Investigation of Learning Motivation and Motivating Strategies in Less Commonly Taught European Languages Teaching Context in China

Pētījums par mazāk izplatītu Eiropas valodu mācīšanās motivāciju un motivējošām stratēģijām Ķīnas izglītības kontekstā

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Motivation is one of the most important factors that determine students' initial persistence and success in the language learning process and teachers' role is to use corresponding strategies to support and enhance students' learning motivation. The purpose of this article is to survey two aspects: (a) the "choice motivation" of students to select Less Commonly Taught European Languages (LCTELs) as their major after graduation from high school, and to what extent their teachers understand this question; (b) the motivating strategies that the teachers think important and frequently employ, and to what extent do the students prove the effectiveness of the motivating strategies. Hereinto, research question (a) provides the background of the theme (b). The investigation is based on a large-scale empirical survey (questionnaire and interview) to 259 students and 31 teachers of 15 LCTELs programs in Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU).

Keywords: learning motivation, motivating strategies, LCTELs, Chinese context.

Abbreviations
BFSU – Beijing Foreign Studies University
CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference
EFL – English as a Foreign Language
LCTELs – Less Commonly Taught European Languages
LCTLs – Less Commonly Taught Languages

INTRODUCTION

A language, as a way of thinking, is the carrier of culture and civilization of a certain group. No matter how many native speakers one language owns, whether it is commonly taught or less commonly taught in the modern world, it shares the same importance with any other language, and is the access to better mutual understanding in communication with another nation.

The Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), in Chinese context, is a concept adopted to organize and administrate foreign language teaching, referring to those languages, which are non-widely spoken in international communication, more specifically, all the languages except English, Russian, German, French, Spanish, Japanese and Arabic.

LCTELs is a geographically-determined branch of LCTLs. LCTELs as Foreign Languages' Teaching in China dates back to the 1950s, with the start of Polish and Czech languages' teaching in Peking University. In 1956, Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (nowadays Beijing Foreign Studies University, BFSU) started a Romanian Program, and integrated the Polish and Czech Programs from Peking University into one faculty. In the past 60 years, BFSU has been the main university of LCTELs teaching, with 27 modern languages (alphabetically, Albanian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Maltese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Swedish and Ukrainian) and 1 ancient language (Latin).

Along with deepening of international cooperation and the "One Belt, One Road" initiative,[1] an increasing number of universities and institutes in China starts or plans to organize LCTELs programs. Nevertheless, BFSU still leads the role, with 13 programs as the only instance in China. The investigation is mainly carried out in the context of BFSU.

Framework for theories of L2 motivation

Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding the definition, all theories and models unanimously stress the importance of motivation. Since 1950s, motivation has received much scholarly attention, and some quite influential theories and models have been generated (e.g., Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Weiner.B, 1972; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Dornyei, 1994; Clement, Dornyei and Noels, 1994; Tremblay and Gardner, 1995).

However, motivation is the product of complex human psychological mechanism, as Graham (1994) stated:

No single word or principle such as reinforcement or intrinsic motivation can possibly capture this complexity.

Dornyei and Otto (1998) evaluated and integrated the existing L2 motivational theories, based on the psychological theory of volition (Heckhausen and Kuhl, 1985; Heckhausen, 1991), to generate the Process Model of L2 Motivation, and defined "motivation" in a more comprehensive and dynamic way, as "dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor process whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized, and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out." The Process Model of L2 Motivation distinguishes "choice motivation"

[1] The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, proposed by China, with a focus on connectivity and cooperation among countries of Eurasia.

and "executive motivation", divides a sequence of learning action into three stages: (1) preactional phase, including goal setting, intention formation and initiation of intention enactment; (2) actional phase, that is a phase of implement, including actional continuity, modification and termination; (3) postactional phase, which is in accompany with causal attributions, standards and strategies elaboration, dismissing intention and further planning. Detailed explanation on the motivational influences through the three stages can serve as fundamental for teachers designing motivating strategies in the teaching context.

Chinese research on L2 motivation on the whole is within the western classic and progress model framework. Nevertheless, considering Chinese educational traditions, some scholars (Hua H., 1998; Shi Y. 2000) advocated to add "certificate motivation" in measurement. This scale is also included in the investigation.

Framework for motivating strategies

Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008) defined "Motivational strategies" as containing two implications: (a) instructional interventions applied by the teacher to elicit and stimulate student motivation and (b) self-regulating strategies that are used purposefully by individual students to manage the level of their own motivation. In this investigation, we refer to the implication (a); in order to avoid ambiguous understanding, hereinafter, we will employ the term "motivating strategy".

Looking into L2 literature, scholars since the 1990s have dedicated a greater attention to motivating strategies, generating lists of recommended techniques for motivating students (e.g. Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Williams and Burden, 1997; Chambers, 1999). Dornyei (1994) developed a three-level framework, that is, language level, learner level and learning situational level, with 30 sub-techniques. In his book *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom* (2001), he enriched his framework with a list of 102 motivating strategies in four main dimensions: creating basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation.

A number of empirical investigations also have been carried out to give evidence to support the effectiveness and rankings of motivating strategies (e.g. Dornyei and Csizer, 1998; Cheng and Dornyei, 2007; Guilloteaux and Dornyei, 2008; Sugita and Takeuchi, 2010; Wang, 2014). Dornyei and Csizer (1998) investigated EFL motivating strategies on the importance and frequency in Hungarian context, and created the "Ten Commandments for Motivating Learners". Cheng and Dornyei (2007) applied the framework in Chinese context to explore, whether the strategies are transferable across diverse cultural and ethnolinguistic contexts. These two conspicuous researches not only examined the present framework for motivating strategies, but also introduced culture-sensitiveness into further discussion.

However, researches on L2 motivation and motivating strategies yet with a focus in EFL teaching, empirical investigations on other languages, including LCTLs, are considerably scarce; even the available literature (e.g. Ueno, 2005; Takala, 2015; Sugita, Kimberly and Kristie, 2014) is mainly rooted in western context. Due to the cultural geographical difference, the connotation and denotation of LCTLs do not correspond between western and Chinese contexts. Last but not least, the framework

of motivating strategies is mostly classroom-oriented. However, in China, especially with regards to teachers of LCTLs programs, it must be noted that they are not only classroom-teaching organizers, but also resource providers, activity supporters, life advisors and psychology therapists; the motivating strategies are not restrained to classroom environment. Thus, in this article, we employ the term "campus-oriented" to make the necessary extension.

Based on a "campus-oriented" investigation in BFSU, this article aimed to preliminarily investigate motivation and motivating strategies in Chinese LCTELs teaching context, and to answer the following questions:

(a) What is the "choice motivation" of students to select LCTELs as their major after graduation from high school? To what extent do the teachers understand this question?

(b) What strategies, thought important by teachers, are frequently employed to motivate students? To what extent the students prove the effectiveness of these strategies?

Methods and Material

Participants

259 students and 31 teachers of 15 LCTELs programs (Albanian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak and Swedish) as students on campus in the 2016–2017 academic year at BFSU were the participants in the questionnaire survey.

Instruments

This investigation aimed at exploring (1) the "choice motivation" of students and (2) the students evaluation on effectiveness of motivating strategies that teachers employ based on their teaching experience and judgment. In order to cover these two aspects, two questionnaires were developed on the base of pre-interview with students and teachers.[2] Questionnaires employed the Likert Scale with 5 degrees (Strongly agree→strongly disagree). Because all the participants were Chinese, both questionnaires were in Chinese language version.

Aware of inherent shortcomings of questionnaires, namely, that respondents are inclined to what they believe to be the expected answer, or to lose patience easily, three measures were taken to reduce the limitations. Firstly, highlighting in the instructions the fact that the information provided was confidential and anonymous; secondly, focusing on the distinct motivating strategies from EFL context to shorten the questionnaire; thirdly, paraphrasing the same motivating strategy to set some checking items. Consequently, 3 responses were proved invalid.

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[2] The questionnaires were designed in November and December, 2016, and survey was carried out in January, 2017.

Data analysis

The data was submitted to statistical software SPSS to test reliability of two questionnaires with Cronbach Alpha, and to calculate mean value and standard deviation of each item.

Table 1

Comparison between final rank orders of "choice motivation" obtained from students and teachers (Cronbach α = 0.754)

	Choice motivation	Mean	SD	Teachers' rank order
1.	to enjoy the feeling of elitism	4.21	0.963	3
2.	interest in the culture	4.07	0.899	4
3.	interest in the target language	4.05	0.915	8
4.	to enter a key major in recent society	3.64	1.150	7
5.	to get a better base for further study or abroad study	3.21	1.063	6
6.	easier access to jobs of foreign affairs	3.09	1.221	2
7.	to meet parents' expectation	3.06	1.274	5
8.	easier access to a better job	3.01	1.097	9
9.	to get diploma in a better university	2.93	1.348	1
10.	access to university first and then change major	2.16	1.082	10

Table 2

Final rank order and descriptive statistics of the motivating strategies
(Cronbach α = 0.920)

	Motivating strategies	Mean	SD
1.	to encourage students to use the target language in practice outside the campus	4.64	0.564
2.	to discuss the whole curriculum planning with students at the beginning of semester	4.63	0.586
3.	to provide students with positive feedback	4.59	0.608
4.	to support students to involve in exchange study in the target language country	4.57	0.722
5.	to share with students that the high esteem that you have for the target language as a meaningful experience and teach them learning techniques	4.57	0.597
6.	to guide students in keeping attention on current affairs in the target language country	4.55	0.643
7.	to invite the target-language-speaking foreigners to study activities	4.55	0.637
8.	to make sure grades reflect students' hard work and celebrate their victory	4.55	0.585
9.	to update information on labor market relevant to the target language	4.47	0.761
10.	to organize studies based on the socio-cultural background of the target language	4.46	0.755
11.	to leave moderate amount of homework to students every day	4.41	0.771
12.	to encourage students to participate cultural exchange activities with the target language country	4.39	0.805

	Motivating strategies	Mean	SD
13.	to create an interactive and supportive classroom climate	4.32	0.755
14.	to provide students opportunity to take language test within the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)	4.31	0.855
15.	to present various auditory and visual teaching aids	4.29	0.856
16.	to invite senior students to share their learning and working experiences	4.22	0.882
17.	to provide students with a joint study program (e.g. LCTELs-Law program, LCTELs-Economics program)	4.18	0.940
18.	to organize visit to the units relevant to the target language	4.17	0.979
19.	to teach and discuss Chinese culture in the target language	4.12	1.035
20.	to make tasks challenging	4.01	0.914
21.	to make sure every student is involved in class interaction (e.g. classroom questioning, group work)	3.98	0.986
22.	to organize lectures relevant to the target language and culture	3.95	0.987
23.	to assign students autonomic learning tasks	3.92	0.908
24.	to provide students with individual consultations regularly	3.91	1.014
25.	to create group-competitive climate in class	3.9	1.012
26.	to organize class consultation regularly	3.04	1.199

Discussion

"Choice motivation" factors of LCTELs students

10 items and rank order of students' main choice motivations are listed in Table 1. According to the mean value, "to enjoy the feeling of elitism", "interest in the culture" and "interest in the target language" take up the first three places. With reference to the Construct of Foreign Language Learning Motivation (Dornyei, 1994), they are more based on the language level, and more integrative than instrumental.

The final rank order comparison between self-evaluation of students and understanding of teachers reveals intriguing aspects. Although concordance can be found in the main trend, 4 items are rather converse, namely, "interest in the target language", "to enter a key major in recent society", "easier access to jobs of foreign affairs", and "to get diploma in a better university".

Hua H. (1998) and Shi Y.(2000) proposed to add "certificate motivation" as a main motivational type to measure EFL motivation in Chinese context. Gao Y., Zhao Y., Cheng Y. and Zhou Y.(2003) argued that systematic and large-scale empirical evidence is still lacking for proof. In our case, this factor was deemed by students to be in a quite low rank with a mean value of 2.93, yet teachers considered it as the most important factor for students enrolling in a LCTELs program, since it was an opportunity to enter a better university with a relatively lower score than commonly taught languages programs after the College Entrance Examination.

"Easier access to jobs of foreign affairs" ranks in the 2nd place in the teachers' order, in comparison with the 6th given by students. 29 of the 31 teachers in the study

have a background of the first study degree in LCTELs; 2 of them have obtained the second degree. In their college period, which was from 1990s to 2000s, the positions in foreign affairs were dream jobs, with a quite high social reputation. With the increasing of internationalization, access to work in foreign affairs was proved in this case not in the very priority rank of students' "choice motivation". However, highly qualified graduates of LCTELs programs are urgently needed talents in foreign affairs area; to cultivate such talents to better bridge international communication is all the more the priority objective. In order to achieve this objective, it is a high time for teachers to consider how to initiate this motivation with effective motivating strategies.

Long distance and less knowledge lead to unfamiliarity with the target language before students' entrance to LCTELs programs. Consequently, "interest in the target language" ranking in the 3rd place of students' choice is beyond teachers' expectation. This bias has resulted in absence of confidence regarding students' intrinsic interest in the target language, thus amplifying the hypothetical difficulty of motivating students on the language level. It is also one explanation to the high ranking of "certificate motivation" according to teachers' estimates. However, in the study, students' attitude towards the target language is rather positive and integrative; hence, it ought to be effective for teachers to use more motivating strategies on the language level (actually, the strategies the teachers provided proved that it is done in practice, and more details will be described below.), in support of initiating the choice motivation into executive and continuous one.

Since more extensive cooperation between China and European countries, and the launch of "One Belt, One Road" initiative, LCTELs programs gain somewhat priority and become key majors in university. This factor is also quite influential to students as the result in the 4th rank order. It reminds teachers to pay more attention to the guiding role of social situation.

Effectiveness of motivating strategies in students' evaluation

Generally, students' evaluation given to the effectiveness of teachers' motivating strategies is fairly favourable, with the mean values in a closed interval of 3.9 to 4.64 (Item 26 is to some degree lower, with the mean of 3.04). At the conclusion of the questionnaire, we also raised the overall questions regarding effectiveness in two dimensions: (1) I have a more explicit studying goal now than when I enrolled in my study program. (2) I have a greater enthusiasm regarding my studies than when I enrolled in my study program. The responses indicate positive results, with the mean of 4.11 and 4.01, respectively.

Looking into the Table 2, a half of the motivating strategies, which the teachers think the most effective and employ frequently (e.g. to encourage students to use the target language in practice outside the campus, to support students in their involvement in exchange studies at the target language country, to share with the students the high esteem that the teacher has for the target language as a meaningful experience and teach them learning techniques, and to invite the target-language-speaking foreigners to study activities), can be brought into the language level of the L2 Motivation Construct (Dornyei, 1994). And their rankings are rather at the

forefront. It is a common understanding that in language learning, communicating meaning effectively is more important than being grammatically correct (Dornyei, 2001). These strategies are introduced by teachers' taking full advantage of resources, including government sectors, universities and other units both in China and the target language country, breaking out of the restrictions of classroom, or even of campus, and placing an emphasis on the language practice in real communication environment. It also reflects the progress in language teaching of Chinese context, which used to be very traditional, classroom-orientated, grammar-emphasized and teacher-centered.

In western context, the link between learner autonomy and motivation has been highlighted and a positive correlation has been underlined (e.g. Dickinson, 1995; Ushioda, 2003). In our investigation, the situation is slightly different with respect to task assignment; – Item 11 and Item 23 show that students are not too readily involved in autonomy. For Item 23, 30.86% of the respondents showed less than positive attitude to autonomic tasks. Comparatively, the students preferred to have a moderate amount of homework, which refers to exercises in controlling style as their incentive and restriction. Autonomy is not observed as being of an equal importance as in western context. In the auxiliary questions to Item 13 and Item 4, (a) "I like classes that are mainly based on teacher's lecturing" and (b) "I feel that I had made great progress during my exchange studies in the target language country", students' responses also affirmed the situation. The mean value to the question (a) was 3.68, and only 11.71% of the respondents clearly showed their negative attitude. The results of question (b) showed that 30 of 134 students, who had experienced studies abroad were uncertain or negative regarding their progress. In the interview with some students, they stated that they were not quite good at taking advantage of the great amount of "free" time left by teachers. Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) reported the parallel conclusion in the research of students' readiness for autonomy in Hong Kong, – that students expected their teachers to make all the pedagogical decisions, believing that to teach is the teachers' job. Education in Chinese traditional context contains a history of compliance with teachers' instruction. The ultimate knowledge source for students on campus is teachers' presentation. Students show less interest in group work and challenging tasks. In the past decades of teaching reforms, autonomic learning has been devoted much attention. However, it is a gradual process. On the other hand, "autonomy" is actually a multifaceted concept. As indicated in our discussion above, introducing students to learning in practice is in fact also a form of autonomy, but with a greater emphasis on language proficiency. In the layer of critical and reflective thinking, it is still in need of teachers' efforts for improvement.

Last but not least, we would like to briefly comment on the following two points. (a) Item 2 showed that students attach importance to the explicit explanation of curriculum planning and objectives to be achieved in advance. Just in recent 4 years, administrators and teachers in the university start to standardize and normalize this strategy. Nevertheless, it is still not fully employed. The result of students' responses should be a strong reminder. (b) Item 17 and Item 19 show the measures of nowadays LCTELs teaching reforms in BFSU. LCTELs are applied relatively narrowly compared to commonly taught languages in social labor market. The joint

programs, such as LCTELs-Law, could raise students' competitive ability or prepare them for further studies. Learning Chinese culture in LCTELs could better support students in communication with the target language country, and deepen mutual understanding.

Conclusions

The aims of this study were to investigate preliminarily "choice motivation" of students in Chinese LCTELs teaching context, and to evaluate effectiveness of teachers' motivating strategies through views of students. The results showed that "choice motivations" of students are based rather on the language level in the Construct of Foreign Language Learning Motivation (Dornyei, 1994), and are more integrative than instrumental. Meanwhile, the teachers understanding of this issue along the main lines was in congruence with the facts given by students, but still with some obvious variances. The 26 motivating strategies, which teachers think important and employ frequently, encourage students to be integrated in authentic language practice, and in general were proved by the students as effective.

The greatest limitation of this study lay in the subjectivity of methods. We mainly employed the questionnaire and interview, obtaining the information from the view of the actual participants in the teaching process. Moreover, the limitation also shows the direction of future research, bringing a suggestion to introduce objective observations and evaluations into the presented problems.

In the survey, we also found that "choice motivation" of students is rather multifaceted. What are the interactions among different choice motivations, and how will they affect the students to initiate them into executive motivations? These are relevant questions for the future research.

Acknowledgment

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Kopsavilkums

Motivācija ir viens no svarīgākajiem faktoriem, kas nosaka studentu sākotnējo neatlaidību un panākumus valodu apguves procesā. Skolotāja uzdevums ir, izmantojot atbilstošas stratēģijas, atbalstīt un veicināt studentu mācīšanās motivāciju. Šī pētījuma mērķis ir izpētīt divus aspektus: a) studentu "izvēles motivāciju", izraugoties LCTELs (mazāk izplatītu Eiropas valodu; abreviatūra angliski LCTELs) programmu kā pamatpriekšmetu pēc vidusskolas beigšanas un atklājot, kā pasniedzēji izprot šo jautājumu; b) stratēģijas, kuras docētāji uzskata par svarīgām un regulāri izmanto, lai motivētu studentus; un parādīt, kā studentu sekmes pierāda to efektivitāti. Pētījumā izmantotas empīriskās pētniecības metodes – anketēšana un intervēšana, kopā aptaujāti 259 studenti un 31 pasniedzējs no 15 mazāk izplatītu Eiropas valodu (LCTELs) programmām Pekinas Svešvalodu universitātē (PSU, abreviatūra angliski BFSU).

Atslēgvārdi: *mācību motivācija, motivācijas stratēģijas, LCTELs, Ķīnas konteksts.*