



SHEIKHBAHAE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**The RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS'
PERCEPTIONS OF EFL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND
THEIR MOTIVATION TO LEARN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

DEDICATION

To My Dear Parents

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who gave me support and opportunities to complete this thesis.

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Abstract

The present study, using quantitative methodology, sought to explore the perceptions of students at Iranian institutes concerning their EFL learning environment in three aspects: the physical environment, instructional arrangements, and social interaction. The study also examined the relationship between the learning context and students' motivation. The students were given two survey tools, namely, Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery and the California Foreign Language Project and related literature. Respondents rated the importance of the overall environment factors ($M = 3.39$) as higher than the students perceived factors actually being in existence ($M = 2.84$) in their EFL environment. There was also a positive relationship between motivation and overall learning. The findings revealed that the EFL environment in the three aspects was considered by students to be an obstacle to their learning, and that student motivation positively correlated with the learning environment.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Chapter one

Introduction

1.1. Overview

“Motivation represents one of the most appealing, yet complex, variables used to explain individual differences in language learning” (MacIntyre et al. 2001, p. 462). These words succinctly describe the multifaceted issue that researchers, classroom instructors and language learners themselves have faced since Gardner and Lambert brought to light the complexities of motivation via their studies in the late 1950’s. The number of factors involved in motivating persons to acquire a foreign language has increased tremendously during the past four decades. The author will therefore attempt to present a limited overview of motivation, supporting research from both inside and outside of the classroom and views challenging its validity.

Prior to exploring motivation and its function in language acquisition, one must first understand the term in its general sense. MacIntyre et al. defined motivation as “an attribute of the individual describing the psychological qualities underlying behavior with respect to a particular task” (2001, p. 463). This goal-directed behavior shows itself through distinct actions of the motivated individual. Dornyei described this explicitly when he wrote the following:

The motivated individual expends effort, is persistent and attentive to the task at hand, has goals, desires and aspirations, enjoys the activity, experiences reinforcement from success and disappointment from failure, makes attributions concerning success and or failure, is aroused, and makes use of strategies to aid in achieving goals (2003, p. 173).

This statement portrays motivation as primarily being internally driven; however, there are also external forces that play a role. Gardner (1996) believed that motivation should be viewed as a hybrid concept, “an internal attribute that is the result of an external force” (as cited in MacIntyre et al. 2001, p. 463). Early motivation research addressed human behaviors other than language learning; recently, the significance of its role in language acquisition has also been realized.

Dornyei (2001) asserts, “A great deal of empirical research during this period [the 1980’s] was directed at measuring the association between various aspects of motivation and L2 language achievement. The emerging body of research studies established motivation as a principal determinant of second language acquisition...” (p. 43). The research Dornyei is referring to is the work of Gardner, who defined motivation with respect to language acquisition as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (1985, p. 10). Gardner added, “Individuals who are truly motivated not only strive to learn the material but also seek out situations where they can obtain further practice” (1985, p. 50). The challenge is to examine what drives this motivation. The first area to investigate is the brain and its processes.

In recent years, John Schumann has been examining second language acquisition from a neurobiological perspective in order to integrate the findings of neuroscience with those of linguistics (Dornyei 2001). Schumann's theory, known as stimulus appraisal, occurs in the brain along five dimensions: novelty, pleasantness, goal/need significance, coping potential and self and social image (cited in Dornyei 2001). Though this concept can pertain to any human action, it serves as the foundation for a language learning theory Schumann calls "mental foraging, or foraging for knowledge, which engages the same neural systems as the ones used by organisms when foraging to feed or mate, and which is generated by an incentive motive and potentiated by the stimulus appraisal system" (Dornyei 2001, pp. 46-47). This notion may seem questionable at first, but it is rooted in proven brain processes. Schumann clarified this when he wrote:

Learning and foraging may share the same neural mechanisms because both processes involve translating an incentive motive or goal into relevant motor activity in order to achieve said goal. In addition, both processes are guided by dopamine, which serves to signal stimuli that are predictive of award, to focus attention on those stimuli and to maintain goal-directed behavior by providing "go" signals. Finally, the dopamine response results from stimulus appraisals that evaluate the stimuli according to whether they are novel, pleasant, and compatible with the individuals goals, coping potential, and self and social image (2001, p. 23).

The most important and well-researched components of internally driven motivation fall under the broad category of self-determination, which includes the

concepts of integrative, intrinsic and instrumental motivation. Gardner (1985) wrote, “An integrative orientation refers to that class of reasons that suggest that the individual is learning a second language in order to learn about, interact with or become closer to the second language community” (p. 54). This fosters a feeling of belongingness to the target language group as the language learner develops “some sort of a psychological and emotional identification” to the native speaking community (Dornyei 2003, p. 5). Dornyei expanded on this idea nearly 20 years after Gardner when he reported:

Integrative motivational orientation concerns a positive interpersonal/affective disposition toward the L2 group and the desire to interact with and even become similar to valued members of that community. It implies an openness to, and a respect for, other cultural groups and ways of life (2003, p. 5).

The question is how exactly does this integrative desire promote language learning? As early as 1972, Gardner and Lambert proposed that “An integrative and friendly outlook towards the other group whose language is being learnt can differentially sensitize the learner to the audio-lingual features of the language, making him more perceptive to forms of pronunciation and accent” (p. 134). Masgoret et al. stated that “learning a second language requires the adoption of word sounds, pronunciations, word orders, and other behavioral and cognitive features that are part of another culture. Individuals who want to identify with the other language group will be more motivated to learn the language than individuals who do not” (2003, p. 172). This explains why immigrants who arrive in a country against their will because of war or political problems often do not show the same rate of language acquisition as their fellow countrymen who voluntarily left their

homeland. However, even in negative situations like incarceration abroad, if the desire to integrate with the surrounding people is strong enough, language acquisition will occur.

Instrumental motivation is the next major type of self-determined motivation. Gardner wrote that persons who acquire languages through instrumental motivation are seeking "...a goal that doesn't seem to involve any identification or feeling of closeness with the other language group, but instead focus on a more practical purpose [that] learning the language would serve for the individual" (2001, p. 10). Such motivation could be considered by some to be learning a target language simply to get ahead in society. Gardner and Lambert wrote, "...a person prepares to learn a code in order to derive benefits from a non-interpersonal sort" and their language skills develop as a "desire to gain social recognition or economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language" (1972, p. 14).

Nowadays, there is no doubt that motivation plays an important part in foreign language learning. It is logical in second language learning to claim that a learner will be successful with the proper motivation. Defiantly, both integrative and instrumental orientations are important depending on certain contexts.

For most psycholinguists, either in a language learning situation or in a second language acquisition context, the importance of the learner's attitudes and motivation plays a major role. A quick look at the major theories of language acquisition will suffice to demonstrate this.

Krashen's monitor model considers attitudes and motivation most influential in unconscious language acquisition; the learner's motivational level acts as an affective filter on language intake (Krashen 1981:102). In *Carroll's conscious reinforcement model* (1981), language learning begins when the learner feels motivated to communicate something to someone. Reinforcement takes place when the desired end is obtained. In *Bialystok's strategy model* (1978), it can be assumed that learners will seek language exposure only if they feel motivated. Thus, using their explicit and/or implicit knowledge, communication will take place. *Lambert's social psychology model* (1974) is more explicit than Bialystok's. He establishes causal links between attitudes, orientation and motivation, and proficiency in L2. That is, learners' achievement largely depends on their attitudinal and motivational state. *Schumann's acculturation model* (1978), though concerned solely with natural second language acquisition situations, also considers that affective and personal factors are highly relevant. The "acculturation" of learners, that is, their social integration, only takes place under certain social, affective, attitudinal and motivational conditions: low language shock, ego permeability, positive group attitudes, cohesiveness, etc. Some of these factors are also very influential in *Gardner's socio-educational model* (1985), which considers the learner's intelligence, aptitude, motivation and attitudes, and social anxiety as factors which determine the learner's outcome. Whereas *intelligence* and *aptitude* for languages play a primary role in formal language situations, their influence in informal language experiences Gardner considers being secondary. Nevertheless, *attitudes* and *motivation* as well as situational anxiety play a primary role both in language learning situations and in second language acquisition contexts. So, it seems obvious to conclude that attitudes and motivation are the most important determinant factors in the learning or acquisition of second languages.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

English in Iran, just like in the majority of countries in Asia, is treated as a subject for study rather than as a living language to be spoken in daily conversation. Therefore, the EFL classroom context is very different from a natural ESL learning environment. Lack of a surrounding community of English speakers outside the classroom increases the challenge for EFL instructors (Parker, 1995). Pèrez (2004) claimed that the opportunity for communication in authentic situations and settings is a major factor for second-language acquisition by adults. Another important determinant of language learning achievement is motivation (Dornyei, 1994). Chang and Shu (2000) also claimed that there is a positive relationship between the learning environment and student motivation, stating that a good learning environment helps to improve the learning outcomes, and inspires and boosts the learning spirit.

The issue of motivation, particularly in EFL settings, is so important that other considerations about teaching methodology seem to pale in comparison. It is important to think about motivation as the essence of language teaching. Because igniting and sustaining a source of positive energy is so vital to ultimate success, everything the teacher does in the language classroom has two goals. One is, of course, to further language development, and the other is to generate motivation for continued learning. Much of the research on motivation has confirmed the fundamental principle of causality: motivation affects effort, effort affects results and positive results lead to an increase in ability. What this suggests, of course, is that by improving students' motivation we are actually amplifying their ability in the language and fueling their ability to learn.

On the other hand, there is also no doubt that students' motivation is highly affected by the environment surrounding them. Chang (1999) and Dornyei (1990) also found second-language motivation strongly tied to the context or where the language is learned. Labrie and Clement (1986) did support the assumption that low learning proficiency is the result of the lack of a true immersion or an authentic environment. Hsieh (2002) claimed that there is a positive relationship between the learning environment and student motivation.

As it was mentioned above, motivation has been considered to be one of major factors in language learning, emphasized by both psychologist and linguistics. Motivation is not just limited to the area of language learning. It can be said that it plays an important part in any kinds of learning. On the other hand, one of factors in enhancing students' motivation is the learning environment. An existence of a good learning environment helps teachers enhance their students' motivation. In other words, students will never be highly motivated unless their learning environment meets their needs and expectations.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that motivation and the learning environment have both been emphasized, not enough attention is paid to these two facts. It is believed that students are not highly motivated by themselves, and it is also believed that they can not be satisfyingly become motivated by their learning environment regarding physical, social and instructional aspects. On the part of students themselves, most students are probably forced by their parents to enroll in English classes or they consider English a pastime. On the part of their learning environment students' needs and wants have never been superior to curricula, benefits and limitations. Due to certain reasons, such as lack of enough budgets and investments, or scientific investigations, the learning

environment lacks many factors which affect positively students' motivation, including physical, social, and instructional factors. The present research aims to show to what extent Iranian students are motivated, and to what extent they consider their learning environment as an obstacle or a motive.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Since motivation and the learning environment are inextricably interwoven, it is worthwhile attempting to improve the learning environment, to the extent; it can be satisfactory and meet students' needs and expectations. The present study tries to highlight the effect of the learning environment and consequently its effects on students' motivation. In recent years, with growth of English and its wide application in all fields of science and technology around the world, efforts have been made to provide students with a better learning environment and facilities in order to contribute to the ease of learning.

The state of English in Iran is not so much different with the rest of the world. With growth of science and technology in recent years, there has been an increase in number of English institutes. Due to this competitive atmosphere, every institute tries to do its best in order get its students satisfied with educational facilities. How over, due to lack of enough investment, budget, and scientific investigation, the efforts have not been as much as they should be, or if any, they have mostly been for the benefit of institutional investors, regardless of students' needs and expectations.

The present study aims to stress the need for constant vigilance of students' likes and dislikes. It sets to draw a distinction between existence and importance; the existence of the things which have already existed and the

importance of the things which should exist. The results of the study can have implications for institutional investors and teachers. First, it gives institutional investors and managers insights into taking students' needs into account. Second, it has implications for teachers to pay more attention to students' feelings, likes, and dislikes in their classes.

1.4. Research Questions

This research study intends to explore how much students are motivated and to what extent they perceive the learning environment. It tries to find answers to the following questions:

- 1) Is there any relationship between students' motivation and the learning environment?
- 2) Is the overall learning environment perceived by the students as an obstacle or incentive to their motivation?

1.5. Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no relationship between students' motivation and the learning environment.

H₀₂: The overall learning environment is perceived by students not to be an obstacle to their motivation.

1.6. Definitions of Key Terms

1.6.1. Motivation

- Motivation is defined as the impetus to create and sustain intentions and goal seeking acts (Ames& Ames, 1989).
- Oxford and Shearin (1984) defined motivation as a desire to achieve a goal combined with the energy to work toward the goal.

1.6.2. Learning Environment

Based on the definition by Newsworthy, and Greer (1978), the learning environment has five dimensions:

1. *Physical environment*, architecture, design, and arrangement considerations for the school and particularly the instructional space.
2. *Instructional arrangements*, curriculum content and characteristics, teaching method, and materials and media for instruction.
3. *Social situation*, teacher-child, child-child, interactions, group dynamics, classroom, school, and community social aspects.
4. *Evaluation instruments and evaluative practices*, placement, summative, and formative devices and procedures used by school psychologists and others.
5. *Supportive services*, in-school (health, speech, counseling) and out-of-school (employment counseling, follow-up) facilities (p. 11).