

How to Motivate English Underachievers in Junior High School

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, English learning has become one of the core contents of secondary education. However, many underachievers in junior high school face challenges in English learning, which leads to their lack of learning motivation and affects their learning effectiveness. Based on self-efficacy theory, attribution theory, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this study investigates the factors affecting learning motivation among English underachievers in junior high school including lack of interest, low self-efficacy, learning anxiety, insufficient family educational support, and inadequate teaching methods. The paper proposes corresponding strategies for teachers, schools, and families to stimulate motivation. This research aims to provide a scientific basis for improving the learning effectiveness of English underachievers.

Keywords: Junior English; underachievers; learning motivation; motivating strategies.

1. Introduction

The importance of English as a global language is unquestionable. It is not only a core subject for university entrance exams but also a key skill for future career development and international communication. However, there are a great number of students who have trouble in learning English. They are often called underachievers. English underachievers in junior high school usually show poor concentration, low participation, low quality of homework completion, weak language expression skills, lack of learning strategies, and strong dependence on teachers and classmates. Motivation is admitted by many scholars and teachers as the main factor influencing students' process of learning English.

According to the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards, learning motivation plays a significant role for students. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors affecting the motivation of English underachievers in junior high school and to propose strategies to motivate them. It not only helps teachers to identify problems and find better ways of instruction, but also helps underachievers become confident and interested in learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Key Terms

This section discusses the two definitions of the key terms of this study. The first is the definition of "learning motivation" and the second is the definition of "underachiever", because inadequate motivation is one of the major factors contributing to the low performance of English underachievers, which in turn affects the formation and development of their motivation to learn

2.1.1. Definition of learning motivation

Learning motivation is an important concept in educational psychology that refers to the force that drives individuals to engage in learning activities and persevere. It has been studied by many experts, scholars and teachers and was defined by a variety of ways.

Gardner defines motivation as "the mixture of effort and desire to achieve the goal of learning language and favorable

attitude towards learning the language"[1]. Gardner and MacIntyre also define motivation as the combination of students' desire, satisfaction and their efforts to goal[2]. Accordingly, learners are more likely to develop strong learning motivation when they have clear goals and combine their efforts with positive attitudes. According to Gardner, foreign language learners' positive psychological states and deliberate actions during the learning process constitute learning motivation. To summarize, Gardner's perspective focuses primarily on goal setting and attitudes in language learning. Ryan and Deci define learning motivation as an intrinsic drive that motivates an individual to pursue the acquisition of knowledge and skills[3]. In this study, learning motivation is defined as the psychological process by which an individual, driven by internal and external factors, achieves a learning goal through effort and a positive attitude.

From the above conceptions, learning motivation can be defined as the psychological process by which an individual, driven by internal and external factors, achieves a learning goal through effort and a positive attitude. It encompasses the desire, effort, and attitudes that propel a person toward achieving their learning goals. Namely, learning motivation has a profound impact on students' learning. A strong motivation to learn can increase students' learning engagement and concentration, making them more willing to spend time and energy to understand and master new knowledge. Conversely, students with lower motivation to learn may not behave well and cannot get a better achievement.

2.1.2. Definition of underachievers

There are numerous other names that are also used to characterize students that struggle with learning, such as "learning disabilities", "learning difficulties", "poor students", "learning deficiency" and "underachievers".

In early research, underachievers were defined simply as a group of people with normal intelligence who were significantly behind in their academic performance[4]. With the development of cognitive psychology, academics began to pay attention to its internal mechanism, for example, the United States Individuals with Disabilities Education Act defines learning difficulty as 'an individual's impairment in listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or

mathematical ability that cannot be effectively improved through conventional teaching strategies'[5]. Chen and Liu suggested that underachievers are 'students whose long-term academic performance is below the expected level due to deficiencies in cognitive strategies or dysfunctional non-intellectual factors (e.g., motivation, emotion) in a regular educational setting'[6]. Based on the characteristics of foreign language learning, Cheng defines them as 'students who have normal language learning potential but whose English proficiency does not meet the requirements of the curriculum standards due to insufficient language input, cultural identity barriers, or metacognitive strategy deficits'[7]. Underachievers are students who have specific cognitive or learning strategy deficiencies that deviate from the norm in terms of knowledge base, learning habits, learning methods, learning psychology, quality, etc., and are unable to meet the basic requirements of the curriculum standards[8].

In this paper, "English underachievers" refers to students whose English learning performance is significantly below the class average (e.g., more than 20 percent below the class average on three consecutive exams) and who are unable to meet the basic requirements of the English Language Curriculum Standards, but whose intellectual and physical development is within the normal range.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1. Self-efficacy theory

Self-efficacy theory, developed by Bandura, emphasizes how an individual's beliefs about his or her ability to complete a particular task affects behavioral choices, effort and persistence[9]. Self-efficacy is shaped by four main sources: successful experiences, alternative experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states.

2.2.2. Attribution theory

Attributions are the explanations and evaluations that people make about the causes of their own or others' activities and their outcomes. Fritz, Kelly and Weiner have all elaborated and developed attribution theory one after another. Attribution theory was first proposed by Fritz Heider, who argued that people tend to interpret events on the basis of cause and effect. Subsequently, Kelly further developed the theory by proposing the principle of covariation. Eventually, Weiner systematized attribution theory into three dimensions and six factors, laying the foundations of modern attribution theory[10]. The three dimensions are internal and external attribution, stable and unstable attribution, controllable and uncontrollable attribution. The six factors are ability, effort, task difficulty, luck, mood, and external environment. Among them, ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck are the four most important attributions. (See the table 2-1).

Table 2-1. Six Elements and Three Dimensions of Attribution Theory

Elements	Stability		Locus		Control	
	Stable	Unstable	Internal	External	Controllable	Uncontrollable
Ability	√		√			√
Effort		√	√		√	
Task Difficulty	√			√		√
Luck		√		√		√
Mood		√	√			√
External Environment		√		√		√

Research has shown that the adaptive attribution model has a positive impact on motivation to learn. Attributing success to effort and strategy, and viewing failure as a temporary, changeable outcome that can be worked on, helps to increase learners' self-confidence and persistence. On the contrary, attributing failure to a lack of competence (internal, uncontrollable, and stable) may lead to learned helplessness and reduce motivation to learn[11].

2.2.3. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is one of the most influential theories in psychology, particularly in the fields of human motivation and personality[12]. Maslow organizes human needs into a five-tier pyramid, starting from basic physiological needs at the base and ascending to self-actualization at the top.

The foundational level of the pyramid consists of physiological needs, such as food, water, and shelter, which are essential for survival. Once these are met, individuals seek safety and security, including personal and financial stability. The third level, belonging and love needs, emphasizes social connections, relationships, and a sense of community. Esteem needs, the fourth level, involve the desire for respect, recognition, and self-worth. Finally, self-actualization represents the pursuit of personal growth, creativity, and fulfilling one's potential. (See Figure 2-2).

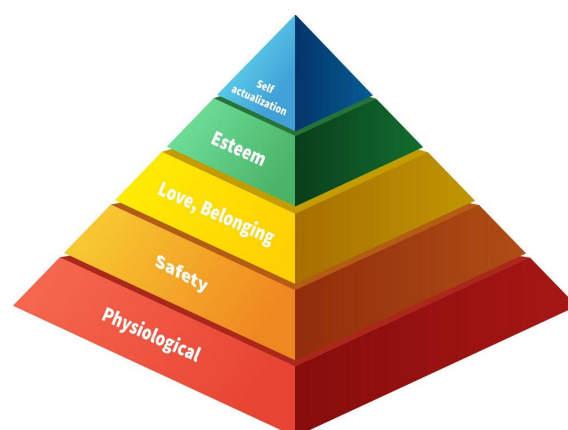


Figure 2-2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow categorized these seven needs into deficiency needs and growth needs. The first four needs are deficiency needs, which are necessary for our survival and important for physical and mental health, and must be satisfied to some degree; once satisfied, the motivation generated by them will disappear or diminish. The latter three needs belong to growth needs, which are important for our adaptation to society and can seldom be fully satisfied.

2.3. Relevant Research

Self-efficacy theory, attribution theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory provide important theoretical support for this study. Based on these theories, there are some relevant researches about learning motivation and underachievers' learning motivation.

2.3.1. Relevant research about motivation

Domestic research on foreign language learning motivation arose in the 1980s. The most basic classifications of learning motivation are Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation. Deci and Ryan in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) stated that the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is the source of motivation[13]. Intrinsic motivation comes from the internal needs of the individual, while extrinsic motivation comes from the external environment. And they believe that intrinsic motivation is more conducive to students' long-term learning outcomes and creativity development.

Gardner and Lambert introduced the concepts of integrative motivation and instrumental motivation[14]. Integrative Motivation refers to students' motivation to learn in order to establish a connection with the target linguistic and cultural group. This type of motivation stresses the social and cultural integrative function of language learning. Instrumental Motivation refers to the motivation of students to learn in order to achieve pragmatic goals. This type of motivation emphasizes the instrumental and pragmatic nature of language learning. Instrumental motivation, while effective in driving students towards specific outcomes, may not always foster a deep appreciation for the language itself. It is important to balance this goal-oriented approach with intrinsic motivation, which arises from within the individual.

Research on underachievers' motivation shows that learning motivation affects learning attitude, interest, and strategies. Stimulating and cultivating the learning motivation of underachievers is an important issue that needs urgent solution.

2.3.2. Relevant research about underachievers' learning motivation

Many researchers have investigated and studied the learning motivation of underachievers. Foreign scholars are inclined to study learning motivation from the perspective of comparison between high achievers and low achievers. For example, McCoach and Siegle compare the attitudes, perceptions and motivations of high achievers and low achievers and confirm that academic motivation predicts academic achievement[15]. Similarly, Samad, Etemadzadeh and Far investigate instrumental and convergent motivation of IELTS high achievers and low achievers in their study, and the results of the study show that language proficiency of high achievers is closely related to convergent motivation[16].

Researchers in China have made a lot of research results on the learning motivation of underachievers. Learning motivation has an impact on many aspects of them. Geng, in his study on the influence of learning motivation on the English learning of high school English underachievers, proposes that learning motivation affects the learning attitude, learning interest and learning strategies of high school English underachievers[17]. Therefore, stimulating and cultivating the learning motivation of students who are struggling is an important issue that needs to be solved urgently. In order to improve the level of learning motivation of underachievers, Lu puts forward the strategies of changing

underachievers' understanding of the value of English learning, grafting their original hobbies to learning, enriching the learning content and creating a learning atmosphere in the light of the characteristics of junior high school students and the characteristics of the English language subject[18].

3. Strategies to Motivate English Underachievers

There are some implications, which is helpful to motivate English underachievers.

For teachers, teachers' teaching style has an important impact on students' learning attitudes and effects. Teachers should flexibly adjust their teaching style according to the actual situation of students and avoid homogenization. For example, for students with high learning anxiety, teachers can adopt a more accommodating and encouraging teaching style to help students build up their self-confidence through positive feedback and gradual guidance; for students with low self-efficacy, teachers can design some moderately difficult tasks to let students gradually experience success, thus enhancing their learning motivation.

For schools, because of the low self-efficacy and lack of appropriate learning strategies of English underachievers, the implementation of tiered teaching and individual counselling is an extremely effective initiative. Schools can divide the class into groups of different levels according to students' English proficiency and learning abilities, and make different teaching objectives and contents for each group. For the group of English underachievers, teaching should focus on the consolidation of basic knowledge and the teaching of learning methods, and appropriately slow down the teaching progress, so that they can keep up with the pace of teaching and gradually improve their learning performance. At the same time, teachers should carry out individual counselling for the specific problems of each English underachiever. Individual tutoring can be conducted either face-to-face after class or remotely through the online platform, helping English underachievers to overcome their learning difficulties in all aspects.

For family, family education plays a vital role in the learning process of students. Parents should maintain close communication with teachers to understand the learning situation and psychological state of students, and avoid exerting too much pressure on students in their studies. Parents can encourage students to express their confusion in learning and provide appropriate assistance by creating a relaxed home learning atmosphere. For example, parents can work out a study plan with students to help them organize their time wisely, or stimulate their intrinsic motivation to learn by discussing the meaning of English learning with them. In addition, parents should also pay attention to the mental health of their students, so as to avoid neglecting the emotional needs of their students due to excessive concern about their grades. Through home-school co-operation, students can be provided with a fully supportive learning environment.

Finally, the learning environment profoundly affects students' attitudes and outcomes. Teachers should endeavour to create a relaxed, active and tolerant learning environment so that students feel safe and respected in the classroom. For example, teachers can stimulate students' interest in the classroom by designing some interesting classroom activities; enhance students' self-confidence by motivating them to

actively participate in classroom interactions; and facilitate students to identify and correct problems in the learning process through timely feedback and guidance. In addition, the school should give students a good learning atmosphere outside the classroom, such as setting up English learning groups, organizing English corner activities and so on, to give them more language practice. By creating an active learning and teaching environment can effectively reduce students' anxiety and promote their learning effectiveness.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary

This study investigates the factors affecting the learning motivation of English underachievers in junior high school including low self-efficacy, inappropriate attribution, learning anxiety, insufficient family support, and inadequate teaching methods. Based on this, the study proposes strategies for teachers, schools, and families to stimulate learning motivation.

4.2. Limitations of the Research

This study still has some limitations. Firstly, the strategies proposed are primarily derived from theoretical deduction. They lack empirical validation through direct classroom experimentation or systematic data collection within a specific junior high school context.

Secondly, the factors affecting English underachievers are multidimensional, including individual differences in learners' age, gender, cognitive ability, learning styles, etc. Therefore, the strategies for cultivating motivation should be different from person to person.

4.3. Suggestions for Further Study

To address the limitations and advance, future research can proceed in the following directions.

Firstly, empirical and action-oriented studies are strongly recommended. Researchers could conduct action research projects in real junior high school classrooms, using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Secondly, longitudinal studies could also be conducted to assess the long-term impact of motivation-enhancing strategies. In addition, more attention could be paid to the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and how to tailor interventions to individual differences.

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