

Initiation and Maintenance of Motivation in Second Language

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Abstract

There are many factors leading to success in Second Language Acquisition. Among them affective factors play a crucial role. The present study focuses on motivation, which is a major factor in affective domain. Through a case study, it is believed that teacher factor and early success are crucial in initiating motivation, while internalization of external factors can facilitate learners to maintain motivation for long-term benefit.

Key words: Affective factors; Motivation; Internalization

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal of research on the factors leading to success in SLA. Among them personality factors, or say, affective factors play a significant role in SLA. Although, as Brown (2002) pointed out, it is difficult to subdivide and categorize the factors of the affective domain; careful, systematic study of the role of personality in SLA has led to a better understanding of the language learning process. From my point of view, affect is human specific and it is no more than emotion or feeling. No matter how undetectable it appears, such things as thoughts, beliefs, desires, dislikes “felt as real to us as any physical objects— perhaps even more real”

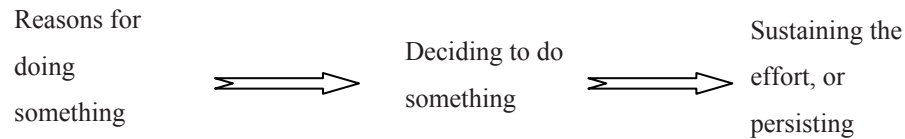
(Bickerton, 1995, p.122). In this study, I concentrate on motivation, which is a crucial factor in affective domain.

Motivation is considered to be the key to success in SLA. What is motivation? Researchers have defined it from psychological, cognitive and social constructivist perspectives. The present study is confined to the psychological perspective. “Motivation is commonly thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action” (Brown, 2002, p.152).¹ Some psychologists define motivation in terms of certain needs or drives. Early psychological views on motivation, with Murray’s drive reduction theories, George Kelly’s pushpull theories and Atkinson’s achievement motivation as representatives, were relatively simplistic in their attempts to explain human behavior by only dependent on external forces. Donald Hebb (1995) in his classic text *The Organization of Behavior* put forward the view of optimal arousal as an alternative of the previous theories. Berlyne (1960) confirmed that even animals could be motivated by curiosity and novel and not just for edible rewards or to avoid pain. There are limitations of those early theories. “It was only when some psychologists began to differentiate between actions that were perceived as within our conscious control and those outside our control that it became possible to develop an entirely different perspective on motivation— one that drew upon ideas from cognitive psychology” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p.115).

Ausubel (1968) identified six needs under girding the construct of motivation, which are helpful to explore the initiation and maintenance of motivation. Those six needs are: (1) the need for exploration, for seeing “the other side of the mountain”, for probing the unknown; (2) the need for manipulation, for operating on the environment and causing change; (3) the need for activity, for movement and exercise, both physical and mental; (4) the need for stimulation, the need to be simulated by the environment. By other people, or by ideas, thoughts, and

feelings; (5) the need for knowledge, the need to process and internalize the results of exploration, manipulation, activity and stimulation, to resolve contradictions, to quest for solutions to problems and for self-consistent systems of knowledge; (6) finally, the need for ego enhancement, for the self to be known and to be accepted and approved of by others. According to my understanding, certain needs are significant and specific to different people, or the same person in different ages. That is to say, if a

person's needs can be detected, it will be crucial to get him or her motivated and to get motivation sustained. The present study attempts to provide relevant evidence for the idea that the most important factor in second language acquisition is motivation. And it also attempts to explore some factors that help to initiate and sustain motivation through interviewing a successful second language learner. In order to make my point clearer, I will introduce a three-stage model of motivation (Williams & Burden, 1997).



We can analyze that reasons for doing something will affect persistence, and the very act of sustaining effort can give rise to further reasons for action. In other words, those three components form a circle by interacting with each other mutually.

SUBJECT

The subject of this study is a 24-year-old native speaker of Chinese named Wang Ting. She is an English major student, who is studying as a graduate in Shanghai Foreign Language University. She and I used to be classmates as well as roommates in Liaoning Normal University for four years. As an undergraduate, she was excellent. She got high marks in her major courses and also got second place in an English speech contest with competitors from the whole Dalian City. After four-year study in Liaoning Normal University, she was sent to Shanghai International Studies University by our school without taking the entrance examination. So, to some extent, she is a successful English learner.

Wang Ting began learning English at a very early age, about 4 or 5 years old. In fact, at that time, she was exposed to English, and forced to study. She often went out to play secretly in order to avoid leaning English. When she was in her last year in primary school, she began learning English by herself. As she said, she just suddenly wanted to learn English without any reason. Within one year, she finished the English text book for the first grade students in middle school. And the learning materials available are only a textbook and several tapes. After one year self-teaching, she went to middle school. From then on, she had formal instruction in English until now. Generally speaking, she was always considered as a good English learner by her teachers and classmates. Her four-year studying in LNU was characterized by steadily increasing knowledge relevant to English, improvement in fluency and communicative competence and lasting interest in language. She often read English newspapers,

magazines, watched English movies and listened to English songs and was more and more interested in English cultures. Each week, she went to English corner to practice spoken English with foreigners. Though her future study requires strong basic English knowledge and high marks, I was not sure whether this was the most significant drive for her to study English. Obviously, the spare time she spent on English was for entertainment rather than learning. It seems that she likes challenges and is always ready for them. She is curious for the unknown. In terms of motivation model, such factors as interest, attitudes, personality, early success and teacher are relevant.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I collected data by interview. Wang Ting was my classmate and roommate for four years. And she is also my good friend. So I choose to conduct a semi-automatic approach: interview guide. I designed a list of questions in form of key words as my guide. Those questions might not be in order and my wording could also be different in the process of interview. We have the same education background and except for her one-year self-teaching, we all began our formal instruction at the same age and for the same period of time. In other words, we share similar external learning environment. Furthermore, I haven't found that she has any special or more efficient learning strategies. But why is she more successful than her peers? Therefore I confined my study to affective factors, among which motivation is the most important. So an interview guide with a framework is my optimal choice, and this approach can also be combined with my observation. In the following part, I will analyze the data from several aspects.

Interest

Wang Ting said that she was very interested in language. She was sensitive to language and she always thought

language beautiful. I'm not sure whether her sensitivity and interest towards language have some causal relations. Because we can hardly know why a sports fan devote his life to supporting a particular team, while another person may probably spend his or her life collecting postage stamps. But curiosity definitely attributes to interest. We are born with curiosity. Children appear to be more curious than adults, because they know little about this world. But in fact, adults are no less curious than children. As Wang Ting said, the more she knew about English, the more unknown was exposed to her. It reminds me of a metaphor comparing what we know to the part inside a circle, and what we do not know to the part outside the circle. You may ask since curiosity is held by all of us, why you still mention it here as a distinctive aspect contributing to SLA. It is because having curiosity is one thing, while arousing and maintaining curiosity is another.

Attitudes

In terms of SLA, attitudes refer to those that second language learners hold toward people who belong to that language community and the society and culture where the target language is embedded. Williams and Burden (1997)⁵ point out that learning a second language is not only to learn the language itself, but also involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being. Gardner (1985) argues that success in learning a foreign language will be greatly influenced by attitudes towards the community of speakers of that language; Wang Ting holds a positive attitude toward target language and its culture. She welcomes a different perspective to see the world. She likes seeing English movies and she is interested in differences between Chinese people and English people, for example their different greeting styles.

I don't think I can rush for a conclusion that positive attitudes attribute to successful SLA. But they do characterize high motivation. Gardner's social-educational model of language learning (Gardner, 1985) combines the learner's cultural beliefs, their attitudes towards the learning situation, their integrativeness and their motivation. He emphasizes that the primary factor in the model is motivation. He defines motivation as referring to a combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes towards

learning the language. We can see that attitude is an ingredient of motivation.

Personality

Self-reliant personality and confidence in her ability; enthusiasm for challenge; curiosity about the unknown; willingness to expand time and energy studying English in the actual context of use.

Early Success

Wang Ting was first exposed to English when she was about 4-year old. At that time, she was forced to study, so she didn't have any motivation. When she taught herself, she felt a sense of success during the process of self-teaching. I highlight this point, because not every second language learner has ever had such experience. This kind of early success was very important to her for it played a crucial role in the initiation of motivation. Early success can enhance and it did enhance Wang Ting's self-confidence and help to establish positive self-esteem. Early success, I mentioned here, cannot be measured by external rewards, instead, it is a state of inner feeling.

Teachers

In the process of second language learning, some "significant others" are sure to be involved. "[T]he reality of language learning in schools and other institutions is that learning tasks are generally introduced by another person, most often the teacher". "[T]he role of the teacher is important at all stages of the motivational process" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p.133). When being asked "who do you think is the most influencing teacher in your SLA?" Wang Ting spoke out, without hesitation, her first English teacher. She told her that the aim of learning language was effective expression and successful communication. The clarification of learning purpose made her not only concentrate on linguistic knowledge, but also on the use of language in real life. The teacher also helped her to develop an autonomic learner.

The five factors discussed above mainly fall into two categories. The first three factors belong to internal domain, and the last two belong to external domain. Teachers play an important role in the initiation of motivation, and early success geared motivation. But the source of energy to sustain motivation is the learner's internal factors. Susan Harter (1981) made a comparison

INTRINSIC

preference for challenge
curiosity/interest
independent mastery
independent judgment
internal criteria for success

vs.
vs.
vs.
vs.
vs.

EXTRINSIC

preference for easy work
pleasing teacher/getting grades
dependence on teacher in figuring out problems
reliance on teacher's judgment about what to do
external criteria for success

between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation:

Therefore according to my analysis and Harter's figure, intrinsic motivation is the key factor contributing to Wang Ting's success in SLA.

CONCLUSION

In this study, some evidence is found to support that motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, is the most important factor in SLA. Teachers and early success are crucial in initiating motivation. But it is only to internalize those external factors, can learners maintain motivation for long-term benefit.

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