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# Language Learners : Their Feelings And Behaviours

SOH KAY CHENG

Teachers know only too well that pupils who are motivated learn better. For effective language learning, the importance of motivation is highlighted by Gardner (1985, p.85) when he says, "The prime determining factor in language learning success is motivation." More recently, Gardner (1990) proposes that there are four broad categories of variables associated with language acquisition, namely, affective, cognitive, pedagogical and environmental variables. It is obvious that motivation and attitude fall into the first of these categories. Notwithstanding the debate on the validity of Gardner's socio-educational theory of second language learning (Au, 1988; Gardner, 1988), there is no denying the vital role of motivation in language learning. And, in the classroom context, Hart (1981) identified five dimensions of motivation to learn: **preference for challenge** (vs. preference for easy work), **curiosity and interest** (vs. teacher approval), **independent mastery attempts** (vs. dependence on the teacher), **independent judgement** (vs. reliance on the teacher's judgement), and **internal criteria** (vs. external criteria) for success or failure. Of late, the need to think of and measure language motivation in a more **psychological** manner has been pointed out by Crookes and Schmidt (1991).

*What, in more specific terms, does it mean to be **motivated**, using 'classroom language' that is meaningful to both the teacher and her pupils? Or, how do motivated pupils feel and behave in connection with, say, the learning of English? In the more specialized domain of reading, a recent study of Grades 1 through 11 pupils (Wasson, Beare, & Wasson, 1990), good readers were found to attend to instructional tasks and volunteer to verbally participate more frequently than poor readers, although no difference was found for starting work, having necessary materials, making unacceptable noise and contact with others, and being out of place. These corroborate with findings of earlier studies (Bristow, 1985; Grambrell, Wilson, & Gantt, 1981; Swanson, 1984).*

Four classes of Grade 5 pupils (N=123) from a school with a strong Chinese tradition located in a densely populated public housing estate completed a questionnaire which asked them how they feel and what they normally do in relation to learning English. Among these pupils, 55 (44.7%) were in Band 1 and the other 68 (55.3%) in Bands 2-4 in the last English examination. Their responses to the 30 items depicting feelings and behaviours in connection with learning the language were compared and the results are shown in Table 1.

From the responses to the **feelings** items, the good English language learners tend to:

- Enjoy showing classmates how to write difficult words.
- Like to help classmates learn language.
- Like to try difficult questions which classmates cannot answer
- Like to do corrections for homework.
- Like teachers talking about homework.
- Still enjoy doing homework even if it is difficult.
- Like to read story books.
- Like to open books when seeing them.
- Like to know words on signboards.
- Like to try different ways of writing words.
- Like answering questions in class to practise the language.

The pupils' responses to the **behavioral** items show that the good English language learners claim to:

Listen carefully when the teacher tells them something about words.

- Listen carefully when the teacher tells them about mistakes:
- volunteer to answer questions during lessons.
- Keep trying difficult words until they can write them correctly.
- Practise difficult words so as to be able to 'say' them correctly.
- Study hard to get good marks for homework.
- Sometimes write their own stories for fun.
- Listen carefully in class – in order not to miss anything the teacher is teaching.

For teachers to improve pupils' English, it is worth considering **training** (though this sounds rather out-dated, today) the weaker language learners to feel and behave like the good language learners do, thus:

- Engage them in challenging yet conquerable language learning tasks,
- Provide them with frequent and clear judgements,
- Induce and satisfy their curiosity in some aspects of the language,
- Help them in target-setting and, above all,
- Ensure mastery through careful gradation of the learning tasks.

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**Table 1. Feelings and Behaviours of Pupils with High and Low English Performance**

Feelings/Behaviours		High	Low	X <sup>2</sup>
<i>Feelings</i>				
1	I enjoy showing my classmates how to write difficult English words.	75.4	47.7	10.95*
2	In English lessons, when my classmates cannot answer difficult questions, I like to try them.	82.5	52.3	13.70*
3	I like to do my English homework because it makes me work hard.	87.7	79.6	1.62
4	Even if my English homework is difficult, I still enjoy doing it.	82.1	65.9	4.50*
5	I like to know how English words are made up.	89.5	83.0	1.19
6	I like to try different ways of writing English/English words.	70.2	70.5	0.00
7	When I see books in English, I like to open them and take a look.	94.7	81.8	5.07*

	Feelings/Behaviours	High	Low	X <sup>2</sup>
8	When I see English words on signboards, I like to know how to read them and what they mean.	89.5	70.5	7.28*
	I like answering questions in English class, so that I can practise the language.	77.2	50.0	10.72*
10	I am keen to know the results of my English homework.	94.7	90.9	0.73
11	I like to compare my English test results with my classmates.	82.5	70.5	2.67
12	If I have made mistakes in my English homework, I like to do corrections.	86.0	56.8	13.59*
13	I like my English teacher talking to me about my English homework.	79.0	58.6	6.40*
14	When I get good results for my English tests, I am very happy.	96.5	93.2	0.73
15	I like my English test papers or homework put up for the class to see.	70.2	55.7	3.07
16	I like to do well in my English to please my teacher.	68.4	74.7	0.68
17	I like to do my English well; this will make my parents happy.	93.0	85.2	2.01
18	I like to help my classmates learn English.	82.5	63.6	5.96*
19	When I am free, I like to read English/English story books.	93.0	71.6	9.89*

Feelings/Behaviours		High	Low	X <sup>2</sup>
<i>Behaviours</i>				
1	Even if I get a good mark for my English test, I will still work hard next time.	94.7	94.3	0.01
2	When the teacher tells us something about English words, I listen carefully.	96.5	78.4	9.13*
3	I listen carefully in the English class, because I do not want to miss anything the teacher is teaching us.	94.5	72.4	13.49*
4	Some English words are difficult to write, but I keep trying until I can write them correctly.	87.5	71.6	5.01*
5	When I see English words which I don't understand, I will ask someone to teach me.	87.7	79.6	1.62
6	If an English word is difficult to read, I'll practise it so that I can 'say' it correctly.	91.2	73.9	6.69*
7	When my English teacher tells me about my mistakes, I listen carefully.	89.5	75.0	4.65*
8	I study hard to get good marks for my English homework.	93.0	80.7	4.23*
9	In English lessons, I volunteer to answer questions.	77.2	59.1	5.07*
10	I sometimes write my own stories in English for fun.	68.4	50.0	4.80*
11	I study for English tests even before the teacher tells us to do so.	75.4	71.6	0.26