

# *A case study on the learning motivation of a 20-year-old Chinese college student*

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**Abstract:** Although several empirical studies conducted by Gao (2004) and her research team have focused on the motivation of college students to learn English [7], there is a lack of studies regarding the motivation of junior college students in learning English. The research has primarily concentrated on undergraduate and graduate students. This study focuses on the qualitative study of the learning motivation of English majors in a private university from the social and psychological dimensions of language learning and analyzes the learning motivation types of a certain one of the private college English major students by using 7 kinds of motivation types. Through the above correlation analysis, it can be concluded that the English learning motivations of the research object (Lisa) are instrumental motivation, cultural motivation, and situational motivation, which coexist.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Motivation is the research topics of common concern in sociology, social psychology, sociolinguistics and other disciplines. Motivation is one of the most important topics discussed in the field of foreign language teaching. Research on learner motivation has gradually focused on the learners themselves instead of focusing on the individual differences among learners.

Focusing on the social and psychological dimensions of language learning, this study conducted a qualitative investigation on the English learning motivation of English majors in a private university and adopted seven motivation types to study the learning motivation of college English learners.

### 1.2 Problem Statement

Motivation is one of the most important factors in effective English teaching and learning. Because learning motivation is the internal motivation to encourage students to engage in English learning activities, it can affect the learning process and the learning effect of students. In addition, some scholars (Oxford & Shearin, 1994) point out that motivation is deeply related [9]. Although Gao (2003; 2004) and his research group are committed to the study of college students' English

learning motivation, the research is mainly focused on undergraduates and postgraduates. There are, however, few studies on junior college students' motivation for learning English. In order to analyze and study the motivational styles of college students in English learning, the researcher conducted a case study at the convenience of the teaching staff.

### 1.3 Purpose Statement

Through this case study and analysis, researchers can provide a summary of the different types of student learning motivation, which will support teachers in better understanding student learning motivation, inspire the teaching of college English, and offer practical teaching recommendations that can be used to increase the efficacy of college English education. Additionally, it aims to some extent to contribute to the expansion of studies on the motivation of college students to learn English.

### 1.4 Research Questions

This case study seeks to answer the following: What are the motivations for a 20-year-old student to study English?

### 1.5 Overview of the Case

This study looks into the different ways that college students are motivated to learn English. A representative student in Junior College English grade 2, with a particular degree of English proficiency and learning enthusiastically, was chosen by the researcher after consulting an English lecturer in order to participate in this case study. This 20-year-old student, Lisa (a pseudonym used to protect privacy), is from a private university in South China's Guangdong province. This is a qualitative study. By using a series of scaled questionnaires to rate the student's motivation as a whole in order to determine what types of motivation she has for learning English. In addition, interviews with the individuals and propositional English diaries were two standard survey methodologies used by the researcher (Nunan, 2007) [8]. Understanding Lisa's opinions and attitudes about the problems being investigated, as well as some information not covered by the questionnaire, will result from doing this. The information and material gathered in the three ways will be used to conduct an objective analysis of the data in order to identify the different forms of motivation that students possess.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

The student showed her desire and active collaboration to participate in the research study when the researcher invited her to participate after choosing the research object. The entire method used to gather the data for this case study is based on qualitative research. Scale questionnaires, in-person interviews, and conventional language learning survey techniques like a written English diary are a few examples (Nunan, 2007) [8]. Below is a detailed discussion of the methods involved.

### 2.2 Questionnaire

Questionnaires are frequently used for collecting data in studies on the teaching of foreign languages (Dornyei, 2007) [3]. The questionnaire contained a total of 30 items, using a Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), which is organized in accordance with Gao, Zhao,

Cheng, and Zhou's (2002) [5] definition of English motivation. According to her, "We have made five questionnaire predictions at three universities in Beijing and modified the questions in accordance with the results. The questionnaire's overall reliability for the actual measurement is 0.84. "It advances the integrative and instrumental incentive theories put forward by Gardner & Lambert (1972) [4]. Taking into account the local context, it is possible to divide student motivation into three groups: instrumental, situational, and cultural. These groups can then be further divided into intrinsic interest, academic performance, learning situation motivation, going abroad, social responsibility, personal development motivation, and information media.

This section consists of thirty questions, all of which are exploratory in nature and focus on Lisa's motivation for learning English. After Lisa receives the questionnaire through email, researchers will figure out her agreement scores for each of the seven motivation types and determine the percentage of each motivation type's total score that Lisa contributed. The purpose is to compare Lisa's motivation types for learning English.

### 2.3 Student's Diaries

Student learning diaries are assigned by the lecturer of the writing class with the aim of encouraging students to develop their English thinking in the form of a diary as much as possible. The learning diaries did not have a time limit within which the task had to be completed, and students were free to create essays of varying lengths. The researcher collected Lisa's study diary twice. The topics were "What do you think about the rush to learn English for all" and "Has English become part of your life in some way". The reason Lisa's study diary was collected was to get a closer understanding of her views and motivations.

### 2.4 Interview

A 40-minute face-to-face interview with Lisa was conducted. The time and place of the interview were chosen by her to avoid making Lisa nervous. Before the interview, the necessary preparations for the interview were confirmed, and Lisa's consent was obtained to record the interview. There are various types of interviews, such as standardized, semi-standardized, and non-standardized interviews. However, in this case study, the researcher chose semi-structured interviews.

A more adaptable approach to the interview process is the semi-standardized interview. It permits the researcher to ask a series of very straightforward inquiries and to investigate any unplanned questions made by interviewees (Coughlan, 2009) [1]. As a result, while some interview questions are based on the interview environment, the majority are prepared before the interview. The planned questions are intended to dive deeper into Lisa's emotional attitudes and specific descriptions than questionnaires and student diaries can.

The reason for choosing a semi-standard interview is that it gives interviewees a chance to tell their own stories rather than answer a series of structured questions. As a result, it increases the spontaneity of the researcher to explore some aspects related to case studies in greater depth. After the interview was completed, the researcher converted the interview audio recordings into text along with notes taken during the interview to obtain a complete interview text of approximately 5700 words. Lisa's responses were transcribed and marked up.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter consists of analyzing and discussing the data collected, supported by relevant theories and literature. The analysis and discussion outline what types of motivation a 20-year-old Chinese university student has.

### 3.2 What are the motivations for a 20-year-old student to study English?

The researcher first analyzed the first 30 questions in Lisa's questionnaire and summarized seven factors. The intrinsic interest in these seven types of motivation is related to classical integrative motivation. Academic achievement, personal development, and information media all have the characteristics of instrumental motivation, but each focus on different purposes: the motivation to go abroad has both instrumental and integrative characteristics (Gao, et al., 2002) [5]. Academic performance and social responsibility are the unique learning motivations of Chinese junior college students: the former is related to the exam-oriented education environment in China, while the latter is based on the culture of mother tongue, which may be related to the cultural tradition and educational concept in China. Therefore, based on the interview results and student diaries, the researcher analyzes and summarizes the types of Jelly's English learning motivations in the following aspects and the proportion of various motivations.

#### 3.2.1 Cultural Motivation - Intrinsic Interest

The five options in Factor 1 reflect the linguistic dimension of Domyei's (1994) theory of motivation, both the interest in the language itself and the fondness for the culture of the Anglo-American country [2]. This particular interest in the language and love for people and objects (movies, songs, etc.) and literature of the target language country stem from the internal interest, as named the interest motive. According to the results of the questionnaire, the total score for Intrinsic Interest Motivation was 25, but surprisingly, Lisa got a perfect score for this part. In the interview, Jelly stated that she had retained her interest in learning English since she was exposed to it in elementary school because her family bought her an English CD when she was a child, and she was always praised when she spoke English. At the same time, Lisa has repeatedly stated and emphasized that she is learning English out of her own interests and hobbies because it will help her to sing like a native speaker and to understand the dialogues and plots of English cartoons without any difficulty.

Lisa's attitude towards learning English is also expressed in the second collection of her diary: "English has become a part of my life to a large extent because language learning is a lifelong process; learning a language requires the regular input of new knowledge. Lisa's strong interest in learning English, which she developed at an early age, as well as her own hobbies further translate into Jelly's positive attitude towards learning English, enabling her to learn and progress along her English learning path. From these data, it is clear that Lisa is particularly motivated by internal interests.

#### 3.2.2 Instrumental Motivation - Academic Achievement, Personal Development, Information Media

Lisa scored 13 out of 25 on the Motivation for Academic Achievement section; however, during the interview, Lisa stated, "If I get a good score on the English test, it motivates me to study English harder, because if I get a good score on the English test, it motivates me to study English harder. If I don't get a good grade, I will doubt my ability to learn, and it will reduce my interest in learning English. At the same time, Lisa believes that even though the certificate is not the whole story, it

doesn't mean that your English is not good just because you don't have a certificate. But it is undeniably important for college students in China to have the CET-4 or CET-6 certificate, which is like a milestone for English majors. Academic achievement motivation has the obvious characteristics of an examination-oriented context. In a later conversation, though, Lisa makes it clear that she is not studying English to get a certificate or, therefore, a good job. However, grades and certificates are characteristic of the Chinese educational system as the main, if not the only, factor in determining one's future, such as further education and job search. Learners are thus also motivated to cope with external demands (Warden & Lin, 2000) [10]. Thus, the merit of the grades and whether she gets a certificate is also one of the factors, albeit somewhat passive, that influences Lisa's motivation to keep trying to learn English.

Factor 6 is personal development motivation, which includes getting a good job, being highly educated and qualified, and improving social status. Lisa scored 13 points (total score 20). Generally speaking, learning a foreign language is a personal activity that is bound to be linked to one's career and salary. In the first diary, it is described that in the age of globalization, mastering a foreign language can help you grasp new opportunities. This description embodies the practical instrumental meaning contained in Lisa's personal motivational development.

Factor 7 is information media motivation, which focuses on the learner's ability to understand information through English and to better study other majors. Lisa also scored a perfect score on this motivation section. In the interview, Lisa also mentioned that a lot of literature materials are now in English. "Learning English well will give me a broader vision of what is new abroad, which can lead to more opportunities for me to learn more".

### **3.2.3 Both Cultural and Instrumental Motivation - Motivation to Go Abroad**

Factor 4 was named motivation to go abroad because each of the five questions reflected a clear goal: to go abroad, immigrate, experience a foreign culture, or seek better educational or job opportunities. As an English major, Lisa is also interested in going abroad, but according to the questionnaire, her main motivation is to experience foreign culture. In the interview, Lisa says that learning English will make it easier to work or travel abroad and experience foreign cultures. She also says that she used to think about working abroad, but that immigration wasn't on her mind. The section has Lisa's questionnaire score of 13 out of 20.

### **3.2.4 Both Cultural and Instrumental Motivation - Social Responsibility**

Factor 5 (social responsibility motivation) The three questions in the questionnaire reflect the traditional Chinese educational ideology, which reflects the close relationship between English education in China and the development of the whole society. Learning English will help his parents, build his country, and let the world know about China. Lisa scored 12 out of 15 on the questionnaire. "More and more foreign companies are working with a strong country, and English is a communication tool," Lisa says in the interview. "If we can master English, then working with foreign companies or trading with companies in China will contribute to the country's economic development." After graduation, if I have a stable income, I can help my family and even bear their expenses. Thus, Lisa's affection for her parents' motherland is also a driving force for her English learning.

### **3.2.5 Situational Motivation**

Factor 3 (situational motivation) is an independent category, confirming the "learning situational level" in the classical extension model (Domyei, 1994) [2]. The questionnaire design includes teachers, teaching materials, teaching quality, and collective motivation components. Teachers' charm, teaching style, and quality, as well as the teaching materials and class atmosphere, are all factors affecting learning motivation. Lisa's situational motivation score is just 60% eligible, but

there's no denying that Lisa's English learning is also more or less influenced by situational motivation.

## 4. Conclusion

According to the mentioned correlation analysis, situational motivation, cultural motivation, and instrumental motivation all coexist to drive the research object's incentive to learn English. Lisa's motivation for learning English was found in all seven categories (Intrinsic Interest, Situational Motivation, Go Abroad, Personal Development, Academic Achievement, Social Responsibility, and Information Media); But it can be clearly seen that the proportion of internal interest motivation and English media motivation is the largest. Social responsibility motivation comes second. In third place was personal development motivation. And the last three motives are the Motivation to Go Abroad, the Situational Motivation, and the Academic Achievement motivation. "In terms of the influence of English proficiency, students with high English proficiency pay more attention to interest, while students with low English proficiency pay more attention to achievement" (Gao et al., 2003) [6]. As stated in the student background information above, Jelly is an excellent English student, so it can be said that this conclusion is consistent with Gao's (2003) [6].

### 4.1 Limitation

Motivation for learning English is highly complicated. Only an exploratory case study can identify the types of English learning motivations of the subject of this case study. The main limitation of this study was that the sample data was too limited, with only one 20-year-old female college student majoring in English participating in the research. As a result, neither the study nor its applications to other situations can be extended, and the conclusions drawn from the data may not apply to other students, such as undergraduate or graduate students. As you read this study, please be mindful of the topic. Since each student's motivation for learning English is unique, more subjects can be chosen to be investigated and researched for a longer amount of time in the follow-up study, increasing the explanatory power of the research findings.

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