control of learning beliefs. They reported less agreement with statements that showed self-efficacy for learning and performance. Students believed that they were able to control their learning if they wanted to; however, they didn’t perceive enough self-efficacy regarding their English learning and performance.

The statistical results showed that significant factors were found in students’ motivational orientations in relation to the demographic variables: age, gender, high school completion, class level, day school or night school, college division, English course level, working hours, studying hours, and whether they have taken any English proficiency examination for the school’s English graduation requirement. Notably, studying time was the most determinant demographic variable to affect students’ motivation in learning English. The more time
students spent studying English, the more motivation they had in learning English. Table 1 summarized the results of significant differences in the six dimensions of the Motivation Scales in relation to demographic groups.

Table 1

Significant Differences in the Six Dimensions of the Motivation Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Significant Differences in the Motivation Scales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Test anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>No significant differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Completion</td>
<td>Self-efficacy for learning and performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Level</td>
<td>Self-efficacy for learning and performance, test anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day or Night School</td>
<td>Task value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>Self-efficacy for learning and performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td>Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Course Level</td>
<td>Intrinsic goal orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Hours</td>
<td>Task value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying Hours</td>
<td>Intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, task value, control of learning beliefs, self-efficacy for learning and performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took an Exam or not</td>
<td>Self-efficacy for learning and performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=1,254.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations were presented in this study. First, English is a tool to communicate with people from other countries in this global village and information age. The value of English should be addressed in order for students to sharpen their English skills. Second, real-life English should be taught in the classroom because English is a language which can be used in daily life. It can also fill students’ learning needs. Third, interactive teaching should be employed when teaching students English. Building an interactive learning environment can benefit all students. Through the class activities, students are involved in their own learning. Finally, teachers should increase students’ self-efficacy for learning and performance with care and praise instead of punishment in order to encourage and motivate them to learn English. Students with higher motivation were willing to better their English proficiency.

REFERENCES


