

An Investigation of Taiwanese College English Majors' Learning Motivation and Self-Identity Changes

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Abstract

Most studies investigating learners' motivation has probed into the relationship between motivation and learners' linguistic outcomes; however, not many looked into the relationship between motivation and nonlinguistic outcomes such as learners' identity formation (Gao et al, 2007; Teer, 2013). Thus, the purpose of the study was twofold; one was to investigate students' self-identity changes and the other was to determine the correlation between students' learning motivation and their self-identity changes. A total of 231 Taiwanese college students who majored in the English department participated in the study. Major methods of data collection include two surveys adapted from Gardner's (2004) Attitude/ Motivation Battery Test and Xu as well as Gao's Self-identity Change Questionnaire (2011). Results of the study showed that the majority of the students showed high motivation toward English learning. Among the six categories of self-identity changes, the most prominent change was learners' self-confidence change. Participants also responded to have undergone productive and additive changes, which showed that learners appreciated their native languages through the learning of their target language and vice versa. Significant correlation was also found between motivation and students' self-identity changes, except for split identity changes. It is hoped that this study can be used to provide future researchers and teachers a better understanding of English learners' motivation and identity formation within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Keywords: EFL; identity change; identity formation; bilingualism; motivation

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Introduction

The issue of language and identity has caught much attention in the field of second language acquisition. However, when investigating the notion of identity, scholars in the past adopted a more categorical approach, using groups and categories, such as gender, ethnicity, or social class to define identity (Tracy & Robles, 2013). The notion of identity was “treated as straightforward, easily categorized, relatively homogeneous and static group variables” (Duff, 2012. p.2). Firth and Wagner (1997) argued that prevailing studies in the past within SLA research were “individualistic and mechanistic,” and failed “to account in a satisfactory way for interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions of language” (p. 285). Individual learners under this notion are often seen as stable and uniform beings and “are considered self-contained, independent entities, extractable from individual minds” (Hall, 2012, p.30). Recent studies on identity have placed more emphasis on how the social context and educational background shape learners’ perceptions of themselves and the world (e.g., Norton Pierce, 1995, Norton, 1997; Gao, 2007; Yue, 2012; Duff, 2012). Norton (1997) indicated that the notion of “identity” should be seen as “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p.410). Similarly, Gao (2009) stated that identity is “self-defined, pluralistic and dynamic, constantly negotiated between the individual agent and the social environment” (p.111). Identity should not be seen as “a composition of discrete entities or a fixed set of traits, but rather a diverse construction, which is interwoven with self-perceptions and experiences in relation to the wider social culture context” (Duo, 2014).

Motivation is another major topic that received much attention in the field of Education. Teachers and researchers have devoted much time and great efforts in trying to figure out the best motivator, to motivate students to learn and to be autonomous. Ryan and Deci (2000) stated that “to be motivated means to be moved to do something” (p. 54). Ormrod (2000) described that “motivation is something that energizes, directs, and sustains behavior; it gets students moving, points them in a particular direction, and keeps them going” (p. 472). Dörnyei (2001) indicated that motivation is responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to persist in the activity, and how much effort they are willing to put into the activity. In the field of foreign language learning, motivation is defined, by Gardner

(1985), as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p. 10). Gardner (1990) proposed that second language motivation has three major elements: 1) a desire to learn the language; 2) effort expended toward learning the language; and 3) favorable attitudes toward learning the language. Language learning motivation involves a long-term commitment to the learning of the language.

Gardner’s socio-education model in second language acquisition (SLA) has been influential and studied for decades. In Gardner’s socio-educational model (Gardner, 1979; 1985), the four variables/phases viz., *social milieu*, *individual differences*, *second language acquisition context*, and *outcomes*, are interrelated when one is learning a second language. *Social milieu* refers to one’s cultural beliefs or environment. Individual differences include intelligence, aptitude, motivation, and situational anxiety. The third variable/phase is second language acquisition context. It refers to the setting in which the target language is learned, and it could be a formal or an informal setting. The last variable/phase is outcome. There are two kinds of outcomes: linguistic outcome and non-linguistic outcome. Linguistic outcome refers to the second language proficiency, such as knowledge and skills in grammar, vocabulary, and so on. Non-linguistic outcome refers to learners’ attitudes and values of the target language community, developed from the second language learning experience. In 1985, Gardner revised his model, adding integrative motive as a part of individual differences. Integrative motive includes attitudes toward the learning situation and integrativeness. Attitudes toward the learning situation refer to attitudes toward the elements in the learning situation, such as evaluation of the teachers, the lesson plans, and the textbook. Integrativeness is considered as a learner’s interest in the cultural community/group of people of the target language.

However, in Norton’s viewpoint, Gardner’s (1985) notion of instrumental and integrative motivation failed to explain the intricate relationship between power, identity, and language learning (Norton, 2000). Dai (2009) also stated that motivation itself could not reside from the interaction of the individual with his or her environment and social context in which they are situated. Drawing from Bourdieu’s sociological construct that language encompasses a form of cultural capital, Norton (1997) proposed the concept of “investment”, which is used “to signal [the] socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to target language and their

sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton, 1997, p.411). This point of view provides an alternative perspective on learner motivation, which assists in understanding the concept of learners’ motivation. As De Mejia (2002) indicated, “language may be seen as a symbolic resource which can receive different values depending on the market. The possession of symbolic resources, such as certain highly valued types of linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge and special skills, help provide access to valuable social, educational, and material resources” (p.36). As such, if learners invested in a target language, they would expect a good return on the investment, and would hope to acquire a wide range of material resources or symbolic resources, and in return, “increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton, 2000, p. 10). This notion provides not only another perspective to examine reasons behind learners’ motivations for learning a language, but also to understand how learners self-perceive themselves and how their identity is formed within a larger social context.

Numerous empirical studies have been conducted on learners’ identity formation in different contexts; however, only a few have examined the relationship between language learners’ motivation and their self-identity changes (e.g., Gao et al., 2007; Teer, 2013). In most English departments in universities in Taiwan, creating a learning environment, which on one hand enables students to be immersed in the target language environment and on the other hand, motivates students to learn the target language have become the focus and course objectives of education planning. Nevertheless, as a teacher teaching in an English department, this often led the researcher to ponder how it might affect the students’ culture identity construction. After being immersed in an environment in which learning the English language and culture is the primary objective, how do learners perceive themselves as English learners and how does it affect their own perceptions of their culture identification? Thus, the purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between English majors motivation and self-identity changes. Based on the purpose of the study, the research questions are:

- 1) What identity changes have college English majors undergone?
- 2) Is there a significant relationship between students’ learning motivation and self-identity changes?

Method

Subjects

A total of 231 students (female, n=177; male, n=54) who studied in the Department of Applied English in a private university in Taiwan participated in the study. Among the subjects, there were 57 freshmen, 38 sophomores, 71 juniors and 65 senior students and participants' average age was 18-19 years.

Instruments

To fulfill the purpose of the study, a modified version of Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Battery Test (and Xu & Gao's (2011) and "self-identity change" questionnaire was used. The motivation questionnaire included a total of 8 questions measuring students' language learning motivation. The self-identity questionnaire contains 38 items and employs a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". A few statements were slightly modified so that they would be more appropriate for the Taiwanese context. The self-identity questionnaire was categorized into six subcategories, each including five items. Based on the definition given by Xu & Gao (2011), the six categories are listed and defined as follows:

- (1) Self-confidence change: This refers to changes in an individual's perceptions of his/her confidence in a positive direction. According to Gao *et al.* (2005, 2007), a self-confidence change here is not the "factor" affecting the students' English learning process, but rather is defined as the outcome of learners' English learning process. The category itself is independent of the other categories.
- (2) Additive change: This refers to the coexistence of two sets of languages, behavioral patterns and values, each specified for the particular context.
- (3) Subtractive change: This is the replacement of the native language and culture by the target language and culture.
- (4) Productive change: This means the target language and native language reinforce each other in a positive way.
- (5) Split change: This refers to the struggle between two different languages and cultures that might cause an identity conflict. Based on the definition given by Gao *et al.* (2005, 2007), this change can be considered as an intermediate phase that students might overcome during the language learning process.

(6)Zero change: This category is used for comparison and mainly refers to the absence of an identity change.

Among the 6 categories, only “additive change”, “subtractive change”, “productive change” and “split change” are considered as categories related to a culture-identity change. The reliability of the motivation questionnaire and self-identity survey was calculated to be 0.84 and 0.73 respectively using Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient. Klimczak and Wedman (1997) had proposed that a Cronbach Alpha reliability value of 0.70 is considered appropriate for survey questionnaires.

Results

The results of participants’ perceptions of six types of identity changes are shown in table 1. A one-sample *t*-test was performed to evaluate whether perceptions of the participants were statistically different than a normal population distribution with a mean value of 3. Results show that all five categories displayed significant differences, except for “zero change”. As shown from the table, “confidence (positive) change” (M = 3.79) had the highest mean score, followed by “additive change” (M = 3.48) and then “productive change” (M = 3.35). This shows that the majority of the students gained confidence after learning English and were able to maintain a balance between two different languages and cultures. The mean values for “subtractive change” (M = 2.88) and “split change” (M = 2.67) were lower than the average mean, indicating these changes were not common among the students. The results of the study were similar to Gao *et al.* (2007), Dai (2009) and Teer’s (2013) study, which also employed Gao’s research framework.

Table 1 Summary of English majors’ self-identity changes

Subcategories	M	SD	μ	<i>t</i>
confidence	3.79	0.51	3	23.55**
additive	3.48	0.47	3	15.53**
subtractive	2.88	0.62	3	-3.05*
productive	3.35	0.49	3	10.83**
split	2.67	0.58	3	-8.64**
zero	3.05	0.50	3	1.60

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationship between learners' motivation and self-identity changes. Table 2 shows different degrees of correlation among the variables. According to Dancey & Reidy's (2004) categorization of the strength of correlation, $r = 1$ indicates a perfect correlation, $r=0.7-0.9$ represents a strong correlation, $r=0.4-0.6$ shows moderate correlation, $r=0.1-0.3$ indicates weak correlation and $r=0$ shows no correlation. Based on this categorization, we can see that there is a moderate positive correlation between motivation and several positive identity changes, including confidence change, additive change as well as productive change. Weak positive correlation was found between motivation and subtractive identity change and weak negative correlation was found between motivation and zero change. Overall, this shows that increase in motivation change was positively correlated with increase in learners' confidence, additive and productive change.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Learners' Motivation and Self-identity Changes

Measures	motivation	confidence	subtractive	additive	productive	split	zero
motivation	1.00	0.57**	0.14*	0.37**	0.35**	0.87	-0.17*
confidence	0.57**	1.00	0.25**	0.44**	0.49**	0.13	-0.09
subtractive	0.14*	0.25**	1.00	0.36**	0.62**	0.58**	0.10
additive	0.37**	0.44**	0.36**	1.00	0.50**	0.30**	0.11
productive	0.35**	0.49**	0.62**	0.50**	1.00	0.43**	0.03
split	0.87	0.13	0.58**	0.30**	0.43**	1.00	0.25**
zero	-0.17*	-0.09	0.10	0.11	0.03	0.25**	1.00

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between English majors' motivation and identity change at a Taiwanese University. Results showed that the majority of the participants did not experience an identity split or a loss of their primary language and culture identification. Instead, they gained more confidence after learning English and were able to maintain a balance between two different languages and cultures (see Table 1). Some studies (e.g., Lin, 2002; Wu, 2008; Shen,

2010, etc.) showed concerns over the possible erosion of learners' ideologies and cultural identity due to English learning. However, other studies have shown different results. Downes (2001), for instance, investigated the Japanese cultural identity of children enrolled in the English immersion program in Japan and concluded that children did not feel "less Japanese" nor did they develop negative feelings toward their native language and culture. Similarly, Chuang (2008) conducted a study to examine students' perspectives on their cultural identity in an English partial immersion program in Taiwan. The results of the study also contradicted with the popular beliefs that bilingual programs might interfere with students' native language and culture. Instead, the majority of the students in the study reported to enjoy both languages and cultures.

Significant correlation was found between motivation and learners' confidence, additive and productive change. Results of the study was similar to Dai's study in 2009. Dai conducted a study to investigate the relationship between Taiwanese college students' motivation and identity change. Results showed that there was a significant relationship between five types of motivation (integrative, individual development, social responsibility, learning situation, and instrumental) and learners' self-identity changes. Integrative motivation was found to correlate with additive, productive, and split changes while subtractive, productive, and split changes were reported to be correlated with social responsibility. Similarly, Gao et al. (2007) surveyed more than 2000 Chinese university students from 30 universities in China using a Likert-scale questionnaire to identify the relationship between motivation types and learner's self-identity changes. Results showed that the most prominent correlation between the variables was between long-term motivation and positive self-identity change. In addition, significant correlations were also identified between individual development motivation and self-confidence change, short-term motivation and negative change, as well as social responsibility motivation and polar change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the relationship between college English majors' learning motivation and self-identity changes. Results of the study indicated a positive correlation between students' motivation and self-identity changes. However, a few major limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the study did not include equal amount of students from different grade levels. The study examined a group of English majors which is composed of different grade levels (freshmen, sophomore, and junior students); nevertheless, among all the subjects, only a small portion of sophomore students were included in the study while the number of other grade levels were equally the same. Furthermore, The findings also imply that it would be desirable to conduct more longitudinal investigations in the SLA field in order to capture the dynamic interaction between learners and contextual and social factors. In addition, since subjects of this study were mainly students from the same department, the results of the study might not be representative of the larger population who also study English as their major. As a result, extensive studies are also required before generalizing the results to the wider population.

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