

The Application of Motivation Theories in English Language Teaching: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores several prominent motivation theories, including Self-Efficacy Motivation Theory, Target Motivation Theory, Self-Determination Motivation Theory, and Social Psychology Motivation Theory, with a focus on their implications in English language teaching. The role of self-efficacy in learning motivation, the importance of goal setting in student performance, and the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are thoroughly examined. By analyzing these theories, this paper aims to provide a framework for educators to enhance student engagement and motivation. Practical strategies for applying these theories in the classroom are discussed, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches based on students' psychological characteristics and learning needs. This work aims to contribute to the development of effective teaching strategies for enhancing student motivation and achieving better educational outcomes.

1. Introduction

Motivation is a key driver of success in education, particularly in language learning. It influences how students approach learning tasks, persevere in the face of challenges, and achieve their goals. Among various theories that address motivation, several stand out in explaining how students are motivated to learn and engage with English language teaching ^[10]. This paper delves into the theoretical foundations of motivation, examining four critical frameworks: Self-Efficacy Motivation Theory, Target Motivation Theory, Self-Determination Motivation Theory, and Social Psychology Motivation Theory ^[15].

Self-Efficacy Motivation Theory, as articulated by Bandura, suggests that an individual's belief in their ability to accomplish a task influences their motivation and persistence. The Target Motivation Theory emphasizes the importance of goal-setting, proposing that clear, specific goals lead to better performance. Self-Determination Motivation Theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, highlighting the importance of autonomy in learning. Finally, the Social Psychology Motivation Theory explores how attitudes and perceptions of control influence behavior.

These theories provide valuable insights into how students can be motivated to improve their English language skills. By understanding the theoretical ^[20] underpinnings of motivation, educators can create more effective learning environments that cater to students' diverse needs^[11]. This paper aims to examine the practical applications of these theories in English language teaching, offering strategies to foster greater student motivation and engagement.

2. Self-efficacy Motivation Theory

According to Dörnyei (2001a, p.22-23) ^[6], self-efficacy theory refers to people's judgment of their ability to perform certain specific tasks. Self-efficacy will determine people's choice, ambition, and the amount of effort and perseverance. Bandura (1973) ^[1] proposed that self-efficacy is determined by four factors: past achievement, resonance learning (i.e., learning by observing role models), verbal encouragement from others, and personal psychological responses (such as anxiety).

People with low self-efficacy in a particular area see difficult tasks as a threat to themselves. They think too much about their own shortcomings and difficulties, rather than focusing on how to successfully perform tasks. Therefore, they are easy to lose confidence in their abilities and give up. Thus, by helping them confidently navigate dangerous situations, maintaining a focus on the task rather than personal diagnosis, strong self-efficacy in the face of failure and persistence can promote people to make doubling efforts to take action for their accomplishments. Self-efficacy beliefs are indirectly linked to actual abilities. Self-efficacy beliefs are the result of a complex self-persuasion process, which is based on cognitive processing from multiple information sources (e. g., others' opinions, feedback, assessment, encouragement or reinforcement; past experience and training; peer observation; relevant appropriate task strategy information, etc.) and so on.

Bandura (1993, p. 118) ^[2] proposed that people make a causal analysis of their role through the personal self-care mechanism. No component of individual self-care mechanisms is more central than beliefs about the magnitude and control they can play in events that affect their own lives ^[3]. Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people perceive, motivate, and dominate their own behavior.

Attribution theory holds that individuals evaluate and predict their behavior by explaining and speculating about the reasons for the success or failure of themselves or others, so as to control their behavior and environment ^[10]. According to Weiner's attribution theory, attribute success and failure to internal and unstable controllable factors (e.g. degree of efforts) ^[17] enables learners to enhance learning confidence and improve learning motivation^[21] when successful, and in the case of failure helps learners to work hard and believe in success in the future. However, to attribute failure to internal, unstable uncontrollable factors (e.g. ability) will make learners do not believe that their own ability can change the status quo, so give up efforts ^[18].

Self-efficacy influences the expectation of self-ability, the choice of tasks and adherence to the selected task, and ultimately the behavioral motivation^[22] and attitudes towards difficulties. Thus, self-efficacy is also one of the determinants of individual motivation behavior^[23].

The attribution theory puts forward a reasonable attribution of learners' ability to successfully complete learning tasks, and the self-efficacy motivation ^[24] theory also advocates that individuals make correct judgments and assumptions on their ability to perform a certain behavior. Self-efficacy motivation ^[25] theory holds that people with high self-efficacy often believe that they can overcome difficulties and focus on actively analyzing and solving difficulties, while people with low self-efficacy will doubt their abilities, worry about failure, and think too much about their shortcomings and task difficulties, leading to their hesitation in the face of difficulties. High individual self-efficacy, more tendency to attribution of controllable instability and high expectation value mean that individuals have strong self-confidence, reflected in motivated behavior is to pay

attention to learning tasks, and do not give up easily in the face of difficulties, but actively analyze and solve difficulties.

According to the self-efficacy motivation theory, in English teaching practice ^[26], in order to stimulate and maintain students' learning motivation, appropriate learning tasks should be designed, and learning methods and strategies should be carried out, so that students can experience success, thereby increasing self-efficacy and confidence.

According to Covington (1993) ^[4], people have a strong motivation to maintain a basic sense of personal value, especially in the face of competition, failure and negative feedback. This fundamental need for self-worth is to generate many unique motivational patterns and face-saving behaviors in the school context, especially when poor performance poses a threat to student self-esteem. In these situations, students may deliberately restrain efforts by trying no effort, that is, because this can allow failure to be attributed to insufficient effort rather than low competence. An example of this situation is when a learner does not spend enough time preparing for the exam, so that once it fails, he or she can use a lack of hard enough effort to excuse his failure, rather than having to admit his lack of ability—which is much more harmful to the student's self-concept.

Covington (1993, p.74) ^[4] assumes that the pursuit of self-acceptance is the first nature of human nature. In school, self-acceptance depends on individual achievement in the competition. In our society, there is a general tendency to equate achievement with human value, or simply, individual value is considered to be equivalent to their achievement. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that students often confuse ability and value. Connecting a sense of value with their ability is a risky step for students who are already unsafe, because schools can pose a threat to their beliefs about their abilities. The school clearly cannot give enough rewards to all the students who work hard for success. Instead, a considerable number of students have to try to avoid failure.... In essence, the self-worth theory holds that school performance is best understood as students' efforts to maintain a positive self-competence image, especially when they take risks of losing in the competition.

While expectation theories provide a strong explanation for how individuals perform in different situations, they do not systematically answer another motivational question: do individuals want to do this task? This is the second component of the expectation-value theory, where value (also for valence, incentive value, attainment value, task value, and achievement task value) intervenes. As Eccles and Wigfield (1995) ^[8] pointed out, in the past most theorists who used expectation-value theory have focused on the expectation component and focused less on the definition and measurement of value components, only recently, this situation has changed better. In order to fill this deficiency, Eccles and Wigfield proposed a comprehensive task value model, define them in four components: realize value, the personal importance of mastering a skill and completing a task; internal value, interest or aesthetic appreciation of topics/skills in discussion and pleasure in ongoing activities; external use value, realizing how closely the task connects to current and future goals and learning how to improve individual quality of life or make people better; cost, that is the negative value component, including the effort and time spent, other actions and various emotional costs squeezed out by planned actions, such as anxiety and the fear of failure. The overall achievement value of the task is composed by the interaction of these four components, and this value is considered to determine the strength of the behavior ^[9].

Expectation value theory emphasizes the influence of the learner's expectation of success and the value of learning behavior on the strength of learning motivation. If learners believe that learning behavior may bring success, they reasonably expect learning goals, and simultaneously, they can generate, contribute efforts, and maintain them. In English teaching practice, only when the learners realize, and attaches great importance to the English learning and their own needs and value, think second language learning for their future use, estimate the learning goals to be able to achieve and predict that their expected results will commensurate with the effort, thus, their learning motivation

will be able to stimulate and maintain. As McCombs & Pope (1994, citing Xu Zhixin, Zhang Lili, 2014:022)^[19] said, "...When they (learners) feel that what they learn is meaningful to them,... they naturally have the motivation to learn." And Tamos and Garade (1995, citing Xu Zhixin, Zhang Lili, 2014, p.022), "The effort for a result is influenced by the possibility that learners feel that they can reach the goal." Therefore, in English teaching, in order to stimulate and maintain the motivation of students to learn English, students must first make clear the importance and practical value of English learning for their study, work and life. Secondly, learning strategy training should be carried out, so that students can master the methods and strategies to achieve learning goals, and enhance their confidence in achieving learning goals. At the same time, teachers should make the whole learning process full of challenges and interesting atmosphere, so that students can experience the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction after the efforts of learning.

University English teachers should give full consideration to the different psychological characteristics and learning needs of high and low level students, and adopt corresponding motivational strategies to stimulate, maintain and enhance their English learning motivation. Low-level students are easy to produce inferiority complex, and show a loss of confidence or insensitive attitude to English learning. Teachers should focus on providing opportunities for them to obtain successful experience regularly and rebuild their confidence in English learning, making English learning meaningful and interesting, enhancing their interest in English learning, increasing the proportion of their usual performance, giving positive affirmation to their efforts and progress, using questioning and listening, attention and care, and developing and implementing personalized strategies when necessary. (Fang Xueqing, 2012, p.2)

3. Target Motivation Theory

According to Dörnyei (2001a, pp. 25-27)^[6], the target motivation theory was developed from the early need motivation theory. Need motivation theory holds that motivation originates from five levels of human need, namely physiological need, safety need, love need, need for respect and need for self-realization, while target motivation theory holds that target is the "engine" to trigger action and provide direction for action. It can be seen that in the target motivation theory, the concept of "need" has been replaced by the more specific concept of "target". Cognition and perception of the nature of the targets are fundamental to motivation^[7].

Target setting theory and target orientation theory are particularly influential target motivation theory:

Locke and Latham (1990)^[12] claims that human behavior is caused by targets. And, in order for behavior to arise, targets must be set and pursued through selection. Targets are different in three particularly important aspects, that is, the specific degree of the target, the difficulty and the investment degree of the target^[13].

The target setting theory is consistent with the expectation-value theory because it increases when it is considered possible (like "expectation") and important (like "task value"). Locke (1996) used five key points to summarize the main research findings of the target-setting theory: 1. The more difficult the target, the greater the achievement. 2. The more specific or the more clear the target is, the more specific the behavior is regulated. 3. Specific and difficult targets trigger the best behavior. 4. When the target is specific and difficult, the investment is critical (i.e., when the target is simple or vague, the individual investment is not difficult because much investment is not required to achieve easy targets, and the vague targets are easy to be redefined to accept poor performance.) 5. When (a) that the target is important and (b) that the target is achievable (or, at least, progressive).

Targets affect behavior in four ways: 1. They focus attention and effort toward activities related

to the target at the expense of unrelated activities. 2. They regulate the individual effort, and people adjust it to the difficulty of the task. 3. They encourage individuals to persist until the target is achieved. 4. They promote individual to establish relevant action plans and exploration strategies.

The target is not only the result of the individual's target, but also the standard of assessing individual behavior performance. In long-term, continuous behaviors like language learning, targets (i. e., mastering a second language) are quite distant, while adjacent sub-targets (e.g., taking exams, passing exams, and fulfilling learning contracts) may have a powerful incentive because they mark individual progress and provide direct feedback on language learning. Achievable subtargets can be made an important way to improve students' self-efficacy.

A target-oriented theory is a theory developed to explain a child's learning and performance in school. As Ames (1992) concluded, the theory emphasizes two contrasting concepts or orientations in student learning: mastering sexual orientation, involving "mastery target" (also as "mission target" or "learning target"), focusing on the learning content, performance orientation, involving "performance target" (or "self target"), focusing on showing ability to achieve good grades or surpass other students. Mastery and expressive targets represent different criteria for success and different reasons for participation in learning. At the center of mastery targets is the belief that effort leads to success, which emphasizes individual improvement and growth. In contrast, expressive orientation sees learning only as a way to achieve targets and consequent public recognition. Ames suggests that mastery targets should be better than expressive targets because they are associated with a preference for challenges, an inherent interest in learning activities, and a positive attitude towards learning.

Target motivation theory explains the important role of targets on motivation and behavior. Moreover, different learners in different contexts have different targets. In English teaching, teachers should encourage students to combine their own foundation, ideal, and other factors to establish reasonable targets, in order to stimulate their own motivation for efforts to achieve the target.

4. Self-determination Motivation Theory

Dörnyei (2001a, 27-29) ^[6] summarizes self-determination motivation theory as follows:

The most common and famous distinction of motivation theory is the distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves the act of experiencing pleasure and satisfaction, such as the pleasure of engaging in an activity or the satisfaction of curiosity, etc. External motivation involves actions performed for a certain purpose, such as getting some external reward (e.g., good grades) or avoiding punishment. The theory also mentions a third type of motivation, no motivation (amotivation)—a state that lacks any extrinsic or intrinsic motivation regulation, in the form of "... no meaning".

Although intrinsic motivation is generally seen as a single concept, Vallerand and his colleagues (1997) ^[15] made the assumption that there are three subintrinsic motivation: to learn (to participate in activities for the sake of understanding new things, to satisfy curiosity and the pleasure and satisfaction of exploring the world); to achieve (to surpass themselves, to meet challenges and achieve or create something); and to experience stimulation (to experience pleasant feelings) ^[16].

Traditional research believes that extrinsic motivation destroys intrinsic motivation. Several studies have shown that if students have to engage in certain learning activities for external purposes (for example, completing school reading tasks), they lose their intrinsic interest in the activity itself. However, other studies have not found a negative correlation between these two motivations. Deci and Ryan (1985) ^[5] use a more detailed structure. According to this structure, there are various types of motivation that can be placed on the continuum between

self-determination (intrinsic) motivation and control (external) motivation according to their degree of internalization (i.e., the degree of motivation transformation from external to intrinsic). As proposed by Deci and Ryan, external rewards can be combined with internal motivation, or even trigger internal motivation, if they are self-determined and internalized enough.

Finally, Deci and Ryan (1985)^[5] reported a consistent finding that the more opportunities people have to experience it, the more internally motivated they act. Autonomy (i.e., reflecting oneself as the origin of behavior), ability (i.e., feeling effective and fulfilling), correlation (i.e., feeling close or connected with other individuals) are found in Deci and Ryan. It seems to be the basic human need that individuals try to self-satisfy^[14].

5. Social Psychology Motivation Theory

Dörnyei (2001, p.29)^[6] summarized the social psychology motivation theory as follows:

A key tenet of social psychology is the belief that attitudes have a direct impact on behaviour because a person's attitude towards a target affects the overall pattern of his response to the target. There are two well-known theories that epitomize how this process occurs: 1. The reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). According to this theory, the main determinant of behavior is the individual's intention to perform a particular behavior, which in turn stems from the action of two basic factors: "attitude towards behavior" and "subjective norms" (which refers to the perception of the pressure imposed on him or her by society to perform the present behavior). If there is a conflict between the two determining factors, the final intention is determined by considering the relative importance of attitudes and normativeness. 2. Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1988). This is done by adding an ingredient that further modifies the theory of rational behavior, that is, perceived behavioral control. This refers to the perceived ease or difficulty with which the person performs the action (e.g., the perception of the resources required and the potential obstacles or hindrances). Behavioural performance can be predicted from people's intention to perform the current behaviour and their perception of control over the behaviour. In cases where one has complete control over behavior, as described in the theory of rational action, intention alone is sufficient to explain the action.

6. Conclusion

Motivation is a fundamental element in the learning process, especially in the context of language acquisition. The four motivation theories discussed in this paper—Self-Efficacy Motivation Theory, Target Motivation Theory, Self-Determination Motivation Theory, and Social Psychology Motivation Theory—each provide a unique perspective on how motivation influences student behavior and performance. Understanding these theories can significantly enhance the teaching of English as a second language by addressing the psychological and emotional factors that drive student engagement.

Self-Efficacy Motivation Theory emphasizes the importance of self-belief in overcoming learning challenges. Educators can foster this belief by designing tasks that are challenging yet achievable, providing regular positive feedback, and promoting a growth mindset among students. When students believe in their ability to succeed, they are more likely to persist and engage with the learning process.

Target Motivation Theory highlights the role of goal-setting in motivating students. Clear, specific, and challenging goals are essential for directing students' efforts and maintaining their motivation. Educators can utilize this theory by encouraging students to set personal learning goals, breaking down larger tasks into smaller, manageable objectives that provide a sense of progress and achievement.

Self-Determination Motivation Theory provides insight into the importance of intrinsic motivation in language learning. By creating an environment that fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness, teachers can cultivate intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to engage in learning for the sake of personal growth rather than external rewards. This theory suggests that when students feel in control of their learning process and believe that their efforts will lead to meaningful outcomes, their motivation is more likely to remain high.

Finally, Social Psychology Motivation Theory underscores the influence of attitudes and perceived control over behavior. Students' attitudes toward learning English and their perceptions of their ability to succeed can significantly impact their motivation. Teachers can help students develop positive attitudes by creating a supportive classroom environment that emphasizes the importance of learning and provides opportunities for success.

In conclusion, applying these motivational theories in English language teaching can significantly enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes. By addressing the diverse motivational needs of students, educators can create a more effective and supportive learning environment. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and improving student motivation, ultimately leading to greater success in language learning.

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