

HOW CAN MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES FACILITATE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING FOR JAPANESE EFL STUDENTS?

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Abstract

After early motivational researchers established framework of motivation in SLA, in the 2000s, Dörnyei (2001) suggested that motivation theories should be implemented in the classroom. His definition of motivational strategies was ‘techniques that promote the individual’s goal-related behavior’ (p. 28). In our previous research, we examined what kind of motivational strategies highly motivated language learners use to keep motivated. Some of the strategies include improving English skills through practical use such as exchange e-mails and seeing the same movie over and over. Introducing these strategies to less motivated students in class was found beneficial, too. However, what students can learn in one classroom time (usually 90 minutes) is very limited and often less-motivated students do not want to study outside the classroom. Even if they do, they use wrong methods, wrong materials, sometimes with a goal too high. Learners can learn by themselves more effectively with the help of these motivational strategies. In this study, we will introduce motivational strategies highly motivated learners have used out of the questionnaire results of 1059 students at 18 universities, and will show step by step how teachers at four different universities can help guide middle or lower level students’ autonomous learning using these strategies especially to enhance listening skills.

1 Introduction

The field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the term motivation has become a familiar icon for SLA research. Though it is widely recognized that motivation is extremely important and a key factor for successful second language (L2) learning, not everyone agrees about what motivation actually consists of (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Ellis, 2001). In the traditional motivational studies, for example, Gardner and Lambert (1959) looked at motivation from the social-psychological perspectives while Schumann (1978), Giles & Byrne (1982), and Beebe

& Giles (1984) approached to motivation by Speech Accommodation Theory, all of which have been heavily influenced by the work of Gardner and Lambert. Consequently, the term motivation has been used as “a general cover term- a dustbin- to include a number of possibly distinct concepts, each of which may have different origins and different effects and require different classroom treatment” (McDonough, 1981, p. 143).

Dörnyei (2001), on the other hand, suggested that motivation theories should be implemented in the classroom. His definition of motivational strategies was ‘techniques that promote the individual’s goal-related behavior’ (p. 28). Dörnyei’s (2001) focus was on the teachers’ use of motivational strategies collected from previous research results on learner motivation. In our previous research, Abe and Ueda (2008) asked students to list their strategies for facilitating motivation, and validated the notion that motivational strategies can be used not only by teachers but also learners. This point of view is especially crucial when teachers put value on learner autonomy and orientation toward the continued, long-term acquisition of a second/foreign language.

In another study, we investigated “How to motivate language learners?” and “What demotivates learners?” (Sugino, Ueda, Abe, & Shimizu, 2013). Just as motivation is important in language learning and teaching and SLA research, demotivation constitutes an important factor. According to Dörnyei (2001),¹ demotivation in SLA is the flip side of motivation, which concerns specific external forces that negatively affect learners’ willingness to study the language. This study reveals that students lost their motivation due to 1. difficulties of grammar, 2. being unable to read long passages, 3. disliking teachers, and 4. unclear goal of learning English, and the period that students most frequently lost motivation was the first semester of their junior high school days.

As for the third factor, “did not like teachers,” Ara (2008) argues that learners themselves need to have strong desire to learn new subjects even though their circumstances are fully satisfying such as unfavorable teachers. Ara further argues that if learners become more tolerant to teachers with stronger desire to learn, it should lead to construct better relationship between teachers and learners. Ushioda (2008) further sustains that learners who rely on teachers to motivate them are unlikely to exhibit the necessary efforts outside of class to sufficiently develop their communicative proficiency. Therefore, learner autonomy plays an important role in L2 learning. Benson (2011) has defined learner autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning (p. 58).”

Also in this research by Sugino, Ueda, Abe, & Shimizu (2013), we examined what kind of motivational strategies highly motivated language learners use, and the results showed that the strategies they employ are: One student tries to convince her that she does not dislike English. Another student never gets demotivated. She tries hard to improve her English skills through practical use such as exchange e-mails with people in English-speaking countries, and seeing the same movie over and over. The other student pushes herself by taking certifying examinations such as TOEIC and TOEFL.

She feels young college students nowadays are attracted to ‘cool people with high income,’ and if there are good role-models to attract them, they will be more motivated. It is hoped that the strategies that highly motivated students employ will be beneficial to less-motivated students in studying English.

As noted, what students can learn in one classroom time (usually 90 minutes) is very limited and often less-motivated students do not want to study outside the classroom. Even if they do, they use wrong methods, wrong materials, sometimes with a goal too high. Therefore, learner autonomy is necessary to motivate them and facilitate their L2 learning though being autonomous does not necessarily mean learning in isolation, but rather having the ability to metacognitively and critically make decisions as to the means one uses to learn and develop.... Students learn autonomy more quickly through guided cooperative learning in which they collaborate with peers to find and create their autonomous and critical voices (Murphy & Jacobs, 2000, p. 228).

Thus the purpose of the present study was to explore motivation/autonomy/learner strategy interface by investigating the following two research questions.

- (a) What kind of motivational strategies do advanced students use for developing listening skills by themselves?
- (b) How can these strategies help guide less capable student's autonomous learning to facilitate their listening abilities?

2 Method

2.1 Participant

In the original study by Ueda, Sugino and Abe (2013), the total number of 1,012 Japanese students across nineteen universities participated in the questionnaire. Some of the participants, especially those majoring in English were from prestigious universities, but the majority of the participants were from middle or lower level universities as far as English abilities are concerned. In this study, we chose 108 college students from three universities.

2.2 Procedure and instruments

Out of the 1,012 participants in the original study, we chose the participants in University R where students are English majors and the level of school is considered prestigious. Out of 144 students in University R, 68 students answered open-ended questions, "What kind (s) of motivational strategies you think effective, and explain how you use them. Only the comments related to developing listening abilities were chosen and later divided into 12 categories for the self-study checklist (see Appendix). Then this checklist is administered to 107 students in four English classes at three private universities whose English levels are middle or lower. In these classes, parts of the classroom activities involve listening activities.

The participants were asked to write their background information, such as 1) gender, 2) school year in university, and 3) major. They were then asked to choose 1) what kind of learning strategies they are using to improve their listening ability and 2) what they think is the most effective way in acquiring English. Then they were asked to choose three learning strategies they would like to try for the following week and the reason (s). Then the following week, the same question was asked but this time, the effect of the learning strategies they chose in the previous week was added. Excel was used to categorize the data.

3 Results

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the 107 participants' background information. Most of the participants were freshman and sophomores because English is mandatory for first and second year students at most universities in Japan before starting their own specialties in their third and fourth years.

Table 1. School year in university

School year	No. of Participants	Percentage
freshman	70	65.4%
sophomore	25	23.3
Junior	8	7.5
senior	4	3.7
Total	107	100.0

Table 2 shows the number of majors and the percentage of male and female students in each field. Since the liberal arts classes are elective, they include foreign language studies, law, economics, history, management, Political Science, and Shinto studies. Science majors include Applied Chemistry and Mechanical Engineering.

Table 2. Participants' majors and ratio of male/female students

major	No. of Participants	Male (%)	Female(%)
Liberal arts	37	14 (38%)	23(62%)
Science	70	63 (90%)	7(10%)
Total	107	100.0	

Since we wanted to pay attention to the results of Self-study Checklist for Developing Listening Abilities, in this paper, we would not include the open-ended answers for 1) what kind of learning strategies they are using and 2) what they think is the most effective way in acquiring English.

After some listening activities, they marked their listening tests by themselves to see where they should develop further and what they think they should do to overcome their weakness. In the first week, they were asked, 'Which language strategies would you like to try to improve your listening skills? Choose up to three learning strategies from the checking list' and were asked their reasons. Table 3 shows the most frequent learning strategies in a descending order.

Table 3. Participants' choices for the first week

Learning Strategies (# in the list)	Total no. of choices
Watch and Listen to YouTube (#2)	79
Use DVD (#1)	52
Increase the number of vocabulary (#10)	40
Listen to Music in English (#3)	21
Study for TOEIC (#7)	19

Self-rewarding (#12)	9
Use English through Facebook (#6)	5
Use cable TV and listen to English (#4)	4
Talk to foreign friends through skype (#5)	3
Communicate with foreign customers at a part-time job (#8)	3
Learn from foreigners or Japanese friends living overseas(#9)	1
Make an opportunity to learn English off-campus such as conversation school (#11)	1
Total number of participants $N=107$	237

As seen in Table 3, for the top three choices students chose were 1. Watch and Listen to YouTube, 2. Use DVD, and 3. Increase the number of vocabulary in that order. To the question 3) What are the reasons why you chose them?, following are some of the answers:

- Sounds enjoyable
- We can start easily and as soon as we can
- Can try easily and last longer
- Like to see movies
- It's convenient and inexpensive

Then in the following week, the students were given the same level of listening test in the class and again evaluate them by themselves. After the evaluation, they were asked to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do you feel that the strategies that you chose last week were effective? Why or why not?
- 2) Which language strategies would you like to try to improve your listening skills? Choose up to three learning strategies from the checking list.
- 3) What are the reasons why you chose them?

In this week, 13 participants did not respond to the questions. The participants totaled 94 in this week.

Table 4 shows some of the answers about the effectiveness of the strategies that they chose last week and the reasons.

Table 4. The effectiveness of the strategies and the reasons

Last week choices	Effectiveness of the strategies and reasons (selected answers)
1,2,3	I thought I could do better on a test this week.
1,2,8	At the part-time job, some foreigners ordered me in English.
2,7, 10	I need to know more words.
1,2,3	Too busy for a part-time job and could not do anything
1,3, 8	It was not effective because I did not listen to them repeatedly
1, 2, 3	I am getting used to listening little by little.
2, 8, 10	I tried 2 but I cannot feel my abilities are improving.

2, 3, 10	I don't think we can see the result so quickly.
2,3,13	Not so effective. I am sorry my points didn't improve.
1, 7, 8	I saw DVDs and could understand some words.
2,3,10	I can sing with CDs a little now.
3, 6, 10	No particular difference.
1, 2, 10	I can know listen to music with reading lyrics in English

Again for the second week, students answered the following questions. Which language strategies would you like to try to improve your listening skills? Choose up to three learning strategies from the checking list, and they are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Participants' choices for the second week

Learning Strategies (# in the list)	Total no. of choices
Listen to Music in English (#3)	67
Watch and Listen to YouTube (#2)	60
Increase the number of vocabulary (#10)	40
Use DVD (#1)	38
Study for TOEIC (#7)	17
Self-rewarding (#12)	10
Learn from foreigners or Japanese friends living overseas (#9)	5
Use English through Facebook (#6)	4
Communicate with foreign customers at a part-time job (#8)	4
Talk to foreign friends through skype (#5)	3
Make an opportunity to learn English off-campus such as conversation school (#11)	3
Use cable TV and listen to English (#4)	1
Total number of participants $N=94$	252

To the question 3) What are the reasons why you chose them?, the following are some of the answers:

- Because I chose them last week and did them.
- I want to continue practicing with the same choices.
- As I enjoyed doing them last week, I want to continue this week, too.
- I chose the same choices. Though they were not effective, I want to try them again.
- Last choices were effective so I want to continue.
- I want to study English more.
- With these choices, I can try easily and continue.
- I can do them in my limited free time.
- They are inexpensive.

As seen in Table 4 and 5, the strategies that students chose did not differ much in order. The top four strategies the participants chose were 1) Listen to Music in English, 2) Watch and Listen to YouTube, 3) Increase the number of vocabulary, and 4) Watch DVD. That 'increase the number of vocabulary' came in the second indicate that students feel vocabulary is

important even for listening. The overall results indicated that participants in this study chose learning strategies that they can do by themselves without interacting other people, on the other hand, the highly motivated and competent students in the previous study chose interpersonal activities such as ‘talking with foreigners’, ‘joining an English conversational club’, ‘talking with friends through skype’, and ‘attending conversation school off campus’

4 Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore motivation/autonomy/learner strategy interface by investigating the following two research questions.

- (a) What kind of motivational strategies do advanced students use for developing listening skills by themselves?
- (b) How can these strategies help guide less capable student’s autonomous learning to facilitate their listening abilities?

For the research question (a), we categorized the open-ended answers into 12 strategies and they were indicated in the self-study checklist for developing listening abilities for the present study. As mentioned in previously in the result section, advanced students rather chose interpersonal activities such as ‘talking with foreigners’, ‘joining an English conversational club’, ‘talking with friends through skype’, and ‘attending conversation school off campus’.

Besides, they recommended “imagining the future,” such as imagining a situation where they will have to use English on the job and “actually using English” in their daily lives. They were eager to use English in part-time jobs, such as working for a restaurant and serving customers who spoke English.

As mentioned earlier, what students can learn in one classroom time (usually 90 minutes) is very limited and often less-motivated students do not want to study outside the classroom. Even if they do, they use wrong methods, wrong materials, sometimes with a goal too high. Learners can learn by themselves more effectively with the help of these motivational strategies. Though this study has limitations such as we need a follow up result, however, by giving them a listening test, know its result right away, choose learning strategies from a self-study list, and students’ carrying them out until the next class time, not only the teachers but also the students could explore motivation/autonomy/learner strategy interface.

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Appendix

Self-study Checklist for Developing Listening Abilities

No.	Learning Strategies
1	<i>Use DVD</i> Ex. Choose the movies that I can understand and imitate phrases. Watch DVDs in English with Japanese subtitles and then watch it again in English with English subtitles.
2	Watch and Listen to YouTube Ex. Listen to the same song repeatedly. Listen to songs with simple lyrics. Watch 'funny shootings' or 'cooking shootings' in English.
3	<i>Listen to music in English</i> Try to understand the lyrics of favorite singers to develop listening comprehension Many Disney's songs are familiar and easy to memorize and above all fun
4	Use cable TV and listen to English
5	Talk to foreign friends through skype
6	Use English through Facebook
7	Study for TOEIC(competence test) ex. Aim at certain points and study for it
8	Communicate with foreign customers at a part-time job
9	Learn from foreigners or Japanese friends living overseas Ex. Join international exchange club such as ESS (English Speaking Society)
10	Increase the number of vocabulary ex. Check the Net or dictionary to check a unknown word
11	Make an opportunity to learn English off-campus such as conversation school
12	Others (Self-rewarding) Ex. give myself a reward after studying Use image-training (imagine yourself using English at work or school overseas)