

Innovation and Practice of College English Teaching under the Theory of Second Language Motivation

Chuanmei Lin

Tianjin University of Finance and Economics Pearl River College, Tianjin, 301811, China

ABSTRACT

Driven by the internationalization of higher education and the Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020 Edition), college students' English learning has shifted from previous "exam-oriented compliance" to a focus on "competence improvement". As a result, second language motivation has become a key variable influencing the sustainability and effectiveness of students' English learning. Based on the theory of second language motivation, this article elaborates on its significance in the reform of college English teaching from four perspectives. It analyzes the reasons for the lack of students' motivation in English learning and proposes strategies to stimulate their motivation. The aim is to achieve an ecological reconstruction of college English teaching centered on the activation of learner motivation.

KEYWORDS

Theory of second language motivation; Colleges and universities; English teaching

1 Introduction

Having undergone continuous improvement across four stages: the social-psychological foundation period, the cognitive-situational expansion period, the process-dynamic focus period, and the social-dynamic integration period, the theory of second language motivation has provided substantial theoretical foundations for the innovation and practice of college English teaching. The research on the innovation and practice of college English teaching based on the theory of second language motivation provides reference for promoting the transformation of English teaching from instrumental-driven to integrative development.

2 The Key to Teaching Innovation: Four Core Insights of the Theory Empowering College English Teaching Innovation

2.1 Reshape the Core Anchor of Learning Value

In the past, college English teaching largely relied on extrinsic instrumental motivations, such as final examinations, to stimulate students' learning enthusiasm. Although this approach may encourage students to focus primarily on grades in the short term, it may undermine their intrinsic motivation in the long term. Consequently, students may develop limited intrinsic interest in the English language, its culture, and cross-cultural communication. In contrast, the application of second language motivation theory highlights for students the deeper significance of learning English. Therefore, the reform of college English teaching should seek to integrate integrative motivation—students' acceptance of and interest in English learning—with instrumental motivations, including their visions of future professional development and their academic identity development. It is essential to transform extrinsic instrumental motivations into intrinsic learning drive in order to enhance students' autonomy and persistence in English learning ^[1].

2.2 Activate Students' Subjective Power

Traditional college English teaching is largely teacher-centered, which often leaves students lacking the ability and habit of learning English independently and thus seriously hinders their initiative and creativity in English learning ^[2]. In contrast, second language motivation theory emphasizes the central role of students, suggesting that the college English teaching system should devolve greater control of learning to students and establish a learning environment that actively supports their autonomous learning. In terms of learning content, students can select English learning materials within a certain scope on their own, such as watching English films. This approach can effectively activate students' agency in learning and thereby improve learning outcomes.

2.3 Build a Learning Community of Affective Support

Second language motivation theory holds that learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but also a process

of emotional communication and interaction. This theory emphasizes the importance of building a classroom learning community with a strong sense of belonging and encourages teachers to stimulate students' enthusiasm for English learning through well-designed activities such as group research projects, peer tutoring, and collective presentations of learning achievements. At the same time, teachers should consciously demonstrate care and respect for students during classroom interactions, create a psychologically safe classroom atmosphere that encourages participation, and effectively reduce the psychological distance between teachers and students. In this way, students can learn English in a positive affective environment, enhance their learning enthusiasm and initiative, and ultimately achieve the teaching ideal that "students trust their teacher's way when they are close to them" ^[3].

3 The Dilemma of Demotivation: A Realistic Review and Root Cause Analysis of the College English Teaching Innovation

In the current reform of college English teaching, structural dilemmas still exist, mainly reflected in two core problems. Specifically, exam-oriented education squeezes the space for ability development, and disciplinary barriers inhibit the diversity of motivations. These factors are not conducive to stimulating students' instrumental, integrative, cultural, and other intrinsic learning motivations, thereby affecting the persistence and effectiveness of their English learning.

Firstly, exam-oriented education limits the space for ability development. In current college English teaching, the trend of teaching primarily for examinations significantly deviates from the essence of language learning, exerting a severe negative impact on the cultivation of students' comprehensive English abilities ^[4]. English teaching in many colleges and universities relies heavily on various examinations, including CET-4 and CET-6, and devotes substantial effort to teaching exam skills and exam-focused knowledge, such as strategies for quickly reading an article and effectively applying writing templates. Such a teaching approach confines students' motivation for English learning to passing examinations, causing them to lose the motivation to continue learning once the goal is achieved. Moreover, the exam-oriented teaching model intensifies competition among students, which is not conducive to the development of students' cross-cultural communication competence. As a result, the improvement of students' comprehensive English abilities is restricted, college English teaching falls into a vicious cycle, students' learning motivation continues to decline, and the societal demand for English-proficient talents cannot be met.

Secondly, disciplinary barriers inhibit the diversity of learning motivations. In college English teaching, such barriers have become a key factor restricting the range of students' learning motivations. Within the current college curriculum system, there are clear boundaries between English and other disciplines, which prevent students from fully perceiving the practicality and value of English learning. For example, business English courses in colleges and universities are often disconnected from practical job requirements, such as cross-border e-commerce and international marketing, and fail to meet students' personalized needs to acquire professional knowledge through English. Similarly, the connection between English teaching and other disciplines, such as literature, history, and philosophy, is weak, preventing students from gaining disciplinary knowledge and cultural insights through English learning. These disciplinary barriers result in fragmented knowledge structures and uneven competence development among students, making it difficult for them to recognize the intrinsic value of English during the learning process and, consequently, failing to generate diverse and in-depth learning motivations ^[5].

4 Teaching Innovation Paths: Reconstruction of Teaching Ecology Centered on Motivation Activation

4.1 Multi-Layered Design of Objectives

In college English teaching, students vary greatly in their English proficiency, learning abilities, and learning objectives. A multi-layered design of learning objectives allows each student to study within their zone of proximal development, thereby enhancing their learning enthusiasm and initiative and achieving the goal of stimulating students' motivation for English learning.

For students at the basic level with limited English proficiency, teachers should place great emphasis on consolidating and accumulating foundational knowledge and formulate learning plans that gradually improve students' proficiency, beginning with basic grammar and vocabulary. For example, in listening practice, teachers can guide students to adapt to different speech rates and a variety of expressions to enhance their language comprehension. At the same time, teachers can incorporate authentic materials, such as interview recordings or movie clips, to help students experience how English is used in different contexts and situations. This approach allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of the language, thereby laying a solid foundation for their productive language skills.

For students at the intermediate level with a certain foundation in English, teachers can set the improvement of students' English language application ability as the teaching goal and provide training in English expression and

thinking through activities such as short essay writing, topic discussions, and public speaking. Teachers can also guide students to read simple English materials, such as basic news reports, to expand their English knowledge and broaden their horizons, thereby deepening students' understanding of the long-term value of English learning and stimulating their motivation. In addition, teachers should provide appropriate guidance and support to help students manage anxiety and other negative emotions that may arise during autonomous English learning^[6].

For students at the advanced level with high English proficiency, teachers can design industry-specific English modules based on students' majors, such as clinical medical English or mechanical engineering English, to enhance their English application ability within professional contexts. For instance, teachers can introduce English literature, case studies, and professional reports, and organize in-depth reading and analysis activities, thereby cultivating students' ability to accurately comprehend and appropriately use English in specific professional scenarios. Additionally, teachers can organize activities such as mock professional meetings, requiring students to communicate in English, which improves oral expression and adaptability in professional communication, stimulates application-oriented learning motivation, and gradually enhances students' self-efficacy in English learning.

4.2 Optimization of Curriculum Ecology

It is crucial to break the monotonous and low-vitality model of traditional college English teaching and to create a diversified, open, and dynamic curriculum ecology.

Modular courses should be designed, with English courses divided into basic modules such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing; expansion modules such as cross-cultural communication; and professional modules, including subject-specific English. Students can then select courses based on their own interests and career plans. For example, students majoring in ideological and political education can freely choose from expansion modules, such as political and diplomatic English, according to their individual needs.

Interdisciplinary mechanisms should be incorporated. Colleges and universities can establish interdisciplinary teaching teams consisting of English teachers and subject-matter teachers to jointly conduct interdisciplinary teaching activities. When teaching English literature for specialized courses, subject-matter teachers explain professional knowledge, while English teachers elaborate on English grammatical structures and terminology^[7]. This cooperative teaching model helps to form a positive teacher-student relationship and enables students to recognize the role of English in professional fields, thereby stimulating their learning enthusiasm and improving the effectiveness of language learning. Additionally, students can be encouraged to participate in interdisciplinary English competitions and projects to enhance their English proficiency, broaden their horizons, and further stimulate their motivation for English learning.

Digital resources should be integrated. In the digital age, college English teaching should actively incorporate various digital resources to enhance teaching effectiveness and students' learning experiences. Colleges and universities can introduce online English learning platforms, such as MOOCs, and select a variety of resources, including English listening materials and oral courses, from these platforms. This process of independent selection gives students a sense of control over their English learning, thereby stimulating their motivation to study English.

4.3 Innovation of Teaching Models

Innovation in teaching models is an important aspect of the development of college English education, as it can break the constraints of traditional teaching and provide students with a new learning experience.

Upgrade of blended teaching. The enhancement of blended teaching represents a key direction for the innovation of college English teaching models. On the one hand, advanced online teaching platforms and tools, such as virtual simulation laboratories, can provide students with a more engaging English learning environment. Through virtual role-playing and other interactive activities, students can receive comprehensive training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, thereby improving their English application ability and enhancing their cross-cultural communication competence. On the other hand, the interactivity of offline classes should be strengthened, with methods such as group discussions adopted to improve students' self-efficacy in English learning.

Implementation of personalized teaching. Teachers can utilize big data technology to conduct in-depth analyses of students' English learning data, understand their English foundations and weaknesses, and then formulate appropriate learning plans and content for them. For students primarily motivated by instrumental goals, teachers should guide them to link their English learning objectives with career development plans and help them recognize the importance and practicality of English learning for their future careers. For students primarily motivated by integrative goals, activities such as English drama performances can be organized to create a favorable learning atmosphere, allowing students to experience the charm of English culture in a relaxed and enjoyable environment and reducing learning anxiety. For students with weak motivation, teachers can gradually build their confidence in English learning by setting phased small goals and providing timely feedback and encouragement.

Empowerment through situational practice. Teachers can create diverse English scenarios for students, such as business negotiations and English drama performances. For example, in a simulated business negotiation scenario, students can assume roles such as buyers, sellers, and business consultants, and discuss contract terms and other content in English. Through participation, students can experience a sense of achievement in language learning, internalize and apply the language, and improve their learning motivation^[8]. Moreover, technologies such as virtual reality can be used to create authentic English scenarios, while teachers focus on emotional guidance, in-depth thinking, and value shaping in English teaching, enabling students to gain a positive English learning experience.

5 Conclusion

Against the backdrop of globalization and the integration of digital technologies, college English teaching should not regard language merely as a communication tool. Instead, it should be grounded in second language motivation theory to cultivate students' cross-cultural communication competence, professional application skills, and awareness of sustainable autonomous learning, thereby fostering interdisciplinary talents capable of adapting to China's opening-up and high-quality development.

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