



Continuity and Change in Chinese English Learners' Motivations Across Different Contexts and Schooling Levels

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Abstract The journey of acquiring proficiency in a second and/or foreign language is lifelong for many learners. In the search for the best educational pedagogies, a study was conducted in which learners' motivations were categorised to analyse each driving effect over learning performance. A retrospective case study of 20 Chinese PhD students learning English in China (i.e. English as a Foreign Language—EFL) and in overseas (i.e. English as a Second Language—ESL) contexts was employed. This study identified 12 different motivational categories which were classified as controlled and autonomous motivations for learning English. Moreover, this study shows both continuity and change in students' motivations: there was a continuity of autonomous motivation over time and across the two contexts, whereas change ($d = .54$) was seen in the frequency of controlled motivation between the two contexts. Specifically, the motivation of these 20 students was dominated by passing exams or proficiency tests in the EFL context and by communication in the ESL context, which possibly accounts for 'silent English' phenomenon in China. Analysis of trends of changes in motivation across different study stages indicated that external regulation belonging to controlled motivation experienced the most

fluctuation. This fluctuation was attributed to enrolment pressure in China as well as the immediate demand of communication and the high-stakes PhD study while studying abroad. The results suggest that the development of language learners' motivation is a dynamic process and contingent upon levels of schooling or learning contexts.

Keywords Successful English learners · Controlled motivation · Autonomous motivation · Oral communication · Language learning contexts

Introduction

In China, despite many years of compulsory instruction and in light of the importance of English to career, academic and social success, a large number of Chinese students are described as 'silent English', that is, they are "unable or cannot fluently speak out what they have learned" (Zhao 2009, p. 154). This might be related to the motivations Chinese learners have for acquiring English, because foreign/second language learning achievement depends upon the various motivations of language learners (Gardner 1985, 2005).

Several important L2 motivational theories and models have been developed, including Gardner's (2005) revised socio-educational model in Canada and the application of Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) self-determination theory to L2 motivation (Noels et al. 2000) in Canada (French language learners) and Korea (Pae 2008). These studies rely heavily on a single language learning context and their results depend, primarily, upon statistically analysed, self-reported survey data.

However, the dynamic nature of second/foreign language motivation demands that motivation should be

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related to the changing specific learning situations and cultures of learning (Gardner 2005). Moreover, motivation changes over time (Dörnyei 2005). It is possible, therefore, that second/foreign language learners at different stages of study would exhibit different motivations. For example, the aim of English learning at primary school is to stimulate students' interest in learning English and in using this language for interpersonal communication (MOE 2001). However, in middle school (Years 7–9) and high school (Years 10–12), English learning is more exam-oriented in order that students can pass the High School Entrance Examination and National College Entrance Examination (*zhong kao* and *gao kao*, respectively; Zhang 2017). Without initial exploratory qualitative studies of the dynamic longitudinal process of language learning (Ushioda 2001), our ability to plan robust repeated measure studies is limited. Thus, the present investigation used a retrospective case study design with the original purpose of (1) examining language learners' motivations across different study stages and contexts, and (2) identifying the trends of changes across these stages and contexts. This would generate useful insights around the problem of unsuccessful 'silent' Chinese learners of English. In studying the changing nature of motivation in the English learning of highly successful Chinese learners, it is hoped that insights will be gained about creating more communicative learning environments and opportunities.

Motivational Theory and Empirical Studies in L2 Learning

Motivation as a focus of second/foreign language research seems to have begun with Gardner's (1972, 1985) social psychological theory whereby the attitudes that L2 learners have towards the specific L2 community impact their L2 language achievement. His theory also shows integrativeness (i.e. interest in learning this second language so as to come close to the L2 communities) and attitudes towards the learning situation (e.g. English teachers, teaching curriculum and teaching plans) as the two antecedents of motivation, and that these two antecedents influence motivation and thus English achievement. According to Gardner (1985), learners with integrative orientation learn a second language to get closer to that language community, whereas learners with instrumental orientation learn a second language for pragmatic reasons (e.g. to secure a good job). Gardner later revised this theory and proposed a socio-educational (SE) model (Gardner 2005) in which motivation, language anxiety and language aptitude directly impact language achievement. Further, Gardner argued that integrativeness (e.g. intrinsic interest in foreign languages) and attitudes towards the learning situation (e.g.

language teacher and language class) are two closely related variables that influence motivation to study a foreign/second language. He suggested that instrumentality (e.g. learning the target language for pragmatic reasons) might be indirectly related to language achievement, mediated through motivation.

However, in an era of globalisation, the concept of the attitude towards the specific L2 community (e.g. British or American) does not make too much sense, as English is viewed as a lingua franca, and people from different ethnic groups will communicate with others in English (Yashima 2009).

Some researchers, therefore, employed self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985) in examining language learning motivation, in the hope of better understanding L2 learners' motivation (Noels et al. 2000). Self-determination theory (SDT) consists of two sub-theories: cognitive evaluation theory, which aims to examine the factors facilitative to the intrinsic motivation, and organismic integration theory, which attempts to specify the different forms of extrinsic motivation. In order to clarify the extent to which these extrinsic goals are under the control of social situations, under the control of other people or under the control of the individual, Deci and Ryan (2000) believed that extrinsic motivation can be described as four regulatory types: external regulation (i.e. external demand or reward), introjected regulation (i.e. protecting self-esteem), identified regulation (i.e. being satisfied with the value of the target action) and integrated regulation (i.e. closely related to personally selected goals).

Noels and her colleagues conducted an empirical study into French language learners in Canada (Noels et al. 2000), which examined learning orientations of language learners from the perspective of SDT. The study reported that (1) instrumental orientation (e.g. learning L2 for pragmatic reasons) and external regulation were strongly correlated, $r = .74$, and (2) knowledge (e.g. learning L2 to become a more knowledgeable person) had a medium correlation to identified regulation (i.e. $r = .54$) and intrinsic motivation (i.e. $r = .59$).

Motivation of Chinese Learners of L2

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, motivation research in Mainland China has become popular and important. Most of the studies conducted in this context have focused on English learning motivations of students at the tertiary level (e.g. Gao et al. 2003; Huang and Wen 2005).

Gao et al. (2003) conducted a large-scale paper-based questionnaire to elicit possible types of the motivation of 2278 undergraduates at 30 universities across mainland China. The exploratory factor analysis found seven factors

accounting for 54.54% of variance. The factors are (1) intrinsic interest (e.g. like the target language and culture), (2) immediate achievement (e.g. get higher grades in the exams or meet the requirement of graduation), (3) learning situation (e.g. English classes and peer students' impact on English learning), (4) going abroad (e.g. find a better education in overseas countries), (5) social responsibility (e.g. contribute to the prosperity of China), (6) individual development (e.g. find a good job) and (7) information medium (e.g. use English to obtain information about the world). These researchers argued that the social responsibility factor, not previously reported by the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner 2005), resulted from Confucian traditions and could be useful in understanding language learning within a Chinese or Asian English learning context (i.e. foreign language context).

Language Learning Context Impact

Dörnyei (1990) distinguished the foreign language context from the second language context: the former refers to a setting in which the use of the target language is less prevalent in society (e.g. English is a foreign language in China), whereas the latter is a setting in which the use of the target language is common to everyday life (e.g. English is a second language in Canada for citizens of China).

Different language learning contexts have invoked language researchers to understand contradictory findings in relation to learners' motivations (e.g. Au 1988). For example, the motivations of Chinese English learners differed between foreign and second language contexts (Li 2011): motivation was more related to fulfilling obligations among learners in a foreign language context ($n = 132$) than the second language context ($n = 122$). Nonetheless, the observed differences may be attributable to individual differences rather than the context, as the participants in these two contexts were different. Therefore, the present study investigates the change in motivations for the same participants across the two contexts, and attempts possible reasons for this change.

Lastly, Ushioda (2008) believed that successful language learners must have motivations, and as a result it is expected that such participants can inform us richly about their motivations. Although a true experimental design could confirm the assertion that language learning context makes a difference, this study contributes to the literature by exploring directly with successful learners about their possibly changing motivations as they progressed in their English learning in foreign and second language contexts.

Method

Research Questions

A retrospective case study design was used because tracking participants in a true longitudinal study (e.g. from primary school to the overseas doctoral study) is very difficult. This design is a type of longitudinal study design where data are collected after the fact (i.e. retrospectively; Street and Ward 2012). Retrospective data generated the same research findings as longitudinal data did in a study of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among older prisoners of war (Port et al. 2001). This design may be prone to memory error and subjectivity in the selection of episodic memories to create the narrative. Such biases may contribute to the reconstruction of a narrative that the participant uses to make sense of their experience and any deviance from objective fact is both unverifiable and unquantifiable. Nonetheless, this design was inexpensive and feasible (Hess 2004) and was used on the assumption that the participant's narrative is the best possible representation of what happened to individuals whose life courses have not been fully documented. In the present study, this technique allowed for the investigation of the types of motivations among a group of successful Chinese learners of English.

In addition, it is worth noting that throughout the paper the focus is on motivation to learn English, which includes speaking, listening, reading and writing, usually determined by school or university requirements. Various forms of learning performance are addable in theory because learning by any channel is supposed to go through the same level of learning demand. Two research questions were posed:

1. What are the motivations to learn English among academically successful Chinese learners of English across different learning stages and contexts (i.e. EFL compared with ESL)?
2. What are the trends in changes in motivations to learn English among academically successful Chinese learners of English across different schooling stages?

Participants

Chinese students' English achievement is not satisfactory. The IELTS report ("Analysis of Chinese Mainland Students' Academic IELTS Scores" 2016) indicated that, from 2005 to 2015, the mean scores (overall score) of Chinese IELTS test-takers were below 6.0 (6.0 is considered as a

competent user by British Council IELTS). Also, according to the newest IELTS report (“IELTS White Paper” 2019), in 2018, more than half of Chinese test-takers cannot be considered as competent English users (IELTS score average ≤ 4.5 , 10.43%; equal to 5, 16.60%; equal to 5.5, 25.15%), though some test-takers (24.70%) can be considered as successful English users, achieving IELTS overall scores above 6 (IELTS score average equals to 6.5, 14.66%; ≥ 7 , 10.04%).

In the present study, twenty doctoral students of Chinese citizenship were recruited from a single research-intensive university in New Zealand. They can be considered as successful English learners because they all met a reasonably high standard in English proficiency for university entrance (i.e. IELTS score average ≥ 6.5 , with no score below 6.0). Further, they used English language as a medium to undertake doctoral study in an English-speaking country and thus can be perceived as successful language learners. Eliciting the information about these participants’ English learning motivations is expected to provide information about successful L2 learning experiences for other learners to draw on, particularly for the less successful L2 learners, given the fact that English proficiency of a large number of Chinese students is still unsatisfactory.

The study participants came from multiple faculties and comprised nine women and eleven men: ten in social sciences (e.g. education, business), eight in natural science fields (e.g. engineering, science, medical and health sciences) and two in arts and humanities. Twelve participants began their English studies at primary school (nominally aged 6–12), while the remaining eight studied English only from the first year of middle school (nominally aged 13–14). One participant studied abroad (i.e. in Malaysia, an EFL context) for both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and one had studied abroad (i.e. in Britain, an ESL context) at postgraduate level before enrolling in a PhD programme at the case site university. Two participants completed postgraduate study in both ESL (i.e. in New Zealand) and EFL contexts (i.e. in China), whereas one participant entered directly into PhD without postgraduate study.

Procedure

Participant recruitment involved two techniques: sixteen participants were recruited through posting an advertisement on the cyber bulletin board of the university’s Chinese postgraduate student association, and the remaining four participants were recruited by snowball sampling (i.e. they were invited to participate in this interview by a participant). Participants were given diagrams and prompts to assist in discussing their motivations for learning English across different stages of schooling. Each interview lasted 25–35 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by

the first author. Eighteen interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author and then transcribed before being translated into English, and two interviews were carried out in English at the request of the participants. Each participant was then provided with a copy of the transcript written in English for approval and correction before data analysis.

Measures

At the start of each semi-structured interview, participants were asked to fill in a diagram to show the type and strength of their motivations at each schooling stage (see Online Appendix A). Participants indicated the strength of each motivation against each timeline using five indicators (i.e. very high, high, medium, low, very low). This approach allowed analysis of changes in the nature and significance of motivational profiles across the life course of their schooling experiences.

Analysis

Thematic analysis as well as quantification of categories was employed to code and classify the interview data. This study identified the patterns in two ways, as recommended by Joffe (2012), in the hope of increasing the interpretation power of thematic analysis. Firstly, deductive analysis was employed in order to search for responses coherent with the motivation categories described in literature. Secondly, an inductive method was applied in order to identify possible new constructs and relationships embedded in the interview data.

Namey et al. (2008) argue that compared with word count, assessing the frequency count of themes takes the context into account, and thus frequency count is a useful analytic technique. Hayashi (1951) also believed that this quantification of qualitative data can increase the validity, reliability, objectivity, reproducibility, consistency and accuracy of the data. Therefore, quantification method was used in this study to provide a deep and complex description of the data with the aim of capturing the changes in motivations across different learning contexts.

To analyse the data, in order to investigate how self or environment drives learning, the authors drew on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000, p. 69). Further, Deci and Ryan (2000) propose that controlled motivation (i.e. enacting the activity due to the external pressure) consists of external regulation and introjected regulation. By contrast, autonomous motivation (i.e. enacting the activity because of one’s own choice and volition; Deci and Ryan 2000) includes identified regulation, integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation. In China, due to its high-pressure examination-oriented education system (Huang and Pan 2011), examination is a very important driver to motivate students to learn English (Wang 2008). For

example, if students learn English only for passing various kinds of exams then they are motivated externally (i.e. controlled motivation). Because of the great significance of English for future career success (Bolton and Botha 2015), English learning behaviour can be internalised. For example, if students learn English for personal development and/or fulfilment then they are motivated internally (i.e. autonomous motivation). As a result, controlled motivation and autonomous motivation were separated from each other in data analysis.

In order to generate insights into motivations of successful Chinese learners of English, Bryman's (2015) data analysis steps were followed: (1) labelling or coding relevant original sentence (2) grouping similar codes into a category and (3) looking for patterns among or between categories. The frequency of motivations rated as medium to very high was then determined, rather than for motivations with low and very low strength, which cannot properly be understood to be motivated behaviours. The categories with at least two participant statements assigned to the same category were reported, and finally English learning motivations were categorised as belonging to one of the 12 different categories (i.e. these categories came from participants' responses directly but it still fitted in well with the self-determination theory; for example, the category 'interest' was grouped into intrinsic motivation) and two motivations (i.e. controlled and autonomous).

In order to replicate the coding process, a data dictionary of definitions and example statements (see Online Appendix B) was developed. Two randomly selected interview transcripts were then used by two independent judges, and the Kappa coefficient was calculated to measure the inter-rater reliability of categorical items using the proportion of interviews that were mutually classified to the same motivation category. Kappa coefficients between the first author and Coder 1 and Coder 2 were good ($\kappa = .83$ and $\kappa = .95$, respectively).

Lastly, differences in the frequency of motivation category across language learning contexts (i.e. EFL compared with ESL) were evaluated. Descriptive analysis of the difference in mean scores by condition was evaluated with a standardised effect size using ordinal polychotomous proportions assigned to each category (Lipsey and Wilson 2001), rather than relying on inferential statistics which may have been applicable to large sample sizes (i.e. $N > 30$). Additionally, participants' illustrative comments were also used, where necessary, to exemplify motivations.

Results

Motivation results across all schooling stages are reported first, followed by the different frequency of participants' statements across EFL and ESL contexts. Finally, trends of

changes in motivation are identified across different stages of schooling.

English Learning Motivations across Different Schooling Stages and Contexts

Firstly, the distribution of the number of participants' motivational codes across different stages of schooling was reported. There were, in total, 12 motivational codes classified to two categories: controlled and autonomous motivations; these categories varied across different stages of schooling (Table 1). Moreover, *oral communication* in different contexts was classified to either controlled or autonomous motivation. For example, oral communication is an immediate need (controlled motivation) while studying abroad: "Although English was not a compulsory course while studying abroad, I had to learn English well to communicate with others since I was in an overseas environment" [Case 04]. However, *oral communication* in Chinese schooling appears to refer to future goals (autonomous motivation): "In high school I hope to communicate with foreigners in English in the future, which was one of the main reasons for studying English harder" [Case 17].

Additionally, different stages of schooling were characterised by relatively different motivational codes and percentages, which is shown in Table 1. *Passing exams or proficiency tests* was the most frequent motivation in secondary schooling, with 65% in middle school, and 80% in high school. This motivation was due to the high-stakes High School Entrance Examination (HSEE, *zhong kao*) and National College Entrance Examination (NCEE, *gao kao*). For example,

In the year 3 of my middle school English study, an important reason for my studying English harder was preparing for HSEE, and in the year 3 of my high school English study, an important reason for studying English harder was preparing for NCEE.[Case 06]

Passing exams or proficiency tests ($n = 8$) and *finding a good job* ($n = 8$) were equally the two most frequent motivational codes in undergraduate study. For example,

When I studied English at my university, examination is one reason for learning English well since we are required to pass the general English examination of every semester during my first two years of university study. Meanwhile, English study was job-related in my university study: I would find a job in the foreign companies if I studied English well.[Case 03]

It was *interest* that characterised only two study stages of this long time span, that is, primary school and post-graduate study, with 50% and 47%, respectively.

Table 1 The number of participants reporting motivations indicating medium to very high across different stages of schooling (percentage in parentheses)

Motivation	Chinese schooling					Overseas schooling SA (<i>n</i> = 20)
	PS (<i>n</i> = 12)	MS (<i>n</i> = 20)	HS (<i>n</i> = 20)	U (<i>n</i> = 19)	PG (<i>n</i> = 17)	
1. Controlled motivation						
1.1 External regulation						
1.1.1 Immediate demands						
1.1.1.1 Oral communication						14 (70.0)
1.1.1.2 Passing exams (e.g. NCEE) or proficiency tests (e.g. CET, TEM, IELTS, TOEFL)	2 (16.7)	13 (65.0)	16 (80.0)	8 (42.1)	6 (35.3)	1 (5.0)
1.1.1.3 Requirement of school or programmes	1 (8.3)	4 (20.0)	3 (15.0)	2 (10.5)	2 (11.8)	8 (40.0)
1.2 Introjected regulation						
1.2.1 Family/friends' influence	1 (8.3)	2 (10.0)	1 (5.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
1.2.2 Meeting others' expectations	2 (16.7)	2 (10.0)	1 (5.0)	2 (10.5)	1 (5.9)	2 (10.0)
1.2.3 Self-worth	0 (0.0)	2 (10.0)	2 (10.0)	2 (10.5)	0 (0.0)	1 (5.0)
Total (<i>f</i>)	5 (41.7)	19 (95.0)	20 (100.0)	11 (57.9)	8 (47.1)	19 (95.0)
2. Autonomous motivation						
2.1 Identified/integrated regulation						
2.1.1 Future goals						
2.1.1.1 Oral communication	0 (0.0)	1 (5.0)	1 (5.0)	5 (26.3)	3 (17.6)	
2.1.1.2 Finding a decent job	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	8 (42.1)	4 (23.5)	4 (20.0)
2.1.1.3 Professional/academic development	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (5.3)	5 (29.4)	8 (40.0)
2.1.1.4 Study abroad to pursue degree	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (31.6)	5 (29.4)	
2.2 Intrinsic motivation						
2.2.1 Interest	6 (50.0)	6 (30.0)	5 (25.0)	7 (36.8)	8 (47.1)	5 (25.0)
2.2.2 Task mastery	0 (0.0)	1 (5.0)	1 (5.0)	2 (10.5)	2 (11.8)	4 (20.0)
Total (<i>f</i>)	6 (50.0)	7 (35.0)	6 (30.0)	15 (78.9)	14 (82.4)	12 (60.0)

Total (*f*) refers to the number of participants, not the sum of the participants in the columns

PS primary school, MS middle school, HS high school, U undergraduate, PG postgraduate, SA study abroad, NCEE National College Entrance Examination, CET College English Test, TEM Test for English Major, CET and TEM are standardised national English proficiency tests for universities students in the People's Republic of China

Participants' interest in English in primary school was due to "English was a new language to me full of freshness" (Case 07), while in postgraduate study they "began to enjoy the beauty of English language" (Case 20).

Oral communication was the most common motivation while studying abroad for 70% of respondents. One student explained as follows:

When I go abroad, I find it is very hard for me to hear the locals speaking clearly and to communicate with them freely. So, in order to communicate with them freely, I do some practices, such as listening to the radio and talking with the locals.[Case 01].

Regarding the frequency of motivational codes across different contexts (Table 2), Chinese EFL schooling was characterised somewhat by *passing exams or proficiency tests* (30%), whereas overseas ESL schooling tended to feature *oral communication* (30%). Moreover, there were

notable differences in the distribution of these codes by language contexts for controlled motivation, with medium effect size (i.e. $d = .54$); but the effect size for autonomous motivation was slight (i.e. $d = .24$), suggesting that the two contexts resulted in different controlled motivation patterns.

Trends of Changes in Motivation Across Different Study Stages

The trends of changes in the motivational categories (i.e. controlled and autonomous motivation) across different study stages are shown in Fig. 1. Controlled motivation fluctuated across all study stages, starting from the lowest starting point in primary school, then ascending steeply to a peak in high school but descending sharply in postgraduate, and finally almost reaching a peak at the stage of studying abroad. Yet, autonomous motivation did not

fluctuate as much as controlled motivation, except in the significant increase from high school to undergraduate study.

Specifically, in primary school, students seemed to be interested in English study and were free from exam pressure: "In my primary school (Year 3), I did not feel study English under great pressure. At that time, I studied

English because of my interest, and the interest was high" (Case 02).

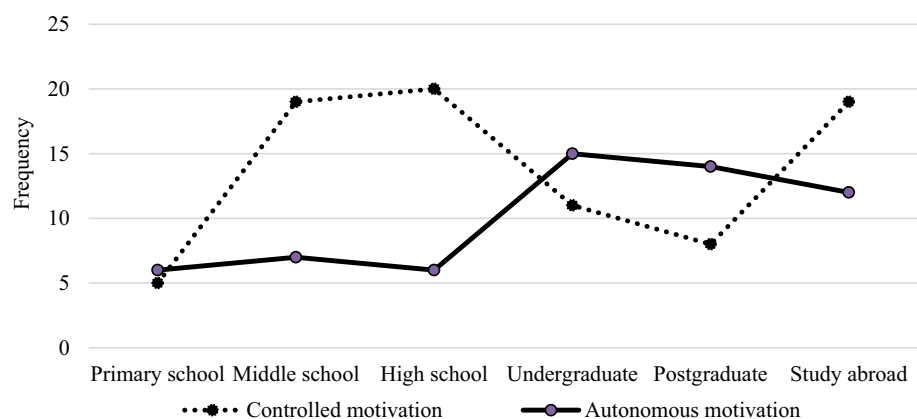
Yet, secondary schooling (i.e. middle school and high school) was characterised by controlled motivation, particularly *passing exams*, which could lead to great pressure in English study and then their interest in English learning decreased. For example, Case 2 reported that "In middle

Table 2 The frequency of motivations indicating medium to very high across different learning contexts

Motivation	Schooling	
	Chinese EFL	Overseas ESL
1. Controlled motivation		
1.1 External regulation		
1.1.1 Immediate demands		
1.1.1.1 Oral communication	0	16
1.1.1.2 Passing exams (e.g. NCEE) or proficiency tests (e.g. CET, TEM, IELTS, TOEFL)	45	1
1.1.1.3 Requirement of school or programmes	12	11
1.2 Introjected regulation		
1.2.1 Family/friends' influence	4	0
1.2.2 Meeting others' expectations	8	2
1.2.3 Self-worth	6	1
Total	75	31
2. Autonomous motivation		
2.1 Identified/integrated regulation		
2.1.1 Future goals		
2.1.1.1 Oral communication	10	0
2.1.1.2 Finding a decent job	12	4
2.1.1.3 Professional/academic development	6	8
2.1.1.4 Studying abroad to pursue degree	11	
2.2 Intrinsic motivation		
2.2.1 Interest	32	7
2.2.2 Task mastery	6	4
Total	77	23

EFL English as a Foreign Language, *ESL* English as a second language, *NCEE* National College Entrance Examination, *CET* College English Test, *TEM* test for English Major, CET and TEM are standardised national English proficiency tests for universities students in the People's Republic of China

Fig. 1 The trends of changes in motivational themes across different study stages



school and high school, I learned English in order to pass exams, and my interest was lower than before” and when Case 2 was asked why his motivation changed in secondary schooling his comment was,

The main reason for the change in my goals was the examination system in China. Because if I wanted to be enrolled in a good university in China, I had to study English well and this learning was under great pressure so there was no interest in English learning.

Likewise, another participant had interest in primary school (e.g. I got access to English learning at Year 5 in my primary school, and at that time I was interested in it), but his interest was lost in secondary schooling due to great pressure of NCEE (*gao kao*). He commented that:

When I came to middle school and high school, the reason for my learning English was that English as a subject was a requirement for my High School Entrance Examination and National College Entrance Examination, and at that time, there was no interest in English. I came from Shandong Province where there is great NCEE pressure, so I had no mood in doing other things and my focus was on the study [Case 10].

However, in undergraduate and postgraduate study in China, students’ controlled motivation decreased dramatically and autonomous motivation increased sharply. After entry into university, they showed interest in English study and English study seemed to be related to their future (e.g. job). For example, Case 5 firstly reported that his motivation in secondary schooling was exam-oriented (e.g. I had to learn English to pass general English test of each term, HSEE, and NCEE. Thus, at that time what I cared about is English examination score). He then commented the change in his motivation “When I studied in university, my goals for studying English have changed”, because “I am aware of the importance of studying English, an important instrument for my future life”, and “English learning is more related to my future life”. Similarly, Case 17 reported the change in her motivation from secondary schooling to undergraduate study (e.g. In university, interest in English study has played a dominant role in my English study, different from the previous stages where motivation was dominated by examination) and then she commented that “In university, English study was more related to my personal goals”. Case 11 also commented that “In my postgraduate study in China, the reason for my English study was my interest in English and the improvement of myself”.

Yet, students’ controlled motivation went up quickly when studying abroad due to the pressure in doctoral study to use English as a medium language in an English-speaking country (e.g. while studying at the overseas

university, the motivation for learning English is high, and since now English learning should be regarded as a subject, a requirement of PhD. Case 20).

Discussion

Both autonomous motivation and controlled motivation were seen across different schooling stages and contexts. Different learning contexts did contribute to the changes in participants’ controlled motivation, and different study stages did lead to the changes in participants’ motivation.

Autonomous Motivation

There is slightly more autonomous motivation than controlled motivation in a Chinese EFL context, suggesting an important role of autonomous motivation in language learners’ English success. Specifically, *interest* is seen between two English learning contexts (i.e. EFL and ESL contexts) and across different levels of schooling. This interest initially derives from students’ freshness and curiosity in this new language when they began to learn English in primary school or middle school. Then, this interest changes to an interest in Western culture (e.g. English motives, TV series, novels and classical works) and the language itself in undergraduate study and onward (e.g. appreciating the beauty of this language), which is similar to Gao and her colleagues’ study finding (Gao et al. 2015). This signified that *interest*, as a motivation, is diverse but also represents a continuity for this group of successful English learners. Further, this *interest* leads to their success in English learning (Lin and Detaramani 1998), and their success in English learning seems to enrich their life through reading English original books and novels.

In addition, *finding a decent job* and *professional/academic development* are the other two important motivations from undergraduate study onward in both Chinese EFL context and overseas ESL context. These two motivations can be labelled as instrumental orientation in accord with Gardner’s (2005) SE model. However, they seem to be long-term motivations (Gao et al. 2014); they are related to personal future development and promotion so that they can be internalised, highlighting the importance of English learning to L2 learners in both contexts. Moreover, this result indicates that these successful English learners aspire to succeed in their career as well. Further, success in English learning would contribute to their future career success in that it provides them with more opportunities (e.g. getting overseas education).

The source of autonomous motivation is internal, satisfying an individual’s inner needs and enhancing growth,

and thus it leads to an increase in an individual's psychological well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000). This autonomous motivation, therefore, is what teachers of the foreign/second language learners encourage and expect learners to have.

Controlled Motivation

Controlled motivation can be seen in both Chinese EFL context and overseas ESL context. Not surprisingly, in Chinese schooling, *passing exams or proficiency test* is the most frequent motivation across different study stages particularly in secondary education (65% in middle school and 80% in high school, respectively) due to the powerful high stakes and pressure of public examinations. This result is consistent with Gao's proposition (Gao et al. 2014) that for high school students the most important motivation for learning English was to enter a good university. Undoubtedly, success in important public examinations (e.g. *gao kao* and *zhong kao*) allows admission to a prestigious key university in China and thus greater career success (Yu and Suen 2005) and eventually would contribute to upward mobility (Feng 1994; He 2000).

Changes in Motivations

There are changes in participants' motivations across schooling stages within a Chinese EFL context and changes between two language learning contexts (EFL compared with ESL). This illustrates the point that motivation is a dynamic process and is in a state of flux rather than stability (Dörnyei 2009).

As the Chinese students moved through the school system their motivations moved. In primary school, students' motivation was largely autonomous (e.g. interest), perhaps because the language was fresh. Nevertheless, by secondary schooling, students' motivation was primarily characterised as controlled (e.g. passing exams) because of the powerful pressure and control and high-stakes public examinations. Indeed, in China, high schools generally have very strict management rules for students' study and life (Li 2007) to ensure that students give 100% effort in their studies. Moreover, the quality of high school is mostly evaluated by college admission rate and hence teachers' teaching is exam-oriented and students' learning is passive learning (Chen et al. 2016). The developmental characteristics of youth mind may have caused this automatic adjustment by showing higher controlled motivation. The potential of adolescents to show higher controlled motivation to respond to the demanding surroundings could benefit from further research investigation. However, upon successfully gaining entry to the undergraduate study in China, students' motivation was characterised by both

controlled motivation (e.g. passing exams or proficiency tests) and autonomous motivation (e.g. finding a decent job), indicating that English learning was associated with future personal opportunities. This may be attributed to the fact that Chinese universities and colleges have less control and more flexible management rules for students (e.g. normally teachers meet students once every week and teachers do not push students to do anything Chen et al. 2016). Students are also given more choices and freedom to learn the subjects that they are interested in (i.e. students take full responsibilities of their studies rather than depending on their parents/teachers to motivate them; Li 2007). Students' learning autonomy and self-motivation, therefore, are developed and promoted in tertiary education. These findings are in accord with the idea that educational settings (e.g. schooling contexts including school management rules, pressures and benefits) play an important role in students' motives (Dörnyei 2009). In this way, it could be argued that L2 motivations exhibit strongly rational traits (Rieskamp and Reimer 2007) within the ecology of the schooling process experienced by these students.

The impact of moving to an ESL context upon L2 motivation is most noticeable in a large increase in 14 students' motivation to engage in communication. Having successfully gained entry to an overseas English doctoral programme, it seems only natural that students' motivations shift towards the need to use the language in real-world contexts. These findings suggest that L2 learners shift their motivation in order to satisfy the different needs of different contexts. Specifically, in an EFL context, language learners are 'learners' of a language as a subject (Wei 2016). In an ESL context, language learners are 'users' needing to communicate with others. Thus, L2 learning motivation research should be related to both the social microcontext (i.e. L2 learning classroom; Dörnyei 2009) and macro-context (Lamb 2013).

All the findings stated previously suggest that in the Chinese secondary educational context, English learning should involve more than passing various kinds of exams or proficiency tests. Eventually, successful learners need to use English to communicate. However, because examinations and tests have been used to select and reward individuals in China (China Civilization Centre 2007), teachers tend to adopt an examination-oriented teaching model (Gao and Watkins 2001) and parents expect teachers to offer teaching activities that result in higher scores in those examinations (Watkins and Biggs 2001). This exam-oriented English learning and teaching context undermines the importance of developing oral competence and may lead to the strange phenomenon in China of "silent English" (Zhao 2009, p. 154). Thus, access to English language media literacy (e.g. news broadcasts; Kung 2016)

and preferably social media interaction with English speakers outside China might be used to facilitate L2 learners' oral competence.

Lastly, some of the motivations reported in the Chinese EFL context are different to those of previous studies. Indeed, nearly twice as many English learning motivations were found (i.e. in total 12 motivation categories in this study), compared to the earlier Chinese survey study (i.e. seven motivation categories; Gao et al. 2003). Specifically, self-worth, task mastery and oral communication do not seem to have appeared in previous studies. Although motivations of task mastery (4%; see Table 2) and oral communication (7% see Table 2) accounted for a very small percentage, they are more related to *using* this language rather than *learning* this language, indicating that at least some participants (in total seven participants) were aware of using this language in the Chinese EFL context. By contrast, social responsibility, found in previous studies (Gao et al. 2003; Jiang 2011), is not a motivation for these successful language learners, implying that it might not be considered as an important goal or motivated behaviour for this sample of successful English learners. Overall, it is concluded that foreign language learners with higher proficiency appear to have multifaceted motivations. That is, research on foreign language learners' motivations should be situated in the specifics of a language proficiency group (e.g. high-English-proficiency learners or low-English-proficiency learners).

Future Research

These 20 retrospective case studies investigated English learning motivations of successful Chinese learners of English across different study stages and learning contexts. The findings in this study were consistent with the survey findings on 443 postgraduate and undergraduate students enrolled in universities in New Zealand (Yu 2018). In this study, for example, intrinsic motivation was an important motivation and introjected motivation was not an important motivation when students were studying abroad. Similarly, intrinsic motivation was strongly endorsed ($M = 5.46$) and introjected regulation ($M = 3.88$) was rejected by survey participants in an overseas ESL context (i.e. New Zealand). However, in order to evaluate whether different learning contexts would lead to a difference in their motivations, a true experiment would be required to test the robustness of claims that EFL and ESL contexts are influential. Nonetheless, the demands of such a design (i.e. random assignment of English language learners to either a second or foreign language context) make such a study expensive and ethically suspect. Thus, longitudinal tracking of learners as they migrate between contexts and detailed examination of less successful learners over the course of

their academic trajectories would more legitimately shed light on this problem.

In addition, the concept of critical period (Bickerton 1981; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2003) may explain how learning motivation and learning performance for foreign language differ across stages based on age. However, other researchers argue that children and adults seem to have the ability to acquire a second/foreign language at any age (Loup et al. 1994; Scovel 2000). Adult second/foreign language learners seem to benefit from grammatical explanations and deductive thinking, whereas child learners do not (Ausubel 1964). The only language property that children can pick up easily but adults cannot is the authentic accent of native speakers (Scovel 1999). Given these different hypotheses about the potential connection between age and language learning, language learners' age should be taken into account in future studies about language learning and motivation, that is, language learning studies should be focussed on child language learners (around puberty normally aged 10–13) and adult language learners (normally aged 18 and above).

Conclusion

It is concluded that foreign language learners with higher proficiency appear to have multifaceted motivations. Further, in order to capture the dynamic development of language learners' motivation, regulatory styles (e.g. external regulation), with reference to self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000), should be widely used in L2 motivation research. Also, these major findings suggest that the changes in schooling stages and contexts impact L2 learners' motivation. The changing characteristics of study stages and contexts should, therefore, be given sufficient attention in L2 motivation research. Additionally, highly examination-oriented English learning and teaching may lead to learners who are unable or unwilling to speak English, suggesting that unless a more communication-oriented approach is taken, Chinese learners of English will focus rationally, and primarily, on passing examinations.

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