



# A Study on the Motivation of an International Student Who Has Come to the UK to Learn English

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## Abstract

This paper uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to study the motivation of a Chinese student studying English in the UK. Motivation, seen as the drive for sustained action towards a goal, is crucial in L2 acquisition, which can be slow and challenging. Using an interview with a Chinese international student, this study examines how motivation changes over time and explores the impact of social context on intrinsic motivation by fulfilling the basic psychological needs proposed by Deci and Ryan: relevance, autonomy, and competence. In addition, this study explored teaching strategies to enhance intrinsic motivation, such as interactive activities and differentiated assignments. However, the study was limited to a narrow sample of a single student and a short time frame, which affected the generality of the results. In addition, the study only considered two motivating factors, teachers and parents, and ignored the influence of other factors. The proposed teaching strategy is based only on the author's personal experience and lacks wider validation. Therefore, further practical studies are needed to determine the effectiveness of these methods. Despite its limitations, this study provides insights into L2 learning motivation and contributes to research on the motivation of Chinese learners for self-directed learning.

## Keywords

Motivation; L2 acquisition process; Self-determination Theory; Teaching strategies

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses to investigate the motivation of a Chinese international student to learn English using the self-determination theory. Motivation is a key focus of research on the factors impacting the secondary language learning process. In this research, motivation is referred to as enthused and sustained action and is considered to be an organism's teleological disposition or endogenous drive toward a goal (Brown, 2014). Second language acquisition tends to be a slow and exhausting process, even in non-emotional contexts, so a motivated willingness to learn will encourage a student to practice the second language effectively, as well as gain confidence to overcome learning hurdles. This paper, therefore, through interviewing a Chinese student in the UK and analyzing the interviewee's motivation for learning English. How motivation has changed over time? Deci and Ryan developed the Self-determination Theory to explain human self-determined conduct (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This theory emphasizes that human action is self-determined, with an individual's social environment boosting intrinsic human motivation, thereby enabling the internalization of extrinsic incentives. This internalization occurs by meeting three fundamental psychological needs—relatedness, autonomy, and competence—which is an act of avoiding shame, seeking approval, and protecting the self. Self-determination theory covers new motivational categories, such as social psychological theory, and opens new motivation research paths by creating enjoyable and fun lessons through the intentional implementation

of a self-determined perspective. Have students create Play-Doh objects, conduct review sessions, discuss personal items, promote peer interaction, and create assignments of varying difficulty to increase students' intrinsic motivation (Jones, Llacer-Arrastia, & Newbill, 2009). For example, in the case of second language learners, Pae has conducted work on Korean English learners and self-determination, finding that Intrinsic motivation only indirectly affected second language success via motivation and self-confidence (Pae, 2008). Continuing with such research, this study examines a UK-based Chinese students' second language motivation, using interviews to explore students' self-determination (or lack thereof) during their coursework. The study will allow for a better understanding of student motivation and may help students, teachers, and schools create a second language acquisition approach that helps improve their learning efficiency. The study will also contribute to the growing research on SDT and second language learning among Chinese students.

## 2. Literature Review

Motivation studies have primarily taken a social psychological approach to the classification and analysis of motivation variables and their relationship to learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). This approach, however, has tended to overlook motivation's complexities, as they forget that FL students are surrounded by their original language. Csizér, K. and Dörnyei, Z. note that motivation addresses "the fundamental question of why people think and behave the way they do, and it is essentially an extremely complex concept to which one should never assume that they know the complete answer" (Csizér, K. & Dörnyei, Z, 2005). Gardner sees motivation as a combination of efforts, desires and attitudes toward achieving certain goals, and thus reorients motivation research towards goal-induced efforts, even if these goals are implicit and imperceptible to the motivated individual themselves (Gardner, 1985). Meanwhile, Maehr and Meyer consider motivation to be goal-directed behavior that is used to explain the stimuli, goals, intensity, persistence and effects of these behaviors (Maehr & Meyer, 1997), while Schunk, D. H. et al see motivation as referring to a psychological disposition that spurs and sustains individuals to perform activities leading to certain goals (Schunk, D. H. et al., 2009). Ultimately, all of these definitions show that motivation can be described as an intrinsic mechanism that initiates and sustains behavior over a period of time.

Motivation, therefore, is considered by most scholars to be within individuals working toward their goals through strong determination and perseverance. In the field of educational psychology, motivation is a driving force for activity that has three functions: a stimulus function, where an organism is motivated to produce a certain activity; an indication function, where motivation is a certain goal or object toward which the organism's activity is directed; and a maintenance and regulation function, where motivation, once developed, maintains an activity at a certain goal, regulating this activity's intensity to maintain it over time. The behavior of motivational functions is therefore complex, as different activities may be governed by the same or similar motivations while different motivations may be expressed through the same activity (Schunk, D. H. et al., 2009).

In the area of second language acquisition, researchers have generally looked for learners' autonomous motivation. In a study of Canadian learners of French, Noels, Clément and Pelletier used SDT to explore intrinsic motivation through reliability and exploratory factor analyses (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 2001). Exploring the relationship between these motivational subtypes and learners' language learning orientations (including instrumental, knowledge, travel and friendship orientations), the researchers confirmed that SDT could effectively assess learners' motivation in second language learning contexts. This study concluded that instrumental orientations were strongly associated with external regulation and that these orientations were highly correlated with recognition regulation and intrinsic motivation. These studies provide valuable suggestions for teaching second language acquisition. The higher the motivation to learn the language in order to communicate with the English-speaking population, the more perceived autonomy and competence experienced with relation to language acquisition.

Self-determination is suggested as an alternate method of using the concept of autonomy in Soenens and Vansteenkiste's research (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Parenting that promotes autonomy was strongly associated with self-determination across all life domains, according to an integrated model of the links between perceived parenting and teaching approaches. In the areas of academic and employment-related behaviors, autonomy-supportive instruction greatly improved the ability to forecast self-determination. Measures of adjustment in the particular life-domains under consideration were positively and specifically correlated with self-determination.

Self-determination Theory has been used to identify categories of motivation relevant for second language learning, particularly intrinsic motivation and the internalization of external motivation. That said, SDT does not sufficiently incorporate social and environmental elements into its conduct, as it posits that individuals make their own judgments and are not influenced by other factors. Social conventions, cultural beliefs, and environmental constraints can restrict

people's choices and capacity to act on their objectives and ideals, meaning that SDT is not applicable to all cases. For example, depression and other mental health issues may make it hard to create and achieve objectives (Levesque, C. et al., 2004). SDT's application in second language motivation must therefore be adjusted to increase student autonomy and high-quality engagement so that they are eager to utilize the new language for communication and learning.

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative study uses SDT to examine overseas students' English learning motivation, using face-to-face interviews to explore the perspectives of a Chinese international student learning English at UK schools. The interview will be held in the UK, as the researcher is a native Chinese speaker who studied English in China for thirteen years and in the UK for more than six months. The interview is semi-structured, with the interviewee asked to learn about some of the research's subjects in advance because the interviewer has the flexibility to make the necessary adjustments according to the actual circumstances of the interview. Face-to-face interviews have been chosen as they allow both parties to make eye contact and communicate better than through online methods; third-party disruptions may disrupt online interviews.

The following research questions were developed to guide this study:

- (1) From the perspective of Self-determination Theory, how did the interviewee's motivation change through time change?
- (2) Using SDT as a guide, what were the reasons the student provided in the interview for the lack of motivation?

Texts of participant interviews were transcribed and coded, with the author then analyzing these texts in an attempt to determine whether there was some information that supported the findings of the analysis.

#### 3.1 The Description of the Participant

The interviewer for this paper is a female student who is from the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. The author lives in the university accommodation with the interviewer, and both two of them first met when the author moved to the UK.

As the interviewee is a native Chinese speaker and has been studying English since the beginning of her childhood, she has been studying in the UK for more than six months, and she is planning to live in the UK for a long time, she was happy to participate in the interview once she understood the author's research topic.

#### 3.2 Procedure

The interviewee was discovered by the author in the accommodation subsequent to the completion of the study. Upon receiving information about the subject information of the research, the participant was provided with a set of inquiries and instructed to prepare accordingly.

Following the interview, a transcript was generated and analyzed by the author, and the language of the interview was Chinese. It was observed that the interviewees frequently digressed from the intended topic, necessitating modifications to the semi-structured interview questions to accommodate the interviewees' thought processes.

### 4. Analysis

The interview showed that, both before and after the participant went abroad, the motivation to learn English was external motivation that had been internalized. According to SDT, human self-determination is a continuum, and motivation is divided into two categories: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation can be transformed into intrinsic motivation by both social and situational factors, a process known as 'internalization', thereby increasing student's motivation to learn English. The main determinant of internalization is the student's external environment, and if there is enough recognition and encouragement in the learning environment, it is helpful for students to develop an intrinsic interest in learning. The interviewee revealed that her learning and living environment had been altered before and after leaving China, their motivation for learning English changed as their surrounding context shifted. After going abroad, the interviewee's pressure to learn English was not as heavy as when she was in China, and she no longer found English to be a pressure on their studies; rather, her developed an interest in learning English, as well as a strong interest in English-language films and songs in their surroundings. Her motivation thus changed from extrinsic to intrinsic, which she found to be an enjoyable process.

#### **4.1 Parents and Teachers Over-emphasize the Importance of English Exams and Therefore Ignore the Positive Impact of Learning English Itself**

During the interview, the interviewee repeatedly expressed the view that parents were only or overly concerned with their English-language grades. In parents' view, the only benefit of learning English was to obtain high marks. Teachers' entire careers and children's entire futures are built on exam grades, so the parents' concerns may be somewhat justified. While exams are important, many parents and teachers treat English exams as the most important thing in their children's and students' lives, ignoring the essence of English learning and focusing only on scores and rankings. This focus overlooks the development of students' thinking and abilities, ignoring their emotional connection to the subject which thereby results in students simply seeking to 'satisfy' their parents' request that they get good grades. These students inevitably are not intrinsically motivated to learn English.

SDT suggests that individuals choose the own course of action on the basis of clearly understanding their real needs, as well as a wealth of information from society. It is students' self-determination that will ultimately guide them toward activities toward which they are passionate and will therefore enhance their talents, promoting their intrinsic motivation. In this case, students may develop an internal motivation toward learning English when they are fully aware of the positive impact it can have on themselves and on society. If parents and teachers only emphasizes the importance of the test and excessive focus on exam results but not the positive impact that English itself can have, this can result in a lack of intrinsic motivation for students.

#### **4.2 Parents Blame Their Children for Their Poor English Performance, Ignoring Their Children's Underlying English-learning Problems**

Respondent repeatedly noted that, when she underperformed in English, her parents never asked why or showed understanding or encouragement; rather, they tended to strongly blame the interviewee for not studying hard enough. At the same time, parents did not attempt to help their children with any practical steps in learning the language, believing that the steps toward learning the language were the same for every student and that low grades were simply a sign their child was not working hard enough. Parental criticism often resulted in students losing interest in the subject.

SDT suggests that people can decide for themselves what they want to do, but that they also need support from their external environment. This, in turn, allows individuals' internal needs to be supported, understood, integrated or affiliated with others during their external communication process. If parents only blame students for underperforming in English but do not pay attention to their student's fundamental English-learning problems, this can result in a lack of independent motivation to learn English.

#### **4.3 Students' Inability to Attribute Success or Failure in Favor of Their Own English Learning**

In the interview, the participant stated:

*"I cannot learn English because I am not smart enough, I am not fit to learn English, or English is too difficult, and other external factors. When I attribute the reasons for not learning English to these uncontrollable factors, I think that no matter how hard I try, my English performance will not improve and I will lose the confidence and motivation to learn English."*

SDT suggests that individuals have an autonomous orientation that is conducive to autonomous motivation, so English teachers should indicate the reasons for students' success or failure—i.e. correct attributions for their grades—to the students themselves. On the other hand, English teachers should also make positive attributions according to each student's past performances, facilitating future English learning. English teachers can also boost students' confidence when learning English by giving out timely feedback and encouragement and by maintaining open communication.

SDT suggests that competent external assistance may help generate intrinsic motivation, but the demand for competence can hinder autonomous motivation. In other words, if English instructors provide students with positive feedback and competence assistance, they will satisfy their students' competency demands, increasing their intrinsic drive to study English. Conversely, Lack of teacher communication in class and feedback in learning may affect students' motivation to learn English.

## 5. Conclusion

This study uses the Self-determination Theory to measure a Chinese international student in the UK's English-learning motivation, finding the reasons for this motivation and providing corresponding teaching strategies and suggestions. The research content and opinions in this paper are the author's, meaning that there are many areas for improving this study. First, this research was conducted within a limited time frame, with its sample comprising only one international student; thus, results are obviously limited and likely unconvincing. Second, while analyzing the reasons for the interviewee's motivation, the author has only considered the two aspects the author believes relevant to motivation, namely English teachers and parents, and so did not consider other motivational factors. Third, the teaching strategies and suggestions reviewed in this study are only based on the author's personal experience, and because the author's teaching experience is limited, further teaching practice is necessary to verify whether they are practical and effective.

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