

Research Article

Exploring Language Learning Motivation and Strategies in Vietnamese High School Students: A Case Study in Ho Chi Minh City

Nguyen Thu Huynh ^{1*}  ORCID

¹ University of Finance – Marketing, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

* Correspondence: hn.thu@ufm.edu.vn

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Abstract: This study investigates the motivation and learning strategies of high school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and explores the relationship between these two factors. The research involved 76 students from Dang Khoa private high school who completed adapted questionnaires to assess their types of motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) and language learning strategies. The findings indicate that the extrinsic motivation (e.g., external pressures, instrumental goals) was more prevalent than intrinsic motivation (e.g., personal interest, enjoyment) among the participants. In addition, a positive correlation was found between motivation level and strategised learning. Students with stronger motivation tended to employ a wider range of learning strategies. Based on these results, the study concludes with recommendations for educators to enhance student motivation and support their strategic use of learning practices for effective English language acquisition.

Keywords: motivation (intrinsic/extrinsic); learning strategies; Vietnamese high school students

1. Introduction

Ellis (1985) identified various factors influencing second language acquisition, including age, aptitude, learning styles, motivation, and personality. Notably, motivation and learning strategies emerged as pivotal factors contributing to individual differences among language learners. Numerous studies have investigated these factors separately to gain a deeper understanding. It has been established through research findings and theoretical frameworks that both motivation and strategy utilization significantly impact students' achievement and proficiency in second language learning (Chang, 2005).

Furthermore, researchers have explored the correlation between motivation and learning strategies. Oxford and Crookall (1989) found that highly motivated students tend to employ a greater variety of learning strategies compared to their less motivated peers. Similarly, Djigunovie (2001) suggested that motivation plays a significant role in shaping language learners' utilization of learning strategies. This highlights the interconnectedness of motivation and learning strategies in the language learning process.

English has emerged as a foreign language in Vietnam, promising to learners an access to knowledge and opportunities across various domains. Recognizing the significance of English proficiency for integration into the global arena, the Ministry of Education has mandated English as a compulsory subject within the general education system. However, despite these efforts, many learners continue to struggle to achieve proficiency in English. To address this issue, it is imperative to delve into the primary causes hindering learners' success in English language acquisition. This necessitates a detailed examination of the factors directly impacting language learners throughout their learning journey. While previous studies predominantly focus on university students or learners with advanced English proficiency levels, this research shifts its focus to high school students, a demographic that has been relatively overlooked in prior research endeavors.

Exploring high school students' motivation and their utilization of learning strategies holds significant value. Understanding the motivational drivers of these students and how they employ various strategies in their language learning process can provide valuable insights.

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Furthermore, this research aims to establish the evident relationship between motivation and learning strategies among high school students.

The findings of this study are anticipated to offer practical implications for educators. By gaining a deeper understanding of what motivates high school students in learning English and identifying effective strategies to enhance their language acquisition, teachers can better support their students in their language learning endeavors. Ultimately, the aim is to optimize English language education for high school students, fostering greater proficiency and success in their language learning journey.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Language Learning Motivation*

Motivation is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of success in various aspects of human life, as it serves as the driving force that inspires individuals to pursue their goals effectively. Within the realm of English language learning, motivation assumes paramount importance, often dictating the efficacy and outcomes of the learning process. Numerous theories have been proposed to define and conceptualize motivation. The conceptualization of motivation can be twofold. From one perspective, it is viewed as a state characterized by a subjective desire for personal or environmental change, coupled with a predisposition for action that facilitates this alteration (Baumeister, 2016). Alternatively, motivation can be framed as a cognitive process responsible for initiating, sustaining, and regulating specific behaviors (Woolfolk, 2018, p. 438).

Integrative motivation, as mentioned by Vaezi (2008), manifests when learners are intrinsically interested in the language due to their fascination with the associated culture, country, and people. In contrast, instrumental motivation is characterized by learners' external drive to acquire language skills for pragmatic purposes, such as passing exams, securing employment, or enjoying foreign-language media (Vaezi, 2008). Consequently, there were also some suggestions supposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972) when they uttered that learners with integrative motivation could take full advantage of motivational effects on second language learning, and they more easily achieved the competence in that language learning (as cited in Nakanishi, 2002, p. 280).

Self-determination theory (SDT) focuses on understanding and explaining the factors that contribute to long-lasting motivation and well-being. It achieves this by proposing a framework of six mini-theories, each addressing a specific aspect of human behavior, such as the initiator (who), the action itself (what), the context (where), timing (when), and underlying reasons (why and how) for an individual's choices (McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Within this framework, autonomous motivation stands out as the most robust form. It is inherently self-sustaining, driven by internal desires and goals. Conversely, controlled motivation relies heavily on external factors for maintenance. These extrinsic influences can include social pressures from teachers, parents, or peers, or external rewards such as scholarships or job prospects that incentivize focused studying. However, once the external support weakens, controlled motivation tends to diminish as well (Nguyen et al., 2023).

2.2 *Language Learning Strategies*

Despite various attempts to define "learning strategy" within language acquisition research, a universally accepted definition remains elusive. Scholars like Oxford and Crookall (1989) describe it as encompassing a broad range of techniques, behaviors, and problem-solving skills that aid learning. Similarly, Grainger (2005) emphasizes the conscious and purposeful nature of strategies, viewing them as tools deliberately employed by learners to facilitate language acquisition. However, defining "strategy" precisely proves challenging. Purpura (1999) identifies four key areas of debate: the specific behaviors constituting a strategy, the issue of whether a strategy can be directly observed, the learner's intentionality in using it, and the directness of its impact on learning or performance.

Research overwhelmingly supports the significance of learning strategies in language acquisition. Scholars like Woolfolk (2018) define them as deliberate plans to achieve learning goals, while Cohen (1998) views them as conscious choices that enhance second language learning and use. This focus on conscious selection aligns with Chamot (1998) emphasis on strategies facilitating student self-learning. In other words, the author suggests a positive correlation between strategic learning and language proficiency, indicating that learners equipped with effective strategies are more likely to succeed in language acquisition and testing.

While Cohen and Weaver (2006) categorize learning strategies based on the targeted language skills (productive like writing and speaking, or receptive like reading and listening), learners also utilize general strategies applicable across all skills, such as those focused on vocabulary, grammar, or translation. Furthermore, the specific strategies employed can be influenced by the learner's individual goals (Sadeghi et al., 2021).

2.3 Previous Studies

Numerous studies have been conducted independently on the topics of language learning motivation and learning strategies, with researchers striving to understand their individual impacts on language acquisition. Dornyei (2001) highlights Gardner and his colleagues' seminal research on integrative and instrumental motivation, which has garnered widespread recognition within the field of language learning motivation (as cited in Wu, 2007). Additionally, Vaezi's (2008) study of Iranian undergraduate students revealed a predominant inclination towards instrumental motivation among participants, indicating a stronger drive towards pragmatic language learning goals (p.58).

In the realm of learning strategies, Park (1997) emphasizes the pivotal role of these strategies in enhancing language learning outcomes, prompting numerous studies to explore their significance. Chamot and Kupper (1989) found that learners with higher proficiency levels tended to employ a greater variety of strategies, with cognitive strategies being the most frequently utilized. However, Griffiths and Parr (2001) presented contrasting findings, suggesting a higher frequency of social strategies among learners compared to memory or compensation strategies.

Moreover, collective research endeavors have sought to clarify the relationship between language learning motivation and strategies. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) and Oxford and Ehrman (1995) observed a strong positive correlation between motivation and strategy use, indicating that highly motivated students were more likely to adopt various learning strategies across all categories (as cited in Moriam, 2008). Similarly, Nambiar (2009) highlights Oxford and Nyikos's (1989) findings, suggesting that motivation exerts a powerful influence on strategy utilization. Feng (2010) concurs, asserting that motivated learners are more inclined to employ learning strategies with greater frequency.

However, discrepancies exist regarding the types of strategies most commonly utilized by language learners. Yang (1995) found formal-practice and compensation strategies to be prevalent, whereas Bremner (1998) identified metacognitive and compensation strategies as widely used among learners. Chang and Huang (1999) and Pong (2002) propose differing perspectives, asserting that intrinsic motivation correlates positively with cognitive and metacognitive strategies, while extrinsic motivation aligns with cognitive and affective strategies (as cited in Chang, 2005).

In light of these findings, it is evident that extrinsic motivation predominates among language learners, with a positive correlation observed between motivation and strategy use. Furthermore, extrinsic motivation appears to correlate strongly with cognitive and socioaffective strategies, whereas intrinsic motivation aligns more closely with cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This research aims to provide additional insights into these relationships, shedding light on why learners driven by extrinsic motivation tend to favor certain types of strategies over others, and elucidating the dynamics between motivation and strategy utilization in language learning.

2.4 Major Research Questions

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between high school students' motivation and their strategies in English language learning within the context of Vietnam. Drawing upon the theoretical foundations and empirical findings outlined in the literature review, the following research questions are formulated:

- What are the types of motivation among high school students for learning English?
- What kind of language learning strategies do high school students use in English learning?
- To what extent do extrinsic and intrinsic motivation relate to language learning strategies?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants

In this study, a total of 76 students were selected from two distinct classes of the twelfth grade at Dang Khoa private high school. Among the participants, 39 were male students (51.32%) and 37 were female students (48.68%). All students were native speakers of Vietnamese and possessed a lower intermediate level of English proficiency. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old. Furthermore, all participants were enrolled in English courses as part of the curriculum within the general education system. All of their parents signed the consent form to allow their participation in the research. In addition, the Board of Directors of the school where the research was conducted signed the approval form to allow the research to proceed.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data from the participant group of 76 students. The first questionnaire aimed to assess the types of motivation prevalent among the students. This questionnaire comprised 20 items selected and adapted from previous instruments utilized in similar studies. Specifically, items were drawn from Chang's questionnaire administered to Taiwan university students (2005) and Vaezi's survey conducted among Iranian undergraduate students (2008). The subcategories of motivation were delineated into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Participants were required to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each item using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

Following the completion of the motivation questionnaire, participants proceeded to respond to a second questionnaire focused on English language learning strategies. This questionnaire comprised a 20-item version adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford & Crookall, 1989). Oxford's framework suggests six types of strategy use: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Additionally, the theory of O'Malley et al. (1985) proposes three main categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective strategies.

To align with the objectives of this study and accommodate the participants' characteristics, a modified questionnaire was created by amalgamating elements from both theoretical frameworks. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "never" to "always" (1 = never, 2 = usually not, 3 = sometimes, 4 = usually, 5 = always).

3.3 Procedures

Data analysis procedures for this study deviated from conventional approaches involving Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Instead, graphical representations with specific figures were utilized to present the analyzed data. While SPSS offers reliability and utility in data analysis, the chosen method was deemed appropriate to provide a more visually intuitive understanding of the results.

The collected data were analyzed separately for both motivation and learning strategies sections. Graphical representations and figures were employed to illustrate the distribution and trends observed within each section. Subsequently, the relationship between motivation and learning strategies was examined using the same analytical approach. Through these procedures, the study aimed to elucidate the motivational dynamics and strategic behaviors of high school students in English language learning, providing valuable insights into the interplay between motivation types and strategy utilization.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Research Results

The questionnaire assessing learning motivation was completed by 76 high school Vietnamese students. The results are depicted in the following pie chart (figure 1):

The first pie chart indicated the types of language learning motivation which high school students tended to follow. The most noticeable thing which could be clearly seen in the chart was that there were two main types of motivation, comprising intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Besides, this chart also illustrated that the proportion of extrinsic motivated students which accounted for 59% was totally higher than that of intrinsic motivated ones with 41%. In conclusion, this data briefly gave us the general view that most language learners were the ones who tended to have extrinsic motivation in their English language learning, which meant they did not learn English for their inner interest of culture

and people of the country speaking that language, but for the outcome such as mark, job or salary and so on.

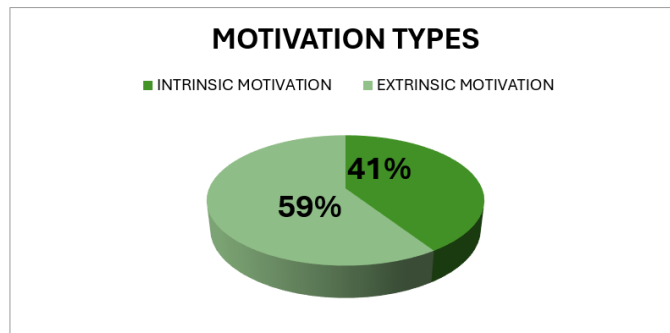


Figure 1. Motivation types

The next survey about the language learning strategies was also carried out by the same group of 76 high school students and its results were carefully described in the column chart below (figure 2):

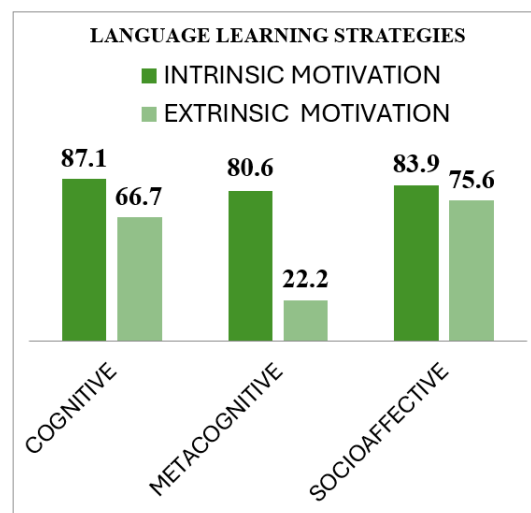


Figure 2. Language learning strategies

This chart showed the language learning strategies which were mostly used by high school students in English language learning process. As could be seen in the chart, there was the significant correlation between learning motivation and learning strategies. It was also noticeable that cognitive, metacognitive and socioaffective strategies were three types of strategies which these high school students usually applied in their language learning. Furthermore, the tendency and the frequency of using learning strategies were also illustrated obviously that these factors were influenced by learners' learning motivation. Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivated students adapted all kinds of strategies suggested above; however, the percentage of intrinsic motivated learners using all these strategies was higher than that of extrinsic motivated learners. The highest percentage was spent on cognitive strategies with 87.1% for intrinsic motivation and 66.7% for extrinsic motivation, followed by socioaffective strategies with 83.9% and 75.6% in turns. At the bottom end was metacognitive with 80.6% for intrinsic and 22.2% for extrinsic. However, the disproportion spent on metacognitive strategies between intrinsic motivation (80.6%) and extrinsic motivation (22.2%) was also remarkable in this chart.

4.2 Discussion

The aim of this study was to illustrate the types of motivation that Vietnamese students at high school followed as well as the strategies that they usually used in their English language learning. Furthermore, the correlation between these two factors was also clearly indicated in this chapter with significant results.

4.2.1 Learners' types of motivation

In this research, extrinsic motivation was shown to be the most frequent type of motivation that Vietnamese high school students tended to be. This result was completely congruent with some previous studies when they claimed that learners of English were more extrinsically motivated than intrinsic motivated in their learning process (Chang, 2005; Vaezi, 2008). Moreover, the reasons to illustrate why the proportion of extrinsic motivated students was higher than that of intrinsic motivated ones were also carefully revealed. Most Vietnamese high school students learn English for external motivation such as getting good marks, passing important exams, being forced by teachers, avoiding punishment or satisfying their parents' expectation etc. The possible illustration may relate to Vietnamese traditional education because the view that children will not achieve the success in life if they do not pay much attention to the study seems to be very familiar and important to Vietnamese people, especially the parents. It is easily recognized that most Vietnamese students try to study in order to please their parents' expectation than study for their own interest. Towards the language learning in Vietnam context, when English is considered as the compulsory course at any education system, it is realized that these students are not actually interested in their English learning, and the limited learning environment is also another factor affecting on their unenthusiastic response to English. Besides, the result revealing that the learners with strong motivation had a tendency to achieve the success in English learning was also congruent with many researchers' results in the world.

4.2.2 *Learners' language strategies*

The finding in this research showed that cognitive, metacognitive and socioaffective strategies were the crucial strategies mostly used by high school students. However, students with different motivation would have compatible kinds of strategy use. When Chamot and Kupper (1989), Yang (2007) and Griffiths and Parr (2001) did research on language learning strategies, they represented that cognitive and socioaffective strategies were the least frequently used strategies by the language learners. The explanation for this finding was described that cognitive strategies required greater effort and deeper mental processing; therefore, it was not widely adopted by learners who sought for the easier and faster way to learn the second language. In this study, it was shown that cognitive strategies were mostly used by high school learners, followed by socioaffective strategies and metacognitive strategies were the least frequently used strategies. This result was incredibly compatible to the findings in Chang and Liu's study (2013).

4.2.3 *The relationship between learning motivation and learning strategies*

Followed Ehrman and Oxford's study (1990), Oxford and Nyikos's (1989), Oxford and Ehrman's (1995), Chang (2005) also found the similarities in his result that there was a significant correlation between learning motivation and learning strategies. The results in this research also confirmed with previous findings when it was indicated that students with stronger motivation, especially intrinsic motivation tended to apply all kinds of strategy use than those with less strong motivation. Actually, most intrinsic motivated students used these strategies very effectively because they really had deep enthusiasm for enlarging their knowledge of second language. Both cognitive and socioaffective strategies were widely adapted by high school students for both extrinsic and extrinsic motivated learners; for example, they often learnt and memorized new vocabulary by writing or reading them aloud for several times. In addition, they also tried to connect previous knowledge with the new one to easily understand and master the whole section of the grammar points because these grammar structures in their curriculum were always set up by units from easy level to difficult one. Furthermore, any students would take full advantage of socioaffective strategies when they tried to interact with different people to find the help if they got troubles in the language learning process. It was said that these supports could come from teachers as well as other partners in class. However, in this research, It was also revealed that a small minority of integrative motivation students who worked by themselves and did not want to help their friends by sharing their knowledge as well as experiences in learning English. In addition, the separately specific disproportion spent on metacognitive strategies between integrative students and instrumental ones in this study should be noticeable. Intrinsic motivated students were self-determined in their learning because some strategies of planning and evaluating were adopted efficiently. These students always planned their schedule to have enough time for studying; furthermore, they set up obvious goals in their learning. They also corrected mistakes by themselves after finishing their task and tried to avoid making those mistakes again in next exams. Evaluating and comparing the results after each exam also

increased students' autonomy as well as encouraged them to gain more success in learning process. While students with stronger motivation used all kinds of strategies, especially metacognitive strategies, there were a small number of learners with less strong motivation using this strategy because most of them did not really pay much attention to goals setting in their second language learning and they even did not plan for learning schedule. Using these strategies effectively required learners to have high self-awareness while students with less motivation, they just needed the easy and simple way to learn successfully.

5. Conclusions

The present study explored language learning motivation and strategies among high school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The findings revealed a predominance of extrinsic motivation, with students primarily driven by external pressures and utilitarian goals. Interestingly, a positive correlation emerged between motivation level and strategy use. Students exhibiting intrinsic motivation employed a wider range of strategies, encompassing both cognitive and socioaffective approaches. These strategies, regardless of the underlying motivation type, demonstrably contributed to second language acquisition.

However, the study acknowledges limitations. The research design relied on self-reported data, potentially susceptible to response bias if students felt pressure to provide socially desirable answers. Additionally, the relatively small sample size of 76 participants restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader Vietnamese high school student population.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights for improving second language learning. Recognizing the prevalence of extrinsic motivation, the findings suggest that fostering intrinsic interest and genuine enjoyment in language learning is crucial. This aligns with Chang's (2005) recommendation of incorporating novel activities and methodologies into the classroom. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of equipping students with effective learning strategies. This includes providing explicit instruction on strategy use, demonstrating efficient application techniques, and allocating sufficient time and practice opportunities for students to master and integrate these strategies into their regular learning repertoire. By empowering students with a clear understanding of the role learning strategies play in language acquisition, educators can cultivate a learning environment that fosters active strategy use and ultimately propels students towards success in their language learning journeys.

Future research can delve deeper into Vietnamese high school students' language learning experiences by employing longitudinal studies to track motivation and strategy development. Investigating motivation and strategy use over an extended period can provide valuable insights into their evolution and impact on long-term language learning outcomes. Another possible approach is to utilize qualitative approaches like interviews to understand student perspectives. In-depth interviews or focus groups can offer richer understandings of the factors influencing students' motivation and their perceptions of the effectiveness of specific learning strategies. In addition, exploring teachers' motivational practices and their strategies for integrating strategy instruction into their teaching can provide valuable insights into how educators can better support students' language learning journeys. In terms of regional variations, it is crucial to investigate potential differences in motivation and strategy use between students in Ho Chi Minh City and those in other regions of Vietnam can shed light on the influence of socio-cultural factors on language learning.

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