

Using Incentive Autonomous Learning Strategies to Enhance EFL Chinese Undergraduate Learning Motivation and Speaking Performances: A Proposal

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Abstract

It is well known that Chinese EFL learners face considerable challenges in speaking English. Affective factors such as learning motivation could be a reason for this issue as motivation plays a vital role in language acquisition. Regrettably, Chinese EFL students lack the motivation to prioritize and improve their speaking as speaking is often neglected at the national examination level. On the other hand, autonomous learning emerges as a highly efficacious way to address the issue of oral English instruction. However, research that incorporates learning motivation, autonomous learning, speaking performance, and incentive strategies is very limited. Thus, this paper attempts to narrow this research gap by proposing incorporating autonomous learning through incentive strategies to improve EFL learners' learning motivation and speaking performance at a public university in China. Adopting an explanatory mixed-methods research approach, the current study will use a quasi-experimental design with purposive sampling where two classes will serve as the experimental and control groups. The 14-week intervention will be implemented in the experimental group, while an in-situ approach will be implemented in the control group. A pretest and post-test data will be collected to check the participants' changes in speaking performance, while a longitudinal survey will be demonstrated to the students to examine their motivation levels before and after the intervention. It is hoped that the study would provide insights into the role of learning motivation and effective teaching strategies to enhance EFL learners' speaking skills.

Keywords: EFL Chinese Undergraduate, Incentive Autonomous Learning Strategies, Learning Motivation, Speaking Performance

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Introduction

Enhancing students' oral English competence marks a significant, persistent, and intricate challenge within the context of foreign language teaching in China. A prevalent issue colloquially referred to as "mute English" is observed in tertiary institutions, which proves to be a difficult predicament to fully rectify (Peng, 2016). Nunan (2007) suggests that a potent strategy to bolster oral English competence is through autonomous learning. Krashen (1982) asserts that affective components such as active motivation can profoundly influence language acquisition. However, it appears that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in China lack the necessary motivation for oral English learning (Tang, 2016), raising the critical question of how to adequately stimulate learner motivation. Scholars from the fields of linguistics and psychology have also highlighted the tight connection between learning motivation and learner autonomy (Gao, 2010; Li, 2010; Qin, 2017; Reinders, 2020). According to Jia (2018), a positive correlation exists between an individual's autonomy and learning motivation. Additionally, Ustunloughlu (2017) posits that autonomous learning can cater to students with different learning abilities and meet various learning demands. Therefore, based on the above views, investigating the influence of speaking learning motivation in autonomous learning to enhance the effectiveness of target language instruction and learning is deemed urgent and imperative. However, research focusing on the role of motivation in spoken English concerning the autonomous learning model with incentive strategies, especially among non-English majors in China, remains somewhat limited, lacking systematic and targeted approaches.

Drawing on the second language (L2) motivation theory (Dörnyei, 1994, 2001a) and psychological motivation theory (Dörnyei, 2005), this study seeks to propose a conceptual framework to examine the crucial role of speaking learning motivation in the relationship between an incentive-autonomous-learning-strategies module and EFL learners' oral English competence. Accordingly, this study attempts to achieve the following research objectives.

Research Objectives

Based on the above scholars' theoretical foundation and the analysis of research gap in this research, the following research objectives are put forward as follows:

1. To identify the level of speaking learning motivation among EFL non-English major learners at a public university in China before implementing the incentive-autonomous-learning-strategies based intervention.
2. To identify the level of speaking learning motivation among EFL non-English major learners at a public university in China after implementing the incentive-autonomous-learning-strategies based intervention.
3. To identify whether the incentive-autonomous-learning-strategies based intervention help improve the speaking performance among EFL non-English major learners at a public university in China.

Literature Review

This section sheds light on the EFL research in China and discusses the theoretical foundation for the current research proposal.

EFL Speaking in China

Speaking, an essential language skill involves forming structured verbal expressions to transmit ideas. It's central to English education and manifests a learner's overall proficiency in English (Kahng, 2020). In 2018, China's Ministry of Education issued College English Course Teaching Requirements (trial), emphasizing that the objective of college English education should be more targeted on nurturing students' holistic command of English, with a particular focus on listening and speaking.

Many experts believe that in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, speaking is more challenging and complex than reading, listening, and writing (Ockey, 2009; Pekarek, 2015; Peng, 2016). Articulating thoughts in a new language isn't straightforward. Speaking is often seen as the primary language skill, evidenced by the term "speakers" for those proficient in a language. Furthermore, learners frequently gauge their language acquisition success by their advancements in spoken communication (Jeon, In'nami, & Koizumi, 2022). This proficiency directly impacts learner's social interactions and individual development (Young, 2011; Van, 2018).

Researchers from China and other areas consistently stress the significance of prioritizing speaking instruction in studies (Qureshi, 2007; Fauzan, 2016; Lin, 2022). In China, speaking teaching is not attached to great importance due to the exclusion of speaking tests in the formal English examination (Gao, 2010). Without external pressure, students themselves often don't feel an intrinsic need to speak English, additionally, students lack effective learning models and instructive guidance from teachers. These issues result in both neglect of speaking teaching and low speaking performance among EFL learners (Deng & Dell, 2023).

According to researchers from psychology and education, there are many factors, such as language learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2001a), autonomous learning (Holec & Little, 2007) and incentive strategies (Zhang, 2022; Gan, 2020; Wang, 2022) may influence learners' speaking skills and competence. The following sections highlight these factors in detail.

Language Learning Motivation

The development from motivation, learning motivation to language learning motivation has experienced a long period, in which the important theories contain self-determination motivation theory, L2 Motivational self-system, and others. In this research, learning motivation is closely related to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1979). The instructor intends to play the role of extrinsic motivation by some inspiring ways to stimulate learners' intrinsic motivation to carry on effective and independent learning.

Some empirical studies have been implemented around language learning motivation, mainly from the perspective of the relationship between learning results and learning motivation. Schmidt (2017) surveyed language learning motivation, and she found that learners with positive and intrinsic language learning motivation are inclined to have much better performance than those with little intrinsic motivation in one aspect of language skill.

Speaking motivation as an important factor in propelling speaking acquisition and teaching (Sukmayasa, 2023) is employed in this study aiming to enhance learner's speaking skills and speaking performance.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning refers to the competence to take control of one's learning (Holec & Little, 2007). This research holds the opinion that autonomous learning is one kind of learning mode, under which, students carry on independent learning with teachers' guidance, methods, and strategies they prefer, learn, explore, and inquire to realize the preset learning goal through their effort.

According to Nunan (2007) and Jia (2018), autonomous learning is an effective way to stimulate and cultivate learners' learning motivation as well as their learning enthusiasm. Unlike other branches under the subject of English, speaking is a comparatively complex skill that needs to be addressed to the individual's differences and needs (Jia, 2018). Thus, autonomous learning carried on by learners themselves may satisfy their different speaking needs and speaking levels.

Besides, the incentive strategies proposed by (Xu, 2020), are adopted to integrate with autonomous learning to help learners stir their speaking motivation and speaking performance.

Incentive Strategies

In China, the specific contents of incentive strategies are proposed by Xu (2020), which incorporate five aspects: interest, participation, goal, confidence, and emotion. The researcher will utilize these strategies during the entire process of oral English teaching. In the pre-learning part, the research will prepare the video relative to each unit theme for students to enjoy, to motivate learners by interest and participation incentive strategies. In class activities, the researcher will invite students to engage in different activities and accomplish corresponding tasks through autonomous learning by applying participation, goal-based, confidence-based, and emotion incentive strategies. In the assessment part, participation, goal-based, confidence-based, and emotion incentive strategies are also applied to motivate them. In this study, the researcher uses the incentive strategies to stimulate students' learning motivation under the autonomous learning model. The cultivation of learning motivation will lay a foundation for further effective learning.

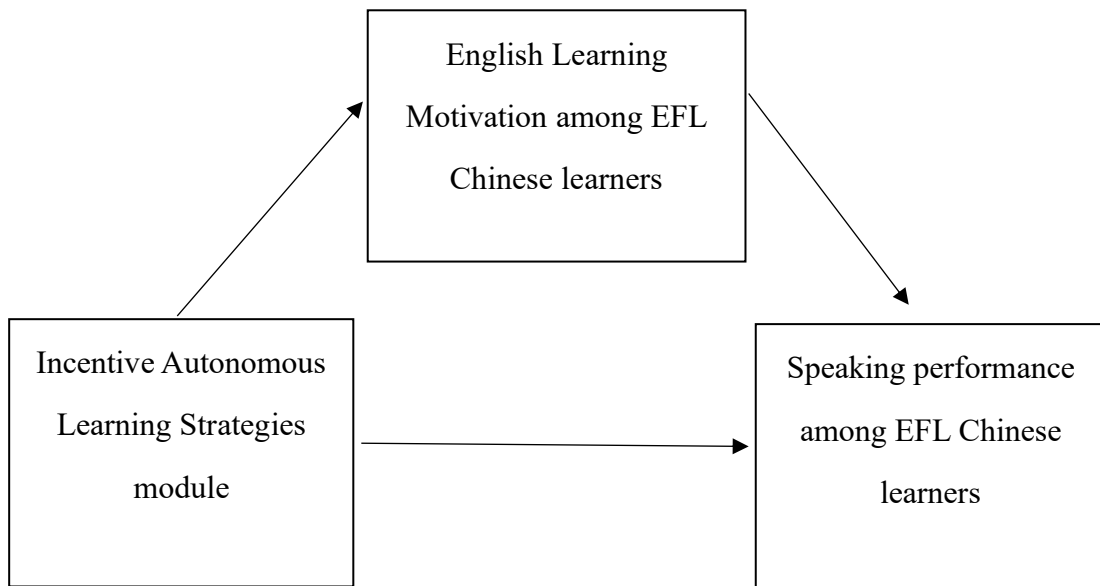
The researcher has discussed the variables associated with speaking motivation, autonomous learning, and the incentive strategies above, which may guide the establishment of the conceptual framework.

The Relationship Among Variables Involved in This Research Proposal: A Conceptual Framework

The current study incorporates and integrates incentive strategies and the autonomous learning model as the theoretical foundation of the speaking module, to improve speaking motivation and speaking performance among Chinese EFL non-English major learners. The speaking motivation served as the crucial role connecting the variable Incentive Autonomous Learning Strategies module and the other variable speaking performance.

After identifying the research objectives above, the conceptual framework is proposed in the following figure, which attempts to investigate the impact of oral English intervention on

EFL Chinese learner speaking learning motivation as well as their oral English performance after the 14-week quasi-experimental teaching.



Research Methodology

Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data will be collected through a quasi-experiment teaching conducted at a public university in China. Concurrently, longitudinal research will be performed by administering a questionnaire to participants to gauge their changes in speaking motivation before and after the intervention.

Participants

The research will adopt a purposive sampling to get two classes involved, representing the control and experimental groups respectively. The quasi-experiment will be undertaken at a public university in China. Non-English major undergraduates in the faculty of Economics and Management at the Chinese university will be selected as the subjects of the experimental process. While the control group consisting of 38 students will receive traditional teaching methods, the experimental group with 40 students will undergo an oral English intervention utilizing incentive autonomous learning strategies (IALS) as shown in Table 1 below.

Research Group	Male	Female	Students' Age
Experimental Group (n=40)	26 65%	14 35%	18-23 100%
Control Group (n=38)	24 63.2%	14 36.8%	18-23 100%

Table 1: Sample of the Study (EFL Learners)

Intervention

This study will adopt the ADDIE Model to develop the incentive-autonomous-learning-strategies based. The ADDIE Model mainly covers five stages: the Analysis Stage is to locate learners' problems and targets they expect to achieve; the Design Stage is to design teaching materials and teaching strategies to use; the Development Stage is to work out a lesson plan; the Implementation Stage is to conduct the intervention; the Evaluation Stage is to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

The module with incentive autonomous learning strategies incorporates the autonomous learning model with the incentive strategies aiming to stimulate and cultivate participants' speaking learning motivation.

After completing the development of the module, the designated intervention will be scheduled to be conducted within 14 weeks during the first semester of the academic year 2023-2024 at the public university in China. The 14-week intervention includes the pretest in Week 1, 12-week teaching activities, and the posttest in Week 14. During the process of intervention, the teaching module will be used in each class with different forms to get learners motivated and activated, thus, enhancing their oral English performance.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

To check the effectiveness of the intervention, different instruments of data collection and analysis will be applied in this research. According to the research objectives, the experimental group will receive the pretest, posttest, intervention, and questionnaires including the motivation questionnaire put forward by Glynn in 2009, the incentive strategies questionnaire developed by Pintrich (2007) and She and Fisher (2000), and the speaking test served as both the pretest and posttest, taken from the 2019-2020 semester one's Speaking Test for non-English major students at the Chinese university, to achieve the corresponding objectives. Among the questionnaires, the motivation questionnaire is longitudinal as the same motivation questionnaire will be assigned and collected twice for participants in the experimental group before and after the intervention. Speaking scores obtained from pre-test and post-test will be collated and analyzed to determine the impact of the intervention on learning motivation and oral English performance; while the control group will accept traditional teaching instruction, only involving the first 2 parts: pretest and posttest.

Research Validity

Validity is termed as the extent to which a concept is accurately measured in a quantitative study (Korb, 2012), which is divided into two main categories as follows, content validity and face validity.

Face Validity

Face validity is the appropriateness, sensibility, or relevance of the test and its items as they appear to the persons answering the test (Holden, 2010). In order to establish face validity of the research instruments, five non-English major students who will not be participating in the real study will be chosen randomly and asked to check the questionnaire items and provide their feedback in terms of its clarity, layout and the language used. Amendments will be made according to the comments obtained from the students.

Content Validity

Content validity refers to the extent to which a research instrument accurately measures all aspects of a construct (Korb, 2012). In order to check the content validity of the Learning Motivation Questionnaire, Incentive Strategies Questionnaire, test, and Oral English Intervention, a panel of three experts with Ph.D. certificates from different fields will be invited to do the evaluation and judgement. One expert from the linguistic field will be invited to verify the suitability, consistency, and coherence of the questionnaires, and the other expert with rich teaching experience will check the rationality and feasibility of the test and the intervention. After their evaluation and analysis, the researcher will do the same as the face validity. Improvements and modification of the questionnaires, tests, and the module will be done based on the responses and feedback from the experts.

Conclusion

This paper establishes a conceptual basis for subsequent implementation of the incentive-autonomous-learning-strategies based module. This study seeks to propose a conceptual framework to examine the crucial role of speaking learning motivation in the relationship between an incentive-autonomous-learning strategies module and EFL learners' oral English competence.

It is hoped that this research could provide theoretical insights through shedding light on the role of motivation in improving the EFL speaking proficiency and enhancing autonomous learning among Chinese EFL learners.

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