
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Research on the Types and Influencing Factors of English Learning Motivation among English Major Undergraduates: A Case Study of Third-Year Students at a University in East China

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| ABSTRACT

English learning motivation significantly impacts learning efficiency. This study empirically investigates the learning motivations of 41 third-year English major students through a questionnaire survey conducted at a university in East China. The findings reveal that the learning motivations of English major undergraduates can be categorized into four types: personal interests, future development, experiential background, and social responsibility. Core factors influencing the types of learning motivation include students' personal cultural interests and their academic and career planning. Additionally, learning motivation is influenced by learning experiences, family environments, and social contexts. This research suggests that university English teachers should adopt a student-centered approach to tailor their teaching methods, thereby assisting students in establishing long-term, profound learning motivations. Furthermore, it encourages universities to implement social practice activities aimed at promoting intercultural communication.

| KEYWORDS

English Major Students; Types of Learning Motivation; Factors Influencing Learning Motivation

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Purpose

With the acceleration of China's opening-up policy, the expansion of foreign trade, and the enhancement of China's international status, the demand for foreign language talents, particularly English-speaking professionals, has continually increased. At the higher education level, this national demand has prompted various disciplines to actively integrate with English, resulting in a multidisciplinary and multilingual teaching model. Concurrently, this demand necessitates that students across different majors actively learn English and apply it in social practices. As prospective foreign language talents, English major students are a focal point for attention and cultivation in higher education institutions. The training process for English major students has evolved from an initial emphasis on teaching methods to a current focus on the students themselves, specifically their learning motivations. An increasing number of universities are examining students' learning motivations and conducting in-depth and ongoing research to develop curricula that better align with students' future career paths and to adopt teaching methods that can effectively benefit their professional development.

Currently, the learning backgrounds of English major students are diverse, and their career plans vary significantly. These multifaceted factors influence the formation of learning motivation, leading to a diversification of motivations among English major students. The complex motivational landscape affects students' learning attitudes and engagement, resulting in different choices of learning strategies and impacting students' autonomy in learning and the sustainability of their studies. Consequently, the categorization of learning motivations among English major students and the exploration of influencing factors are essential. This research will help educators better understand the learning mindsets of English major students and assess their learning trends, thereby providing targeted guidance for specific students. The findings can also offer data references for departments and schools, facilitating the development of educational activities.

2. Theoretical Framework

Motivation has been categorized in various ways due to the diversity of its subjects. Canadian scholars Gardner and Lambert (Gardner, 1972; 1985), through extensive research in the psychology of language learning, redefined language learning motivation into two broad categories: "instrumental" and "integrative." Instrumental motivation refers to language learners utilizing the language to achieve certain practical goals, such as gaining economic benefits, social status, academic qualifications, or opportunities for further study. Learners with this motivation often leverage the tool-like function of the language to achieve their objectives, a motivation commonly observed among university students aiming for goals such as passing exams, studying abroad, or securing positions.

Conversely, integrative motivation emphasizes understanding and assimilating the culture of the target language and engaging with the community that uses that language. This classification considers the influence of family, social, and cultural environments, offering a macro perspective. However, it neglects individual learner interests and personal learning experiences, lacking a microscopic approach to personal attributes.

Another common categorization divides motivation into "intrinsic" and "extrinsic." The distinction here lies in the source of achievement: whether it stems from the language activity itself or from external factors (Atkinson, 1953).

Since the 1990s, social psychology has contributed to the theoretical foundations of motivation research. The application of psychological theories to the study of foreign language learning motivation has led many scholars to incorporate relevant theories from social and educational psychology, continuously deepening and expanding upon previous research on foreign language learning motivation. For instance, some scholars have identified the essential characteristics of human motivation in learning foreign languages and refined foreign language learning motivation theory in conjunction with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Oxford, 1994).

A notable influence during this period has been the "three-dimensional model of motivation," developed by Hungarian scholar Zoltán Dörnyei. He observed that while previous research retained well-established social background factors, individual learner factors were often overlooked. In constructing his three-dimensional model, he intentionally considered both macro and micro perspectives on learning motivation. He proposed that the motivation of foreign language learners should be examined from three dimensions: the language, the learner, and the actual context, such as common classroom teaching settings and extracurricular English activities like language corners. His three-tiered theory connects language learners, the language they are learning, and their societal background, enriching the multidimensional and multi-layered nature of motivation research and expanding its boundaries. This theoretical advancement has practical implications for university foreign language education⁵.

In the context of Chinese university students, Gao Yihong conducted a comprehensive and systematic survey and analysis. Based on classic theories of motivation and subsequent expansions, she classified Chinese undergraduate students' English learning motivations into three main types: instrumental, cultural, and situational⁶. The "situational" motivation corresponds to the "learning context" dimension in the three-dimensional model of motivation, mutually reinforcing each other. These explorations and studies of motivation among foreign language learners in China provide a solid foundation for implementing a "learner-centered" approach to foreign language education that is humanistic in nature. They also serve as a valuable reference for establishing more targeted curricula that meet diverse learner needs, facilitating the principle of "teaching students according to their aptitude."

In recent years, Chinese scholars Zhang Hong and Du Xinran⁷ analyzed data using the PQ Method and Nvivo 12.0, discovering that there are four primary types of English learning motivation among university students: aspirational, failure-avoidance, self-development, and cultural interest, thus expanding and refining the categorization of English learning motivation among Chinese students. Their research focuses on personal learning motivations while considering the impact of learning contexts and experiences, integrating these factors into individual value judgments rather than treating them as standalone motivation types.

In 2024, Fitriani, Kalsum, and Sardi conducted a questionnaire survey among English learners at SMPN 5 Lembang to identify their dominant learning motivations and influencing factors. They categorized motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic types and found that extrinsic motivation (52%) surpassed intrinsic motivation (48%), emerging as the dominant motivation. Influential factors included the need for good exam results, the desire for a good job, and aspirations for further overseas study. However, the study did not specify the dominant factors.

This research refers to Gardner and Lambert's initial motivation classification and Gao Yihong's theoretical expansion, combining "instrumental," "integrative," "cultural," and "situational" types. In the questionnaire design, questions related to learning motivation were categorized into four main types: "personal interests" as cultural or integrative motivation; "future development" as instrumental motivation; "experiential background" as situational motivation; and a fourth category, "social responsibility," combining integrative and cultural types. For each of the four motivational categories, questions were initially designed based on personal experience and subsequently supplemented and refined through individual interviews to create the survey instrument.

3. Research Process

This study employs empirical research methods, using a sample of third-year English major students from a university in East China. A questionnaire was administered to collect data on students' English learning motivations, which were subsequently categorized, analyzed, and summarized. The questionnaire design referenced the research of Gao Yihong, classifying learning motivation into four categories: personal interests, future development, experiential background, and social responsibility. Each category included multiple specific descriptors, allowing participants to select their level of agreement with each motivation based on their personal circumstances. The results were weighted to derive mean and variance data for further analysis.

A total of 50 questionnaires were distributed, and 41 valid responses were collected. The retrieved data were weighted using a Likert scale to calculate the mean and variance for each motivation type, resulting in two analytical tables. Table 1 presents the average value analysis for each type of motivation, while Table 2 shows the frequency and average value analysis for each option. In these tables, an average value below 3 indicates that the majority of students disagree with the description of that option, while an average value above 3 suggests general agreement. Larger variance values indicate greater polarization in the selection results, whereas smaller values suggest more concentrated agreement.

Table 1: Average Values and Variance Analysis of Motivation Types

Motivation Type	Average Value	Standard Deviation
Personal Interests	3.72	3.52
Future Development	3.21	2.21
Experiential Background	3.26	1.07
Social Responsibility	3.36	0.75

Table 2: Average Values and Variance Analysis of Individual Options

Type	Question	Strongly Disagree (%)	Slightly Disagree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Slightly Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Average Value	Standard Deviation
Personal Interests	1. I enjoy learning English.	14.63	31.71	4.88	29.27	19.51	3.07	1.20
	2. I want to understand the culture of English-speaking countries.	9.76	0.00	4.88	63.41	21.95	3.88	6.56
	3. I enjoy English films and songs.	4.88	4.88	7.32	29.27	53.66	4.22	4.59
Future Development	1. I want to study abroad.	9.76	14.63	19.51	12.20	43.9	3.66	1.92
	2. I want to work in an English-related field.	24.39	31.71	14.63	24.39	4.88	2.54	1.08

	3. I want to be more competitive in the job market.	14.63	4.88	12.20	58.54	9.76	3.44	4.77
Experiential Background	1. I performed well in English during high school.	9.76	9.76	9.76	39.02	31.71	3.73	2.03
	2. I feel pressure from my family regarding my English learning.	24.39	29.27	16.00	14.63	24.39	2.85	0.39
	3. Learning English is a trend in society.	19.51	7.32	39.02	4.88	29.27	3.17	2.09
	4. I admire people who excel in learning English.	14.63	14.63	26.83	14.63	29.27	3.29	0.55
Social Responsibility	1. I want to enhance China's international influence and voice.	19.51	2.44	19.51	29.27	29.27	3.46	1.20
	2. I want to promote Chinese culture to the world.	14.63	12.20	24.39	29.27	19.51	3.27	0.49

4. Data Analysis

From Table 1, it is evident that the average value for "personal interests" significantly exceeds that of the other three types of motivation, indicating that the students' learning motivations tend to align with their personal learning desires. The majority of students exhibit patterns characteristic of "intrinsic" and "integrative" motivation, which support long-term learning, sustained high levels of motivation, and an efficient learning process. The average values of the other three categories are all above 3, showing no significant differences among them. This suggests that the English major third-year students at this institution possess a diverse and balanced range of motivations, integrating both intrinsic and extrinsic, as well as "instrumental" and "integrative" motivational models. They are capable of objectively evaluating and timely adjusting their learning motivations based on the contemporary context and their learning experiences. Notably, the average value for "social responsibility" motivation is slightly higher than that of the other two categories, reflecting the students' patriotic sentiments and international perspectives, as they view the strengthening of national power and enhancement of international standing as part of their responsibilities as aspiring young individuals in the new era.

The variance data from Table 1 indicates a decreasing order of variance values across the four types of learning motivation, suggesting significant divergence among the English major students regarding personal development motivation types. While the majority recognize personal interests and future development as important factors influencing their English learning motivation, some students express a lack of interest in English learning and do not plan to engage in English-related work in the future. In contrast, there is considerable consensus among students regarding the social trends of English learning and the desire to enhance China's international status.

Combining the specific data from Table 2 allows for further analysis. Regarding "personal interests," the choices made by English major students show an approximately symmetrical distribution, although there is a slight increase in the number of affirmative responses. However, the vast majority of students acknowledge their interest and curiosity about the cultures of English-speaking countries, which constitutes a primary aspect of their English learning motivation. This phenomenon arises from students' recognition of the importance of cultural engagement in their motivation.

In terms of "future development," there is no strong inclination toward pursuing further study abroad or finding employment directly related to English, as the overall distribution of choices is relatively even, with a low variance value. This indicates that "instrumental" motivation is not the absolute mainstream trend among English major students. Nevertheless, a significant majority

believe that mastering English will enhance their competitiveness in the future job market, thereby allowing them to secure better employment opportunities. From this perspective, English is still fundamentally viewed as a "tool for employment," with "instrumental" motivation, while not overtly dominant, subtly influencing a substantial portion of students' learning psychology and affecting their motivational changes.

Regarding "experiential background," past learning experiences and achievements significantly influence the learning motivation of the English major students at this institution. Most students continue their English studies in college due to their strong English performance in high school. In contrast, family expectations and admiration for successful English learners are not the primary components of their motivation, as these factors exhibit average values and variances close to zero. Another noteworthy factor is the general awareness of the necessity and importance of English learning in today's social environment. Some students view learning English as essential and incorporate this understanding into their motivation. However, a considerable number of students express uncertainty about the current significance of English learning, with some believing that it is not a mainstream trend today. This divergence between their judgment of mainstream trends and the content they study may contribute to a gradual weakening of their motivation for English learning, leading some students to abandon further English studies after graduation in favor of pursuing other majors or careers.

Lastly, concerning "social responsibility," while most students do not prioritize the lofty goal of enhancing China's international status and cultural influence as a primary aspect of their English learning motivation, they do consider it in their evaluations. They hope to contribute to national development through their English proficiency, grounded in pragmatism.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In summary, the analysis of learning motivations among the third-year English major students at this institution reveals that their motivations are predominantly driven by personal learning desires and past academic achievements, fostering an "integrative" intrinsic motivation. However, underlying this overt trend is a persistent focus on "instrumental" learning motivations centered around employment. Furthermore, it is evident that Chinese English major students maintain a strong sense of patriotism and international perspective, aspiring to contribute to national development and showcase their talents on the global stage.

The research indicates that the learning motivations of third-year English major students can be categorized into four types: personal interests, future development, experiential background, and social responsibility, with personal interests holding the highest proportion and the remaining three categories showing no significant distinctions. In terms of influencing factors, cultural interests, and career planning emerge as dominant elements affecting the learning motivations of more than half of the participants. Additionally, learning experiences, family expectations, and social culture also play roles in shaping students' learning motivations.

The study's conclusions suggest that university English educators should adapt their teaching methods according to specific circumstances. First, in response to the dominance of personal factors in students' motivations, teachers should proactively understand students' interests and enhance cross-cultural communication education. Educators with relevant experiences abroad should share their insights, providing students with diverse perspectives on cultural information to foster greater enthusiasm for learning.

Second, for students inclined toward future development in English studies or related fields, teachers can offer information on research processes, career planning, job market demands, and industry prospects. Schools with the resources may organize research activities, company visits, social internships, and career planning workshops to help students better adapt to relevant content, clarify their development pathways, and enhance both their motivation and learning efficiency, as well as offer guidance to those still uncertain about their future.

For students heavily influenced by family factors, educators should engage with them to understand their family backgrounds and clarify the pathways through which motivations are formed, providing tailored academic advice. Meanwhile, for students affected significantly by social and cultural contexts, educators and institutions should enhance patriotism education, guiding students to actively embrace their roles as foreign language learners and practitioners. They should also promote the correct dissemination of Chinese culture and recommend participation in local foreign affairs activities, offering language services or fostering channels for communication with international students to promote the spread of Chinese culture.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Due to the limitations imposed by the author's cognitive level and understanding, this study has certain constraints: First, the sample range is relatively narrow, focusing on a single institution, which means the conclusions might require validation with a larger sample size. Second, the questionnaire's scope is limited by the sample, leading to potential deviations between the

statistical results and actual conditions. These potential shortcomings were not part of the original design, and expanding the sample size in future research should address these issues.

Future research should focus on the following areas: First, increasing the sample size to enhance the generalization of the findings. Second, conducting a more detailed quantitative analysis of the factors influencing English learning motivation to explore the specific impact of various factors. Subsequent studies will aim to delve deeper into these aspects to refine and expand upon the current research.

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