

An investigation of factors influencing English proficiency of Non-English Major students in China

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ABSTRACT

Although the fact that English language has been taught from primary school to university, the students who entered universities in China still have not acquired mastery of the language. It is important to investigate Non-English Major Students' perception what factors influencing their English proficiency, whether there are gender differences between male and female students. This thesis aims at investigating factors that influencing English proficiency of Non-English Major students in Chinese University. With the adopting of quantitative research, a total of 300 samples comprise were obtained from Henan Polytechnic University. The research findings revealed the Motivation to learn English of Non-English major students in Henan Polytechnic University is the most important factor contributing to their English language proficiency. The hypothesis testing results indicated that the female students' perception of factors they considered important to English language proficiency is greater than male's perception.

Keywords: *English proficiency, Non-English Majors, Motivation, Learning Strategies, English Learning Cognition, Belief about learning English.*

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1. Introduction

In the last three decades or so, English language has been gaining importance and popularity at an accelerated rate in the People's Republic of China (PRC). There has been a clear recognition of English language as an important resource that the nation can harness in its drive to modernization (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). English is perceived as a key to promoting international exchange, acquiring scientific knowledge and technological expertise, fostering economic progress, and participating in international competition (Ross, 1992). Because of the importance English has accrued in relation to the nation's rapid modernization and economic development programmes, English language teaching (ELT) in schools and colleges has received a great deal of attention in China. The traditional approach to ELT in China has been a curious combination of the grammar-translation method and audio lingual method, which is characterised by systematic and detailed study of grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, memorisation of structural patterns and vocabulary, painstaking effort to form good verbal habits, an emphasis on writing language, and a preference for literary classics. The approach has its roots in, and has drawn strong support from, the Chinese culture of learning, hence its popularity among Chinese teachers and learners (Hu, 2001). The approach, however, has failed to develop an adequate level of English language proficiency among school and college students in China.

Most Chinese students begin their study of English language from the primary school, some even from kindergarten years (Ren & Bai, 2016). Despite the fact that English language has been taught from primary school to university, the students who entered universities in China still have not acquired mastery of the language.

The total number of Non-English major students is approximately 34,610,000 and the total number of English Major students is approximately 1,000,000 in all Chinese university. Only Foreign language major students gain the professional practice in listening and speaking in Chinese university. Non-English major students only pay attention to College English Test 4 (CET-4) results, due to requirement of graduation from college and employment. The Non-English Major student forms majority of the students who leave the university, they leave the universities and colleges without having acquired a good working knowledge (written and spoken) of English. Given this background in English proficiency of Non-English major students in Chinese universities, the focus of this research study is to investigate potential factors that aid or impede the development of English proficiency among Non-English major students in a Chinese college of higher education in Henan province of China.

The problems related to English language mastery of students entering universities have been investigated by many researchers in China (Sun, 2014; Yun, 2014; Wei, 2016; Zeng, 2003; Ren, 2012). Among the areas investigated include motivation, language aptitude, anxiety, self-esteem, individual character, learning preference and intelligence (Sun, 2014). Perhaps there is a combination of factors that, influence English proficiency of Non-English major students instead of single factors such as motivation or learning strategy.

2. Literature Review

Motivation is a kind of power to inspire, maintain and make the behavior point to a specific purpose. It is an explanatory concept, used to explain that why individual has this or that behavior. In traditional psychology, it is believed that motivation is the reflection of the internal driving force such as instincts, willingness and mental force, or caused by stimulus and reinforcement, and is generally understood as the static state of mind. Gardner (1985a) has proposed

that motivation refers to the desire to achieve the goal of learning a language as well as the efforts made to achieve the goal and a good attitude towards learning language. To some extent, learning motivation has impact on the language learning and is a key factor which may dominate the success or failure in second language acquisition (Chang & Lehman, 2002).

Language learning strategy refers to the processes and action that are consciously utilized by language learners to help them to learn language more effectively (Cohen & Macaro, 2007). O'Malley & Chamot (1990) stated language learning strategies as the specific thoughts or behaviors which students adopt to serve them to understand, study or obtain new information. Oxford (1989) believed language learning strategies as particular action that learners take so as to get language learning easier, quicker, more self-oriented and more interesting.

Beliefs about language learning was taken to be the students' feeling or emotion towards the English language and the culture of the English-speaking people. To be more specific, it is what they think of the language and the people who use the language as their first language. According to Lu (2013) college students' learning beliefs is a multidimensional structure, which is based on the beginning of knowledge, including essence beliefs and motivated beliefs of the subjective beliefs in the whole system. Schommer (1994) studied that the learning belief has an effect on learner's information processing system and learning achievements.

The concept of Cognition which was introduced by Flavell (1979) and Alci and Altun (2007) refers to students' awareness of their own thinking procedures and their control on these procedures. This concept includes individuals becoming aware of their own knowledge, managing to control that

during the learning process and regulate it when necessary. It is conducted that the English language cognition includes individual view, learning behaviors and learning strategies.

According to Adigüzel & Orhan (2017), individuals who have cognitive behaviors are very successful at performing actions such as planning what to study, choosing the sources, defining the roles, distributing those roles and dividing duties among the group members (Tonbulođlu & Aslan, 2013). Furthermore, such individuals are good at foreign linguistic skills, gathering their attention, keeping things in memory and the social interactions (Iwai, 2016). Language learning Cognition is of importance for language-learning achievement. Because learning process for language learners include too many novelties, unknown rules, surprising rules, different writing systems, unexplainable social customs and unconventional instructional approaches. Amidst such great number of new concepts, students lose their focuses and compensate this drawback using such cognitive strategies as attention focusing or association between the known and the unknown (Adigüzel & Orhan (2017).

3. Methodology

The research was conducted by using a non-experimental quantitative research design that used a questionnaire survey. The aim of this survey is to identify factors that influence English language proficiency of Non-English Major students in Henan Polytechnic University. A 60-item questionnaire developed by (Chou, 2007) was adapted for this study and was used to collect quantitative data.

These 300 respondents were selected from 3 separated faculties from a total of 19 faculties in Henan Polytechnic University. Out of the 300 students who

took part in this study, 163 were male students, accounting for 54.3 percent. The rest of 137 students were female students.

4. Findings

The researcher analyzed the data by SPSS using descriptive analysis and T-test. The English proficiency of Non-English Major students is measured as the results of CET-4.

4.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The data shows show that that the CET-4 results of female (137) and male (163) students. There were 27 female and 14 male students in the High group; 53 female and 67 male students in the Moderate group and 57 female students and 82 male students in the Low group (Table 1).

Table 1: *Distribution of CET-4 Results by Gender*

Gender	N	High	Moderate	Low
Female	137	27	53	57
Male	163	14	67	82
Total	300	41	120	139

Note. N=Number of respondents

Based on the findings (Table 2), students rated motivation to learn English as the highest in perceived importance ($M=3.83$, $SD=0.737$). The mean and

standard deviation of the English Learning Cognition scale was (M=3.79, SD=0.688). The mean and standard deviation of the Belief about Learning English scale was (M=3.78, SD=0.742). The mean and standard deviation of Learning Strategies scale was (M=3.66, SD=0.784).

Table 2: *Distribution of Mean, Std. Deviation and Number of Items*

Factors	N	Mean	Std.Deviation
Motivation	5	3.83	0.74
English Learning Cognition	6	3.79	0.69
Belief about English Learning	5	3.78	0.74
Learning Strategies	10	3.66	0.78

Language learning motivation refers to the desire of students to learn a foreign language and the driving force of learners, it is the catalyst in many individual factors for language learning, and is also one of the most important factors to successful language learning. The influence of motivation in language achievement is clear and proves that motivation is a determinant factor in achieving proficiency in a second or a foreign language. Zhang (2015) indicates that language learning motivation is one of vital factors which strongly correlated with the success in second language acquisition. Motivation can sustain students' desire to accomplish learning tasks and generate new desire to start further learning. When learners are motivated, they internalize the need for learning and develop a self-urge towards learning. (Makewa, L. N., Role, E., & Tuguta, E, 2013). Also, Yamashiro and Mclaughlin (2001) replicated the study in Japanese EFL contexts and concluded similarly that motivation had significant influence on language proficiency. In the literature, it is reported that there are many factors which influence English language learning such as attitude, motivation, classroom

activities, family environment and learning resources (Makewa & Ellen Tuguta, 2013). Although there are other factors which contribute as well, motivation is the most relevant and determinant since as some researcher (e.g. Masgoret and Gardner, 2003 and Dornyei, 1990) prove, motivation variables is the one which contributes higher with language achievement. The tremendous influence that motivation has in language achievement is one of the reasons why researchers pay so much attention to develop motivation tasks and strategies that can help learners feel more motivated and enthusiastic to learn a language (Fernández, 2013).

The second highest mean score was observed for English language cognition ($M=3.79$, $SD=0.688$). English language cognition refers to what learners know about language learning. It is a prerequisite to self-regulation and helps learners to actively participate in their performance rather than be a passive recipient of instruction. English language cognition is important for language-learning achievement (Adıguzel and Orhan, 2017).

The third highest mean score and standard deviation was observed for the Belief about Learning English scale ($M=3.78$, $SD=0.742$). The Belief about language learning refers to opinions or views held by people about language learning. The beliefs considerably impact on both the progress and success of any learning activity, as well as exerting a direct influence on English achievement. It has been found that the students' English learning beliefs is generally a strong influencing factor of English achievements (Ren and Bai, 2016).

The fourth highest mean score and standard deviation was observed for Learning Strategies scale was ($M=3.66$, $SD=0.784$). Language learning strategies refer to the processes and action that are consciously utilized by

language learners to help them to learn a language more effectively. Oxford (1990) has found that learning strategies are of great importance, especially for language learners because they enhance active, autonomous involvement in language learning process and this is important for developing communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of language classes. Also, Oxford (2001) explicitly suggests that language learning strategies is among the key factors in determining the quality of student learning in second (L2) and foreign language. It is assumed that the students who have employed certain strategies would report better language achievement (Setiyadi, Sukirlan, & Mahpul, 2016). Fewell (2010) indicates that language learning strategies are thought to be an “effective and workable” (p. 159) factor in language learning process among other important factors affecting L2 acquisition because they are controllable and it is possible to manipulate and manage strategies in order to improve language learning.

In conclusion, this analysis shows that language learning motivation is most important factor that contributes to English proficiency of sophomore Non-English Major students in Henan Polytechnic University.

4.2 Inferential Statistics Analysis

Table 3

Distribution of Means, Standard Deviation, t-value and p-value of the Sample of Female and Male Students with Respect to the Five Factors.

Factors	Students (N: 300)	Mean	SD	t	p
Learning Strategies	Female(N=137)	3.79	8.02	-2.47	.014*
	Male(N=163)	3.56	7.57		

Belief about learning English	Female(N=137)	3.92	3.76	-3.09	.002**
	Male(N=163)	3.66	3.54		
Motivation	Female(N=137)	3.92	3.61	-2.83	.005**
	Male(N=163)	3.72	3.67		
English Learning Cognition	Female(N=137)	3.93	4.11	-3.52	.000***
	Male(N=163)	3.67	4.00		

* p<0.05, **p< 0.01, ***p<0.001

The results of the analysis show that there are statistically significant differences between male and female students in their perception of factors influence English proficiency of female and male students in Table 3.

In the Learning Strategies scale, the mean score of female students (M=3.79, SD=8.02) was statistically significantly higher than that of male students (M=3.56, SD=7.57; $t(298) = -2.47$; $p<0.05$, two-tailed). In the Belief about learning English scale, the mean score of female students (M=3.92, SD=3.76) was statistically significantly higher than that of male students (M=3.66, SD=3.54; $t(298) = -3.09$; $p<0.01$, two-tailed). In the Motivation scale, the mean score of female students (M=3.92, SD=3.61) was statistically significantly higher than that of male students (M=3.72, SD=3.67; $t(298) = -2.83$; $p<0.01$, two-tailed). In the English Learning Cognition scale, the mean score of female students (M=3.93, SD=4.11) was statistically significantly higher than that of male students (M=3.67, SD=4.00; $t(298) = -3.52$; $p<0.001$, two-tailed).

The results of the study show that the perception of female students with respect to four factors, Learning Strategies, Belief about Learning English, Motivation and English learning Cognition were statistically significantly higher than that of male students. These results suggest that female students' perceived that the Learning Strategies that they used to study English language made a significantly higher contribution to their English language proficiency than male students. According to the results, female student's perceived that Belief about Learning English contributed significantly to English language proficiency. Moreover, female students also perceived that motivation to learning English contributed significantly to English language proficiency. Female students' perceived that English Learning Cognition significantly affected students' English language learning.

Similarly, in the literature, most of the research done on the impact of gender differences on learner motivation indicate that females are more motivated and hold more favorable attitudes towards EFL learning than males (Ahât, 2013; Sugimoto, Rahimpour, & Yaghoubi–Notash, 2006). Girls have been found to be more interested in cultures and the people of the target language community than boys in most of EFL learning context (Wang, 2008; Mori & Gobel, 2006). According to Li (2015), females report higher level of intrinsic motivation than male students and there is significant gender difference between them. Also, it is reported that there are significant differences of using learning strategies to learn English between male and female students. (Ren, 2012)

As a consequence, female students' perception of four factors influencing their English proficiency is significantly higher than that of male students. Compared with male students, female students believe the Learning Strategies, Motivation, Belief about learning English and English learning Cognition are important factors that influence their English language proficiency.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study revealed that the language learning motivation is the most important factor contributing English language proficiency. With respect to the motivational factors, the Henan Polytechnic University authorities and English teachers could explore different way of motivating Non-English Major students to learn English. The authority and teachers could explore ways to encourage these students to revise their English lessons, and how to improve their writing skills. This is necessary to tackle some of the problems found among students in this study, particularly on how to motivate them to improve their English proficiency. This could be achieved by giving them more exercises and assignments on writing, speaking, listening and reading in English. English teachers should encourage students to manage their own learning by guiding students to choose what kind of learning task and to make the individual learning plan. They give students the direction of the task and encourage students to actively participate in various activities. When students are confused in learning, teachers give students some advice about what to do next, and the decisions are made by students themselves.

What may also be profitable for the teachers to do is to further exploit the students' intrinsic motivation to learn English. This can be done by the contextualization of exercises and other classroom activities so that English is practiced in situation that realistically reflect the use of it in the world outside. In this way, the teacher could stimulate and sustain the students' interest in learning English and so increase their intrinsic motivation.

In this study it was found that there were gender differences in the students' perception of factors that affect English language proficiency of Non-English major students. Obviously, the male students should be paid more attention to teaching English. Teachers should also give more different and suitable exercises and assignments to different gender students. The gender difference

towards learning English language will bring challenge to English teachers and motivated them to enrich the method of teaching in Chinese universities. More opportunities should be made available to the male students to use particularly more English in their daily communication with teachers and friends in order to increase interests of learning English.

With respect to gender difference, female students perceived that Learning Strategies, Belief about Learning English, Motivation and English Learning Cognition were more important in acquiring English language proficiency than that of the male students. This finding has teaching and learning implications for language instructors at the Henan Polytechnic University.

Further research is deemed necessary to help explain more the findings of this research. This study only involved 300 respondents as sample. Other researches using larger samples including those from other Universities in China would perhaps be useful to further verify or negate the findings of this study. Although the Henan Polytechnic University is a comprehensive university, it is not representative of all Chinese Universities. Findings would be more representative and authoritative if more universities will be chosen to research in further study.

The researcher in this study focused on the factors influencing Non-English Major students in general and did not explore the background of students deeply. The lack of background information about respondents such as the faculties they represented, whether they are cities or rural dwellers would have provided more information about the difficulties they faced in learning English.

According to Chandrasegaran (1979), there is indeed a need for further

research into the strategy of approaching English language as a system, particularly into the efficacy of the processes of verification, monitoring and inductive/ deductive learning. However, the most effective way of observing these learning processes, and of gauging the amount of learning they produce, is probably through highly controlled studies, followed by observation with the respondents involved. Interviews may be more effective, since it may not suffice to only use the linguistic output to predict the learning strategies employed. Interview may also allow the researcher to investigate the learner's mind and determine if the learning strategy, for example, actually contributes to the students' level of performance.

Finally, many studies about factors influencing students' English proficiency have investigated for many years (Chen, 2015; Sun, 2014; Yun, 2014). It is recommended that future studies explore the factors like language aptitude, anxiety, self-esteem, self-efficacy and attitude and these together are related to students' English proficiency.

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