An Empirical Study on the Correlation between Motivation and Autonomous Learning of Business English Learners

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Abstract: *Under the framework of learner factors and autonomous learning theory, this paper studies how motivation influences the autonomous learning of English learners via an empirical study on Business English majors at a university in Beijing, with a view to enriching the relevant theoretical study of autonomous learning and to promoting Business English teaching and personnel training. Based on the findings of the study, suggestions to enhance the habits and abilities of Business English learners are proposed: pay enough attention to both integrative and instrumental motivation boost autonomous learning.*

Keywords: *autonomous learning; motivation; learner factors; Business English*

1. Introduction

With the deepening of global economic integration, China's economic and trade cooperation and exchanges with foreign countries and regions have expanded in depth and width. Business English (BE) is widely used in foreign business activities and becomes the necessary media and tool. The growing demand for BE talents greatly stimulates the teaching and learning of business English. Up to now, over 540 universities and colleges have set up the major or direction of Business English with a total enrollment of more than 200,000 students.

In the 1980s, autonomous learning theory was applied to English teaching and the focus of English teaching and research has been on the cultivation of students' autonomous learning. But few studies and researches have focused on the autonomous learning abilities and motivation of Business English (BE) learners. Business English, as the major carrier in business activities, has a strong character of interdisciplinary and practicality, which means that business English and general English teaching have something in common, and that, at the same time, it has its own distinct characteristics in function, teaching purpose, application scenarios and teaching methods. Compared with general English majors, BE majors are facing more fierce competition in business market home and abroad in the future. Besides basic English learning, they have to learn many business-related subjects and later they have to integrate all these into business practice. To Cope with the situations successfully and effectively, there is an earnest need for BE majors to develop their autonomous learning abilities gradually and consciously in daily learning.

2. Literature Review

Since 1980s, many linguists, psychologists and educationalists have heated discussion on motivation and learner autonomy in education and in English teaching, and they have made great achievements in the related fields.

The researchers from home and abroad have conducted lots of studies and researches on motivation. From 1960s, western educationalists advocated that education's ultimate goal is to cultivate learners' responsibilities. In 1981, Holec first introduced the concept of autonomous learning into the field of foreign language teaching in his book *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*[1]. Language autonomous learning has become a hot topic in the field of foreign language education and research.

Dickson (1987) thinks learner autonomy is the attitude towards learning and the ability to learn independently and he also argues that autonomous learners take the responsibility of making learning-related decisions and is responsible for the implementation of all the decisions[2]. Dickson (1992) studied

the relationship between autonomous learning and foreign language learning motivations, and found that students' autonomy contributed greatly to the enhancement of students' learning motivation and effectiveness[3]. Brown (1987) analyzed their researches and found out the relationship between motivation and academic achievement: 14% of the academic achievements can be attributed to self-efficacy[4]. Zimmerman (2000) pointed out that self-efficacy impacts learners' motivation through autonomous learning such as setting goals[5]. Oxford (1989) shows in their research that there are significant gender differences in the choice of language learning strategies. He also find that different majors have various and significant impact on the using of strategies[6].

In China, researchers and scholars have different focuses and put emphases on different factors. In 2002, Wen Qiufang and Qin Xiaoqing analyzed the motivations of the non-English majors in colleges and universities and found that "outcome attribution and learning interest have both direct and indirect influence on students' motivational behaviour; former English scores have little and indirect impact on motivation; self-efficacy, potency and goal-orientation have very obvious influence on motivation in separate ways.[7]" Xu Jinfen (2007) wrote the book *Autonomy in College Foreign Language Teaching-- From Theory to Practice* and this is the first book in China to systematically study the theories and practices of the university foreign language learners' autonomy[8]. Li Shaoshan (2012) has done a dynamic study of learner factors on university students' English proficiency development, which is a diachronic study focused on learner factors such as intelligence, language learning ability, motivation, style and personalities, thus proposed some effective learning strategies based on these factors[9].

Based on all these studies, we can find that motivation provides self-propulsion for learners and guides the direction of autonomous learning. Motivation is an important prerequisite for learning to occur, maintain and improve. Learner autonomy is influenced by both internal and external motivation.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the influence of motivation on the autonomous learning of Business English majors and to find the correlation between them, a certain university is chosen to do the research.

3.1 Research participants

The research is done at a university in Beijing. There were altogether 45 students and two BE teachers involved in the experimental procedure. All the 45 students were investigated by questionnaire. The students are freshmen from Business English major. They were all native speakers of Chinese. Among them, there are 10 male students and 35 female students. 20 out of the 45 students are interviewed and those students are randomly chosen to take part in the interview to get very real situation of their autonomous learning condition and the data. Among the 20 students, there is 5 boy and 15 girls. Besides, Two BE teachers are also interviewed, one is teaching Business English Writing and the other one is teaching Business Communication. Both of them give the 45 students lessons for twice in a week.

3.2 Questionnaire

The motivation questionnaire takes the scoring method in Likert Scale and includes 5 items to find out the relationship of motivation and the ability of autonomous learning; the questions are chosen and revised from Liu Huijun's Achievement Goal Orientation Scale and from Xu Jinfen's Questionnaire (2007). To make sure that the questionnaire is reasonable, SPSS 19 is adopted to verify the questionnaire's reliability and the reliability is 0.864.

3.3 Interviews

The topic of the interviews of students is about whether the students are interested in the major, whether they are satisfied with the present teaching mode, whether they have the awareness of autonomous learning and whether they know motivation. The topic of the interviews of teachers is about their teaching method, their knowledge about motivation and learner factors, their awareness of cultivating autonomous learning ability, and their intriguing points in their teaching, etc.

3.4 Grouping and Observation

Before the questionnaire is issued, 4 prediction items are given so as to group the students into Better

Autonomous Learners (BAL) group and Autonomous Learners (LAL) group.

The four items are: My learning style is autonomous learning; I will solve the difficulties encountered in BE learning by myself; I think my knowledge and ability mainly come from independent learning; I can have deeper understanding of the learned knowledge by autonomous learning after class and I can form my own opinions. Those students who choose 3 or above in all the four prediction items are categories into a group, and there are 22 students in this BAL group. And those who choose 2 or below in all the four prediction items are grouped into the other group BAL, and 23 students are included in LAL group.

The students who get the score equal to or higher than 3 in the four prediction items are marked as BAL group, and this is to distinguish between high and low groups relatively accurately because those who get high scores in the four items do better and are more stable in daily self-evaluation and their learning habits are more consistent.

To check the validity of the interview, the two BE teachers helped to do observations on their classes to make sure that the grouping is acceptable. The two teachers interviewed the students and observed the marks put on the margin when students are in question or the notes students took down on textbooks or task papers, etc. By their interviews and observations, they think that the grouping is reasonable and acceptable.

4. Findings and Discussions

We know that internal motivation is the most primary and important motive in language learning. It is an important guarantee for the successful long-term acquisition of the second language, and is closely related to the success of language learning. Internal motivation can promote students to carry out school learning activities more effectively. The students with internal motivation are eager to get the relevant knowledge and experience autonomously and spontaneously. If a BE major chooses to study English out of his/ her interest in English (internal motivation), he / she will, initiatively and readily, spend more time and effort to study English and business knowledge and get to know the culture, so that they can integrate into the target language groups and achieve the communicative purpose better and more easily. In the interview, the teachers also express that BE students who are interested in learning are more active in the classroom and they can give more accurate interpretations when answering questions. While in the learning process, they can obtain more satisfaction.

Some BE students choose the major out of external stimuli, such as to improve the future competitiveness and applicability in employment, to change their employment expectations and to gain good living conditions and social status. With these external motives, students are also willing to spend more time and effort in learning to qualify themselves with the expectation to have the advantage in future employment and competition. In order to guarantee and maintain their own advantages, students will choose their own learning contents in depth and in wider scope and they are willing to adjust their learning strategies to make themselves more successful.

The students with external motivations will learn much more passively, and they lack interest in learning itself. When external motivation takes effect, students rely more on their sense of responsibility / duty or their desire to be rewarded and not to be punished. In this sense, the external motivation is, in essence, still an internal motive to learning. Thus, both external motivation and internal motivation (Instrumental Motivation and Integrative Motivation) have a positive impact on students' autonomous learning. While internal motivation is more important than external motivation and is more lasting in initiating and maintaining the behavior of autonomous learning.

To learn the impact of motivation on autonomous learning, SPSS 19 is adopted to learn about the correlation between motivation and their autonomy.

4.1 The Impact of motivation on autonomous learning

Motivation is an important prerequisite for learning to occur, maintain and improve. Learner autonomy is influenced by both internal and external motivation.

Table 1: Motivation Comparison between BAL and LAL

	BAL			LAL		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median
I love English.	22	3.59	1.054	3.67	23	3.30	1.185	3.36
I choose BE out of love for English.	22	3.05	.844	3.06	23	2.48	1.039	2.50
I choose BE for better job opportunities.	22	3.23	1.343	3.27	23	2.35	1.071	2.27
I believe learning BE will offer me a better job prospect.	22	3.59	.854	3.65	23	3.13	.869	3.22
I learn BE for going abroad.	22	2.55	1.143	2.47	23	2.00	1.243	1.73

From Table 1 we can find out that in motivation, BAL will have much high internal/integrative motivation than LAL (When talking about one's love for English, the comparison between the Mean is 3.59 to 3.30 and the Median is 3.67 to 3.36; while talking about why they choose BE, the comparison between the Mean is 3.05 to 2.48 and the Median is 3.06 to 2.50.), that is to say, those with higher internal motivations will be better autonomous learners while those with lower internal motivations will show less possibility in autonomous learning. In external motivation (the latter three), the average scores of BAL are also higher than those in LAL (The comparison of the Mean is 3.23 to 2.35, 3.59 to 3.13 and 2.55 to 2.00; while the comparison between the Median is 3.27 to 2.27, 3.65 to 3.22 and 2.47 to 1.73.). Therefore, we can conclude that stronger internal and external motivations will help one to become a fairly successful autonomous learner while when one does well in autonomous learning, the level of internal and external motivations is also higher. Although external motivation is rather passive and not as strong and lasting as internal one, stimulating of it will surely help one to be a better autonomous learner.
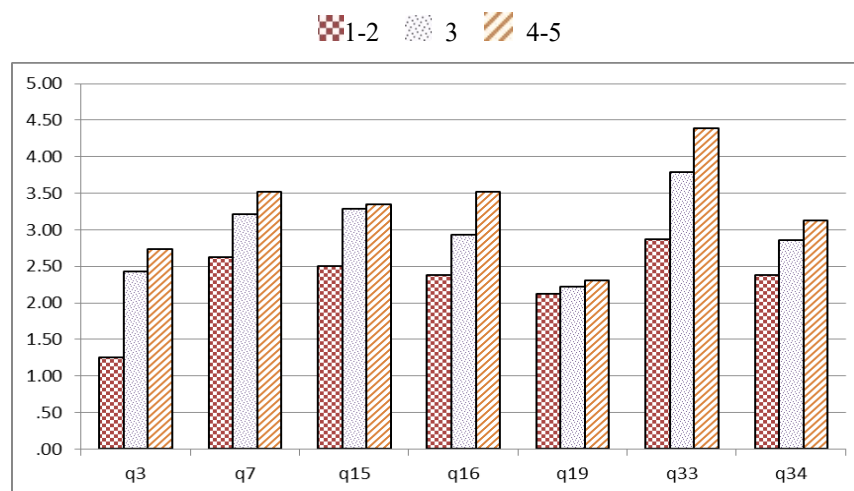

Figure 1 Correlation between Integrative Motivation and Autonomous Learning

From Figure 1, we can find that those who are more interested in English spend much more spare time autonomously reading English newspapers/ magazines or watching English films. Interest, as the internal motivation, also have impact on students' self-efficacy and strategy using, for example, those who love English are much more confident in autonomous learning process. They have the tendency to take best use of modern multimedia instrument to help them become more competent . Consequently, the students who have higher interest in English are much more confident in learning and utilize modern instruments to help their autonomous learning. Students with higher interest level are more possibly to internalize what they have learned in the class and put it into practice. At the same time, students with higher interest can adjust their strategies according to the learning contents. It is an inspiration that interest in English should be combined with the use of other factors to optimize the effect of autonomous learning.

From the analysis, we can also find that motivation is closely related with one's autonomous learning.

Those with higher integrative motivations will have higher level of self-efficacy and also have the higher awareness of using strategies. Most students with higher instrumental motivations have a very strong tendency in taking use of all kinds of resources to facilitate their learning (with the average scores almost as high as 4.5), which is a sign that nowadays information media has gradually become important in one's autonomous learning.

4.2 Findings and Analysis of the Interview

From the interviews, we can learn that the teachers have little knowledge about learner factors and that most students have no awareness and habit of autonomous learning.

4.2.1 Interviews with Teachers and Students and the Findings

Two teachers are interviewed and the questions are as follows: the teacher of Business Communication (BC) said she would like to take the situational and task-based approach, while the writing teacher would like to take measures of learning group and create BE situations; as to the question what factors can affect students' autonomous learning, the BC teacher thinks interest and the difficulties of the textbook are the influencing factors, while the writing teacher thinks the lack of BE knowledge will be the greatest obstacle; when talking about the ways to stimulate students' autonomous learning in class, BC teacher usually assigned pre-learning tasks, while the writing teacher used the content-related videos to arouse their interest; the BC teacher will focus more on students' oral English and communication skills while the writing teacher will focus more on key words and sentences; as to how they foster students autonomous learning, BC teacher gave students a list of reference books for students to read after class, while the writing teacher divided students into groups to finish the assigned task, and in the process students will supervise and evaluate each other; when discussing about what factors can influence the autonomous learning of the students, they both think that internal and external factors have great impact but they admit they lack systematical knowledge of learner factors.

As is mentioned above, 20 students take the interview. Among them, when talking about why they choose to study BE, only 4 say that they choose BE out of interest in English, which is an internal motivation. Another 6 think that studying BE gave them the chance of communication and can broaden their minds, which can be seen as internal or integrative motivation to learn the target language so as to have the chance to integrate into the target-language community. The rest 10 choose BE as major out of external motivation, that is to say, they think studying BE will provide them with better opportunities in finding a good job and to earn much more money to improve living standards.

When talking about the teachers' current teaching methods, 7 think the teaching methods taken are satisfactory, 8 think the methods are not so satisfactory and only 5 feel unsatisfactory about the current teaching methods. The result shows that most students don't have very clear awareness of autonomous learning.

When mentioning whether they have the awareness and habit of autonomous learning, only 4 think they have the awareness and habit and 5 honestly think they have no awareness or habit; the rest 11 think they know they should learn autonomously but they have no strong awareness and have no habit to learn autonomously.

When asked whether they know something about motivation, most are at a loss or give a very simple answer like "Interest is a motivation", "Environment is very important in my learning", "Motivation is important", etc. They know very little about motivation.

4.2.2 Analysis of the Interviews

From the interview of the teachers, we can find that the teachers have little knowledge about motivation and learner factors which are more important for students' autonomous learning and teaching. Instead, the teachers paid much attention to the knowledge itself. But luckily enough, although they haven't many measures to improve students' autonomous learning, they have the awareness for students to use the learning strategies and the writing teacher pays enough attention to students' mutual supervision and mutual assessment. In the training process, the teachers should bear the following ideas in mind.

In the cultivation of autonomous learning, teachers should be both observers and trainers in the whole process. Teachers should pay attention to the feedback received in the teaching and help students to form the habits of objective and correct attribution. They should help students to cultivate self-efficacy by encouraging them and erase their anxieties in learning. Teachers also have to know how to stimulate

students' motivations with the combination of integrative and instrumental motivations, that is, to stimulate their inner desire and interest to learning, while at the same time, refer to job-related or future-related factors. Teachers should know that to improve student's autonomous learning, improving self-efficacy will enforce the students' desire to learn and their belief that they can learn well. While in the learning process, the employment of strategies will reinforce students' responsibility, improve the abilities in autonomy, independence and self-guidance and moreover, it will be a promoter to life-long learning.

From the students' interview we can see that most students have no awareness and habit of autonomous learning. For the teachers' traditional methods in the classroom, they just think that the current teaching and learning mode is acceptable, which means that they have no critical thinking and they also have no initiatives in learning. While most have no proper internal motivation, which is a more lasting and strong stimulation in autonomous learning; but most of them can use the resource management strategies well. From the interviews, we can learn that as the center and core of education, the students lack the knowledge of autonomy-related factors, which will be a promoting factor to improve their learning if they are aware of and take full advantage of them.

5. Conclusions

From the research, we can find that motivation actually have impact on BE students' autonomous learning. The students had better stimulate the integrative and instrumental motivations to boost the autonomous learning.

Motivations also have much influence on autonomous learning. Interest in the internal motive for students to love the major you choose while a good job and the chance of going abroad will be good for their future. So for a better future, students should know without love and enthusiasm for what they choose, they can't really be very competitive. Although the integrative motivation plays a much more important role in their autonomous learning, students have to pay enough attention to instrumental motivation which will have a promoting and supplementary influence on their learning. So it's a must to integrate the two kinds of motivations appropriately.

Teachers should have the awareness that motivation is the inner motives to learn autonomously but it takes a long time to foster. Stimulating and preserving motivation is the key to foster learner autonomy. First, develop students' self-confidence. In BE teaching, the teachers should choose appropriate learning tasks, at the same time, illustrate the task and guide the students in the procedures and strategies, set the standards and provide students with chances of displaying outcomes, thus students will experience the sense of pride and satisfaction. When the set teaching materials are difficult, the teachers should build the scaffolding to lower the difficulty.

Second, introduce the contents of social and cultural knowledge. In the teaching, encourage students to watch the original films and videos, create the opportunities to communicate with native speakers to enforce their understanding and identity.

Third, evaluate and feedback reasonably. In the assessing, illustrate the values of the task, affirm students' achievements and provide constructive suggestions and feedback. Apart from motivation, the subject students have very significant differences in learning strategies, especially cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Therefore, in the fostering of students' autonomous learning, the teachers can play a very key role because teachers are responsible for guiding and helping students to cultivate the utilization of correct strategies. Firstly, teachers should strengthen their training of the strategies for students. Also, teachers should have the awareness of creating opportunities to practice all kinds of strategies and encourage self-reflection in students' learning so that students can find suitable strategies as well as adjusting the unsuitable ones to enhance their abilities of using metacognitive strategies.

The research shows there are much difference in style and attitude between BAL and LAL, which means they have much impact on autonomous learning. Although style and attitude cannot be easily changed for its consistency, the students and teachers can work together to know the importance of them and then try to consciously change the style and attitude positively.

There is little difference between the two groups in attribution and self-efficacy, that is to say, the two factors are not directly related with autonomous learning, but they can exert their influence through other factors.

With the development of globalization and international trade, learners must get a good knowledge

of English as the carrier to know the world. BE teachers should have the awareness of taking full use of the information media of English, and create in-class and out-of-class opportunities for students to use business English, thus to cultivate autonomous learning gradually.

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