

Correlations among Motivation, Course Achievement and Proficiency of EFL University Learners

Haedong Kim
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul,
Korea

ABSTRACT--- *The aim of the study is to illustrate the correlations among motivational orientation, incoming English proficiency and outgoing English achievement. The main investigation was carried out within the context of a compulsory general English course for first grade university students in South Korea. The correlation between the two variables of incoming motivational orientation and current English proficiency was computed as $r = -.0237$ ($n = 142$), indicating no correlation. The correlation between incoming motivational orientation and outgoing English achievement was computed as $r = .1592$ ($n = 154$), indicating virtually no correlation. The correlation between incoming English proficiency and outgoing English course achievement was computed as $r = .3246$ ($n = 172$), indicating a very low level of relationship. However, there was a significant difference in the scores for final course grade between the learner-group of high and low orientation, $df = 152$, $t = 2.1705$, $p < .05$ ($= .0315$). Consequently, in dealing with motivational orientation, individual differences need to be considered, such as categorizing individuals into the high and low levels of motivational orientation.*

Keywords – EFL Motivation, Course Achievement and Proficiency

1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to illustrate the correlations among motivational orientation, incoming English proficiency and outgoing English achievement. The findings – partly based on my Ph.D thesis – may have a potential pedagogical implication for ELT teachers, who pay attention to individual learners' motivation. By identifying the level of motivational orientation of classroom learners at the beginning of a course, namely 'incoming' motivational orientation, a teacher may carry out 'motivational treatments' selectively on learners with a low level of motivational orientation. Hutchinson and Klepač point out that "ELT has rightly focused on the question of how to motivate the students to learn. But we must not forget the motivation that the student already has" [1, p. 143].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivational Orientation

The term 'motivational orientation' refers to long-term goals, purposes or reasons for studying English as a foreign language [2]. In the present study, the model employed to define learner motivation is that of Gardner. The main reason is that: many models adding new motivational components into the Gardnerian model are apparently thinking along similar lines. In other words, there may be a "solid base" in our understanding of EFL learner motivation in this model [3].

Gardner defines 'motivation' as "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language"[4]. For the present investigation purpose, we propose that learner motivation may be reflected by intensity/level or amount of desire to achieve the goal of learning, behavioural effort in classroom and experienced satisfaction associated with achieving this goal. 'Motivational orientation' is one of the components of learner motivation. It is only relevant to 'the goal of learning'. According to the definition drawn by Gardner and MacIntyre "orientations refer to reasons for studying a second language, while motivation refers to the directed, reinforcing effort to learn the language" [5, p. 58]. More specifically, there are two sub-types of motivational orientation identified by Gardner and his collaborators. The one is 'integrative orientation' which involves a personal interest in the people and culture of the target language group, and the other is 'instrumental orientation' which reflects "the economic and practical advantages" of learning a target language, for example getting a job [6, p. 52]. In this study, we focus on 'orientation' rather than other motivational components, because of "its simple and yet comprehensive nature" [7, p.520]. Van Lier points out that, in the ELT field, "virtually all discussion of motivation has been heavily dominated by motivational orientation" [8, p.104].

Since we focus on a particular ‘type’ of motivational component, our concern is not the question: ‘which types of motivation/orientation do the learners have?’ but the question: ‘whether the learners are more or less motivated?’ In other words, this study concentrates on different ‘levels’ or ‘amounts’ of motivational orientation (of Gardner type) not their different ‘types’ or ‘kinds’. Consequently, in this study, the term ‘level of motivational orientation’ - and ‘learners of high/low orientation or motivation’ - is used when we are talking about amount of motivation - whether within the various sub-types of orientation or not).

Individual Differences

In considering ‘individual differences’ in motivational orientation, there may be two possible ways of categorizing individual learners. One way is to divide the learners according to ‘level’ of motivational orientation, and the other way is to categorize them on the basis of ‘type’ of orientation. In other words, the former divides the learners into groups of high and low orientation, whereas the latter categorizes them as integratively and instrumentally oriented groups.

In the present investigation, we adopt the former way, for the following. First, as Finocchiaro and Brumfit argue “‘instrumental’ and ‘integrative’ should not be considered as standing at different ends of the learning process. Both types of motivation should be fostered in the language classroom” [9, p. 34]). Gardner and MacIntyre also point out, “someone who is oriented to learn a language for integrative reasons might well recognize the instrumental value of learning the language and vice versa” [10, p.58]. Ellis mentions that “Learners can, of course, have both integrative and instrumental motivation (a possibility not clearly allowed for in the earlier work but acknowledged in the latter)” [11, p. 510]. In this aspect, it would be better to avoid a strict bipolar view of the two types of motivational orientation. Second, the categorization of integratively and instrumentally orientated learners would be preferable if a ‘comparative’ study were to be designed and the results obtained from different settings, such as bilingual vs. monolingual or bicultural vs. monocultural. In the present study, however, only one context is selected, and the chosen South-Korean context is a racially homogeneous and primarily monolingual society. It seems suitable, therefore, for us to categorise the learners based on their levels, i.e. high and low level, of orientation. Third, we hold that categorizing the learners by levels of motivational orientation may reflect more truly the reality of an ordinary classroom. A classroom usually has learners of high and low level of motivational orientation, regardless of the group’s preference for any particular type of orientation. It has been documented that achievement in foreign/second language learning can be facilitated by motivation. It has also been reported that learners’ interest in school-subject and learning achievement is correlated. For instance, Bloom reviews various studies reporting the relationship between primary or secondary school learners’ interest in the ‘school-subject’, such as mathematics and foreign language, and academic achievement, measured by test scores or course grades [12]. The average correlation that he found was about .31. Although the actual level of correlation reported is very low, there still exists a certain level of correlation.

In this study, what we focus on is one of the learners’ motivational components, namely orientation. In other words, we do not assess other various components of the learners’ motivation that can influence achievement.

3. METHODOLOGY

Setting

The target course for the main opinion survey was a general English course for first grade university students in South Korea. It is compulsory in most universities in South Korea for first grade students to take a two-credit or three-credit (two or three hours per week for 16 weeks) general English course. Emphasis in the course is on the development of communicative ability. In some universities, English is the sole medium of instruction in the course. In some universities students there are 20 to 30 students in a classroom, whereas in others there are over 40.

First grade students have had minimum of six years English learning in secondary school. Most of them have had little opportunity to use English outside the classroom, since it is rarely used for social interaction in South Korea. A limited number of students attend private institutes for extra classes in English.

The aim of the course, identified by the course syllabus, was to practice communication in English. None of the syllabuses mentioned the development of grammar as a course aim. The syllabus content and the class schedule followed topics of the chosen coursebook. Classroom work included individual, pair, small group and whole class activities, and classes were conducted entirely in English.

Participants

A total of 308 learners took part in the main survey on motivational orientation at the beginning of the course. A total of 231 learners supplied their English test scores on a nation-wide university entrance examination in the main questionnaire. A total of 250 learners’ final course grades from colleague-teachers, including this teacher-investigator, were obtained.

Instruments and Procedures

The learners were asked to rate how far they agreed on the importance of each of the eight items representing motivational orientation. Four instrumental and four integrative items were mixed and presented in a random order: the integrative items were the 1st, the 4th, the 6th and the 8th. Ratings were on a 7-point Likert-scale on which 1 = *fully disagree*, 2 = *quite disagree*, 3 = *disagree*, 4 = *not sure*, 5 = *partly agree*, 6 = *mainly agree*, and 7 = *fully agree*. The items were as follows; Studying English can be IMPORTANT to me because ‘it will allow me to be more at ease with people who speak English’, ‘it will someday be useful in getting a good job’, ‘it will make me a more knowledgeable (about my major-study) person’, ‘I will be able to participate more freely in the activities of other cultural people’, ‘other people will respect me more if I have a knowledge of English’, ‘it will allow me to meet and talk with more and varied people’, ‘I’ll need English to get a good exam result such as TOEFL or TOEIC’, and ‘it will enable me to better understanding and appreciate other countries’ art and literature’.

Nine course-teachers had distributed and collected questionnaires in the classroom during the second week of the course. English was used to explain the purpose of the survey to the learners, as the medium of instruction in the course was English. After collecting the data, the questionnaire items were evaluated (invalid or missing responses were excluded in the evaluation-analysis).

For the four items representing integrative orientation, Cronbach’s alpha was computed as $\alpha = .7502$ ($n = 301$ learners), and for the four items representing instrumental orientation as $\alpha = .6289$ ($n = 304$ learners). The results indicated an acceptable level of item reliability. For the eight items of orientation, the optimal number of factors, identified by a scree plot from the factor analysis, was one. The conditions for the factor analysis were met since Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure = .815, Bartlett significance < .001. The results of the correlations between the items revealed that the two orientations were positively correlated, so indicated that the learners of the main survey had both instrumental and integrative orientation.

We also referred to students’ SAT (Scholastic Ability Test) in English - SAT is an examination required throughout the country for university entrance in South Korea. A course grade was given, on the basis of mid-term and final examinations, assignments, class attendance, and class-work participation.

4. FINDINGS

We measured the correlations between the level of incoming orientation with the degree of incoming English proficiency, and with the degree of outgoing final course grades.

Correlation between orientation and incoming English proficiency

The correlation between incoming orientation and incoming English proficiency was calculated by correlating an individual’s mean score over the eight orientation items with his or her English test score (expressed out of a maximum of 100 and a minimum of 0). A total of 142 learners’ paired data was submitted to Pearson r . The correlation was computed as $r = -.0237$, indicating no correlation between the two variables of incoming orientation and current English proficiency.

We checked the descriptive statistics of the mean English test score in each group of orientation. The group of high orientation showed a slightly higher mean score ($M = 85.0714$, $SD = 7.1646$, $n = 70$ learners) than the group of low orientation ($M = 83.3976$, $SD = 7.6182$, $n = 72$ learners) with a mean difference of 1.6739. For a significance test, we carried out an independent t -test, with the group of orientation as the independent variable and the English test score as the dependent variable. The one prerequisite of the homogeneity of variances for the test was met as Levene’s test $F = 2.1448$, $p = .1453$. The other prerequisite of the normality of scores was not met, as the two separate Kolmogorov-Smirnov one sample tests revealed a significant result in one test. The result indicates that there was no significant difference in the English test scores between the learner-groups of high and low orientation, $df = 140$, $t = 1.3479$, $p = .1799$.

Correlation between orientation and outgoing English achievement

The correlation between incoming orientation and outgoing English achievement was calculated by correlating an individual’s mean score over the eight orientation items with his or her final course grade (grade ‘A +’ was transformed into score of ‘11’ and grade ‘F’ into score of ‘0’). A total of 154 learners’ paired data was submitted to Pearson r . The correlation was computed as $r = .1592$, indicating virtually no correlation between the two variables of incoming orientation and outgoing English achievement.

We checked the descriptive statistics for the mean course grade in each group of orientation. The group of high orientation received a better course grade ($M = 7.3333$, $SD = 2.2583$, $n = 81$ learners) than the group of low orientation ($M = 6.5068$, $SD = 2.4671$, $n = 73$), with a mean difference of .8265, a difference of almost one grade. For a significance

test, we carried out an independent *t*-test, with the group of orientation as the independent variable and the grade-score as the dependent variable. The two prerequisites of homogeneity of variances and normality of scores for the test were met, as Levene's test $F = .4161$, $p = .5199$ and there were no significant results from the two separate Kolmogorov-Smirnov one sample tests. The result shows that there was a significant difference in the scores for final course grade between the learner-group of high and low orientation, $df = 152$, $t = 2.1705$, $p < .05$ ($= .0315$).

Correlation between incoming English proficiency and outgoing English achievement

The correlation between incoming English proficiency and outgoing English course achievement was calculated by correlating an individual's English test score with his or her score for final course grade. A total of 172 learners' paired data was submitted to Pearson *r*. The correlation was computed as $r = .3246$, indicating a very low level of relationship between the two variables of incoming English proficiency and outgoing English course achievement.

However, this level of correlation between incoming proficiency and outgoing achievement was relatively higher than the level of correlation between incoming orientation and outgoing achievement. Moreover, the nation-wide English proficiency test did not measure speaking proficiency, whereas over 40 % of the course grades were dependent upon oral interviews, i.e. speaking proficiency. Therefore, the correlation between incoming proficiency and outgoing achievement for this group of learners may be interpreted as showing a moderate level of relationship. (Partly due to the discrepancies of the evaluated areas of English ability and the size of total population between the nation-wide test and the course grade within a class, a repeated-measure ANOVA for a significance test was not carried out.)

5. CONCLUSION

The results showed that: There was no correlation between incoming orientation and incoming English proficiency ($r = -.0237$). There was virtually no correlation between incoming orientation and outgoing English achievement ($r = .1592$). There was a very low level of correlation between incoming English proficiency and outgoing English course achievement ($r = .3246$). The following may be suggested, from the results of the correlations and significance tests, the learners' incoming level of motivational orientation was not related to their current or previous level of English proficiency. A learner with a high level of incoming motivational orientation tended to be more positive in the classroom. Perhaps, this behaviour in turn might have helped to develop his or her English ability, and so outgoing level of English achievement might then be attributed to incoming motivational orientation. A learner with a high level of current English proficiency might use classroom materials more efficiently. This would help him or her achieve a better grade at the end of English course. It might also help to create a positive language learning experience and so sustain motivation.

Finally, we propose that i) we need to use two or more equivalent English tests to detect changes (or development) in the English proficiency of individual learners through the course period, ii) we need to estimate not only learners' incoming motivational orientation but also their outgoing motivational orientation to be specific about the effects of incoming and outgoing orientations on outgoing English development, and iii) it may be desirable to estimate not only motivational orientation but also other motivational components (or other variables of individuals) to check the relative effect of orientation on outgoing English development.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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