Motivation in Second Language Acquisition in Chinese Research Students in the UK

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The present study sets out to examine motivation to learn English by Chinese research students in an informal setting. Data were collected, using semi-structured interviews, from four research students at two points in time during their first year in the UK. The main findings are: they believed that learning English was important; their main goal orientations were instrumental and extrinsic; they set learning goals and persisted to attain them; they valued their current learning environment in general and saw it as supportive of their goals; they held both positive and negative attitudes towards the British, which had differential effects on their motivation; their self-perceived support seemed to have a positive impact on their motivation and the development of self-confidence; they tended to attribute their success to stable causes such as the environment and failure to unstable but controllable causes such as effort. It is concluded that qualitative data of this kind may complement insights from quantitative research. Implications for target country institutions in the provision of support are discussed.

Keywords: Chinese learners, informal setting, qualitative methodology, second-language learning, second language motivation

Introduction

In recent years, increasing numbers of Chinese students have been coming to study for higher degrees in Western countries, particularly English-speaking countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. China remains one of the top source countries, as well as, proportionally, the fastest growing, and is regarded as being of strategic importance in the international education market (e.g. IDP Education Australia, 2004; Larsen et al., 2002; UK Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2004). There is a growing need to understand this particular international student population – their needs and expectations, and their adaptation to the academic and cultural conventions in the host society. The present study aims to make a contribution to this debate by looking at Chinese research students in the UK.

One of the problems with this group of students is their limited competence in English, notably in speaking, listening and writing skills (Jin, 1992; Jin & Cortazzi, 1996; Zeng, 1996), with serious consequences for both their academic and social life during their residence abroad. An understanding of their motivation to learn English may shed some light on the impact of the linguistic challenges they face and the process of their adaptation to both their degree study and the new society and culture.
In this paper, the present author will first briefly review relevant research on motivation in second-language learning and then present findings of case studies.

**Previous Research**

During the last 40 years or so, a large body of literature has helped to highlight the importance of motivation in second-language learning (e.g. Dörnyei, 1998, 2001, 2003; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993a; MacIntyre, 2002). Until recently, most of this research has taken a social psychological approach, in which the links between motivation and social attitudes are considered important. This approach is best exemplified by the construct of ‘the integrative motive’ – a complex of three sets of variables: motivation, integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situation (Li, 2001). Each set of variables is in turn conceptualised as having several components, which are operationally defined and assessed with a standard measurement instrument, the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (Gardner, 1985). For instance, motivation consists of three components: motivational intensity, desire to learn the language and attitudes toward learning the language. The basic argument for the proposition of the higher-order construct of integrative motive is that attainment of proficiency in a second language usually entails long-term effort on the part of the learner and motivation needs attitudinal/affective support (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993a). A number of studies present evidence in support of the importance of the integrative motive and its relationship with aspects of achievement or proficiency in a second language (e.g. Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991, 1993b; Gardner et al., 1992; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

However, earlier research in this tradition also emphasised motivational goals or orientations (as in contrast to motivation per se as defined above). Two types have attracted the most attention: an integrative and an instrumental orientation (see Gardner & Smythe, 1981). 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’ (Gardner, 1985: 54). It reflects ‘an openness and willingness to interact with members of the other community’ (Gardner, 1996: 35), thus having a more interpersonal quality (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). An instrumental orientation characterises an individual whose reason for learning a second language is ‘to gain social recognition or economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language’ (Gardner & Lambert, 1972: 14), thus having a more self-oriented and practical quality (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). An earlier assumption was that an integrative orientation might be better at promoting motivation because such a goal ‘is more likely to sustain the long-term effort needed to master a second language, especially when one starts only at the high school age level’ (Gardner & Lambert, 1972: 16). While this was the case in some studies (e.g. Gardner, 1972; Gardner & Lambert, 1959), the picture seemed to be more complex in others (e.g. Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Later research also shows that the two orientations are related to each
other (Clément et al., 1994; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993b), suggesting complex relationships among the motivational constructs originally envisaged by Gardner and his colleagues. More recently, however, Masgoret and Gardner (2003) have convincingly demonstrated the positive relationships between the attitudinal and motivational variables and second language achievement, based on a meta-analysis of a number of studies conducted by Gardner and associates. They argue that the conflicting results in the literature are more likely due to inconsistencies in conceptualisations of motivational constructs in different studies.

Parallel, and sometimes complementary, to this line of enquiry are the studies conducted by Clément (1980). Clément proposed a two-stage motivational model – ‘the Social Context Model’ – to account for the role of attitudinal, motivational and contextual factors in second-language learning. The secondary motivational process is represented by the construct of self-confidence, which derives from the quantity and quality of contact with members of the second language group, and it mediates the effect of the primary motivational process, which is the function of two antagonistic factors – integrativeness and fear of assimilation.

Current theorising and research, however, suggest the need to draw on a wider range of theoretical perspectives to enhance our understanding of motivation in second-language learning (see Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994, 2001, 2003; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Skehan, 1991; Ushioda, 1996). The most pertinent to the present study seem to be a cognitive perspective of student goal orientation, goal-setting theory and attributional theory, which will be briefly discussed below.

A cognitive perspective (Pintrich, 1989) distinguishes two major student goal orientations – extrinsic and intrinsic. Learners demonstrate an intrinsic orientation if their rationale for engaging in a task is challenge, curiosity, learning or mastery. On the other hand, if their reasons for engaging in a task are to obtain rewards, grades or approval from others, they are considered to be extrinsically oriented. In the second-language acquisition literature, there is some evidence to support the claim that intrinsic motivation is strongly related to second-language learning outcomes (Ellis, 2004; Noels et al., 2003).

Goal setting theory starts with the basic premise that ‘much human action is purposeful, in that it is directed by conscious goals’ (Locke & Latham, 1994: 14). According to the theory, the motivational significance of goal setting lies in its influence on performance and helps to explain why some people perform better on work tasks than others. Two aspects of goals are important – goal attributes and goal mechanisms. The two most extensively studied goal attributes are content and intensity. The aspects of content that receive the most research effort are goal specificity (i.e. whether a goal is vague or specific) and goal difficulty. For example, it has been found consistently that goals that are both specific and difficult lead to better performance than those that are vague but challenging, those that are vague but unchallenging, or the setting of no goals. The most frequently studied aspect of intensity is commitment – ‘the degree to which an individual is attracted to the goal, considers it important, is determined to attain it, and sticks with it in the face of obstacles’
Locke and Latham (1994: 19) outline three direct mechanisms by which goals regulate performance:

First, goals direct activity toward actions that are goal relevant to it at the expense of actions that are not relevant. Second, goals regulate effort expenditure in that people adjust their effort to the difficulty level of the task or goal. Third, goals affect the persistence of action in situations where there are no time limits.

Attributional theory of motivation portrays human beings as scientists who 'are motivated to attain a causal understanding of the world' (Weiner, 1992: 284). The strivings for a causal explanation of events and the causal inferences made are assumed to have behavioural implications. In achievement-related contexts, the main sets of causes identified as being responsible for success and failure are ability, effort, task characteristics and luck. Ability and effort are often perceived to be the most common causes of performance (Weiner, 1992). (Recently, however, some researchers have started to question the generalisability of these sets of causes to the language learning context: see Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams et al., 2004.) The causes identified are differentiated along several dimensions. The most fundamental one is the internal–external distinction, which reflects the more general divide between person (factors within the person) and environment (factors within the environment) implicit in all the major theories of human motivation (Weiner, 1989). This dimension is labelled locus of causality. But, as argued by Weiner (1989), the distinction made in attribution theory differs from the divide in other major motivation theories in its emphasis on the consequences (e.g. disparate affective reactions, future expectations and behaviours) of the internal versus external ascriptions. The second dimension describes whether a cause is relatively stable and is labelled the stability dimension. The third specifies whether a particular cause is under a person's volitional control and is labelled the controllability dimension. For example, ability and effort are clearly within the person whereas task characteristics and luck are considered to be factors external to the person. Although both ability and effort are internal causes, they differ in that ability is a relatively stable trait of the individual whereas effort can be subject to change. Although effort, mood and fatigue are all internal and unstable causes, it is recognised that the exertion of effort is normally under volitional control while mood and the onset of fatigue are mostly not. Within an attributional framework, it is argued that the most important causal property is the stability of a perceived cause, which is conceptualised as influencing expectancy of success (Weiner, 1992).

There has been increasing evidence on the relevance of these theoretical perspectives from general/educational psychology in the field of second language motivation (e.g. Dörnyei, 1990, 2003; Graham, 2004; Kondo, 1998; Noels et al., 2003; Oxford, 1996; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Unger, 1989; Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams et al., 2004).

Another aspect is the methodology used in previous second language motivation research. Until recently, the dominant paradigm of research has been quantitative and data have been collected through written questionnaires (consisting of single or multi-item scales). Such data are then subject to
statistical analyses to establish correlations or, in some cases, causal relationships among the variables studied. Nowadays, more and more researchers realise the limitations of such a methodology and advocate the use of a more qualitative methodology or a combination of a quantitative and qualitative methodology in order to obtain richer data (Dörnyei, 2001; Skehan, 1991; Spolsky, 2000).

It is also worth noting that, compared with the research endeavour directed at the formal classroom setting, it seems that relatively little effort has been made to investigate the dynamics of motivation in second-language acquisition in the informal setting. Particularly, there is a shortage of carefully designed studies in the latter (see Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). In view of the conceptualisation of the pivotal role of motivation in such a setting (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993a), such studies seem to be warranted.

**Research Questions**

This study aims to examine motivation in second-language acquisition in an informal setting (as in contrast to formal instructional setting) by focusing on Chinese research students in the UK. Specifically, it hopes to answer the following questions:

- Do Chinese research students think it is important to learn English? Why?
- Do they set language learning goals? What goals do they have?
- What are their perceptions of, or attitudes towards, the present learning environment as compared with their previous learning environment in China?
- What are their attitudes towards British people?
- What impact does their perceived support have on their motivation to learn?
- What are the difficulties they encounter and how confident are they of their English?
- How successful do they think they are in learning English and how do they attribute their success or failure?

**Respondents and Data Collection Procedure**

Four first-year research students from Mainland China participated in the study. This was their first time in the UK and also their first experience in an English-speaking country. The four respondents were located through my own social networks in the form of ‘friend of a friend’, a well documented field work strategy (Edwards, 1986; Milroy, 1987). Details of the four respondents are summarised in Table 1. (To protect the anonymity of the respondents, the names given below are pseudonyms and such names will be used consistently hereafter.)

Respondents’ ages ranged from 24 to 40. They were studying Social Sciences, Science or Engineering and had varied experience of learning English as a Foreign Language in China prior to their study in the UK. With the exception of one respondent, Zhao, the others had been non-English majors in Chinese universities.
Information on the respondents’ oral/aural proficiency in English was also obtained, details of which were reported elsewhere (Li, 2001). Overall, Zhao and Li were assessed as the most and least proficient learner respectively at both stages of the present study. Although the other two respondents, Qian and Sun, were initially ranked second and third, they were on a par with the most proficient learner, Zhao, in terms of the global measure of oral proficiency towards the end of the study.

Data were collected from the four respondents individually at two points over a period of approximately one year, using semi-structured interviews (an interview guide was prepared in advance only to keep the interviews focused but allowance was made for emerging lines of inquiry to be followed up). The decision on the two points of data collection was based on the present author’s understanding that negotiation of access to the respondents was dependent on the amount of time they could afford and the travel that would be involved. Given the respondents’ different times of arrival in the UK, the first data collection point was at approximately two to three months after they had arrived, to ensure all of them had more or less the same starting point in terms of the length of their prior stay in the UK. The second point was towards the end of their first year (about nine months later). Such a design would allow the generation of rich data and the examination of the dynamics of motivation in these respondents over time. The second round of interviews also offered the respondents the opportunity to validate some of their data from the first interviews. The interviews were conducted in the respondents’ mother tongue, Chinese, and each interview took about an hour. During the interviews, the respondents were encouraged to elaborate in sufficient detail on the areas of interest for the present research and to initiate new topics or to reflect on salient aspects in their experience of learning the language. In addition, special attention was paid to the manner in which the questions were asked to ensure that they were truly open-ended. Permission was obtained from each respondent to tape record all interviews. The recorded interviews were first transcribed verbatim in Chinese and relevant parts of the transcriptions were then translated into English by the present author.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Current research subject</th>
<th>How long ago started to learn English (years)</th>
<th>Major at university in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhao</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>American Cultural History</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Humane Architecture</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Non-English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Non-English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Structural Engineering</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Non-English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

The interview data were scrutinised and relevant themes and patterns were identified. A colleague was invited to examine a sample of the categories and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. These findings will be discussed in relation to the research questions.

The importance of English and motivational orientations

The respondents reported that they attached importance to their English language learning. In addition, all four respondents expressed this belief at both points of time during their first year. Towards the end of the year, one respondent even considered that the upgrading of his English was as important as his own research:

I think, now I feel ... further improving my English should be given the same status as my own research project. The two should be fifty/fifty each. Improving language should be given such importance. This is how I feel and how I understand it.

It is likely that this perception of the importance of learning English would exert a positive influence on the learners’ motivation to learn the language.

The reasons offered by the respondents relate to various aspects of their life in the UK, including their current degree research, their daily life, their adaptations and even their future career perspectives. There seemed to be several ways in which these reasons could be further categorised so that they reflect the respondents’ general purposes or goal orientation. Within a social psychological framework, the present data seem to point to both an instrumental orientation and an integrative orientation in their English learning. From a cognitive perspective, the data suggest that the four respondents mainly adopted extrinsic orientations.

The majority of the reasons given by the respondents can be categorised as reflecting an instrumental orientation. It reflected their perceived needs in their research, either current or anticipated, depending on the stage of their study. Initially, the respondents felt the urgent need to improve their oral skills (listening and speaking) in order to cope with academic activities such as understanding seminars, and discussions or communications with their supervisors and others about their research. Three of the respondents also mentioned the importance of reading in their research, particularly the rate of reading. Only one respondent mentioned the importance of writing. Towards the end of their first year, however, with the easing of the pressure of coping with the immediate language demands, their instrumental orientation now pointed to anticipated needs in their research: the importance of spoken English in their future presentations and the viva and of writing in their thesis, which are important stages in a research student’s academic life. In addition, two other aspects of the instrumental value of learning English now clearly emerge. One concerns career prospects and the other, social recognition. However, these were considered by the respondents to be of secondary importance compared with the importance of English in their current research.
The prominent importance of learning English they accord to their research is understandable. Based on the researcher’s own informal observation of Chinese research students, the pursuit of the PhD programme in the UK is undoubtedly regarded as the centre of their life (e.g. in some cases, the spouse even suspends or gives up his/her employment and the child quits school in China to follow as dependants). Arguably, successful completion of the programme depends partly on a certain level of proficiency in their English. It is only natural that the motivating force for improving their English first comes from the realisation of its importance in their research. This is especially the case when they initially settled into the target language country and were embarking on their research programme. As time passed, they were able to see or anticipate a wider range of pragmatic gains associated with the improvement of their English.

The interview data also suggest an integrative orientation. These learners wanted to improve their English either to enhance communications with speakers of the language or to deepen their understanding of the country and its culture so that they can integrate and adapt to the society, as Li remarked at the second interview, ‘to integrate into British society and to really understand the society, ... how can it be possible without [the help of] English?’

It is interesting to note that, at the first interview, Zhao, the most proficient learner of the four, seemed to be more inclined to such an orientation, whereas the least proficient, Li, tended to be more preoccupied with an instrumental orientation. For Li, practical aspects of the English language seemed to far override the integrative dimension. However, at the second interview, an integrative orientation emerged distinctively in Li. This change seems to be related to his actual experience of living in the target language country; that is, as time went on, his sphere of life was expanded and therefore he could see the need to be more socially–emotionally involved with the target language community – its speakers, social life, culture and so on.

In a cognitive perspective (Pintrich, 1989), data suggest that these respondents mainly adopted extrinsic orientations. They believed that it would facilitate their current research and improve their career prospects; it would also enhance their communications and interactions in English and help them to integrate into British society. Or more broadly, it would make their life in Britain better. Although their goal orientations were predominantly extrinsic, there were indications that some learners also had intrinsic goal orientations. For instance, at the second interview, Li expressed an increased interest in the language:

In general, I’m getting more and more interested in English. My interest in language, that is, the English language, is increasing in the process of learning. ...I can feel it clearly. ...In fact, this interest is developing, gradually, and you’re not born with it.

Note that Li was assessed as the least proficient learner among the four at both phases of the study. This suggests that an intrinsic interest in a second language is not necessarily associated with a high level of proficiency in the language; rather it can develop as a result of increased experience in learning or using the language. As Li further commented, situational demands seem
also to have contributed to the development of this interest. But on the other hand, Li also admitted that he was interested in language in general; for instance, he once had a great interest in the Chinese language when he was at secondary school. Thus, it is also possible that intrinsic interest in a second language is a more stable trait in an individual.

**Language-learning goals**

The respondents reported the following goals of English learning at the first round of interviews:

- to have contact with ordinary people and get to know the language as used in society (Zhao);
- to improve listening comprehension (Qian);
- to have no problem communicating with others, in terms of speaking and aural understanding; to be able to understand idiomatic English; to be able to understand others’ seminars (Sun);
- to be able to cope with listening and speaking in daily life and work (Li).

These goals focus on the improvement of their oral/aural proficiency in English. In addition, the setting of goals seems to be based on self-perceived weaknesses in certain aspects, as the following extract from Li at the first interview illustrates:

I dared not aim too high. But my goal then [when I first came] was to be able to cope with understanding and speaking in everyday life and in my work. To be able to manage these two things. . . . I set this goal based on my weaknesses. I have laid a good foundation for my reading and writing, . . . I don’t feel I have much difficulty in these. Just these two things: to be able to understand and to be able to express myself accurately. . . . These are my goals for this year. As for reading and writing, I’m not that worried.

When they initially came into contact with authentic English in the UK, they realised that aspects of their oral/aural skills acquired in China were inadequate in meeting the demands of various academic and non-academic situations. Their goals served to prioritise improvement on these aspects. Alternatively, such goals can be regarded as embodying the needs they perceived as salient at the start of their research in the UK.

At the second interview, they were asked to reflect on the goals they initially set. The following pictures emerged: first, all four respondents felt that they had maintained their original goals or were at least guided to some extent by such goals. For example, Sun and Li felt that they had not reached their goals as yet. Second, they were clear about their goals. As one respondent, Qian, said, he knew what his weaknesses were and thus knew in which direction to move. These observations indicate that these learners were committed to their original goals. Such commitment is likely to prompt action and sustain effort and thus enhance goal attainment. It is also interesting to note that these learners seem to have their own subjective criteria for the attainment of goals. These goals might be broad or general (e.g. improving speaking or listening
comprehension), but as long as they felt they were committed to them or realised they had not reached them, they were likely to persist.

In addition to their original goals, two respondents mentioned new goals at the second interview. For example, Qian wanted to expand his vocabulary. One big problem at this stage was that he felt his vocabulary was not large enough. It affected both his reading speed and his listening comprehension. Apparently these new goals emerged as they went along and reflected their newly perceived needs. Again, these goals were also likely to affect the action they would take in learning the language.

Perceptions of the present learning environment

The respondents’ perceptions of, or attitudes towards, their present English learning environment as compared with their previous learning environment in China, are summarised as follows:

- They were learning English in real life.
- The learning environment was more facilitative of the improvement of their aural understanding and speaking.
- The need to be adaptive is more motivating.
- Language learning is less systematic.

The respondents generally perceived their present English-learning environment in a positive light. This was especially the case in terms of their major language learning goals – the improvement of oral/aural skills in English. However, one respondent, Qian, felt less satisfied with the less systematic opportunities for learning English presently in comparison with the more structured classroom learning in China. As English was learned through daily exposure in the current naturalistic environment, he felt that there were not necessarily many opportunities for such exposure and therefore learning could be quite incidental. In contrast, he felt that learning in a classroom setting might be more structured with teaching materials and approaches more tailored to students’ level of proficiency. It was this belief that prompted him to attend in-sessional language support courses at his university. It is also worth noting that Qian’s perceived lack of opportunities for practising speaking in this environment was not linked to his level of English though, as he was assessed as relatively advanced in his oral/aural skills at the start of this study.

At the second interview, the respondents evaluated their English learning environment in some of the following ways:

- The environment is good for learning English.
- The environment is important for the improvement of English.
- The usefulness of the environment is determined by the learner.
- There are not many opportunities to improve English.

For Zhao, the second-language environment in Britain was good in that it offered him the opportunities to have contact with a wide range of people from different strata of society. He believed that such opportunities would be difficult to find elsewhere. Another respondent, Qian, regarded the present
learning situation as good mainly for the improvement of his listening comprehension. Input for listening was easy to obtain, as the sources of such input were all around and it did not have to require his direct participation. For example, he could eavesdrop on people talking and there was the input from TV and so on. For yet another respondent, Sun, certain aspects of the environment had contributed to her positive evaluation of the environment. These include the sociolinguistic features of the place where she was studying. For example, she considered the accent of local British people to be close to that of standard English and therefore had experienced fewer problems of comprehension. But, at the same time, there were opportunities for exposure to various foreign accents because of the large population of overseas students at her university. She welcomed this exposure as her previous experience had been limited to standard English, thus presenting an interesting contrast with Zhao, the most proficient learner of the four, who seemed to regard accented speech as a challenge to his understanding in real-life situations. In addition, the local people seem to be very supportive. She felt that they were very patient and ready to lend her an ear when she spoke English, which was encouraging and gave her the confidence to learn. In addition, her social networks were predominantly English-speaking, which she thought was good for the improvement of her English.

While acknowledging the advantages of the present environment, the only place where one could learn idiomatic English, Li took a dialectic philosophical stance and stressed the importance of the interaction between the environment and the learner. He believed that, on the one hand, the usefulness of the environment was dependent on the initiative taken by the learner and, on the other hand, the environment itself pushed him to learn the language.

But on the other hand, two respondents felt a lack of opportunities to improve their English. Qian’s perceived lack of opportunities to practise speaking was consistent with his comment earlier on at the first interview. Li attributed his perceived lack of practice to the pressure of his research. Although he commented earlier in the same interview that he considered learning English and doing research to be equally important, as discussed earlier, in practice his research was given priority.

Within the social psychological framework, this study suggests that overall the respondents had positive attitudes towards their current language learning situation. Such attitudes can have an important influence on the learners’ motivation to learn. Alternatively, with a cognitive perspective, evidence indicates that the respondents perceived their current language-learning environment as relevant to their major needs and goals, which would help to sustain their motivation.

**Attitudes towards British people**

The data suggest that the respondents had both positive and negative attitudes towards British people. On the one hand, they regarded them as good/kind, helpful, considerate, patient, gentlemanly, polite, hospitable, caring or generally cultured. On the other hand, they felt that British people were reserved, arrogant, prejudiced, indifferent, cold, hypocritical and not necessarily more intelligent, on average, than the Chinese. Further analysis
reveals the following patterns. First, the respondents used slightly more positive attributes \((T = 9)\) than negative ones \((T = 7)\) to describe British people. Second, there seemed to be less consensus on the negative attributes than on the positive ones. For example, at least two respondents concurred on the majority of the positive attributes. In contrast, negative attributes were more individually held by the respondents.

Individual case data were more informative. For instance, at the first interview, Sun was frustrated by some British people who she found to be very arrogant and would have preferred to avoid. However, at the second interview, she associated British people almost entirely with positive attributes – in fact, most of those listed above. She had revised her original opinion and now considered very few of her acquaintances to be unpleasant. Although she suspected that British people might feel superior deep inside, she felt there were few overt signs that this was the case; her impression of British people and Europeans in general was good. As her data indicate, this characterisation was based on her direct experience with British people and other Europeans in several capacities, mainly as colleagues and residents in student accommodation. By contrast, Li’s attitudes towards British people seemed to carry a more negative tone. He became quite emotional when he expressed his feeling that British people, especially those who were not so well educated, were prejudiced against people from developing countries. This position was based on experience. He considered, for instance, that his British landlord had treated him less favourably than British tenants who shared the same house in the allocation of rooms. This negative image of some British people seems to have been reinforced by his perception of the British media, which he thought were biased against China. His attitudes towards British people and the British media did not change as time passed. On the contrary, they were reinforced by the Sino-British political events in which he was involved, shortly before the second interview. It was quite evident that the development of such negative attitudes was the result of his negative experiences in the UK, for which his low oral/aural proficiency in English might well have been partly responsible.

The attitudes of the other two respondents, Zhao and Qian, seem to be more balanced. For example, on the one hand, Zhao associated British people with such positive images as polite, hospitable, helpful, caring and thoughtful; on the other hand, he thought they were reserved, indifferent, cold, hypocritical and rather arrogant. Again, his attitudes were based on his direct contact with people in various contexts. Of all four respondents, Zhao used the most attributes to characterise British people. The fact that his PhD research was on culture might, of course, explain the fact that he was more reflective of such social/cultural issues than the other respondents. Alternatively, this could be the result of his relatively wide range of experiences with British people, which his higher proficiency had enabled him to gain.

Qian’s comments below at the first interview further indicate the influence of learners’ actual experiences on the formation of their attitudes and suggest the possible relationship between learners’ level of proficiency in the language and the nature of their experiences with speakers of the language:
It was said that British people were a bit cold and indifferent. Since I came, I feel they are not as cold and indifferent as those people said. But they are not that warm, either. They are all right. Or it probably depends on the person. If your English is better, probably they will talk to you more at length.

Qian’s data here also imply that learners may enter the second-language environment with preconceptions about speakers of the language and that learners’ actual experiences may challenge such preconceptions. But on the other hand, it is also plausible that learners’ actual experiences may also reinforce their preconceptions. For instance, the attribute of ‘gentlemanly’ used by Sun and Qian could be seen as a reinforced traditional image of British people.

Learning English in this environment often involves the participation of British people. The attitudes held by the respondents seem to have some impact on their motivation to learn the language. Sun and Qian commented that their attitudes towards British people affected their willingness to interact with these people, their desire to learn English and their confidence in communicating in English. Sun offered the following comments at the second interview:

I feel that if they are nice, I will feel encouraged. For example, if you speak, speak very poor English and if they appear to be very impatient, I no longer want to ... at least no longer want to talk to them. I won’t feel good. But if they are nice as they now are, I will feel encouraged. I will feel more confident. Yes, [I want to learn their language]. I feel British people are really nice.

However, Li seemed to have mixed feelings about this. On one occasion, he commented that his attitudes towards British people did not have much effect on his learning of English. But on another, he felt that his negative attitudes formed a kind of psychological barrier, preventing him from interacting openly with British people. Moreover, he placed responsibility for this barrier on British people and the British media.

The psychological barrier that Li felt is reminiscent of the concept of ‘acculturation’ in the literature. In his model of second-language acquisition, Schumann (1978, 1986) discussed a number of social and psychological variables under a broad concept of ‘acculturation’. Schumann’s (1986: 384) major hypothesis is that ‘SLA [second language acquisition] is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the TL [target language] group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language’. In other words, the degree of a learner’s acquisition of a second language is determined by his/her social and psychological closeness to the second-language group. The psychological barrier that Li felt is similar to the psychological distance in the model and may well affect his acquisition of English as a second language.

It is clear that the respondents have both positive and negative attitudes towards British people. However, such attitudes are not static or fixed. They develop as a result of their direct experiences of interacting with British
people. Quantitative studies in the literature tend to portray learners’ attitudes toward a target language group in terms of a general positive or negative tendency and the effects of such a tendency on learners’ motivation (e.g. Gardner, 1985). Qualitative data from this study point to the differential effects of positive and negative attitudes in the same learner, thus offering complementary insights into the real effects of attitudes on motivation in second-language learning.

The impact of the perceived support on motivation to learn

A distinctive theme that emerges from the interview data of three respondents (Qian, Sun and Li) is their perceived support in their English learning. Such support was largely institutionally based and provided in the form of in-sessional English courses and the efforts made by the academic departments or the university to encourage their students to enrol. The courses cover both social and academic topics and aim to help the students to cope with the use of English in both everyday social situations and academic situations. In addition, Li commented that his department created a very supportive atmosphere by taking the following steps: the head of the department asked everybody to try to talk to Li in English and help him to improve his oral/aural skills, skills considered to be rather weak by Li himself; the department allowed him to move office so that he was placed among other English-speaking research students; it also took the exceptional step of paying for a private tutor to help improve his presentation skills in English. Sun’s data also reveal a very interesting aspect of institutional support. As her supervisor was originally a Chinese national, her department wrote to him, asking him to talk to his Chinese research students more in English and to encourage them to talk in English among themselves.

Another source of support regarded as important by the respondents is the support of the respondents’ supervisors, other members of staff and their fellow research students. These are the respondents’ social networks (Li, 2001), with whom the students are likely to have regular contact and who may exert influence on their motivation. They amount to ‘significant others’ discussed in the literature (Williams & Burden, 1997). Sun stated at the second interview that her supervisor would allocate native English-speaking project students to her so that she could have more opportunities to practise. In addition, her colleagues in the same lab were also enthusiastic to help her with her English and she appreciated that.

The effects of such support on the respondents are obvious. It creates a favourable atmosphere in which they feel encouraged to use English. It also exerts a positive influence on their effort to improve their English. Sun’s data sum this up well:

After all I’m a lazy person and I need other people to give a push... So it’s so good that they push me like these. If on the other hand they don’t care about you, they’re not bothered if you don’t speak English. Actually it’s like this in the West. It’s your own business and if you don’t want to learn, suit yourself. Nobody has the obligation [to make sure you learn]. Don’t you think? Therefore, what they did are really really good. I don’t
By contrast, the lack of data from Zhao indicating perceived support can be either explained by his background as a linguist and his higher level of proficiency or by other contextual factors. His higher linguistic ability may have enabled him to cope with most language use situations and therefore the need for support regarded as important by the others might simply not arise. The perceived level of support could be influenced by the type of working environment in which the respondents found themselves. For example, Sun and Li had more native or non-native speakers of English around than Zhao at the work place and the nature of Sun’s research (e.g. lab-based) seemed to entail more interpersonal contact.

Learners’ self-perceived support may have significant motivational implications. As the respondents commented, they felt encouraged to further improve their English. Besides, such a supportive atmosphere also seems to enhance their self-confidence in English, an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

**Difficulties encountered and confidence in English**

Another theme running through the interview data is the respondents’ perceived difficulties and the related concept of self-confidence in English. At the start of their study in the UK, the respondents commented that they experienced difficulties in speaking English and understanding spoken English, with the former being a more commonly reported problem. For example, Sun felt inadequate in expressing herself fully in English due to her perceived lack of phonological competence and useful vocabulary and, in order to understand others, she needed them to speak slowly and clearly. These difficulties caused inhibition when it came to speaking English, thus affecting her self-confidence. Such a lack of confidence affected her motivation to further practise her spoken English in real life. Qian’s case was similar. The difficulties facing Li in speaking and aural understanding, however, seem overwhelming. It was the single most distinctive and recurring theme in the data from his first interview. In his work environment, oral communications between him and his supervisors or other staff were very ineffective, if not completely impossible. Sometimes they had to resort to writing or other visual aids to help to put the messages across. Such ineffective communication led to low efficiency in his work. Misunderstandings arising from such oral communications were sometimes sufficiently serious to be face-threatening. In informal social situations, he felt it difficult to participate in conversations in English. He sometimes felt shy and hesitant to talk and he felt bad that his English was not fluent. Such difficulties also led to several incidents, which he considered to be extremely embarrassing and even potentially dangerous. However, in Zhao’s case, the difficulties encountered initially were mainly in the comprehension of heavily accented speech and sometimes in responding to formulaic expressions in English. Interestingly, despite being a linguist and the most advanced learner of the four, he felt that even responding to the most common daily exchanges such as ‘How are you?’ was not particularly
straightforward. Occasionally, Zhao felt nervous when he found it difficult to understand non-native speakers of English with a heavy accent.

By the end of the study period, some of the initial self-reported difficulties had not been entirely resolved and new problems were identified. Data from the second interview point to two major areas of difficulties in English – aural understanding and the hindrance of thinking in Chinese. All four respondents commented that they had a problem with their aural understanding, although the causes varied. The most advanced learner, Zhao, identified cultural aspects of language use as a major obstacle in his aural understanding, with dialect often adding to the difficulty. Qian felt the problem with his aural understanding lay in his vocabulary and sometimes a whole stretch of utterances simply passed uncomprehended because of it. Sun felt she still could not fully understand TV programmes in English, although she could not pinpoint the cause of the problem. Li’s perceived difficulty with his aural understanding remained a recurring theme at the second interview. He considered it to be the biggest obstacle to fluency in English.

The other self-perceived common problem was the issue of thinking in Chinese or of the translating process. All commented on the phenomenon at the second interview, although it seemed to differ in degree with each respondent. For example, Li felt that his way of thinking was still Chinese and sometimes he resorted to literal translation. He felt that such a process could make the English he produced complicated, as his rich repertory of Chinese could influence the English he thus created. He regarded such a way of thinking as an unbreakable barrier and believed that his age was a factor (he was the oldest of the four).

Despite such difficulties, there is evidence of increased self-confidence in English, at least in some of the respondents. In Sun’s case, this gain was obvious at the second interview:

I feel things are better than before in that sometimes I’ll take the initiative to ask others. Like before, I tried to avoid the question; that is, I tried not to ask if possible. . . . mainly because my aural understanding was in my way and then I was even less willing to speak. But now since they are better, I’m willing to ask them . . .

Perceived support, particularly that from within her social networks might have played an important role (Li, 2001). However, supportive social networks may not be sufficient in themselves. Li also felt that he had a very supportive social network but data from his second interview clearly indicated that he still felt a lack of confidence in his speaking and aural understanding, particularly the latter. It seems that he felt so overwhelmed by his difficulties that his confidence in these aspects was seriously undermined. Interestingly, although the results of proficiency measures showed that he had made progress in his oral/aural English (Li, 2001), he himself did not feel the change; this self-perception clearly had a negative impact on his self-confidence. Therefore, it can be argued that self-perceived improvement in the second language is an important contributing factor of an increase in self-confidence. This seems to lend support to the conception of self-perceived proficiency as a relevant dimension of self-confidence in a second language (see Clément et al., 1994).
Perceptions of success in learning English and attributions

The general areas where respondents felt that they had made progress were aural understanding, spoken English and the use of vocabulary. The areas where each respondent reported steady progress during the year were: the use of vocabulary for Zhao, aural understanding for Qian, aural understanding and speaking for Sun, and reading and writing for Li. In contrast, the areas where most felt progress had been minimal included reading, writing and speaking. Qian reported a lack of progress in all these areas at both interviews; Li was the only one who reported lack of progress both in speaking and aural understanding at the second interview.

When the respondents were asked about the factors they believed to be responsible for such outcomes, distinctive attributional patterns emerge. They tended to ascribe their self-perceived progress (or success) in English primarily to environmental factors and self-perceived lack of progress (or failure) primarily to personal factors. The environment was considered important both in terms of the opportunities it provided for exposure and the nature of such exposure. Sometimes it was perceived as exerting pressure on them to use English in various situations. However, respondents were more inclined to invoke personal factors when they made attributions about their failure. Both Qian and Li ascribed their shortcomings to the lack of practice in relevant areas, which they believed to be the result of their lack of initiative to seek opportunities to engage in such activities. However, we need to bear in mind that they were research students and their full-time job was their research project, which means that they were naturally constrained in how much effort they could practically invest to improve their English.

It is surprising though that none mentioned ability as a cause either for success or failure in their English. In discussions of achievement, it is well documented in the literature that, among Westerners (Graham, 1994), the most dominant causes that people offer for their success and failure are ability and effort. In view of this evidence, the notable absence of ability as a perceived cause for either their success or failure could be explained in terms of culture. A distinctive characteristic of the Chinese culture seems to be the upholding of the collectivistic ideal in the society (see Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Wen & Clément, 2003), as well as considerable personal effort. Closely related to this is the concept of modesty. As a general rule, being modest is deemed a virtue whereas boasting one’s own merits and talents is less valued. Such cultural characteristics might shed some light on why ability as a factor is missing completely in the respondents’ attributions of their success in learning English.

Nevertheless, given that they tend to attribute their success primarily to stable factors such as the environment, and failure to unstable but controllable personal factors such as effort, there is a strong possibility that they will be motivated to continue to strive for further success in the future.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study set out to investigate motivation to learn English by Chinese research students in the UK. Interview data suggest that they were motivated to learn out of the belief in the instrumental or extrinsic value of
English, primarily in their studies. They had learning goals that embodied their needs and focused on self-perceived weaknesses in their oral/aural skills. They were committed to their goals and persisted to attain them. They valued their current learning environment in general and saw it as supportive of their major goals. On the other hand, some learners did not feel that this naturalistic environment was a guarantee of actual opportunities for learning; instead, the learning that was taking place was seen as incidental. In response to this perceived deficiency of the environment, some learners, particularly weaker ones, opted for more structured learning (e.g. seeking instruction in the language).

Social attitudes have been considered an important basis of second-language motivation in the social psychological tradition. The respondents in the present study had both positive and negative attitudes towards the British, mostly developed as a result of direct experience in the host society. However, positive and negative attitudes seemed to have differential effects on their willingness to interact with the British and therefore their motivation to learn. Another theme emerging from the data was their perceived institutional or interpersonal support, which seemed to have a positive impact on their self-confidence and motivation to learn. Although all respondents reported linguistic and psycholinguistic challenges, there was evidence of increased self-confidence in some learners, which seemed to have developed over time in supportive environments. However, self-perceived improvement in proficiency seemed to be a prerequisite for the development of self-confidence. The respondents also reported distinctive attributional patterns, which were not only conducive to their motivation to learn but also seemed to reflect cultural characteristics.

Data on motivation were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and the respondents were prompted to reflect on their own learning experiences in some depth. This method was shown to be productive, providing rich qualitative data on the motivational mechanisms operating in these learners. Such research will undoubtedly complement insights gained from quantitative research. However, the present author is aware of potential problems associated with self-report data (Oller & Perkins, 1978a, 1978b) and acknowledges the potential weakness of the lack of triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Hammersely & Atkinson, 1995) in the present study. The data collection procedure (e.g. two-stage data collection) was, however, designed to minimise these problems.

It is hoped that findings from this small scale but in-depth investigation will contribute to an understanding of motivation in second-language learning in an informal setting, a particularly under-researched area. The present study may also have implications for target country institutions in terms of the provision of initial support to Chinese research students. They need supportive environments where they have the opportunity and feel encouraged to experience the second language in real life. However, given the nature of their study (e.g. research students in the UK are often lone researchers, who do not usually attend lectures), such environments do not seem to be readily available, even in the target language country. Measures that help to create such microenvironments will undoubtedly assist them in overcoming the...
linguistic challenges and fostering positive social attitudes and self-confidence, particularly in weaker learners. For those who are involved with Chinese students in higher education, one way to help, for example, is to ensure there is social interaction at the workplace. Given that these students have a clear understanding of the benefits of learning the language and are motivated to learn, such efforts on the part of the host institution may be effective in contributing towards a positive experience in the students’ academic and social life in their residence abroad.

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