

THE INFLUENCING FACTORS AND INCENTIVE MEASURES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING MOTIVATION

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ABSTRACT

The first quarter of 2020 saw the global spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which has seriously affected how education institutions operate. Facing this dilemma, many colleges recourse teaching and learning activities through the online platform. A recent survey made by some scholars in China found that total online teaching weakened students' learning motivation, and some students encountered difficulties in adaptation, low learning enthusiasm and learning weariness, which resulted in poor learning outcomes. As an effort to overcome these problems, this preliminary study examined the factors promoting and hindering students' online English learning motivation of college students in Guangdong Province, China. A total of ten both highly and lowly motivated college students aged between 18 to 20 were invited to take part in this qualitative study whereby data was primarily obtained through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data were analyzed via the content analysis method with an inductive approach and the consequential findings reveal that the students, their peer groups, teachers, network environment and other factors affect students' online learning motivation in different aspects. Based on the analysis of the influencing factors, Dörnyei's Motivational Teaching Practice (MTP) theoretical framework and relevant learning motivation theory, this paper put forward some incentive strategies to motivate and maintain the motivation of online English learning for college students, which include: scientific and reasonable online English learning standard environment, appropriate guidance for autonomous learning, reasonable organization of online teaching methods, effective communication among learners and teachers' timely and effective evaluation and feedback, as well as other incentive measures.

Key words: influencing factors, incentive measures, learning motivation.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Online learning begun as early as in 1980s but gained increasing popularity globally in the beginning of the 21st century. As early as August 2007, the teaching requirement document issued by the China Ministry of Education clearly put forward that the teaching of College English be carried out via both computer-based and classroom-based modes. This adoption of new yet varied approaches to teaching and learning have resulted in numerous advantages for teaching ideas, teaching methods, and teaching models, just to name a few. However, at the level of students, teachers and environment, there are also some incongruous phenomena with the teaching reform model, and the ecological balance of the traditional college English classroom has been broken (Liang & Pang, 2019).

At the beginning of February 2020, the Ministry of Education of China issued the guiding opinions on the organization and management of online teaching in Colleges and universities during the period of epidemic prevention and control, which requires the government to lead the main body of colleges and universities, and the participation of the society to jointly implement and guarantee the online teaching in colleges and universities so as to realize "non-stop teaching and non-stop learning". The teaching mode of many universities changed from classroom teaching as the main mode and online teaching as the auxiliary mode to a total online teaching mode. At this point, students need to adapt to a completely different online teaching context. Over the past 20 years, there have been numerous researches on online learning (Yang & Quadir, 2018; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Tang & Chaw, 2019; Yu, 2019; Wang & Zhan, 2020), but these researches were all based on online learning as a kind of auxiliary learning.

In fact, the implementation and development of online teaching has unique advantages in following the concept of educational modernization (Xiao & Ran, 2020). Online teaching can pay more attention to the learning of each student, reflect the requirements of individualized teaching, and become a new form of personalized teaching. However, under the influence of traditional education and teaching concepts, the complete online teaching still stays in the framework of teaching and learning for "exam oriented". Online teaching activities still use a unified curriculum plan, curriculum content, and even curriculum design. During the epidemic period, the total online class makes students become online "listeners" or "viewers" rather than real learners, with little acknowledgement of students as learning subjects nor addressing their learning enthusiasm. While there have been studies showing increased preference toward new approaches of learning, including online (Yao & Li, 2019), a recent survey by some scholars (Zou, Yan & Li, 2020) in China found that total online teaching diminishes students' learning motivation. Some students struggled to adjust to this "new normal" of learning while others reported lack of enthusiasm and increased weariness in learning henceforth resulted in poor learning effects. Given this scenario, the researchers were interested to examine factors that promote or block students' motivation on online English learning and explore the characteristics of students' English learning motivation under the online learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though considered to be a rather elusive and somewhat controversial concept, motivation provides the essential impetus to initiate second language learning (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Daif-Allah & Aljumah, 2020), and later be the driving force to sustain learning amidst the potential difficulties. As one of the most important factors affecting second language learning, motivation of second language learners differs in dissimilar groups with different characteristics, as well as in diverse learning contexts. Many researchers have also found factors that both promote as well as hinder students' learning motivation (Gedera, Williams & Wright, 2015; Thongsri, Shen & Bao, 2019). In addition, some studies found that students' motivation for foreign language learning and their performance to be affected by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in different circumstances (Ghanizadeh & Rostami, 2015), while a conclusion from Simon (2013) highlighted three key factors affecting foreign language learners' motivation, namely integrativeness and the ideal L2 self; the enjoyment of learning; and external pressures.

Meanwhile, in retrospect, many researches of online English learning were conducted in a context of combined traditional classroom learning and online learning, mainly blended learning or flipped learning (Wang & Zhan, 2020; Yao & Li, 2019; Yu, 2019; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Huang & Hong, 2016). Other researches mainly focused on the effects (Yang & Quadir, 2018; Basal, 2019; Pan, 2017) of online learning, or teaching modes design (Liang & Pang, 2019), or teaching platforms design (Chen & Keng, 2019; Tan, 2018) in the context. And there were also some researchers concerned about the factors that contributed to the students' online learning motivation (Subramanian & Budhrani, 2020). Previous studies have mostly considered that online teaching assisted classroom teaching can effectively stimulate and maintain students' motivation for English learning (Jeong, 2019). However, few studies were concerned about online English learning as a dependent learning approach, and even fewer studies involved in exploring influencing factors behind learning motivation in the context.

Linking the various works reported on motivation and online language learning, this study was carried out using Dörnyei's (2001) Motivational Teaching Practice (MTP) in L2 Classrooms model as its theoretical basis. According to MTP, what matters is not how many different strategies L2 teachers use in their teaching, but the quality of the strategies used. Dörnyei suggested four main components of the teaching practice that created an efficient motivating learning environment in the L2 classroom: creating basic motivational conditions; generating initial motivation; maintaining and protecting motivation; encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. The current study however, serves as a preliminary study to a bigger one where the researchers aim to explore influencing factors of learners' online English learning motivation.

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interview as means of acquiring data on motivational factors that promote or hinder online English learning and to explore the characteristics of college students' English learning motivation in the online learning environment. Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyu (2019) assert that semi-structured interview allows the researchers to elicit in-depth data, which include the participants' beliefs, opinions and attitudes, about the addressed topic. All interviews were carried out and recorded via Wechat (a free application launched by Tencent in 2011). Initially, a face-to-face interview session was planned but had to be scraped out due to the imposed COVID-19 restrictions.

A total of ten (10) college students aged between 18 to 20 were invited to become research participants. The students came from diverse academic programs offered by a model higher college in Guangdong Province. Five highly motivated students and five students with lower motivation were chosen according to the online learning observation data and their instructors' discretion. Selection of participants were done purposively according to the following criteria: (i) they do not major in English language, (ii) they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and (iii) they are currently taking an English Language course.

The interviews with the students were intended to gain a deeper understanding of motivational factors for promoting students' online English learning as well as factors that hinder students' interest to learn English via online mode. The interviews were recorded on the Wechat platform after interviewees' consent was taken. The qualitative data were analyzed via the content analysis method with an inductive approach. Therefore, the data analysis was data-driven, rather than theory-driven as in the deductive approach. From the study, the researchers hoped to put forward the incentive measures for online English teaching of college students

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS FOR PROMOTING STUDENTS' ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING

In response to the question on reasons why the participants studied English online, the top ten factors given are as listed in Table 1. Studying English online for these participants are not necessarily limited to the required lessons and tasks set out by their English Language teachers; the participants may go beyond by proactively search for other apps or additional information relating to their interest in learning English.

Table 1: Motivating factors of online English Language learning

Factors for students' online English learning	Frequency
1. school and teachers' requirements	8
2. more autonomous learning time	6
3. obtaining good exam scores	6
4. better job prospect after graduation	5
5. more autonomous learning content	5
6. relaxed learning process	5
7. enriched learning resources	4
8. convenience of traveling abroad in the future	3
9. convenience of studying abroad in the future	3
10. positive influence of other students	2

Although the reasons listed may appear "positive", further analysis shows that the participants either could be motivatedly "pushed" or "pulled" toward online English learning. There are five identified aspects that drive the research participants' motivation to online English learning as follows:

External pressures

According to the data of the interview content, the main reason for students' online learning is that during the period of covid-19 virus they can only study at home, for online learning is the only way to learn. A participant illustrated that:

"all the courses including English course are taught online, then I have to learn online on time every week day in order to attain my scores and reach the requirement from the school and teachers."

The interview indicated the presence of external pressures, such as academic achievement and requirements, from the teachers and school are the main factor for their online learning. This finding just confirmed a research in South Korea that in many cases, external pressure pushed students continue their language study (Nicholson, 2013).

Learner autonomy

In an online learning environment, most learning materials and relevant information were posted on the teaching platform. Some students mentioned being happy that they could plan their own learning, study on their own under the guidance of instructors, and in the end, felt that they could proceed their learning more freely through online learning. Some students indicated there were advantages whereby when learning online, they can go back to the contents they could not fully understand and leave questions to their teachers privately, which often cannot be realized in traditional classroom learning. In addition, some other students thought that there were enriched learning resources and they had more choices to study. The findings also confirmed the relevant theory of autonomous study that learners can claim to have proactive autonomy when they are able to take charge of their own learning, determine their own objectives, select methods and techniques, and evaluate what has been acquired (Holec, 1981; Tsai, 2019).

Prediction of future development

According to the information gathered through the interviews, some correspondents gave out an instrumental orientation of online English learning which included: for a good job after graduation, for the convenience of traveling abroad in the future and for the convenience of studying abroad in the future. These students could foresee the important position of English in the future social life and career, link the current language learning with the future career and life, interact with the gap between the vision of the future and the reality, and promote the learners' learning motivation towards learning goals. These findings show the same result with a recent research in China Macao that "the young EFL learners' study mainly for instrumental reasons" (Wallace & Leong, 2020)

Relaxed learning environment

Regarding the learning environment affecting students' learning motivation, some respondents indicated,

"during the online learning process, I feel relaxed and I am not afraid of not being able to answer the questions", "as we (teachers and students) are not face to face, I will not be afraid of being laughed at for my mistakes".

Classroom environment or classroom climate refers to the objective' perception of students towards the social and emotional features of a class (Nicholson, 2013). Online English learning created a relatively relaxed objective perception and peaceful emotional feature for a class, which is conducive for arousing students' English learning motivation.

The Roles of Peers

Peers with positive attitude is one of the motivation sources to promote students' online English learning motivation (Tanaka,2017). Learners' motivation is influenced by their peers and in general, motivated peer engagement in L2 learning enhances learner's motivation. Interviewees mentioned that:

"according to the records of the learning platform, I found that my classmates learn online on time every day. If I don't log onto the learning system to study, my learning progress will be behind them".

As online English learning platform records the attendance and the performance (some even have a ranking list) of the online class, most of students will pay close attention to the records and make comparison with their classmates. Consequently, peers will play a positive or negative effect on learners' learning motivation.

MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS HINDERING STUDENTS' ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING

Through content analysis, it is found that the top ten factors in response to this problem are: low learning efficiency, the role of English on their future career, boring online teaching methods of teachers, insufficient supervision of teachers, too many professional online courses, no interest in learning English, no significant progress in learning, interference of online entertainment resources, and lacking of corresponding learning strategies, network learning equipment and environment (network speed) are not good, etc. see Table 2 for details.

Table 2: Motivational factors hindering students' online English learning

Factors of blocking students' online English learning	Frequency
1. learning efficiency	7
2. role of English on their future career	6
3. boring online teaching methods	6
4. insufficient supervision of teachers	6
5. too many professional online courses	5
6. no interest in learning English	5
7. no significant progress in learning	5
8. interference of online entertainment resources	4
9. lacking corresponding learning strategies	3
10. network learning equipment and environment (network speed) are not good	3

Further analysis shows that factors that hinder students' online English learning mainly comes from the following aspects.

Learning experience

The importance of pleasant learning experience was also highlighted by the students. From the interview records, it is found that the learning experience of online English learning is the main factor hindering students' motivation of online English learning, including "low learning efficiency of online English learning", "no significant progress in learning" and so on. This kind of factor, in the light of self-determination theory, is considered as the most self-determined type of extrinsic motivation and can be defined as a kind of identified regulation (Guay, Denault & Renauld, 2017). It is widely accepted that learners with identified regulation place a high level of importance and value on learning (Yu, 2020). In the interview, the participants responded that:

"in the online English class, when the teacher is giving out living online teaching, I try my best to follow him. However, I almost fail to realize that. Most of time, I feel sleepy and find I have got nothing from the online class."

Students' not realizing the importance and value of online English learning negatively affected their learning motivation online.

Teaching methods

Teaching methods is what students are very much concerned about. One respondent clearly indicated:

"I don't want to do the homework online. I don't want to join the discussion part and I dislike the small test one after another. It's too boring while teacher just there talk and talk....."

As such, it can be concluded that boring online teaching methods and insufficient supervision of teachers greatly demotivated students' online English learning. Just like Hassan and Khan posited that: though motivation is primarily a responsibility of the learners, teachers' endeavors to motivate students should be laden with constructive, positive feedback (Hassan, Hariri & Khan,2020). This finding is in line with the research results derived from the study of Gedera et al. (2015) that thoughtful and appropriate teaching design and course organization are critical factors that are associated with students' motivation and positive/negative experiences of learning online.

Role of English in future career

Some interviewees doubted the role of English in their future career:

"My major is Mold Design and Manufacturing. After my graduation, I will work in a factory, and I don't think English will be useful in my future job. I think learning English now is a waste of time for me."

"My major is Logistics Management. After graduation, I think I will be involved in a job which has nothing to do with English. I don't think English will play a very important role in my work in the future. I don't like learning English."

The above illustration indicated that in the process of learning, students will connect the current language learning with the future career. And in some students' perception, there is a gap between the vision of the future and the actual learning, which affects the motivation of learning.

Online learning strategy

In online learning environment, as there is an absence of direct face-to-face guidance and supervision from the teachers and students themselves most of time need to autonomously decide how to engage with the course content, the specific learning strategy in online English class is of great significance for the students to achieve personal learning objectives. Nonetheless, from the interview, many students reflected that they lacked this specific online learning strategy, which resulted their low motivation to learn online. Two of the excerpts that reflected this point are as follows:

"When I am learning online, I will just sit in front of screen, listening and listening until the end of the class."

"When I have my English lesson online, I don't know what to do except listening."

Some other participants also said that there were too many professional online courses and they felt tired of online learning. How to effectively arrange the learning subjects and time has been another factor to affect students learning motivation.

Other factors

Besides the above factors affecting learners online learning motivation, some interviewees stated that bad network learning equipment and slow network speed often interfered their learning and made them low motivation in online learning. This factor indicated that necessary excellent social support provided by parents are very important factors for students' learning online.

Some other thought that they did not like English and that was the most important factor hindering their motivation to learn it online. These factors are just in accordance with researches of in-person instruction that appeared in traditional classrooms that an intrinsically motivated learner will maximize effort and persistence in challenging activities optimally and experiencing interest and enjoyment that increase or sustain participation as opposed to a not intrinsically motivated learner (Bosch, Mentz & Reitsma, 2019).

INCENTIVE MEASURES FOR ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING MOTIVATION

Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes some incentive measures to promote college online English learning.

Scientific and reasonable online English learning standard environment

Extrinsic motivation is an important reason for students to enter online English. In this study, learning motivation is more regulated by external factors. Learners will be motivated or lose learning motivation because of whether online English learning will bring pragmatic benefits to their future learning (academic performance) or career. In light of Skinner's theory, language learning attempts would be best followed by positive reinforcement of praise or successful communication (Broad, 2020). Teachers' rewards or punishments will directly affect learners' enthusiasm and motivation for learning. Therefore, the scientific and reasonable standard environment of online learning is the premise of online English learning. The standardized environment of online learning refers to the stable learning atmosphere, learning habits, learning attitude, behavior standards, etc., which is formed in the learning process and has a binding effect on learners. On one hand, teachers should clearly explain the importance of English learning to students' future career and life; on the other hand, they should set up clear and detailed online English learning reward and punishment measures, and strengthen the supervision of online learning. Let the standard and reasonable online learning environment become the driving force of online English learning motivation.

Appropriate guidance for autonomous learning

Hsieh & Hsieh (2019) state that learner autonomy in foreign language learning can be developed systematically, such as in teacher-led learning modes or in a natural setting, in a self-learning mode. In addition, Zou, Yan, and Li in their recent research posited that the success of online English learning is whether students can learn and carry out autonomous learning (Zou, Yan & Li, 2020).

One of the characteristics of online English learning is that students can arrange their own learning time and content independently. However, in an open, individualized and diversified online learning environment, learners' self-discipline, sense of responsibility, sense of morality, purpose and consciousness are greatly weakened, and they are easy to get lost in rich online learning resources and online games. Therefore, timely discovery and correct guidance are needed to point out the direction for learners to move forward. In addition, real-time and appropriate encouragement is needed to strengthen learners' trust and confidence, stimulate their learning motivation, and cultivate and highly effective independent learning ability.

In terms of specific measures, following measures are proposed: emphasizing the design of learning tasks combined with the actual life of students; enlightening the constructing of learning resources; the guidance of students' learning should be moderate; the learning tasks should not be presented together with the task answers; the incentive mechanism should be set in the teaching evaluation to improve students' interest in learning and encourage students to communicate through certain incentive means.

In addition, while cultivating students' ability of autonomous learning, teachers need to restrain students' random learning behavior, and appropriately adopt certain punishment measures to make students realize that they can't easily give up curriculum requirements. Form a clear system, teachers correctly guide students to learn online. While for individual students tired of learning behavior, teachers should communicate in time. The construction of correctly guiding students to learn independently and form the habit of online learning is a subtle process, which needs teachers' attention and attention.

Finally, there will be array of activities and strategies to aid learners' creation of autonomous English online learning. However, only when the instructors introduce them to the learners with clear and direct explanations, they will respond in highly positive ways and achieve the learning goals better in the end.

Reasonable organization of online teaching methods

From the above analysis, it is obvious that instructors' or teachers' teaching methods are of utmost important to stimulate, maintain or block students' online English learning motivation. The level of learning motivation has a direct impact on learners' internalization of knowledge. For online course designers, important ways to ensure learning efficiency and quality are by sustaining learning enthusiasm through interesting, informative yet challenging exposures to instructional materials, learning activities, and opportunities for interaction. Meanwhile, the teachers should have sound mastery of their content knowledge, English pedagogical skills and online teaching. The design of online content cannot copy learning resources, such as directly transplanting the teaching content of traditional courses to the online platform; rather to recognize the significance and characteristics of online learning, to reasonably select course content, to carefully design teaching process, and to present course content based on students' learning level differences with different presentation methods.

On the other hand, in terms of teaching methods, we should strengthen the interaction between teachers and students, and stimulate students' interest in online English learning. A common problem reflected in online learning is that teachers and students are separated in time and space. Therefore, the arrangement of curriculum content and the design of resources need to be based on the good interaction between teachers and students. If there is no interaction between teachers and students, even the students with strong independent learning ability will have blind obedience and anxiety in learning, which will affect students' learning Cognitive and learning motivation. Therefore, teachers should first understand the needs of students, make statistics on the overall needs of students, and pay attention to the individual special circumstances of students on the basis of meeting the needs of most students, so as to increase the interaction between teachers and students. In addition, teachers actively communicate with students on the learning management platform and make reasonable evaluation and expectation for students' learning results in each stage. Fully understanding students' needs, teachers should increase and decrease the interaction time according to students' learning style and cognitive level and make corresponding changes in teaching design when students complete tasks. For students with strong autonomous learning ability, it is necessary to appropriately reduce the communication between teachers and students and encourage their learning and give out subsequent expectations in each communication. For students who are not suitable for independent learning and have poor autonomy, it is necessary to increase the degree of communication between teachers and students, patiently solve the problems in the process of students' learning, with not only answering the specific content of learning, but also giving corresponding guidance from learning methods and cognitive methods, so as to fundamentally improve students' online learning motivation and academic level.

Effective communication among learners and teachers

First of all, teachers need to actively use the discussion area function of online learning platform to set up a place for learners to communicate with each other and guide students to communicate. Because online learners have similar social experience and cultural background, their communication is more convenient, and their emotional communication is more likely to resonate.

Then, learners' high-frequency and high-quality communication can affect the learning attitude of "followers" and "silencers" in the online learning platform, so as to drive them to keep up with the learning progress and keep consistent with it. Teachers should encourage students to share their real online English learning experience with students who have technical and psychological barriers in online learning. On the one hand, teachers should actively encourage students to have a sense of competition and encourage each other; on the other hand, they should establish a good cooperative relationship with their peers, actively exchange learning experience online, and encourage them to learn from their peers.

Timely and effective evaluation and feedback

Many studies have shown that the frequency of learners' engagement in online learning is positively correlated with teachers' feedback (Caruso, Fraschini & Kuuse, 2019; Lai, Lin, Lin & Tho, 2019). If learners can get timely answers and help in the process of online learning, it will gradually increase learners' confidence in online learning, improve learners' participation in online learning, and stimulate learning motivation. On the other hand, learners can judge their learning effect, adjust their learning progress and make further learning plans through feedback. The enhancement of online learning confidence and the formulation of online learning plan can greatly improve learners' learning enthusiasm and strengthen learners' enthusiasm for online learning.

Therefore, strengthening the teaching evaluation of online English learning is another important way to improve students' online English learning. The evaluation method can be the way of teachers' direct feedback to directly inform learners of the effect of learning; it can be the way of giving different grades to learners' discussions or assignments; it can also be the way of peer evaluation for feedback. Teachers' evaluation has high authority and can get the trust of learners, while peer evaluation can expand the depth and breadth of learners' learning. In the process of evaluation, learners change from the performer of learning tasks to both the performer of tasks and the evaluator of their quality. This is not only a method of knowledge sharing, but also a way to improve learners' sense of responsibility and provide learning opportunities for other learners. It also enables learners to recognize their own shortcomings, stimulate their enthusiasm and their motivation for learning English online and improve their abilities while learning from other learners.

Other incentive measures

We also found some other influencing factors that demotivate students to learn online include bad network learning equipment, slow network speed and too many professional online courses, all of which negatively impacted students' participation in online English learning.

CONCLUSION

It is broadly accepted that when learners feel comfortable in the learning processes, they will be motivated and better engaged in the learning. From this study, it is apparent that online English learning offers promising advantages such as promoting self-regulated learning and allowing students to express themselves creatively as well as to discover content which are of personal interest and relevance. At the same time, online English learning also has its disadvantages whereby some students may end up realizing that it is not their cup of tea, especially when they lost interest or cannot see the relevance of mastering English and not able to communicate and collaborate effectively to complete assignments. Anyhow, the findings did shed some light as to how online lessons should take place so as to motivate learners; and the crucial role and strategies that English instructors must consider when teaching the subject online. Through the suggested strategies, it is hoped that English language learning and teaching will take place effectively

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