



Motivation and Beliefs of Successful Learners.

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Abstract

Previous studies of both motivation and learner beliefs have shown their importance in learning, indicating their influence on learners' behaviors and learning outcomes. The aim of this study is to investigate the differences between high and low proficiency learners in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses in terms of their motivation and beliefs about language learning.

Forty-four undergraduate students of various majors at a university in Japan completed questionnaires on motivation and beliefs. The sample consisted of twenty-six students with high proficiency and eighteen students with low proficiency, as measured by their English placement test scores.

A comparison of the two groups in light of motivation and learner beliefs revealed remarkable differences between the groups. High proficiency students showed a greater range of motivations and higher intrinsic motivations. In addition, they were more likely to agree with the learner beliefs reflecting self-efficacy for EFL.

1. Introduction

As summarized by Dörnyei (2005), researchers in the field of psychology have been trying to achieve two different and somewhat contradictory objectives: to understand the general principles of the human mind and to explore the uniqueness of the individual mind. An independent subdiscipline within the field has emerged from the latter orientation, and has traditionally been termed 'differential psychology'. Today this discipline is often referred to as 'individual difference research'.

Individual differences are, in the broadest sense, any personal characteristic that marks a person as a unique human being. All scientific definitions of individual differences, however, have a narrower sense and assume the relevance of stability (Dörnyei: 2005, 2009). In other words, differential psychology focuses only on the individual features that exhibit continuity over time. Besides, it focuses on the idiosyncrasies (a) that are applicable to everyone and (b) that discriminate among people (Snow, Corno, &

Jackson, 1996). Thus, most physical differences such as foot size and eye color are apparently of little or no relevance determinants of behavior, whereas psychological differences such as personality appears to play a major role in influencing our behavior, as suggested by Eysenck (1994).

The importance of individual differences has been widely recognized in educational contexts based on the assumption that learning is most effective when differences in personality, motivation, and various cognitive abilities are taken into account. Much of the previous research on individual differences conducted in educational psychology focused on how to adapt instruction to the strengths, weaknesses, and preferences of the learners. Also in second/foreign language (L2) research, individual differences have been examined extensively because there is a wide variation among language learners in terms of their ultimate success in mastering a second or foreign language.

What are the most important individual differences in language education? According to Dörnyei (2005), personality, ability/aptitude, motivation, learning styles and language learning strategies are core learner variables. On the other hand, he suggests that anxiety, self-esteem, creativity, willingness to communicate (WTC), and learner beliefs are unlikely to be considered core individual differences partly because further research is still required to clarify their nature and roles in language learning. These learner variables, whether major or minor, have been reported to have an impact on learning processes and learning outcomes.

1.1 Motivation

Motivation refers to the driving force in any situation. In L2 research, it is usually understood to refer to “the desire to initiate L2 learning and the effort employed to sustain it” (Ortega, 2014: 189). It is now well established from a variety of studies that motivation is one of the most important factors that influence the pace and success of L2 learning.

Many theories, models or frameworks concerning motivation have been proposed since the 1960s. Dörnyei (2005) summarized the history of motivation into three stages: the social psychological, the cognitive-situated, and the process-oriented periods. The social psychological period, which lasted from 1959 to 1990, was characterized by the work of Canadian researchers Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert who were interested in understanding the unique Canadian social situation where Anglophone and Francophone communities coexist. Much of the literature in this period adopted a social psychological approach that was based on the main idea that “students’ attitudes toward the specific language group are bound to influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of that language” (Gardner, 1985, p.6). The Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), devised by Gardner in 1985, contains over 130 items and allows for researchers to quantify overall amount of motivation. For any given item or statement in the test, what is known as a Likert scale is offered and respondents choose on a seven-point continuum from ‘strongly agree’ (which gets scored as a seven) to ‘strongly disagree’ (which gets scored as a one). This test is a useful self-report instrument and it has been adapted for many

learning contexts all over the world.

Next came the cognitive-situated period in the mid-1990s after three critical reviews by Crookes and Schmidt (1991), Dörnyei (1994), and Oxford and Shearin (1994). These studies incited much research into the various aspects of L2 classroom motivation components such as the teacher, the curriculum, and the learner group, inducing a trend to narrow down the broad view of Gardner and his associates' research which was useful to understand the motivational patterns of whole learning communities but insufficient to understand the motivational features of actual language classrooms. Also, a new instrument to measure motivation in terms of quality was devised: the Language Learning Orientation Scale (LLOS; Noels, et. al., 2000) based on the Gardnerian model and the well-known self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), which focuses on various types of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

The process-oriented period was initiated by the work of Dörnyei, Ushioda, and their colleagues in Europe around the millennium. The period is characterized by an interest in "dynamic character" and "temporal variation" of motivation (Dörnyei, 2005, p.83). The studies which adopt a process-oriented approach aim to account for the ongoing changes of motivation over time.

Overall, these studies highlight the need for investigating motivation in L2 research and education contexts. As Dörnyei (2005, p.65) notes, "without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and

good teaching enough on their own to ensure student achievement". It follows from what has been said that motivation plays a vital role in L2 teaching and learning and that researchers, teachers, and curriculum developers must understand when and how their students are motivated or demotivated and how successful learners differ from unsuccessful learners in terms of motivation.

1.2 Beliefs

According to a definition provided by Horwitz (1987, p. 120), beliefs about language learning are "opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning". For Victori & Lockhart (1995, p. 224), language learning beliefs are "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning." The first serious discussions and analyses of beliefs about language learning emerged during the 1980s and the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) devised by Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988) marked the beginning of systematic research on learner and teacher beliefs. The inventory consists of 34 self-report items and assesses learner beliefs in five major areas: 1. difficulty of language learning; 2. foreign language aptitude; 3. the nature of language learning; 4. learning and communication strategies; and 5. motivations and expectations.

The BALLI has been widely used for exploring language learning beliefs of various groups of learners and teachers all over the world. Some studies with BALLI revealed that some beliefs could be helpful while others

could be unbeneficial for language learners. For example, Toyama (2015) found that Japanese EFL learners who could control intonation and rhythm of their L2 English speech well and could get high scores on a speaking test tended to possess positive beliefs such as: I believe I can communicate well if my English pronunciation is good. Thus, it is essential for L2 researchers, teachers and curriculum developers to understand their learners' beliefs about language learning, since "insightful beliefs" held by successful learners have a "facilitative effect on learning" (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) while mistaken or negative beliefs may lead to a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995), and classroom anxiety (Hortwitz, et al., 1986).

2. Purpose of the study

The review of the literature suggests that both motivation and learner beliefs are of interest because they affect how people think, feel, act and learn. Learners need to have helpful motivation and beliefs so that they can improve their skills, deepen their knowledge and achieve their goals. Researchers, teachers, and curriculum developers need to understand the characteristics of their learners' motivation and beliefs in order to facilitate their learning.

The purpose of this paper is to show how students from high proficiency and low proficiency groups differ in terms of motivation and beliefs.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Forty-four undergraduates of various majors at a university in Japan completed

questionnaires on motivation and beliefs respectively. The sample consisted of twenty-six students with high proficiency and eighteen students with low proficiency, as measured by their English placement test scores at the beginning of their freshman year. Those with high proficiency were enrolled in advanced EFL courses while those with low proficiency were enrolled in intermediate EFL courses. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 22 years. Their majors varied, including law, journalism, French, and philosophy. They did not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

3.2. Questionnaires

The motivation scales used in this research was devised based on Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB; Gardner, 1985), and Ogawara (1997)'s study. It includes 24 items such as *I like studying English.* and *I want to make friends with English speakers* (See Appendix A). Some items were selected from AMTB and Ogawara's scale and used without any changes while others were partly modified and added to the present questionnaire. All items concern interest and desires EFL learners associate with the learning of their target language. Some items were modified to examine the participants' motivation for oral communication.

The questionnaire for beliefs was based on BALLI (Horwitz, 1988) and Toyama (2015). It includes 25 items to assess student opinions on EFL oral communication learning.

The questionnaires in this study uses a five point Likert-type scale to ask respondents how much they agree with each statement. Participants were asked to read each

statement and then to indicate a response ranging from 5 = "Strongly agree" to 1 = "Strongly disagree." All the items and response options are written in Japanese to avoid any problems Japanese EFL learners could encounter understanding them.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted with respect to the objectives set for this study. All analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21.0.

4. Results and discussion

The purpose of this paper is to show how students from high proficiency and low proficiency groups differ in terms of motivation and beliefs.

4.1. Motivation

As the sample size was small in this study, the generalizability of the results is subject to certain limitations. Having said that, it is important to note that high proficiency students (HPS) reported to agree with more statements indicating motivation for EFL than low proficiency students (LPS) did. There were 22 items (91.7%) with which over half of HPS reported to *strongly agree or moderately agree* (See Appendix B). In contrast, there were only 10 items (41.7%) with which over half of LPS reported to *strongly agree or moderately agree*. These results confirm the association between motivation and proficiency of EFL learners: the higher the proficiency in EFL, the more motivated to learn English from more directions.

For the moment, let us look closely at the items showing large difference in terms of

response options. Examining percentages of HPS and LPS who chose response options *strongly agree and moderately agree*, a difference above 30 % was found with the following statements:

- A) I want to be able to read books, research papers, or documents written in English. (40.4%)
- B) I'm interested in English speaking cultures and histories. (35.5%)
- C) I like studying English. (33.8%)
- D) It is enjoyable to pronounce English words and sentences. (33.1%)
- E) I want to be able to speak English and work in English speaking countries. (32.4%)

The point to observe is that these statements mirror intrinsic motivation for learning. Intrinsic motivation, which refers to "the innate energy that people demonstrate when they pursue a goal or an activity because it is interesting" (Koestner & Losier, 2002), enjoyable, or fulfilling, manifests as a strong desire to learn something, to seek challenges and to develop competence. It is clear that seek of challenges is represented in Statement A and E and that interests and enjoyment are reflected in Statement B, C, and D. These results show another important finding: there is a strong relationship between high proficiency and intrinsic motivation.

In view of all the response options from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree), independent t-tests were conducted to find out if there were any items in the motivation questionnaire showing a significant difference between high and low proficiency groups. As a result, the responses of HPS and LPS

significantly differ on the following items:

- I like studying English.
- I want to understand EFL learning materials completely.

Regarding the first item *I like studying English*, 100% of HPS reported to agree with the statement whereas only 82.4% of LPS did so ($t(42)=2.64, p<.05$). With the second item *I want to understand EFL learning materials completely*, 91.7% of HPS reported to agree while 70.6% of LPS did so ($t(42)=2.30, p<.05$).

If we now turn to extrinsic motivation, there is another interesting finding. The

responses to the statement *I take English classes because they are compulsory* revealed a contrary tendency compared with the statements reflecting intrinsic motivation. As Figure 1 shows, most HPS selected 2 = *moderately disagree* (46%) while most LPS selected 3 = *somewhat agree* (47%).

It is generally assumed that extrinsic motivation results from pressures, rewards, or approvals of outside force. This statement, *I take English classes because they are compulsory*, obviously mirrors extrinsic motivation or extrinsic regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). This is a typical example of extrinsically motivated behaviors that are performed to satisfy an external demand or reward. In other words, those who reported to agree with this statement were externally regulated. Those who reported to disagree with this statement, however, were not externally regulated to learn English or take English classes.

In sum, the results of this study suggests 1) that learners with high EFL proficiency have greater range of reasons to study English and pursuing a greater range of goals than those with low proficiency did, 2) that there is a strong relationship between high proficiency and intrinsic motivation, and 3) that low proficiency in EFL has to do with external regulation. All the results reported here are in agreement with previous studies indicating that motivational factors are potentially influential in successful L2 learning.

4.1. Beliefs

Let us now extend the observation into learner beliefs. Examining percentages of HPS and LPS who chose response options *strongly*

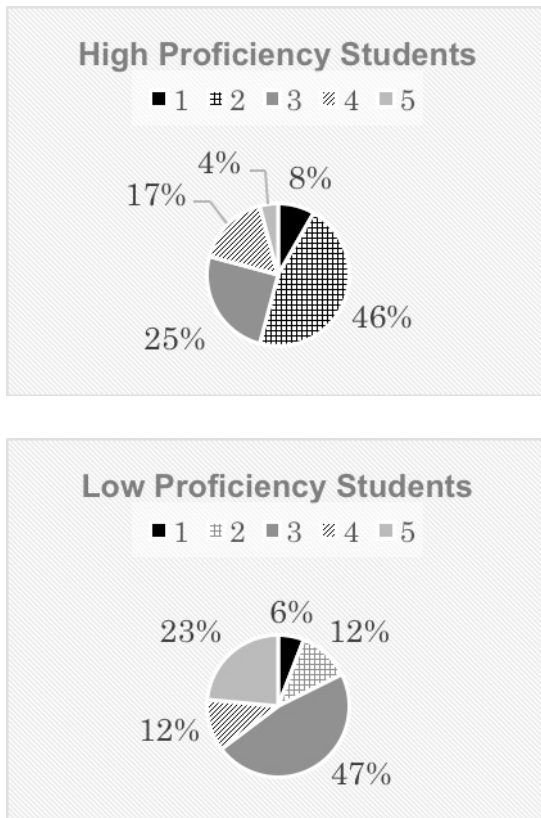


Figure 1. Responses of HPS (top) and LPS (bottom) to the statement *I take English classes because they are compulsory*.

agree and moderately agree, top five largest differences were found with the following statements:

- A) Someday I will be able to speak English with good pronunciation. (38.9%)
- B) It is important to speak English with a good pronunciation. (34.6%)
- C) It's O.K. to make some pronunciation errors if I can make myself understood. (-27.8%)*
- D) I believe I will ultimately learn to speak English with excellent pronunciation. (23.9%)
- E) If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job. (23.3%)

Note that Statement C above is a reverse item in the present questionnaire. The point to observe here is that these statements mirror self-efficacy (A and D), and identified importance of speaking English with good pronunciation (B, C and E). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome (Bandura, 1997). Previous studies have shown that self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment. Therefore, the results of this questionnaire suggests that learners with high proficiency are more certain that they will be a successful L2 English speakers by controlling their motivation and behaviors than those with low proficiency.

In view of all the response options from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree), independent t-tests were conducted to find out if there were any items in the belief questionnaire showing a significant difference

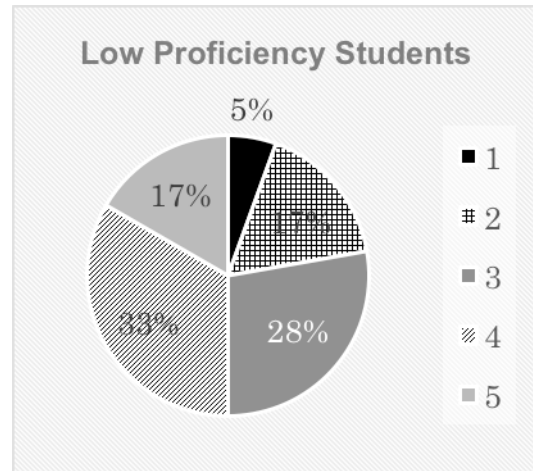
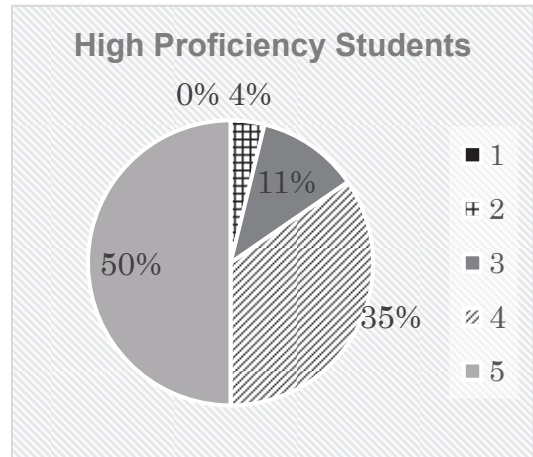


Figure 2. Responses of HPS (top) and LPS (bottom) to the statement "It is important to speak English with good pronunciation".

between high and low proficiency groups. As a result, the responses of HPS and LPS significantly differ on the following items:

- It is important to speak English with good pronunciation.
- Someday I will be able to speak English with good pronunciation.

Regarding the first item *It is important to*

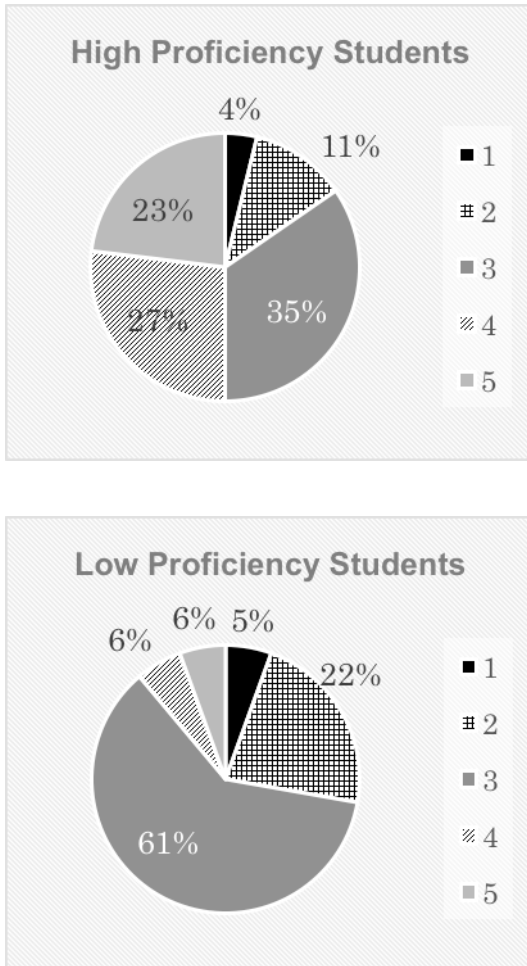


Figure 3. Responses of HPS (top) and LPS (bottom) to the statement “Someday I will be able to speak English with good pronunciation”.

speak English with good pronunciation, 50 percent of HPS reported to strongly agree with the statement while only 17 percent of LPS did so ($t(42)=3.08, p<.005$). With the second item *Someday I will be able to speak English with good pronunciation*, 23.1 percent of HPS reported to strongly agree while only 5.6 percent of LPS did so ($t(42)=2.27, p<.05$). The percentages of each choice for each group are

shown in Figures 2 and 3.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to examine differences between high and low proficiency learners of EFL in light of motivation and learner beliefs. The responses to the questionnaires were analyzed and the following results were obtained:

- 1) High proficiency students (HPS) reported to agree with greater range of statements indicating motivation for EFL learning and goals than low proficiency students (LPS) did.
- 2) HPS tended to select *strongly agree or moderately agree* for the statements indicating intrinsic motivation than LPS did.
- 3) The response patterns of HPS and LPS showed significant differences with two motivational items:
 - A) *I like studying English.*
 - B) *I want to understand EFL learning materials completely.*
- 4) Most HPS selected *moderately disagree* (46%) while most LPS selected *somewhat agree* (47%) for the statement *I take English classes because they are compulsory*, which mirrors external motivation (or extrinsic regulation).
- 5) More HPS tended to select strongly or moderately agree for the learner belief statements reflecting L2 self-efficacy and identified importance of speaking English with good pronunciation.
- 6) The response patterns of HPS and LPS showed significant differences with two learner belief items:
 - A) *It is important to speak English with*

good pronunciation.

- B) *Someday I will be able to speak English with good pronunciation.*

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that successful learners and unsuccessful learners differ in terms of quality of motivation and beliefs. An implication of this study is the possibility that EFL learners can be more successful by encouraging them to be aware of a greater range of reasons to study English and to set and pursue a greater range of realistic goals, and then by strengthening their beliefs in their capabilities to achieve those goals. The findings of this study hopefully extend our knowledge of motivation and learner beliefs, and their relationships to proficiency, especially in L2 learning and teaching.

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Appendix A: Motivation questionnaire

1	I want to try hard to improve my English pronunciation.
2	I make efforts to pronounce correctly.
3	I would like learn English pronunciation more in classes.
4	Pronunciation is important in EFL learning.
5	I want to be able to give presentations in English well.
6	It is enjoyable to pronounce English words and sentences.
7	I'm interested in English speaking cultures and histories.
8	I like studying English.
9	I want to understand academic lectures in English.
10	I want to understand EFL learning materials completely.
11	I want to study subjects in my major with English speakers.
12	I want to make friends with English speakers.
13	I want to talk with English speakers.
14	I want to go to English speaking countries and use English.
15	I'm interested in a job which requires English communication.
16	In the future, I will be more able to talk with English speakers.
17	In the future, I will be able to speak more accurate English than now.
18	In the future, I will be more able to express my opinions in English.
19	I want to be able to speak English and work in English speaking countries.
20	I want to understand academic lectures in English.
21	Those who can speak English can choose a job from a wider range.
22	I take English classes because they are compulsory.*
23	I want to be able to read books, research papers, or documents written in English
24	The more I practice listening and speaking English, the more enjoyable they will be.

*Item 21 is a reverse item.

Note: This questionnaire was written in Japanese when administered.

Appendix B: Motivation questionnaire results of high proficiency students (left) and low proficiency students (right).



⊗ 1. Strongly disagree // 2. Moderately disagree □ 3. Somewhat agree ■ 4 Moderately agree ■ 5. Strongly agree

*Item 21 is a reverse item.

Appendix C: Learner beliefs questionnaire

1	It is easier for children than adults to learn foreign language pronunciation
2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign language pronunciation.
3	Some languages are easier to learn than others in terms of pronunciation.
4	English pronunciation is easy.
5	It is easy for Japanese to learn English pronunciation.
6	It is important to speak English with good pronunciation.
7	You shouldn't pronounce anything in English until you can pronounce it correctly.
8	It is easier for someone who already mastered a foreign language pronunciation to learn another one.
9	It is better to learn English in an English speaking country.
10	Someday I will be able to speak English with good pronunciation.
11	English Speaking, listening, and pronunciation exercises should be enjoyable.
12	I believe I will ultimately learn to speak English with excellent pronunciation.
13	I want my teacher to correct me immediately if I make pronunciation errors.
14	I believe I can communicate well if my English pronunciation is good.
15	If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.
16	People study English pronunciation to pass university entrance exams.
17	It's O.K. to make some pronunciation errors if I can make myself understood.
18	I have a foreign language aptitude.
19	It is important to repeat and practice often to acquire English pronunciation.
20	I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.
21	If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.
22	It is effective to practice in a CALL room to improve pronunciation.
23	Women are better than men at speaking English.
24	If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job.
25	People who are good at math and science are not good at speaking English.

Note: This questionnaire was written in Japanese when administered.

