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The influence of learning strategies and self-efficacy on students' motivation in university EFL settings

Makiko Okazaki

Abstract
The answers from two groups of students' questionnaires including open-ended questions, are closely examined to investigate the influence of students' sense of efficacy and development of learning strategies on their motivation to learn English.

keywords: motivation, learning strategies, self-efficacy, EFL

1. Introduction
Students' motivation to learn has been the focus of many instructors and researchers in the EFL field. In Japanese settings, it is true that instructors can not necessarily expect high motivation to learn English from all students. In reality, many instructors have to deal with students presenting with limited motivation. Given this background, the factors believed to affect students' motivation are examined in this study. Among those factors, learning strategies and students' sense of efficacy are specifically examined.

Firstly, learning strategies have been studied as one of the major factors to affect student motivation. For university students, it is effective to teach learning strategies because these students have experienced more in terms of language and concepts, thus they can handle various discussions of cognition and metacognition (Hofer, Shirley & Pintrich, 1998). It is assumed that understanding how to learn effectively in a self-regulated way can benefit our students, especially at the introductory level of English learning, because they have failed to study English successfully during the past six years (their high school education). Hofer et al. (1998) presented two learning strategies: cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are direct learning skills such as reciting texts, highlighting important parts, summarizing the material to be learned, and active note taking, which enables recognizing and connecting ideas and outlining the text. Metacognitive learning strategies include skills such as study planning, setting proper goals, and monitoring and regulating one's own study. Monitoring strategies include various skills such as self-testing to check for understanding, taking time to reflect on one's own learning, and writing journal or study logs. In relation to self-regulation in learning as one of the monitoring strategies, Belfiore and Hornyak (1998) postulate the importance of making a system of self-observation of learning. This system includes creating a list of tasks related to the target learning using a self-recording sheet and then checking off each of these items as learning proceeds.

Secondly, students' sense of efficacy has also been widely studied in relation to motivation to learn. Self-efficacy is defined as people's judgments of their own capability to learn or perform at designated levels (Bundura, 1997). Self-efficacy affects students' motivation significantly. Students' beliefs relating to self-efficacy influence "how much effort they invest in selected endeavors, how they persevere in the face of difficulties, how resilient
they are to adversity, how vulnerable they are to stress and depression, and what types of choices they make at important decisional points that set the course of life paths" (Bandura, 2003, p. 769). Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) mention that the more students are engaged in learning, the more they learn and achieve, and eventually, the higher self-efficacy they possess. With this high self-efficacy, students will gain motivation to study and try harder to learn.

In this study, two groups (successful and unsuccessful) of students' questionnaires, including their open-ended answers, are closely examined to answer the following four research questions:

1. What are the learning strategies and efficacy beliefs of successful students and unsuccessful students?
2. How does students' sense of efficacy affect their motivation to learn?
3. Does the acquisition of learning strategies enhance students' learning and motivation?
4. Does setting goals enhance students' learning and motivation?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 35 university students (three second year students and 32 first year students). All were assigned to the introductory level English class based on their scores on a placement test developed by the university. This placement test was given ten days before the start of the first semester of the class.

2.2. Procedure

The students were taught by the author in two groups for 13 weeks. There were two classes per week, each using the same texts and the method of teaching. During the first 10 minutes of each class, the students took a short test based on the content of the previous class. The tests were the same for the two classes. The questions were each worth a maximum of five points, with the points added up to obtain the final score or marks. Reading tests based on the texts were given four times during the semester. The short tests and the reading tests were each worth 50% of the course grade. In the both classes, students were given sheets on which they were encouraged to write down their test scores each time.

The students were notified that they would get credit for the course and a passing grade if they obtained more than 120 points out of the possible 200. This rule was explained to them more than four times during the semester. The marks on both the short tests and the readings tests generally increased during the course of the semester, but there were two students in each class whose marks changed very little; these students showed poor motivation for studying. Thus, they were interviewed by the instructor individually outside of class.

After the course was completed, the students were asked to fill out a questionnaire designed by the author. The most important items asked about the students' motivation to study, the time spent preparing for the short tests, their understanding of the evaluation system, their attitude about learning English, and their reasons to study (see Table 1). Thirty-four of the 35 students completed the questionnaire.

3. Results and Discussion

The students were divided into two groups based on their class grades. The 24 students who achieved a final score of 65% or greater on the two class tests combined were placed in Group 1 (successful students), and the remaining 10 students were placed in Group 2.
Table 1: Questionnaires and answers in Groups 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Did you have motivation to study English before you began this class in April?</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did you feel that your motivation increased after that?</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Did you understand the evaluation system?</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Did you try to get good scores according to the system?</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did you develop your own goal for your learning?</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Did you always know your cumulative scores?</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Were you able to study as much as you wanted?</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you think that you your proficiency in English improved compared to before the class?</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you think learning English is interesting?</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you want to become more proficient in English?</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Do you want to keep studying English?</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you want to take elective, higher-level English classes?</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
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Question 1

On the question, “Did you have motivation to study English before you began this class in April?”, Group 1 scored slightly higher than Group 2. However, both groups reported relatively low motivation. As the classes were at the introductory level, intended for students below the university standard in English, it was assumed that the participants were not able to learn English successfully during the previous three to six years (junior high and high
school). For this reason, they may have developed a negative attitude toward learning English.

**Question 2**

On the question, “Did you feel that your motivation increased after that?”, 75% of Group 1 and 80% of Group 2 answered “yes.” Thus, it can be said that the instruction affected students’ motivation positively. Some of the students in Group 1 said their motivation was already high at the beginning, so their level of motivation did not change. This is the reason why the Group 1 students show a slightly lower percentage than the Group 2 students. It is unclear why the students in Group 2 were unable to learn successfully, given their high motivation.

As a secondary, open-ended question, the students were asked, “When did your motivation increase and why?” Following are sample answers from Group 1:

1. After I took several classes, because I began to understand the class.
2. After one month, because I was able to get a lot of points on the short test.
3. Immediately after the first class, because the class was easy to understand.
4. Because the instructor started with the very basic things and I began to understand, and then I started to feel that the English class was enjoyable.
5. Because the accumulation of the scores on each short test was directly related to the final score. Also, the short test was based on the previous class. So I decided not to miss the class. Then I started getting a good score each time. I started feeling that the English class was interesting.

Following are sample answers from Group 2:

1. After one month, because I felt I may have failed.
2. After several weeks, because I started to understand English.
3. After one month, because the instructor taught me that if I try hard I can improve my English.

Some negative comments from students in Group 2 suggested decreased motivation: For example, “Because I kept getting low scores in each short test.”

The major factors affecting students’ motivation in Group 1 are the experience of success in the short tests, a feeling of understanding the content, enjoyment of learning, and a sense of security that they could learn successfully. Many students in Group 2 stated that they were motivated to study because of anxiety about failing the class. For some students in Group 2, failing the class meant they would have to repeat a year or drop out of school. These students fully understood their situation. Although many students in Group 2 cited this fear of failure as motivation, the motivation was not always successful in getting them good marks in the class.

**Question 3**

On the question, “Did you understand the evaluation system?”, the two groups differed significantly: 75% of Group 1 students answered “yes,” compared to just 50% of the Group 2 students. These results indicate that the successful students were able to understand the evaluation system and they knew how to get good marks and be successful in their studies.

**Question 4**

On the question, “Did you try to get good scores according to the system?”, 88% of students in Group 1 and 70% of Group 2 answered “yes.” These results suggest that some students in Group 2 were motivated to study but did not know how to achieve good marks. If students’ motivation is to be high enough for them to be successful in their studies, they must understand how to study properly.
Following are sample answers from Group 2:
1. If I think about my scores, I will feel tired.
2. If I think about my scores, I cannot learn.
3. I think I will probably be OK even if I don’t try.

The first two answers reveal negative feelings and pressure to achieve high marks, which led the students to try not to think about their scores. The third answer suggests that the student did not feel responsible for his studies or did not know how to achieve a good outcome.

Question 5
On the question, “Did you develop your own goal for your learning?”, 75% of the students in Group 1 answered “yes,” compared to 70% for Group 2. According to the answers to the secondary, open-ended question, Group 1 students set higher goals than Group 2 students. Most of the Group 2 students stated that they felt satisfied if they could get the minimum passing marks.

Question 6
On this question, “Did you always know your accumulated scores?”, 79% of Group 1 students but only 40% of Group 2 students answered “yes.” This is a significant difference. Monitoring of test scores was considered to be a crucial part of successful learning. Group 1 students have better metacognitive strategies than Group 2 students.

Question 7
On the question, “Were you able to study as you wanted?”, 71% of the Group 1 students, but only 20% of the Group 2 students, answered “yes.” The students were also asked why they were or were not able to study as they wanted. Some sample answers from Group 1 students who answered “yes” to the main question follow:
1. Because I feel I understand very well.
2. Because I was able to learn in the class very well. The pace of this class is suitable for me.
3. Proper choice of textbook.
4. Good and interesting class content.
5. Because I feel learning English is enjoyable.
6. Because I was able to learn the basics.
7. Because I was able to take enough time to study for this class.
8. Because the class was easy to understand.

Following are sample answers from Group 1 students who answered the main question “no”:
1. Because I rely heavily on memory and I think I did not understand well.
2. Because I do not know how to study.
3. Because I do not like studying English.
4. Because I am too easy on myself. I sometimes slept in the class.
5. Because I was too busy with other things, like part-time jobs.
6. Because I do not like grammar and it is difficult.

Following are answers from Group 2 students who answered the main question “no”:
1. I was not able to concentrate in the class.
2. I did not understand the basics.
3. I have never studied anything properly before.
4. I did not have enough time to study, because I had part-time jobs and other subjects to study.
5. The textbook was too difficult for me.
Generally, students who answered the main question positively stated they were satisfied with the content, the textbook, and the level and pace of the class. They were able to spend enough time studying. They understood the class content and found their learning enjoyable. The Group 1 students who answered negatively did not concentrate in class, did not like studying English, did not know how to study, and were not able to devote enough time to studying. The negative Group 2 students made similar points. Some of the students who answered negatively mentioned that they do not know how to study. They seemed to have very limited knowledge or skills not only for learning English, but also for learning in general. They failed to develop good study habits in earlier years.

**Question 8**

On the question, “Do you think that your proficiency in English has improved compared to before you started the class?”, 100% of Group 1 and 90% of Group 2 students answered positively. Almost all the students reported some improvement in their learning.

**Question 9**

On the question, “Do you think learning English is interesting?”, 88% of the students in Group 1 but only 60% of the students in Group 2 answered positively. The Group 1 students generally felt successful in learning, which might explain their positive feelings towards it. On the other hand, the Group 2 students did not find learning English to be interesting. This attitude may have been caused by their lack of success in the tests or the lack of a sense of achievement in their studying at home.

The students who answered the main question positively were also asked, “When and why did you start feeling that English is interesting?” Following are sample answers from the students in Group 1:

1. When I started learning English (junior high school). I found it interesting when I understood the content.
2. When I understood relative pronouns and clauses (structure, infinitives, and so on) in this class.
3. After one month, when I felt that I could translate an English sentence into Japanese with a dictionary.
4. From the beginning of this class. I found that I am improving and it was a good feeling.
5. After one month, when I started to understand the structure of the English sentence.
6. After one month, when I started to get good grades on the short tests.
7. When I was in a junior high school. I like American music.

A “yes” respondent in Group 2 answered, “Quite recently. I began to understand the structure of English.”

It is possible that interest in a subject and specific feelings about it are closely related. Especially when students think they understand the subject, can answer the questions, and monitor their progress, they tend to have a strong interest in learning.

**Question 10**

Although there are many differences between Groups 1 and 2 in their feelings towards learning, all of the students in both groups answered the question, “Do you want to become more proficient in English?”, “yes.”

**Question 11**

On this question, “Do you want to keep studying English?, 96% of the students in Group 1, and 80% of the students in Group 2, answered “yes.” In Group 1, 20% of the students
expressed a desire to become proficient in English but did not want to continue studying it. Students who answered the main question “yes” were then asked why. Sample answers from Group 1 follow:

1. I like English. English is fun.
2. I want to improve speaking and listening. There are many people who can speak and listen. It is a shame that only I cannot do it.
3. I don’t want to waste the skill I have already gotten. If I stop learning, I think I will lose it.
4. If I can’t use English for my work in the future, it will affect my career negatively.
5. I think I have not mastered English enough. I would like to understand more.
6. I think English is useful for my work.
7. I want to watch foreign movies without subtitles, and I want to communicate with native speakers.
8. I want to master at least the minimum amount of English.
9. I want to become able to translate English into Japanese more fluently.
10. I want to get an English-related license.
11. I will go abroad, so I have to prepare for it.

Sample answers from Group 2 students who answered the main question “yes” follow:

1. I need English.
2. I want to get more knowledge.
3. I want to communicate in a language other than Japanese.
4. I like English.
5. It is beneficial if I can use English.

A student in Group 1 who answered the main question “no” wrote, “I want to become proficient in English but I do not want to suffer from the hard study.” Group 2 students who answered “no” wrote, “If I can get credit, it is enough,” and “I am not good at English, but I want to improve it.”

The students who answered positively in Group 1 tended to have clearer and more concrete long-term goals than those in Group 2. It may be important to let students think about why they want to learn and to set their long-term goals from the beginning.

**Question 12**

On this question, “Do you want to take elective, higher-level English classes?” 71% of the students in Group 1 answered positively compared to 60% of the students in Group 2. Most of students who answered negatively thought that elective classes are too difficult for them. Students in Group 2 felt that strongly, indicating a significant lack of confidence in their ability to learn.

**The interview and the special treatment for students who did not show progress**

Four students in Group 2 who kept getting extremely low marks (0 to 20%) were individually interviewed by the instructor. They did not realize that they would be failed if they kept getting low marks. They had poor study habits and said that it was difficult to find time to study. However, they were motivated to pass the exam, so they agreed to take part in the supplemental classes where they would learn basic grammar. The instructor also clearly explained how to study and assigned homework. After four times (one hour each) of these supplemental classes, the marks on the short tests increased to 70% of full marks, and the marks on the final readings tests increased to an average of 89% of the maximum. One student reported that he began to understand grammar and realized he could translate English sentences into Japanese. He expressed his interest in learning English. All four students passed the exam. They had developed good study habits in just 3 weeks.
The answers to the research questions

The answer to the first research question “what are the learning strategies and efficacy beliefs of successful and unsuccessful students?” can be summarized as: successful students have a higher and stronger sense of self-efficacy; conversely, unsuccessful students have a lower and weaker sense of self-efficacy. Also, successful students generally have better metacognitive learning strategies such as understanding the evaluation system, planning to study, and monitoring their own performance.

The answer to the second research question “how does students’ sense of efficacy affect their motivation to learn?” can be summarized as: the students’ sense of efficacy significantly affects motivation to learn. Both groups of students did not have high motivation at the start of the learning period; however, successful students started to increase motivation as they begin to have positive experiences such as understanding better, getting good scores, and becoming able to translate English without help. On the other hand, unsuccessful students continued to exhibit low levels of efficacy and did not enjoy learning as much as successful students.

The answer to the third research question “does the acquisition of learning strategies enhance students’ learning and motivation?” can be summarized as: learning strategies lead to successful learning, which directly enhances students’ sense of efficacy and motivation. Unsuccessful students generally have limited learning strategies, which may lead to repeated failure and a diminishment of their sense of efficacy and motivation.

The answer to the fourth question “does setting goals enhance students’ learning and motivation” can be summarized as simply “unclear” because there was no significant difference between Groups 1 and 2 in Question 5. This is partly because the question itself did not specify whether they should be long-term or short-term goals. However, with the data collected through open-ended Questions 5 and 11, it was found that successful students tend to have clearer and more concrete long-term goals than unsuccessful students.

4. Conclusion

From this study, it was found that students’ sense of self-efficacy such as “I understand,” “I can do it,” and “I can monitor my progress” is closely related to their motivation. At the same time, motivation seems to be unrelated to negative feelings such as threat, fear, or anxiety. Therefore, it is important for instructors to try to raise students’ sense of self-efficacy and not to threaten students with failure or punishment. Thus, encouraging students to have successful experiences repeatedly is an important goal for instruction because one of the sources of self-efficacy is the “mastery experience” (Bandura, 1997). The study also discovered that teaching learning strategies is effective in order to lead students to success. In fact, many unsuccessful students do not know how to study or what to study. Not only cognitive learning strategies but also metacognitive strategies should be introduced to students. The importance of the development of metacognitive awareness in learners is emphasized by Hiromori (2004), who mentioned that teaching metacognitive strategies can lead to students developing stronger cognitive skills and deeper processing.

Learning strategies, self-efficacy and motivation seem to be factors in a cyclical process. Getting learning strategies may lead to successful learning, which raises self-efficacy. With higher self-efficacy, students achieve higher levels of motivation to learn. Unless we expect already highly-motivated students, the starting point for instructors is teaching learning strategies including clear and concrete instructions about how students can become successful in learning. Metacognitive leaning strategies including setting proper goals at the beginning of the instruction, monitoring one’s own learning, regulating their study behavior, and taking
responsibility for one's own learning should also be emphasized.

References


