Motivation Factors for English Language Learning of Vocational Students in Hong Kong

Siu-may Yeung

Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education

Abstract. Purpose: This study investigates the motivational factors for English language learning of Hong Kong vocational students.

Methodology: The qualitative case study approach was employed with self-completion questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, diary notes and informal talks as research tools. The study was carried out in two phases in one academic year.

Findings: The results show that vocational students have intrinsic and strong instrumental motivations for learning English. In the process of learning, participants regarded English as a functional language which was tied up with their careers. This finding is consistent with the previous studies on attitudes towards learning English of Hong Kong students.

Limitations: The limitation is on data collection through the use of interviews. It may pose a risk of disparity between an informant’s later interpretation of an experience and what actually happened. Moreover, the data of diary writing may not be typical or true. There might be inadequate recalls and a sample selection bias on activities that participants had recorded.

Value: This research revealed that vocational students’ intrinsic and strong instrumental motivations are influenced by many factors directly and/or indirectly of the society. Further research on exploring social influences on student’s motivation in learning English language should be performed.

Keywords: Language Learning Motivation, Attitudes to English, Hong Kong Vocational Students’ Language Attitudes.

1. Introduction

Motivation is one of the main elements directly related to success in developing a second/foreign language (L2). It determines the extent of active and personal involvement in language learning at different stages. In Hong Kong, studies of how motivation operates in English language (L2) learning have been conducted mostly with secondary and tertiary students (Lai, 1999; Lin et al., 1991; Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Richards, 1998; Salili & Lai, 2003). The findings showed that both groups had instrumental motivation. There was limited study on motivation for learning English language of vocational students in Hong Kong. The present study aims to find out whether vocational students’ attitudes and perspectives are the same as those determined from previous surveys on secondary school and tertiary students. Participants in this study had graduated from secondary schools and may have been dis-enchanted with the slow progress of their English and ascribed this to various causes, internal or external; or, they may have belonged to the group of students who had integrative and/or instrumental motivations. The rationale of the study is to reveal the motivational factors of vocational students for the education provider to present a quality and strategic instruction which can encourage the less motivated students to improve their English learning behavior and promote an active English learning environment.

2. Literature Review

Motivation has been found to significantly affect language learning success (Dornyei, 2005, p.65). In this paper, motivation is defined as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (Schunk et al., 2008, p.4). Among the motivation theories, Maslow’s (1954) humanistic theory puts forward that humans have five levels of needs: physiological, security, social, esteem and self-actualization needs. (Schunk et al., 2008, p.173) One of the growth needs, self-esteem, is regarded as a motivator for successful learning. The hierarchy of needs theory lays the foundation for language learning theories in which variables
Intrinsic motivation describes students’ engagement in actions “for their own sake and without coercion such as satisfaction, as sense of competence, interest, learning and challenge” (Alderman, 2008, p.252). Extrinsic motivation occurs when “students engage in activities for external reasons (outside of themselves) such as praise, grades, special privileges, and certificates or material rewards. Pressure from someone and coercion are also forms of extrinsic motivation” (Alderman, 2008, p.252). Heightened self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations will raise intrinsic motivation and lead to further learning (Bandura, 1993).

Gardner’s view of L2 learning motivation is that L2 achievement is related not only to the individual learner’s linguistic aptitude or general intelligence but also to the learner’s motivation and interest in learning the target language. According to Gardner, integrativeness is a motivation to learn a second language because of “positive feelings toward the community that speaks that language” (Gardner, 1985, pp.82-3). The integratively motivated learner is one “who has an open interest in the other language community and other ethnic communities in general, perceives the language learning context positively, and expresses a high degree of motivation to learn the language” (Gardner, 2005, p.351). Gardner also proposes that instrumental orientation is a powerful motivator in second language learning. Instrumental orientation emphasizes the “practical value and advantages of learning a new language” (Lambert, 1974, p.98). It is to pertain to the potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency, like getting a better job or a higher salary.

Motivation is a complex and multifaceted concept. Dornyei (1998) asserts that no single theory can possibly explain the complexity of foreign/second language learning motivation in different contexts. Dornyei (1998) summarized the main motivational domains described in the 1990s research (Clement et al., 1994; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearins, 1994, 1996; and others) by identifying seven main dimensions. The first one is the affective/integrative dimension, which includes integrative motives; affective motives; language attitudes; intrinsic motives/attitudes towards L2; and learning/enjoyment/interest. The second one is the instrumental/pragmatic dimension. The third one is the macro-context–related dimension, which has multi-cultural/inter-group/ethno-linguistic relations. The fourth one is the self-concept–related dimension (generalized/trait-like personality factors), which includes the self-concept; confidence/self-efficacy; anxiety/inhibitions; success/failure-related (attributional) factors; expectancy; and need for achievement. The fifth one is the goal-related dimension. The sixth one is the educational context–related dimension (learning/classroom/school environment). The seventh one is the significant others–related dimension (parents, family, friends) (Dornyei, 1998, p.128). This summary gives a comprehensive coverage of education-friendly approaches which focuses on classroom, teachers and learners. It also includes the variables of socio-educational models (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) of which instrumental and integrative orientations have continued to inform numerous empirical studies on motivation of language learning. The present research’s theories and models are based on Dornyei’s (1998) dimensions because it covers motivational factors that are related to the context of the present study.

It is found that foreign/second languages (L2) are learned in diverse contexts. Learners have a range of factors associated with the significant others on motivation which include parents, teachers and peers. Parental influence on L2 motivation was a major component of Gardner’s model because parents were seen to “act as the major intermediary between the cultural milieu and the student” (Gardner, 1985, p.109). Parents play active role when they encourage their children to do well, and when they reinforce any successes identified by the school. The passive roles involves parents’ indirect modeling and communicating attitudes related to L2 learning and the community. Gardner suggests that when parents have positive attitudes towards the community, they would serve to support an integrative motive in the student (Gardner, 1985). Motivations are also enhanced when parents allow children to make decisions, to state suggestions; when they acknowledge children’s feelings and needs, and provide children with choices (Dornbusch et al., 1987). Parental influence in the motivation of learning the English language is obvious in the present study. To enhance students’ motivation for learning, teachers should strive to meet students’ personal, emotional and cognitive needs as different students have different needs (Stipek, 2002). Teachers should have the ability to create an active learning environment and, as a result, shift from passive learning to students taking responsibility for their own learning. It requires that teachers transfer to students some of their control over the curriculum, teaching and learning, (Chapman & Aspin, 1997). The data from the present study reveal that
some participants’ teachers are motivators as described here. Observers’ beliefs can be affected by their observation of models. Observation of peers can lead students to adopt comparable goals (Bandura, 1988) because peer-oriented goals are highly valued by students. Peer network heavily influence members’ academic motivation, and help to define students’ opportunities for interactions, for observing others, interactions and access to activities (Ryan, 2000). Over time, network members become more similar to one another. Researchers have found that discussions among friends influence learners’ choices of activities and friends often make similar choices (Berndt, 1999).

3. Methodology

The research design does not adhere to one specific framework. The study employed the qualitative research approach of case study (Merriam, 1998) with self-completion questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, diary notes and informal talks as research tools. The participants were ten vocational students: Student A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and J. They were studying the four-year Higher Diploma course in a vocational institute of Hong Kong during the research period. English language is a compulsory academic subject in the students’ course. Most students in vocational institutes are either unable to gain admission to university or, having been left school for some time, decide to return to study in order to improve their prospects for re-entering the work force. Although they would have been learning the English language for more than 10 years, on entering the vocational institute some students’ level of English does not meet the required standard. The three main research questions in this study examine:

- The factors that motivate students in a vocational institute to learn the English language.
- The English language learning attitude of students in a vocational institute; and whether integrative and/or instrumental motivation exist(s) among students of a vocational institute.

4. Summary of Findings and Discussion

The existence of instrumental motivation is apparent from the findings both of the interviews with the participants and of the diary writings. Pragmatic reasoning or motivation is one of the instrumental factors, which can be grouped into two areas. The first area relates to increasing job opportunities and salary potential. The second area relates to further study and communications. This finding is the same as that of the research on attitudes of Hong Kong students towards learning English. Motivation and attitude surveys undertaken in Hong Kong since the 1970s have shown the same result. Instrumental/pragmatic motivation of different ages of students is consistent in the periods both before and after the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China. The present study shows that this is a typical view held by students not only in the primary and secondary schools, tertiary and university settings, but also in the vocational institute. Seventy percent of university students took an English language elective course to improve their English for career preparation (Lai, 1999). Most Hong Kong undergraduates (Hyland, 1997) responded in the questionnaires about the instrumental importance of English. English would continue to perform a gate-keeping role after the handover and it would still be the dominant language in the employment context. In terms of pragmatic reasons, vocational students agree that a determination to obtain good examination results is one of the motivating factors to learn English. This finding is the same as that for tertiary students in the attitude research of Hong Kong students. The survey of 2156 tertiary students on pragmatic attitudes, focusing on the practical values of English for personal success, showed that pragmatic motivation is the strongest motivation (Littlewood & Liu, 1996). The result is similar to that of a survey conducted in seven senior secondary schools (Richards, 1998). Nine students of that survey emphasized the importance of gaining English qualifications in securing a good job or getting accepted into universities.

Another finding from the present study is that vocational students enjoy learning English. Nine participants out of ten are interested in learning the language, find English an interesting language and enjoy the learning process. Some participants particularly like the English language and some of them reinforce what they have learned by practicing it in daily activities. The interest that these participants show is more of an intrinsic nature than integrative. Other participants demonstrate that they are intrinsically motivated by engaging in language activities, organizing their knowledge and applying their skills and knowledge in different contexts. When they can actually use English to speak with others, they have a sense of achievement. Perceiving their progress, the participants feel more efficacious about learning (Bandura, 1986, 1993).

Many participants are interested in foreign cultures and wish to travel to foreign countries. This kind of interest, however, is different from that of integratively motivated learners who has an open interest in the
other language community and other ethnic communities in general (Gardner, 2005, p.351). The findings of the present study do not show that participants have an open interest in other ethnic communities, and the degree of motivation to learn the target language is not exceptionally high. Their interest is at the stage of feelings or beliefs but is not actually deeply engaged with the target language community. Intrinsic motivation has also been found in a survey of senior secondary school students from Form four to Form seven students, with 36 students taking part (Richards, 1998). Ten participants indicated that they were motivated primarily by an intrinsic interest in English, in foreign languages and in learning in general. Seven of these ten students were motivated by a desire or perceived need to communicate with native speakers of the language in Richards’ (1998) study.

The fact that instrumental and intrinsic motivations are factors operating with the vocational students, as shown in the present study, does not imply that this will not change. Data shows that some vocational students have a motivational change over a period of time. Students A and F started learning English to fulfill school requirements. Since then, they have become intellectually engaged with the language and foreign culture, and they say that they want later to live and work in an English-speaking country and use the language. These examples show that initial participation can lead to interest, which can then lead to further involvement and changes in the reasons for the language learning. Motivation, thus, follows developmental paths that may change over time and may not remain in a definite framework of instrumental or intrinsic motivation (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Vocational students display instrumental and intrinsic motivations but not integrative motivation. The practical value of learning English is heavily stressed and an intrinsic interest in learning the language is also shown. These findings suggest that the participants in this study are motivated by a range of factors: the dual desires to master the language and interact with native speakers; an interest in the language; and the instrumental and practical uses of English in Hong Kong society.

5. Conclusion

The research has served to expand the understanding of Hong Kong vocational students’ motivation for learning English. This study can draw greater attention by providing a picture which shows that students, in addition to having strong instrumental motivation, also have intrinsic motivation. Through their experience and increased knowledge, students’ motivation grows and their attitudes towards English change. They realize the usefulness of using English and their confidence increases when they actually use English as a means of communication and self-expression. As a result of this learning experience, they find meaning in their learning in the society in which they live. Eventually they exhibit their motivated and self-regulated learning behavior habitually. The limitation of the research is on data collection through the use of interviews. It may pose a risk of disparity between an informant’s later interpretation of an experience and what actually happened. Moreover, the data of diary writing may not be typical or true. There might be inadequate recalls, and a sample selection bias on activities that participants had recorded. It is suggested that further research on exploring social influences on student’s motivation, in particular, parental influences on student’s learning development should be performed. In the process of analyzing the data in the present study, the researcher was impressed by the family support of parents, particularly the mother, in encouraging participants to learn English. It is the aspiration of the researcher to design another study which focuses on the mother’s role and influence on children’s motivation for learning English in Hong Kong.

6. References


