A STUDY ON MOTIVATION 
IN SELF-REGULATED ENGLISH LEARNING

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1. Introduction

The goal of current education tends more and more to improve one’s ability and strengthen one’s overall quality. In this information age, people have to handle a great deal of information, have to adapt to this changing society, thus the knowledge acquired at school is impossible for one to use all one’s life. The future society is a continual learning one that requires people to learn throughout one’s life. Self-regulated learning (or autonomous learning; self-directed learning), has associations with independence, self-fulfillment freedom from external constraints. Hence, it is necessary for students to cultivate their self-regulated learning ability.

1.1 The theoretical framework of this study

Self-regulated learning has been an important problem in educational and psychological field. Many western researchers tried to define self-regulated learning accurately, in which, Zimmerman’s theory is the most representative (Pang Wei-guo, 2001). For a definition of self-regulated learning, a common conceptualization of students has emerged as meta-cognitively, motivationally and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process (Zimmerman, 1986). In terms of meta-cognitive process, self-regulated learners plan, organize, self-instruct, and self-evaluate at various stages during the acquisition process. From a motivational vantage, self-regulated learners perceive themselves as self-efficacious and intrinsically motivated. In terms of behavior, self-regulated learners select, structure, and even create social and physical environments that optimize acquisition.

Generally, self-regulated learning has these main features:

First, self-regulated learners believe that self-regulated learning can facilitate learning and take responsibility for their own learning. Lacking this faith, the learners
cannot plan their learning activities, regulate their learning process, evaluate their learning results and adjust their learning activities again.

Second, self-regulated learners can use meta-cognitive, motivation and environment to learn systematically. They have gained many general and detailed strategies. They know how, when and where to use them to get the most efficient results.

Third, self-regulated learning is a continual circle. In this circle, the learners first set the goal, then achieve this goal by using strategies. During this stage, they always check the obstacles and correct them in order to achieve the task.

Fourth, self-regulated learners can make good use of environment when they encounter some difficulties or a complicated task, such as material source (e.g. reference) and social source (e.g. teacher and more capable man). During seeking for help, self-regulated learners get the information from the environment and find the answer from the information by themselves.

Fifth, self-regulated learning is a volition process that needs time and effort. Self-regulated learning is a complex psychological learning process, in which the learners will meet with many obstacles. The learners make great efforts to overcome the obstacles by volition.

1.2 The necessity for administering this study

English, as a foreign language, is regarded as a chief media at current information age and the main source for getting information of the world. However, it is a long, hard learning process to master a foreign language. What the students learned in English at school cannot meet the needs when students go to society. Especially for students at Secondary Vocational School (SVS), most of them will complete their formal education after graduation. They have little chance to enter university to further their study. That means, with the development of science and technology, they will meet more challenges if they can not keep on learning English after they go to work. So they should learn how to take responsibility for their own learning at school so as to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education.

The present study was administered in an effort to promote students’ self-regulated English learning by motivation at SVS. Previous research suggests that the expectancy and value factors will be positively related to the other three self-regulated learning components (strategy, volition and environment). Accordingly, one purpose of this study was to examine and clarify the empirical relations between
motivation and other three components in self-regulated English learning at SVS. The second purpose was to examine the role motivation played among the four components in self-regulated English learning at SVS. Finally, the characteristics in self-regulated English learning were examined. In summary, the three research questions were:

1. How is motivation related to the other components in self-regulated English learning at SVS?
2. What role does motivation play in self-regulated English learning at SVS?
3. What characteristics do the motivational factors reflect on students in self-regulated English learning at SVS?

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects

The subjects were 500 students registered in 3 different Secondary Vocational Schools in Jiaozuo city, Henan Province (Jiaozuo Girl Vocational School; Jiaozuo Vocational Educational Center; Jiaozuo Technical School). The subjects in this study were selected at random, ranging from Grade 1 to Grade 3. The participating students were taking different courses including Children Education, Tourism Management, Clothing Design Education, and Computer Education. All of them have studied English at least for three years at Junior Middle School. The mean age of them was 17 years old.

2.2 Materials

The questionnaire concerned with various aspects of self-regulated learning in English, including motivation, learning strategies, volition and environment. All items for the measures were related on a 5-point response from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The reliability and validity of the materials were measured again and the scale ranged from .71 to .90. The items of questionnaire were translated into Chinese in order to avoid misunderstanding due to the students’ different levels of proficiency in English.

The items of motivation and learning strategies were taken from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich & Elisabeth, 1990). Due to lacking of the pressure of examination at SVS, the motivational scale consisted of 14 items regarding to Self-efficacy (e.g. I expect to do very well in English class.), Task Value (e.g. I think that what I am learning in English class is useful for me to know.) and Goal-orientation (e.g. I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new
things.). The strategical scale consisted of 13 items regarding to the use of cognitive strategy (e.g. When I read materials in English class, I say the words over and over to myself to help me remember.) and the use of meta-cognitive strategy (e.g. I ask myself questions to make sure I know materials I have been studying.)

The items of volition and environment used here were developed by researchers at the University of Michigan (Garcia & others, 1998). The volitional control scale consisted of 7 items (e.g. I can concentrate my attention on English study even if I feel it more boring.). The environmental scale consisted of 6 items (e.g. I feel understood by my teacher in English class.).

2.3 Procedure

The study was administered in the students’ English classes during October and November in 2003. The participating students were assured that their names would be kept anonymous in order to express their true ideas and behaviors on self-regulated English learning. Among 500 pieces of feedback, ten of them were regarded as ineffective questionnaire because of the same answer on all the items. So, this study includes 490 pieces of effective feedback. The data was processed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). At the same time, the interviews with 30 subjects took place after class.

3 Results

3.1 The correlation between motivation and other components in self-regulated English learning at SVS

The first question of the study concerned the relations between motivation and the other three components in self-regulated English learning at SVS; the results were generally as expected. Table 1 presents the correlation between motivation and the other three components in self-regulated English learning at SVS, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed through Spearman correlation statistics. As predicted, higher level of motivation (r=.59) was correlated with higher level of strategy. Higher level of motivation (r=.64) was correlated with higher level of volition. Higher level of motivation (r=.37) was correlated with higher level of environment. Meanwhile, Table 1 also shows the correlations among other components in self-regulated English learning at SVS. Such as, higher level of strategy (r=.66) was correlated with higher level of volition. Higher level of strategy (r=.48) was correlated with higher level of environment. Higher level of volition (r=.48) was correlated with higher level of environment.
Table 1: Correlation for Motivation and Self-regulated Learning Variables in English at SVS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volition</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

3.2. The role of motivation in self-regulated English learning at SVS

The second research question concerned the role of motivation in self-regulated English learning at SVS. Table 2 presents the answer by descriptive statistics. Motivation plays a leading role in self-regulated English learning at SVS. The total mean score of motivation is 3.82, which is higher than the total mean score of other components. The next one is 3.72, representing the volition control. The mean scores of strategy use and environment adaptability are 3.36 and 3.04 respectively, which are much lower than the mean score of motivation. After examining the mean scores, it was evident that the motivation plays a more important role than other components in self-regulated English learning at SVS.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Motivation and Self-regulated Learning Variables in English at SVS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Volition</th>
<th>Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N= 490

3.3. The characteristics of the motivational factors in self-regulated English learning at SVS

The third research question concerned what characteristics the motivational factors reflect on students in self-regulated English learning at SVS. Table 3 presents the percentages, means and standard deviation of the expectancy component of motivation in self-regulated English learning at SVS. The expectancy component includes students’ beliefs about their ability to perform a task. The results show that almost ninety percent students have positive attitude and only ten percent of them have negative attitude on English learning. The mean scores are higher (4.31 and 4.14). Almost forty percent students are not sure of their performance and the mean scores are medium (3.68 and 3.61). More than sixty percent students are not confident
on what they are learning in English class and the mean score is 2.97. The numbers of standard deviation are obvious on assignments and materials learned in English class. Only more than ten percent students have positive attitude on their study skills and the mean score is 2.67. Only fifteen percent students have positive attitude on their using learning resources and the mean score is the lowest (2.52).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Expectancy Component (in percentage, mean and standard deviation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Score (%)</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Std.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compared with other students in English learning I expected to do well.</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to do very well in English class.</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am sure I can do an excellent job on problems and tasks assigned.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know that I will be able to learn the material for this class.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am certain I can understand the ideas taught in this course.</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My study skills are excellent compared with others in this class.</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared with other students in this class I think I can use the learning resources.</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=490 Mean scores were based on a 5-point likert-type scale which from 1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. Items in the table are listed in order of means.

Table 4 also presents the results of the third research question. It shows the percentages, means and standard deviation of the value component of motivation in self-regulated English learning at SVS. The value component includes students’ goals and beliefs about the importance and interest of the task. The results show that almost ninety percent students realize the importance of English and almost eighty percent students realize the importance on what they are learning in English class. The mean scores on the importance of English learning are higher (4.30 and 4.05). More than seventy percent students have positive attitude on English usefulness and the mean
score is 3.91. More than thirty percent students have less interest on what they are learning in English class and the mean score is 3.77. More than thirty percent students are not willing to accept the challenging work and the mean score is 3.75. Almost twenty percent students have no curiosity on English learning and the mean score is 3.48. The numbers of standard deviation are obvious on students’ interests and attitudes on English learning. Almost fifty percent students are not sure of the utility of English and the mean score is 3.34.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Value Component (in percentage, mean and standard deviation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Std.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding English is important to me.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important for me to learn what is being taught.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that what I am learning in English class is useful for me to know.</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that what we are learning in English class is interesting.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like what I am learning in English class.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think I will be able to use what I learn in English class into practice.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=490 Mean scores were based on a 5-point likert-type scale which from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. Items in the table are listed in order of means.

4 Discussion

The study indicated that, in self-regulated English learning at SVS, motivation was positively related to strategy use, volition control and environment adaptability. That is to say, students who have strong motivation are more likely to use more learning strategies, sustain volition in difficulties and make good use of learning
environment. Conversely, students who are lack of motivation cannot use more learning strategies, easy to give up learning in difficulties and cannot seek help from learning environment. Moreover, motivation played a more important role than other three components, which assured us of achieving self-regulated English learning effectively by stimulating motivation at SVS.

As far as the characteristics of motivational factors reflected on students at SVS, the results are puzzling. In the same scale of expectancy and the value component, the students have different attitudes, different opinions on the statements. This is just the salient characteristic of the students at SVS. There are three pairs of contradiction among the questionnaire: (1) Students expect to learn English well, but their poor level, lacking of confidence lead to helplessness of their learning. (2) Students can fully realize the importance of English, but they cannot put what they are learning in English class into practice. (3) Students have little skills on English learning, but they do not know how to seek help from the learning resources. These three pairs of contradiction are the new findings of this study.

In order to cope with these three pairs of contradiction, the vital important thing is to find out the reasons. But the reasons for learning are a complex matter, according to the survey questionnaire and the interviews with the students after class. I am going to discuss the reasons from two sides.

The positive factors that stimulate students’ motivation are due to two aspects: one is about the students themselves. They are young, energetic and eager to learn everything. They enjoy receiving new things and have great interest in the culture and people of other countries, such as the famous stars, English songs, English films, etc. Learning English can satisfy their needs and curiosity. The other is about the changing situation of the society. With the development of science and technology, especially China entering the World Trade Organization, the competence of mastering English has become more and more important. In China’s current market economy system, proficiency in English often means easier and more access to well-paid jobs, nearly all the companies, especially joint-ventures, would like to employ those who are skilled in English. Facing with this situation, students at SVS have fully realized the challenge they will meet after graduation.

The negative factors that decrease students’ motivation are due to four aspects. One is about the educational goal. The emphasis of educational goal is laid on special subjects and special skills. Because of the misunderstanding of the current competitive system, most students think it necessary to learn the specialized subjects and master some skills and unnecessary to learn the courses of general knowledge,
especially English. Moreover, students registered at SVS can get a diploma after 3 years learning without considering their marks and performance, which influences the students’ attitude on English learning undoubtedly. The second is about the textbook and the teaching style. The materials in textbook are old, have little relation with their specialized subjects and the teaching style is simple, which decrease the students’ interests. The third is about the low demands of their parents. Due to the students’ learning condition and family economical limitation, some parents only want their children to learn some special skills, get a diploma and find a job in the future. While English is only an important course for National Entrance Examination, it is not a course that they should put much effort on it. This low demand also leads to slack off in their English learning. The fourth is about the source of students. The policy of enlarged enrollment made it possible for poor students to enter school, some of them even get a few marks in English examination. That is, this sort of students does not have a solid foundation in their English learning in Junior Middle School. After entering Vocational School, they almost give up their English learning because of their poor foundation.

All these factors lead to the contradiction reflected on the students at SVS. On one hand, the students are in good time to pursue knowledge, including English. They can fully realize the challenge they will meet after graduation. On the other hand, the emphasis on special subjects, the old materials and simple teaching style, the low demand of their parents and their poor foundation all decrease their motivation on English learning. Even some of them think that English is too boring and too difficult to learn, they believe that they have no capability for English learning, thus lose confidence and give up, let alone put English into practice. At the same time, these so-called poor students cannot get more attention at Junior Middle School. They do not know how to learn and how to make use of the learning resources (mainly refer to the teachers). The teachers always neglect them. It is hard for them to get learning skills and learning experience from their teachers.

5 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the results provide the advantage and salient characteristic of motivation, which are closely related to self-regulated English learning at SVS. At the same time, the paper discusses the reasons which cause three pairs of contradiction reflected on students at SVS from two sides. Hence, another important subject is how to stimulate students’ motivation to achieve their self-regulated English learning at SVS. Stimulating and enhancing of motivation are influenced by many factors, but
“peoples’ motivation is greatly affected by their perceptions of themselves, by whether they see themselves as in control of their actions” (Williams & Burden, 2000). Students at SVS have their own characteristics on motivation in self-regulated English learning. The measures of enhancing motivation should be suitable for their own characteristics.

5.1 Altering students’ beliefs about themselves

The results show that students at SVS regard themselves as low-achieved. In English learning, some think they are not intelligent and cannot learn English well. Some think their English is poor and cannot catch up with others. Most of them lose interest in English, some even feel helpless. So, the first step to stimulate students’ motivation is to alter their beliefs about themselves. This can be achieved through attribution. The attribution theory emphasizes that students’ perception of their educational experiences generally influence their motivation more than the actual, objective reality of those experience. Weiner (1995) points out that students’ beliefs about the reasons for their success will determine whether this assumption is true. Students’ attribution for failure is also important influence on motivation. When students have a history of failure in school, it is particularly difficult for them to sustain the motivation to keep trying. Students who believe that their poor performance is caused by factors out of their control are unlikely to see any reason to hope for an improvement. In contrast, if students attribute their poor performance to a lack of important skills or to poor study habits, they are more likely to persist in the future.

The research indicates that the progress of Chinese, Mathematics and English is likely due to effort. Hence, the students at SVS should realize that their success in English depends more on their effort and self-discipline than on innate ability. With effort and willpower, every one can achieve his or her goals. Conversely, their putative failures or shortcomings can be ascribed to a lack of efforts than to a lack of potential. As Dickinson points out (1995:171), such beliefs are an important foundation for motivation, since ‘personal effort, unlike ability or chance, is within the control of the students’.

After knowing the reasons why they cannot learn English well, the students should be given some certain tasks to experience success or failure in learning process. After mastering the task, the students should be told that is due to their efforts. Without mastering the task, they should be told to make more efforts on it until they master it. After a period of training, the students not only can form their correct
attribution, but also build their confidence, improve their English ability. Meanwhile, their efforts should be given feedback in time. They are usually told that all the progress can be got from their efforts. Only in this way, can they feel its effectiveness for their efforts and form their correct attribution, can they actually set free from their helplessness and persist in making progress.

Of course, it is inappropriate for the students to think their English failure is due to a lack of efforts. According to research, when the students fail, they can use learning strategies to promote their learning efficiency. This attribution can both make them try hard and consider how to reinforce cognitive skills. In English learning, the students should be taught to acquire some learning strategies to use them. Only in this way, can the students overcome the difficulties and adopt the strategies consciously in their English learning.

5.2 Building students’ self-confidence

Self-confidence in general refers to the belief that a person has the ability to produce results, accomplish goals or perform tasks competently. It appears to be skin to self-efficacy and is a significant motivational subsystem in English learning. However, the results show that most students at SVS are lack of self-confidence. So after altering their beliefs, the next step is to build students’ self-confidence, which can be achieved through the following ways: a) Match tasks to students’ ability. For instance, *English for Secondary Vocational School Students’ Book* is generally adopted. The basic principle of this book is topic-based or task-based. That is, within one topic, there are some tasks in a unit, which vary from easy to difficult. In class, the tasks assigned to students should be in accordance with their level and competence. Try to make everyone feel that English is not so difficult that they can learn it well, help them arouse interest and build confidence. b) Set clear, specific, attainable learning goals. In the course of learning, the tasks that the teachers’ assigned should be clear, specific and attainable. The students can understand the tasks exactly and make their efforts to achieve them. Otherwise, they will be puzzled and do not know how to fulfill the tasks. c) Stress self-comparison. During learning process, self-comparison should be highly emphasized. If the students always compare themselves with others, they will find they fall behind the good students and it is hard to keep pace with those students. If the students compare what they are doing now with what they have done before, they will find they have gained a lot in English learning. They will enjoy their accomplishment. Gradually, they have possessed self-confidence.
5.3 Showing the Value of English

The results show that students at SVS can realize the importance of English, but they do not know how to put them into practice. So, in English learning at SVS, the tasks should get on with their jobs. The tasks in which we involve our students should focus on authentic, natural and normal communication because competence in language is evaluated on whether one communicates meaning successfully. For example, students who major in tourism should be asked to act as pilot attendants, bank cashiers, tourism guides etc. After experiencing the meaningful practice, they will have interest in learning English because they realize it is very useful. If the students are asked to provide the correct verb form in a blank in a sentence, gradually, they will feel English so boring and lose interest in it.

Another point is the tasks should contain some real problems within students’ ability. At the beginning, the teacher can give them some suggestions to help them solve the problems without offering the answers. When meeting with problems, the students are asked to solve by themselves. Only in this way, can the students’ curiosity be aroused, their volition be practiced. At the same time, the students should learn how to make good use of the learning resources. They should learn knowledge, strategies, experience from their teachers voluntarily and become more motivated or have more volition in learning English for its instrumental use.

5.4 Helping students focus on success

Generally speaking, the content and quality of students’ motivation at SVS is related to concrete social setting and educational context. So its content and quality have social nature. In other words, most educational motivation comes from society. According to social psychologists, the theory of reasoned action, which is a kind of basic social motivation, has great influence on students’ learning at Vocational school.

In English learning, the students should be encouraged to communicate their ideas, feelings, thoughts effectively with others, including their teachers and classmates, even everyone who can speak English. If they communicate frequently, they will gain more opportunities to respond and experience the happiness of success. They will find they will be capable to learn English well. Meantime, the tasks given to the students should be in accordance with the students’ abilities, reduce task risk without simplifying the task. Third, the most positive learning environment should be established. Every student can create positive results happily.

Moreover, two points should be stressed here. One is that this study was
conducted only in three Secondary Vocational Schools in Jiaozuo city, Henan Province, which had some regional limitations. The other is that motivation is not an isolated factor, other components, such as strategy, volition and environment, also influence self-regulated English learning. Therefore, further exploration should be continued.

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