

## THE ENGLISH LEARNING MOTIVATION OF CHINESE STUDENTS: CROSS-GRADE SURVEY ANALYSIS

Xiaoqing Song

Marketing Trading Centre, Xizang Province, China.

### ABSTRACT

*Existing literature indicates that motivation is the most powerful determining factor that influences the rate and success of second language learning. Currently, there is a growing body of empirical research indicating the changes in second language learning motivation in different grades at the same or different schools. The findings of previous studies have mostly shown that student second language learning motivation increases with increasing school levels. Do"nyei (2000) suggested that concentrating on the time dimension of second language motivation is crucial for comprehending the second language motivation of students. However, the temporal variations of second language motivation, particularly motivational changes at different Chinese school levels, have not been sufficiently emphasized by second language motivation researchers, therefore, this quantitative research investigated the changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation from primary to high school. An English learning motivation questionnaire was used and administered to 3000 students from Grades 1 - 12 in public primary, junior high, and high schools across Mainland China, and employed the reliability analysis and analysis of variance to analyze quantitative data. The statistical results revealed that high school students ranked highest in English learning motivation, followed by junior high and primary school students. Furthermore, the college entrance examination had a positive impact on high school students' motivation to learn English.*

**Keywords:** English Learning Motivation, School Levels, College Entrance Examination, Cross-grade Analysis.

### 1. Introduction

This study adopted a quantitative research method to investigate the changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation from primary to high school. Existing literature indicates that motivation is the most powerful determining factor that influences the rate and success of second language learning (e.g.). Contemporary research by many researchers (e.g.) has underlined the temporal fluctuation and dynamic nature of second language motivation in recent years. They have shown that motivation undergoes continuous fluctuations, indicating a dynamic changeability in learning across varied time spans.

According to Do"nyei and Ushioda (2011), "motivation does not remain constant throughout months, years, or even a single session. It ebbs and flows in complex ways in response to various internal and external influences" (p. 6). Given that second language learning is a long-term activity, it is expected to go through diverse phases. More specifically, motivation ranges from taking a single second language class to studying a language for

months, years, or even a lifetime. Furthermore, students' second language learning motivation varies throughout school levels (i.e., primary, junior high, or high school). Students may be less motivated to acquire a second language in primary and junior high school, but highly motivated in high school.

There is a growing body of empirical research indicating the changes in learning motivation in different grades at the same or different schools (e.g.). The findings of previous studies have mostly shown that student motivation increases with increasing school levels. Do"nyei (2000) suggested that concentrating on the time dimension of second language motivation is crucial for comprehending the second language motivation of students.

However, the temporal variations of second language motivation, particularly motivational changes at different school levels, have not been sufficiently emphasized by second language motivation researchers. By using a quantitative research method, which includes a motivational questionnaire, this

research investigates (1) changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation from primary to high school and (2) changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation's subcomponents from primary to high school.

### English Education in China

In the educational sector of the People's Republic of China (hereafter China), the significance of English has been increasingly highlighted. According to Jiang (2003), the Chinese government urged children to learn English early in their education.

In order to enhance English learning, the Chinese Ministry of Education (hereafter MOE) enacted new curriculum reforms. Taking into account regional disparities in schooling, the reform was carried out in two batches: Beginning in the fall of 2001, primary schools in cities and counties were required to provide English programs for grades 3 students and higher, while all other schools were required to do so in the following year. The reform, meant to increase students' overall language proficiency, had five interconnected components: language skills, linguistic knowledge, emotional attitude, learning techniques, and cultural consciousness.

According to this new reform, objectives during primary school were to stimulate and raise children's interest in English study. Compared with the primary school learning context, for junior high school students, English is regarded as one of the three core school subjects along with Chinese and Mathematics. In addition, junior high school students must pass a high school entrance exam, which includes English. English accounts for a significant share of the college entrance test for high school students - 150 out of the total score of 750 marks. Therefore, English performance is seen as a key element that determines whether high school students can enroll in a prominent institution in China.

This paper is organised as follows: literature review describes the studies on the second language learning motivation of Chinese students; the methodology uses an English learning motivation questionnaire, administers to 3000 students from Grades 1 - 12 in public primary, junior high, and high schools across

Mainland China, and employs the reliability analysis and analysis of variance to analyze quantitative data; based on the findings of this study, limitations, directions, and pedagogical implications are also discussed.

## 2. Literature Review

Studies on the second language learning motivation of Chinese students (e.g.,) have noted that students have a high level of instrumental motivation to learn English. Further, instrumental motivation often reflects Chinese cultural and educational traditions.

For instance, Hua (1998) and Shi (2000) identified certificate motivation or the motivation to learn English in order to obtain a certificate stating it, as the primary motivational type for many Chinese high school learners and defined it as their desire to learn English in order to achieve high scores. Chen et al. (2005) explored the effect of Chinese culture on the second language learning of Taiwanese learners. They developed a motivator, the Chinese imperative, which focuses on the social pressure exerted on Chinese students' second language learning by parents, instructors, and the whole Chinese community. Similarly, Taguchi et al. (2009) also identified a mostly exam-oriented motivation among Chinese students and a significant familial effect on students' second language learning.

However, the majority of research on Chinese students' English-learning motivation has concentrated on higher education, particularly undergraduates. It is uncommon to find a comprehensive study on comparative the motivation of primary, junior high, and high school students. Moreover, Chinese second language motivation studies have often ignored the temporal variation of second language learning motivation.

Consequently, this quantitative research emphasizes the temporal dimension of second language learning motivation. As previously stated, its significance has been underscored by second language motivation researchers (e.g.,), despite the rarity of related studies, as Doˆrnyei (2001) indicates:

*Although most practitioners with sufficient classroom experience are aware that student motivation does not remain*

*constant during such a lengthy process, hardly any research has been done on analyzing the dynamics of second language motivational change and identifying typical sequential patterns and developmental aspects. (p. 82).*

In addition, current researches often examine changes in motivation between grades at the same school level (e.g.,) or at three distinct school levels (e.g.,). For instance, Williams et al. (2002) and Chambers (1999) found that the second language learning motivation of British students increased between the seventh and ninth grades, while Tachibana et al. (1996) found that the motivation for learning English in both Chinese and Japanese students increased from primary to high school.

Lamb (2007) investigated the English learning motivation of Indonesian junior high school students over twenty months using surveys and interviews. The investigation revealed interesting findings: As the students got more aware of their motivation, they used various self-regulation tactics to sustain their English learning drive.

Recently, Kim (2012a) administered a questionnaire to 2783 Korean students in Grades 3 through 12 to examine changes in motivation among Korean second language learners. The data suggested that second language learning motivation among Korean students tends to exhibit a curving pattern. Specifically, the motivation of Korean students consistently fell from Grades 3 through 9 and then showed an upward tendency between Grades 10 and 12.

As indicated in the findings of previous studies, students' second language learning motivation undergoes dynamic changes at different school levels (i.e., primary, junior high, and high school). According to most researches, students' second language motivation tends to increase as they advance throughout the school levels and therefore shows a positive trend (e.g.,). They indicate that teacher-related factors are the most beneficial factors that encourage students' second language learning.

However, few studies have investigated the changes in second language learning motivation from primary to high school. In

addition, considering the Chinese educational framework, in which English remains one of the major subjects until the end of high school, it is essential to comprehend students' second language learning motivation at different school levels of education. Therefore, two research questions were developed:

*How does English learning motivation change in Chinese students from primary to high school?*

*How do English learning motivation's subcomponents change in Chinese students from primary to high school?*

### 3. Methods

According to second language motivation researchers, a quantitative research method study is a promising direction for future second language motivation research; hence, this method merits academic attention. Therefore, the quantitative research method was chosen for this study, as it has particular value in achieving an elaborate and comprehensive understanding of complex topics within an educational context. This research looked into the changes in English learning motivation of Chinese students from primary to high school by using the English learning motivation questionnaire.

### Instruments

This study used the English learning motivation questionnaire (see "Appendix 1"), which was designed by Qian-Mei Zhang and Tae-Young Kim with a total of 35 questions and adopted a five-point Likert scale (i.e., 1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree). The measurement covers seven subcomponents: self-development motivation, academic motivation, patriotic motivation, achievement motivation, integrative motivation, pragmatic motivation, and other-regulated motivation. Self-development motivation reflects students' realistic understanding of the importance of English, eagerness to communicate with others in English, desire to expand their own opinions/knowledge, and anxiety to strengthen self-development; academic motivation reflects students' internal forces in English learning, and also it reflects students' ability to learn English and actively evaluate themselves; patriotic motivation reflects the phenomenon that

English is used as a tool to realize students' patriotic aspirations in China; achievement motivation shows students' needs for achievement, records their use of English to meet the requirements of school and expectations of parents and themselves; integrative motivation exhibits students' positive attitude towards the target language and target language group; pragmatic motivation demonstrates the motivation of students to learn in order to obtain practical and utilitarian benefits from English learning (such as getting good grades on exams or getting a better salary); other-regulated motivation proves that students' learning motivation can be influenced by others (such as friends and classmates), their own role models, or the social learning environment. Among them, self-development motivation, patriotic motivation, achievement motivation, and pragmatic motivation refer to using English to achieve specific, pragmatic goals, and they are produced by tool orientation.

#### Participants

The sample for this quantitative research was comprised of 3000 students from Grades 1 - 12 in public primary, junior high, and high schools across Mainland China. The sample collection was based on convenience sampling

and students who were willing to respond to the survey.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

The research was carried out from March to April 2023 by employing an English learning motivation questionnaire. Before administering the main study, the researcher conducted a pilot study in March 2023 in which a total of 300 primary, junior high, and high school students participated. The pilot study's findings revealed that the questionnaire items had high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.705$ ), which can be used for subsequent research. Finally, 3000 students from Grade 1 to Grade 12 in public primary, junior high, and high schools across Mainland China completed the questionnaires. All the resulting data were processed using the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29.0, employing two statistical measures: reliability analysis and analysis of variance.

#### 4. Results

This study involved 3000 primary, junior high, and high school students, covering twelve grades from Grade 1 to Grade 12, with 250 students in each grade, including 1400 male students, accounting for 46.67%, and 1600 female students, accounting for 53.33%.

#### The Current Situation of Students' English Learning Motivation

Table 1. Current characteristics of students' English learning motivation

Motivational factors	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Self-development motivation	1.00	4.80	2.72	0.69
Academic motivation	1.14	4.86	2.68	0.58
Patriotic motivation	1.00	4.75	2.67	0.69
Achievement motivation	1.00	4.75	2.72	0.67
Integrative motivation	1.00	4.60	2.79	0.65
Pragmatic motivation	1.00	5.00	2.78	0.68
Other-regulated motivation	1.00	5.00	2.83	0.79
English learning motivation	1.12	3.88	2.73	0.46

It can be seen from Table 1 that the mean of students' English learning motivation is 2.73, indicating that students' English learning motivation is in a lower intermediate state. At the same time, the types of English learning motivation among students are other-regulated motivation, integrative motivation, pragmatic

motivation, self-development motivation, achievement motivation, academic motivation, and patriotic motivation from high to low. That is, the motivation of students to learn English is mainly influenced by others (such as friends and classmates), their own role models, or the social learning environment.

#### The Changing Trend of English Learning Motivation at Different School Levels

Table 2. Analysis of variance of English learning motivation at different school levels

Dependent variable	School levels	M	SD	F	sig	Scheffe
English learning motivation	Primary school	2.53	0.54	194.916	<0.001	High school>Junior high school
	Junior high school	2.64	0.50			High school>Primary school
	High school	2.89	0.33			

p&lt;0.05

p&lt;0.01

p&lt;0.001

Through analysis of variance, it is found that the English learning motivation difference at different school levels is statistically significant ( $p<0.001$ ). Further analysis showed that the motivation score of high school is significantly higher than that in junior high and

primary school; the motivation score of junior high school is significantly higher than that in primary school (Table 2). In other words, English learning motivation develops toward an increasing trend, with the lowest in primary school and the highest in high school.

Table 3. Analysis of variance of each factor of English learning motivation at different school levels

Motivational factors	School levels	M	SD	F	sig	Scheffe
Self-development motivation	Primary school	2.51	0.70	71.878	<0.001	High school>Junior high school
	Junior high school	2.64	0.68			High school>Primary school
	High school	2.86	0.66			
Academic motivation	Primary school	2.47	0.64	98.599	<0.001	High school>Junior high school
	Junior high school	2.62	0.61			High school>Primary school
	High school	2.81	0.50			
Patriotic motivation	Primary school	2.46	0.72	85.198	<0.001	High school>Junior high school
	Junior high school	2.57	0.74			High school>Primary school
	High school	2.83	0.62			
Achievement motivation	Primary school	2.58	0.72	27.994	<0.001	High school>Junior high school
	Junior high school	2.69	0.71			High school>Primary school
	High school	2.80	0.61			

	High school					school
Integrative motivation	Primary school	2.59	0.68	98.649	<0.001	High school>Junior high
	Junior high school	2.67	0.66			school>Primary school
		2.95	0.60			
	High school					school
Pragmatic motivation	Primary school	2.52	0.71	147.005	<0.001	High school>Junior high
	Junior high school	2.64	0.69			school>Primary school
		2.98	0.60			
	High school					school
Other-regulated motivation	Primary school	2.58	0.87	101.220	<0.001	High school>Junior high
	Junior high school	2.70	0.87			school>Primary school
		3.03	0.65			
	High school					school

$p < 0.05$

$p < 0.01$

$p < 0.001$

Through analysis of variance, it is found that there are statistically significant differences in seven dimensions of self-development motivation, academic motivation, patriotic motivation, achievement motivation, integrative motivation, pragmatic motivation, and other-regulated motivation among different school levels ( $p < 0.001$ ), as shown below.

The motivation score of high school is significantly higher than that in junior high and primary school; the motivation score of junior high school is significantly higher than that in primary school (Table 3). Put another way, the above motivations develop toward a continuously increasing trend, with the lowest in primary school and the highest in high school.

## 5. Discussion

This research employs the quantitative research methodology to investigate the changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation across various school levels and the

changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation's subcomponents across various school levels. According to the statistical results of surveys, Chinese high school students ranked the highest in English learning motivation, followed by junior high and primary school students (see Tables 2 and 3).

It should be noted that the questionnaire revealed a positive trend in terms of second language learning motivations in Chinese high school English classes. The types of English learning motivation among high school students are other-regulated motivation, integrative motivation, pragmatic motivation, self-development motivation, achievement motivation, academic motivation, and patriotic motivation from high to low. That is, the motivation of high school students to learn English is mainly influenced by others (such as friends and classmates), their own role models, or the social learning environment.

Additionally, preparation for the college entrance exam also influenced high school



students' second language learning positively. This is consistent with earlier research on Chinese students. Liu and Chen (2007) and Liu (2011) found that Chinese high school students tended to be motivated in English learning, which researchers ascribed to the college admission exams. Namely, high school students' English learning motivation are greatly motivated by the college entrance exam; consequently, the college entrance examination motivates students' second language learning.

Moreover, in this exam-oriented educational environment, instructors prefer to utilise exam-oriented teaching approaches in second language classes, and this positive consequence is attributed to the effect of college entrance exam. The high school students were comfortable with the teacher's grammar-translation teaching techniques and the exam-oriented teaching approach. It has been stated that the primary job of Chinese high school English instructors is to prepare their students for college entrance exam, and hence English classes are largely grammar-focused and teacher-centered. Exam-oriented teaching approaches are therefore considered a motivational factor for high school students.

Furthermore, both junior high and high school students in China are required to take entrance examinations: high school entrance exams for junior high school students and college entrance examinations for high school students. After completing the junior high school curriculum, junior high school students have the option to choose either a vocational or an academic, college-bound high school. And a majority of college-bound high school students face the college entrance examination, which will affect students' fate and the situation of their families. As a result, compared to primary and junior high school students, high school students are more driven to achieve good grades on college entrance examination. This study employed a quantitative research method to provide empirical evidence that Chinese high school students' English learning become motivated because of college entrance exam.

### **Summary, Limitations and Directions**

This quantitative study investigated how Chinese students' English learning motivation changed from primary to high school. Chinese high school students had the highest level of English learning motivation, while primary school students were the least motivated. Besides, the college entrance examination had a positive impact on high school students' English learning motivation.

This study has following limitations. First, though this research aimed to examine changes in English learning motivation from primary to high school and changes in English learning motivation's subcomponents from primary to high school, the research design was quasi-longitudinal. This study was only able to present differences in English learning motivation at school levels, and by looking at these differences the participants' changes in motivation were inferred. Therefore, future research needs to concentrate on longitudinal changes by exploring the temporal variations of second language learning motivation.

Second, this quantitative study only adopted a questionnaire to investigate the changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation from primary to high school and the changes in Chinese students' English learning motivation's subcomponents from primary to high school, and did not conduct semi-structured interviews with students to explore the reasons for second language motivational changes across school levels. Therefore, interviews with a diverse student population should be conducted in future research to explore students' perceptions of their English learning motivation in a more thorough manner.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Notwithstanding the contributions, limitations, and suggestions, the pedagogical implications of the study should also be discussed. First, a method of teaching through which English teachers encourage students to actively take part in Chinese English class activities, and create an opportunity for them to use English, may generate a feeling of success in students, which could in turn increase their English learning motivation. Second, providing plenty of input on the target

language serves as an essential element to boost students' English learning motivation when they are placed in an English-speaking environment.

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