Enhancing the Motivation of Foreign Language Learners Through Blended Learning

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Abstract

Today's society is hyper connected, and requires language skills that are far above the standard of what was required twenty and even ten years ago. As the demands on languages increase, so do the demands on education. Therefore, students are required to have a much deeper knowledge of how to communicate in today's global society. This paper focuses on the factors that motivate students to learn foreign languages in order to be able to communicate effectively within the business and educational world. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are assessed, with attitude and self-confidence being the primary factors that create a motivating environment for students to sharpen their skills. Self-determination indicates that a student is highly motivated intrinsically, which is the case for some students but is not the norm. Research shows that biggest value in motivating students to learn language comes with a blended style of learning, where they are both extrinsically motived (as the intimal motivating factor) and intrinsically motivated as their self-confidence, self-esteem and other internal struggles began to heal; then they can progress.

Keywords

Blended Learning, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Self-Determination Theory, SDT, Foreign Language, Motivating Factors.

I. Introduction

Developing the skills necessary to communicate with others around the globe is more important than ever. The demand for multilingual workers has increased in many aspects of modern life, such as in the fields of business and in education. The acquisition of a foreign language also provides a better chance of finding employment and more educational opportunities. However, learning a foreign language is incredibly challenging for many students because it involves a variety of skills, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking, all of which require a high degree of proficiency in order to communicate effectively. In fact, acquiring a new language may require years of training for a student before an efficient level of communication is reached (Lee and Chong 2007). For example, students need to increase their vocabulary, learn advanced grammar, and most importantly practice using what they have studied, sometimes in an environment where there are not many opportunities to do so. With these difficulties, it is important for the language learner to have a strong enough motivation to get them through the difficult times. Without the proper motivation, the increased demands on language learners can decrease their ability to focus during learning and could potentially lead to relatively high dropout rates (Mayer 2011).

Motivation is one of the single most determining factors in the success of a language learner. The amount of motivation depends on why and how the person is learning the language and also how difficult of a time they have learning. When difficulties inevitably occur, a learner needs something that will not let them quit. Busse and Walter (2013) found that the decrease in students' efforts to engage with language learning over the course of the year correlated to decreasing levels of intrinsic motivation, which was attributed to the lack of opportunities to practice the target language. In order to increase motivation in students, new technology has been increasingly incorporated to the foreign language-learning environment.

Technology provides effective tools and methods to help language learners search and communicate with their peers and native speakers in an enriched and effective manner. Technology also fosters foreign language learners' desires and motivations (Yulin,

2013). Motivated students tend to approach challenging tasks, persist in difficult circumstances, enjoy learning and achieving new knowledge, and often perform better in the language (Rayn & Deci, 2000, 2008). However, technology is only partly used in foreign language classrooms. Most foreign language institutes use the traditional method of teaching, which includes listening to tapes and reading textbooks. This method demotivates language learners and slows their language acquisitions because of the limitation of learning tools and the lack of student centred learning. This realization led researchers to find a way to utilize technology and implement it into the foreign language classroom, creating what is called a blended learning environment. Blended learning, known also as hybrid learning, is the elaborate melding of face-to-face and online learning experiences. Blended learning has emerged in response to the increasing need and demand to respond to diverse students' needs and to provide engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Blended learning is unique because it integrates the power of face-to-face communication with the flexibility of online communication such as labs, simulations, tutorials, and assessments (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Blended learning should be used in the foreign language classroom to enhance students' intrinsic motivation and increase their language skills. This paper aims to address the following two questions: What factors influence the motivation of foreign language learners? How blended learning is effective in increasing the intrinsic motivation of foreign language learners?

II. Motivating Factors of Foreign Language Learners

Motivation has generally been defined as an internal process that activates, guides, and maintains behaviour over time (Carreira, 2011). Language learning motivation is defined as "the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (Gardner, 1985, p. 10). Language learners are at the center of a dynamic process that is constantly influenced by a set of affective factors such as attitude, orientation, anxiety, and motivation (Gardner, 1985). Although a person studying language is affected by all of these factors, motivation plays a vital role in the learning process and many researchers emphasize

the significance of identifying the construct of motivation not as single factor but as multi-factorial one (Hussin, Maarof, & D'Cruz, 2001). There are two main types of motivation: intrinsic, or internal, and extrinsic, or external. Oxford and Shearin (1994) analyzed a total of 12 motivational theories or models, including those from socio-psychology, cognitive development, and socio-cultural psychology; and identified six factors that influence motivation in language learning. The first factor is the learners' attitudes toward the learning community and the target language. Second is the learner's belief about himself or herself, including expectations of success and self-efficacy. The third factor is learning goals as reasons for learning. Involvement is the fourth factor, which refers to the extent to which the learner actively and consciously participates in the language learning process. The next factor is environmental support from both teachers and peers and the integration of cultural and outside-of-class support into the learning experience. The final factor includes students' personal attributes, such as aptitude and prior language learning experience. Similarly, de Burgh-Hirabe and Feryok (2013) used a model of complex and dynamic motivation that divided the motivational process into three stages—preactional, actional, and postactional—in order to identify the major factors that influenced language learners' motivation. The findings showed the main factors as: a goal to improve language, instrumental benefits, perceived progress and feeling of success, intrinsic values, and beliefs about language learning, autonomy, external demands such as exams and homework, and self-regulation. de Burgh-Hirabe and Feryok also found that the ability to self-regulate played a more important role than did materials and attitudes. Mezei (2008) characterized self-regulated learners as learners who are autonomous, persistent, and self-confident. Moreover, self-regulated learners are able to set intrinsic and personal goals, be realistic about their own knowledge, and truly love learning. Similarly to Oxford and Shearin (1994), Ebata (2001) also indicated three specific factors that are strongly believed to build motivation towards language learning: self-confidence, experiencing success and satisfaction, and good relationships among learners and between learners and teachers. Additionally, curiosity and enjoyment are positive predictors of language learning motivation (Carreira, 2011). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation and four extrinsic motivations, including the drive to excel, academic compliance, test compliance, and social sharing, are identified factors that influence language learners' motivation (Reiko, 2013).

III. Self-Determination Theory and Foreign Language Learning

Most of the language learning factors previously discussed influence students' extrinsic or intrinsic motivations. However, unlike many theories that focus only on the amount and factors of motivation, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) highlights the importance of understanding extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation, and highlights the essential elements that foster intrinsic motivation specifically. Although some students learn a foreign language for external purposes, learning language for internal purposes is more effective and beneficial. Research shows that intrinsically motivated foreign language students use the target language more independently, creatively and personally. They also spend more time on learning and have higher language proficiency levels (Ly Thi, 2007; Wang, 2008; Midraj, et al., 2008). The SDT is an influential theory. According

to the SDT, there are two main motivations: autonomous and controlled motivations. Positive outcomes mainly emanate from autonomous motivation whereas negative outcomes are associated with controlled motivation. Additionally, individuals' actions are based on different types of motivation such as intrinsic motivation and identified, interjected, and external regulations. Intrinsic motivation and identified regulation are considered autonomous motivation. Intrinsic motivation is a highly autonomous type of motivation that is derived from an individual's inherent interests. For instance, a student who is learning a foreign language to acquire new knowledge is intrinsically motivated. Identified regulation occurs when a person views an uninteresting task as valuable and important. Therefore, if students have internalized the importance of learning a foreign language they have internal fulfillment regulation, which is more autonomous. Interjected and external regulations are considered controlled motivations. Interjected regulation occurs when a person engages in an activity to bypass internal pressure, such as feeling shame. An individual is extrinsically motivated when he or she satisfies external demands rather than satisfying internal drives (Deci & Flaste, 1995). For instance, if students are learning a foreign language merely to pass an exam, then they are externally motivated. Research by Wang (2008) shows that autonomous extrinsic motivation or identified regulation positively correlated with intrinsic motivation and high English achievement, whereas controlled extrinsic motivation correlated negatively with them. According to SDT, an individual needs to satisfy three universal, innate, and essential psychological needs in order to function optimally: these three needs are the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The need for competence is concerned with the experience of efficacy after completing certain task. The need of autonomy refers to the initiative and freedom that an individual experiences when engaged in an activity in the absence of outside pressure with respect to his or her personal goals. The need for relatedness concerns the feeling of connectedness to significant others, including teachers and peers. (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Successful language learning can only occur when four conditions are met: first, when there is high quality input; second, when ample opportunities for practice exist; third, when the learner is given high quality feedback; and fourth, when the learner is faced with individualized content (Zhao, 2005). Instructors can enhance students' intrinsic motivation and accomplish these four conditions using a blended learning environment by combining the strength of effective technological tools and face-to-face experiences.

IV. Blended Learning and Motivation

Blended learning environment is a very rich environment that enhances students' motivation, increases their participation in the learning process, and supports autonomous and collaborative learning (Marsh, 2012). The nature of a blended learning environment that contains nonlinear and interactive technology enables foreign language learners to access information according to their own learning needs and explores multiple language learning materials while lowering the affective filter of the language environment by providing a place beyond the classroom to practice the target language safely. The flexibility of blended learning helps students meet their psychological needs and develop skills necessary for twenty-first century learning (Loon, Ros & Martens, 2012; Marsh, 2012). Many interactive technologies such as blogs, wikis, social media, video/audio conferencing, mobile technologies, and discussion forums have been integrated into the

blended learning environment to enhance students' motivation, engagement, and learning (COHERE, 2010). Sucaromana (2013) examined the effect of blended learning on university level students who studied English as a second language. The participants were randomly assigned into a treatment group that was taught using blended learning and a control group that was taught using traditional methods. The findings indicated that the treatment group students had significantly higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning English, a better attitude towards English as a subject, and better satisfaction with the learning environment. Shih (2010) also explored the effects of blended teaching using blogging as an instructional strategy in English for a specific purpose course. The research methodology combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. Forty-four English major students participated in the study. The findings showed that the blended learning environment enhanced learning effectiveness and students' motivation. The findings also showed that peer and instructor's feedback and blog features such as free access, ease of revision, and interesting material, were major factors that enhanced students' motivation. Some educators utilized the power of games to increase students' motivation and foster their language skills. Chen (2013) explored thirty-five college students' reactions toward an English adventure game called "BONE." The findings indicated that students considered the game helpful in enhancing their language skills and motivation. Students also reported they enjoyed playing the game because of the interesting game design. The findings of this study suggest that adventure video games such as BONE can help foreign language students enhance their listening, reading, and vocabulary skills while increasing motivation. Blended learning can also motivate students and enhance their academic writing, which is one of the genuinely challenging skills foreign language students often face, by blending tools such as wikis in the learning process. Wang (2014) conducted a study to evaluate the use of wikis in learning English as a foreign language classroom and to discover the extent to which wikis can facilitate collaboration and promote foreign language acquisition. The results found that wikis increase students' motivation to learn English, improve their writing confidence, and promote their initiatives for collaborative learning. Moreover, students stated that wikis are an engaging, interesting, and challenging environment that enabled them to enjoy working with their peers on writing tasks. Students are encouraged to use instant messaging to practice conversation skills and forums for discussion on topics of interest. Pazio (2010) revealed that mail correspondence treated as integral part of a language course helped students to expand their vocabulary, eliminated the majority of spelling mistakes, and influenced the complexity of students' writing. A longitudinal study examining the influence of using wiki-based teaching and learning on students' motivation indicated that the adoption of the Wiki Learning System in the teaching and learning process increased students' motivation (Nejkovic & Tosic, 2011). In their research, Lee and Chong (2007) revealed that students' vocabulary and listening skills were improved by offering more opportunities for web-based learning, whereas grammar and oral skills required more face-to-face interactions in the classroom between instructor and students. However, new video-communication technology can also develop students' speaking and oral skills. A study by Tian and Wang (2010), which examined the potential of enhancing oral skills via Skype, a videoconferencing tool, indicated that the exchange had improved students' oral skills and intercultural competence. The findings also showed that students reacted positively toward integrating technology in the lesson and suggested that Skype could be a sustainable mode of learning outside the classroom.

V. Limitations and Strengths of Blended Learning

An autonomy-supportive environment helps fulfill the needs for autonomy and enhance intrinsic motivation in students (Deci & Rayn, 2008). Reseach by Sanprasert (2010) showed that blended learning effectively enhanced students' autonomy. Blended learning helps foster students' autonomous learning by minimizing external pressure and offering ample choices. Thus, students feel in control of their actions and learning when they have the opportunity to choose from a number of sources (Reeve, 2002). However, an environment that offers many choices without guidance and clear expectations may create overwhelmed students who are only able to acquire superficial knowledge and may lose direction and focus on the internet. Therefore, providing structure, including providing clear goals and expectations, plays a crucial role in creating an optimal blended learning environment. Reeve (2002) furthered this idea and emphasized that structure has to be offered in an autonomy-supportive manner to foster student motivation and engagement. Similarly, research by Loon, et al., (2012) found that blended learning environments that combined autonomy support and structure had a positive influence both on students' intrinsic motivation and performance.   Although blended learning is an effective method that enhances foreign language learners' motivation and learning, there are several barriers and challenges that impact the implementation of blended learning. These barriers include teachers' resistance, students' reluctance to move from a passive to an active student role, insufficient pedagogical and technical support, absence of a clear institutional policy and strategic plan, and appropriate leadership to support and sustain blended learning initiatives (COHERE, 2010). Teachers should beware that adding technology into the learning process without a plan, knowledge of the character of technology, and whether it is suitable for students' needs might make the learning process more complicated. As Zhao (2005) indicates "Traditional conceptualization of technology uses in second language learning has a number of problems that have limited the impact of technology on second language acquisition" (p. 4). Therefore, teachers and students need to know and understand their role in the blended learning environment in order to reach effective and meaningful learning.

V. Conclusion

Taking from the idea of SDT that positive outcomes, resulting from autonomy, lead to intrinsic motivation and hence, more successful language learning experience; it has been shown how the use of technology through blended learning can help to achieve this goal. The unique construction of blended learning provides foreign language learners with great opportunities for more active and deeper learning. The flexibility of blended learning allows learners to access content any time from any place and fosters autonomous learning. Blended learning also motivates students to collaboratively construct knowledge and develop language skills.

Meeting the essential needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness and fostering intrinsic motivation in foreign language learners can be effectively and efficiently accomplished through blended learning. However, the success of using blended learning

for enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and language skills largely depends on teachers' support and guidance. They also need to effectively facilitate students' learning processes and support social interaction.

Blended learning is not simply an addition that increases educational expenses. It symbolizes a restructuring of class contact hours with the goal to enhance engagement and develop language skills through extending access to Internet-based learning opportunities (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Moreover, the success of blended learning relies on students' abilities to use technology in academic settings. Many American students use technology at home, but this is not true for students in other countries. Teachers need to be aware of how familiar students are with technology as well as their level of expertise. More attention may need to be paid to students who are not as familiar with the type of technology that is used in a blended learning environment. Overall, if these few problems can be resolved, a blended learning environment can help enhance students' motivation to develop their language skills.

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