

Exploring the Role of Motivation in the Reflection of the Effects of Intercultural Learning on Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

This study targets students speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) and studying abroad in an English-speaking country and adopts interviews to explore whether and how their motivation to learn English reflects the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning. As such effects are found to be reflected in integrative motivation and instrumental motivation which function well in enabling students to learn English actively and effectively, the researcher concludes that these two types of motivation are essential to determining how and why intercultural learning has an effect on foreign language learning. While finding that the willingness to communicate and interact with native speakers commonly emerges among students studying abroad due to the impact of intercultural learning, she also concludes that it can be included as one of the components in motivation and play a role in promoting the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning.

Keywords: EFL, intercultural learning, integrative motivation, instrumental motivation, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

While globalisation is producing a global society, the use of English as an international language has become increasingly common to people across the world. According to Warshauer (2000, p 512), people in the twenty-first century are in “a new society, in which English is shared among many groups of non-native speakers rather than dominated by the British or Americans”. As people living in the global society of the twenty-first century use English as an international language to communicate and interact with each other, they may act as intercultural speakers to share the social reality in the host culture (Byram, 2008) or even the global culture (Dornyei, 2006). Global effects of this sort, on the one hand, are evident in the fields of communication, education, politics, economics and technology (Graddol, 2006). On the other hand, the changes caused by such global effects have led to increasing numbers of people studying, working, and travelling abroad. In fact, pursuing advanced knowledge in a study abroad context has become one of the global phenomena urged by political concerns, economic needs, cultural interaction or the easiness of travel (Byram & Feng, 2006). According to the statistics, there are more than one million students and scholars studying broad around the globe (Graddol, 2006).

A further massive increase in the number of those who study abroad is in progress due to the trend toward globalisation and internationalisation (UNESCO, 2007). Leask (2004) points out that study abroad programmes in which teachers and students go abroad to experience intercultural contacts with the target culture not only provides learners with a good opportunity to become intercultural speakers but also promotes the internationalization of education. Ryan (2003) also emphasizes that people learning a foreign language abroad experience a process which leads to increased curiosity about intercultural aspects.

Since a study abroad context may offer students who speak English as a foreign language (EFL) many opportunities to use English as a shared language and to experience intercultural learning during the encounter with native speakers in daily life, whether and how they are affected by intercultural learning and also benefit from it deserves more attention of researchers across the world. This study thus targets EFL students coming from Asian countries and studying abroad in an English-speaking country and adopts interviews to explore the effects of intercultural learning on their foreign language learning. It is firstly hypothesized that the length of residence in a host country would predict the degree to which EFL students studying abroad experience intercultural learning. Secondly, it is assumed that EFL students' motivation to learn English would be affected by intercultural learning and increase as a function of increased length of residence abroad. Given that integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are subsumed under the general rubric of motivation, it is also hypothesized that they would be affected by intercultural learning and increase as a function of increased length of residence abroad. The following three research questions are posed by this study:

- (1) Does intercultural learning have an effect on EFL students' motivation to learn English in a study abroad context?
- (2) To what extent does intercultural learning affect EFL students' motivation to learn English in a study abroad context?
- (3) How do integrative motivation and instrumental motivation exist and function among EFL students studying abroad due to the impact of intercultural learning?

2. Motivation and Intercultural Learning

With the trend toward globalisation and internationalisation, intercultural learning is often associated with automatic outcomes arising from being immersed in different cultures in reality (AEI, 1998) or in a simulated electronic learning environment (Müller-Hartmann, 2000). According to Roberts et al. (2001), people from different countries may act as intercultural speakers using English as a shared language to communicate and interact with one another in daily life. No matter how people in the global society of the twenty-first century experience intercultural learning, the way in which they actually become involved in the target culture remains the key to determining the effects of intercultural learning. The first perspective of this study thus arises from the notion that motivation to learn the target language is an important factor that enables students studying abroad to intuitively experience intercultural learning and benefit from it. Alred (2003) points out that psychology usually provides a common frame of reference for understanding an individual's intercultural development.

Studies have found that motivation to learn a second or foreign language may reside in one's interaction with the host environment (McGroarty, 2001). Motivation to learn a second or foreign language is also considered to include the willingness to communicate and interact with native speakers, which enables learners to initiate communication with native speakers, achieve communicative competence and develop a consistent predisposition favouring or opposing encounters with native speakers and the other culture (MacIntyre et al., 2004). Studies have also showed that motivation to learn English as an international language is beneficial for developing worldviews (Lamb, 2004) and cultural identity (Houghton, 2010) which facilitates involvement in intercultural learning. When motivation involves one's global perspective, cultural identity, and willingness to communicate and interact with native speakers, it could help to understand how EFL students studying abroad experience intercultural learning and also benefit from it.

3. Motivation as a Role in Second or Foreign Language Learning

While EFL students' motivation to learn English is associated with the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning, the second perspective of this study derives from the role that motivation plays in learning a second or foreign language. Of the factors claimed to affect second or foreign language acquisition, motivation has been identified as the main reason for achieving the success in learning the second or target language (L2) (Norris-Holt, 2007). Learners with greater motivation maintain long-term success in second or foreign language acquisition (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). Gardner (2001) points out that a truly-motivated student usually holds the desire to learn a second or foreign language, makes efforts on learning it and enjoys its learning tasks. According to Saville-Troike (2006, p. 85–86), "motivation largely determines the level of effort, which learners expend at various stages in their L2 development, and is often a key to the ultimate level of proficiency". Even though L2 motivation is the key factor that determines the success in second or foreign language acquisition, motivation itself can be influenced by other factors. Studies have found that motivation to learn a second or foreign language is closely connected to attitudes (Stables & Wikeley, 1999) and contexts (Thorne, 2000). Since L2 motivation is linked to contexts and often involves the desire to acquire a second or foreign language, it could be essential to the reflection of the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning among EFL students studying abroad.

4. Integrative Motivation versus Instrumental Motivation

As motivation is categorized into two motivational orientations (i.e. integrative motivation and instrumental motivation) according to one's reactions to both the target language and the target language group (Gardner & Syme, 1981), the third perspective of this study originates from the notion that integrative motivation and instrumental motivation may play a role in reflecting the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning. For example, Crookes and Schmidt (1991) identify integrative motivation as the goal of acquiring a second or foreign language, the development of positive attitudes toward the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community.

Dornyei (2003, p.5) explains integrative motivation as “an openness to and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life; in the extreme, it might involve complete identification with the community (and possibly even withdrawal from one’s original group)”. Unlike integrative motivation, instrumental motivation based on an individual’s interest can reflect personal values and stereotypes (Huguet, 2006). Hudson (2000) relates instrumental motivation to the desire to acquire something practical or concrete from learning English. Gardner (1985) emphasizes that both integrative and instrumental dimensions refer to “orientation” rather than motivation itself. More importantly, instrumental motivation is later classified to be the attitudes toward the target language and even placed outside the domain of motivation (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). In addition, the function of instrumental motivation is largely ignored by Gardner and his associates (Dornyei et al. 2006). However, studies have found that two motivational orientations can be considered to be two types of motivation and may affect L2 learners at different stages of learning (Dornyei & Otto, 1998; Lamb, 2004). Lamb (2004) even argues that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation exist but are not necessarily considered to be separate concepts, especially when English is not associated with any specific western country. No matter what kind of motivation EFL students studying abroad hold, it could be helpful to explaining why they are affected by intercultural learning and become motivated to learn English.

5. Method

Based on the claim of Gardner’s socio-educational model (1985) that L2 learners usually hold two motivational orientations (i.e. integrative motivation and instrumental motivation) in order to achieve the success in second or foreign language learning, this study targeted EFL students studying abroad in the United States and explored whether and how their motivation to learn English which consisted of integrative motivation and instrumental motivation functioned in reflecting the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning by drawing upon focus group interviews. The sample size used for qualitative research was smaller than the one adopted for quantitative research. However, the qualitative data in this study were gathered from students in different groups to provide a clearer and more detailed explanation of how and why EFL students’ motivation to learn English reflected the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning..

5.1 Participants

Thirty participants as members of focus groups were recruited from those who had filled out questionnaires on campus at a university in the United States and shown interest in expressing more about what they thought. The length of residence abroad among participants ranged from three months to eight years. Thirteen participants came from Taiwan, seven from Japan, six from China, and four from Korea. All participants were in their twenties, and some of them had had the experience of living with American roommates or host families. Six participants had been studying in a doctoral programme, nine in a master’s programme, six in an undergraduate programme and nine in an exchange programme.

5.2 Procedure & Data Analysis

This study was conducted at a university in the United States and adopted focus group interviews with semi-structured question. Participants recruited for this study were categorized into three groups according to length of their residence abroad (i.e. more than two years, 1-2 years and less than one year). Ten participants studying abroad for more than two years were in Group A, ten studying abroad for 1-2 years in Group B and another ten studying abroad for less than one year in Group C. Since participants in each group came from different countries, they all agreed to speak English as a shared language during interviews. The raw data were tape-recorded with the permission of participants and later subjected to thematic analysis in which the researcher coded, categorized, and integrated the data by making comparisons (Boyatzis, 1998)

6. Results and Discussions

On the one hand, the results of this study showed that intercultural learning could affect participants’ motivation to learn English which indeed facilitated their foreign language learning in a study abroad context. On the other hand, it was found that under the influence of intercultural learning, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation occurred and operated together among participants studying abroad. However, the results of this study did not find that participants’ motivation to learn English increased as a function of increased length of residence abroad. According to the findings, participants’ motivation which reflected the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning might be too unstable and unpredictable to be clearly associated with length of residence abroad.

More importantly, it was found that the reasons why participants' motivation was not easily predicted by length of residence abroad might be related to the characteristics of both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Some of the raw data regarding both the existence of integrative motivation and instrumental motivation and their differences which may help to explain why and how intercultural learning can lead to the success in foreign language learning are presented below.

6.1 Reasons for Learning English

It was found that under the influence of intercultural learning, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation could exist and be identified on the basis of the reasons for learning the target language. For example, most participants in Group A, who had been studying abroad for more than two years, considered English learning important for the purpose of "integrating into the mainstream", "interacting with people", or "being more understood by native speakers". The following excerpts implied that participants in Group A tended to hold integrative motivation:

A7: English is important because I live in this society. I hope I can **join the mainstream** some day.

A6: English plays a role in how you **interact with others** and how **people treat you** in this society.

A1: English is part of communication skills that helps American people **understand more about what you are thinking**.

Although most participants in Group A held integrative motivation, several also expressed instrumental motivation by providing reasons for learning English such as "survival", "career" or "gaining professional knowledge". Instrumental motivation seemed to occur concurrently among those who had studied abroad for a long time, as exemplified by the following excerpts:

A2: I need it to **gain professional knowledge**.

A8: English is important to my **career**.

A10: It is important to my **survival** in this society.

Unlike those in Group A, most participants in Groups B and C considered English to be a tool for dealing with the activities of daily life such as "shopping", "doing studies", "contacting people", "getting information" or "surviving in the society". These responses indicated in following excerpts shed light on the situation that most of the participants in Groups B and C held instrumental motivation:

B6: English is very important to my life such as **shopping**, banking, and seeing a doctor.

B10: English is important because you can use it to **do studies** and **contact people**. I have no choice. This is the only way to live your life while studying abroad.

C2: If I can speak English well, I can **contact people** all over the world and **get a lot of information**.

C1: English is an instrument for **survival in the US**. If I could not speak English well, I could not survive well in this society.

Even though participants in Groups B and C tended to hold instrumental motivation, several also seemed to express integrative motivation, as evidenced in their desire to "make friends with people" or "communicate with people". This emphasis on communication and interaction with people indicated by participants in the following excerpts revealed that integrative motivation could underpin their desire to learn English and that such motivation might also facilitate their experience of intercultural learning:

B3: English plays a role in my life when I **make friends with people**.

B7: For example, I write e-mails a lot. I also have to **communicate with people** by using English every day.

C7: I think English is important in my life in such areas as **communications with people**.

C9: I think I need English **to communicate with people**

6.2 Different Levels of Awareness Involved in Learning English

In the discussions concerning how integrative motivation and instrumental motivation reflected the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning, the results of this study found that they could also be identified according to the level of awareness which was involved in learning English as a shared language.

Some participants in Group A, who held integrative motivations, noted the level of awareness related to learning the target language in that they considered English learning as “part of life” and also learned English “naturally” or “without consciousness”. The level of their awareness involved in learning English was typically low, as indicated in the following excerpts:

- A6: I might learn English **without being conscious of it** and without knowing I’m still learning it.
- A8: In my mind, English is not a foreign language any more because I have to use it for speaking and writing e-mails to people. English is **part of my life**.
- A10: It may be **natural** for me to learn English. The longer one lives abroad, the more he can learn English **without being conscious of it**. I believe I can learn English from life.

In contrast, participants with instrumental motivation may develop a conscious learning mode and grasp every opportunity to practise the target language and to learn it. For instance, some participants in Groups B and C noted that they “pushed” or “asked” themselves to learn or practise English while studying abroad. These responses indicated in the following excerpts revealed that the level of awareness shown in instrumental motivation was higher than the one of awareness demonstrated in integrative motivation:

- B5: I sometimes **push myself to learn** English. If I am lazy or do not spend time on English, I may not learn English at all.
- B6: I think I really practise English in my everyday life. I usually **push myself to practise** it.
- C3: I often **ask myself to practise** English through listening to what people around me talk about.

6.3 Different Functions in Developing English learning Strategies

While finding that under the influence of intercultural learning, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation differed in both the reasons for learning English and the level of awareness involved in learning English, the results of this study showed that they might also be related to the development of different English learning strategies. For example, participants in Group A, who had been studying abroad for a longer period of time and held more integrative motivation, noted that they often learned the target language from “the media”, “the host family” or “American roommates”. The following excerpts implied that their English learning strategies were mainly related to native speakers and the target culture and might enable them to experience more intercultural learning:

- A7: If you ask me how to learn English from everyday life, I will suggest finding **a native speaker as a roommate** as the best way.
- A3: I often learn English from my **friends**. Another way to learn English is to **watch TV and listen to the radio**.
- A5: Living with **a host family or an American roommate** is really a good way to improve English.

More importantly, some participants who held integrative motivation in Group A responded that changes in their thinking modes helped them to learn the target language more efficiently and effectively. In addition to “the help from native speakers”, they liked to adopt such an approach as “thinking in English” which facilitated English acquisition. The following excerpts revealed that participants studying abroad for a long time might have very different learning strategies such as internal processing mechanisms developed within a natural environment (Ellis, 2002):

- A9: English is also **part of my thinking system**. I watch TV shows and listen to the radio. I read different kinds of books and try to **think in English**.
- A10: I learn a lot of English from **my American friends**. They **correct my errors**. I also learn to **think in English**.
- A2: If I want to learn more English during my life, I have to **talk to myself as much as possible**. Another way is to ask **American friends** to correct my English.

Although participants in Groups B and C, who had been studying abroad for a shorter time, tended to express instrumental motivation, they might also hold integrative motivation due to the impact of intercultural learning. Integrative motivation was particularly evident in their English learning strategies such as “learning from American culture”, “watching TV”, “reading advertisements and newspapers” or “listening to the radio”. These responses indicated in the following excerpts shed light on the situation that participants studying abroad for a short time were also not isolated from the target culture in daily life:

B8: If we **know more about American culture**, I believe our English would be much improved.

B4: We can learn new vocabulary from shopping, **watching TV**, **reading advertisements** and so on. If you are not shy and willing to ask people, you can even learn how to use words from them.

C6: I learn English from shopping, **watching TV**, **reading newspapers** and so on.

C2: I feel relaxed to learn English every day. I try to **watch TV** and **listen to the radio**.

Irrespective of the type of motivation expressed by the participants in the three groups, they tended to associate their English learning strategies with communication and interaction with native speakers. The following excerpts underscored the role of communication and interaction with native speakers in reflecting the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning:

A8: **Talk, talk, and talk**. I try to **practise English** with native speakers and people from different countries.

A9: I like to **talk to people** and concentrate on what teachers say in class.

B9: Watching TV, **communication** with people and **discussion** with classmates and professors are the ways to learn English during studying abroad

B2: I learn a lot of English from **discussions with people**.

C7: I think I learn a lot from having **conversations** with native speakers in everyday life.

C10: I try to **talk to American people** in the dormitory.

7. Implications and Suggestions

While finding that students’ motivation to learn English can be affected by intercultural learning, the results of this study identify integrative motivation and instrumental motivation as two types of motivation which can well reflect the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning. Firstly, it is found that due to the impact of intercultural learning, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation occur simultaneously among EFL students studying abroad and can be identified on the basis of different reasons for learning English. For example, students with integrative motivation tend to learn English in order to integrate into the target culture, whereas those with instrumental motivation may learn it for practical reasons such as survival in the target culture. Irrespective of the reasons for learning English, it is found that those who hold either integrative motivation or instrumental motivation are not isolated from the target culture. On this point, it can be argued that these two types of motivation are essential to understanding whether EFL students get involved in the target culture and experience intercultural learning while studying abroad. The researcher also emphasizes that these two types of motivation should even explain why intercultural learning facilitates the success in foreign language learning among EFL students studying abroad.

In addition to clarifying different reasons for learning English, secondly, the results of the study show that integrative motivation and instrumental motivation differ in the levels of students’ awareness which is involved in learning English. For instance, students with integrative motivation usually feel motivated to learn English by communicating with native speakers naturally or using their own internal processing mechanisms subconsciously. In contrast, those with instrumental motivation tend to learn English consciously and grasp every opportunity to practise it purposely. While finding that instrumental motivation seems to operate at higher levels of awareness in one’s efforts on learning English than integrative motivation, the results of this study show that most students hold two types of motivation concurrently. It can thus be argued that predictions about how much motivation EFL students studying abroad hold are not easily made through a single factor such as length of residence abroad.

However, the researcher suggests that how much motivation students studying abroad hold should be identified from the type of motivation. In addition, she emphasizes that two types of motivation should be viewed not only from the reasons but also from the level of awareness involved in learning English.

The results of this study thirdly show that due to the impact of intercultural learning, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation serve different functions in developing students' English learning strategies. Indeed, both of them function equally well in developing various English learning strategies. For example, students with integrative motivation tend to learn English from understanding the target culture, participating in activities related to communication and interaction with native speakers or thinking via internal processing mechanisms, whereas those who hold instrumental motivation commonly learn English from the input of the natural environment during the routines of daily life such as shopping. It can thus be argued that the development of various English learning strategies, which arises from two types of motivation in the process of intercultural learning, facilitates the success in foreign language learning among EFL students studying abroad. On this point, the researcher maintains that integrative motivation is different from instrumental motivation in the reasons for learning English, the level of awareness involved in learning English and the functions in developing various English learning strategies.

In response to Gardner's emphasis, she argues that integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are equally important to EFL students for learning English efficiently and effectively. She also suggests that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation should be viewed as part of overall motivation which is essential to reflecting the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning. No matter what motivation is held by students studying abroad, the results of this study show that both communication and interaction with native speakers are commonly recognized as good strategies for learning English. The researcher thus echoes the perspective of other researchers and argues that the willingness to communicate and interact with native speakers can be regarded as one of the components in L2 motivation. More importantly, she emphasizes that the willingness to communicate and interact with native speakers should play a role in determining the degree to which EFL students are affected by intercultural learning in their efforts on learning English.

8. Conclusion

While increasing numbers of EFL students are studying abroad, they are indeed provided with many opportunities to experience intercultural learning. Although EFL students studying abroad seem to be unable to resist the impact of intercultural learning, they may not actually feel intercultural learning and also benefit from it. While finding that the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning among EFL students studying abroad can be identified from their motivation to learn English, the researcher concludes that EFL students should become alert to such effects through their own motivation while studying abroad. As it is found that under the influence of intercultural learning, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation occur concurrently among EFL students studying abroad and also function equally well in developing various English learning strategies, she also concludes that both of them should not be considered to be "orientation" but rather part of motivation. She emphasizes that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation should be equally important to EFL students studying abroad for experiencing intercultural learning and in turn achieving greater success in foreign language learning. Since the willingness to communicate and interact with native speakers commonly emerges among EFL students studying abroad due to the impact of intercultural learning in a study abroad context, she further concludes that it can be included as one of the components in motivation and play a role in promoting the effects of intercultural learning on foreign language learning. It is hoped that educators and English teachers across the world recognize the importance of intercultural learning to EFL students in the twenty-first century for enabling them to achieve greater success in learning English outside the classroom.

9. References

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