

The Influence of Motivations on College Students' English Performance from the Perspective of Urban and Rural Differences

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Abstract: *Motivation is key to foreign language learning (FLL) and directly affects learners' frequency of learning strategies, the volume of accepted FLL, and duration of developing FLL skill and so on. Many factors are considered to illustrate how motivation affects learners' performance, and among them, linguistic environment is particularly discussed here. The difference between urban and rural areas leads to a different linguistic environment, which motivates students in disparate ways. Owing to the distribution of resources, cities and countries are developing a gap that has parted them in educational investment, family income and school equipment. Therefore, students living in urban and rural areas are growing up with different learning motivation and thus performance.*

Keywords: *Urban and rural differences; English language learning; Motivation*

1. Introduction

Higher Education in China has existed the problem of developmental unbalance. This research delves to understand the underlying factors from the perspective of linguistic environment and individuals. Having viewing the previous findings, we have found that college students from urban areas outperform those from rural areas. Motivation behind their performance varies and thus contributes to such a discrepant result. Based on the situation, this research puts forward some suggestions to address the problems and narrow the motivational gap between urban and rural areas.

2. Linguistic environment and current situation of English learning for college students from different areas

2.1 Definition: linguistic environment

As we all know, language study must be based on a certain environment. Professor Manchun Dai and Yunnan Xiao define linguistic environment as formal and informal linguistic environment. Formal linguistic environment refers to class environment created by teachers and students; while informal linguistic environment indicates natural linguistic environment. Linguistic environment is a place where it produces and offers language input, which includes all the materials that language learners heard and read. Linguistic environment also includes specific environment, such as classroom, conversation context, and newspaper-reading place. Actually, linguistic environment comprises not only class, family, and community that provides proper material bases, but also teachers, students and parents that are called human resources. [1]

2.2 The relation between FLL and linguistic environment

Most researchers lay emphasis on linguistic environment that has an influence on language learning, mother tongue or second language. William and Burden state that language learning is progressing under a certain environment which inevitably exerts influence on language learning. [2] Qi Deng reports that creating a good learning environment could enhance students' attitudes and strengthen their efficacy. [3] Professor Lianrui Yang and Delu Zhang believe that social environment decided the way learners would choose. It is obvious that learning process is decided by goals, and goals are decided by the social needs. As a consequence, environment determines the way and the speed of learning. [4] In

the rural areas, people extremely lack opportunities to use the target language---English language. Some countryside are economically left behind due to the scarcity of the environment of English learning, and students there only obtain language knowledge through class. However, we all know that language learning, which requires social context to practice rather than just to understand, is quite different from other subjects.

2.3 Current situation of English learning for college students from different areas

As China joined WTO, English is becoming more and more important in our daily life. Thus on the one hand, relative education department puts much emphasis on English teaching; on the other hand, our society encourages all citizens to learn English and communicate with foreigners. By and by, English learning flourishes in every corner of China. Especially in universities, a number of college students work hard to master as many English skills as possible expecting one day they could get admission to a better university or go abroad. But the reality is, there emerges a gap between those students living in cities and those in countryside. According to a survey which analyzed the relationship between students' performances in English and their backgrounds, students from cities had much better performances than those from countryside. Based on the influence of linguistic environment and the differences of individuals, urban and rural college students have developed various views on English study, which accounts for English learning motivation.

As a dynamic system, motivation directly guides people to pursue what they want. Motivation theories can help us explain how motivation functions and suggest in what way we can change.

3. Definition and classification of Motivation

3.1 Definition

All human activities, simple or complicated, physical or mental, are pushed by a certain inner motivation. Such activities together with its aiming dynamic are psychologically called motivation. It is used to explain why performers act like this or that instead of explaining how actions are done. [5]

3.2 Classification

Gardner and Lambert define 'motivation' in terms of the L2 learner's overall goal or orientation. [6] Brown identify three types of motivation: (1) global motivation, which consists of a general orientation to the goal of learning a L2; (2) situational motivation, which varies according to the situation in which learning takes place (the motivation related to classroom learning is distinct from the motivation involved in naturalistic learning; (3) task motivation, which is the motivation for performing particular learning tasks. The first definition clearly corresponds to Gardner and Lambert's sense of 'motivation'; the second one is a new concept, and the third definition seems to be the same as Gardner and Lambert's 'attitudes'. [7]

Motivation can be also classified into three major types. They are respectively integrative/instrumental, intrinsic/extrinsic, and state/trait motivation.

3.2.1 Integrative/Instrumental

Integrative motivation refers to the desire to learn a language to be integrated smoothly into the target language community. Instrumental motivation is the learner's desire to learn a language for utilitarian purposes such as passing exams in schools, getting a good job, doing translation work, or applying for entrance of foreign countries. Thus it refers to a more functional reason for language learning.

3.2.2 Intrinsic/extrinsic

Intrinsic motivation is regarded as a kind of dynamic source which derives from learning activities or learners themselves. Needs, expectations, and interests of learning are major components of intriguing inner motivations. Without rewards, learners can be easily satisfied with what they have learned. On the contrary, extrinsic motivation refers to the dynamic of learning which is stimulated by objective factors. Any praises, rewards, comments, and competitions are stimulus for learners. This motivation can not last for long, and it would disappear when outside situations change. Motivation depending on the learner's learning goal is far less amenable to be influenced by the teacher than that

derives from a sense of academic or communicative success. In the case of the latter, motivation can be developed by careful selection of learning tasks both to achieve the right level of complexity to create opportunities for success and to foster intrinsic interest. [8]

3.2.3 State/Trait

In psychology, motivation is also viewed as a psychological force that gives rise to personality. When a learner is said to be motivated, the teacher may attribute the motivation to the learner's characteristics. In this case, it is called trait motivation. Sometimes when a learner is motivated only for certain tasks and not for other ones, this type of motivation is called state motivation. Trait motivation refers to relatively stable motivational attributes, while state motivation refers to motivational responses to the learning situation. Therefore, many educators prefer trait motivation.

3.3 Function

Learning motivation, as an inner force, directly facilitates students' daily study, which is reflected in the correlation between the intensity of learning motivation's function and learning efficiency. Generally speaking, the more intensive the learning motivation is, the fiercer the learning enthusiasm is, thus the higher the learning efficiency and vice versa. However, with the strengthening of inner force that is beyond a proper limit, the efficiency would decline. M. Yerks and J. D. Dodson have a very specific explanation about the relationship between motivation and learning. They claim that the level of proper motivation is in accord with what the difficulty of learning task is. It seems that the proper motivation of complicated tasks is apparently lower than that of simple ones. [9]

Besides, learning motivation has the function of enhancing learning achievement. As what M. Uguroglu and H. Walberg study in 1985, those students with high level of motivation achieve more, and vice versa. [10] In 1987, it is found that those testees with strong motivation are likely to insist in studying and learn more efficiently than those with weak motivation.

4. Related theories of motivation

4.1 Social-psychological model

Social-psychological theory regards second language as a phenomenon of the society, hence it extremely emphasizes environment. This theory cares about group environment especially individuals who are within the target language surroundings. It clearly focuses on integrative motivation which reflects the relationship between the individual and the group. Acculturation model put forward by Schumann also stresses integrative motivation. In his opinion, second language acquisition is just part of culture adaption and the volume decides what the level of second language acquisition can reach. [11] Some relative theories demonstrates that the desire to learn a second language for the sake of the integration of culture or language is revealed in all levels of language learning motivation of social-psychological structure. Ajzen divides the level into three parts: (1) Attitude toward behavior, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control; (2) Willing or desire; (3) Behavior. The first part refers to people's reaction to behavior, positive or negative and its value; the second part indicates social influence, which comes from teachers, parents etc.; and the last part refers to people's understanding of their tasks. [12]

4.2 Clement and his confidence theory

Clement realizes the limitation of Gardner's theory and then called for a wide perspective rather than integrative and instrumental motivation. [13] In the last decades, confidence has become the hot topic in the L2 motivation researches.

Confidence is a belief that encourages human beings to reach goals and complete tasks. It interferes with two aspects: emotion and recognition. In other words, they are language- using anxiety and self-efficacy of language competence. Clement and his colleagues start a series of experiments to separately check the relationship between social scenes, attitudes, and confidence and L2 acquisition. He finds under the circumstance of different language communities, the predominant motivation is the quality and amount shared by members from different communities. Clement furthers his research and discover confidence is a significant element in foreign language environment. Even learners have few contact with other members of L2 group, and they indirectly go through much more cultures of L2. His

confidence theory is considered as a breakthrough in traditional motivation theories.

4.3 Behavioral perspective

Skinner, the representative of behaviorism, considers that human beings are born with low level needs, and acquire high level needs through operant conditioning. In fact, high level needs are the tool which meets low level needs, and they are formed and consolidated by the strengthening of the meets of low level needs. [14] As a consequence, motivation is the result that certain behavior is reinforced by external factors, as far as behaviorists are concerned. The theory believes that during learning process, when students get a good points or be praised by teachers and parents, students' motivation would be reinforced and vice versa. Skinner divides reinforcement into two parts: positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. Under the operant conditioning, it produces positive reinforcement when people are given satisfying stimulus and negative reinforcement when people are suffering from thwarts and pains. According to this theory, any behavior of human beings is encouraged by rewards which will lead to positive affections.

4.4 Cognitive perspective

Contrary to behaviorism, cognitive theory highlights invisible and testable phenomena. To understand behaviors, cognitive theory indicates, that we have to link invisible cognitive factors to thinking process, intension, expectation and the explanation of specific environment. The theory believes the force of behavior cannot be observed and it becomes information as a belief through coding and outputting. Hence the motivation of cognitive theory is founded in the cognitive process of goal- selecting, decision-making, planning and analysis of possible success. Cognitive view has been the most influential approach to motivation in current mainstream psychology which contains expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy theory, attribution theory, goal theory and self-determination theory.

5. Comparison of English-learning motivation for urban and rural college students

Owing to the locational distribution, diverse cultures are rooted and prospected in urban and rural areas. Sundry differences finally fall to a deviation of education, which directly and indirectly influences students' L2 motivation.

5.1 External factors

A general distinction of external factors can be made between natural settings and educational settings. The former arises when learners have contact with other speakers of the L2 in a variety of situations in the office, at home, through media, at international conferences or during business meetings etc. Educational settings arise in classrooms when learners make some attempts to raise their consciousness about the nature of the target language rules in order to help learning. Most learners will be exposed to the L2 in both natural and educational settings. [15]

5.1.1 Natural settings

Family: for urban and rural college students, their family backgrounds and exposure to media distinguish their further performances in the colleges. As Spolsky points out: "social contexts are relevant to the family or home, and the community, city, and state." [16] As one of the most crucial components of social contexts, family strongly influences learners' language learning. Musgrove describes the family as an all purposes social and economic organization, where it exerted a powerful influence on the prospect, capacity for development and life- chance of the young. [17] The most comprehensive and systematic study is conducted by Coleman, and he views family background especially family social economic status (SES) accounting for the biggest variation of students' academic achievement. [18] After that, relative researches could be found to support Coleman's conclusion. They explain that family SES leads to different learning environments which affects children's learning motivation and intelligence. In the meanwhile, more researchers devote themselves to enriching the structural dimension of family environment to family reading materials, family language, and individual computers. But the results remain the same.

Society: society, as a basic background, provides an extended platform for people living there. On the one hand, for those urban students, they are more likely to come across foreigners, with whom they

have chances to practice their oral English. But for rural students, it is almost impossible for them to get such a chance to meet foreigner, let alone conversation. On the other hand, all kinds of public places are scattered in the big cities, such as theatre, cinema, library, so on and forth. These places can actually offer diverse atmosphere of English culture, to which rural students hardly get access.

5.1.2 Educational settings

As we know, education is the primary way to learn a formal language for students. Basically speaking, educational distribution is not equal in urban and rural areas. Although investment to rural area has grown increasingly in gross, there still exists a great deficiency. Since 1996, our government has thrown a large amount of fund to support rural primary and middle schools. From 1996 to 2003, its investment had risen by 8% of 213.52 for per middle school student, and the investment had risen by 12% of 306.54 for per primary school student. [19] If the unequal distribution is counted, countryside must get a much lower educational investment. Deficient gross of investment makes it more difficult to distribute educational resources, which would intensify the inequity between areas. Besides, urban schools are mostly equipped with advanced media that can easily catch students' eyes. They are usually having fun in English class and getting much pleasure from English language. Nevertheless, rural schools seem scarce in educational equipment. The only way they get to know English is their English class. And monotonous teaching skills and contents make students feel bored and lose interest. Apart from this, they have to finish a hill of examinations to catch up with urban students, which loads a heavier burden on them. As a result, their learning motivation is gradually disappearing.

5.2 Internal factors

5.2.1 Self-assessment

A survey about self-assessment of college students ever aimed to make a comparison between urban and rural areas. [20] It investigates 175 universities to explore the influence of areas that lead to English capacity deviation for freshmen. Artic capacity, organizational capacity, creativity, and English capacity of listening and speaking are added as items to make a relation to testees' living places. It shows that among the 17 items of self-assessment, 16 items appear prominent differences. The data claims that students living in urban area have a higher self-assessment in English listening and speaking as well as in English reading. For rural students, they rank their English capacity of listening, speaking and reading on the top of all the items, which means they are weak in these subjects. However, for those urban students, these two English capacities just rank 15 and 16. [21]

6. Ways to improve the motivation of rural students' English language learning

Based on the facts we discussed above, a series of resolving methods would come into use to help those rural students. But how do we improve their motivation of English language learning?

First, although rural parents do not get educated a lot, they basically recognize English as an important language and they are willing to provide their children with necessary stuffs and comfortable atmosphere. Schools could hold some lectures or organize parenting groups to popularize education knowledge, better family education environment, and improve the level of family education. When students are well guided by their family, they are more willing to take up a new language and last it for a longer time.

Second, school as the only place where rural students learn English language, should be equipped with diverse media that would arouse students' curiosity. If students get fun from English cartoon movies, English songs or English architectures, their learning motivation is more likely to be raised. It is necessary for the government and relative departments to devote more funds to supporting local education. In addition, improving rural English teachers' qualification can not be ignored. If teachers adopt a variety of ways to express English, holding more amazing English activities for example, students must rebuild the motivation for English learning.

Last, rural students should face up to the reality that their English foundation is weaker than urban students. But they should not contribute all results to their environment. If they want, they have chances to overcome such problems. Teachers and educators also should help them build up confidence and cultivate their potential for learning a language. In all, through their own efforts, rural students can performance excellently in English language learning as urban students do.

7. Conclusion

In China, there is no doubt that cities receive more attention and support than that of countries. Thus, rural area is faced with a scarce resource in education. Students living in such a poor condition naturally lack an overall cognition of English, let alone English learning. Hence, to improve rural college students' English learning motivation seems no time to delay. Family, school, and local government should incorporate together to aid rural college students in various ways. But the most important thing is rural students should build up confidence. Intrinsic motivation has a powerful force to push someone to get succeeded. Rural students should recognize the importance of English nowadays, and try to get a closer access to the information about English so as to arouse their interest.

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