Research Paper

Motivation of Remedial EFL Learners
(A Case Study of Japanese College EFL Learners)

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Abstract: This paper focuses on motivation of Japanese English learners from a remedial learners' point of view because there are difficulties in remedial English instruction in Japanese colleges. Remedial English instruction should be undertaken with a firm grasp of the roots of the learners' motivational deficiencies. This study aims to investigate those motivational deficiencies. First, it discusses differences in level of motivation in remedial level English learning among three learning groups with different attainment. Methods of enhancing the motivation of remedial English learners should be different between levels of achievement and for learners of different past learning experiences. And then, it discusses how the subjects obtained their motivational deficiencies.

Keywords: English learning, motivation, self-determination theory, group influence.

1. Background of the research

Up to now, much research in motivation has been carried out in light of the models of its formation process. In the study of English learning as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan, much motivation research has been carried out (Kubo 1999; Mori 2005; Honda 2005; Hiromori 2005). In remedial education, however, studies so far of learner motivation have been made more from the viewpoint of Japanese language learning and general learning motivation (Tanaka, Koyama and Baba 2006; Koyama 2007), although the necessity of the study of motivation in remedial EFL learning is increasing.

This paper focuses on EFL learner motivation from a remedial learners' point of view because there are difficulties in remedial English instruction in Japanese colleges. Although the majority of Japanese colleges and universities require students to take courses in English, quite a number of students have very low motivation towards EFL learning. This lack of motivation negatively affects their EFL learning.

In the case of university students who need remedial EFL instruction, many of the students have failed in learning EFL in their introductory stage at the junior high school stage, and probably could not succeed even in the high school period. In other words, the motivation of these university students has been low for a long period of time during the junior and senior high school. What will the motivation of learners who have remained unsuccessful for six years from the junior high school through high school be like? Remedial English instruction should be undertaken with a firm grasp of the roots of the learners' motivational deficiencies.

As an example of an assisting program of remedial English education in universities, dividing classes based on the degree of English proficiency is often introduced. Although it is very important to be aware of learners' English proficiency in classes, we also take their quality of motivation into consideration.

Generally, this is especially apparent when considering the fact that EFL courses require effort by the students outside of class in order for studied materials to become acquired. In other words,
motivation is necessary in order to facilitate continued self-study such as preparation of the lessons, taking lessons at classes, and review of what they have learned. It is a kind of learning cycle necessary for EFL learning.

The current situation of remedial EFL learners' motivation must be examined in order to enhance motivation of remedial English learners. This study attempts to examine the following:

(1) Are there differences in motivational level between learners with different degrees of English learning achievement?
(2) Should methods to enhance EFL learners' motivation differ depending on according to their levels of English proficiency and past learning experiences if the question above is confirmed?

As a presupposition of this research, the level of English proficiency in college remedial education must be defined.

The Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), which is Japan's largest testing body defines English ability according to Japanese school system as follows.

There are seven levels from Grade 1 as the highest to Grade 5 as the lowest. Grade 2 and Pre-2 are Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) benchmarks for high school graduates. Grade 3 are MEXT benchmarks for Junior high school graduates. That means a level of Grade 3, 4 and 5 could be comparatively lower as a level of college students. STEP defines ability level of Grade 3 as "can understand and use language concerning familiar, everyday topics such as likes and dislikes and basic personal and family information." It also defines ability level of Grade 4 as "can understand and use simple words, phrases, and short sentences," and ability level of Grade 5 as "can understand and use simple words, phrases, and short greetings."

Considering the definition of STEP, higher ability than English conversation level corresponding STEP Grade 2 or pre-2 is necessary for college level learners because they have to understand more academic contents through English. This research defines the level of remedial instruction for college students who haven't attained Step Grade pre-2.

2. Research method

To research the current level of motivation of the students for whom English remedial education was necessary, the following procedure was utilized.

Participants were divided into three groups according to their English proficiency. Then, aspects of their motivation were examined in order to the relations of the levels of proficiency and the motivation. As a follow-up investigation, some of the participants who showed remarkably low motivation were interviewed to find out the further information.

2.1 Participants

The subjects of this study were university students who entered a university in 2008.

The STEP placement test was utilized for dividing the subjects into three groups of achievement level.

The group with the highest attainment ranged from STEP Grade Pre-2 level to 3. The majority of them are STEP Grade 3 and there were 75 subjects in this group. The number of subjects in the group with the second highest attainment level was 62, and their level is Grade 4. There were 63 subjects in the group with the lowest attainment, and their level is Grade 5. From now on, the groups are called Group A, B, and C as follows:

Group A with the highest attainment, ranged from STEP Grade Pre-2 level to 3
Group B with the second highest attainment, STEP Grade 4 level
Group C with the lowest attainment, STEP Grade 5 level

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Fig. 1 The self-determination Continuum

2.2 Method
2.2.1 Investigation of motivational level

In order to investigate differences in motivational level between learners with different degrees of English learning achievement, a questionnaire developed by Hiromori (2005) with a scale of five stages based on the studies of self-determination theory was used. The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 1985, 2000, 2002) discusses motivation from the three elements of "autonomy", "self-efficacy", and "relation". The self-determination continuum (Deci & Ryan 2000, 2002) which grades motivation on a step-by-step scale is suitable for estimating the motivation of learners, especially students who need remedial support because it takes the viewpoint of the lower motivation. The scale shows five stages of motivational regulation for behavior, from Intrinsic Regulation as the highest, through Identified Regulation, Introjected Regulation, and External Regulation, to Amotivation as the lowest motivation with no regulation of behavior (Deci & Ryan 2000, 2002).

The self-determination theory defines "Intrinsic Regulation" as the most desirable motivational regulation because it possibly relates to learners' autonomy to promote learning with more genuine motivation such as "I learn English for the interest I have when I learn English."

"Identified Regulation" is defined as the second desirable motivational regulation such as "I learn English because I think it is necessary for my personal development."

"Amotivation" is defined as an attitude without any motivational regulation such as "I cannot come to see why I study English, and I don't give a damn."

The questionnaire asked students' degrees of motivation with five levels for each regulation. For each regulation, five questions were prepared such as a reason for Intrinsic Regulation being, "(I study English) for the interest I have when I learn English. (refer to Appendix)" Students answered by choosing one degree, from "I strongly agree." to "I don't agree at all."

Results of each group will be examined statistically with analysis of variance to test differences among groups. A multiple-comparison correction will be used if a statistical significant difference is found.

2.2.2 Follow-up investigation

In addition, as a follow-up investigation, the learners with the lowest motivation, labeled amotivation, were interviewed individually. This interview aimed to investigate why and how the subjects lost their motivation for EFL learning.

To all the interviewees, the following questions were asked.

"Did you have high motivation at the beginning of your study of English?"

"Why did you lose your motivation?"

"How do you feel when your English study was not successful?"

"Have you ever tried to start learning English again from the start?"

3. Results
3.1 The results of the questionnaire

Results of each group were examined statistically with analysis of variance to test differences among groups. The Bonferroni correction was used for a multiple-comparison correction because some statistical significant differences were found among groups.

Although all three groups showed comparatively higher degrees of Identified Regulation, differences
Table 1 Motivational degrees of each group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Intrinsic</th>
<th>Identified</th>
<th>Introjected</th>
<th>Extrinsic</th>
<th>Amotivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.00061**</td>
<td>0.00043*</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.227</td>
<td>0.0074**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were seen among the four stages of regulations of behavior and amotivation.

As the Table 1 shows, Group A with the highest attainment showed higher degrees of Intrinsic Regulation and Identified Regulation than other groups, while the other two groups showed significantly higher degrees of amotivation with analysis of variance.

This means that Group A has more desirable motivation such as intrinsic and near intrinsic, while Groups B and C have more learners whose motivation is extremely low. Considering the fact that the attainment levels of these groups are different, there seems to be a boundary in motivational quality between learners with Step Grade pre-2 or pre-3 level attainment and learners below that level. In other words, there will be possibility of qualitative changes if a learner obtains Step Grade 3 or pre-2 level attainment. This point will be discussed more at the chapter of consideration.

3.2 The results of follow-up investigation

While Group A has more desirable motivation, Groups B and C comparatively have different motivation in quality, which is lower motivation and high degree of “amotivation” without any motivation for their EFL learning. So, the follow up interview focused on how and why learners whose motivation is extremely low have lost their motivation.

Eight students who showed very low motivation were interviewed. Three from group B, and five from group C. All reported to have lost their motivation to learn English when they were in junior high school. One student lost his motivation at the end of his first year of junior high school. Five students lost it in their second year. Two students lost it in their third.

Through the process of interviewing, it became apparent that all of the interviewees had high motivation to learn English at the beginning, which is the first semester of junior high school. All of them had experiences English lessons at elementary schools. Although the lessons were temporary and just introductory ones, all of the interviewees said it was fun to do the game-like activities. Naturally, they had high expectations for a regular EFL learning at their junior high schools.

Yamamori (2004)112, who studied EFL learning motivation in Japanese junior high schools, reported that 60% of the first graders were able to maintain their high motivation at the third semester, although it modestly declined from 90% at the end of the first semester.

Considering the fact that as much as 30% of the first graders lost their high motivation at the end of the study year and EFL instruction becomes more difficult at the second and third grade in junior high school, it is expected that more learners will lose their motivation.

As a matter of fact, causes of their losing motivation are as follows.

(1) Causes of losing motivation

All of the interviewees indicated the following three points answering to the question, “Why did you lose motivation?”

(a) They couldn’t keep up with the class because English grammar suddenly became difficult at the second grade.

(b) The number of words and phrases to be memorized increased a lot.

(c) At first, lessons were interesting, but became boring because explanations and drills of grammar rules increased markedly.

These were the first stumbling blocks for the
learners. As compared with other students, they might have had personality differences such as a lower tolerance of short-term failure. But remarks such as these are commonly heard as causes of demotivation for EFL learners in Japan.

(2) Reflections on emotional state

And then, I asked the question of whether they had tried to start learning English again. Their common answers are as follows.

(a) They once tried to start English learning again from the start, but they were discouraged through a lot of unsuccessful experiences.
(b) They thought it would be useless to ask teachers for help.
(c) They felt at ease in their senior high school because the level of English taught there was not so high. So, they didn’t have to try it again from the start.

(3) Sense of alienation

I also asked how they felt during English classes. It turned out that five of eight subjects felt a sense of pressure and alienation concerning English learning. Their shared remarks follow.

(a) The pressure to be successful in learning English is higher than that of other subjects.
(b) It was painful to read English aloud in class because they didn’t know how to read correctly.
(c) They felt a sense of alienation, and that this feeling was brought about through poor performance in English classes during their junior high school period.

On the other hand, the other three subjects gave an opposite reaction. It is as the following:

They did not feel any pressure because they belonged to a group which did not study English at all. They chatted, slept, and read comic books during the lessons. The teacher did not say anything to them, so they did not care about their poor performance.

Although this comment about not feeling any pressure represents the opposite pole from that of students who felt excess pressure, both types of remarks show that the learners couldn’t make constructive liaisons with other members in a joint effort to succeed in the class.

Organizing the answers of the follow-up interview, I concluded procedures of losing motivation as the Figure 2 shows. At the beginning of EFL at the junior high school, all the interviewees had high motivation. As contents became difficult, they gradually lost motivation to study English. A lot of unsuccessful experiences also discouraged them to try English study again. The important point is that they did not have chance to make constructive liaisons with other members in a joint effort to succeed in the class, which possibly prevent them from nurturing their motivation to continue their English study and building up basic learning custom.

Thinking of the experiences of procedures of losing motivation, methods to enhance EFL learners’ motivation should differ depending on their levels of English proficiency and past learning experiences.

4. Considerations

As the results of the questionnaire investigation and the follow-up interview, it turned out that there are differences in motivational level between learners with different degrees of English learning achievement.

It turned out that Group A with the highest attainment ranged from STEP Grade Pre-2 level to 3 has more desirable motivation leading to autonomous learning such as intrinsic and near
intrinsic, while Groups B and C have more learners whose motivation is extremely low.

I mentioned the possibility of a boundary in motivational quality between learners with STEP Grade ranged from pre-2 to 3 level attainment and learners below that level. STEP investigated the relation of English learning and the situation utilizing its examinee data and questionnaire investigation\(^{12}\). STEP divided EFL learners into three categories according to their situation of using English. A level from STEP Grade 1 to pre-1 is defined as an independent English user. A level from STEP Grade 2 to Pre-2 is defined as an independent English learner. A level from STEP Grade 3 to 5 is defined as a dependent English learner. This definition means that there is a qualitative boundary in learning attitude between learners with STEP Grade 3 level attainment and above that.

The result that Group A with the highest attainment ranged from STEP Grade Pre-2 level to 3 have a different motivation from Group B and C ranged from Grade 4 level to 5 corresponds to the result of STEP investigation.

From the follow-up interview, the process of losing motivation was turned out. After starting out motivated, many EFL learners lose their motivation through repeating unsuccessful experiences in their study. This coupled with a failure to form constructive relations with successful learners further damages their motivation, leading to perceived permanent failure.

The demotivation of the subjects of this study was affected by their learners' group attitude in the junior and senior high school.

The fact that the subjects couldn't build up constructive relations with the other learners in the class as a group shows that this is a crucial factor in making their EFL learning unsuccessful. Especially at the start of EFL, constructive relationships with other learners and teachers are necessary because they build up basic English learning custom and motivation at this early stage under the influence by other learners and support from the teachers in their class. If they feel too much pressure or feel alienated in the class with repeating unsuccessful learning experiences, their motivation may be deflated by low self-efficacy.

Dornyei (2005)\(^{10}\) claims that the group can highly influence L2 motivation.

"It is my belief that group influences can be seen as a major aspect of the L2 motivation complex and the notion of group norm is in many ways the group equivalent of individual student motivation."

"Group norms range from explicitly imposed school regulations to spontaneously and unconsciously evolved routines as a result of copying certain behaviors of some influential member or the leader."

In light of the above, I propose the following approaches to remedial instruction. Learners of STEP Grade Pre-2 level to 3 attainment are minimally prepared to learn EFL, as they possess intrinsic or close to intrinsic motivation. Teachers can focus on promoting an interest in studying English for its own merits. This should help students develop an impetus to learn more vocabulary and expressions.

Learners with attainment below STEP Grade 4 level may have trouble in acquiring the minimum motivation needed to succeed in EFL. Teachers therefore need to recognize that there is a necessity to nurture basic motivation of the learners in this level. There may also be cases needing individual care.

One prerequisite to enhancing motivation of EFL learners with low attainment is to build good relationships in the class, not only with other classmates but with teachers as well. These students haven't had appropriate support for many years, and also have given up asking for such support from teachers and other learners.
Low motivation means losing a sense of value in learning itself. Successful learners have been able to internalize the value of learning through observing other successful learners' attitudes and performance. Learners in this study, however, have become alienated from EFL learning through repeating failures, and have lost their self-efficacy, which discouraged them to internalize the value of learning. Encouraging them to realize self-efficacy through meaningful and supportive group or pair tasks could be effective.

Furthermore, poor learners have not had the opportunity to form study habits, so it is important to instruct them in the procedure of EFL learning. In other words, coach them in how to study not only inside the classroom but outside as well.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to make the following claims.

There is a qualitative motivational boundary ranged from learners with STEP Grade Pre-2 level to 3 and below that level. The motivation of learners who have not attained STEP level 3 contains more serious difficulties which may prevent their EFL learning from being successful, and I believe that it is necessary to take different approaches to enhance motivation in remedial English instruction, customized to each particular level.

The influence of learning group should be taken into consideration especially in learning motivation in remedial instruction.

Reference

Appendix
Examples of the questions
Intrinsic Regulation
"For the interest I have when I learn English."
Identified Regulation
"Because I think it is necessary for my personal development."
Introjected Regulation
"Because I would feel guilty if I didn't study English."
External Regulation
"Because my parents and teachers tell me to study English."
Amotivation
"I cannot come to see why I study English, and I don't give a damn."

Received on Nov. 14th, 2008 and accepted on July 12th, 2009.