

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN IMPROVING THE MOTIVATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
LEARNERS IN CHINA TO ACHIEVE PROFICIENCY

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THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN IMPROVING THE MOTIVATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Laura Anderson

Numerous studies have shown that motivation plays an important role in English language classroom teaching. However, a recent study indicated that approximately 53% percent of English language learners in China lack interest or motivation in their English language learning, particularly at non-prestigious universities and colleges (Zeng, 2017). How to improve the motivation of English language learners has become one of the greatest challenges to teachers of English in China and to the success of English language classroom teaching.

This paper discusses relevant motivation theories and research findings on the teacher's role in motivating English language learners in China to learn English more effectively, with particular attention paid to the teacher's personality, attitude and classroom management skills. Thereafter, some workable suggestions or methods are put forward on what teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can do to increase the level of their students' motivation. This paper is of some significance to EFL teachers in making their classroom teaching more dynamic and lively.

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Chapter I Introduction

With the open-door policy, China has an increasing number of people who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL). As a compulsory course at all levels of instruction, including primary schools, secondary schools and universities, English teaching and learning have brought significant challenges to teachers and students. Though great progress has been made on English teaching and learning in China, lack of motivation in English language learning is one of these challenges. Much work has been done on the study of learner motivation, and strategies have been suggested and theories have been drawn on how to motivate English learners to achieve proficiency. However, little research has been done on the relationship between the teacher's roles and English language learners' motivation in English classroom teaching settings. Lack of motivation or demotivation for EFL learners has greatly affected English teaching and learning activities in many schools, particularly among lower to intermediate level schools. As an English instructor with over 20 years of college level teaching experience in China, the author of this study has become interested in the research question of whether there are better approaches that the EFL teacher can adopt to stimulate students with comparatively low motivation for learning English. Why do EFL learners have less motivation to learn English in spite of their teacher's hard work? Is there anything wrong with the methodologies teachers use in the classroom? How should a teacher assist students with low motivation in English? These questions merit the attention of researchers, scholars and teachers of English in China.

Statement of the Problem

In this paper, the following issues are discussed: 1) the characteristics of motivation; 2) how motivation is classified; 3) why motivation is important to the success of EFL learners; and 4) what EFL teachers can do to motivate their students to learn English effectively.

Definitions of Terms

1. Controller

The term “controller” in this paper refers to one of the roles that an EFL teacher takes in a teacher-centered class while carrying out his or her instruction in English. In particular, it stands for the traditional way of classroom teaching in which the teacher dominates the class in almost every activity and task as a “commander-in-chief,” while students, on the other hand, act as “private soldiers” who are forced to follow the teacher’s arrangements in a passive manner and who may be corrected at any time. In this situation, the teacher serves in a managing role in the classroom, presenting resources and information to students and at the same time organizing and assigning tasks to the students. Teachers who act as a controller in English classroom instruction are not uncommon in China, particularly in many of the lower-ranked colleges and universities. Students, due to their insufficient English skills, just follow the assigned schedules passively instead of taking the initiative in classroom learning (Shu, 2006).

2. Facilitator

Contrary to the role of controller, the instructor in the role of “facilitator” acts as a guide, a prompter or a helper in carrying out his or her teaching tasks. Facilitators prefer to adopt a more flexible, modern way of teaching English to their students so that their students can achieve their goals independently and learn at their own pace. A teacher who acts as a facilitator does not give

his or her students the solution directly, but rather teaches them how to find the answer on their own (Shu, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Library research will be conducted on the co-relationship between EFL students' motivation and the various roles a teacher takes in classroom teaching, such as acting as a controller or facilitator. The purpose of the research is to find out how an EFL teacher's in-classroom teaching can lead to the improvement of students' motivation to learn and their performance in English language learning.

Significance of the Study

The study is of great significance as motivation plays a key part in the success of students' acquisition of English language skills. It is commonly believed that highly motivated students tend to make greater achievements in their academic learning. The roles that an English teacher takes in his or her teaching of English will have a great impact on a student's motivation to learn English, since the EFL teacher is the primary source of instruction. Therefore, the study is meaningful and significant in terms of analyzing students' achievement in learning English.

Methodology

This seminar paper will be written by means of library research. The author is planning to conduct the study as follows: 1) collect sufficient data and resources from the library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and The National Library of China; 2) read extensively all appropriate sources found in both libraries and sort them out according to the study questions of

the paper; and 3) make a list of all the references in the appropriate American Psychological Association (APA) format for later use in writing the paper.

Chapter II Review of Literature

The scholarly viewpoint on motivation has experienced great changes over the past decades, moving from a biological perspective to a behavioral one, then to cognitive and psychological perspectives. The concept of motivation is abstract and is not directly observable. Moreover, motivation is a multidimensional construct and can change over time. It is important for EFL teachers to be familiar with these characteristics of motivation in order to stimulate English language learners in their English learning. Therefore, the roles of the EFL teacher in the classroom can be multifaceted in different contexts or situations. Various studies have been done about different aspects of motivation. Gardner and McIntyre (1993) studied motivation from the perspective of language learning. William and Burden (1997) researched motivation from the cognitive and emotional aspects.

What is Motivation?

Researchers have defined the concept of motivation quite differently and have tended to put their focus on various aspects of the nature of motivation. Some offer their definitions in terms of social-psychological aspects, while others define the concept in light of behaviorism. Ryan and Deci (2000) held that "to be motivated is to move to do something" (p. 54). To them, motivation is a desire to work towards a goal or to reach an objective. If motivation is present, learning can be facilitated; but if motivation is absent, effective learning becomes difficult. Petri (1981) defines motivation as "the concept we use when we describe the forces acting on or within an organism to initiate and direct behavior" (p. 3). He pointed out that "the concept of motivation is also used to explain differences in the intensity of behavior and more intense behaviors are considered to be the result of higher levels of motivation" (p. 4). Dörnyei (2001), on the other

hand, states that:

Motivation is an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do. It is obvious that in this sense the term subsumes a whole range of motives-from financial incentive such as a raise in salary to idealistic beliefs such as the desire for freedom-that have very little in common except that they all influence behavior (p. 1).

Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994) placed motivation into three levels: the language level, the learner level and the situation level. However, for Williams and Burden (1997) motivation is "a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal or goals" (p.120). Gardner and McIntyre (1993) regarded motivation as a process driven by the learner, who "wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities as associated with achieving this goal" (p. 2). All these definitions affirm that motivation is a consequence of a combination of different influences, which leads to different types of motivation.

There are certain points of commonality and of disagreement among scholars regarding the various definitions mentioned above. It is Dörnyei (2001) who perhaps came to the most definitive conclusion concerning motivation: "perhaps the only thing about motivation most researchers would agree on is that it, by definition, concerns the direction and magnitude of human behavior, that is: the choice of a particular action; the persistence with it; the effort expended on it" (p. 8).

Although the concept of motivation, frequently mentioned and discussed in second or foreign language learning and teaching, has undergone many different interpretations in the last few

decades, the one point in common that most scholars seem to share is that motivation is one of the key factors that influence the success of second or foreign language learning. EFL teachers should therefore pay proper attention to students with low learning motivation.

What are the Types of Motivation?

In general, a learner's motivation may be classified as integrative or instrumental, or both integrative and instrumental, which describes second language (L2) learning motivation in terms of orientation. It is believed among researchers and teachers that this classification usually goes back to Gardner and Lambert (1972), who pointed out that, from a social-cultural perspective, motivation is influenced by two language-learning orientations. An integrative orientation is typical of someone who has the desire to identify with the target language and to be integrated successfully into the target language community. Whoever has such an orientation is regarded as having an open, positive attitude to the groups that speak the target language. It is an internal, lasting motivation for language learning. The integrative motivation includes measures of integration and attitudes towards the learning situation. An instrumental orientation refers to the desire to learn a language in order to pass a test, get a good job or to raise one's social standing in the community. Learners with instrumental motivation are likely to see language learning for practical goals, enabling them to do other useful things. This kind of learning is utilitarian and pragmatic in nature, but the learner has no particular interest in communicating with the L2 community (Zhang, 2007).

Another type of motivation was raised by Deci and Ryan (1985), who classified motivation as intrinsic and extrinsic. They wrote that "[i]ntrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for

their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination” (p.108). In brief, intrinsic motivation means performing an activity simply for the pleasure and satisfaction that follow the action, while extrinsically motivated behaviors are usually carried out in anticipation of a reward from outside and beyond the self. They are performed not because of inherent interest but for some outside rewards. Typical extrinsic rewards are money, prizes, grades, and even certain types of positive feedback (Zhang, 2007).

In short, language-learning motivation can be divided into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. It can also be divided into extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Whatever it is, motivation is closely related with the learner’s study performance, and it can significantly increase the EFL student’s language competency. Most Chinese EFL learners would be placed in the category of instrumental motivation. They are faced with all kinds of tests: mid-term examinations, final examinations, and entrance examinations for primary school, secondary school, and college or university. They learn English in order to pass many different standardized examinations, such as the College English Test-4, the College English Test-6, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and the Graduate Record Exam, in order to get a pay raise or a professorship. Research on motivation in China is mainly focused on the influence of motivation on learner outcomes or the relationship between motivation and other instructional factors.

Why is Motivation Important to the Success of EFL Learners?

Scholars and researchers have published many studies on the importance of motivation in the ESL/EFL learning environment. It is widely recognized that motivation is one of the most

important factors that can decide the success or failure of the process of EFL learning. Allwright and Bailey (1994) state that “motivated learners are more receptive than those who are not motivated” (p.182). Ellis (1997) points out that sometimes learners do not have any special attitude, but motivation can involve curiosity that prompts interest and engagement in learning activities. This is particularly true of English language learners in China. Students need to be self-aware and confident, establish long-term and short-term goals, eliminate unfavorable factors in the English language learning process, study conscientiously and adopt scientific studying methods.

Review of the Teacher’s Roles in Teaching English

A great number of studies have been conducted, both in China and abroad, on the role of the language teacher. Harmer (1983) gives a brief summary of the main roles a teacher plays in the foreign language classroom as controller, assessor, organizer, prompter, participant and resource. Wubbels and Levy (1993) focus on the teacher's role as the creator of the classroom atmosphere. Tudor (1993) puts an emphasis on the teacher's roles as a source of knowledge, an activity organizer and a learning counselor in a learner-centered classroom.

Shu and Zhuang (2008) from China point out that foreign language teachers need to be equipped with specific characteristics and skills, in addition to general teaching skills.

The methodology of language teaching is more diverse and aims at creating contexts for communication and maximizing student involvement. Foreign language teachers should not only have a good command of the target language, but also the ability to organize, explain and clarify, as well as to arouse and sustain interests and motivation among students. Due to the special characteristics of foreign language teaching, an effective foreign

language teacher should be proficient in the language being taught and good at organizing and implementing classroom activities with modern teaching equipment. A good foreign language teacher should also have an attractive personality and be equipped with knowledge and theories about second language acquisition, as well as foreign language teaching approaches (pp. 150-151).

In China, the teacher usually acts in a dominant role in the classroom in transmitting knowledge to the students, while the students are expected to listen and memorize information instead of constructing knowledge in their own way. English language teaching in China is chiefly "teacher-dominated," "textbook-oriented," or focused on drills and practice. However, with the reform of English language teaching in China, more attention is now being paid to the students. There has been a shift from a teacher-centered teaching mode to a student-centered one. According to *Na Xue Ying YU Jiao Xue Zhi Nan* (English translation: *A Guide to College English Teaching*), published in 2015 by the Chinese Ministry of Education, English teachers should change their role from an all-time controller to a guide or a facilitator in the process of English language learning and teaching in order to assist and lead students to achieve their goals. At the same time, teachers should equip themselves with the latest computer-based or Internet-based teaching skills in order to guarantee successful teaching outcomes. The *Guide* also emphasizes that a teacher ought to become a lifelong learner in order to keep up with the latest developments in English teaching methods or approaches. So, in order to meet the needs of modern society and new requirements in English teaching, college English teachers' roles should be reexamined.

In conclusion, motivation can be defined from various viewpoints and can be classified into different types, such as integrative motivation, instrumental motivation, extrinsic motivation and

intrinsic motivation. Motivation is a key factor in the foreign language classroom and plays a crucial role in the success of the learners' fulfillment of their goals, and the roles a language teacher takes have a great impact on the learners' motivation in either a positive or a negative way. Therefore, how a teacher behaves or performs in the classroom becomes the primary task that all foreign language teachers should consider improving.

Chapter III The Teacher's Role in Improving the Motivation of English Language Learners in China to Achieve Proficiency

With the popularity of multimedia English teaching modes in colleges and universities, English teachers have had to redefine their roles in the classroom. The traditional roles of a controller, knowledge provider and all-knowing instructor have been shifted to roles of manager, facilitator and atmosphere creator so as to improve students' motivation and the achievement of teaching objectives. Zhang (2006) states:

In multimedia-aided English teaching, students are treated as the subjects of teaching and learning activities. They are supposed to be responsible for their own learning. Multimedia-aided English teaching emphasizes the cultivation of learner autonomy. Students are autonomous learners and they are the main characters in the learning activities while teachers stand by or after them to be a help and facilitator (p. 41).

The Teacher as a Manager

When teachers are described as a designer and manager, the metaphor implies that the language teacher who is carrying out the teaching curricula has certain responsibilities. As a manager of an EFL class, an EFL teacher has multiple tasks to accomplish while carrying out well-prepared lessons. One of the duties is to establish discipline or create certain rules for students to follow. Surely, the purpose of setting up rules is to set limits or boundaries, which tell students how far they can go and make them feel that someone is in control and responsible for their environment. Discipline is necessary and important in fostering a classroom environment in which students behave themselves and in making the room a protected, comfortable place where students can learn without any anxiety or fears. Wong and Wong (2017) point out that there are

two things that a teacher should keep in mind in implementing discipline or rules. One is to make sure that rules and discipline apply only to behaviors, not to the person. The second is to limit the number of rules. Too many rules may put up barriers in classroom teaching and take time to maintain.

The second duty for a manager is to establish classroom procedures for students or simply a method or process for getting things done in the classroom. In other words, procedures demonstrate each step of doing things in an acceptable and organized manner, such as the procedure for taking roll or for how to read an article (Wong & Wong, 2017). Procedures are important and necessary for effective classroom management, so the teacher (as manager) has the duty to state them clearly. Besides, clear procedures can reduce the risk of confusion in carrying out learning activities in the classroom. The teacher as the manager of the class should design appropriate procedures to guide students to successful language learning. In setting up discipline and procedure, a good manager should put procedure first instead of discipline. An effective teacher must take procedure teaching as the priority in classroom instruction and should make the procedures taught to the students a routine or a habit, even a practice in their learning (Wong & Wong, 2017).

Another thing that teachers as a manager may do is try their best to design tasks for students at different levels. Good organization of class events contributes to the improvement of students' motivation. English teachers should always take into account the needs of learners. Besides, good interpersonal relationships with students are crucial to forming a trusting bond with each student. At the same time, a teacher's tolerance of differing points of view during class can make class management run in a smooth way.

The Teacher as a Facilitator

“To be a facilitator, the English teacher should encourage students to discover, to create and to solve problems in a new Internet-based English teaching mode” (Kang, 2013, p.48). With the rapid development of science and technology, English teaching in China has experienced a giant reform, both in theories and in equipment. The employment of modern teaching equipment and technology has brought a challenge to English teachers. The Internet, multimedia equipment and smart mobile phones have expanded the field and scope of English teaching and learning far beyond the physical classroom. To keep up with the developing trends in English education, English teachers have had to shift their roles from the traditional controller to a facilitator and supporter in order to stimulate and maintain motivation in their students. In the article “Effects of situated mobile learning approach on learning motivation and performance of EFL students,” Huang, Yang, Chiang, and Su (2016) discovered that the experimental group using a mobile-based approach “exhibited significant improvement” in their vocabulary learning performance and that the mobile learning tool enabled students to focus on understanding the meaning of new words and remembering new words without reference to a textbook or dictionary (p. 263). Furthermore, with modern teaching technology and software, students can learn at their own pace with higher motivation instead of learning vocabulary by rote. Therefore, English teachers today in China should play their roles as facilitators both in and out of the classroom to make sure that all students are actively involved in the teaching and learning process.

As a facilitator, EFL teachers should also figure out ways to stimulate and maintain students’ motivation with novel and interesting teaching approaches so as to make classroom teaching meaningful and instructive and allow the students to fulfill their academic or developmental goals.

Teachers must also supply timely suggestions and instructive advice and support when students have difficulties or are frustrated in their English language learning. Well-designed activities like group work, discussions, presentations, English songs and movie clips are better options than a lengthy lecture in the classroom. In other words, “teachers should guide students to learn by themselves, introduce good learning methods to students, and improve their ability to use English” (Kang, 2013, p. 49). To be a facilitator, a teacher should play the role of a helper, a guide, a prompter and a mediator in assisting the learners to reach their goals.

A good language teacher in the classroom should not do a preacher’s job or act solely as a lecturer in transmitting knowledge to the student. Instead, a teacher should help his or her students to set suitable goals. According to goal theory, goal setting is a significant motivational strategy in language learning, and it determines the direction, intensity and duration of an action.

“The realization of a short-term, obtainable goal will increase students’ self-confidence, generate self-satisfaction and arouse their learning motivation in short time” (Zhang, 2007, p. 9). One of the key reasons why a large number of Chinese English language learners have low motivation is that they have no clear goals set when they enter college or the university. Exhausted after laboring for three years on the *Gaokao* (the college entrance examination) under the monitoring of their parents and teachers, they suddenly feel at a loss as to what to do when they enter college. The first thing they have in mind is to lie back and relax. Therefore, what a language teacher should do for freshmen is help them set suitable goals of their own and offer necessary guidance for a productive college experience.

In addition, being a facilitator also means that an English teacher plays the role of a prompter. As a prompter, English teachers ought to “excite the enthusiasm of students and prompt them into

various activities” (Zhang, 2006, p. 46). However, this is not easy to do as Chinese English learners tend to keep quiet when teachers ask them questions. No one wants to raise his or her hand and answer the teacher’s questions willingly unless his or her name is called. To overcome this unwillingness to speak in the classroom, the teacher should make the class activities more relaxed and interesting so as to stimulate the interest and enthusiasm of the students.

Furthermore, a teacher as a mediator should give fair and reasonable feedback to students’ behavior and performance in a right and acceptable manner at the appropriate time. Students value the feedback from their teacher, and they care very much about what the teacher thinks about what they have done so far. To improve the motivation of their students, language teachers should try to avoid giving students severe and straightforward criticism in class. Instead, the teacher might expand or modify the student’s incomplete answer to maintain his or her confidence and motivation to speak another time, rather than ask another student to answer the question. When students answer questions correctly, the teacher should make encouraging comments like ”good,” “excellent,” or “terrific.” These kinds of positive feedback can inspire students to go on with their study, which will eventually lead to a positive outcome in classroom learning.

In summary, classroom teaching is more than the textbook-oriented, teacher-dominated activity. Rather, effective classroom teaching offers various opportunities for students to experience and participate in the whole learning process, with the teacher’s timely assistance, guidance and necessary help. The teacher’s primary job is to assist students to reach their learning targets with well-planned activities, meaningful and attractive materials, and novel and inspiring approaches to teaching. The teacher should always keep in mind that it is the students rather than the teacher who act as the dominant participant in achieving their personal and

educational goals, and that it is only when students are highly motivated that they are able to take an active role in their learning.

The Teacher as an Atmosphere Creator

In China, the majority of English language learners have their language learning activities in the school classroom. A good, relaxing environment with a friendly climate in the room is an indispensable condition for students to be successful in learning the language. Otherwise, the learners' motivation will be undermined and their interests will diminish if there is a tense atmosphere in the classroom. Therefore, the language teacher, as the key designer of teaching tasks and activities in the learning process, ought to shoulder the responsibility for creating such a pleasant and soothing learning environment in order to minimize fear, nervousness and anxiety in the English language learners and to maximize their potential (Zhang, 2007).

First, the teacher should become familiar with the students' names as soon as possible and be able to call out their names during class when asking them questions. A nametag for each student is useful in obtaining this goal. Calling on students instead of pointing a finger at them appears to be a minor act, but it has a significant influence on students. It brings the teacher closer to the students in their mind, and it also indicates that the teacher shows great concern for them. More importantly, it can reduce the learners' nervousness, fear or sense of anxiety and improve their motivation to learn at the same time. A warm-up activity such as "Who am I?" in which students make a vivid self-introduction in front of the class using pictures or texts, can not only leave others with a good impression, but also offer good opportunities for teachers and students to get to know each other in a friendly, relaxed manner.

Another thing that a teacher can do to create a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom is always to enter the classroom in a happy, positive mood and full of enthusiasm. Emotions are contagious. A teacher's sense of happiness and high spirits will consequently result in the students' enthusiasm in learning. An easy-going teacher with a good sense of humor will always win the love and respect of his or her students (Zhang, 2007). In addition, a sweet smile on the teacher's face can no doubt contribute significantly to a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.

One last thing a language teacher can do to create a good learning environment is to shift the traditional classroom seating to a flexible configuration in which students are not confined to their seats, but can feel at ease to move around and form groups for the sake of communication and interaction among students and between students and their teacher (Zhang, 2007).

A teacher as the creator of a favorable environment should do whatever he or she can to improve the motivation of students in the classroom and to enhance the positive interaction between the students and the teacher. A soothing environment will facilitate English learning and teaching. A good language teacher will always bear in mind that the emotional factor has a great impact on the learner's achievement of his or her educational goals (Li, 2011).

In conclusion, the motivation of English language learners in China is one of the greatest concerns for teachers. How to stimulate students to learn English actively and effectively inside the classroom has become a more challenging task for English teachers at all levels of instruction (Li, 2011). How English teachers behave in the classroom will inevitably have a great impact on students' motivation. English teachers can play different roles as a manager, facilitator or climate creator in their classroom teaching, according to different teaching goals or objectives.

Chapter IV Conclusions and Recommendations

What a language teacher does in the classroom has a great effect on students in terms of motivation and their achievement in learning. This paper, from a teacher's point of view, analyzes briefly the theories on motivation and the research findings on the common roles that an English teacher plays in the classroom teaching process. The metaphorical roles a teacher takes as a manager, environment creator and facilitator indicate in some ways what an English teacher should do or how to behave in order to improve students' motivation in the context of classroom teaching. This paper offers a theoretical study of the issue, instead of an empirical one. Further study can be done in the future on the other roles of the teacher, such as evaluator or content designer.

The following conclusions can be drawn. First, there are four main terms used when classifying English language learners' motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, instrumental and integrative. The most common classification in English language learning for students in China is instrumental: students want to pass the exams required to graduate from college or university with degrees. Secondly, English language learners' motivation is affected by complicated factors, such as environment and the teacher's personality, attitude, or ways of teaching. The teacher's roles in the classroom can be varied in different teaching contexts, but are of great significance in arousing, improving and sustaining English language learners' motivation. One of the reasons for this may be that Chinese English language learners tend to place their teachers in a dominant position in their education. The suggested ways for English teachers to motivate their students in the previous chapters are helpful to those pre-service and in-service English teachers in carrying out their English teaching in the classroom.

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