Motivation in the ESL Classroom: Results of a Questionnaire Given to Toyo University International Regional Development Majors

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Motivation in the ESL Classroom:
Results of a Questionnaire Given to
Toyo University International Regional Development Majors

Robert LAMITIE*

Abstract

Giving 143 Toyo University students majoring in International Regional Development a
questionnaire highlighting how much time they had planned to study English outside the classroom,
how much time they were actually spending, and how much time they planned to spend in the future,
coupled with questions about how serious they felt they were as students, how much they liked
English, and how much they felt having good English skills would help them in their future careers
produced some interesting results. I first reviewed the research on motivation in ESL students, I found
that as might be expected, these Japanese students had a strong instrumental motivation for learning
English. I also found that they were planning to study English more than twice as many hours as they
actually finally managed. This raises the question of whether they are motivated strongly enough.

Introduction

I wanted to look at the state of motivation research on ESL classrooms generally and Japanese
students in particular. I then wanted to see what I could find that would apply to Toyo University’s
Kokusai Chiki Gakkubu (International Regional Development) Department, where I work. The
students there have a very international outlook, as many of them go overseas. As I researched
motivation, I wondered how my Regional Development students would look in the context of the
various schools of thought concerning motivation in the ESL classroom.

I gave my students a short questionnaire I created particularly to test the hours of study which they
had put in, were putting in, and intended to put in in the future. I also asked them to rate on a scale
of 1 to 5 whether they thought that being able to use English would help them in their future careers,
hoping to examine the level of their instrumental motivation. The questionnaire also asked them to
rate themselves as to how seriously they approached their studies and how much they liked studying
English, again on scales of 1 to 5.

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Theoretical Background

Gardner and Lambert (1959) created a seminal model of motivation, the socio-educational model. The model identifies two types of motivation, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, and attempts to examine their effects on ability to learn a second language. Integrative motivation refers to the desire on the learner’s part to integrate to some degree into the culture of the language being learned, so students who want to live in the foreign country or make friends from that country would be said to be driven by integrative motivation. Students driven by instrumental motivation on the other hand would be learning the language for utilitarian, practical reasons such as to advance their careers. Gardner felt that integratively motivated students would be better learners.

Gardner (2001) also notes that student attitude towards the teacher and the learning situation also serves as a piece of the L2 learning puzzle. This is certainly an area where teachers have a major impact. In so far as that attitude is malleable, teachers may greatly affect ability to learn.

Use of the second language serves both as a necessary part of the learning process and also often as the reason for learning the language. Students who more frequently speak the language both in class and out tend to acquire the language better (Seliger, 1977). It’s therefore worth trying to understand what gets students to speak more frequently, to become “high input generators,” as Seliger describes these more active students.

Studying Japanese ESL classrooms, Hashimoto (2002) found that Willingness To Communicate (WTC) and motivation both influenced L2 use, which should be enough evidence to get teachers to start thinking about how to influence students to be more willing to communicate, both by eliminating language anxiety as much as possible and also by better motivating them.

Dornyei (1990) studied students learning in a “unicultural” society, in this case Hungary. Lessons learned there should perhaps apply also to Japan, another unicultural society. Dornyei found that instrumental goals were the main motivational drivers for these students, many of whom did not meet native English speakers or use the language communicatively. They were driven largely by the desire for good grades, the desire to get into a good university, the desire for a higher TOEFL score and similar instrumental goals, and this does seem to be parallel to the situation at many Japanese high schools and universities.

Dornyei found in this study that these instrumental goals did seem to be enough to motivate students to learn successfully, but only up to the intermediate level. These students seemed to be satisfied with a working knowledge of the language that would allow them to communicate well enough to accomplish most everyday tasks. Students desiring a higher level of proficiency, the ability to hold sophisticated conversations on more difficult topics, or who expected to spend a significant amount of time in a foreign country, were generally motivated more by integrative goals. Can we convince Japanese students to try for more challenging goals in their English study?

Chihara and Oller (1978) did a study in Japan which, like Dornyei, found that (the Japanese) unicultural students, though not having much of a chance to speak to native speakers outside the
classroom nonetheless had good gains in proficiency with instrumental motivation as their basic outlook. Chihara and Oller noted that many of these learners felt that visiting a foreign country in the future was an important priority for them, so their conclusions were that there may be something different happening for these learners, who despite not having immediate chances to integrate with foreigners seemed able to motivate themselves by the possibility of doing so in the future.

Svanes has done a number of studies in this area but perhaps the most relevant is his study of adults from many cultures learning Norwegian (Svanes, 1987). He found that Asians, along with Middle Easterners and Africans, tended to be less integratively motivated than European and American students. Svanes speculated that the students from developing countries were forced, by their need to get an education that could eventually pay off for them economically, to have instrumental motivation. He also found that cultural distance made a difference in motivation, with more distance correlating negatively with motivation. Could Japanese people feel less of a cultural distance from English culture than other Asians, perhaps because of the American occupation?

What then, can be done to stimulate the motivation of Japanese students?

The Study

I decided to give a questionnaire to my students. I gave the questionnaires to 143 students in seven classes. The students all belonged to the International Regional Development Department, and the classes ranged from low level students studying simple conversational English to intermediate to high-level students studying Media English and looking at original American newspaper articles.

I wrote seven simple questions.

1) Do you think you are a serious student? How serious? Rate yourself from 1 (Not serious at all) to 5 (Very serious)
2) How much do you like studying English? Rate yourself from 1 (I hate it) to 5 (I love it)
3) During summer vacation, how many hours per week did you spend studying English outside of class?
4) How many hours a week did you PLAN to study English during this semester?
5) How many hours a week did you ACTUALLY STUDY English outside class during this semester?
6) How many hours a week do you expect to spend studying English outside of class during this (upcoming) vacation?
7) How useful do you think having good English will be in your future career? Rate your opinion from 1 (Not useful at all) to 5 (Very useful)

The questionnaires were given anonymously, as I felt asking for their names would have skewed the results.

Findings

While the results were all over the board as far as study hours, it was unsurprising to learn that the
lowest numbers were the numbers recording actual hours of study, while the hours planned for study averaged more than twice as high as the actual study hours.

It also shouldn’t be surprising that the ratio of planned study hours to actual hours went up with the low level classes and down with the high level classes. The lowest level classes studied a significantly lower percentage of their planned hours than did the students in the higher level classes. It’s a consistent problem, but leads to the inevitable question, are they low level because of their poor motivation and study habits, or are their poor study habits the results of their unhappy experiences in English classes? Either way, the lower level classes need more help.

Here are the results of the questionnaires for questions one, two and seven, the three questions in which students were asked to rank their answers on a scale of one to five:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Scores</th>
<th>Question 1 (Seriousness)</th>
<th>Question 2 (Liking)</th>
<th>Question 7 Usefulness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

Perhaps the most interesting finding for me was how the students seem to have overstated the likelihood of English being important in their careers. They are studying International Regional Development, so perhaps this should be expected, but the students appear to believe that English will be very important for more than half of them, 72 of 143, and this is surely unlikely.

Another interesting result is that the students in each and every class gave themselves higher average scores for how much they liked English than they did for being serious students. It’s hard to know why that is, but the consistency of the finding was interesting. Are they perhaps underestimating their own seriousness? Are the department’s English teachers doing a particularly good job making classes interesting? It would seem that students who considered themselves as unserious students would tend to dislike a fairly difficult subject such as English. Is the solution simply that English classes are seen as more fun than other classes that might be less communicative? Again, you’d expect the lower level classes to like English less, and they did like it less than the higher level students did, but they still averaged higher scores for liking than for seriousness.

I conceived this project more as a stimulus to my thoughts and my self-development, and as a way to better understand my students, rather than a rigorous statistical analysis testing a hypothesis. However, the results are interesting enough that I will consider giving a similar questionnaire to students of another department and perhaps another university for comparison. I’ll also try to add some more questions to compare time spent studying English outside the classroom with time spent...
outside the classroom on other courses, so that the hours spent working will tend to more clearly illumine whether the students are correctly estimating their seriousness of purpose. It would also be worthwhile to add a question concerning students’ plans to abroad, which would indicate a degree of integrative motivation, and perhaps their interest in engaging with foreign culture by means such as studying English songs or enjoying movies in English while still living here in Japan.

Conclusions

The students of International Regional Development do seem to be motivated by instrumental motivation, as the research suggested that Japanese students might be. However, Regional Development students do travel to other countries to do fieldwork, foreign study, and home stay and volunteer programs with higher frequency than most other departments. It’s difficult to be sure how much that would activate integrative motivation.

The students also ranked their liking for English consistently higher than their own seriousness of purpose as students. This was a surprising finding for me, and I would like to follow up on it.

Students nearly all spent less time studying than they had planned to in the past or had plans to do in the future. I believe that it’s a good idea to give them a questionnaire that has them consider how much time they spend on English study outside the classroom. I will do this in the future even if it’s not part of a study. Perhaps I can even get them considering how time spent studying might affect achievement in English.

References


Li, C., 2003. Motivating students to learn English through language arts activities: an exploratory study. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.


